


Conferring Across the Day:
Insight from Students in Writing and Math

A Conversation with Carl Anderson and Jen Munson

Would student conferencing work equally well across all subject matters?

Recently, two authors known for their zeal for the power of the student conference discussed this very topic. Jen Munson, author of *In the Moment: Conferring in the Elementary Math Classroom*, joined with renowned writing conference expert Carl Anderson to compare and contrast how best to use conferring in both math and writing classrooms. In this excerpt from their chat, Carl discusses conferencing strategies that inform his new release, *A Teacher's Guide to Writing Conferences*, as well as his best-selling *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers*, and Jen shares that learning mathematics is a social endeavor, and how conferring can best support math students as they collaborate to learn.

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JEN: The spirit of inquiry you talk about, Carl, is true for all teachers and students. Learning mathematics is a social endeavor, and conferring supports students as they collaborate to learn. This means that students need to be working together—with a partner or a small group—on whatever mathematical work they are tackling. As teachers, we can then confer with many more students during each lesson, because each interaction is with two, three, or four kids. For students, this means that when conferring is over, the conversation isn't. They have one another to continue to develop ideas, ask questions, and move forward.

Our essential role is to find out what students are thinking and trying, to deeply understand their work from their perspective before we do anything with it. Eliciting and probing student thinking is at the heart of conferring, and even if we do just that, research shows that students benefit from talking about their reasoning as it is unfolding.

What elements do you consider essential for effective writing and math conferences?

CARL: First of all, it's important that the kids with whom we confer are working on their writing—writing their thoughts in their writers' notebooks, composing drafts, revising and editing those drafts, and, finally, publishing them. We teach students how to do all of the different kinds of writing work that writers do at each stage of the writing process, so students actually have to be trying out these kinds of work for us to confer with them.

JEN: I agree, Carl, students have to have something worthy of conferring *about*. For math, they need to be engaged in rich math tasks that require productive struggle. In that struggle, as students are sorting through conceptual understanding, developing strategies and representations, figuring out how to talk about their thinking, and trying to do it all together with partners, we have so much to talk about and so much to learn from students.

CARL: Exactly, and that's why it's important to bring a spirit of inquiry into our conferences. We talk to children to discover what they're doing as writers. We want to find out what students think is going well with their writing, what's a bit hard, what lessons they're trying out from the current unit of study, what writing goals they're working on—and what their thinking is about these things. The Latin root of the word *assessment* is *assidere*, which means "to sit beside." Conferences provide the time to sit beside students and learn as much as we can about them, so that we can teach them in a way that's most responsive to who they currently are as writers.

CARL: Ultimately, our most important job in a conference is to help a student become a better writer. This means that the goal of a conference is to teach the student about a writing strategy or craft technique that they can try today *and* continue to use in future pieces of writing. We shouldn't spend our conference time fixing a student's errors, like an editor would; rather, we are there to help a student develop their repertoire of strategies and craft techniques.

JEN: That's true, and the work must still belong to the students. When we support students in deepening the work they are already doing, when we seek to nudge that thinking forward, we're not telling students what to do, and we're not showing them how to solve a problem or how do it more efficiently; those practices short-circuit learning. Instead, focus students' attention on one aspect of their work and ask them what they could do to grow their thinking. How could they represent their ideas? What does the problem really mean? What might they try? Kids can generate original mathematical ideas when we expect this of them routinely.







How is conferring with students different for writing versus math?

CARL: One way that writing conferences are different than math (or reading) conferences is that in a writing workshop, students are *making something*—memoirs, arguments, feature articles—that will be read by an audience. In many conferences, then, we teach students about the craft of writing. This requires writing teachers to have a knowledge base about craft to share with students during conferences.

JEN: There is one key difference between conferring in writing and math, Carl, and that is with whom you are conferring. Mathematics must be a collaborative effort among students, and when teachers confer, we are seeing several simultaneous activities: each student's math thinking, the collective progress of joint work, and the students' collaborative dynamic. This means that in addition to asking ourselves, "What is the child thinking and trying?," we also have to be asking, "How are these children working together toward shared understanding?" We must consider issues of authority, power, and equity within the collaboration and be ready to use conferring to counteract marginalization.

How can teachers learn as much as they can from a student during a conference?

