In pursuit of "a good healthy chat": The roles of organization and rapport-building in effective middle school literacy instruction

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IN PURSUIT OF "A GOOD HEALTHY CHAT": 
THE ROLES OF ORGANIZATION AND RAPPORT-BUILDING IN EFFECTIVE 
MIDDLE SCHOOL LITERACY INSTRUCTION 

BY 

DOUGLAS KAUFMAN 
B.A., Bates College, 1985 

DISSERTATION 

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire 
in Partial Fulfillment of 
the Requirements for the Degree of 

Doctor of Philosophy 
in 
Reading and Writing Instruction 

May, 1998
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

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Dr. Cyrene Wells, Assistant Professor of Education
University of Maine at Machias

April 1st, 1998
Date
DEDICATION

To the loves of my life:

Jennifer, who modeled motivation, put up with it all, and still loves me

and Rebecca, who set my priorities straight and gave me perspective.

I adore you both.
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To those who don't believe writing is a social event, try writing a dissertation. The support, encouragement, ideas, and advice I received from friends, family, and members of the academic community helped shape and enhance this dissertation from its first tiny conceptual seeds. I honor you all.

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truly understand for the first time what the term teacher-researcher means. She has made me a better teacher and a better learner in thousands of ways. Cheers to you, Linda.
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ABSTRACT

IN PURSUIT OF "A GOOD HEALTHY CHAT": THE ROLES OF ORGANIZATION AND RAPPORT-BUILDING IN EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL LITERACY INSTRUCTION

by

Douglas Kaufman
University of New Hampshire, May, 1998

In this study I explore what classroom conditions a master eighth-grade language arts teacher created in order to become a more effective listener. I defined effective listening as a deep receptivity that leads the listener to create responses that satisfy the other’s needs. Responses must help students move their ideas and work progressively forward.

Conditions that promote effective listening, then, serve two purposes: they 1) enhance teacher receptivity and 2) help students better articulate their interests, knowledge, and needs.

During the 1996-1997 school year I conducted a qualitative study that drew heavily upon ethnographic methodologies. As a participant-observer I took extensive field notes; conducted surveys; collected student writing and other documents, audio- and videotaped writing conferences and class sessions, and conducted interviews with the teacher and students. I analyzed my data for patterns that provided “structural corroboration” (Eisner, 1991), cataloguing aspects of the teacher’s practices that promoted or inhibited her ability to provide effective response. My analysis included a component of the teacher’s own self-reflections about her pedagogy.

My findings suggest that two fundamental conditions enhanced the teacher’s literacy instruction. The first was her rigorous and long-term development of consistent classroom organization and procedures. A resultant increase in efficiency gave her more time to listen to students. Commensurately, it offered students easier reception of her instruction. The instruction (based on modeling and sharing authentic literature and literacy practices) in turn
gave rise to student stories that became the basis of their writing.

The second condition was the teacher's establishment of rapport with students—a mutual sense of comfort, trust, and affinity that promoted open, effective communication. Rapport allowed students to discuss freely issues of personal relevance. It also engendered in the teacher a more receptive attitude toward students and their words. That this rapport had an affective as well as an intellectual component suggests that we need to address students in terms of their emotional and social lives as well as their academic ones in order to help them further their own literacy growth.
CHAPTER I

HOW MAY WE BETTER VALUE STUDENTS' VOICES?

What new challenges do we as teachers face when we offer students voices in the classroom? What do we tend to miss in our instruction when we welcome those voices? How do we access those voices, ensuring that students communicate effectively and that we hear them when they do? The impetus for this study came from questions I had about the difficulties and failures that we teachers encounter when we attempt to restructure our language arts classrooms according to a more response-based format (Murray, 1985). This study is for the teacher who has tried to provide students more time, choice, and response and has come away frustrated. We have read about the successes of language arts teachers at many grade levels (Atwell, 1987; Avery, 1993; Karelitz, 1993; Keams, 1997; Rief, 1992; Romano, 1987; Rothermel, 1996; Wilde, 1993). We intellectually as well as intuitively understand the value of opening up the curriculum to a wider array of possibilities, offering more freedom and responsibility to our students. But in practice we have also encountered unexpected obstacles. “What conditions,” I ask, “does a teacher have to create to listen and respond effectively?”

I have been a middle school language arts teacher, a Ph.D. student, a researcher in a grade school, a tutor, an educational consultant, a teacher of college methods and writing courses, and a supervisor of pre-service teachers. In these capacities I have experienced and seen many of the troubles that occur when we abandon time-honored practices of classroom control and try to find new ways to share control and responsibility with our students. While we champion giving students more “voice” in the classroom, we often have not considered the difficulty students may have in finding their voices or in effectively undermine their learning if we do not determine how our roles as teachers shift to using their voices to grow academically. Our acceptance of students’ voices might, in fact,
complement those voices. Here are three examples, from my own observations and experience, of the dilemmas we face.

1) A graduate intern I supervise is teaching for the first time in an eighth grade classroom. During the first week of school she tells her class that this year they will have the opportunity to choose their own topics, time to revise and craft their work, and permission to move around the room to consult with classmates. Three weeks later she is distraught. Many of the students, she feels, exploit their freedom, gabbing the class away. Others seem utterly confused and frustrated. They seem to have lost direction, seem paralyzed. Still others are unruly. The class rumbles. Angry and sarcastic outbursts punctuate the din.

The intern struggles for control. She returns desks to neat rows and assigns each student a seat. She replaces much of the writing time with vocabulary worksheets and grammar lessons. In a couple of weeks the class is blissfully quiet and the students appear to be working harder, but she is still dissatisfied. The class feels hollow. How, she agonizes, does she encourage freedom and creativity without losing control?

2) At a conference workshop where I present, a grade school teacher says to the group, "I need help! When I confer with students I know I should be listening to them more and letting them talk, but I can’t help myself. As soon as I read their writing I see all these things that need to be corrected, and I just start talking, on and on. How can I stop doing this?" People murmur and nod their heads in empathy.

3) The third example is myself. I entered my first year teaching middle school language arts with very little background. I, like the intern I supervised years later, envisioned a classroom where students would write joyfully about their own topics, learn through experience in authentic situations, and take responsibility for their work. I knew I wanted a classroom where students’ voices were heard.

But I had little idea of how to create one. During the first tumultuous weeks of that first tumultuous year thoughts of my dream class evaporated as I desperately swam upstream to
maintain a modicum of control. My journal entries from the beginning of the year are a sad litany of self pity, confusion, and blame as I try to find my way through the social problems and into academics:

OCTOBER 1: Woe, woe, woe, I'm feeling sorry for myself. My classes were shitty. I wasn’t prepared. I was very tired and short-fused. I bored the kids. I let them get to me. I’m falling behind Elizabeth, and that worries me. I’ve got to prepare, but I’ve been so concerned with group dynamics that I’ve been slacking the academics. It just means more work for me.

Melinda is a handful, really surly and devious. She has no problem with refuting me at every turn. I made her smile today by telling her she was exactly right when answering a question. I will try to use Ron and Jerry to apply peer pressure on the kids with bad attitudes. Their meanness is what gets to me. In 6th grade I was recipient of some of this meanness. I think I take it personally. I bawled out Aaron again today. He’s been loud—demanding a lot of attention—and he’s been making faces behind my back. I finally told him I was sorry I singled him out, because I have seen other kids being obnoxious. It’s just that his voice has been the loudest. He really came around and accepted my explanation. He’s a good kid at heart. Most of them are. I will try to understand Candi and Melinda, and keep a good foot on Vincent, but praise him when he comes through.

Do more activity-related stuff with the kids!

But I had no idea how to do “activity-related stuff with the kids”: how to establish safe boundaries for exploring, set up the physical classroom for easy student flow, or listen to what they said. My methodology was a hodge-podge of lesson plans borrowed from other teachers, many of whom had opposing educational philosophies. As my struggle for control intensified, my practices became more autocratic. By October, my typical language arts class consisted of a) a ten-question quiz to determine who had done the previous night’s reading, b) a discussion (i.e. lecture by me) about the previous night’s reading, c) a whole-class read of the next chapter: student one, read the first paragraph please, student two, read the next paragraph, please. To my credit, I felt humiliated and incompetent.

About halfway through the year, with an acute notion of what didn’t work in my teaching I began anew. A colleague had lent me his copy of In the Middle, by Nancie Atwell (1987). I gushed in my journal, “What a book! It touches on so many things that I want to do!” I had been saved! Over the next few days, I abandoned the busy work I had been assigning and began a writing workshop.
But, as many other “saved” teachers have discovered, the beautifully efficient classroom and profound student writing of Nancie Atwell’s students did not occur spontaneously, as I had hoped, or maybe even expected.

DECEMBER 16: I started the new writing process today. Atwell says in her book that on the first day there has never been a student who didn’t write.
Trina didn’t write.
I knew she wouldn’t. Thus beginneth the long, painful process. I must persist and stick to the program.

Students were wary, confused by the completely new approach thrust upon them. This new style also meant they would have to work harder and think more deeply. Most resisted, and I received a lot of weak, diluted writing. But it was writing, and a far sight better than anything I had seen previously. As the year progressed I chalked my failures up to experience, consoling myself with my administrator’s brilliant insight: “Your first year of teaching you do not teach, you learn. Now get in there and learn.”

I spent the following summer reading voraciously and learning more about teaching language arts. I planned out my classroom, blocked the school year into sections, and ordered vast quantities of writing supplies, paper, and trade books. Most importantly, much of the time I just sat and thought, visualizing how I wanted my classroom to run, dealing with imaginary problems that were sure to arise, trying to justify why I believed the things that I did.

The next year my classes ran more smoothly. My students, beginning the year with a coherent, consistent theme, felt comfortable in this literate world and produced some wonderful work. They were enthusiastic and inquisitive.

But I knew I still had not succeeded. Problems still nagged at me. For instance, as I sat down each day to confer with students about their writing, I found myself asking the same limited number of questions over and over again. “Why did you use the lead you did?” is one I remember. In response, students gave me stock answers that revealed little about their processes or interests (“I put that lead because I wanted to bring the reader into the
story”). In essence, I had ritualized my instruction. I had taken what I had read and treated it as a formula, a step-by-step procedure as to how to teach reading and writing. It was easy to do. In fact, the term “process writing” that many educators threw around, unintentionally lent itself to the idea that there was indeed a single, formulaic process by which students wrote and by which we could teach (Graves, 1997). For instance, countless “activity” books for teachers, ostensibly promoting a process approach, depict literacy learning as a set of programmed procedures and activities (e.g., Jasmine, 1993; Joy, 1992; Schlosser & Philips, 1991; Sobut & Bogen, 1993).

However, the basis for this approach to literacy instruction is a philosophical stance (Bergeron, 1990; Edelsky, Altwerger, and Flores, 1991; Weaver, 1994) that precedes and influences methodology. The philosophy supports a pedagogy in which students learn through active experience, read and write through the context of meaningful language, focus on the process of creation as well as on the created product, interact socially, self-evaluate, and bring prior knowledge to their learning processes. But it does not promote any specific methodological formula. Donald Graves, in his forward to Atwell’s book certainly did not conceive of *In the Middle* as a book about formula:

> Readers looking for methods or step-by-step approaches to a sure fire literacy program will be disappointed. Atwell has no method. Rather, she provides a full immersion approach to reading and writing, an immersion not unlike the acquisition of a new language, where only the new language can be spoken. There is relevant, literate talk in this room; there are no canned lessons, assigned topics, workbooks, language arts textbooks, or the following of prescribed curriculum guides (Atwell, 1987, Foreword).

Yet I, and I suspect others, found ways to turn the ideas into “methods.” I relied too heavily at the beginning of the year on what I saw as a prescribed writing formula of rehearse, draft, confer, re-draft, confer, edit. I also fell into formula when my repertoire of questions became finite. But even Atwell was at first a little taken aback to discover she had no “method”:  

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The first time I read Donald Graves's foreword to *In the Middle*, his declaration that "Atwell has no method" gave me pause. Since I had looked at *In the Middle* as three hundred pages of method, I was interested to know what he thought was going on here. Graves went on to describe my teaching as "a full immersion approach to reading and writing, an immersion not unlike the acquisition of a new language, where only the new language can be spoken." I had to rethink method.

It's true that my experience of literacy and teaching had led me to developing systems for evaluating, keeping records, conferencing, organizing the classroom, and so on. But as my experience grew more diverse and more complex, it was less and less mediated by traditional views of method, of a teacher who's up there orchestrating a program. When I wrote, read, and discovered what I and others did as writers and readers, I began to recognize the conditions [my emphasis] that fostered engagement and excellence (1991, p. xv).

As Atwell suggests, when we focus on the conditions within which the student grows and excels, our priorities shift away from formula. In order to create those conditions, I realized, the first step I had to take was to quit telling students what I thought they needed and listen to them to discover what they did need. Later, during my doctoral studies, I discovered upon review that most of my writing revolved around the central issue of listening to students--learning from them in order to reshape teaching. My interest led to my research question: what conditions are necessary for a teacher to become a better listener and responder? To discover the answer I approached Linda Rief, a teacher who, in her words and practice, demonstrates the value of listening to students. She welcomed me into her classroom for a year to learn how she taught and what challenges she faced while trying to listen. Her invitation highlighted her learning stance: she said she did not think she was a good enough listener and wanted to learn how she might become better.

**A Definition of Effective Listening**

Linda counts as her most influential mentors Donald Murray and Donald Graves, both of whom taught her at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) where she received her masters degree. She continues her relationships with them to this day, and they continue to influence her teaching. She claims that much of what she learned about valuing students voices she learned from them.
Murray, Graves, and their colleagues have been instrumental in revolutionizing the way we teach writing. Beginning in the late 1960s, Murray (1968), along with others exploring similar themes (Britton, 1975, 1993; Elbow, 1973; Emig, 1971; Macrorie, 1970; Moffett, 1968), began to focus on the process of writing as an important learning process in and of itself. In the 1970s and 80s, Graves, Jane Hansen, and Thomas Newkirk at UNH demonstrated that when children have the opportunity to use reading and writing to explore and present what they already know in personally relevant ways, the process of writing contributes to further learning of reading and writing as well as of content material (Graves, 1983; Hansen, 1987; Hansen, Newkirk & Graves, 1985, Newkirk 1989). A call went out for teachers to engage in classroom practices that gave children a “voice,” encouraging them to analyze their work and talk about it while the teacher listened and responded to their needs.

The result was a variety of teaching and learning innovations designed to exploit and enhance the processes of students’ reading and writing as well as the end product. Teachers began to conduct writing conferences, where students spoke first-hand about their processes of draft creation (Graves, 1978; Murray, 1979), and designated “author’s chairs” (Graves & Hansen, 1982; Karelitz, 1993), where students presented their writing to interested peers. They encouraged students to choose their own writing topics (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983) and reading books (Hansen, 1987). They implemented journals where students responded to texts and shared their ideas with other classroom members (Atwell, 1987; Rief 1992). Today, these practices give students the opportunity to engage more thoroughly and thoughtfully in the processes of writing and reading, which enhances their metacognitive skills.

These practices also fundamentally change the role of the student from that of a mere receiver of information to that of a communicator: one who shares with others personal knowledge, wants, needs, successes, and difficulties. This new role means only one thing
for the teacher: a corresponding role shift to that of listener (Brown, et al., 1996; Harris, 1986).

Murray (1982, 1985, 1989) writes often about the importance of listening when teaching composition to college students. He called his approach “response teaching,” in which the student acts first by talking and reading her own writing and the teacher responds according to what he learns by listening to her:

When the student speaks and the teacher and student listen they are both informed about the nature of the writing process that produced the drafts. This is the point at which the teacher knows what needs to be taught or reinforced one step at a time, and the point at which the student knows what needs to be done in the next draft (1982, p.168).…Again and again the teacher listens for what the student is saying—and not saying—to help the student hear the other self that has been monitoring what isn’t yet on the page or what may be beginning to appear on the page (p. 170).

Graves (1983) addresses the role of the writing conference as a venue for teacher listening:

Children do have things to teach us, both about their subjects and how they write about them. The teacher who conducts conferences has a strong appetite for learning, both about the information the child shares, and what the facts reveal about the child and how he writes (99-100).

More recently (1994), he has expanded and highlighted the role of teacher listening, calling it “the foundations for all the actions in [my] book”:

Through our active listening, children become our informants. Unless children speak about what they know, we lose out on what they know and how they know it. Through our eyes and ears we learn from them: their stories, how they solve problems, what their wishes and dreams are, what works/doesn’t work, their vision of a better classroom, and what they need to learn to succeed in math or complete reports (p.16)….Listening to our students helps us to see the inner mechanisms of their learning. Of course, by revealing their learning construct to students, we allow them to see themselves as learners (p.18).

wise parenting, begins with watching and listening and delighting with the learner” (54). Avery (1993) writes, “Given the opportunity to talk with a more patient and authentic listener, [children come] forth with wonderful ideas that [amaze] me with their rationale, thoughtfulness, and creativity” (143).

But, considering the imperative status these educators seem to give to listening, there has been little discussion of how it is defined. Let me give a definition. I begin with the suggestion that proper teacher response is the measure—the only measure—of effective listening. Effective listening is a process of engrossment (Noddings, 1992) and reflection in which the teacher learns from the students and then acts according to what she has learned. A teacher who has listened well may discover that a student needs direct instruction in a specific skill or may discover that the student simply needs to hear his or her words back. The teacher may use these discoveries for long-term reflection that provides context and shapes future action. My working definition for this study is:

*Listening is a deep receptivity of another, which leads the listener to create a conscious response that satisfies the other's immediate and long-term needs.*

The active response is the critical component of the definition. The response may be a conscious non-response or it may be elaborate action. It depends upon the other’s situational need, which the listener learns through deep, careful reception.

To determine whether or not a student’s needs have been met I rely on John Dewey’s (1963) assertion that good education produces “a continuous process of reconstruction of experience” (p.87). For Dewey, there were three types of experiences: 1) “educative” experiences, which promote further and richer experiences; 2) “non-educative” experiences, which do not affect further experiences one way or another; and 3) “mis-educative” experiences, which arrest and/or distort further experiences. Providing educative experiences is at the core of what has come to be known as “progressive education.” One is not being educated unless conditions create new, progressively expanding experiences, each experience building on previous ones and influencing
subsequent ones. An effective response, then, is one that pushes the student forward and promotes a continuously expanding spiral of new experiences that help evolve the student’s knowledge and ability to address personal, social, and academic problems and needs. Dewey states that in any good process of education an effective response “renders its subject capable of further education: more sensitive to conditions of growth and more able to take advantage of them” (1957, p. 185) and “arouses in the learner an active quest for information and for production of new ideas” (1963, p. 79). Murray echoes these sentiments when describing the role of the editor, who must listen and respond well to writers: “There is no one editing personality, but it is the duty of the editor to respond to the writer in such a way that the writer continues to direct his or her own development” (1989, p.123). Listening is only effective if the response it evokes allows the other to make connections with current conceptions of the world and move forward toward new experiences and evolved conceptions. Dewey defined the role of this listening teacher beautifully:

[He] must, if he is an educator, be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental. He must, in addition, have that sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning. It is, among other things, the need for these abilities on the part of the parent and teacher which makes a system of education based upon living experience a more difficult affair to conduct successfully than it is to follow the patterns of traditional education (1963, p. 39).

Effective Listening and Response as an Unnatural Classroom Activity

“A more difficult affair,” says Dewey. The mitigating difficulty of consistently listening and providing educative response helps drive this study. Graves and Murray describe the difficulty of listening in their own work. Graves writes, “Listening to children is a more deliberate act than a natural one. It isn’t easy to put aside personal preferences, anxieties about helping more children, or the glaring mechanical errors that stare from the page” (1983, p.100). Murray notes, “But I thought a teacher had to talk. I feel guilty when I do nothing but listen (1982, p.160).” Teacher listening, in fact, goes against our deeply
rooted pedagogical traditions in which we assume the teacher is the giver of knowledge and the student is the empty vessel waiting to be filled. Nowhere in this transmissionist construct of teaching does teacher listening seem essential.

Instead, most teacher-student correspondence traditionally takes an Initiation-Reply-Evaluation (IRE) format (Cazden, 1988; Mehan 1979), which diminishes the need for engrossed listening: the teacher initiates an action sequence with a student in the form of a question or directive, the student replies according to his or her perception of what the teacher expects, and the teacher then evaluates the response for appropriateness. Often, the teacher initiation elicits one-word or short-sentence answers from students, which can then be evaluated with "yes" or "no," "right" or "wrong" counter-responses. Students who want to be recognized must speak at appropriate junctures in the pattern, in accordance with the teacher's expectations.

IRE is by far the most prevalent form of classroom discourse. Cazden calls it a "default pattern"—what happens unless deliberate action is taken to achieve some alternative" (1988, p. 53). The reasons are easy to speculate: 1) It provides order through its standardized procedure: students focus on the teacher and remain quiet when not answering initiations. 2) It offers evidence that students have learned: students provide correct answers to specific questions. 3) It gives the teacher control of the subject matter and classroom activity: he or she initiates and determines what is presented, how it is presented, and who responds to it. 4) It diminishes the teacher's need to listen carefully: most initiations ask for short answer replies that correlate with an answer the teacher already expects. Cognitively, the only evaluative choices for the teacher are "correct response" and "other."

While the IRE pattern is a useful construct for the teacher who needs specific information from students at various times, its use as the primary discourse methodology is dangerous. By imposing a highly structured sequence of question and response, it effectively prohibits students from searching out new information, reasoning out answers
through extended thought and conversation, and hypothesizing alternative answers (Johnson, 1993).

Hence, the evidence of learning is exaggerated. The short answers students give are discrete and recognizable, which makes them appear powerful, but they offer little evidence that students can carry on effective dialogues, analyze complex problems, access information independently, set goals and make plans, think metacognitively, and use their natural curiosity. The more complex evidence of learning that reveals itself when students are in the process of learning, is superseded by the specific evidence of a very narrow band of factual knowledge.

The teacher's social control that the IRE format engenders may further eliminate student opinion, speculation, and conversation. The teacher's sense of relevance takes precedence and students who feel disenfranchised from her views may resort to apathetic acceptance of her singular view of the world, rebel through deliberate acts of transgression, or simply fail because they do not understand the teacher's expectations (Delpit, 1995; Gilmore, 1983, 1985; Heath, 1983, Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Taylor, 1991).

These difficulties are exacerbated because, by not having listened deeply, the teacher does not understand the student's educational expectations. Sperling and Freedman (1987) examined the misunderstandings that occurred between teachers and students in writing conferences. They posit that the teacher and student each bring a different set of information, skills, and values to the conference, which causes each to misread the other's comments and responses. These differences may be seen on the individual student level and in the student community as a whole.

