

The Role of Classroom Discourse and Teacher Decision-Making On Student Agency During Writing

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ABSTRACT

Learning to write is not merely an individual process of putting words on a page. Learning to write is a social practice in which students and teachers form Discourse communities (Cazden, 2001; Dyson, 2003; Gee, 2001). This article considers how classroom Discourse and teacher decision-making during writing conferences influence the way fourth-grade students assert agency and make decisions as writers. This article describes how one teacher's beliefs about the relationship of self-evaluation and a common curriculum-driven language influence her teaching decisions that supports student agency during writing conferences.

Introduction

As students enter the classroom, they begin chanting, "Free write! Free write! Free write!" In a kind voice, I reply, "I'm sorry boys and girls, but today we first have to get our thinking maps out and do some pre-writing exercises." Teachers make decisions every day about how to teach writing. These decisions influence much more than the children's ability to transcribe words on the page. What children write, how they write it, and who they are as writers reflect the complex social relations in a classroom, and thus directly influences academic outcomes in school. In the example above, students assert agency and a love for writing about self-selected topics. However due to curricular constraints, the teacher decides the opportunity for students to write about topics they choose, had to be missed.

In this article we discuss how students learn to write, by addressing an aspect of writing that might be overlooked in our practice. We focus in on the social processes of writing development with an emphasis on how students assert agency during writing.

Through interactions during writing conferences, Sara establishes a community of practice or shared understanding about the goals for writing with her students. Within those communities, students assert an agentive or non-agentive stance related to writing (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010). By studying the relationship between teacher decisions and student agency we give further insight into student writing development, beyond the acquisition of skills, as a process of collaboration with others in which knowledge is constructed, revised and applied (Wells, 1999). We consider how learning to write is measured through changes in the way students participate and assert agency as a result of collaboration with their teacher. Through Discourse analysis, of teacher-student writing conferences, we study how students construct what it means to be a writer, or what is valued during writing time, in the classroom.

Learning to Write as a Social Process: Discourse and the Role of the Teacher

Classrooms are Discourse communities. Discourse is a "map" or "identity tool kit" for language use associated with how to look, act and speak in a social context in order to gain access to a social or cultural group (Gee, 2001). Big "D" Discourses, as opposed to little "d" discourses (language in use), are specialized kinds of languages that we learn in order to participate in social and cultural groups. Students and teachers think with and through the Discourse of writing in order to make decisions on how to participate (Smith, 1987). For example, talk about process writing activities, includes the Discourse of editing and revising. Understanding the influence of Discourse, or language-in-use, is critical to understanding how teachers and students negotiate social relationships, assert agency and make decisions during classroom writing activities (Dyson, 1999; Rowe, 2008).

Writing is an on-going interaction of the text, the writer and the social context (Rosenblatt, 1994). During conferences, teacher decision-making, or the way teachers talk to students about their writing, is part of the social context for learning to write. The Discourse teachers use impacts the writer's purpose, the relationship between the writer and his/her audience, as well as the resulting text construction (Calkins, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1994; Cazden, 2001; Dyson, 2003; Graham & Harris, 2013). For example, when talking to students, teachers ask students to consider the type of experience their reader has had with the topic in order to determine how descriptive the writing should be and in order to determine what vocabulary to use (formal/informal).

As writing teachers, we have studied and understand the relationship between effective teaching practices and teacher decision-making (Griffith, 2013; Bauml, 2011; Philips, 2011; Robertson, 2014). Effective teachers are adaptive in-the-moment decision-makers (Hoffman & Pearson, 2000; Morrow,

Tracey, Woo, & Pressley et al., 2001). During writing time, teachers make decisions that are driven by varying and sometimes conflicting forces. The purposes for teacher decisions are driven by curriculum demands and personal theoretical beliefs about student-centered learning (Griffith, 2013). However, our questions around writing do not consider the reasons for teacher decisions. Our interest is in examining the impact of teacher decisions and resulting Discourse on how students participate, how students assert agency and how students develop writing identities.

Our dialogic perspective of language and learning theorizes that any word or utterance is connected to and in response to a preceding or proceeding response (Bakhtinian, 1981). Our goal is to describe student agency in relationship to teacher-student Discourse during writing conferences. One particular relationship scholars describe is the connection between teacher assessment of student writing and student motivation to self-evaluate their own writing (Graham & Harris, 2013). Individual feedback on writing skills or strategies, equip students with the ability to evaluate their own writing and make decisions to revise and edit. Our goal is to further explore the way teachers give feedback and the resulting impact on student participation (Griffith, 2013; Corno, 2008; Duffy, Miller, Kear, Parsons, Davis, & Williams, 2008; Vaughn & Parsons, 2013). Understanding the relationship between classroom Discourse and the way students participate or assert agency will give insight into student writing development that has not yet been considered.

