

**Writing Conferences:
Powerful Tools for Writing Instruction**

CSE Technical Report 494

Monette Coleman McIver and Shelby A. Wolf
University of Colorado at Boulder

November 1998

National Center for Research on Evaluation,
Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST)
Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE)
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1522
(310) 206-1532

Project 1.5 The Effects of Standards-Based Assessments on Schools and Classrooms. Brian Stecher, Project Director, CRESST/RAND

Copyright © 1998 The Regents of the University of California

The work reported herein was supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, PR/Award Number R305B60002, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U. S. Department of Education.

The findings and opinions expressed in this report do not reflect the positions or policies of the National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U. S. Department of Education.

**WRITING CONFERENCES:
POWERFUL TOOLS FOR WRITING INSTRUCTION¹**

**Monette Coleman McIver and Shelby A. Wolf
University of Colorado at Boulder
Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST)**

Abstract

This report highlights one of six language arts case study teachers whose classroom we have visited for a two day period to observe writing instruction, to ask questions about the KIRIS assessments and to talk with her students about their writing. In this piece we talk about questions and how this teacher's expert use of query gives her students the encouragement they need to make their writing flow as well as the capacity and skills to unplug the writing of their peers. This cycle informs her instruction and constitutes a major portion of her curriculum. Her commitment to questioning embodies not only her pedagogical content knowledge but her special stance as a curious and critical reader. The students' responses to their teacher's questions give her the feedback she needs to decide when and how to incorporate different illustrations and examples into her teaching that will help her students become better writers.

Nestled amidst the rolling hills of a Kentucky suburb rests an elementary school where students of all ages actively engage in literate activities. In one fourth grade classroom these activities—reading stories aloud, writing poetry, listening to peer authors and voicing opinions to name a few—are extraordinary chiefly because the students have an extraordinary teacher, Mrs. Olinski. We would like to show how this exemplary teacher talks with her students about writing and how she employs the art of questioning in writing conferences.

Mrs. Olinski is one of six language arts case study teachers. For the past year and a half, we have visited her classroom for a two-day period to observe her instruction, to ask her questions about the statewide performance-based assessments and her personal knowledge base, and to talk with her students about their writing.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the National Conference on Large Scale Assessment titled "From Rhetoric to Reality: Assessment Reform Gets Real," Colorado Springs, CO, June 14-17, 1998.

I've borrowed the pseudonym for this teacher from E. L. Konigsburg's Newbery Award winning novel *The View from Saturday* because her classroom practices closely resemble those of the teacher in the story. Mrs. Olinski, both fictional and hypothetical, uses questions to encourage her students to take risks because "sometimes to be successful, you have to risk making mistakes" (p. 120).

Here we share a snapshot of the type of risks students are willing to take in this classroom. Last spring we eavesdropped on an intriguing conversation taking place during writers' workshop time. There were two small boys sitting in the book corner deeply engaged in a student-to-student writing conference. We sat quietly and listened as Richard read his football poem to Joseph. Joseph listened intently before responding based on his dual role of reader and peer.

Joseph: Okay, I have a question. Is this supposed to be like a story?

Richard: No a poem. A poem doesn't have to rhyme.

Joseph: [agreeing] But it doesn't flow like a poem. You need to make it flow more like a poem.

Richard: [perplexed] You mean add a comma? You mean add a pause?

Joseph: [struggling to articulate his thinking] To where your words connect like a poem. Since it's not a rhyming poem, your words are kinda ...

Richard: Choppy?

Joseph: Yeah, that's why I asked cuz it sounded more like a story.

After this brief discussion, Joseph still wasn't satisfied with the exchange or with his ability to adequately convey his needs as a reader to Richard. Recognizing that they were conveniently situated in the book corner, Joseph reached behind him, pulled out a book of poetry and encouraged Richard to look at the poems as a model even though they were rhyming poems. They talked about the poetry, and then Joseph offered Richard the following sound advise, "Some poems kind of stop. But then [they] will start flowing again. It's kind of like a waterfall when it gets plugged up. But then it unsticks and starts flowing again."