Dyson (1993) and Newkirk (Newkirk & McLure, 1992) have suggested that students comprise a unique culture or "social world" within the classroom, with fundamentally different tastes, needs, rituals, and agendas from the teacher. If one adopts this perspective, it is easier to acknowledge the teacher's difficulty in understanding and listening to students. Being less familiar with the customs of the student world, the teacher
does not necessarily know which student-given cues are significant, and therefore can not always respond most effectively.

If, however, she adopts a listening stance, she begins to attend better to their now clearer needs, attempting to bridge their different perspectives so that the child may become knowledgeable about, and articulate in, both social realms. This is one of the rationales behind the call for teacher-research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

It is not a new idea, but it is still a revolutionary role change. Those who have not adapted their role—who have not accepted or understood the profound shift from “giver of knowledge” to “listener and responder”—may fail to create educative experiences, which engender “a continuous process of reconstruction of experiences.” Teacher listening, however, leads to proper courses of action. These were the benefits Linda Rief strove to attain.

Linda Rief: A Teacher Committed to Effective Listening and Response

I first became familiar with Linda Rief’s work when I read her book, Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents (1992), which documents her attempts to learn about her students. Two years later I took a summer course on reading and writing instruction from her and observed her teaching first-hand. It was notable in that we students spoke much more in class than did she, and that she relayed back what she had learned about each of us.

In her writing I saw Linda’s commitment to provide effective responses to her students after learning their needs:

My classroom has evolved slowly. I didn’t change everything over night. I focused on one or two things at a time. I listened to my students, trying constantly to figure out what was working and what wasn’t working. (1992, p.2)

[One] year my focus was on conferences. A professor taught me what not to do. “This is garbage,” he said, throwing my master’s thesis across the desk. With this comment all the constructive positive responses from the other four readers went right out of my head. I couldn’t revise the paper for months. I carry that lesson with me every time I kneel down to talk with kids about their writing. What response helps the student learn best? Who gives that response? How can I best
model constructive response? My first question to students has become, “How can I help you?” (1992, p.3)

We show our students we value them as individuals when we value their voices. And we hear their voices when we invite them to show us what they know and how they know that through their reading and writing. We will hear the unique, honest, courageous voices of our students when they are allowed to show us what they think and know and feel. It is the kind of learning that matters. Listen to the voices that emerge when our students are reading and writing for life. (1994, p.87)

I am an observer in my own classroom, jotting down what students say and do that intrigues me. (1994, p.94)

The craft of teaching is inextricably tied to the craft of listening to our kids and acting on what they tell us. (1995, p.9)

I entered her classroom to discover how she met her challenge to herself.

Discoveries from the Research: Conditions that Promote Vital Talk and Enhance Listening and Response

Given Linda’s demonstrated commitment to the type of listening and response I define above—and the difficulties of performing them well—one of my goals was to uncover what classroom conditions Linda had to create that allowed her to listen and respond effectively.

I observed, participated, and collected data in Linda’s eighth grade language arts classroom for the 1996-97 school year. I left in June with a complex idea of what promoted academic success. I discovered the profound importance of the teacher creating conditions that promoted rich and extensive student conversation about topics that were worth listening to.

Linda determined worth by the value students placed on the subjects of their own talk and writing. Her first motivation, then, became to help students to discuss and write about aspects of the world that had real significance to their lives. The requirement was quite foreign to some students, whose discussion and writing topics in previous years had been chosen by others; they had grown accustomed to writing about issues irrelevant to themselves. Many students initially struggled to break down the barrier between what was personally important and what was school-important.
I discovered that in order for Linda to help her students most effectively talk and write about significant issues, she had to create two conditions: 1) that of organization and procedure and 2) that of rapport.

First, the immaculately organized physical and procedural dimensions of her classroom ensured the time and space for extended talk, writing, listening, and response for both students and Linda. It also taught students how to manage and exploit new freedoms of time and choice.

In class, Linda was the center of attention for only brief periods of the day. She rarely guided students' work by rigid assignments. But the class functioned smoothly and efficiently because of Linda's attention to organization and clear working procedures, which students learned to abide by without her daily direction. In this class every book, every written idea, and every piece of finished writing had a different, specific, accessible home. Resultantly, the control Linda had relinquished by opening the curriculum up to student choice and freedom of movement was not lost. Instead, it shifted to another part of the classroom dynamic, housed inside this larger framework of procedures and organization that established clear boundaries while setting the stage for students to work, talk, and write more often and more independently. Linda didn't simply give students more freedom; she first taught them how to organize their freedom. She shifted much of the responsibility for classroom control to them, which had the residual effect of giving her more time to listen. Chapter Four will show how.

The second condition of rapport, which I define as a mutual sense of comfort, trust, and affinity between the teacher and student that engenders more open, effective communication, sends the message that the teacher cannot always simply focus upon the student's work—either product or process—and expect growth and success. More often than not, the interpersonal relationship between the student and teacher has a profound effect on the student's motivation and work (McLeod, 1995; Tobin, 1993). Linda had to attend to her interactions with the students much more carefully than if she had taught using...
a primarily lecture- or textbook-centered approach. To encourage students to discuss personally important topics, often for the first time in their school careers, she had to attend to the affective as well as the intellectual aspects of most students' lives, had to recognize and embrace social as well as academic concerns. When she did, Linda's listening became an activity that fed itself. When she opened herself to what was actually significant to students and returned responses that satisfied their needs, their relationships grew. Talking to the teacher gradually became easier. Listening helped to erase the line between personal and academic.

Rapport-building necessitated Linda abandon formula or strict agenda. In a classroom of twenty-seven students, there were twenty-seven unique personalities and sets of needs. To ensure that she met those needs, Linda could not rely on pat questions or instruction. She had to identify individual needs in individual situations, sometimes groping to find which words were truly important to the student and which were not.

But what a complex world! I was profoundly struck at how tremendously difficult authentic listening and relationship-building are, even for this most successful teacher. The implications of opening the classroom up to the creative outpouring of twenty-seven personalities made themselves clear. First, it was virtually impossible for Linda to give each student the individual time she wanted to give. Instead, her listening had to serve as a model to the students so that they could begin to listen and respond to one another, providing them with listening skills that could serve them in the future. Students in this class did not rely on Linda alone for appropriate feedback. They had to learn to rely on one another.

Difficult, too, were the inevitable clashes in personality and personal agendas. While Linda could quickly empathize and build rapport with many students, she struggled to relate to those students who had vastly different concepts from hers of what is important in the world. Linda's challenge was to remain focused on discovering what was important to them rather than immediately trying to save them from their own perspectives.
This dissertation reveals her successes and failures in the hope that they will benefit teachers who have had difficulty implementing literacy programs where untraditional responsibilities muddy—and enrich—the pedagogical waters. By presenting this teacher—this organizer and rapport-builder—I depict at least two keys to successful classroom evolution.
CHAPTER II

SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

Durham, New Hampshire

Durham, New Hampshire, rural-suburban town of about 11,500 residents, is located in south-eastern New Hampshire, near the Great Bay, which opens into the Atlantic. It is a prototypical New England setting: bucolic and dotted with clapboard houses. Two rivers, the Oyster and the Lamprey, run within its boundaries; swans reside on the Mill Pond.

Durham was first settled in 1635 as part of the adjoining city of Dover but was separately incorporated in 1732. In 1891 the University of New Hampshire, a land grand institution then called New Hampshire College, relocated to Durham from Hanover after wealthy farmer Benjamin Thompson bequeathed his land to the state to create an agricultural school. The school's move steadily redefined the town from that of the center of a primarily farming and ship-building community to that of a more urbane college town. Today the University is Durham's largest employer and greatly affects its demographics. It is one of the more affluent communities in the area. Its residents have a high school graduation rate of over 97%, and over 66% have earned bachelors degrees or higher. Almost two-thirds of the residents are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Durham is largely Caucasian. 1990 census figures show less than one percent of the population to be Black, about two percent to be Asian, and about one percent to be Hispanic.

Oyster River Middle School

Walk about three blocks out the front door of Thompson Hall, the oldest and most distinguished building on the UNH campus, and you will reach the front door of the Oyster River Middle School. It is a large, red-brick, L-shaped building that houses about 800
students in grades 5 through 8. The building has undergone extensive renovation this past year to accommodate the growing school population. At the beginning of the year the students had to navigate around workmen on ladders and suffer the occasional rattle of jackhammers as they tried to read and write. Behind the school is a large grassy area broken into different playing fields. Walk beyond the fields and you will come to the Oyster River High School. Both schools are part of the Oyster River Cooperative School District, which also serves the adjoining towns of Lee and Madbury. The district's two elementary schools, which feed the Middle School, are in these towns.

The faculty and students of the Middle School get along well. They talk amiably with one another in the halls and in class, and though some students belong to various social cliques, the groups here appear more loosely affiliated. Students hang out with their friends but they are also open and friendly with almost all the other students. They seem to respect their school. Halls are clean and everyone keeps their talk to a low buzz when other classes are in session.

Although the community is primarily middle to upper-middle class, there are still students whose families live below the poverty level. Some students from every economic level have been coded with learning disabilities or have been identified as needing some sort of special help. The school, with resources made available from the community's high property tax base, is able to accommodate most students' special needs.

The accessibility of the University and its affiliated events and programs have greatly benefited the teachers at the school. On average they are a committed, highly professional group with an ongoing desire to improve. Oyster River teachers pay no tuition for University courses, and many continue to take classes and attend workshops, conferences, lectures, and cultural events that come into town. A few others, like Linda, have written for professional publications. The University affords them a good number of undergraduate student teachers, graduate teaching interns, and researchers. Many
classrooms have a surprising number of adults moving in and out during the day, observing and helping students with their work and other concerns.

In this year, the Middle School has approximately 197 eighth graders, a larger than usual group. While fifth graders stay with one teacher for most of their subjects, sixth through eighth graders belong to teams. Each team consists of two to four teachers who each teach a specific subject area. Within each team, two to four classes of about twenty-five students each travel among the teachers on separate schedules. Some teams have combinations of sixth and seventh or seventh and eighth grade classes. In the past Linda's team, "Polaris," was comprised of two seventh grade and two eighth grade classes, but this year all four classes are eighth grade.

Since each team works as an individual unit, the team teachers devise their own schedules, which allows them a high degree of professional autonomy. Many teams, including Linda's, sometimes use their freedom to create interdisciplinary projects and curricula.

There are three other teachers on Linda's team. Michelle McInnes is the math teacher. She and Linda sometimes spend their lunch periods going on walks and talking. Mark Nichols teaches social studies and Sue Bissell teaches science. They all work together to link the subject matter of their disciplines and accommodate one another's time needs during the year. In addition to these core members, an art teacher, a health teacher, foreign language teachers, and a music/drama teacher work with the team. The students will study each of these disciplines for one quarter of the four-quarter year. Linda works especially closely with Beth Doran, the art teacher and David Ervin, the music teacher. With Beth she will teach a unit where students draw and write cartoons and illustrate their writing. With David she and the students will collaborate to write and produce a full-length musical play. The mutual like and respect of the team teachers for one another seems to influence the attitude and actions of their students.
My Role as a Researcher

My Relationship with Students

For my study I adopted the role of a participant observer in the classroom, a term that suggests "that you are directly involved in community life, observing and talking with people as you learn from them their view of reality" (Agar, 1980, p. 114). My first goal was to develop rapport with the students, what Spradley (1979) calls a "harmonious relationship" between the students and the researcher, which means that "a basic sense of trust has developed that allows for the free flow of information" (p. 78). This relationship did not have to mean friendship, just a measure of respect that allowed easy and open communication.

In past research, rapport-building had felt fairly natural and easy for me; the role of participant observer is one with which I feel comfortable. I had engaged in teacher-research in my own language arts classes, conducted participant research for two years in a fourth grade classroom (Kaufman, 1995, 1998a, 1998b), and observed and interacted with teachers and students in a variety of grade levels in my capacity as a college instructor. By entering my sites expressing my genuine curiosity as to what was going on and my genuine regard for young people, I have felt, in most cases, accepted as a researcher and as a person. I have adopted a conversational, friendly approach that I felt followed my natural style of interacting with people.

I was able to develop a strong working rapport with almost all of the students in Linda's classes. In class I participated in ways that I felt gave me academic insight and also gained students' trust and increased their willingness to converse honestly with me. Immersed in the classroom day as I was, I sometimes took on the role of helper or teacher, conferring with students about their work, helping them find books, answering their questions.

At times I became a student, often performing the same exercises and activities that students themselves did in class. There was a certain artificiality to this role in that I was not being graded or otherwise scrutinized (although Linda asked me on occasion to read my
writing), but I took the assignments seriously and often shared them with students. My sharing seemed to encourage them to begin to share their writing with me, and when I conferred with students about their writing, I often felt they saw me more as a writing peer than as a teacher.

I also engaged in social talk and activities with students. I spent my lunches in Linda’s room where a group of girls who called themselves “the lunch bunch” gathered to talk and scavenge one another’s food. I shared my stories about my childhood in New Mexico, my wife and new baby, and the hardships of my research. We shared many jokes, most of them obnoxious, some of them unprintable. I also attended some out-of-school events, including a teachers’ conference to which Linda took a group of students, and the class’s end of the year musical.

Also helpful was the stance I took on my first day in the classroom when I introduced myself and explained my reason for being there. I told them I was there to understand how Mrs. Rief listened to students, and I strongly emphasized that I was there in the role of a learner. My intent was to dispel the idea that I was there in the role of “evaluator,” somehow judging them or their work for correctness. Instead, I told them I was there to discover something I didn’t yet know: how do students teach the teacher? This statement appeared to appeal to many students who came up to me later to verify what I had said. Linda also helped put me in the position of learner rather than judge, introducing me to each class by saying, “The reason I invited Doug into this classroom is because it’s good for me to have people wondering what I’m doing. It helps me, makes me think about my teaching.”

One role I was unwilling to assume was that of disciplinarian. There were times that I saw untoward activities in the classroom, but I did not confront students or inform Linda if there did not appear to be immediate danger. On occasion, if I saw a particularly blatant act of cruelty by one student upon another I would quietly inform Linda with the request that she find a way to address the student without revealing where she got her information. If
students asked me for some sort of permission I usually told them I had no authority one way or the other but would tell them it was fine by me if they went to the bathroom (which they were allowed to do without asking permission). On occasion I had opportunities to substitute teach Linda's classes. Wilcox (1995) felt comfortable substitute teaching the third class she was researching. I, on the other hand, was wary that the disciplinary role I would have to assume would undermine my future ability to have students speak openly with me, so I turned the opportunities down.

By the end of the year I discovered that the inherently social nature of qualitative research had thrust me into a variety of roles, all of which, when performed sincerely rather than as a conscious effort to gain favor, helped to create and sustain rapport with my co-participants. By the end of the year I had played the roles of interested observer, helper, purveyor of needed information, storyteller, confidant, friend, counselor, and learning colleague.

Almost every student seemed to accept my presence in the classroom, although their daily interaction with me varied. Some students left our relationship at a friendly hello at the beginning of class and would rarely speak with me unless I first approached. When I did approach they were accommodating, answering my questions freely but perhaps not offering many details beyond the scope of my specific query. Other students almost immediately took me into their fold, eagerly demanding that I sit down at their tables, thrusting their writing into my hands for feedback, reading passages to me from their favorite books, and telling me their trials and tribulations. Every student called me by my first name after I told them to call me whatever felt most comfortable to them. These students quickly began to ask me questions about my personal life: my past, my family, my likes and dislikes.

On occasion their questions got quite personal. For example, near the end of the year a couple of students asked me if I had ever smoked pot. A question like this can be an attempt to undermine the adult's position as an authority or moral figure by creating
discomfort or revealing hypocrisy. It can also be honest inquiry by a student who trusts the adult or perceives a social bond between them; the student poses this question to help process personally important issues. In this case I felt the question was one of the latter. From rumors I had heard, I suspected that these students were experimenting or considering experimenting with marijuana, though I had no evidence. I felt I had to answer them honestly to preserve the relationship we had built over the months, yet at the same time I felt obligated to fulfill my role as a more experienced adult who could not condone pot smoking by thirteen-year-olds. I could not give a message of tacit approval despite the risk I might take to my relationship with them. I told them that I had tried pot when I was younger but also told them, truthfully, that I had not continued because it had made me feel sick and out of control. Trying to remain truthful so that my message did not sound like propagandistic rhetoric I said I had known people who had spent many years in jail for dealing drugs. I concluded: “The question for me has always been not whether I should or should not smoke pot because of what someone else tells me, but why I am doing it? That question forces me to think for myself. I do know that the people I knew who drugged—and some were my friends—were also the people who liked themselves least.” I don’t know the long-term effect of my answer, but I know that it appeared to satisfy their immediate question. It also allowed me to state my views while still maintaining an open relationship with them in the days that followed. Finding that line was often very hard work.

Many of the students with whom I had the closest relationships—and whom I would describe as my key research informants—were female. The reason had much to do with Linda’s own relationship with her students. Most of these girls were members of the “lunch bunch.” They were drawn to her classroom for obvious reasons. Almost all of them were highly motivated writers and readers and loved language arts. They felt a real bond with Linda. Many had been her seventh grade students. They considered Linda a true friend, and the feeling was mutual. Linda had students like these every year and many
of them had continued their relationships with her even after they had graduated from college. They dropped by class, wrote Linda letters, and sent her pieces of writing to review. This year, the core group of the lunch bunch happened to be exclusively female. They talked about everything under the sun with Linda. She was their confidante.

When I arrived on the scene I was treated by Linda as a friend and colleague, and I believe her response introduced me to the group as an ally, someone who also shared their tastes and passions. I was accepted by the lunch bunch in an "any friend of Mrs. Rief’s is a friend of mine" fashion.

My Relationship with Linda

When I entered Linda’s class, I already felt comfortable working and talking with her. I had taken a course she taught, attended her conference presentations, and visited her classroom. Further, she welcomed me with the message that my research would help further her own teaching.

The primary problem I felt I would have was in maintaining a productive working relationship with her. I knew Linda as a very open and accessible person, sometimes at the expense of her own needs. The real danger for me, I felt, lay in exploiting her willingness to help me to the point that hidden resentment would build or that I would undermine the effectiveness of her teaching or her relationship with her students. At the beginning of the year, before either of us had developed a set of boundaries, I tried to stay out of her way as she taught, but also declared my availability to help her in any way she deemed fit. I asked permission before or during class to follow her from table to table as she conferred with students, even though her answer was invariably “yes.”

If possible, I would have interviewed Linda every day. Her insights were the most valuable information I collected. When I asked for an interview, she usually said yes. If my requests ever bred any resentment she never let on, but at times I began to feel a vague discomfort about monopolizing her time. I began to preface my requests with lengthy admonitions not to comply unless she truly had time, and occasionally she would admit she
had things to do, apologizing profusely as she turned me down. In exchange for her time I offered to help her with busy work: covering new books, collating and stapling handouts, and occasionally responding to students journals. However, I often became distracted as we talked; more often than not I would leave one page out of my collating and have to rip out staples. Linda’s bemused eye made me think she did not trust me as a helper any more, but professionally I felt entirely accepted. She was the perfect research participant in that she welcomed me into her classroom with genuine enthusiasm for the project. She wanted to learn about herself in order to better herself as a teacher. She was surprisingly open, even with delicate personal issues and she put deep introspection into her responses to my questions. These had been the reasons I had chosen her as a research partner in the first place.

**Subjectivity**

I was certainly not emotionally detached from my research questions or from the participants; I don’t believe any qualitative researcher can claim to be. The relationship necessary to evoke relevant and satisfying stories from research participants demands an emotional investment that wreaks havoc on any modicum of objectivity one might claim to have going into a project. In my case I also hoped that I could in some way offer my help to Linda and her students *during* the project as payment for their graciousness in allowing me into their world. Instead of denying subjectivity, I had to approach it as honestly as I could and ascertain where it might affect my interpretations. Fine (1993) calls research objectivity a “lie” and Peshkin (1988) asserts that our mission lies not in avoiding subjectivity but in recognizing it, analyzing it, and “taming” it:

I advocate the enhanced awareness that should result from a formal systematic monitoring of self. Speaking personally—but meant generally—I see this monitoring as a necessary exercise, a workout, a tuning up of my subjectivity to get it into shape. It is a rehearsal for keeping the lines of my subjectivity open—and straight. And it is a warning to myself so that I may avoid the trap of perceiving just that which my own untamed sentiments have sought out and served up as data. If trapped, I run the risk of presenting a study that has become blatantly autobiographical (p. 20).
By monitoring one’s subjectivity, the researcher can use it to present a statement actually more powerful in it’s unique perspective.

Upon reviewing my daily field notes and adding analytical commentary, I asked, “What is it in my own agenda that would cause me to find things that aren’t there?” I searched for data that appeared to refute the patterns I saw emerging. Further, when I began to discover trends and patterns, I had to be careful that I did not begin to ask leading questions to participants, which might somehow shape their responses. Finding the correct line of questioning was sometimes difficult. I tried to confirm with Linda and the students that the patterns I saw were actually there, but by explaining the patterns I ran the danger of biasing their responses to me if they decided to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. To protect myself I diligently stressed to them that they were my teachers: I wanted to know exactly what they thought. I believe I was fairly successful in avoiding the pitfalls of leading questions. Students were rarely averse to telling me one of my assumptions was wrong. Some of my questioning that appeared to be leading was often my attempt to confirm my observations. My advisor, Jane Hansen, was good at pointing out instances in my transcripts were she felt I had asked leading questions. In these cases I had to determine more clearly the nature of my subjectivity, and I went back through tapes to study the context of the question and the tone in the conversants’ voices. In reviewing the tapes I disagreed with Jane about some of the questions. It depended a great deal on my relationship with the participant. With some students I could ask a question that was more challenging, and thus potentially leading, knowing that they had the wherewithal to refute its premise if they did not agree. With other students I had to consider more carefully if their responses were representative of their viewpoints.

**Ethical Considerations**

As one who feels that one of my strengths as a researcher is in developing productive working relationships with my participants, treating them with the respect that I would like
to be afforded, I feel the greater potential danger to participants in qualitative research lies not during the fieldwork phase of the research but in the final interpretations and write-up. My main concern was to avoid exploiting the sometimes extremely personal conversations of my participants on the pretense of their academic, practical, or artistic value to my readership. It is a fine line to tread for someone who wants to tell honest stories. How much of someone’s story do you write before you violate an implicit trust that supersedes the agreement that the participant’s comments are “on the record”? How much of a story do you leave out before you undermine necessary background and truthfulness? I do not have a definitive answer; I simply worked hard to find a successful balance. I consulted with the participants and I had trusted outside readers review my writing with an explicit purpose to find potentially exploitative material that seemed unnecessary to the story. As a teacher my first classroom rule is that we must ensure the physical, emotional, and intellectual safety of one another. I considered my research and my writing as direct components of my teaching, and I had to abide by these rules in considering what to include.