Why Agency is Important

Writers with a strong sense of personal agency believe they can be successful writers. Building a strong sense of agency is important because it leads to becoming a strategic writer, with the writer empowered by his/her knowledge of how to plan, draft, revise, and edit writing. Agency is important because writers who lack agency set low achievement goals and lack resiliency. Writers with a strong belief in their own agency understand the writing process and will apply skills and strategies to compose, revise and share their writing (Skinner et al., 1998).

Teachers hinder or help in building student agency through the ways they interact with students (Johnston, 2004). Agency is built around an environment that is responsive to student actions (Bruner, 1962). Student agency increases when students feel there is a relationship between how they participate and what happens in their writing. For instance, during writing conferences teachers acknowledge or fail to acknowledge a student's personal thoughts about the writing, either by building on the student's idea or by verbally rejecting the student's idea. Teacher decisions lead the student to establish a sense of agency and to establish an understanding of what is valued during writing time in the classroom. In order to answer our questions about how Discourse impacts student agency, we look more closely at the way the teacher-researcher talks with her students and how Discourse builds or weakens student agency.

Agency is fluid and shaped over time through personal interest and through interactions and relationships with others (Hawkins, 2016; Dyson, 2003; Rowe & Neitzel, 2010). Students

assert agency to configure writing events based on purposeful talk with their teacher as well as personal interests (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010). For example, students assert agency as they appropriate, transform and reject conference talk with their teacher (Hawkins, 2016). Students with procedural interests assert agency as a writer based on how the systems of language work, with a focus on conventions. Students with social orientations to writing use writing to mediate social interactions and assert agency as a writer in an effort to seek group membership (Rowe & Neitzel, 2010). Students also assert agency collectively within peer writing groups such as when peers rewrite traditional male superheroes (based on white gods and goddesses), to include an African American girl as a new superhero named Venus (Dyson, 2003). Our work is designed to further understand how agency is fluid and shaped over time during teacher-student interactions, rather than in relation to personal interests or peer interactions.

Context

Like many teachers, we notice a constant tension between our overt theories for writing driven by student agency and our tacit theories driven by curriculum expectations for writing. This work is a study of the first author's teaching, driven by questions about best practices in writing and tension between her personal theoretical beliefs and high-stakes curriculum demands.

In our suburban community elementary school in the southwest, we serve 730 students, kindergarten through fifth grade from upper-middle class backgrounds. Our population is 75% white and 15% Hispanic population, and with 7% classified as economically disadvantaged. During the daily one-hour writing block, students participate in the social practices of writer's workshop that include a teacher-led mini-lesson, independent writing, peer collaborative writing, individual teacher-student conferencing and ending with student's sharing written work as a class.

Through Discourse analysis, during teacher-student writing conferences, we consider how teacher decisions influence student writers in the teacher-researcher's fourth-grade classroom. Because knowledge is recursively constructed, applied and revised in interaction with others (Cazden, 2001; Dyson, 2003; Gee, 2001; Strauss & Xiang, 2015; Vygotsky, 1994); writing conferences serve as a context for us to purposefully study emergent agency.

Three phases of discourse analysis act as a funnel starting with the larger corpus of data from the class of 17 students and leading to a more in-depth analysis of discourse patterns of two focal students at varying proficiency levels. During phase one, we identify teacher decisions; phase two we describe the types of teacher decisions; and phase three we describe the implications of teacher decisions on student agency.

Analysis of our data reveals factors associated with teacher decision-making which mediate student agency during writing conferences. Data sources include post-hoc field notes, video-taped writing conferences from the case study students, debriefing interviews between the first and second researcher and student writing samples. Through excerpts from our two case study students, we describe how the Discourse of student self-evaluation and the language of the curriculum assessment rubric mediate student agency.

Self-Evaluation Mediates Student Agency:
A Writing Conference with Beth

Self-evaluation is a Discourse through which the teacher-researcher and her students participate and jointly construct knowledge about writing. Agency is the belief that there is a connection between what one does and what happens as a result (Johnston, 2004; Rowe, 2008). The Discourse Sara uses during writing conferences reflect her tacit belief that a strong sense of student agency emerges when student self-evaluation guides the discourse around writing, rather than teacher evaluation.