CARL: First, start conferences with an open-ended question like "How's it going?," which invites students to talk about what they're doing as writers. Second, give students lots of wait time to think about what they're doing and come up with a response. Third, be in the habit of responding to what students say with the phrase "Say more about that," which nudges students to elaborate on what they're saying and gives us a richer sense of what they're doing, and why. In general, we should bring our best conversational selves to conferences and draw students out just like we draw out the people with whom we have good conversations in the other aspects of our lives.

JEN: Be curious! Watch. Listen. Ask. Ask more. Make no assumptions. As teachers, we often fill in the gaps of students' thinking, assuming we know what they are doing and why. Perhaps we've seen this strategy before, or we know conceptually why a student might decompose numbers or use fingers to count. But we must keep in mind that this thinking is *new to the child*. If we've set students up with rich tasks, they aren't following the templates in *our* minds; they are carving their own original way through mathematics. Ask what they are doing and why. Ask where their numbers, ideas, drawings, and decisions came from. More often than you'd imagine, you'll hear surprising answers, from novel connections to misconceptions. And that's fascinating. Allow yourself simply to marvel at what students think, do, and say.

How can teachers find time for these all-important writing and math conferences?

CARL: The best way to create time to confer with students is to have a writing workshop every day, which includes a half hour of time in which kids get to work on their writing—and gives us the time we need to confer.

To see more students in a writing workshop—especially when class sizes are large and students have complex needs—teachers can also do some small-group work during the independent writing time. For example, a teacher might do a small-group lesson and hold two or three conferences during that time. However, it's important to remember that conferring is the most important teaching we do in writing workshop and is much more effective in many ways than small-group lessons: it's through conferring that we develop relationships with

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What new approaches should teachers consider to improve their conferring techniques?

CARL: One of the areas on which I spend a lot of time when I'm coaching teachers is helping them learn how to support student talk in conferences. Too often, I see teachers give up after a student initially doesn't say much in a conference. I encourage teachers to use a number of conversational strategies that can help draw students out and talk well about what they're doing as writers. Another area I focus on with teachers is using mentor texts to teach craft in conferences. Using mentor texts is one of the most effective ways I know of helping students envision how to craft their writing powerfully, and should be in every teacher's conferring repertoire.

students that help them learn from us; it's through conferring that we deepen what we know about students as writers every day, and it's through conferring that we offer students the most differentiated instruction and coaching.

JEN: It is tempting to use students' collaborative work time to clean up administrative tasks or manage the classroom. Teachers get more time for conferring when there are systems in place for students to be increasingly independent with decision-making, from going to the bathroom to retrieving manipulatives. Let's think of conferring the way we think of reading with students: everyone needs to build stamina. We need to build our stamina for listening to students; this is hard cognitive work and it can be exhausting. Students need to build stamina for making decisions without you. Reflect with students, particularly in the fall when you are establishing norms on how students use their partners to make decisions, build independence, or resolve conflicts while you are conferring with others. Make explicit the tools they use to continue to make progress and be productive. Recognize and celebrate their growing stamina, and keep working to stretch it.

JEN: Conferring in math is a new frontier of its own. As teachers, we should be talking with kids about their thinking all day long, but for a long time this has not been the norm. I know that many teachers have not found for themselves joy in teaching math, and I believe that conferring is one pathway toward that goal. Children are spectacularly creative thinkers. Rather than finding this intimidating, we can choose to find it marvelous. It's OK not to know what students mean or what's going on; in fact, this will make your questions authentic as you genuinely try to figure it out. But let's figure it out and show students, through this persistent desire to understand them, that their thinking matters. Model curiosity, perseverance, and struggle, and let them know that their ideas are worth it.

I think this is easier to try with a partner. If you've got a teaching partner across the hall, a math coach, or a buddy with the same interest in trying, find ten or twenty minutes to confer with kids together and then talk about what you saw, heard, learned, and wondered. Make it a habit to grab your colleague after school to announce, "They said the most amazing thing today!"

Jen Munson is assistant professor of learning sciences at Northwestern University and received her PhD in mathematics education from Stanford University. A former classroom teacher, Jen works with teachers and school leaders across the U.S. to develop responsive and equitable mathematics instruction.

Carl Anderson is an internationally recognized expert in writing instruction for grades K–8. He works as a consultant in schools across the world, and is a longtime staff developer for the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. Carl is the author of the new *A Teacher's Guide to Writing Conferences*, the best-selling *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers*, as well as *Assessing Writers* and the *Strategic Writing Conferences* series.

To continue to engage with Jen and Carl on this topic, please go to www.heinemann.com/pd/journal.