During my fieldwork phase, the most prominent ethical issue I dealt with concerned not exploiting students’ time. I valued any time I could sit down and interview students about classroom goings-on. They were obviously less interested in the ultimate importance of my work than was Linda, and their academic, athletic, and social schedules left them very little free time. They were usually remarkably accommodating when I asked them to talk with me, but some students would flat out tell me that they could not or did not want to talk to me now. That made my job easier. With other students, however, I had to develop a heightened awareness as to whether I was intruding. I backed off many of my requests for time if I sensed in any way that the student was hesitant. This meant that I sometimes had to wait a long time to get an interview I really wanted--in a couple of instances several months. This may have compromised my research, especially when discussing certain classroom occurrences that had faded from memory. But the trade-off was both ethically
and practically necessary. It intruded on students' lives less and also helped sustain the long-term relationship.

Another in-class consideration was one that Wilcox (1995) touched upon in her research. I gave students freedom to read and review my field-notes. They provided me with feedback, enhancing and clarifying my observations and speculations. They also developed a deeper sense of the nature of my research. I wanted to demystify the process for them. By showing them my notes students became much truer collaborators in that they knew more about my motives and my process and thus had a context for their role in the project. But I then had to be very careful about how I phrased things. I could not afford to insult or hurt those who had given me their time and stories. If I had an observation I absolutely did not want students to see, which was rare, I simply jotted down a code word and wrote it in after class.

**Methodological Approach**

My methodological approach drew upon ethnographic inquiry. It was not ethnographic in that I was attempting, predominantly, to illuminate the practices and beliefs of one individual rather than "discover the cultural knowledge that people hold in their minds, how it is employed in social interaction, and the consequences of it's employment" (Spindler and Spindler, 1992). One of my initial assertions was that teacher listening is necessary to determine students' unique individual needs as well as cultural ones. My assertion compelled me to move away from the student as cultural member as I observed Linda try to determine students' unique needs, which may or may not have been a result of influences removed from the culture-bearing community. However, the study took on some ethnographic overtones in that Linda's interactions with students were always fraught with negotiations and miscommunications that were results of different ways of reading and navigating the world, different agendas, and different opinions as to what is educationally important. Some researchers (Dyson, 1993; Newkirk & McLure, 1992) have defined these as social or cultural differences. Though I was trying to decipher how one successful
teacher performed, I also had to attend to the “webs of significance” (Geertz, 1973): the understandings and cultural rituals of Linda and her students that both bound them together socially and kept them apart, and which most certainly influenced their performances.

My extensive time on site, my use of interviews and classroom recordings, my collection of relevant class documents, my emphasis on “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), and my role as a participant observer directly involved with the community are all activities recognized as standard in the field of ethnography and related qualitative research designs (Agar, 1980; Chang, 1992; Geertz, 1973; Moss, 1992; North, 1987). I also attempted to adopt the approach to my data that Wolcott (1994) proposes of description (addressing the question, “What is going on here?”), analysis (identifying the essential features of classroom activities and describing the interrelationships among them), and interpretation (addressing the questions, “How does it all mean?” and “What is to be made of it all?”). In essence, in this mode of inquiry I was trying to explicate the sometimes hidden patterns of activity and relationships that defined the fundamental workings of the class.

At the same time, however, the purpose of my study was to try to determine if and how Linda moved past more prescribed patterns of behavior and thought, listening to respond uniquely to unique individuals in unique situations. To do this I adopted a case study approach in which I identified students with decidedly different ways of approaching their work and navigating the classroom world. Case studies are sometimes used for the express purpose of identifying people or characteristics that deviate from or are “invisible” to the mainstream culture (Newkirk, 1992). In my case, I identified four people with vastly different classroom tastes and needs to examine Linda’s response approaches to each.

I conducted my on-site research on a fairly consistent schedule of three to four visits per week during the first three quarters of the school year, except for six and a half weeks from the end of November to the beginning of January where I did not attend classes but interviewed Linda several times. During the fourth quarter I attended an average of two to
three times per week, except for the month of May, when I was away. I attended the last six days of class to observe students' portfolio presentations, collect needed documents, and say good-byes.

For several weeks I attended all four of Linda's eighth grade language arts classes every day. However, about halfway through the second quarter, after I had begun to catalogue a framework of patterns, I focused my attention on one of the four classes (I still attended and took notes in the other classes occasionally). From this one class, I chose my four case study participants.

During the course of the year I also attended a conference for New Hampshire teachers where Linda and her students presented, team teacher meetings, and meetings between students and the many teachers from other schools who visited to observe and learn from Linda's class.

Field Notes and Observations

I wrote field notes in longhand on spiral legal pads. I varied my observational perspective, sometimes sitting away from the class to get a general feel for what was going on, sometimes sitting at a table with a group of students, sometimes sitting with an individual student during work time, sometimes following Linda as she moved from student to student. Linda helped me set up a home-base of sorts, on a table in one corner of the room where I could see the entire room but was away from the student tables. Here I kept a computer, copies of my field notes for Linda's and students' review, and my audiotaping and videotaping equipment.

For the first two weeks I engaged in an almost feverish, random note-taking, jotting down whatever flashed before my eyes and ears. I wrote down lessons, conferences, lunch talk and other social talk, things that students said behind the teacher's back. I was not interested in noting patterns so much as attempting to build a large enough cache of descriptive information from which I could pull patterns. However, I quickly began to
recognize areas of significance, and focused my note-taking onto talk and incidents that seemed more relevant to my guiding questions and the patterns I saw developing.

After school I typed the day's notes into my computer. This allowed me to review the notes once again and add in or flesh out any observations I had not had time to record. I used a two column system, typing my notes on the left half of the page, incorporating new questions, speculations, and remembered observations I had not had time to write initially (I often put questions and speculations in parentheses to separate them from description). I left the right-hand margin clear to leave room for further commentary as I reviewed the notes repeatedly over the following months. For the first six weeks of school, the first notes I wrote in the right-hand column were questions and comments to Linda about what I had been observing. Periodically, about once a week, Linda took my field notes and read them in full. She also used the right-hand column to write responses to my notes. Her responses were important for triangulation: an examination of data from different theoretical perspectives, using the classroom participants to corroborate findings and using a variety of methods to obtain data from a variety of sources, which leads to a more complete, and hence more valid, interpretation of data (Doheny-Farina & Odell, 1985). Linda offered me insights and perspectives I could not possibly have had during the early stages of my research. However, as the year progressed and Linda began to read more student papers and write grades, we discontinued the practice. From then on we triangulated data by discussing at least some aspect of my field notes on an almost daily basis. On occasion, Linda perused the notes themselves.

I kept my notepad in full view of all classroom participants. If anyone asked to read them I complied unless I was in the middle of writing observations. I also made a practice, when speaking with Linda or students, of replying in response to their talk, "Oh, that was a good quote! Can I write that down in my notes?" My intent was to make note-taking seem less a subversive activity and more a simple documentation of wonderful insights. If I observed anything that I wanted to record but felt might upset someone who might read it, I
jotted a code word so that I could record the incident out of class. I rarely had to resort to that; my original notes were usually simple observations, devoid of judgement save that I had found them important enough to write down. If a student asked, for instance, why I had written down that he had sworn, I would reply that I was simply writing down everything I could that I observed going on in class and I happened to hear him. I told them that I would delete the note if they wished me to. No one ever asked me to do that.

I asked some students to read and comment on my notes occasionally, making sure that I did not include any notes that might compromise another student's status in class. This was another effort for triangulation, with students offering me other classroom perspective I could not possibly have.

**Document Collection**

Students generated massive amounts of writing and though I collected only a tiny portion of it I filled binder upon binder. I tried to photocopy any student writing that I mentioned in my field notes or seemed otherwise relevant to my work. I collected the working drafts and, later, the final drafts of the writing discussed in any of the conferences I recorded. I also collected “Case Histories,” which were students’ descriptions and self-evaluations of the creations of their drafts. Other student-generated documents included artwork, selections from response journals, and various portfolio artifacts and writing. I photocopied case study students’ entire year-long journals, their entire final portfolios, and some or all of their earlier quarterly portfolios, which often included different work.

At the beginning of the year each student filled out a “Readers’/Writers’ Survey,” which outlined their histories and views of reading and writing. I collected as many as I could. At the end of the first and second quarters they also completed “Quarterly Evaluation” sheets, which charted their perceptions of their literacy growth, the accomplishment of their quarterly goals, new goals for the upcoming quarter, and their evolving views of reading and writing. I collected many of these. I made sure I collected all these documents from the case study students.
In their final portfolios, students wrote lengthy “Self-Evaluations” that outlined in detail their work and growth throughout the entire year as well as allowed them to critique the class and Linda’s teaching. I collected Self-Evaluations from every student in my focus class, plus several from students in the other three classes whose work I had collected or whose comments seemed particularly significant.

Other documents collected included handouts from Linda to students: copies of short stories they read together in class, articles about the process of writing and writing conventions, historical information about the Holocaust, etc. Linda also used students’ work from previous years to demonstrate good writing or writing ideas. She wrote a lot in class and shared her writing and her own journal in class, and I collected these artifacts.

Other collected documents included general school announcements, a copy of the school’s mission statement, and a brochure put together by the teachers of the Polaris team to hand out to parents and provide them with background on the team’s goals, philosophy, and approach.

**Surveys**

Linda’s own assignments to the class—the Readers’/Writers’ Survey, the Quarterly Evaluations, and the year-end Self-Evaluations were all wonderful survey material that gave a clear portrait of students and their attitudes about reading, writing, language arts, and, often, Linda. I supplemented them at the beginning of the year with a three-question survey of my own, designed to elicit student’s views on listening skills. I asked: 1) What makes a good listener? 2) Describe a specific incident in which you were a good listener, and 3) What makes a teacher a good listener? In order to compare answers, I asked each student to write down whether or not Linda had been their seventh grade teacher. Nineteen of ninety-nine respondents had been in her class.

At the end of the year Linda conducted a survey, initiated in part by my desire to know what aspects of her classroom approach had been most important to the students. She asked the students to answer: “In what ways do each of these things matter to you as
writers and readers?: 1) Choice, 2) Time, 3) Response, 4) Organization, 5) My [Linda's] Writing and Reading.” I collected these surveys from all four classes.

**Audiotape and Videotape Recordings**

My primary goal in audiotaping was to get accurate transcripts of writing conferences between Linda and the students. However, I also randomly selected days upon which to audiotape Linda’s mini-lessons, whole class discussions, student conversations during work times, and formal interviews with Linda and case study students. I also audiotaped interviews between students and other teachers or researchers who visited the class.

I used a small microcassette recorder, which produced surprisingly clear results as long as there was not too much background noise. I did not record for the first couple of weeks, first allowing students to get used to my presence. When I introduced the recorder I asked participants for permission to record. Once they agreed, I placed the recorder on the table and ignored it, listening silently to the conversation and taking notes. During some situations where the conversation was less formal, as during the social talk that occurred with students during work time, I sometimes found myself a participant in the talk. If invited into the conversation or if I had a question about something I really wanted to know I would join in, but I tried to let the participants focus on their own agendas, keeping the natural flow of the conversation.

There was interest in the recorder the first time or two I used it, but students ignored it for the most part the rest of the year. The only times students verbally recognized the recorder and appeared obviously self-conscious on tape were two instances in which I asked students to record themselves while I was away from their tables. At these times they referred to the recorder, made direct comments to me by carrying on a dialogue with the recorder instead of one another, and discussed topics that seemed to me unnatural and out of context.

But when I was there observing, students appeared to forget about the recorder. I suspect that by the time I began recording I had already established myself as a ubiquitous
but non-intrusive presence at the students' tables, one who appeared truly interested in what they were saying but never asked them to perform. Often, the participants ignored me. As documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman noted, "It always amazes me, but situations become so intense that the subject neither knows or cares that you are there" ("Public Documents," 1971, p. 99). However, on the two occasions where I asked students to record themselves, I blatantly called attention to the recording device by having them operate it, which reminded them they were being monitored.

I planned to do extensive videotaping during the year, but quickly realized that it was much more unwieldy than I had expected. I was not an expert filmmaker like Wiseman and did not have my camera running continuously, as he had. I was much more obtrusive as I set it up and lugged it from one spot in the room to the other on an infrequent basis. I did, however, videotape several mini-lessons and whole class discussions, Linda’s workshop and keynote presentations at a teachers conference in New Hampshire, students’ presentations at that same conference, and the final portfolio presentations of every student in the focus classroom.

My primary purpose for videotaping was to record Linda’s and student’s body language during different classroom situations, but I compromised in order for quicker and smoother access to classroom talk. Instead, I recorded body language observations in my written field notes.

Interviews

I conducted informal interviews with students on an almost daily basis, asking students for their takes on classroom activities. Many informal interviews with students occurred after writing conferences. After Linda left a conference, I would ask a student what had happened, if and how Mrs. Rief helped them, what they hadn’t gotten from the conference that they wanted to, etc..

Formal interviews were defined by the fact that I audiotaped most of them, scheduled them in advance, and approached the conversation with a more formal agenda and set of
Most formal interviews had less to do with specific events and more to do with students’ general views about Linda, her teaching, and the class.

Other formal interviews addressed students who had written a certain piece of writing or had performed some kind of activity that particularly intrigued me or seemed particularly relevant to some aspect of my research. I would formulate a series of questions before talking with the student.

Along with my daily conversations with Linda, I tape-recorded several formal interviews with her throughout the year. Topics included biographical information, her educational philosophy and views about teaching, her views on listening and the difficulty of listening to and teaching some students, and significant events that occurred in the classroom.

**Case Study and Conference Analysis Interviews**

Some of the most important interviews pertained to my work with the four case study students and the analysis of their writing conferences with Linda. I chose the four students on the basis of what Linda and I both considered to be their very different personality types, and recorded several of their conferences during the year to analyze.

In order to portray the students accurately, I compiled all the observational notes, taped transcripts, writing drafts, surveys, evaluations, portfolios, and journal writing of each student into separate files. In April, I taped formal interviews with each case study student to learn their views about Linda and classroom life. I worked from a self-designed questionnaire, making sure I asked each student each of these questions:

1) Do you consider yourself to be a writer and a reader?
2) Tell me about yourself as a writer and a reader. Give me some of your history.
3) What do you think of language arts?
4) How is this class different from other language arts classes you have had?
5) What's the best thing about language arts?
6) What's the worst thing about this language arts class?
7) Tell me about the fact that students talk with one another while writing in class. Does this help your writing? Why or why not? If yes, tell me how.
8) Tell me about Mrs. Rief as a teacher.
9) What's the best or most helpful thing Mrs. Rief does in class?
10) What do you wish Mrs. Rief would do differently in class to help you more?
11) Describe Mrs. Rief as a listener.
12) How does Mrs. Rief listen differently than other teachers you’ve had?
13) Tell me about writing conferences with Mrs. Rief. How do they help? How could they help more?
14) Mrs. Rief writes and reads with you in class. Is that significant? Does that influence or help your reading and writing in any way? How?

During the course of each interview I also asked other questions that arose from what the students said.

I eventually chose one or two conferences from each student to analyze, adopting Newkirk’s (1995) method of creating a “backstage” area (Goffman, 1959) where both teacher and student could discuss their conference performances outside the constraints of their roles as teacher and students. For each conference I interviewed both Linda and the student at separate times, playing the conference for them and asking them to respond to it conference (The exception was Meg, whom I didn’t interview about her conference because she was out ill for an extended period). Using a second tape recorder to capture their responses, I stopped the original recordings at points I found intriguing or in need of interpretation and asked each participant to do the same. I then asked each participant to analyze and interpret the conference talk. I was attempting “to provide a way for them to uncover (or discover) strategies or reactions that are tacit or intuitive” (Newkirk, 1995, p. 198). Interestingly, I found that I was usually the one who stopped the tape, perhaps an indication of the roles we had assumed in this backstage area, with me as the superordinate “researcher” in charge and the other as the subordinate “subject.”

Storage and Organization of Data

Field notes, transcripts, surveys, and collected documents amounted to well over three thousand pages of data. In order to find and analyze efficiently the material for salient information, I had to organize my data well. I printed all my typed field notes onto white paper, numbered the pages, and stored them chronologically in black, three-ring binders. I tabbed the first page of each day’s notes and dated each tab for easy reference. Any documents I collected that had been referred to in my field notes, I filed directly behind the
field note page upon which they were mentioned. I numbered each document page with the corresponding field note page number, followed by a letter. For instance, if a field note on page twenty-three referred to a two-page piece of student writing I had collected, I would paginate those document pages as 23A and 23B and place them directly behind page 23 in the field note binders. I then recorded these page numbers in the original field notes for cross-referencing.

I filed documents I had not referred to in my field notes (most often pieces of student writing) in folders I created for each student and Linda. Each time I collected a document from one of them, I would date it and file it chronologically in the appropriate folder. I arranged the files alphabetically in file crates for easy reference.

I personally transcribed every audio recording, in full. To distinguish transcripts from field notes, I printed transcripts on cream-colored paper and stored them chronologically in blue binders. I headed each transcript with the recording date, a title that identified the sequence of the recordings in case I recorded multiple episodes in a day, a one-sentence synopsis of the content, the tape and side number where the recording was located, and the beginning and ending tape counter numbers. In my field notes I wrote the episode title, tape number and tape number side for each episode in my field notes for easy cross-referencing.

Qualitative Analysis of Data

Analysis of my data began with my first day's notes and continued for several months past my last day in class. I worked with the overarching question, "What is going on here?" (Wolcott, 1990) in mind, attempting to reduce and organize my data into something simple, defendable, and clearly understandable. I searched my data for patterns that would provide "structural corroboration" (Eisner, 1991), which, like triangulation, "is a means through which multiple types of data are related to each other to support or contradict the interpretation and evaluation of a state of affairs" (p. 110). Eisner writes, "In seeking structural corroboration, we look for recurrent behaviors or actions, those theme-like
features of a situation that inspire confidence that the events interpreted and appraised are not aberrant or exceptional, but rather characteristic of a situation" (p. 110).

Constructing these patterns or categories involved reiterative readings of my field notes and transcripts, searching for words and ideas that supported and validated one another enough to fit comfortably together into a unit I could call a category of "typical" thought, talk, or action.

My reading of my notes after every classroom visit as I typed them into my computer, adding further questions and comments, was the first step of formal analysis. Once I printed the hard copy for the binder I would often skim the notes again, writing even more commentary, identifying potential patterns or categories, and handing them to Linda for her comments.

Once a week, usually on Friday after school, I reviewed the entire week’s field notes again and wrote up a more formal analysis of the week’s events, which I called my “blue pages,” because I printed them on light blue paper. I placed them in their own binder to separate them from my other notes. The blue pages ranged in length from two to eight pages per week. They were a series of mini-essays that tried to make sense of the data and describe the patterns I was finding. Creating them was probably the singular most important activity in making sense of my data. They allowed me to see which patterns were most important and which recurred week after week. By forcing myself to write in prose form, I also created a large body of writing that became like “starter” prose when I began to compose the first formal draft of my dissertation.

For each category and pattern I identified (“Linda’s engrossment in her writing,” for instance), I went through all notes and transcripts, copying and pasting into a computer file every piece of data that might conceivably relate to it. I labeled a hard copy with a category description and placed it in a binder. I could then individually review the evidence for each pattern.
Qualitative Analysis of Case Study Students and Conferences

When I focused my attention on the four case study students, I followed a similar procedure of data analysis. Doing a computer word search of the students’ names through all notes and transcripts, I copied and pasted all conceivable data mentioning or pertaining to each student into four separate computer files. I placed the hard copies into separate three-ring binders and then included in the binders all relevant documents and artifacts—portfolios, journals, writing drafts, survey answers, class-evaluations, self-evaluations, etc. Finally, I placed copies of the case study conferences along with Linda’s and the student’s taped responses to them. Analysis then involved reading and re-reading this concentrated data, searching for more patterns and identifying characteristic writing.

Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Linda’s Conference Talk

I had not intended to do any quantitative analysis, but I soon realized that a numerical examination of Linda’s conference responses would give me a good sense of her “typical” talk. I analyzed twenty-one transcribed conferences: six first-quarter conferences and five third-quarter conferences with males, and five first-quarter and five third-quarter conferences with females.

To find the general content of Linda’s conference talk, I categorized each of her utterances into one of several categories of speaking approaches I had developed from a qualitative analyses of the conferences. I then calculated the percentage of Linda’s speaking turns within which each type of her speaking approaches appeared. (I describe my procedure in more detail beginning on page 113.)
CHAPTER III

PHILOSOPHY: THE TEACHER'S AND STUDENTS' ROLES IN A CLASSROOM THAT VALUES VOICES

Our philosophy guides our teaching from the first day we enter our classroom. It might well change and will certainly mature as we gain experience, but we need a starting point—a strong foundation based on what we know and believe—which complements, coordinates, and gives direction to our classroom practices.

My interpretation of Linda's philosophical foundation is based on my review of all my class notes, interviews, taped transcripts, her writing, and the numerous conversations we shared throughout the year. I analyzed and categorized any commentary that remotely resembled a belief statement. Each category highlighted a role that Linda perceived either she or her students had to take in order to create the optimal classroom.

Linda derived her roles from what she wanted from her students, her classroom, and herself. She said, "I would like kids to be life-long learners and to love reading and writing and take great pleasure in it." She wanted reading and writing to matter to her students. "I want students to find something that has meaning for them," she said, and she did not want them to fall into the trap of producing for the teacher. Writing had not had meaning to her when she was growing up. She felt she had gotten such a late start on reading and writing for genuine purposes that she might never catch up to where she wanted to be. She expected students to work thoughtfully and said she got most upset when she perceived they didn't care about their own work. Once they did care, Linda then wanted them to use literacy to extend their thinking and challenge themselves intellectually in an ongoing process.

"When kids leave at the end of the year," I asked, "what's the most important thing you want them to leave with?" In addition to her desire that "they love reading and writing..."
more,” she said,

That they have strategies for reading and writing...that another teacher [might require], or just for their own reasons...I love it if I see an editorial in the paper written by a kid in ninth or tenth grade and then find out that nobody solicited it; it wasn’t an assignment, but they did it totally on their own because they felt so strongly about something.