In this piece we will talk about questions and how Mrs. Olinski's expert use of query gives her students the encouragement they need to make their writing flow as well as the capacity and skills to unplug the writing of their peers. This cycle informs Mrs. Olinski's instruction and constitutes a major portion of her curriculum.

Her commitment to questioning embodies not only her pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) but her special stance as a curious and critical reader. The students' responses to Mrs. Olinski's questions give her the feedback she needs to decide when and how to incorporate different illustrations and examples into her teaching that will help her students become better writers.

There are three key points we would like to make. First, teachers' wealth of knowledge, including their pedagogical content knowledge, gives them the unique perspective necessary to meet the specific instructional needs of their students. Second, the writing conference, albeit short and succinct, provides valuable opportunities for teachers to meet these needs because they are so amenable to the use of questions. And finally, Mrs. Olinski's expert model permits her students to openly question and offer opinions about the writing of their peers.

Lee Shulman (1987) reminds us that the art of teaching necessitates a broad knowledge base. Primary among the different forms of knowledge teachers possess are content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, curricular knowledge, knowledge about students, and pedagogical content knowledge. He considers pedagogical content knowledge as "that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding" (p. 8). Implicit in this type of knowledge is a firm grasp of both pedagogy and subject matter and specifically how both relate to the individual needs of learners. And as Shulman further contends, it is this combination that separates teachers from subject matter specialists.

This special amalgam so adequately represents the teacher in this case study, Mrs. Olinski, and her instructional technique because it allows her to simultaneously display her needs and strengths as a reader, or her content knowledge, with her gift as an instructional leader via her pedagogical knowledge.

Mrs. Olinski's primary opportunity for conveying this knowledge base to her students is the writing conference. Writing experts tell us that these conferences enable teachers to learn what students already know (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983, 1994). As Donald Graves (1994) contends, "The purpose of the writing conference is to help children teach you about what they know so that you can help them more effectively with their writing" (p. 59). As this quote suggests, the need for pedagogical content knowledge is central to the writing conference. As students teach us what they know through their writing, we as teachers assume the role of

an inquisitive reader who requires certain elements from written work. These might include clarity of message, audience appreciation and attention to playful or artful language. But at the same time, we must use these interactions to actually teach the skills that enable student writers to “discover the meanings they don’t yet know” (Atwell, 1987, p. 94). Thus, the writing conference is the optimal moment for teachers to employ their pedagogical content knowledge or “the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations—in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others” (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). Mrs. Olinski confirms this connection when she says, “It’s me understanding what the concept is and then helping the kids understand what that concept is. I do it through mini lessons. I do it through conferencing. I do it through interacting with the writing.”

Although the conference provides the forum necessary for this exchange of knowledge to take place, Mrs. Olinski must use a practical method to communicate her needs as a reader to her students. She does this by questioning, by effectively prodding her students to return to their seats and add that those vital components that will further engage their readers. Stephen Smith (1992) reminds us that the use of questions promotes shared investigation. That is, questioning is a method of engaging all in the process of mutual understanding. Further, J. T. Dillon (1986) believes that students’ questions give teachers unique insight into how they are constructing meaning. Yet this advantage works both ways, for teachers’ questions exhibit their understanding also. Given a sample of student writing, upon hearing its reading in a conference, the teacher responds in a manner that clarifies interpretation for both the student and the teacher when questions are employed. Nancie Atwell (1987) furthers this point when discussing her guidelines for teachers during the writing conference. She writes,

In questioning students, ask about something you’re curious about as an inquisitive human being. Forget you’re an English teacher and focus on the meaning. What would you like to know more about? What didn’t you understand? Then focus on just these one or two issues, taking care not to overwhelm the writer, asking open-ended questions that will allow the writer to talk. (p. 95)

As a reader, Mrs. Olinski makes her understanding of students’ writing known through her questions which provide the feedback necessary to uncover those important and essential components of effective writing. As Mrs. Olinski advocates,

“the power of the conference is the power of suggestion,” and her suggestions routinely present themselves through her questions.