In the conference around with Beth's poem, Sara not only models evaluation of Beth's writing, but also supports Beth's sense of agency by asking her to regularly self-evaluate. As the interaction begins, the teacher prompts Beth to self-evaluate through phrases like "Tell me how it's going?" and "What are you working on?". Beth's strong sense of agency is apparent as she talks about the connection between the draft of her ideas (See Figure 1 and 2) and the personal meaning of the poem she is writing. Beth continues to assert her agency as she talks about her struggle to describe the constraining atmosphere of the private school she once attended. She continues to talk about her experience and describes it by using the word "torture." The teacher leads Beth to reflect on her feelings of being tortured and the impact her feelings would have on the tone of her poem. Sara says, "So the poem is going to be a little..." and Beth finishes Sara's sentence saying, "Sad. Yeah. We had to wear uniforms. We had to be proper. There was no playground."

Next, the teacher prompts Beth to evaluate her list of ideas. Sara asks Beth to choose ideas for her poem, based on the sad tone. Sara says, "Well, to me, the properness and the uniforms and losing your best friend when you moved away were huge. You want to choose the ideas that really reflect the sadness."

Beth and the teacher continue to negotiate meaning and talk about what ideas to include in the poem that will convey the sad tone. Sara says, "It looks like you started to put ideas down to decide what to include. What are you thinking?" Beth responds, "I said, 'When I was eight, I went to a private school. We had uniforms,' But then just saying uniforms wasn't very descriptive. I wanted to say, 'We had to wear uniforms.'" Next Sara goes back to the language Beth has used earlier in our discussion to further guide her decision-making saying, "You could even include how you were expected to be 'proper' at all times." Beth agrees and Sara continues to discuss how the tone of the poem will impact her reader. Sara says, "I like the way you have a theme of sadness in your poem. The tone of the poem is going to draw your reader in and give the reader the sense that you didn't really like the school." Beth responds with an adamant, "No!".

Using a Common Language Mediates Student Agency: A Writing Conference with May

Although student self-evaluation is critical to asserting agency as a writer (Strauss & Xian, 2015), many times students do not have the language with which to assess their writing. Using the common Discourse of the curriculum to evaluate and negotiate meaning around writing supports student