That they’re better at it than when they came in. That they have strategies: if they don’t know something, they know where to go for help or they know what to do to help themselves. I want them pretty independent.

It comes back constantly to [them] realizing that they really do like reading and writing and that they’re going to continue to do it for life. It might be dirt bike magazines, but they love reading dirt bike magazines. I hope they know by the time they leave here that reading mountain bike magazines is very valuable—that’s just what they like doing and that’s what they’re good at. It’s not just novels and writing essays.

Linda’s emphasis on developing a love of literacy, an ability to find information, a lifelong practice of reading and writing, and a sense of intellectual independence clearly set her in a philosophical camp that shifts away from a focus on specific subject matter, and toward a focus on the process of learning for its own sake and for authentic purposes. Her approach valued the completed product—a student’s newspaper editorial, for instance—but her philosophical focus was to nurture a process of creation where one learned how to proceed and produce continually in the future. Her ultimate want was simple: “I want these kids to be the most articulate readers, writers, and speakers they can be.”

Linda’s remarks suggested several roles she and her students should assume in order to accomplish these goals.

Students’ Roles

I found four general student roles that Linda expected students to portray: 1) Students as Doers, 2) Students as Knowers and Growers, 3) Students as Self-Evaluators, and 4) Students as Social Participants.

Doers

In the introduction to her book Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescence (Rief, 1992) Linda writes,
Like Aunt Addie Norton (Wigginton, 1985) I want my students to learn by doing: "I tell you one thing, if you learn it by yourself, if you have to get down and dig for it, it never leaves you. It stays there as long as you live because you had to dig it out of the mud before you learned what it was." I want the same for me (p. 4).

Her belief stemmed from personal experience. She said, "The things I learned in school were the things I actually participated in. I could take wonderful notes, but I couldn't fit them into anything, just a little box. I couldn't apply them." Novice teachers should learn that way, as well. She argued that practical experience was highly undervalued in education training: "[Taking courses without being in a classroom] is truly out of context. You really should be in a classroom. If we are truly going to revolutionize methods courses you should be in the classroom from the day you decide you're going to be a teacher."

Knowers and Growers

A metacognitive awareness of personal knowledge, Linda believed, offered a comfortable foundation for students, a context within which to position new ideas that arose from their writing and reading. They could use their prior knowledge arising out of past experience to compare and analyze the new experiences they encountered as they continued to "do"--to write and read. Commenting on one of the two books that the whole class read together during the year she said, "I just somehow know that inside me I'm looking for them to connect this to themselves so it looks like it's a book worth reading--that they can make meaning from it or take meaning from it for themselves."

Self-Evaluators

Linda desired that her learners not only read and write on their own, but that they evaluate their reading and writing processes and proclivities. When she exhorted students to find relevance in their work, the admonition that often followed was, "You should be able to write why it's important to you." In Seeking Diversity, she comments about how her former students taught her the value of self-evaluation:

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The more they were asked to look at their own writing, the better they got at it. What started out as a “wondering how well kids can evaluate their own writing” is now an integral part of my classroom. I know kids can evaluate their own writing; I know that the evaluative process helps them make their writing better; I know that evaluation of writing in progress is as important, if not more important, than the final product; and I know how to help them learn to do that (1992, p. 122).

The transition of evaluation from product to process was an important one to Linda, for it transformed evaluation into a tool for continued growth rather than a process-ending judgement. To Linda, self-evaluation meant that students found value in themselves and in their work.

Social Participants

Linda defined education as a social activity. She said, “I want them to be a community of trusting individuals, where other kids hear what it is they know. [I want them to know] they’ve got people they can trust—that other people care about them.” She expected students to converse, explore, and work together, developing multiple perspectives and a “social imagination” that gave them the ability to read others in the community better (Johnston, 1997). She felt this led to interdependence among themselves, but also to more independence from the teacher:

They know that the teacher is not the only authority in the classroom. Academically they know that they’ve got much to contribute to one another, so you’ve got twenty-seven teachers in the room instead of one. You’ve got twenty-seven views, so there are all kinds of alternatives and all kinds of ways of looking at the world....There isn’t one way of thinking and there isn’t one way of learning, so it helps them to see that there is no one answer to everything.

Social learning, she hoped, would transcend the classroom and influence the greater society, at large:

You want kids to care about other people beyond the classroom. I think the greatest pleasure is seeing them informally say, “Listen to this, listen to this. What do you think of this idea?” If you translated that to what happens to them outside in the community, what a great place it would be to live, in the United States or anywhere in the world....Then people can respond in positive ways to each other—in ways that value those ideas and then build on them.
These four roles encouraged students to begin their learning on a foundation of prior knowledge and interest and continue it through experiences created by their constant personal and social activity. They were the ones who pursued new experiences through their active and authentic writing and reading, who took charge of articulating what they knew, and who actively talked and evaluated their own growth processes, progress, and knowledge. Linda believed that there were certain things that good readers and writer should know, and, for the most part, students were responsible for discovering them. She, as teacher, had other roles in mind for herself.

Linda's Roles

When Linda presented at conferences and teacher workshops, she often handed out a sheet to participants that outlined five “Keys to Literacy”: 1) choice, 2) time, 3) response, 4) organization, and 5) demonstration (modeling). The first three, she told them, she took from Mary Ellen Giacobbe; the last two were hers. Linda saw herself playing specific roles in order to provide all five keys her students. Four of those roles, 1) Provider of Choice, 2) Provider of Time, 3) Organizer, and 4) Writer and Reader (Model), attended, in general, to the creation of a strong classroom framework. These roles were largely proactive, establishing the organizational and procedural foundation and framework that promoted efficient and fruitful conversation, reading, and writing.

The fifth role, Listener and Responder included several sub-roles—6) Prod, 7) Transmissionist, 8) Evaluator, 9) Caregiver, and 10) Social Participant—in providing more direct, interpersonal interaction with students, most often on an individual basis. They focused more on specific actions and practices of students and required Linda to attend to her relationships with students. These roles were largely reactive, responding to unique situations and needs.

Provider of Choice

“I don’t know how you say it differently from Don [Graves] and Mary Ellen [Giacobbe]. I think you have to offer kids choices about what they do.” Linda wanted to
give students choice to select writing topics and reading texts, choice to abandon non-
edifying writing and reading, choice to revise writing and re-read books, choice in what to
publish, and choice in what reading to share. Choice gave opportunities to students who
had difficulty with the demands of her class, and she wanted to offer them a variety of
modes of expression, including art and talk.

However, Linda’s belief in choice was not unconditional. At times, students needed
direction in order to expose them to opportunities they might not see for themselves. She
said,

When I first started teaching I really believed that it had to be total free choice all the
time, and then I started writing and reading myself. I realized that there are a lot of
times when I want people to ask me to try a certain kind of writing, and I want them
to nudge me into some kind of reading. So I would have to say that I think there is
a balance of both in the classroom. There are times when I require particular
things. There’s choice within parameters. There are other times where there is total
free choice. When I say “choice,” it does mean that there’s a balance of both in the
classroom.

Providing choice taught: if Linda discussed what different choices meant and where they
might lead, she felt she could help students learn to make thoughtful, productive choices
and avoid those that did not move them forward.

Provider of Time

Under “Time” in her “Keys to Literacy” handout, Linda had four sentences: “1) Learn to
write by writing and reading. 2) Learn to read by reading and writing. 3) Learn to speak
by speaking and listening. 4) Learn to listen by listening and speaking.” They highlight
not only her ideal of learning by doing, but also the need to have the time to do (Freedman,
1987). Her ideal classroom time allotment was a five- to ten-minute read-aloud or mini-
lesson, with a full forty-five minutes reserved for students to read, write, and discuss their
work. When she stuck to this schedule, she believed, astonishing things could happen.
She recalled a former student who had written two novels during the school year, each
several hundred pages long. I asked, “What was it that kept [him] moving forward?” “He
wanted to write those novels!” she exclaimed, “I gave him time and permission.”
On occasion, Linda pondered her tendency to answer her own questions if the class did not respond quickly. She speculated that teachers often do not give students enough time to think about and formulate better quality answers. She also spoke of giving students enough time to read their own writing to her, noting occasions where, in a hurry, she had read students’ writing to herself instead of listening to them read. The practice may have saved some time, but she felt it had its consequences:

“I discovered listening takes so much longer. So I did what I told kids not to do. I picked up their [pieces of writing] and I read them. I took responsibility away from them. I finally said, “I can’t do this”....I let them read and listen to themselves. It doesn’t take as long as I think it does and they listen harder to themselves anyway.

But time was precious, Linda acknowledged, and finding enough of it was one of the most difficult aspects of her job. She said, “The vicious circle comes in when you’ve got twenty-eight, thirty kids in a classroom and you’re running around the barn and you can never get in! It takes time.”

“It takes patience, too,” she continued. Patience appeared to be closely related to time in her mind. Time and patience let students discover their own literacy. Sometimes it took the entire year and she had to fight growing frustration. She recalled a girl from the previous year’s class who had resisted Linda’s every effort to challenge her thinking. Only at the end of the year did she write a letter thanking Linda for not accepting her complacency. As Linda waited on some in this year’s class, stories like this offered solace and hope. She knew, in any event, that time and patience were always better educators than frustration and anger:

If there’s one thing I’ve learned it’s not to get angry with kids who just absolutely refuse to write about anything that seems really meaningful to them. If I get angry it stops them and I’m acting the same way that I think somebody has already acted to them, which has kept them from writing.

Linda’s clear and consistent message: time was not a luxury for students, but a necessity. Only time could allow thought to mature from the superficial to the profound.
Organizer

Linda’s need for organization addressed two outcomes. First, it heightened classroom efficiency. She stated that she needed to organize time, materials, and expectations. She wanted to organize time through well-planned scheduling and working procedures and organize materials through a detailed system of classroom procedures for using materials and a designated place for each book, piece of paper, and writing implement. Organization of expectations came from her explicit, detailed statements of how the classroom was to run and what she required of her students. “They know what is expected of them,” she said, simply.

She suggested, however, that excessive organization—overly-detailed assignments, for instance—might inhibit students. “I want structure, but I want them paying attention to their writing,” she said. “I want the structure to be so subtle that it’s not even part of the class any more.” Organization was truly a success, she explained, when the room worked so efficiently that one did not think about the procedures any more, they just followed them.

Second, organization created a classroom that encouraged specific student activities she championed, most notably talk among students. In explaining her preference for round tables where students sat face-to-face rather than desks, she said.

The minute you sit them facing face-to-face, you truly are saying, “I value you talking to each other,” and if you’re not valuing them talking to each other then you might as well put them in rows where they’re isolated and can’t talk, and scream and yell at them when they hand notes under the table to each other. I see kids handing notes to each other all the time! I mean, let them write!

The classroom designed to let students talk needed immaculate organization of procedure and materials: “If I don’t get us organized I can’t deal with the chaos of so many ideas.”
“What I value in this class is that these kids leave this class thinking they are learners for life. And that’s what I have to model for them every day.” Linda’s definition of modeling was short and succinct. Her “Keys to Literacy” handout had, simply, two capitalized sentences: I WRITE. I READ. Her statements about modeling went well beyond the notion of simply demonstrating techniques and practices and into what Graves called “living a life of literacy”:

> The literate life...includes far more than reading and writing. Literate people have a passion for asking questions, both big and small, a hunger for learning new things and for making connections. In short, they have a particular stance toward the universe: one of constant engagement (1990, p. 105).

In this book, Graves’ singled Linda out as living a life of literacy. She felt the obligation to share this life with her students. The writing and reading she performed in class was rarely an exercise created for the lesson, but came from her personal and professional writing and the books she read for her own pleasure and edification. When she did create an exercise, she said it was essential that she write with her students. She urged other teachers to write, too. She couldn’t spend forty-five minutes writing in class, she acknowledged, but she could take three minutes to write along with them in her journal. She needed to push her own thinking and challenge herself explicitly in class:

> [I want students] to try some things that [they] might not normally try. And I have to do that, too. I mean, kids still do say to me, “You do everything you ask us to do.” I think it does matter to them that we as teachers have to know that they’re watching us like hawks, and if it isn’t good enough for me, then it’s probably not good enough for them.

Thus, she reaped another benefit: she could discover first-hand what wasn’t good enough for her students. She commented on one failed assignment she had given:

> How did I realize the assignment was stupid? I tried to do it. I could not do it and I had to reshape it for myself. And I’ve realized the writing that matters to me now did not come out of those nine questions.
It was the authenticity of her tasks that made them valuable activities. "When they see me as real, they tune me in. When I'm a teacher, they tune me out. How does this happen? Why?" Participation took her away from the role of a "teacher" and into the role of a practitioner, doing what she loved amidst others.

Listener and Responder

Listening and response seems to tie together almost all other aspects of Linda's teaching. By providing choice and time to students and by organizing the classroom in the way she did, she wanted to create situations where students would write, read, and talk in voices that both she and they could clearly hear. Then, by listening carefully, she could teach as well as learn from students. "I hope I model listening," she said.

Linda's listening often began with two questions. She said, "Don Graves taught me how to say, 'Tell me more,' and Don Murray taught me to say, 'How can I help you?'" Answers to these questions let her act, she said.

To my question, "Describe a specific incident in which you were a good listener," she wrote,

I was sitting at a table with four 7th graders. They were all talking about different things, yet they all seemed to hear what each person said, despite all the disconnections. Tim and Joel were playing chess AND memorizing lines for a Ulysses presentation. They moved the chess pieces around as they spoke lines. Lena kept talking about her hair—did they think it looked good? Had they noticed her nails?—they answered these queries, too. Megan kept trying to enter the conversation—I didn't hear her until she said—"My mother's having a baby—this is the one she wants." Kids looked at her, moved right on. All I could hear was this announcement over and over again. I wrote her a note in her log. I heard all that stood behind her words. She knew it.

Linda defined good listening, then, as hearing things in voices that may be subtle or obscured. She wrote to me, "A good listener hears things that others don't." As my research developed I learned it was not insignificant that she had chosen a personal, not an academic, incident to exemplify her good listening. She said, "I'm searching for, 'what do they care about in this piece of writing? What in this piece of writing matters to them?'"
Linda told me when she felt she was at her best and her worst as a listener:

I’m at my best when I’m feeling well. I’m at my best when I see kids committed to what they’re doing and there’s a steady hum. Noise does not bother me unless it’s random noise, and that really bothers me. I am not a listener when that happens. I can tune out twenty-five kids and still hear the person next to me if I can sense it’s work talk….So I’m not at my best if it’s not a steady hum of really busy people.

I’m not sure I’m as patient now as I used to be. I don’t know if that comes with old age. I just get disappointed in kids. I’m not a good listener when I’m disappointed in them, and I’m disappointed in them when they’re not listening, or listening to themselves, or really committed to their work.

I think listening involves not just oral listening, but listening to them when they write something. By the time I get to the hundred-and-tenth journal I’m not a good listener; I can’t take all of those at one time. I find that I write things that are not what the kid really needs to hear….

I am not a good listener when it feels like it’s wasting my time. There isn’t time to waste when you’re working with kids.

Difficult as it was for her to listen, at times, Linda stressed its importance in ensuring appropriate response. In an interview I asked her what made a good listener. Her answer emphasized listening’s connection to response:

What makes a good listener? Somebody who acts on what somebody has said to them. Somebody who does nothing but listen as the person is talking to them—who focuses on that person. With teaching, a good listener is somebody who either changes what they do or continues to do what they do because what they heard made them do that. It’s the acting on what the child says….You could stand there and write down all kinds of notes and nod your head, but if you don’t act on it then you weren’t listening well. Sometimes, in a hurry to do things, I don’t listen well. I really [don’t] hear what [is] underneath the words. That’s what I tried to write about for that last NCTE talk (where she was a keynote speaker): the silence between the words….It’s not the silences so much as it is the spaces between the words. Kids are saying things that if you know them well enough you know what they’re really saying.

Linda’s definition of listening clearly corresponded with my own working definition of listening as being determined by the response it evoked. In fact, the five roles that follow can all be seen as response roles, requiring direct, specific action and interaction with students, which are determined by her perceptions of their needs in individual situations.

Prod

Linda defined learning not by the retention of some specific subject matter, but by the continual growth of the student which led to their pursuit of subject matter and aroused
them to continue to grow. It was her responsibility to challenge her students’ thinking continually to help them forward:

Give them real, positive responses to what they’re doing, find the things they’re doing well, and then begin to push them to try some things that go beyond their comfort level. Make them really push their thinking. I’m not sure if kids really know what I mean when I write to them, “You really have to push your thinking a bit.” I think that does mean to me push your comfort level. [They say], “I can do this, I can do this, and I feel really good and that’s all I’m gonna do.” [I say], “But try some things you might not normally try.”

Linda used the words “push” and “discomfort” often to help define what she meant. Yet her comments also indicate her acute awareness of the need not to halt the resistant student: “Am I saying things that make kids think, push their thinking, grow as thinkers?” she asked, “or do I stop them cold?” Her response that a good listener “tries to know the kids well enough to know how much they can handle…” reinforces her point.

As we shall see, Linda tried to understand her students on two fronts, the intellectual and the emotional: did they have enough background and ability at this point in time to move forward into the things she was helping them discover? Were they emotionally capable of accepting her pushes without resisting and halting their progress? She spoke of sometimes making “too many leaps” intellectually with students. She recounted trying to explain the metaphor of a poem to an uncomprehending class. “I almost shouted, ‘This is a perfectly simple poem!’” she said, but caught herself, realizing she had made too great a cognitive leap.

Monitoring emotional capability was just as important. She offered an anecdote: A few years ago, a boy in one of her classes wrote nothing but gory chainsaw massacre stories. Linda tried fruitlessly for months to expand his repertoire, nudging, searching for what mattered to him. Eventually, in desperation, she told him, “Listen, when you decide not to write garbage, I’ll come back and talk with you.” She regretted the words as they fell from her mouth. “He did not write for the rest of the year. Sometimes I’ll see his mother downtown and cringe, thinking, ‘I hope he didn’t tell her about me!”’ Experiences like
these affected her deeply. "Sometimes it really does take knowing the kids and knowing if you’re pushing too hard," she concluded.

Transmissionist

Though she believed in students taking control of their learning, Linda valued her role as a "teacher" in a more traditional sense, directly offering information that students did not yet possess. "It’s like Murray says, you can’t hold back information if you know it.” In a lecture-based class, transmission might not be considered an interactive role, but Linda offered most of her information in one-on-one situations or group discussions, often in response to something that had been said by a student. She discussed one conversation about the movie *Schindler’s List* in which she provided information about literary devices director Steven Spielberg used: “I want to throw into their ring what I know about literary devices like that or decisions that [Spielberg] might have made…and I want them to think about that.” I asked her how she ensured students would not begin to perceive that their role was to sit and listen to her rather than explore and evaluate on their own. She speculated that students would have a hard time in her class adopting a passive role. “I don’t find it with them because normally…you condition them by saying, ‘Pay attention, take notes, I’m going to give a test on this.’ They know full well that they’re never going to have a test in here.” Specific subject matter was appropriate to disseminate when a situation called for it in the context of a student’s active learning process. It then served as a tool to further growth, not merely as an end. In these situations she did not feel she necessarily took responsibility away from the learner. Commenting on her tendency to write information and suggestions on student papers, she said, “They still own the words. I have info…that they don’t have. I give it to them.”

Evaluator

Linda believed that evaluation should be a tool to further learning and growth, not a judgement of competence that often served to inhibit students. Her evaluations of students’ work almost always started with positive commentary and built on it. “When people tell
me negative things, it stops me writing. When people tell me positive things, it keeps me writing,” she said, and applied that experience to her own teaching. “I'm always trying to find something that they did well. And sometimes it's the color of the ink. I mean, if I sit there silent for a long time, I'm really struggling to find something that is really working. But I am trying to find something that they did well.” She framed critical comments in terms of things to improve rather than things done wrong. Once she felt a student comprehended the positive qualities of his or her work and could subsequently build upon them, Linda then felt comfortable offering clear evaluations of problems she perceived. She insisted on evaluating—and having students evaluate—actual reading and writing processes and products, not test scores.

I have not given a test since the first week I started teaching. In all honesty. I gave a test on direct objects and indirect objects because that's what the sub had left with me to do, and I saw absolutely no sense in it, and I haven't seen sense in testing since. The kids know that this is real work and they're going to be evaluated on real work, and every skill that anybody's trying to help kids learn in any language arts class is going to surface in what these kids are doing as readers and writers.

“What stopped me reading in school was I knew we were going to have a test on it,” she said.

She was uncomfortable in her role as grade-giver, and at one time had contemplated eliminating grading requirements altogether. The concept of grading seemed to go against her philosophical stance that learning was a continual process. Grades put an artificial end to the process. Ultimately, however, she believed that her grading criteria, no matter how imperfect, provided a framework that offered students a vision of a direction in which to move. The one imperative she had was that students took their writing seriously and valued it. When they did, she said, “they are ‘tested’ every time they read it or read it out to an audience.”

Caregiver

Linda repeated or paraphrased one statement on many different occasions: “I swear, it wouldn’t matter what I taught as long as they know I care about them. I could diagram
sentences.” Teacher care, she implied, was the foundation of student loyalty, which allowed them to be more receptive to her help. For most students, she said, “I’m not sure sometimes that it matters what we teach. They just want us to like them. And if you don’t like them first, there is nothing that you’re going to get across to those kids.” Linda constantly referred to her need to value her students’ voices and the things about which they truly cared. I responded one day, “It seems to me what you’re saying is you really have that empathy for the student’s age and for the things that are important to them, and you have to remember what it was like for you back then.” She said,

“For you. Right. Definitely....The big thing, I think, is friends and boy-girl relationships and helping them deal with that. I think that matters a lot more than school. I think that’s what makes them human beings. And for us to think that the subject we’re teaching is the most important thing is wrong. It’s not the most important thing we teach our kids.

Recognizing that adolescents’ perspectives often drew more from the affective than the intellectual, Linda believed she had to recognize explicitly their traumas and emotions rather than use a purely analytical approach.

She did have a caveat about care, however. After speculating that students would follow her as long if she cared about them, she continued: “This is why we should teach good stuff. The kids will follow you [if you don’t], but eventually they would be in trouble.”

Social Participant
Tied closely to her role as a caregiver and to her belief in healthy social talk as a vital classroom activity was her role as a social participant in the world of her students. She believed a teacher could not be most effective if she refused to interact with students on anything other than an academic level. Many times she commented on the need to establish trust between herself and students, forming a multi-faceted relationship with them. On my first day in the class I noted that many students didn’t trust themselves to write, but instead came up to her to ask her what they should do in class. Linda replied, “Mostly, these kids
are new to me. They don’t trust me or know me yet. They want to do things ‘right’.”
Trust took time and a lot of relationship-building. As we shall see, the nature of these
relationships was at the heart of some of my most important findings.

