Assessment for Learning: Student Conferencing

How can I make student conferencing more student-directed and more
purposeful for students in a grade 4 classroom?

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Background:

I was proud that conferencing was scheduled into my daily routine. I felt that my students were more capable of guiding their own learning and goal setting but my practice would not allow them the freedom. I wanted to work toward student-student conferencing that included goal setting. I was interested in how can I improve conferencing with students in my classroom?

Conferencing is one of the most valuable strategies to drive student improvement. I recognized that I needed to treat conferencing as I had other facets of my literacy block (through the use of modelling, gradual release of responsibility, and anchor charts).

Length of the study:

This study took place over an 8 week period – one teacher learning critical pathway (but ended up continuing throughout the rest of the school year).

Description of class:

My grade 4 class had 30 students with 5 students working with an IEP. I was modifying the work for the grades 1, 2, and 3 levels for specific students. When students came to conference with me, they knew that for writing they would hear a strength and weakness and then we would determine a next step. For reading, they would show me how they reached their previous goal and then we set a new one. The problem in both areas was that the students had become complacent and would simply let me decide their goal for them. I decided that I had two areas that I wanted to focus on. They were: 1) ensure students understood why we conferenced (how it helped them as learners) and 2) that they led the conference (student ownership).

Starting Points:

I did two separate baseline assessments. For the first, I had my resource
teacher come in to time my reading conferences with three different students
(strong, average, very weak) to see how long I talked compared to how long they
talked. The results are in the chart below.

Student	Total Time for Conference	Time Student Spoke
Very strong	105 s.	72 s. 69%
Average	120s.	72 s. 60%
Very weak	159 s.	14 s. 9%

The second assessment that I did was ask my whole class these three
questions:
1. Why do I conference with you?
2. Who directs/leads the conference?
3. Is it helpful? Why or why not?

I was quite pleased with the students' responses to both #1 and # 3. Students
had a solid understanding that the conferencing was for student improvement
and goal setting. However, 61% thought the conference was teacher directed.

Monitoring progress:

I decided to have the resource teacher come in again to time me to see if the
student talking time increased and I decided to focus between 10-15 minutes of
my literacy block each day to improving student conferencing.

Teaching Actions and Strategies:

1. Discuss baseline conferencing and pre-test data with my students. *I wanted the students to be clear on why I had asked the questions I did and why the resource teacher was in timing the conferences.*

2. Share my goals. *Just as I ask students to set goals for themselves, I thought they would be more open to discussing this if they knew it was my goal.*

3. Discuss what needs to be brought to conference. *We roleplayed different conferencing scenarios to ensure that all students were clear on the expectations. I explained that there was a lot of time wasted if I sent a student to go get the required materials (e.g., reading log, goal sheet, etc.) rather than begin the conference promptly).*

4. Brainstorm a list of possible reading and writing goals. *We made a list together of all the possible goals they could set when meeting for a conference. These lists were posted at the back of the room near the conferencing table.*

5. Post the learning goals so students could decide on a possible goal before coming to conference. *These lists were posted at the back of the room near the conferencing table.*

6. Role-play a reading conference with me as a student. *The students enjoyed seeing me acting as them during a conference.*

7. Role-play a reading conference with a strong student. *The students got to "listen in" on what an effective conference looks and sounds like.*

8. Continually review possible goals and what to bring. *We did daily*

reviews to ensure that students remembered the expectations.

9. Role-play writing conferences with me as the student and with a strong student. *See above.*

10. Set new expectations for conferences. *I reminded students to bring the proper materials to conference before joining me and thus set the new standard for conferencing.*

These actions were moving my students in the right direction. Students were coming to conferences prepared with the proper materials as well as having their next learning goal in mind.

Findings:

The students were coming to conference prepared and I had my resource teacher come in again to time the conferences. The results are shown in the table on the next page.

Student	Total Time for Conference	Time Student Spoke
Very strong	75 s.	55 s. 73%
Average	79s.	49 s. 62%
Very weak	111 s.	38 s. 35%

After discussion with the resource teacher, we decided that we could not feasibly increase the time I spoke any more with the very strong and average students (if I didn't respond or provide input, it would not be a discussion). There was still work to do with my very weak student and we decided to try helping him set

shorter term goals that would be easily achievable because his most recent goals were too difficult to achieve success.

I also wanted to train two stronger students to become the conference leaders in the class. They would run the conferences as the teacher and then give me a written form (see below) that was filled out while in conference with another student. I added these forms to my conference notebook.

Name: _____   I conferenced with _____.

My goal was	My next goal is
I reached my goal by	I will reach my goal by

In September, 28% of my class could identify a suitable strength/weakness in their writing. At the end of the TLCP cycle, 93% of my class could do this reflection!

Input from critical friends:

As a junior demonstration teacher, many teachers saw the conferencing focus during their visits to my classroom and we would discuss how it was going and my possible next steps during the afternoon debriefing session. I know from follow-up visits that some of the teachers were going to try student-student conferencing in their own rooms (either before the end of the school year or in September).

Conclusions (including next steps):

I know that I will begin working on conferencing right away in September next year. I will treat conferencing as I treat the other aspects of my literacy block (what does it look like, what does it sound like, why do we do it) at the beginning of a school year. As our routines become more established in the fall, we will work through the same steps that we did during the TLCP cycle.

Key learnings:

My key learning is to maximize my time with students by allowing students to have more ownership over their learning. I need to continually look for areas within my program and across subject areas that lend themselves to students doing more on their own. This will allow me more time to work one-on-one with students who truly need more of my time. To other teachers, I would suggest that they identify an aspect of their classroom/planning/assessment that they feel can be improved if they took the time to do some research and be willing to continually reflect on what is effective in their current practice and what can be changed for the better.

References:

Junior Guides to Effective Instruction

Making Classroom Assessment Work – Anne Davies

Self-Assessment and Goal Setting, Setting and Using Criteria, Conferencing and Reporting – Kathleen Gregory, Caren Cameron, Anne Davies

Boy Writers – Ralph Fletcher

Comprehensive Literacy Resource for Grades 3-6 Teachers – Miriam P. Trehearne

Teaching for Comprehending and Fluency – Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell