Struggling to Compose

How Children Regard Themselves as Writers

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I began to think about my students. What did I really know about them as writers? Maybe instead of asking questions about their writing, I needed to ask them questions about themselves as writers.

Someone once told me, and I'm sure it was a teacher, that often it's more important to figure out the right questions than to come up with answers. I have been struggling for a long time with the problem of motivating children in my fifth grade class who produce very little writing. What was I failing to do for them that I seemed to be doing for the others?

I decided to concentrate on finding out what I was doing wrong. I began taping my conferences with the children I had labeled "reluctant writers" hoping that, by listening to my part in the conferences, I would find some answers. After hours and hours of taping and transcribing, I was no closer to any real insights than when I had started.

Tom

Ironically, a conference with one of my students, Tom, helped me to find some answers and pose some important questions. I had not taped my conferences with him because he was not one of those I had targeted as a reluctant writer. By March, when we had this conference, he had already published ten pieces. He is very cheerful about writing. He confers with friends often and loves to share his pieces with the class at whole group share—not at all what you would call "reluctant." I didn't tape the conference; this is approximately how it went.

Anne: What would you like me to help you with, Tom?
Tom: I'm publishing this piece.
Anne: How long have you been working on it?
Tom: Since Monday [two days].
Anne: Are you sure it's ready to be published?
Tom: Sure. I'm done.
Anne: Okay, let's hear it. (He reads the piece to me.)
Tom: Can I publish now?
Anne: Is there anything you want to add?
Tom: Nope, that's it.
Anne: What will you do next?
Tom: I'm going to write about going bowling with Rohan yesterday.
Anne: Tom, would you consider trying a different form of writing like those poems I've been reading to you, or a fairy tale?
Tom: I like this.
Anne: I know, and you work hard at writers' workshop. But you can mess around with different things, too.
Tom: Can I publish now?
Anne: It's your choice.
Tom: Okay. I'll publish.

I watched him saunter over to the computer to "publish" his piece and I realized that most of his conferences were like this. They were boring for both of us and I never felt very satisfied that we had accomplished much. After school, I decided to take out Tom's "Final Copy Folder" to see what he had published so far. All his pieces were
personal narratives, and all about his best friend, Rohan. They were all about the same length and pretty much the same level of complexity. Tom certainly wasn't a risk-taker and he had been resisting my suggestions for a long time. He had been turning out pieces, though, so why was I feeling so uneasy about him? After conferring with him all year long, I realized I really didn't know him as a writer.

I began to think about the three students I had been tape all these months. What did I really know about them as writers? Maybe instead of asking questions about their writing, I needed to ask them questions about themselves as writers. I decided to have individual conferences with each of them, very different conferences than I had been having. Here I present the conferences verbatim.

The first is with Jesus, the second with Samantha, the third with Ronnie. It is March, and so far in this school year Ronnie and Jesus have published one piece, and Samantha has published none.

**Jesus**

Jesus never initiates a conference with me, and I literally have to force him to meet me about every other week. I poke and prod him when we confer and he reacts by agreeing with everything I say just to get away from me.

**Anne:** Read me what you have, Jesus, and then I want to ask you some questions.

Jesus reads his piece to me. It's about a mouse named Itchy who has adventures traveling around the world. In each place, he makes a new friend and the friend joins him on his travels. He has been working on the same piece all term. He makes lots of starts, puts it away, starts again. It seems to me, he never commits to anything.

**Anne:** What do you think of it, Jesus?

**Jesus:** It's good, I guess.

**Anne:** You don't sound too sure.

**Jesus:** What do you think?

**Anne:** I think I talk too much when we have a conference. I want to hear what you think about writing.

**Jesus:** I like it. (Long silence. He's waiting for me to say something.) I like this Itchy character. I have to use the globe to find the countries he'll go to next ... and then I look up the country to find out about it and make up his friends' names and stuff like that. I keep getting new ideas for new places. It's fun.

**Anne:** That's what writers do all the time ... they do research like you're doing.

**Jesus:** It takes time to do it ... sometimes the whole writing period and I'm still not done. I read slow. Sometimes I have to ask Greg to help me with words.

**Anne:** I see. What do you plan to do with your Itchy stories?

**Jesus:** It's a chapter book. Every chapter is a different place. I have six places already. But it's taking me long to put it all together.

**Anne:** Read me the very first one you have.

**Jesus:** Why?

**Anne:** I don't remember hearing it. Don't you want to?

**Jesus:** Okay. (He reads the first draft he started months ago. He stumbles where sentences end and begin and has to go back to correct himself.)