Conclusion

These roles Linda envisioned for herself and her students determined the shape of her
classroom practice. The following chapters examine Linda’s practice, gradually narrowing
in on her direct interaction with, and response to students. In Chapter 4 I paint a portrait of
her classroom as it looked in practice, giving an overview of the procedures and discussing
the patterns of behavior and activity I discovered. In Chapters 5 and 6 I look at the nature
of Linda’s conferences and interpersonal relationships with students. Finally, in Chapter
7, I present case studies of four specific conferences with different students, which reveal
not only general patterns but also the complex anomalies that I suggest do more to define
the nature of conferences than do the general patterns.
CHAPTER IV

CLASSROOM PRACTICE: CONDITIONS THAT PROMOTE STUDENTS' VOICES

It is the good teacher who can practice what she preaches most of the time. Linda Rief is an excellent teacher. This is not to say, however, that her practical journey is smooth or flawless. It was, in fact, a continual struggle for Linda to maintain philosophical constancy in her working classroom. On a daily basis she had to check herself, looking for the spots in her teaching where impatience, exhaustion, or ignorance had caused her to flag from the philosophical course she had set for herself. Sometimes she found great errors in her teaching that made her almost despondent. At other times, she could look at her actions and say, “Yes, good job.” Her self-analysis never ended; it was, in fact, necessary if she was to remain true to valuing students’ voices. If she did not examine whether or not she had acted according to students’ expressed needs, she would have failed her own mandate.

This chapter reveals, in part, how Linda set her philosophy into action. First I describe her classroom design and depict her in action, teaching a “typical class.” I then detail her expectations for her students; her organization of classroom procedures, materials, and space (which made her expectations and teaching style viable); and her instruction, which was driven by the modeling and presentation of authentic reading and writing.

Next, I present the result of her efforts: a classroom example of collegial students pursuing a variety of interests with relative autonomy, but also employing one another and their teacher as separate ears and voices that helped shaped their literacy work. It was a complex and lively place.

Linda’s Classroom Layout

The walls outside of Linda Rief’s classroom are covered with brightly colored posters made by her students. The photographs, poetry, quotations, and writing they present
depict their lives as readers and writers. On her door is an enormous reproduction of a
cartoon. A student who hates to write created the cartoon as one of his final writing pieces
for the first semester. He spent many days on it, producing five drafts until he got it right.

Linda’s large square classroom is bright airy, with comfortable places to work and hide.
Students use nooks between bookshelves as sanctuaries from a busy class to read and write
in semi-privacy. Hanging above tables are mobiles covered with quotations from authors;
passages from books and poetry; and cartoons about reading, writing, and school. The
many art supplies throughout the room (including a flower press) support Linda’s assertion
that literacy includes art. Linda’s desk hides in a corner behind a bookcase. She never sits
there during class, preferring to walk around the room.

Examining the room, three other features strike the visitor. The first is the sheer number
and variety of books, all carefully filed within the ten bookcases and several plastic bins
that line the walls. One case houses information books: dictionaries, thesauri, student
writer’s guides, historical biographies, how-to books, videos of literary works and five
binders chock-full of biographical information about authors. Linda has collected articles,
newspaper clippings, publisher’s biographies, interviews, and authors’ letters for years,
and she has catalogued them all here. Among the genres within the other cases and bins:
fiction, non-fiction, short stories, essays, poetry, young adult literature, books about
writers and writing, books devoted to human rights issues, student writing anthologies
from classes past, professionally published children’s writing, picture books, cartoon
anthologies, riddle books, folktales, fairy tales, and issues of Merlyn’s Pen. There are
sections devoted to generations, grandparents, music and musicians, the moon,
environmental issues, Native Americans, journal writing, sketching, art, artists, and crafts.
Linda also has a large collection of tapes of authors and students reading their work or
talking about writing.

Linda estimates that she has well over two thousand books in her classroom. The many
genres and the surprising number of picture books indicate that she values more than the
standard adolescent fare. She often reads from picture books, pointing out their poetic simplicity and the value of exquisite illustrations to a book’s meaning. She emphasizes quality literature regardless of the age for which it was intended, listening for “beautiful language.”

The second prominent feature is the wall ornamentation. Student artwork and writing dominate. Linda posts all work she considers particularly fine, and students spend much time perusing their colleagues’ work. One board displays bright cartoon strips students made during a joint art-language arts project. (Later in the year, four students will submit their cartoons to a national contest. The head of the contest will call Linda, astounded that all four are finalists even though the judging was blind). There is a huge mural students made by writing on, decorating, and weaving together long strips of paper (the way a child makes a construction paper place-mat). Colorful masks made by students glare down from the walls. There are also many posters, which offer tips for better writing, celebrate authors, describe different literary genres, depict picture book art, and promote human rights and world unity. A bulletin board displays notices about writing contests, student publishing outlets, and articles about authors who have visited the class. Almost everything on the walls is devoted to literacy.

The third striking feature is Linda’s careful organization and attention to detail. Books are organized by theme or genre, and non-picture books are shelved alphabetically by author. On top of one bookcase sit four plastic card files—one for each of Linda’s classes—where students put check-out cards after they have taken a book. Cardboard shelving systems organize reading lists, conference sheets, permission slips, and paper. Color-coded plastic file crates hold students’ work-in-progress folders. On a wall hangs a system of file cards and paper pockets used to designate weekly student jobs—attendance taking, handing out papers, etc.

Linda also arranges her tables carefully. Six rectangular tables, and a large round table sit at odd angles to one another. Students sit four to a table. A smaller round table serves
as Linda's working table. The tables appear to be in random arrangement, but Linda always returns each one to its particular spot. The arrangement ensures that no table has quite the same view—that there is no obvious focal point as there would be if desks faced the same way or in a circle. At the tables, students sit across from one another, which invites talk.

The careful design Linda puts into the room upholds her philosophy. It is a place that promotes talk and brings her into conversations rather than isolating her in front of the class or behind a desk. It is a place that values book variety and authentic, creative student work over a more limited and manageable repertoire of “classic” books and skills work. Linda’s choices give rise to new problems as well as new opportunities, but her arrangement clearly indicates the direction she wants to take as she practices her craft and interacts with her students.

A “Typical” Class in Action

To depict a class in action I take an approach similar to that ethnographer Heewon Chang who depicted a “typical” day of an American high school girl (1992). I portray this scene as a single class, but it is actually a composite of my observations of classes on a single day. In each class I looked at different elements of the same lesson. Though in reality there was no such thing as a “typical” class, this composite construction portray the look and feel of Linda’s classes.

7:45. Linda’s group of ten advisees meet in her room for “home-base.” Home-base eases kids into the school day. Linda often uses this time to find out what is happening in their lives outside of class. Today, the art teacher, Beth, brings her own advisees to Linda’s room. The kids have brought in coffeecake, donuts, bagels, and juice. As they eat, some kids write or do homework; others read. Four kids sit on the futon and pore over a book together. Talk undulates, low and pleasant. Linda kneels on the floor and talks softly with Beth, who sits in a chair. Linda was up until 4:00 a.m. last night, suffering from one of her frequent migraines, but she appears to be alive and chipper. As
class time draws near, Linda reminds the students, “Folks, I would greatly appreciate it if a couple of you could clean up the breakfast area.” Dodge, as usual, hems and haws and then volunteers another student. Linda laughs and volunteers Dodge. Some students wander out to other classes while others stay behind for Linda’s.

8:05. Class begins. Twenty-eight students cheerfully buzz as they settle into their seats, teasing one another and telling friends what they did the night before. Linda moves toward the small round table and quietly scans their faces; most of them settle quickly. “Would you take out your journals please.” Yesterday she handed out a list of five spelling rules to help students as they write. Today she reminds them to paste the rules into their journals for easy reference.

She begins her lesson. Where do writers get ideas for their writing? Today she shows a poem she is writing, which was inspired by one of her favorite authors, Cynthia Rylant. Rylant wrote a book called When I Was Young in the Mountains (1992) about her experiences growing up in West Virginia. The book took Linda back to her own childhood. She places a transparency of her typed draft up on the overhead projector and reads it for the class:

WHEN I WAS YOUNG AT THE OCEAN

With thanks to Cynthia Rylant for When I Was Young in the Mountains

When I was young at the ocean, I sat at the edge of the wooden pier and dangled my toes in the water. Like tiny rowboats my toes skimmed the rolling waves, ever alert for sharks. Sometimes I sat cross-legged in shorts and Tee-shirt, a bamboo fishing pole stretched to catch mackerel. No one ever told me to bait the hook.

When I was young at the ocean, I cracked open mussels and periwinkles and clams, and ran my fingers across the gushy insides. I squished seaweed nodules between my forefinger and thumb, anxious for the pop and spray from the moist insides.

When I was young at the ocean, I burned my shoulders and smelled of Noxzema through the entire month of July. I drank in the aroma of hip roses, salt water, and seaweed. At low tide I played croquet with the Queen of Hearts, flew the moon in a hammock, and fed my dolls deviled ham sandwiches in the shade of the screened house.
As the tide came in, water lapped at the rocky shore. The skin of my feet toughened as I paced those rounded stones, my eyes searching for skippers. When I was young, I never wished to climb the mountains, or live in the city, or camp in the forest. The ocean was enough. It still is.

Those who look carefully at her paper can see that Linda has already begun to revise her poem. There are check marks next to the words and lines Linda particularly likes: “gushy insides,” “Noxzema,” “hip-roses, saltwater, and seaweed.” These are the types of descriptive words and phrases Linda endlessly exhorts her students to find in their own writing. At the bottom of the page are her handwritten notes of other memories she might include: “Clam digging with Grampa...hoist me on his shoulders...dominoes—penny candy—root beer barrels...walkway—peonies—lily of the valley—clothesline—white sheets...moon across the ocean...combine-connect summer-ocean.” An arrow juts from her words “rounded stones” in the last stanza and points to a possible replacement, “ragged stones.”

Linda reminds the students that writing ideas and leads can come from a variety of sources, including the authors whose books they read. “Every piece of writing, professional, kids books, observations...give me ideas,” she says, and it is not improper to borrow lines or phrases from others to get you started. “I want you to borrow my line, ‘When I was young at....’ I want you to write for two minutes as quickly as you can about a place that’s just for you. I want you to write about the sights, the sounds, the smells....” Every eye is on Linda as she speaks, attentive and ready to write. Almost. At the farthest table a boy whispers to his three friends from behind his hand, “When I was young in my bedroom...spanking my monkey!” They burst into uncontrollable giggles, trying to stifle themselves with their hands and tucking their heads into their shoulders, but it is no use. Linda hears them and looks up, but she does not address them. Instead, she waits until the giggles subside and then begins to write on a scrap of paper.

The class is silent as they, too, write, in their journals. Linda stands next to the overhead projector. She cradles her own journal in the crook of her arm and uses it as a
writing surface. She moves over to a table of students, sits in an empty chair, and continues.

Three minutes pass. Linda looks up. “Okay, even if you’re not done, stop. A trick a teacher taught me at UNH is, if you’re in the middle of a sentence, don’t finish it. It helps you pick up where you ended when you come back to it.” Linda asks if there is anyone who would like to read what they wrote. Neil volunteers. He clears his throat and speaks:

“When I Was Young in the Woods.” When I was young in the woods, I could hear the leaves beneath my feet crackling and the trees creaking left and right, swaying to the rhythms of the wind. I can hear the busy beaver gnawing at the wood, I can hear the howl of the coyote deep in the woods. I do not wish to be anywhere else, just right here, deep in the woods.

“Wonderful!” Linda exclaims, “I love the creaking of the trees.” Over the next few weeks, Neil will take this passage and carry it through three revisions to create a richly descriptive poem, which will grace his portfolio as one of his best pieces. He will call the poem one of his favorites because it tells so much about himself and his love of the woods. He will write, “I encountered problems of how to describe each sound along the way. I solved them by gathering ideas from teachers and peers. I want you to know how much I enjoy the outdoors, and the noises it makes.” Many will not use this quick-write, which is perfectly acceptable. It is meant only to create possibilities.

After a student reads about “sights of everlasting rides” at Disneyworld and another about feeling “like the king of the world” as a child, Linda comments, “Every one of you, those are the startings of poetry—the sights and sounds.” She then reads what she wrote. Apparently, the scribbles on her original poem gave rise to another memory:

When I was little I couldn’t wait to visit Gram and Grampa Mac. I would swing open the door at the top of Beltram St., leap from the car, and race down the root-filled pathway towards their house. Dodging rocks, exposed roots, through the white swinging gate, past the lilies of the valley, past the holly hocks, under the clothes line, my hands pushing aside damp white cotton sheets flapping in the summer breeze to fall breathless into my grandmother...
“I did not know I would write this,” Linda tells her class, explaining that ideas most often come during the act of writing, not before. She asks, “What was the purpose of doing this?”

“Getting our imaginations going,” replies Annie.

“That’s right. And we will continue to do something like this two to three times a week, in different ways, to keep your writing going.”

A closer inspection of the paper from which she just read reveals Linda has also been writing notes to herself since early this morning:


Months later these notes will make more sense; Linda will have introduced her students to the Holocaust and the class will have read The Giver (Lowry, 1993), a book in which the characters sacrifice freedom for comfort, which leads to oppression and death. Linda writes notes like this to herself continually. There is also one other line on the paper:

“Kelly: My teacher said, my moon was wrong.” Often, when a student says something that particularly appeals to Linda, she will write it down for future reference.

“So we’re spending this period writing,” Linda continues, “I don’t mind if there is quiet talk. I mind if I can hear individual voices.” Linda suggests possibilities for student writing today: they might write about a topic of their own choice, they might write in their journals about something they are reading, they might continue with their “When I Was Young” leads, or they might continue with a pre-existing draft.

The students have no trouble getting to work. Linda begins to move from table to table, listening for students who need help. She shows Mandy and Lynn how to cut and paste their spelling rules into their journals. Damon has drawn a beautiful illustration, inspired by Mossflower (Jacques, 1996), the fantasy book he is reading. His illustration has further inspired him to create characters for his own fantasy story. Amy reads a letter to
Linda, who enthuses about how Amy moved from general to very specific comments. Amy is ready to edit it.

Another table. Linda sits down with George, who yesterday filled out a questionnaire designed to help Linda individualize her approach to each student. The questionnaire asked, "What can I expect from you this quarter? What do you really want to do as a reader and writer? What do you really need to work on? How do you plan to do that?" What do you expect from me? How can I best help you?" George shows her his answers. He has written that Linda's requirement of three to five journal pages a week has simply been too much and that she can expect one to three pages from him. Linda weighs his offer, debating in her mind how much to challenge him. Knowing George's history, suspecting that his offer is sincere, and realizing that one to three pages will be an improvement, Linda says, "One to three pages is good." Hal works on a story. He says he has an idea where it is going. Linda leaves immediately.

A third table. Ralph is frustrated. "I can never come up with any ideas to write about," he moans. He thinks he wants to write about science fiction, but his tone of voice seems to belie his interest. Linda casually asks him what his interests are. "I don't know," he says, but his face gradually softens. He loves to snowmobile. Linda does not suggest he write about snowmobiling. Instead, she remembers that Aaron's mother recently wrote an article for an outdoor magazine and she thinks that it had an article about snowmobiles in it. She will get it for him. She asks, "What's your favorite book?" Ralph replies, "Jurassic Park" (Crichton, 1990). Linda smiles and gets up to leave. Ralph begins to write, perhaps about snowmobiles, perhaps about dinosaurs, perhaps about something entirely new.

Linda moves to Dodge, who had read his quick-write earlier in the class. Linda suggests he expand it into a story or poem, but he has lost his muse; he doesn't know how to continue. Linda suggests, "If you take every line and write as much as possible about each one, you'd have a lot of pieces." Her nudging is not successful. Dodge ponders a
few ideas, including writing to Michael Crichton, but Linda never hears excitement in his
voice. She gives up for the present and moves on.

Linda confers with Leo, whom she had as a seventh grader. He tells her he wants to
start reading more this year, but he is discouraged because he is not that good at it. But
Linda has been tracking his work this year and counters, “You are reading more this year.”
Knowing his reading tastes, she writes in his journal the names of two books she thinks he
will like, then asks him what books he has liked recently. Leo says he really enjoyed
Wright” (1993).

Elena reads Linda her new poem and suddenly it is the end of class. Linda tries to make
it a point every day to bring the class full circle by using the last five minutes as a whole-
class share where a student reads something they have written, someone reads a
professional piece, or the class discusses their day’s discoveries. However, more often
than not, class ends with her and her students absorbed in their own work. This bothers
Linda, who feels the students are not hearing nearly enough of one another’s writing.

The students file out quickly. Linda calls several back to slide their chairs underneath
their tables and pick up crumpled papers off the floor. As the last student wanders out
slowly, she reviews the class. She was particularly impressed with Damon’s journal
illustration. “For a kid who’s not awake,” she exclaims, “he was really there. If you say
the right thing to him he wakes up.” She speculates about one of the more reluctant writers
in the class, whose mother is a professional author. Some of the toughest kids to teach,
she says, are the kids of writers. Perhaps it’s their age, their adolescence. She gets them
at the point in their lives where they do not want to do anything their parents do. Perhaps
there is a gender component, too. Writers’ daughters seem to have less trouble than
writers’ sons. She wonders how she can counteract this resistance. Then she sits down to
rest for one minute before the next class begins.
Other classes throughout the year consisted of workshops by local authors, lively whole-class discussions about literacy and social issues, and trips to the theatre and museums, but the class I depict contains many of the types of activities that occurred on many days. Linda's sharing of her work and others' work, her immersion into students' activities, and her one-on-one conversations them helped define the tone and tenor of the class.

**Classroom Expectations**

Linda had two types of expectations for her students—curricular and creative—which shaped what she listened for in their work and talk. She spelled her curricular expectations out in an "8th Grade Language Arts Curriculum" handout: she expected students to read for half an hour each night, write three to five pages of reflections and responses to reading in their journals each week, maintain a list of books read, maintain a list of difficult spelling words, define three to five difficult vocabulary words from their reading each week, take class notes, create three to five pages of rough draft writing per week, complete two final drafts every four weeks, set goals, and self-evaluate (For a similar document, see Rief, 1992, pp. 30-31).

"Reader's/writer's logs/journals" and portfolios were the primary repositories of student writing. Linda used the unwieldy name "reader's/writer's log/journal" because she could never decide on a more appropriate one. She felt that both "log" and "journal" gave the wrong connotations to students, who then viewed them as either simple notebooks or as personal diaries (In class Linda referred to them either as logs or journals; hereafter I will refer to them simply as journals). Linda viewed them, however, as the place where students accumulated a vast number of observations, thoughts, and ideas for potential writing. She also encouraged them to include drawings and other artwork, which, she said, could express ideas differently than words. Journal entries became students' primary sources for the ideas they eventually took to draft. "I would like you to collect fragments of language," Linda said. "This becomes the seedbed of all writing you might do."
outlined her journal expectations, stating that responses did not have to be about books
students were reading but could be about anything they wanted to preserve or remember.
She suggested several options for entries. Students could quote or point out aspect of good
writing, jot down experiences or memories, state reactions to books, ask questions,
evaluate, and collect artifacts that showed who students were or documented “anything you
want to remember as a writer, reader, thinker, listener, participant, observer of the world
around you.” (For a similar list, see Rief, 1992, pp. 276-277.) Through the year she
repeatedly exhorted students to write about all they encountered—any observations that
might potentially influence or inform their future writing. Early in the year she showed
several journal entries from past and present student she thought were particularly beautiful:

Here's another response: "Today I read on my bench in the woods. Mom wasn’t
around to say, ‘Jade, those shoes by the door would be there forever if not for me.
Put them away.’ Min, my sister, wouldn’t be able to yell from the piano room,
‘Jade, what note comes after C?’ The silence of the woods is so different from that
of my house. Instead of the steady ‘thum’ of the dishwasher, there was a whistling
of passing wind. A few birds chirped in the trees. What a fabulous day.” Is that
about the book she’s reading? No. It doesn’t have to be, but it’s about her
reading. This is her process—“Where can I find a place to read?” The other thing
that she’s done here is she’s got the start of a possible piece of writing, and it could
be a piece of prose poetry—this incredible repetition between my mother asked me
this, my sister asked me this, my father asked me this, I need to find a place to
read.

Portfolios were where students presented and evaluated what they deemed to be their
most effective writing and artwork at the end of each quarter. She expected careful self-
evaluation and gave them a detailed list of questions asking them to examine what made
their pieces effective, what their writing processes looked like, what problems they
encountered, what goals they accomplished, and what new goals they intended to set.

Students included in their portfolio each quarter an “Evaluation of Writing and
Reading,” which detailed their views on what made a someone a good writer and reader,
what they had learned and how they had grown during the quarter, what goals they had met
and what goals they wanted to set, how Linda had best helped them, and how she might

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better help them in the future. (For a similar list, see Rief, 1992, p. 146.) By answering
the same questions every quarter, they and Linda could track their growth.

Students wrote “Case Histories” (Rief, 1992, p. 282) for at least two pieces each
quarter, describing how the pieces originated, from conception to final draft. For each
piece they evaluated and graded 1) their writing processes, 2) the content of their pieces,
and 3) mechanics. Linda then assigned her own grade to each of these areas and
determined a final grade by averaging her grade with the student’s (Linda discussed with
students large discrepancies between grades). These grades were the primary determinants
for report card grades.

Linda also asked students to include in their portfolios any creations from other classes
and outside of school that mattered to them. By giving a more complete picture of their
talents and proclivities, they could better self-evaluate, and she could also could better
evaluate. These parts of the portfolio could greatly enhance their final grades.

In journals, drafts, and portfolios students created and documented not only their own
reading, writing, and thinking, but also documented their adherence to Linda’s
expectations. Her expectations did not pertain to specific subject matter, per se, but to a
work ethic that created a large body of reading and writing, which the student could
evaluate carefully.

Linda and her students read, wrote, and evaluated within a curriculum divided
thematically among the four quarters of the school year. The first quarter introduced, and
immersed students in, reading and writing. Linda familiarized them with classroom
structures and procedures; discussed their histories as readers and writers; and introduced
processes of topic-finding, writing, and revision. She also worked with the art teacher,
Beth, to create joint projects that linked literacy and art. Students had almost complete
freedom of topic choice.

In the second quarter each student chose an author to read extensively. Though they
still had choice in their reading and writing, a portion of their work (personal writing,
literature reviews, artwork, etc.) had to show what they had learned about literacy from their authors.