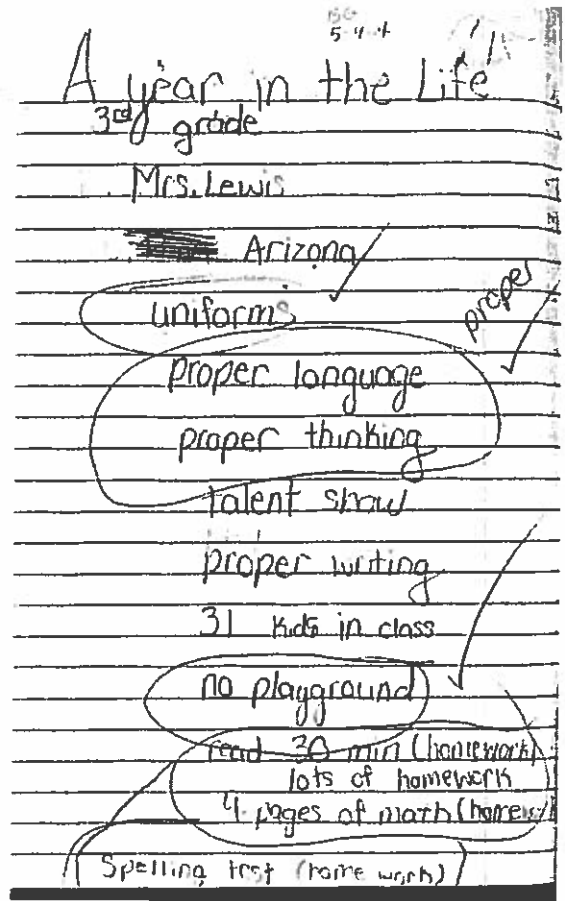


Figure 1. Beth's planning list of ideas for her poem

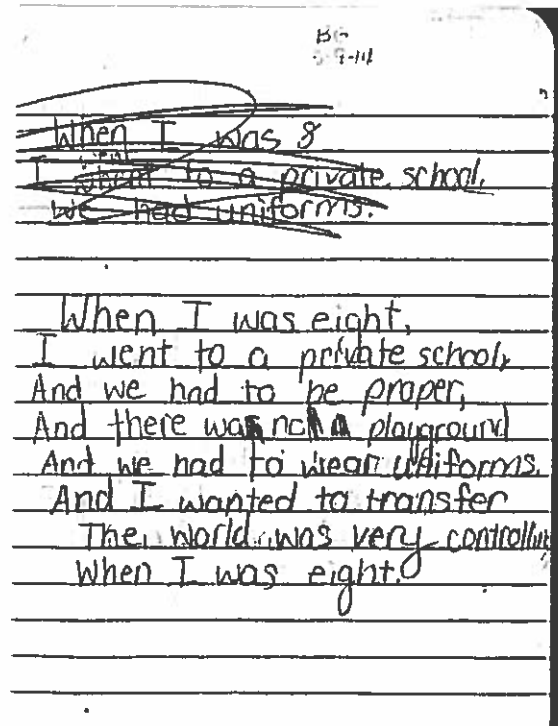


Figure 2. Draft of Beth's poem describing her private school experience

ROLE OF CLASSROOM DISCOURSE AND TEACHER DECISION-MAKING

	<i>Beginning/Limited</i>	<i>Developing/Basic</i>	<i>Proficient/Satisfactory</i>	<i>Advanced/Accomplished</i>
<i>Trait</i>	1	2	3	4
Organization	The organizational structure of the essay is inappropriate to the prompt.	The organizational structure of the essay is inappropriate to the prompt.	The organizational structure of the essay is inappropriate to the prompt.	The organizational structure of the essay is clearly appropriate, skillfully crafted, and well suited to the prompt
Clear central idea	The central idea is missing, unclear, or illogical. The composition fails to maintain focus.	Some ideas are generally linked to the topic, but the central idea is weak or somewhat unclear.	The writer establishes a clear central idea. Most ideas are linked to the topic.	The writer establishes a clear central idea. All ideas are focused on the topic. The essay is unified and coherent.
Ideas flow logically	Progression of ideas is weak. Lack of transitions and sentence-to-sentence connections causes the writer to present ideas in a random or illogical way.	The progression of ideas is not always logical and controlled. Transitions are formulaic or weak. Repetition and wordiness cause disruption in flow.	The progression of ideas is logical and controlled. For the most part, transitions are meaningful and sentence-to-sentence connections support the flow of the essay.	The progression of ideas is logical and well controlled. Transitions are meaningful and strong sentence-to-sentence connections enhance the flow of the essay.
Use of appropriate details and examples	The writer uses details or examples that are inappropriate, vague, or insufficient.	The development of ideas is minimal. Details and examples are brief or partially developed.	The development of ideas is sufficient. The writer uses details and examples that are specific and inappropriate.	The development of ideas are effective because they use details and examples that are well chosen.
Thoughtful and engaging	The essay is weakly linked to the prompt or demonstrates a lack of understanding.	The essay reflects little or no thoughtfulness.	The essay reflects some thoughtfulness. It is original, rather than formulaic.	The essay is thoughtful and engaging. Ideas are connected in personal interesting ways.
Effective word choice	Vague or limited word choice effects the quality and clarity of the essay.	The writer's word choice is basic, general, or repetitive which effects the quality and clarity of the essay.	The writer's word choice is consistently clear and specific. The word choice contributes to the effectiveness of the essay.	The writer's word choice is purposeful and precise. The word choice strongly contributes to the quality and clarity of the essay.
Varied and connected sentences	Sentences are simplistic, awkward, or uncontrolled significantly limiting the effectiveness of the essay.	Sentences are awkward and only somewhat controlled weakening the effectiveness of the essay.	Sentences are consistently varied and adequately controlled contributing to the effectiveness of the essay.	Sentences are purposeful, varied, and well controlled, enhancing the effectiveness of the essay.
Appropriate punctuation and grammar	No command of sentence boundaries. Serious and persistent errors interfere with meaning.	Partial command of sentence boundaries. Some distracting errors may cause minor disruptions and interfere with meaning.	Adequate command of sentence boundaries. Some errors may be evident, but the create few (if any) disruptions.	Consistent command of sentence boundaries. The overall strength of the conventions contributes to the effectiveness of the essay.
Spelling	The writer has little or no command of age appropriate spelling. Serious and persistent spelling errors interfere with meaning.	The writer has partial command of age appropriate spelling. Some distracting spelling errors interfere with meaning	The writer has adequate command of age appropriate spelling. Some distracting spelling errors interfere with meaning	The writer has consistent command of age appropriate spelling. Minor spelling errors do not interfere with meaning.
Score	9,10,11,12,13,14	15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22	23,24,25,26,27,28,29,30,31	32,33,34,35,36

Figure 3. School district expository scoring rubric

agency to readily evaluate their work. The language of the curriculum rubric (See Figure 3) serves as a dialogic tool for participation in Sara's writing conferences with students.