However, for Mrs. Olinski, this cycle of inquiry is complete only when her students assume what Commeyras and Sumner (1995) call an “independent, confident, questioning spirit” (p. 26). (See Figure 1.) This means the students willingly accept responsibility for questioning each other as well as Mrs. Olinski because they recognize and appreciate the requirements of good writing.

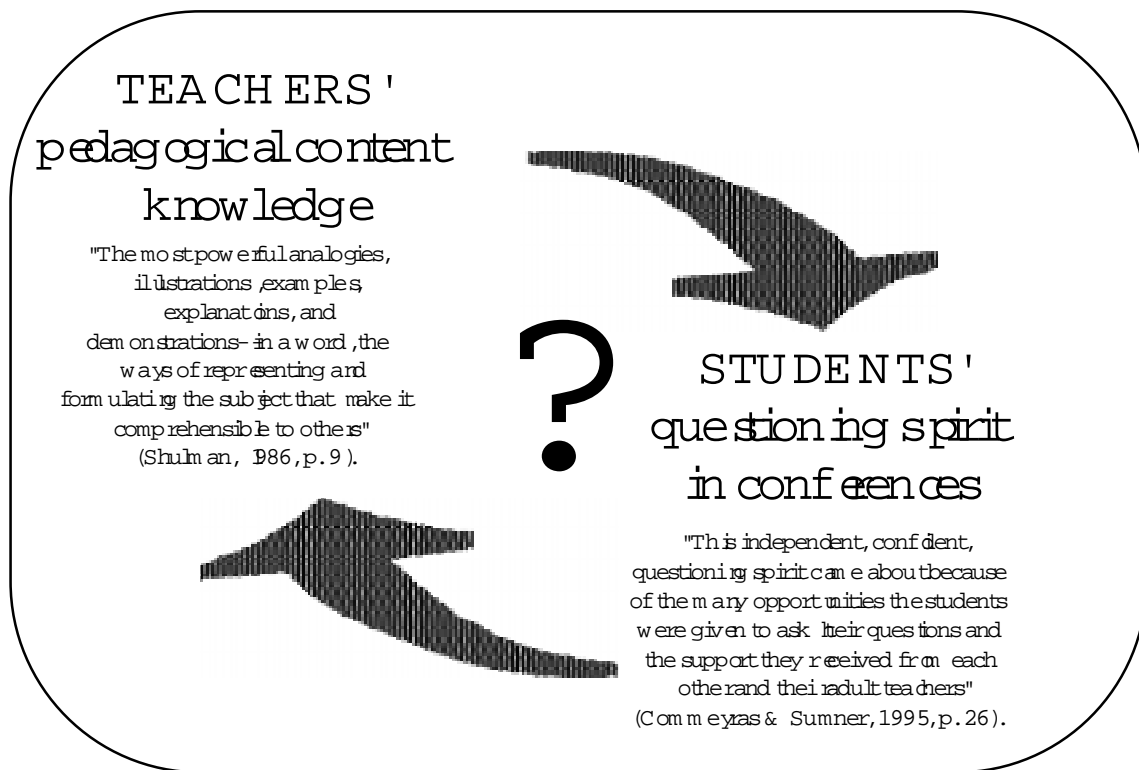


Figure 1. The cycle of inquiry that takes place in the classroom

Mrs. Olinski’s pedagogical content knowledge allows her to represent her subject matter knowledge in ways that are clear and informative for her students. As a result, her students possess the independent, confident, questioning spirit that permits them to ask for and get better writing from their peers. And all of this learning and knowledge exchange takes place through the use of questions.

In order to understand the craft of Mrs. Olinski’s conferencing style, it would be helpful to review and analyze a typical teacher-student conference. We returned

to Kentucky this past fall during the time when Mrs. Olinski and her students were just beginning this cycle. Her teacher-student conferences rarely last for more than five minutes, yet they are packed with information which the students immediately put to use.