The third quarter explored human rights and focused specifically on the Holocaust. Students chose books from the extensive selection of human rights literature. They had a much autonomy in what they read and wrote, but Linda required they read at least a few self-selected books about the Holocaust. At one point, she assigned them to create pieces of writing and artwork devoted to the Holocaust; however, they still had choice of genre and theme. The class saw two movies dealing with Holocaust issues and devoted over a week to reading *The Giver* out loud as a class. They used the movies and *The Giver* as prompts for whole-class discussions.

In the fourth quarter students created personal reader’s/writer’s research projects, with complete freedom to use their literacy skills as they deemed fit. They read and discussed *Romeo and Juliet*, viewed two movie versions and a stage version, then wrote dramatic scenes. Finally, Linda and the music teacher, David, worked together to link the language arts and music classes. Students’ final portfolios presentations had to show some connection to music. All four classes collaborated to write and perform a full-length musical for the school.

Linda’s creative expectations revealed habits she felt all good writers practice. She discussed three particular habits more often than any others: 1) Good writers write about what they care, 2) Good writers give specifics, and 3) Good writers write a lot.

**Good Writers Write about What They Care**

Before the class read the short story, “Eleven” (Cisneros, 1992) together, Linda had listed on the board what she called “The Elements of Fiction”: “beginning, characters, conflicts, setting, dialogue, journey, ending, theme.” Now, as they discussed the emotions they had felt while reading about the girl humiliated by her teacher into wearing a filthy red sweater, they recounted their own stories of being shamed. Linda listed on the board what they said: “bad feelings,” “helplessness,” “injustice,” “unfairness.” She looked
at the separate lists. Pointing to the "Elements of Fiction," she said, "In my experience, this is not what you pay attention to first." She then pointed the list of emotions. "You pay attention to this first and this [pointing back to "The Elements of Fiction"] after."

Linda gave a clear and consistent message to students: write about what you know and what is important to you. Read what interests you and stirs your imagination. If a student was not invested enough in a book to gain pleasure or edification from it, it was his or her responsibility to find another one. Linda's responsibility was to help students identify their cares and passions. "It's that constant search for 'When can I make writing more meaningful for you? When can I help you make reading meaningful?'" she said. She often used quick-writes like the "When I was Young..." exercise to elicit what was important to the writers. She assigned interviews among students and lists of "seventeen things you love, seventeen things you hate, and seventeen things you wonder about." When Linda discussed the purpose of journals she said, "Everything you want to remember as a reader, writer, observer, listener of the world should go in here....It's all the rememberings that are possibilities for writing." She shared students' journal responses that showed their investment in their topics:

Here's an entry again. "I think this [One Child, Hayden, 1995] is one of the most emotional books I read. Every joy Torey and Sheila has is fragile, like a wheatberry branch in a heavy storm. It showed me how precious love is. You can't live with it, you can't live without it. I really believe that. I finished this book standing in the bathroom and cried. My mom, who'd been passing by, asked if I was okay and spoiled the moment." I would hope that every book you pick to read is so wonderful to you that somebody interrupting you spoils the moment...that you love it that much. And if you can't find some books that you love that much this year, then I have failed--we both have failed to really help each other as readers. That's how important books should be to you. It doesn't mean you're summarizing it. I want to know what you're thinking about that book.

When Elena mentioned that she did summaries and book reports in her old school, Linda responded, "I don't want you to do that. Why wouldn't I want to read a summary?" The students responded that they were boring and didn't require any thought. "Do you love book reports?" asked Linda.
"No!"

"I hate book reports. I want you to discuss what interests you. I want you to find what you think is absolutely beautiful language."

**Good Writers Give Us “The Sights, the Sounds, the Smells…”: They Give Specifics**

Linda repeated a pet phrase over and over again: “Give us the sights, the sounds, the smells…” Whether they were journal writing, draft writing, responding to others’ work, giving answers or explanations, goal-setting, or self-evaluating, students should supply their audiences with unique and relevant details. She constantly asked the question she had learned from Graves: “Tell me more.” As Mark wrote down in a piece that he loved “food,” I said, “You know what Mrs. Rief is going to say when she sees this?” he nodded and rolled his eyes: “Be more specific.”

A visiting author, Rebecca Rule (see Rule & Wheeler, 1993), supported Linda’s exhortation. Rule explained that a short story was not based on plot, but was “an accumulation of detail.” She showed the class a quilt she had sewed, and explained how all the details—bits of fabric—came together to form a “dominant impression.” Details in a piece of writing came together to form a dominant impression, too. Echoing Linda’s oft repeated line, Rule wrote on the board, “See, Hear, Taste, Smell, Touch, (what the character) Does, (what the characters) Think/Imagine.” She explained, “Good writers try to bring in readers with all the senses. Referring to a character in one of her stories, she asked, “How do you feed chicken soup to a woman who is a hundred years old?”

Specifics forced the writer to create plausible new specifics: “It’s one detail feeding the next, feeding the next.”

The day after four professional authors and artists conducted workshops in her class, Linda asked the students what they had learned from one artist. A student answered, “How you should draw certain characters.” Linda responded back, “What did he tell you specifically?” forcing the student to elaborate how one could use geometric shapes to outline features.
The more specific and descriptive the writing, response, or evaluation, the more valuable the work. Even on pieces that Linda or the student considered failures, a detailed Case History of what happened, how it happened, why it happened, and what was learned became the primary evaluative focus. It greatly influenced Linda’s portion of the grading process. Specifics gave every form of expression the individual student’s unique stamp.

**Good Writers Create a Large Volume of Potential Writing**

Linda did give specific whole-class assignments: autobiographical posters at the beginning of the year; graphs charting students’ loves, hates, and wonderings; a handout of questions in response to *The Giver*; and the daily responses in journals, to name a few. But instead of being vehicles to teach specific literary principles, conventions, or methodologies, the assignments served the singular purpose of having students create a large cache of preliminary writing out of which bits of good writing would appear. These could then be taken and crafted into quality pieces. Linda often paraphrased Donald Murray’s line, “Write badly to write well” (1993, p. 145), suggesting to students that the more they wrote, whether they deemed it good or not, the more chance they would find quality lines within it to develop further. As Murray analogized,

> A few times I’ve worked on stories with well-known photographers, and I was struck with the fact that where I would shoot a roll of film they would shoot dozens and where I would choose a picture to print they would choose that picture to crop and shade and redevelop. What they were doing was finding from abundance something that worked and then making it work better (1985, p.138).

Linda often told her students, “You have to do a volume of writing to get good writing....This assignment is purely to generate a volume of writing out of which the writer might find a topic.”

**Difficulties Arising from Expectations**

Linda’s expectations shaped what she listened for during interactions with students. If they did not meet these expectations, she believed their writing would be boring and inauthentic.
But the path to important, detailed writing is complicated. Many expectations proved to be extraordinarily difficult for some students to navigate initially. There were a number of general difficulties some students faced while trying to negotiate the requirements of the class.

**Students Have Difficulty Utilizing Choice, Time, and Other Freedoms**

Nineteen of one-hundred-and-ten students were familiar with Linda’s classroom, having had her as seventh graders. Many others had entered on the first day with an entirely different conception of what language arts class was. They were used to being assigned books and writing topics. Some like Peggy, who had never been taught writing as a process, panicked. Linda said, “She’s been taught that you write, hand in a piece, get it back.” Revision was foreign to many. They expected to hand in first drafts as final drafts.

Many students shunned their freedom of topic choice and didn’t know how to exploit their extended work time. During the first few weeks some seemed obsessed with getting Linda’s explicit approval before they took initiative to write or read. Their questions began with, “Can I…”: “Can we put more than one poem in our journals?” “Can I cut out pictures from bike magazines?” They would not begin to write unless Linda first approved their topic.

A few exploited writing time to socialize and ignore work, but more of the students who weren’t writing looked chagrined. Time to create without explicit direction from the teacher seemed to freeze them. They appeared not to know how to begin. In many of their previous classes, the teacher guided their procedures by assigning books and pages to read, handing out materials when they needed them, or passing out work sheets. In this class it was the students’ responsibility to find their own books and working materials. Those who had never had these responsibilities became confused. Questions abounded about how to check out books, where to find drawing paper, and where to store folders and portfolios. It was a logistical nightmare for those unused to the workshop atmosphere.
**Students Have Difficulty Identifying Personally Important Writing Topics**

Many students, including most who had had Linda the previous year, had little trouble identifying their passions but many others did. Adolescence may have played a part. Students beginning to question their identities, relationships, and societal roles (Barbieri, 1995; Erikson, 1950; Gilligan, 1982; Marcia, 1980) may have greater difficulty identifying the aspects of their lives that are most important to them, be reluctant to reveal those aspects for fear of ridicule or ostracism, or simply not believe that the things they value might also have value to others.

Their lack of experience in topic creation, which prompted the familiar complaint, "I don't know what to write about," certainly contributed, as well. But, remarkably, some students who had difficulty in class finding writing topics demonstrated a deep value of writing outside of school. One student, Kurt, shocked Linda with his diametrically opposed attitudes toward in-school and out-of-school writing. Linda spoke about Kurt:

> Literally, my rank book is a blank for him. Well, come to find out, he's writing for a computer magazine! He has published at least seven articles this year, but he didn't think it mattered! And he didn't think to mention it! I went, "You're going to win a Pulitzer prize and you're going to stand up there and you're going to say, 'I did this despite my language arts teacher!' He has a zero in the class! But he goes home and he works on the Internet. He's got an editor he works back and forth with; he's fourteen years old and writes for computer magazines and mountain biking magazines....I said, "Could you bring in, Monday, the letters that have gone back and forth with your editors, the e-mail that you've done, the pieces that you've published?" He goes, "Yeah."

Kurt had been writing for two on-line magazines for about a year, after finding a want-ad for a columnist on the Internet. His job required him to read and research extensively and write columns about technical aspects of mountain bikes. I asked him why he hadn’t put this work in his portfolio. He said, “It never just came to me that you could include it for writing.” Maybe Mrs. Rief could, he suggested, tell students what kind of writing she accepted. Incredulously, I showed him numerous examples from my notes where Linda had specifically exhorted students to bring in important out-of-school writing. “Yeah,” Kurt shook his head and smiled sheepishly. “I really don’t know why I didn’t include it.”
Kurt knew what was important to write about, but did not know it was important in the context of school. He said that past experiences had taught him teachers wanted “pieces of writing that had to be on a certain topic.” That Linda had explicitly welcomed the exact type of writing he was doing demonstrates the highly ingrained nature of students’ difficulty understanding what “important” meant in her classroom. It also demonstrates the magnitude of her challenge in overcoming that difficulty.

**Students Simply Don’t Care About Writing**

While a student like Kurt secretly appreciated writing, some students—many of whom were fantastic oral storytellers—hated to write or seemed indifferent to it. Linda said,

> There are also kids who don’t really care about reading and writing. That could be because there are things going on in their lives that I have absolutely no control over, and reading and writing don’t matter to them at the moment. But it doesn’t mean I’m not going to try to offer them experiences that I think are good for them. I’ll be as patient as I can, I’ll always be there, but I can’t continually spend my forty-five minutes working with those one or two kids that still, at this point in the year, are not doing work.

Linda was torn between devoting her time to these students or to the already interested students who clamored for her precious attention. She hoped that the work of their classmates would somehow model literacy’s importance better than she could. For these students she often shifted away from academics, toward simply trying to help them work through problems beyond her direct influence.

Sometimes even willing readers and writers acted in ways that Linda felt demeaned their work. At the end of the first quarter, students presented their portfolios to one another. Each listener wrote a response on a Post-It note to each sharer. I sat at one table, surprised at their general lack of enthusiasm. Many faced their portfolios toward themselves, skimming through them rapidly, barely commenting, seemingly embarrassed. At another table, students who had shared their writing for weeks ignored one another. Their responses were generic and uninspired. “I like the description you used,” wrote one listener. Some students refused to read. As the class grew louder, Linda looked up and
was appalled to see two of her most conscientious students write “Kick Me” on Post-Its
and stick them on friends’ backs. She stood up and addressed the class with tears in her
eyes. “It’s been a really bad day for me,” she told them. She was saddened because they
didn’t seem to care about their writing. They had written some wonderful stuff, she said.
She wanted them to value it. She had even been embarrassed to share her own writing
because people talked and did not look at her as she read. The speech was notable in that it
was so personal. Linda loved writing and reading; she wanted her students to feel the same
way. She knew that some might never love them, or might have an off day, but she
expected them to respect her passion and treat reading and writing with respect in front of
her.

Students Write Generalities, Not Specifics

For students less invested in writing, the notion of supplying details seemed to be either
bewildering or a waste of time. Even fine writers often gave general descriptions and
sometimes resisted Linda’s attempts to lead them toward detail. Writing generalities was
one of the most prevalent difficulties among all students.

In one instance, Lloyd wrote a poem in which he enthused, “Hockey is my life, hockey
is everything.” Linda remarked, “He must have used the word ‘hockey’ about seventeen
times,” but had not supplied any descriptive details. In a conference she encouraged him to
list the sights, sounds, and smells of hockey, but his next draft was largely unchanged.
Linda gave him an exercise. She asked him to write a new hockey poem under one
condition: he could not use the words “hockey” or “winter.” Lloyd, she said, looked grim.

Students Confuse Quantity with Quality

At the beginning of the year, some students’ primary worry was how much writing
Linda expected from them. Linda initially exacerbated this worry by requiring of a certain
number of journal entries each quarter. In October questions such as “How many pieces
are due?” and “If you do two pages in your journal does it still count as only one entry?”
prevailed. Linda became frustrated. Students were not concentrating on the quality of their writing.

The danger Linda ran in stressing quantity to find quality was that students misinterpreted the quantity as the focus of the assignment, which turned their writing superficial. Ultimately, said Linda, the number of pages had little effect on her final evaluation. She expected fine products upon which students could thoughtfully comment, regardless of numbers. She simply knew, as a writer, that fine products came about with more writing. Though she explained this several times, quantity still stuck in some students minds as the major consideration when writing.

**Practices to Anticipate and Address Student Difficulties**

Linda wanted to establish an atmosphere that promoted talk and writing that was relevant to the students. Her role as an organizer served to reduce the difficulties fostered, in part, by her expectations, which interfered with the creation of this talk and writing. Her careful organization offered a stable procedural context to students overwhelmed by their new-found freedoms of choice and time. Without this foundation they were unable to attend as well to her instructional approach. But when organizational stability enhanced receptivity to her approach, which relied on her modeling and presentation of authentic texts, students were subsequently able to grapple with their other difficulties of topic-finding, generalization, focus on quantity, and even indifference to reading and writing. Through real writing, which authors had struggled with themselves, students began to see possible solutions to their own difficulties. Solutions led to greater interest, and more enthusiastic talk and writing.

Linda’s efforts, though, paid off only in the long term. The generally proactive efforts of organization, which led to successful authentic instruction could not be practiced sporadically or judged on a daily basis. Consistency in action and patience were essential to success. Linda did not obtain immediate results.
Organization and Procedure: Creating Foundation and Context

Linda Rief is nothing if not organized. This is not to say that she does not misplace her share of papers or lose her car keys periodically. However, the organizational details and classroom procedures she insisted students master were essential to her teaching style and to her ability to listen carefully. Linda spent close to two months at the beginning of the year teaching students how the classroom ran, and it was not until they were sufficiently familiar with its layout and procedures that they immersed themselves fully into writing and reading.

In Linda’s classroom, every paper, every pen, every table and chair, every book had its place. As she familiarized herself with students’ ways she modified organization and procedures to increase efficiency, but at any point in time she knew where each artifact resided and how every procedure functioned. “Perhaps I’m a fanatic perfectionist!” she said, “I can’t work in a messy environment, and the more I have to do, the more organized I have to be!” Her statement was punctuated by the noise of her vacuum, which she kept in class and used daily.

Procedures and logistics. Linda’s organization began before the start of the school year. She catalogued each new book in her computer. All hardbacks received stickers with her name and a plastic library cover. Paperbacks received her name on the inside front cover and, if there were multiple copies, an identifying number. She covered each paperback with contact paper. She placed homemade library cards in the middle of each book.

Her mini-lessons at the beginning of the year often were not “mini”--she sometimes devoted entire classes to familiarizing students with the room’s set-up, procedural expectations, and book borrowing. Students learned where supplies were kept, how to sign up for conferences, how to catalogue and cover new books, how to write down assignments, how to clean the classroom, and how to sign out to go to the bathroom.

While some of these procedures are familiar to anyone who has attended school, what is
significant is the weight Linda placed on them and the extensive amount of class time she spent reviewing and reinforcing them.

Journals. Every journal was organized in the exact same way. Using white tabs, students divided their journals into four sections: Response, where they put book responses, thoughts, or artifacts that informed their reading, writing, and thinking; Notes, where they wrote mini-lesson information; Vocab, where they wrote unfamiliar words; Spelling, where they wrote down personally misspelled words. Inside the front cover of the journal, each student stapled three pages. The first was a Reading List to document information about every book they read (Rief, 1992, p. 278). The next two pages detailed directions about how to use the journal.

Journal set-up was non-negotiable, and Linda explained why: she would review over a hundred journals, and she intended to be thorough. If everyone arranged their journals differently, she would have to rummage to find what she wanted. If she had to spend just two minutes searching for reading lists and other work in each journal, she would lose over three hours of precious time.

Portfolios. Near the end of each quarter, students chose approximately four to five final pieces, placing the most effective piece, in their estimation, at the beginning of their portfolios, and the least effective at the end. They included every draft--final draft on top and working down. On top of their two or three best pieces, they placed their Case Histories. They also included a Readers'/Writers' Survey that outlined their talents, tastes, and needs (for a similar list see Rief, 1992, pp. 270-271) and the quarterly Evaluation of Reading and Writing.

Working draft folders. Linda created four color-coded file folder bins, one for each class. Each student had a folder in his or her class’s color in which to put working drafts. Anyone who wanted Linda to read a draft placed it vertically in his or her folder in the bin. Linda then knew to read and comment on it.
Tables. Students were free to roam the room, but Linda assigned each to a table. She wanted students who could help each other to work together. She tried to ensure that each person sat with at least one fairly close friend, but friends could also inhibit work, so Linda kept alert to dynamics. As we shall see, she encouraged much social talk at tables, but she continually struggled for balance. Table organization had to create social talk that influenced the students' literacy work, but did not break down production. She fiddled with arrangements and, to introduce students to fresh viewpoints, rearranged tables whole-scale a couple of times a quarter.

Conferences. Linda gave each student a Conference Sheet. During a conference, the student handed the sheet to her. The sheet had five boxes where both students and Linda wrote commentaries and questions (For a similar sheet see Rief, 1992, p 279). Linda used conference sheets extensively for the first two months, but as students internalized the procedures they abandoned the sheets. They began to write on drafts themselves.

Taking the time to organize and proceduralize leads to success. The road to an organized, smoothly running classroom was a long one. Students did not become competent after hearing directions only once, no matter how clear Linda’s explanations. Linda went over organization and procedures time and again, alternately bemused and frustrated when students continued to ask sincere questions about what to write in their journals. Students read and wrote every day, but reviewing procedures ate time.

In October some students still used journals as places to write formal drafts. In class, Linda told them, “I’m really worried. I took too many leaps with this journal.” She again explained the differences between journal responses and draft writing. She spent the rest of the class moving from table to table, helping students reorganize their journals and folders, and explaining what she expected in terms of entries and rough drafts.

A few days later, Linda reviewed all the journals. She was sorely disappointed. Students still had not organized according to her written directions and mini-lessons. Many had few reading responses. On Monday she again reviewed journal requirements. “We’re
going to start over at the very beginning," she said as she put up a transparency of a journal's Reading List on the overhead projector. Though the material had been reviewed many times, many students still struggled. "This is confusing!" whispered Annie, softly, as Linda spoke.

I called Linda at home that night. It was a low point in the year for her. She was uncomfortable with her classes, even now, because she did not yet know her students through their writing. School was a month old and they still struggled with classroom operations. She had talked to Nancie Atwell on the phone the night before, who had empathized with her. "I hate all the organizing!" Nancie told Linda, "It takes a full month!"

Would students ever learn? Linda wondered. Weeks later, after the class had begun functioning smoothly, she laughingly admitted that she felt the same panic at the beginning of every year. She always remembered what last year's students had done in June and had forgotten the same struggles she had encountered with them in September and October.

Linda's persistence—her unwillingness to drop the organizational issue even when it took away from learning about students and helping them read and write—quite suddenly showed results in the first week of November. Within the span of a few short days students began to use their journals according to her expectations and quit tugging at her sleeve. "Can I..." questions as well as questions about the location of supplies and books dropped precipitously. Linda now began to confer even more often with students about their work.

Linda designed her organization to shape the freedom and time needed to enhance the creative process. She standardized the organization of classroom resources and the presentation of student products, but did not control the content or process of students' work. However, in October, some students interpreted one requirement as an appropriation of their writing. Linda announced that she expected each student to complete at least five pieces of writing by the end of the month. One of these pieces would be a "major piece" of five pages or more. The other four could be "minor pieces"—short prose
or poetry. Over the next few days confusion ensued as students tried to figure out which of their pieces they could call “major” and which were “minor.” There were exchanges like this:

STUDENT: Is this long enough to be a minor piece?
LINDA: It’s a major-minor.

Definitions were not clear in anyone’s mind. Things came to a head. Laura had written a short poem she loved and announced that it was her major piece. No, Linda disagreed, a major had to be a five pages. Laura cried out, “No! I can’t do it!” She felt her short piece was the one that deserved the honor of being a “major.” Why, she asked, did Linda insist on evaluating pieces according to their length rather than their quality? Later in the day, frustrated with herself and the students’ apparent inability to understand her motives, Linda changed the rules:

I’m not going to count major or minor anything any more. It’s [writing] just what is important to you. That’s all that counts. I don’t care if you do one piece or twenty as long as it’s something you care about.

While Linda had implemented her requirement solely to ensure that students had enough quantity and variety of writing to finding true quality work, some students perceived her directive as a mandate on how to shape their pieces. They resisted as they sensed their autonomy as writers being wrested from them. Linda vowed in the future to tell students they simply needed enough writing to be able to unearth material worthy of carrying forward into final pieces. Her organization had cut too close to the creative product for those who welcomed creative freedom.