May and Sara discuss writing on the teacher assigned prompt, "Tell about someone who is important to you". As they talk, May reads aloud her heartfelt piece (See Figure 4) describing how her mom is "always there for her to take care of her when she is sick" or to "tell her a joke and cheer her up when she is sad." May's message ends as she reads, "There is nothing in the universe that can replace a mom like mine."

Although May's writing is personally meaningful, when the teacher asks May to talk about her process, May initially explains how she revises her piece based on errors she notices with spelling and capitalization. As May continues to describe her revisions, in an effort to move May's sense of agency associated primarily with surface-level features of writing, Sara uses the language of our curriculum rubric as a dialogic tool to guide the conference Discourse. May continues to describe her revisions, but struggles to explain why she rewrote one of the paragraphs. She says, "It wasn't really the paragraph it was supposed to be. It was kind of shortened. It's kind of hard to explain." Linguistic markers such as May saying, "It's kind of hard to explain," indicate her agency to think about the meaning of her writing is associated with uncertainty. Using the language of the curriculum rubric and the word "specific," Sara responds by saying, "Did you think it didn't give enough detail or it wasn't specific enough?" May "takes up" the Discourse of the curriculum as a dialogic tool to assert her own agency. She says, "The things on my rubric made me think I needed to add more to be specific."

The Discourse of the curriculum rubric continues to guide Sara's decisions and the language she uses to talk about qualities in May's writing. Next, May reads aloud the paragraph she rewrote (See Figure 5). Sara's evaluation includes the Discourse of the rubric (give examples) guided by curriculum expectations for the structure of an expository text. The teacher says, "I love the way, when you are writing, you tell the reader, you make a statement. Like when you wrote, 'My mom didn't take chances that she could have.' Then you give examples to explain what you mean. Like when you say she didn't 'live in a mansion or get a job.' That is so important for your reader."

By noticing qualities in May's writing that are meaningful to her reader, the Sara extends May's sense of agency to self-evaluate beyond her desire to be more specific. By using the language of the curriculum rubric, May's sense of agency grows stronger as she begins to understand how the way she writes and gives examples helps her reader connect emotionally to her writing. As the conference ends, May continues to evaluate her writing and says, "I think we need to do the same thing in the next paragraph that we did here. It's not really that specific."

Conclusion

Writing conferences in Sara's classroom go beyond traditional institutional literacy concerns (student's cognitive processes in isolation and the teacher as sole evaluator) toward an emphasis on teacher-student interaction. In looking at teacher interactions with students during writing conferences, decisions Sara made clearly influence student agency.

STAAR WRITTEN COMPOSITIONS
EXAMPLE OF LINED PAGE

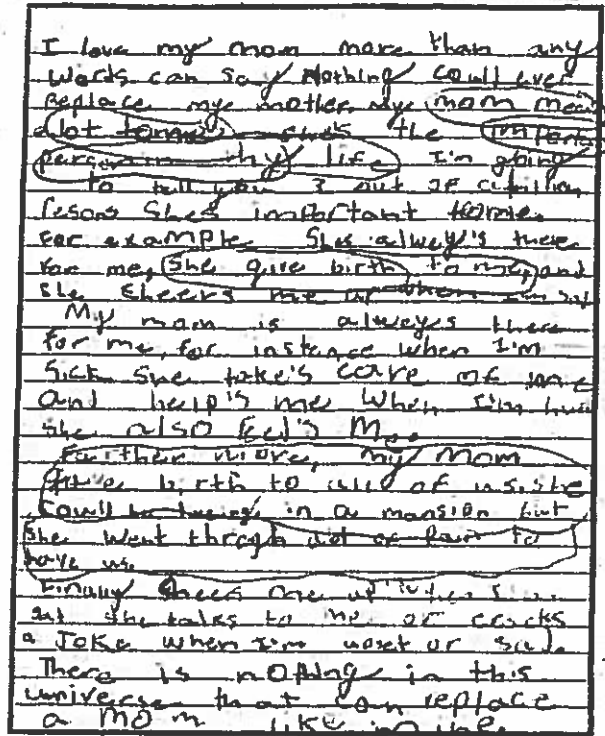


Figure 4. May's prompt writing "tell about an important person"

Teacher decisions to frame writing conferences around student self-evaluation and the use of a common curriculum Discourse to talk about writing, mediates the way students assert personal agency.

Teachers establish what is valued during writing time through the decisions they make about how they talk with students. If the Discourse during a writing conference values agency, children come to develop a sense of the relationship between what they do and what happens (Johnston, 2004). For example, in Sara's classroom, the act of student self-evaluation illustrates a sense of agency. The students know that their own assessment, about what they are doing well as a writer and what they need help with as a writer, matters to the community. If the Discourse community does not value agency, children may see passivity as the accepted social practice. Students may not want to reflect on their writing given they fail to see how their assessment influences the interaction during a conference.

As teachers, we want our students to understand, practice and apply writing strategies using the language of the curriculum and thus evaluate, revise and edit writing with purpose and intent. However, we can all recall a writing conference when a student is non-responsive. Students cannot talk about writing in meaningful and purposeful ways if they do not have the language to do so. The common Discourse of the writing curriculum is a specialized language that acts as a scaffold or dialogic tool for students to assert agency and be strategic writers.

Using the Discourse of the curriculum, Sara and her student's notice and name specific qualities in student

STAAR WRITTEN COMPOSITIONS
EXAMPLE OF LINED PAGE

revisions

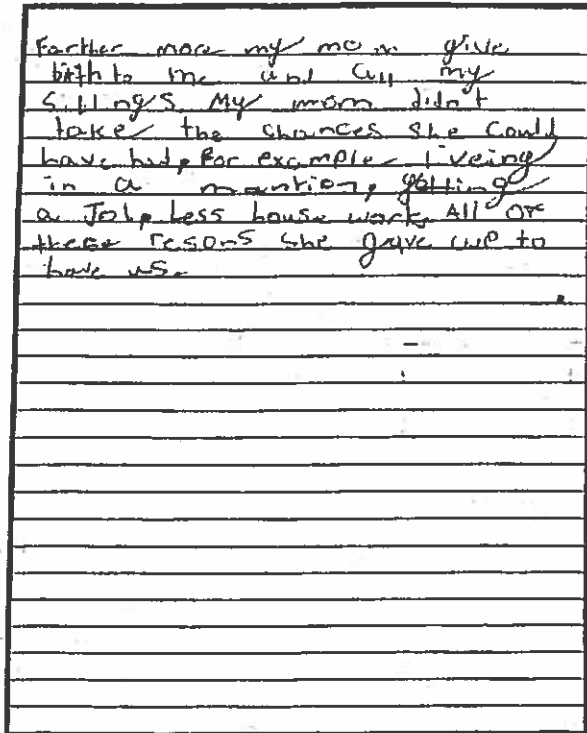


Figure 5. May's revision to her prompt writing "tell about an important person"

writing. Sara explicitly recognizes the qualities of student writing such as organizational structures associated with specific genres or the sad tone conveyed in a poem. Modeling the use of the curriculum Discourse to give feedback during writing conferences equips students with the tools they need to be agentive evaluators of their own writing.

Implications

Our work has implications for all teachers to reconsider the purpose of writing conferences. During traditional writing conferences teachers ask students to share writing. Then teachers tell the student what to fix. Unfortunately, in many instances the "fix-its" we emphasize are related to service level features of writing such as errors in spelling or grammar. From this traditional view, students do not participate in the reflection or evaluation of their own writing. From our view, the Discourse of writing conferences should be about teachers asking, not telling, students about their writing.

If the purpose for writing conferences is to increase student abilities to compose, revise and share ideas through written text, the intention behind the conference must shift from being about teaching writing to teaching the writer (Calkins, 1994). We suggest a change in the structure of writing conferences to include student evaluation as the guiding force behind student writing processes. The self-evaluation process will enable emergent writers to apply, with increased agency and with increased complexity, their understandings about writing. ■

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Sara Philips is a lecturer in the College of Education at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. She teaches undergraduate courses in literacy theory, methods for teaching English language learners, children's literature, writing and strategies for teaching reading across the curriculum. Her research focuses on teacher decision-making and student agency within the changing demands of literacy in a standards-based community.

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