This conference is Sarah's second conference of the morning. Sarah was writing a personal narrative describing an amusement park visit, and she wanted to share the writing she had completed since her earlier meeting with Mrs. Olinski. Sarah read her writing, and Mrs. Olinski acknowledged that the trip sounded exciting. Afterwards, the following exchange occurred:

Mrs. Olinski: What was perhaps your most favorite event? Was it the ride? Could you describe the roller coaster a little more? Close your eyes, go back and lock yourself in that roller coaster car. What are you thinking about right now? [Student is excited as she responds saying something about dropping.] You dropped? Where did you go? Where did your stomach go? Did it jerk you and did you go like this [starts jerking around]? What else? What were you hearing while you were on the roller coaster? I need words.

Sarah: It sounded like something is being smashed.

Mrs. Olinski: Really how come? Could you compare it to something?

Sarah: Like how?

Mrs. Olinski: Well I could compare this noise [points to a portable fan to her side]. I find that to be a soothing noise. That soothes me like the rolling ocean.

Sarah: [understanding] It sounded like a train or something.

Mrs. Olinski: I want you to really help your reader know how fun that ride was.

This was a typical example of how Mrs. Olinski used questions to improve her comprehension of Sarah's work. She started with the representations Sarah already recorded in her writing, and then she asked for those additional formulations that would focus the story on one particular ride and bring that experience to life. But Mrs. Olinski did this as an interested, inquisitive reader and not only as a teacher. Thus, an element of her pedagogical content knowledge is the necessity to read or interpret her students' work as a reader genuinely interested in what they have to say.

For example, at one point in the interaction Mrs. Olinski encouraged Sarah to imagine she was once again in the roller coaster car. Sarah's eyes closed, Mrs. Olinski asked her "What are you thinking about right now?" Sarah was visibly excited and told Mrs. Olinski that she could feel herself dropping. Next, Mrs. Olinski tossed out several rapid fire questions to help Sarah relive the experience and to recreate a physical recall of her moment on the roller coaster. She asked,

- You dropped?
- Where did you go?
- Where did your stomach go?

These questions may not be considered thought-provoking because they are not higher-order thinking questions such as the "why" questions. And although Dene Thomas (1988) tells us that "why" questions are important because they "[sit] at the very heart of learning: the spirit of curiosity" (p. 555), questions themselves are context specific and as such are not hierarchical (Smith, 1992). J. T. Dillon (1987) advises that, "No specifiable types of questions or questioning behaviors can serve through [the] range of classroom practice, no more than any can serve across the diverse fields of question-answer practices" (p. 61). Thus Mrs. Olinski's choice of questions—while not centered on "why"—symbolized her curiosity as a reader. Through this particular interaction Sarah learned that her reader, in this case Mrs. Olinski, would appreciate more details about the roller coaster ride. At the same time, Mrs. Olinski's decision to ask "where" questions highlighted her willingness to use those practices that best supported and pushed Sarah to become a more competent and effective writer. By asking "what" and "where" Sara could include those words and phrases that would further engage her reader perhaps even more so than a "why" question would have at this point in her writing. To return to Shulman's words, these specific questions show Mrs. Olinski's "own special form of professional understanding" and exhibit her own competency as an astute and attentive reader-teacher.

This conference takes place while Sarah and Mrs. Olinski sit side by side on a bench. This physical proximity allowed Mrs. Olinski to add actual movement to the effectiveness of these physical recall questions. As she asked Sarah the next question, Mrs. Olinski literally started to move around knocking into Sarah as if they were both sitting in a roller coaster car. She asked Sarah, "Did it jerk you and did you go

like this?” Here again, Mrs. Olinski’s ability to help Sarah return to the scene of her experience emphasized her special needs as a reader. To better appreciate Sarah’s harrowing roller coaster ride, Mrs. Olinski solicited information about the motions of Sarah’s stomach and the movement of her body. Yet, note how casually Mrs. Olinski reminded Sarah of her ultimate task. This conference was productive and amusing, but Mrs. Olinski was still the teacher and as such she reminded Sarah that she must recapture this moment in language when she said, “I need words.”