**Anne:** Why is that happening?

**Jesus:** I don't have any periods. I can't use them when I write.

**Anne:** How come?

**Jesus:** It stops me from thinking so I put them in after. I haven't done it yet.

**Anne:** Oh ... I see ... It's good you know that about yourself.

**Jesus:** Yeah.

He continues reading his piece. It really is very funny. I realize I never asked him before why he was stumbling over words. I thought it was because he has difficulty reading and didn't want to embarrass him. He really is a good storyteller.

**Anne:** You're a great storyteller. Did you know that about yourself?

**Jesus:** Yeah. I was trying to write poems and mysteries and stuff like you wanted us to write, but it's too hard for me. I like to write funny stuff like this. It's easier to write about animals than about people too. You laughed at all the right places, Anne.

**Anne:** Was this a test?

**Jesus:** Yeah. (laughs)

**Anne:** What will you do now?

**Jesus:** I think I'll try to bring Itchy home again and go back and see what I can change from the beginning. It might take me a long time.

**Anne:** Should I wait for you to sign up for a conference when you're ready?

**Jesus:** Yeah. Sometimes I'm not ready when you call me.

**Anne:** Okay. Thanks, Jesus.

I felt bewildered after this conference. What made him think that I wouldn't value his piece because it "wasn't as hard as a poem or a mystery"? And why didn't he tell me before why he wasn't ready for a conference when I called him? Why didn't he object to being called in the first place? The usual procedure for a conference with me was to
sign up when you needed one. The implication was that he couldn't be trusted to do that for himself. Why didn't I trust him?

**Samantha**

Samantha never wants to confer with me or with other children. I have to seek her out. She's very noncommittal at a conference. She always makes me feel as though I'm intruding on her privacy.

**ANNE:** What are you working on, Sam?

**SAM:** The same thing.

**ANNE:** Read me some.

She proceeds to read a piece she has started months ago. It's a "chapter book" about a brother and sister who decide to run away because their mother is getting married again and they hate their prospective stepfather and stepbrother. The first chapter is very well done. She has set up the characters very carefully. The second chapter, the one she is reading to me, is an elaborate explanation of how they plan to run away and where they're going to go. She reads slowly and methodically with very little expression or enthusiasm. She seems uncomfortable and angry at having to share it with me. She obviously wants to get it over with.

**ANNE:** I feel like you don't want to share this, Sam.

**SAM:** Well, I wasn't ready.

**ANNE:** Do you think I should wait until you sign up for a conference by yourself?

**SAM:** Yes. You don't call the other kids... just me. Why do you do that?

**ANNE:** I guess because I'm afraid you're not writing anything and I need to find out what you're doing. You haven't published anything all year.

**SAM:** So what? You said authors take a year... sometimes two years to write a book. Nobody tells them they have to publish seven books a year. I don't think you're being fair.

**SAM:** I'll sign up when I'm ready.

**ANNE:** Okay.

**SAM:** Maybe tomorrow or the next day.

**ANNE:** It's okay, Sam... really. I'm glad you told me how you feel.

**SAM:** You see, when I write, it takes me a long time to figure out how something ends up. I try it different ways in my mind, but only one way fits right. I have to do it with every chapter because there's something that happens in each chapter that leads to something else in the next chapter. I have to think about things a long time without writing anything.

**ANNE:**... and you don't need to talk to anyone to help you solve the problems.

**SAM:** No... it just interrupts me and I have to start thinking all over again.

**ANNE:** Oh... so when I call you for a conference, it just interrupts you.

**SAM:** (big sigh) Yes!

**ANNE:** Thanks, Sam... that's a big help to me.

**SAM:** Okay.

I've often told my students that writers make many starts and sometimes take a long time to finally come up with a piece of writing that satisfies them. By saying that, wasn't I giving them permission to take as long as they needed? If I meant that, then why did I decide to require seven published pieces? Is that why Samantha has seemed angry at me all this time?
Ronnie

Ronnie does everything but write at writers' workshop. Mostly he draws or reads or talks to other people about their writing. He loves to have peer conferences and he'll confer with anyone who asks him. He has produced one piece of writing, a fairy tale of some length that he worked on for about six weeks. He made many revisions and was very proud of the result. Since then, he hasn't produced anything.