Subsequent days proved that effective organization also required vigilant upkeep and maintenance. Procedures that students had internalized weeks before sometimes broke down as familiarity bred disregard. On one weekend Linda came in to shape up the room. She found books on the shelves that were out of place or placed backwards or upside-down. Some books were missing check-out cards. Again she took immediate action. On
Monday she told the students they could sit on the floors during reading times. She once again, in detail, reviewed proper book organization and check-out procedures, then referred students to another detail she had just added: reference signs that described which books sat on which shelves. Periodic upkeep like this continued throughout the year.

Linda's devotion to organization, even though it took away from vital reading and writing time, offered students procedural boundaries within which to conduct their work. It gave direction to their freedom of time and choice. Further, the efficiency it eventually engendered created time: time for students to talk, ponder, read, and write in the long run, over the course of the entire year. It also gave Linda the time to listen to and observe students, which informed her responses to them. She knew she would read and respond to extraordinary amounts of student writing, listen and respond to extraordinary amounts of student talk. It was impossible to respond thoroughly or well if the classroom did not function smoothly. Students had to flow through the day without interrupting her with problems they could learn to answer for themselves. Her ability to listen to a student's process of creation, rather than just the final product, depended completely on time.

**Teaching by Doing and Sharing Real Writing and Reading**

Once students internalized organization and procedures, they were able to attend more fully to Linda's literacy instruction. Linda taught literacy by sharing authentic writing with students. She taught almost exclusively through three sources of writing: students' writing, professional authors' writing, and her own writing. Through them, she examined method, style, and convention, eschewing workbooks, worksheets, basals, anthologies and other materials created directly for school instruction. She also read and wrote with students during class.

**Students' writing.** Every year Linda copied and shared hundreds of pieces of writing she thought were exceptional. The writing spanned all genres, including journal writing and quick-writes, and taught a multitude of lessons. It demonstrated procedures (how to set up journal entries, reading lists, evaluations, and portfolios), progressive drafting and
other aspects of the writing process, exceptional products, and, importantly, topics other students had considered important to write about. For example, she showed Tim and Kelly’s letter to a local newspaper protesting their class’s treatment by Presidential candidate Morry Taylor. The letter was so exceptional that Harper’s picked it up and ran it.

Linda asked the class, “Has anyone made you feel so strongly that you had to write something?…Has there been a time when you have been either humiliated or embarrassed?…Have you ever done anything that humiliated or embarrassed someone? Jot them down. They may turn into writing.”

She demonstrated students using rich, specific description. She showed a journal entry of a former student who had written an entry while on a train. “She’s just noting what she sees and hears—the smells…”:

“Black train, seats pink like Pepto-Bismol, rubbing knees with Hannah, curled on the seat beside my own. Moon in the waning stage, illuminating snow piles out the window, which we rush by, rattling. Orange lights pierce darkness, a white church steeple…”

Professional authors’ writing. The professional writing Linda shared came from primary sources rather than anthologies or compilations published for schools. It encompassed a staggering variety of genres: fiction and non-fiction; young adult and juvenile fiction and non-fiction; adult, young adult, and children’s poetry; picture books, art books, and art instruction books; nature books; humor books; travelogues; cartoon and comic books; short stories; history and documentary books; information books; pamphlets; speeches; student writing from outside her class; newspaper and magazine articles; advice columns; and excerpts from sketchbooks and journals. She wanted students to relate them to their own lives, often saying, “Write down anything this reminds you of, makes you feel, makes you think.”

Often, Linda shared to examine some particular element of writing or the writing process. To show students how they might incorporate artwork into their journals, she showed illustrated journal entries from authors Jean Craighead George and Karen Ernst.
Just as often, she read simply to show the raw power of words. She challenged students to look for “beautiful language.” Sharing *My Mama Had a Dancing Heart* (Gray, 1995) she said, “I want you to listen to the words she made up. This is poetry. Even though it’s a kid’s book it’s poetry.”

Linda had met many of the authors whose works she shared. She had inside information about the creation of their books, which personalized them and showed their influence on Linda’s own writing. Discussing revision, she held up the book *Wombat Divine* by Mem Fox (1996). Before she read it, she told the students that Fox had given her a copy of the first draft. She read a page, then said, “Now, here’s the final draft of the same page.” She continued to juxtapose first draft text final. “Can you hear the big difference? Huge differences.”

**Linda’s own writing.** Linda also exemplified a wide array of literacy styles, genres, and conventions through her own writing. She rarely showed, however, her final drafts, choosing instead to focus on journal entries and works-in-progress. Her writing revealed the writer’s inspiration because she could trace every piece back to its original source. To show how journal entries inspired further writing she shared an entry about the awe she felt meeting Miep Gies in Germany. She then showed a letter she was drafting to Gies explaining her admiration of her.

Linda taught conventions through her own writing. In one instance she showed her draft of a poem, detailing the proper formatting for her title, with quotation marks and important words capitalized.

**Real modeling: Linda writes and reads in class.** “Mrs. Rief doesn’t listen!” Jade joked one day, “All she does is write!” In most instances, Linda completed her in-class assignments with students, directly modeling the behaviors she wanted them to acquire. She drafted an autobiographical sketch, interviewed students, and created a comic strip showing how she had shredded a wooden spoon in a blender but still served the meal to her husband’s boss. She wrote and shared quick-writes and usually came to class with a
book. She sat at table with students or alone in a corner, reading, underlining passages, and writing rapidly in her journal. When visiting authors conducted workshops, Linda participated as every student did.

However, as students became more familiar with reading and writing on a daily basis, Linda often limited herself to quick-writes; the rest of the time she devoted to conferring. She tried to sit with students on reading days, but other responsibilities began to take precedence. Nevertheless, when there were bits of time to be had, Linda waded back into the middle of the crowd to read and write with her students again.

Her reading and writing powerfully influenced students’ work. Because she took literacy seriously and used it beyond the walls of the classroom, students seemed to respect her requests for an atmosphere conducive to work and adopted her learning stance. Linda noticed, “The kids watch me really carefully. The kids who want to do well really watch me to see what I’m using. It just confirms to me that they are really conscious of what you do as a teacher.” Most students took her behavior quite seriously. Gretchen said, “I look [at] examples of her writing and it gives us ideas. Like that hair piece. She read that to us a couple of days ago and I got an idea from it.” As the next chapters show, her modeling also had an affective influence, moving beyond the provision of information, into the enhancement of student attitude and motivation.

But for all the success her “living a life of literacy” seemed to engender, Linda was not completely satisfied. She speculated that student sharing and modeling was more important because their experiences were more similar. This year, she said, she had not had students read their writing and respond to one another nearly as much as in previous years, which troubled her. She felt this year’s classes had had more difficulty getting up to speed, and she speculated that lack of student modeling and sharing might have been the culprit.

But when surveyed, students overwhelmingly stated that Linda’s practice and sharing of her own literacy was invaluable. It offered them new writing ideas and perspectives, challenged their thinking, and helped them find new books. It made reading and writing
more personal, tangible, and accessible. One student, Ian, wrote, “The reading and writing is very inspiring. To get some pro writing...makes me want to write like that, but I still can’t get it.”

Authentic writing and reading inspire personal stories that influence subsequent work. As Linda presented personally relevant work, both she and the students had frequent and sudden flashes of empathic recognition: one person’s story elicited others’ personal stories (Kaufman, 1995), which Linda encouraged them to share. Linda’s own stories could be remarkably intimate. She shared a poignant quick-write about her father’s alcoholism and how she tried to hide his bottles as a child. “I did not know I was going to write about that,” she said. Several times she strongly insisted that writing about something important did not have to mean something intimate or intensely private; nevertheless, her shares expanded the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable classroom conversation. Students seemed too feel more comfortable discussing more of their lives. They talked about families, boyfriends, and girlfriends; swapped jokes; complained about school; discussed what they did over the weekend; disagreed and argued. Social and personal concerns began to inform academic ones, introducing the subject matter Linda felt was most important to their writing.

The first student conversation that made me recognize some of the unique dynamics occurred after a conference between Linda and Tina, who had mentioned she had a trampoline. After Linda left, Melanie and Lynn, who had been listening in on the conference, began to discuss trampolines, which led Tina to re-examine and discuss the autobiographical essay she was writing. Her story reminded her friends of their own stories. Their subsequent social talk provoked them to return to their own autobiographies. Most notable was the continual pulsing and shifting between academic and social talk. Stories fed into one another, giving rise to progressively more stories. The informal stories influenced their texts.
This social talk was productive because the students continued to work on their writing while talking or shifted back to work during lulls in conversation. The social talk eventually led students to ask questions about assignments, read their writing to friends, and ask for help. Now focusing on their work, they conferred. Finally, they attended directly to their drafting and revising, utilizing their peers' feedback. The conversation then shifted to new work concerns and new social topics, the cycle repeating.

But the social talk could not overwhelm the task at hand. If students did not attend to work on a continual or regularly patterned basis, social talk took the form of "goofing off." In one instance, as Dustin, Kip, Robert, Ashley, and Greg talked about sports and dating, none of their social talk translated back to the page. Some of them, in fact, did not have pens. Their ideas, strikingly similar to those working hard at other tables, vanished once spoken.

It was a delicate balance Linda had to listen for. Students' personal lives drove their writing and talk was the primary method by which they explored life experiences before committing them to the page. Linda had to evaluate each talk situation to see if it enhanced writing or took time away from it. How could she tell? "The noise!" she said. "They seem to be having too much fun that has gone beyond the bounds of personal talk contributing to actual asks." The volume of talk was a fairly reliable indicator of its value to writing. If the noise level rose above Linda's acceptable "working hum" to where she could distinguish individual voices, it indicated that students had become temporarily oblivious to a requisite of productive work: a quiet enough atmosphere in which to think. Had they been attentive to their work, they would have heeded the rule of relative quiet, in need of it themselves.

On the other hand, if students were unwilling or unable to discuss personally relevant issues, their talk held less academic value. For example, at the beginning of the year two students, Hans and Mickey, interviewed each other in order to write short biographies about each other.
HANS: What's your most favorite thing you like to do?
MICKEY: I like to play hockey and draw.
HANS: Why?
MICKEY: Hockey's the best sport on earth.
HANS: And drawing?
MICKEY: Because I'm good at it....How long have you been in school?
HANS: That's stupid. You know that....What's your favorite spot to be when you're angry?
MICKEY: My bedroom, because that's where I get sent....What are your favorite hobbies? Is that a good question?
HANS: I like to read, play the computer, and draw....What do you want to be when you grow up?
MICKEY: A hockey player or animator.
HANS: Why?
MICKEY: Will you stop with the why questions! That's what I like.

The talk here is perfunctory and a little stilted. Mickey is reticent to elaborate for what may be any number of reasons. He may have been shy in front of someone unfamiliar. He may have felt that the things he liked weren't important enough to share. He may have been reluctant to participate in talk that led to writing. He may have come from classrooms where one's personal life had not informed the formal curriculum. Perhaps he did not know exactly what Linda wanted from him. Whatever the reasons, no easy conversation gave rise to potential new writing. Instead, talk followed the unadorned line of the assignment: to ask and answer questions. In this sense the questions were as dryly "academic" as possible, purely following the teachers directions, unembellished by personal curiosity or enthusiasm for what was being said.

However, Hans subsequently asked Mickey who his favorite character to draw was. Mickey responded, "Moe. Want me to draw it?" He drew a picture of a little man with a large nose and a mustache. This was the only point in the interview in which Mickey volunteered unsolicited information, drawing enthusiastically and easily. Drawing, I learned later, was the form of expression with which he felt most comfortable. Mickey was a very likable person; he just didn't do as much small talk as others, and he loathed writing.
The question that arises is what happens to the student who either is not a natural talker or, due to past scholastic experiences, is unable to associate personal conversation with the academic agenda? For Mickey, Linda tailored her approach. Her encouragement of his drawing skills resulted in the wonderful cartoon and accompanying poem that adorned the front door of her room, one of the cartoons that received a finalist award in a national contest. Almost everyone, though, learned through Linda’s consistent, persistent message that talk and writing did in fact inform each other. They were able to use talk as one of their primary modes of pre-drafting.

The Result: Productive Social Talk at Work

Good organization enhanced authentic reading and writing instruction, which in turn gave rise to extensive student talk. To illustrate how talk informed and enhanced students’ academic work, I present a table conversation that highlights the informal nature of the talk. It is talk generated by participants wholly comfortable with one another. Their words have in some ways been inspired by the academic agenda presented them, but social talk sustains the conversation and influences subsequent writing (Barnes, 1992, 1995; Britton, 1993; Wells, 1986).

As class began, Linda reminded students that the quarter was drawing to a close. She suggested they work toward completing any unfinished pieces they wanted to include in their portfolios. Kelly, Gretchen, and Anna, three close friends who had attended school together for years, rummaged through their writing to decide what they would work on. Gretchen wanted to confer with Linda about a new piece, but saw a long list of names ahead of her on the board. She decided to work instead on a science assignment: each student had chosen a natural phenomenon to observe daily over several weeks, recording any changes. Linda recognized these observations might offer students ideas for writing. She arranged it with Sue, the science teacher, to have students record their observations in their language arts journals. That the talks that first ensues in this table conversation is about science underscores the expansion of acceptable discussion genres in Linda’s
classroom. As we shall see later, science observations had already provided inspiration for
language arts writing, just as Linda had hoped they would.

GRETCHEN: I have to observe. And it's not gonna be hard to observe stuff
about nature, but every day it looks the same. So, I don't know what to
write.
KELLY: I know! You'd be, like...
DOUG: No, it doesn't. As a matter of fact, who was it? I can't remember who I
was talking to yesterday, but they said, "I have to have an observation,"
and they looked out yesterday, and I said, "What did you see?" And they
said, "Nothing." And I go...
GRETCHEN: I don't see...I see the same thing I saw yesterday.
KELLY: No, it was raining yesterday!
GRETCHEN: No it wasn't.
KELLY: Yes it was.
ANNA: It was raining in the morning and...
GRETCHEN: Well, I didn't write about that. I wrote at night yesterday.

This exchange shows a primary characteristic of table conversation: each person's
speaking turn usually connects in some way with another person's previous commentary.
Kelly empathizes with Gretchen's complaint, and shouts, "I know!" I, who had heard
another student's similar complaint, challenge Gretchen's opinion. Gretchen's statement
evokes unique personal experiences from both Kelly and me. My statement then evokes in
Kelly another experience and she extends my commentary, reminding Gretchen of
yesterday's rain.

Gretchen's statement that she wrote the night before inspired Kelly to write her own
science observations:

KELLY: I'm writing now. It's like blue sky, and, see what kind of clouds there
are. There's cumulus clouds out...
GRETCHEN: When it was dark. Around five thirty. It wasn't really night, but it
was dark. It's been getting so dark early.
ANNA: (adding to Kelly's comment) ...and they're moving really, really fast.
GRETCHEN: What do you write about cumulus clouds? They're boring!
ANNA: They're moving really fast.
KELLY: Well, yeah! But that's an observation, isn't it?
DOUG: What does it mean that there are cumulus clouds?
GRETCHEN: They're puffy.
DOUG: Yeah, but what does cumulus clouds mean?
ANNA: They're cotton balls.
GRETCHEN: Oh! Does that mean it's nice weather and it's sunny?
ANNA: Yes.
GRETCHEN: Cumulus, I forget. I know the sign. It looks like that. (draws a symbol on her page)
KELLY: Yeah, me, too. That's the sign for it.
GRETCHEN: I know. I just said that.

Again, exchanges prompt reactions that supply information and provoke thought. The tone here is informal; it is talk among friends. But it is also academically informative—a collaborative science lesson. Significantly, the conversational nature of this talk precludes rules that might diminish one's willingness to contribute. Whereas a "teacherly" question carries with it an agenda that might compel the student to conjure up a "right" answer, here none of the students feel that explicit responsibility.

This table talk has another layer of complexity. While the students' exchanges merge to ride one topic as their personal experiences offer them entry into the topic, each student also has an individual agenda riding in the undercurrent. For instance, at this point in the conversation, Anna works on her own project. A few days before, she had read Linda a poem she had written in seventh grade, about lost innocence (a friend had called her snobby for trying to act like an adult). Linda, had cried, "That's beautiful! It's fabulous! It makes me cry! I don't think you have to change a word," but had added, "I can see somebody putting this to music. Can you hear the rhythm?" Today, while she talked clouds, Anna also revised her poem and pulled a new line of conversation to the surface:

ANNA: I had to rewrite the poem because I made another verse. And now I'm upset because I hate writing this thing.

The students continued to talk about Gretchen's observations. Anna contributed to the conversation but also, while working on her poem, hummed a tune she had written to accompany it. The tune caught Kelly's ear and redirected the conversation.

KELLY: Is that your little song?
ANNA: (Singing, then stops) Yeah. Those are the words. Well, not all of them.
GRETCHEN: I made up my own tune after listening to yours.
ANNA: Yep. (sings)
GRETCHEN: They're sort of similar.
Kelly's writing had already influenced Gretchen. A day or two earlier, Anna had sung Gretchen her song-in-progress, which inspired Gretchen to compose her own music—a project she otherwise would not have attempted. It was a familiar phenomenon: one student's statement or activity inspired another to begin a new project or revise current work. We see here, also, how new topics arose and veered in surprising directions at a rapid pace, changing according to the unique experiences of the individual participants. During table talk a great number of topics arose in a short time, contrasting with more "academic" discourse, which is designed to focus on a limited number of topics at a time in a very ordered fashion. The trade-off is that while a mini-lesson, for instance, can clarify a specific topic or concept, social talk in the language arts classroom provides a vast array of potential writing topics.

Talk dominated the room, and students often milled around from table to table. It was how students initiated conferences. They rarely stated, "Let us confer." Instead they approached one another with an informal: "Do you like this line?" or "Read this." The ensuing talk held the same conversational tone, but contained valuable academic feedback as the respondent addressed the writer's concerns. Today, for instance, Charlie came to the table, handed Kelly the play he was writing, and asked, "Do you think this is neat enough?" The conference that ensued involved the whole table. Gretchen and Kelly praised the piece's humor, laughing and pointing out parts that worked. Anna offered specific help to Charlie's questions about neatness and spelling, and a pointed criticism: "This is stupid! Nobody would go that far on a dare! It's a good story, but nobody would go that far on a dare." The tone was different than student-student conferences I had observed in classrooms where the teacher formally assigned students to confer. Here again, informal, friendly conversation set the tone. Instead of formulating responses guided covertly by a teacher-sanctioned academic agenda, the responses were those of friends answering one another with what immediately came to mind.
Charlie left. Gretchen wrote her observations. Anna worked on her song, turning her
attention to its meter:

ANNA: I have to write this on, you know the paper with the lines? I have to
write it as music notes, and it’s really hard because I don’t know what
time it’s in. I don’t know if it’s more four-quarter or three-quarter.
KELLY: Do you want us to figure that out for you?
GRETCHEN: Sing it.
ANNA: (sings) “Have you forgotten what it’s like to float among the clouds, to
ride the w...” Definitely not all quarters.
GRETCHEN: That’s two-two.
KELLY: That four-four. That’s four-four time.
ANNA: That’s what I thought.
KELLY: And then you can just put it in quarter notes.
ANNA: Okay.
GRETCHEN: (sings). “Have you forgotten what it’s like...”
KELLY: The two things are kind of funky.
ANNA: I know. She made up her own tune. It was great.
GRETCHEN: I made up my own! See, I listen to hers and then I make up my
own!
ANNA: And then she kind of twists it around!
GRETCHEN: ‘Cause I can’t sing like her, so I make it up my own way.

Over the next few speaking turns the topic shifted several times, providing students with
the oral equivalent of the cache of writing ideas they stored in their journals. Anna insisted
Gretchen had a beautiful voice to which Gretchen replied she could break windows. This
led to a discussion about how certain pitches could shatter glass. Kelly announced she had
just written “cumulous clids” in her science observations, which prompted Anna to review
the spelling in her lyrics. “How do you spell ‘among?’” she inquired. The girls then wrote
silently for awhile, until Gretchen began to hum again, which reopened the students’ song
analysis.

GRETCHEN: (sings) “Have you forgotten what it’s like...”
ANNA: It goes up a scale (Anna and Gretchen hum their respective tunes).
“Have you forgotten what it’s like...” and then it goes back down again.
And it’s a scale.

At this point, Diane came to the table to get feedback on some watercolors of the sea she
was painting to illustrate a poem. The table had now conferred about multiple genres of
expression: science writing, a play, song lyrics, music, and painting. By the end of class, this list would increase.

Diane received response from three people. Kelly pointed out which picture she found most appealing, Gretchen noted the picture's shading worked well for her, and Anna suggested further ways to shade it. The sheer amount of information exchanged was one of the defining factors of this type of communication.

Linda came over to the table. All three students immediately vied for her attention. Anna read her new verse out loud, Kelly picked up a book from off the table and exclaimed, "You should get this book!" Gretchen asked for feedback to a draft, a piece that had, in fact, come from a science observation in her journal. Keeping the first two lines from the observation, Gretchen had created a short piece designed to evoke a mystical mood:

The fog is thick, giving a heavy feeling to the air. Lugging a large doubt in the mind of a wanderer. He hugs his oversized coat in close as he shivers from the early morning chill. A breeze blows by him and his imagination takes over. He sees himself getting carried away by the wind, just like the sand that's stinging his face. He is a bird, a bird of mysteries. A mysterious wanderer, roaming around with no particular place to go.

The figure keeps walking down the path. The long, winding path that he is not stranger to. In his mind he can see every root, every rock, every slight imperfection disturbing the smoothness of the path.

I follow him steadily, curious where he is going. He takes his time, one faded footstep after another. Ahead I can see a lake. The mist gives an eerie, spooky feeling to it. There he approaches it cautiously, as if he's looking it over and deciding it's suitable. He starts walking faster. Picking up speed as if he were going to splash right through it. Feeling the cool water riding over his body.

He stops at the edge and prepares for whatever he plans to do next. My mind is racing, clueless as to what's happening. I show a blank expression on my face. I wonder if he knows I'm watching.

As my curiousness expands he takes off, floating across the hazy darkness of the water.