The ability and willingness to instruct is ever present in Mrs. Olinski’s teacher-student conferences. Following the physical recall, Sarah told Mrs. Olinski that “It sounded like something is being smashed.” With this statement Mrs. Olinski assumed both reader and teacher roles. As a reader she understood that it would be helpful if Sarah could compare the sound she remembered to something unique and fresh that might help her readers create a vivid picture in their own minds. And as a teacher she also recognized an opportunity to introduce figurative language in the form of a simile or metaphor. Mrs. Olinski quickly took advantage of the “teachable moment” by not only providing Sarah with an appropriate example but by using what we have come to call an oppositional metaphor. Instead of staying in the moment with Sarah and using a metaphor that could have easily been associated with the roller coaster smashing sound such as a car crashing, Mrs. Olinski chose an exact opposite comparing the soothing sound of a fan to a rolling ocean. By doing this, Sarah could not simply agree with Mrs. Olinski’s example, but she had to actually create a comparison of her own that would adequately describe the smashing sound she remembered from her roller coaster ride. By using techniques such as this oppositional metaphor, Mrs. Olinski **gives** to her students **without giving everything away**. She helps them see the type of language they need to include, but she respects their ability to find the right words and their own words to make their message.

Sarah immediately understood this comparison and offered that “it sounded like a train or something.” Before closing this conference, Mrs. Olinski reminded Sarah that her job as a writer was to make sure that her reader could fully appreciate her roller coaster experience. She sent Sarah back to her desk to continue her writing with the these final words to help focus her task, “I want you to really help your reader know how fun that ride was.”

Returning to the figure which depicts Mrs. Olinski’s instructional cycle, this teacher uses her knowledge about writing and the art of teaching writing to help her

students see their own strengths and capabilities as writers. Her most effective method for sharing this with her students is questioning—questions that highlight her requirements as a critical reader and questions that allow her students to learn provocative writing techniques. By virtue of her consistent modeling and ability to encourage her students to take risks with their writing, the boys and girls in this fourth grade classroom eventually transfer these literate skills into their own peer conferences. Those conferences where Joseph is brave enough to not only question Richard’s decision to use poetry to talk about his football experience, but also Richard’s willingness to attend to Joseph’s desire for a poem that flows.

In closing, Mrs. Olinski shared her theory of how children learn during one of our recent visits to her classroom. She said, “That right there is my theory of how [students] learn. They know. They’ll tell me ... if I listen to their questions. We don’t need to develop any fancy curriculum. We need to listen to kids’ questions.” Mrs. Olinski not only listens to her students’ questions, but she utilizes this query herself. The answers to both give her the messages she needs to inform her future instruction and inspire the creative, competent, and fearless writers and readers in her classroom.

References

- Atwell, N. (1987). *In the middle: Writing, reading, and learning with adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Calkins, L. M. (1986). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Commeyras, M., & Sumner, G. (1995). *Questions children want to discuss about literature: What teachers and students learned in a second-grade classroom* (NRRC Year 2 Project 1.9.2 Research Report). Athens, GA: University of Georgia and University of Maryland, National Reading Research Center.
- Dillon, J. T. (1987). The multidisciplinary world of questioning. In W. W. Wilen (Ed.), *Questions, questioning techniques, and effective teaching* (pp. 49-66). Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Dillon, J. T. (1986). Student questions and individual learning. *Educational theory*, 36, 333-341.
- Graves, D. H. (1994). *A fresh look at writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Graves, D. H. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Konigsburg, E. L. (1996). *The view from Saturday*. New York: Atheneum Books.
- Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57, 1-22.
- Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15, 4-14.
- Smith, S. G. (1992). What is it to question? *Soundings*, 75, 129-146.
- Thomas, D. K. (1988). Why questions and why answers: Patterns and purposes. *Language Arts*, 65, 552-556.