Anne: What's happening, Ron?
Ron: I can't think of anything to write about.
Anne: I know . . . that's what you tell me every time we have a conference. Don't any of my suggestions help you?
Ron: No.
Anne: Tell me how you get an idea for a piece?
Ron: Myself?
Anne: Yes.
Ron: Why do you want to know?
Anne: I don't know . . . it occurred to me after listening to all the tapes of our conferences, I never asked you that and I really want to know.
Ron: Well, it usually takes me a very long time. I never know when it hits . . . it just comes to me . . . bam . . . like that. Then I write and write and . . . like my fairy tale. I got the idea from Andy when she was telling me about this movie she saw and then it just hit me . . . just like lightning.
Anne: Okay . . . so you get your idea and then you write and write and then what happens?
Ron: After I publish, it's like I'm worn out . . . like when a balloon loses its air . . . just flat. I don't feel like writing again for a long time . . . so I do other stuff and just wait for another idea to hit me again.
Anne: Is there any way to make the ideas come faster?
Ron: I don't know. Do you know any?
Anne: I guess not . . . the ways I knew I shared with you and they didn't seem to work.
Ron: I know. I guess writers all have their own way and nobody can really help them.
Anne: I guess real writers know that about themselves.
Ron: What should I do now?
Anne: What do you want to do?
Ron: I think I'll read some more Shel Silverstein. I really like his poems.
Anne: Okay. Let me know when another idea hits you.
Ron: Okay. Thanks, Anne.
Ronnie was really happy with himself as a writer. So why was I feeling so frustrated all year? If he had been less independent and secure would I have felt more useful? What did all this have to do with Ronnie being labeled a reluctant writer?

The Purpose of Writers' Workshop

As I looked over my transcripts of past conferences with these three children, I realized my focus was constantly on ways to move them along to publish. I heard myself remind them over and over that they needed to publish seven pieces and they were nowhere near that number. I accused them, also, of doing nothing constructive at writing time, which, as you can see from these conferences, was the furthest thing from the truth. And most importantly, they knew themselves as writers much more intimately and intelligently than I did. So then, what is a "reluctant" writer? Is writing a social act for everyone? What drove me to require a particular number of published pieces? Where was the ownership of the writer in that decision? Are we talking about "writing" or about "composing"? And if we're talking about "composing," isn't it much more than "writing"?

It seems clear to me now that "writing" is only one piece of the puzzle that is "composing." I should have known that from my own experiences struggling to compose. Composing is the getting ready to take the risk; it's the struggling to develop an idea; it's the self-doubt, the inner critic constantly challenging you; it's all the revision that happens before you ever get a word down on paper. Composing is the thinking, the problem solving, the choices. It's the totality of every act that finally produces "writing." And this whole process is so different for each one of us.

If all of this is so, then what is the purpose and value of writers' workshop? Is it to help children to know themselves as writers, or is it to publish? That question is rhetorical since one of the revelations that came to me "like lightning" is that writers' workshop time is for helping my students see themselves as writers and be secure with what they know. Publishing is important if the writer thinks it's important, but it's no more important than any other piece of the composing process. It took these three children all term to get up the courage to tell me who they are. I read in a "teacher book" that children decide what is important not by what you say, but by what you do. My message to these children was that publishing is writing. These three children had the courage to resist me so that they could be

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true to themselves. There is nothing “reluctant” about them. There are other times of the day to be concerned about product. Writers’ workshop will be a time to be concerned about the process of composing.

There’s another issue that clearly can’t be avoided. If I really believe that the writer must have ownership of decisions about his or her writing, what drove me to establish a requirement for published pieces? Knowing what I know about my own writing process, I never could have met this requirement myself! I suppose it was my “easy way out.” Evaluation of writing has always been impossible for me. Except for mechanics, everything else seems so arbitrary. The final product is the end of a long road. I’ve never been able to simply look at the “finished” piece all by itself. Maybe setting a required number of pieces helped me to avoid the real issue. Why should writing be graded at all? How is this helpful to anyone?

As you can see, I have a few answers, but many more questions. Thinking about Tom, he is much more afraid of writing than Jesus, Ronnie, or Samantha. He won’t even talk about himself as a writer. It may be that he is whipping off all these pieces just to keep me happy and avoid having me ask him the questions I now know that I need to ask him. Would I call Tom a “reluctant” writer? He’s reluctant to reveal himself; he’s reluctant to share; he’s reluctant to ask for help or admit he has needs. Maybe the real question is, why label him anything? It just gets in the way of knowing who he is.

Schools shouldn’t be for judging, they should be for listening, respecting, and helping.

So how do I help Tom? And how do I break it to the class that there is no required number of published pieces?

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