Gretchen initiated a conference:

GRETCHEN: Do you like that?
LINDA: I like this.
GRETCHEN: But...
LINDA: Um, there are a couple of things I'm wondering about. This...
GRETCHEN: Uh-huh?
LINDA: It's almost like it's not a he. It's really the fall....
GRETCHEN: I know! It is.
LINDA: ...that you're seeing. Okay. It's almost like, I mean, you've got this saved on the computer?
GRETCHEN: Yeah.
LINDA: I mean, it's fine as it is, but the one thing...it's almost like I need to...have one phrase or something at the end, like, "He is gone...or is he?"
GRETCHEN: Right. Okay.
LINDA: It's almost like there's something that I'm just waiting for that...
GRETCHEN: Right.
LINDA: Right. That just one little thing. The other thing I want to mention, and it's fine that you did this: you've got a whole bunch of fragments all the way through here.
GRETCHEN: Uh-huh.
LINDA: Now, if you've done them with intent, that's okay. Because part of it is...it's almost like it works that the fragments of your thinking are going in and out of the fall, so they're not complete sentences. If you're doing it with that intent, then it works. If you just made a mistake...
GRETCHEN: No. I like...
LINDA: Okay. Then...
GRETCHEN: That's what my mom said. She was helping me, and she said, "This is an incomplete sentence." I said, "I know, there's not complete sentences all over it. That's the point." It's not really a story. It's just...
LINDA: It's images.
GRETCHEN: Yeah.
LINDA: Then, that's perfect.
GRETCHEN: I like it that way.
LINDA: Then that's the way you should keep it.

Gretchen easily initiates the exchange, clearly wanting Linda’s feedback. She asks, “Do you like that?” in the same tone and manner she addressed similar questions to her friends—directly, with a hint of excited anticipation in her voice—indicating a real sense of comfort with the procedure and with Linda.

In Linda’s responses we can detect a tone slightly different than that given by Gretchen’s peers. Her words, voice, and mannerisms indicate a more conscious awareness of the impact her responses might have on Gretchen. Whereas these students simply and directly told each other their opinions (Gere & Stevens, 1985), Linda uses more introductions (“Um, there are a couple of things I’m wondering about...”) and qualifiers (“The other thing I want to mention, and it’s fine that you did this...”) to soften the blow of any statement that might be interpreted as criticism. She knows that her words carry a different weight, derived from her power as class leader and official evaluator. This shift in verbal
approach illustrates a key difference between casual peer conversation and more traditional “academic” talk. In the latter, responses are more consciously measured, informed by a more specific agenda. In this instance, Linda’s agenda is to help Gretchen with her writing, move her forward, but not alienate her. She has to weigh her words to find that balance. Friends’ talk, guided by the different rules of their confident social relationships with one another, allowed for blunter commentary and more informality.

Linda likes the piece, but suggests an addition to Gretchen’s ending of “…and he is gone.” Gretchen acknowledges and responds in a non-committal, generic way (“Right. Okay,” “Right,” “Uh-huh”), but her tone of voice indicates she isn’t at all sure she wants to do that. Linda then questions Gretchen’s use of sentence fragments. However, she does not order her to “fix” them. Instead, she explores the possibility that Gretchen had written them intentionally, for effect. Throughout the year Linda applauded the breaking of writerly conventions if the writer knew what she was doing, stating, for instance, “Does a sentence always have to have a noun and a verb? No it does not. Some of the best authors [play with language].” In this case, Gretchen indicates that, yes, this was indeed a conscious strategy. She had already talked with her mother and made her decision in order to establish mood. Linda’s statement, “Then, that’s perfect,” shows her acceptance of Gretchen’s explanation.

At this point, Linda returned to her first question, about Gretchen’s ending:

LINDA: And the only thing would be...something at the end that makes me stop to think. It’s almost like I’m still thinking it’s a person, and then I’m thinking, “No, it’s not. It’s fog...or is he, or is it,” or something in there. Just something that leaves us thinking at the very end.

GRETCHEN: Okay. (reads the piece to herself) Okay.
LINDA: And it could even be, “Will he be back tomorrow?” Because then, I mean, I don’t want you to give too much away, because you’ve got, I don’t know. It might just be, “Or is he?”

GRETCHEN: Okay.
LINDA: Just think about what that last sentence could be. But that works really well....
KELLY: Can I read this, Gretchen?
GRETCHEN: Yeah.
LINDA: And I really like the fact you know that’s what you meant.
Kelly’s seemingly innocuous statement, “Can I read this Gretchen?” is important. As Gretchen’s conference began, all other talking at the table stopped. Kelly and Anna listened intently to the conference. In effect, Linda was giving a conference to all three people. They all heard Linda’s questions, suggestions, and complements as well as Gretchen’s explanations and justifications. This “one-on-one” conference had a more wide-reaching effect.

Linda left the table. Anna reached over and took Gretchen’s piece.

ANNA: (looking at Gretchen’s piece) See, I like that. I would say that would be the ending. (reads) “As my curiosity expands, he begins forward, drifting across the dizzy darkness of the water, almost magically, fog engulfs him and he is gone...or is he?” I don’t like that. I just like, “And he is gone.”

GRETCHE:N: That’s what I like. I don’t like the [other way].

In effect Gretchen’s conference is not over. Anna had heard the conference with Linda and disagrees with Linda’s suggestion to change the ending. Gretchen expresses the same feeling, which one might have predicted from the tone of her responses to Linda. That she had not challenged Linda’s suggestion in conference may indicate her sense of respect for a traditional teacher-student relationship, a fear of contradicting Linda, or a need to mull over the suggestion. In any case, she now had a collegial ally and another opinion to weigh as she revised.

The talk continued to shift and flow and intertwine. Anna showed a cartoon she had drawn, Kelly began to work on a social studies report that was due soon. Diane came over again and conferred with Gretchen about a poem and another illustration. Gretchen debated Linda’s suggestion some more.

GRETCHE:N: I think it’s weird.
ANNA: I like it how it is. “He is gone.”
GRETCHE:N: I didn’t know what to write in the bottom, ’cause I had this part up to, “I wonder if he knows I’m watching?” When I was typing it, I was like, “That can’t end. It’s just stupid,” (laughs) and it was due the next
day, so I just kinda wrote something. Well, actually, I spent a little time with the thesaurus, but...

A week later, when Gretchen handed in her portfolio, her completed piece ended with, "...and he is gone." In her Case History she admitted, "Ending it was/is a problem for me. I could picture what I wanted to happen, but I couldn’t describe it." But Gretchen felt enough comfort and control over her own writing to weigh and then dismiss Linda’s suggestion, which defines the classroom behavior Linda tried to engender.

The class ended with Kelly reading her autobiographical fiction about an eighth grade girl struggling with overbearing skating coaches, rude teachers, and snobby classmates. Each character was based on a real person. It is a fitting story with which to end the analysis of this transcript because it highlights vividly the connection between students’ personal issues and the academic product. These students exploited the extraordinary variety of opportunities with which their conversations presented them and created literacy products out of their own lives. Their talk played a critical role in their learning and discovery; their subject matter and enthusiasm indicated their commitment.

Linda’s organization enabled students to receive her presentation and modeling of authentic literacy with clearer reception. What they heard encouraged and enhanced their own classroom conversations. Yet, another component of Linda’s instruction was also necessary to promote educative conversation, particularly in regard to her personal interactions with students. The dynamics of the teacher-student relationship were often more difficult to navigate than those among friends. Linda had to adopt a more sophisticated approach that addressed a wider spectrum within students’ personalities. The next chapters examine Linda’s one-on-one interactions with students, focusing on her writing conferences with them. They demonstrate the conditions Linda established to achieve more effective interpersonal communication, enhancing her listening and response.
CHAPTER V

LINDA’S CONFERENCE “FORMULA”

In this chapter I outline the basic construction of Linda’s writing conferences with students, how they generally worked, what purposes they generally served. In this sense I’m showing the “formula” Linda had developed through years of experience and experiment.

A writing conference was any conversation between Linda and an author or co-authors about their texts or writing ideas. Conferences sometimes sucked in other curious students sitting nearby, in the way Linda’s conference with Gretchen drew Kelly and Anna in. These others listened intently to the conversation and sometimes joined in, providing their own commentary. They asked questions, gave Linda background about the author’s piece, and offered advice. In short, conferences sometimes became social events that revolved around the author’s work and text but which also informed, and were informed by, other listeners. Linda believed this phenomenon taught students as much or more than if she were the sole respondent.

Not every conference followed what I call Linda’s formula. In fact, in the following chapters I will focus on variations of approach, which led to more individualized instruction. However, I clearly identified a consistent general pattern of interactive elements. I think of this pattern as the shape of Linda’s proactive approach to students. It is a ritualized activity borne out of her years of experience and experimentation. an approach based upon what she knew usually worked and what she wanted from the student before she entered the conference. Her conference formula had six basic steps: 1) initiating the conference, 2) learning the student’s needs, 3) receiving the text, 4) praising the text, 5) questioning, suggesting, and explaining, and 6) closing the conference.

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1) Initiating the Conference

Both Linda and students initiated conferences. Linda often roamed the room searching for writers who appeared to need help. She required students to confer with her about any piece they intended to include in their portfolios.

Students initiated conferences by putting their names on a list on the board. However, time often ran out before Linda reached the bottom of the list. Those particularly eager for help lobbied for a few minutes of her time before she went on to the next name on the list. At other times the list disappeared and students simply approached Linda.

2) “How Can I Help You?”: Orienting the Conference and Learning the Student’s Needs

Linda began almost every conference by asking Don Murray’s question, “How can I help you?” It forced the student to identify and focus needs. The student’s answer oriented Linda’s listening focus and shaped her subsequent approach. “How can I help you?” started the conference in the writer’s hands: the writer controlled the topic and Linda addressed the stated needs before she imposed her own agenda.

After Linda asked her orienting question one of two things usually happened. First, the student might articulately detail a specific need with which he or she wanted help. Second, the student might not be able to identify or articulate a need. In this case, Linda could not orient herself and assume a clear listening stance. She might then ask the student to clarify or focus a too-vague answer, ask the student to analyze his or her problem, ask the student a series of questions to orient both of them, or ask the student to read his or her piece and then comment according to her own agenda—what she perceived the student needed.

3) Receiving the Text

Once Linda understood the student’s need and other necessary background, she asked, “Why don’t you read it to me?” When students read their own writing Linda could ignore the mechanical problems of an early draft and better hear it in the way the author perceived it. It also forced the author to hear and analyze his or her own work. Linda always wanted
the author to read the text aloud, but sometimes had difficulty following her own rule. There were still times when, feeling rushed, she picked up a paper and read for herself. It bothered her when she did.

4) Praising the Text

Once she had heard a piece, Linda’s first response was always to praise the student’s text, writing process, or talk. Praises implicitly revealed her interpretation of what ideas should be nurtured during subsequent work. Students sometimes solicited praise, asking, “What do you think?” More often, Linda offered it unsolicited. Usually, Linda focused praise on a particular statement or aspect of a text. Praises served the purpose at the beginning of conferences of providing the student with a solid footing from which to continue to build writing. Linda’s praise had to be legitimate, revealing something she truly found important or appealing so the student could build from an authentic foundation. Random or vague praise in pursuit of a generic notion of building self esteem, Linda felt, did not instruct.

The following excerpt shows how Linda used praise to instruct and set up further commentary. She confers with Judy, who is drafting a letter to author Carolyn Coman. Judy is an ice skater and loved a description of ice in the book *What Jamie Saw* (1995). Linda sits down and Judy tells her about the letter. Judy’s friend Katie sits at the table, too. Linda reads the letter to herself.

LINDA: That’s a wonderful piece of writing.
KATIE: She writes good letters.
LINDA: I like the way you went from a general comment to something really specific. Writers love to see that....What do you think you need to do to the piece now?
NIKA: Edit it.
LINDA: The only thing I see is that you talk about three different things. You should have three paragraphs.

Linda begins with legitimate praise for a specific aspect of Judy’s work. Judy now has a good sense of Linda’s perception of the merits of the piece and may now build off of
them. Linda *then* segues to aspects of the piece that might need work (Slattery, 1993), and Judy is able to formulate her own perception of what the piece needs: editing. Linda concurs and offers advice.

5) Questioning, Suggesting, Explaining

During this phase Linda most obviously challenged students to analyze their texts and ideas critically. She had now gathered enough information to fashion personalized responses, and she blended questions, suggestions, and explanations together in a multifaceted approach. She gave students new literacy knowledge, offered them new options, and nudged them to think about what they had done and what they wanted to do. From here she expected students to formulate an enhanced direction for their subsequent work.

Questions

When Linda questioned, she attended to matters beyond the printed text and allowed students to build the story behind their writing: their intentions, expectations, difficulties, and confusions. Her questions helped create a dialogic partnership with the author that began and sustained forward motion.

Linda’s questions fell into two general sub-categories. First, *Orienting Questions* provided Linda a basic background of students’ needs and knowledge, which she used to construct her subsequent approach. These included: *questions that provided background about students’ knowledge or experience* (“Did you ever read the poem in *The Outsiders, ‘Nothing Gold Can Stay’*?”), *questions that clarified unclear practical information* (“How long is your story?”), *questions that determined the status of students’ work* (“Did you get that written?”), *questions about schedules, organization, procedures* (“Did you sign up for a conference?”).

Second, *Analyses Questions* provided background information, as well, but also served to push students toward critical self-analysis, challenging them to take control of their own work to improve their texts. Linda expected students to learn to ask themselves questions. Her expectation that students become “doers,” “knowers and growers,” and self-evaluators
revealed itself in her questions, which asked them to analyze what they were doing and how they were doing it, what they knew and how they were growing, and what they had created and how well they had done. Analysis questions included: questions to elicit the personally important (“What’s the best book you ever read?”), questions to encourage addition to or refinement of oral or written description (“the sights, the sounds, the smells…”) (“What does it look like when these dust clouds rise in the air?”), questions to encourage addition to or refinement of ideas and concepts (“Music is a part of my life’: what do you mean by that?”), questions to encourage analysis of overall purpose of pieces (“What is it you want to get across to the reader?”), questions to encourage analysis of previous, current, or future writing process (“So what do you need to do now?”), questions to encourage evaluation of writing products (“What do you think of this writing?”).

Two conference exchanges highlight how Linda used questioning to emphasize, especially, her expectations that students write about personally important topics and supply descriptive detail. In the first conference, Anna tries to write about her father’s heart attack. She has a very rough draft and can’t find a focus for the piece. “It’s just this and then this,” she says, worried that the draft is a series of disjointed facts. Linda asks Anna simply to tell her the story of the incident. Anna finds it much easier to speak the story; she immediately describes being upstairs when she heard her father scream, “Call 911!” She says she was so frightened that she almost asked, “What’s the number?” Linda replies, “That would be a great lead: ‘Anna, Call 911!’ ‘What’s the number?’” But Anna still believes she has a larger problem with focus, so Linda tries a different tack:

LINDA: What are you trying to get across in this piece?
ANNA: I don’t know.
LINDA: What do you love about your dad? What do you like about your dad?
ANNA: I don’t know.
LINDA: Well, maybe that’s why you need to start [writing, so you can to find out]....What do you like...
ANNA: His car.
LINDA: Why were you scared?
ANNA: 911 could be anything. He could have been dead down there.
LINDA: What would you miss about him?
ANNA: That’s hard. What do you miss about your dad?
LINDA: That he was there, though he didn’t do a great job all the time. He was an alcoholic, but when he was sober he was the nicest, most wonderful man...He kept a roof over our head. I loved going to the dump with him...He was smart, a CPA...
ANNA: You’re too good at this, Mrs. Rief! (Anna thinks and talks a bit, trying to come to terms with this question.) I would not go to the dump with my father. He’s annoying.
LINDA: Why?
ANNA: He focuses on the bad instead of the good. If I clean the entire kitchen and don’t empty the dishwasher, he’ll come in and say, “You didn’t empty the dishwasher!”

Linda begins with an analysis question about Anna’s purpose. When Anna can’t answer, Linda asks a series of questions designed to help Anna discover what she really cares about, for that will define her focus and purpose. Question after question she chips away at Anna’s lack of focus.

Anna then turns the tables on Linda asking a personal question, and Linda gives a remarkably personal answer that exemplifies one type of answer Anna might provide. Anna is chagrined at the ease with which Linda answers, but what is important to Anna—her annoyance at her father’s demeanor—does begin to come out. This is a potential focus for her writing. With work she might be able to incorporate it into her original topic about fear over her father’s heart attack or she might abandon the first topic altogether. In either case Linda’s line of questioning has helped push Anna forward.

What Linda learned from her questioning, inspires her to try a novel approach. “I’m going to give you a strange assignment,” she says. She tells Anna to create a number of sentences on a piece of paper. She will begin each sentence “If I,” follow it with an action she performs, then follow that with the word “he’ll,” and follow that by the reaction her father has. Linda tells her to start the first sentence, “If I clean up the kitchen without being asked, he’ll...” She says, “Put down at least thirteen things he’ll do.” Finally, Linda tells Anna to answer two questions about her father in her journal: “If something really bad happened to him, what are three things that would really change for you?” and “What are three things that you would really miss about him?”
Linda formulated this assignment on the spot. It is an assignment individualized to Anna’s unique problem. It is an assignment that gives Anna more questions to contemplate, the answers to which will elicit the essentials of her relationship with her father and perhaps reveal a focus to her piece.

The second exchange highlights Linda’s emphasis on descriptive detail. Kim has written a poem draft called “Wonder”:

I sit and wonder,
about everything.
How the world will be,
tomorrow,
ext century.—will there be any wilderness left?
I sit and wonder,
about what will become of me.
Will I be rich?
Poor?
Will I have a job?
What will it be?
I sit and stare,
at the outdoors.
Next time I look, will the fall leaves be on the trees?
Or will they be a carpet on the green grass. I love the swing—
how it dances in the breeze.
Will it remain?
Will I feel safe anymore?
I sit and wonder,
about my friends.
Will I be wanted?
Who will they be?
What will they look like?
I sit in silence.

Linda finds potential in the piece, but believes Kim has not supported the grand issues she ponders with enough details that will personalize the theme and make it accessible and relevant to her readers. She begins her questions:

**LINDA:** Where are you sitting and wondering?
**KIM:** My front porch.
**LINDA:** What do you see?
**KIM:** Just the trees and the grass, the swings and the flowers that are dead now.
**LINDA:** What do you think is going to happen to those?
**KIM:** They’re going to be gone, or something.
**LINDA:** What would you miss?
**KIM:** It being natural.
LINDA: What do you see that you take great pleasure in?
KIM: Trees and grass.
LINDA: Is it colors, shapes...?
KIM: They seem just so quiet and peaceful. I don’t know. It just seems more comforting.
LINDA: When you think of the word “comforting.” What words come to mind?
KIM: I don’t know. (pause) Just feeling wanted, I guess. I don’t know. Feeling safe.
LINDA: (pause) Good. Okay. (reads) Where in the whole poem could you add some things that could give us the strong feelings you have? You have some very generic lines here...this is not Katmandu. What are specifics?
(paraphrasing the poem) The leaves are carpeting the grass. What does it look like...? You want to give the sights, the sounds, and the smells that you treasure....Your words are going to take us in and out....But it’s lyrical. It sounds like a song. What are the two or three lines you might repeat as a chorus?"

Linda’s questions focus on specifics. They do not simply provide her with information to guide subsequent suggestions, but also become de facto suggestions, forcing Kim to think about how she might change her pieces for greater effect. Kim uses general terms like “natural,” “trees,” “quiet,” “peaceful,” and “comforting” without enhancing them with specific imagery. But Linda wants qualities that make universal concepts unique and personal. She asks for details that set Kim’s words apart from others’ words on the same subject.

Linda now knows much more about Kim’s piece, her approach, and her difficulty in discovering specifics. She can now shift from questions to more explicit explanations and suggestions:

LINDA: ...Here’s a thing in poetry that isn’t going to work: (refers to the second line of Kim’s poem) “about everything.” It’s so much that it’s nothing. It’s so generic.
KIM: I could cross it out.
LINDA: Yeah. Does it change the poem if you take it out?
KIM: No.
LINDA: Look for lines like that, that you can take out without changing the integrity.

Although Linda stresses the addition of details, Kim formulates her own solution, realizing that deletion is an option for reducing generalities. Linda recognizes this is a legitimate strategy, drops her own agenda for a moment, and builds off the student’s idea.
thus putting Kim in a position of control. However, her closing suggestion reveals she has not abandoned her opinion; she wants to ensure that necessary description is not thrown out.

These excerpts exemplify the nature of Linda’s conference questions. They are not questions that require yes or no answers, but are overwhelmingly “thinking” queries: they discourage a traditional Initiate-Reply-Evaluate approach because they do not require a “right” answer, but a thoughtful one.

Suggestions (and Directives)

Suggestions proposed academic actions for students to consider or take. In Linda’s mind, writers always had the right to refuse suggestions. She presented suggestions to provide options for writing. By increasing choices, suggestions promoted critical thinking. Most of Linda’s suggestions consisted of her ideas to improve specific aspects of a given piece of writing. (Directives, on the other hand, were commands to revise academic work. They offered students no options to weigh, and thus provoked less analysis. Linda’s directives focused almost exclusively on writing conventions—spelling, punctuation, and grammar—rather than ideas [“This should not be a capital; it’d be a small ‘l.’”]. Linda used vastly fewer directives than suggestions.)

While Linda’s questions often tried to draw out what the student cared about, her suggestions carried the message further, advising the student how to use the subject matter they identified as important. But she gave suggestions only after she had picked up cues from the author. In this example, David wants to talk about his science fiction piece:

LINDA: Okay, how can I help you? What are you thinking?
DAVID: I’m not sure. I want to make it a little longer, but I’m not sure what to stretch.

David has an idea of what he needs, so Linda can move directly to listening to his piece. David reads his futuristic tale about an apprentice scientist and his best friend who work together in a lab specializing in gene splicing. Despite the high-tech nature of the scientists’
jobs, David’s portrait of the future is somewhat bleak. When not in the lab, the protagonist
lives in a tin shelter with his pet “iguanoid” (a gene-splicing experiment gone wrong) and
keeps all his food rations and other “treasures” in a garbage can. David finishes reading
and Linda responds:

LINDA: Everything you’ve done, David, I really like. I mean it’s just a fun piece
to read, and I honestly almost believe you. This iguanoid, the rations, the
PET lab, the scales instead of feathers, the whole splicing, the dialogue,
the admitting that he prefers to be the best. And the grandfathers...that’s
really wonderful, and it all works. A place that you might add on to this
is, what does this tin shelter [uc], and maybe it’s not like home, but by the
time you get to the very end of it you don’t mind it being home. I’d really
like to hear more about how you would describe this tin shelter. And, I’m
not sure you answered this because you might’ve. I wrote the question and
I thought you might have answered it: why he was disappointed that he
wasn’t one of the scientists, but he always wanted to be number one? I
think you’ve answered that question. The other thing I’d like to know is
what does this lab look like?

DAVID: Okay.
LINDA: Those are a couple of places that you might add to it.

Linda starts with specific praise, then segues to her first suggestions, which respond
directly to David’s original statement of need about where to find legitimate places to
lengthen his story. Her response to elaborate on the shelter comes from what she, as the
audience, wants to know more about.

But Linda also presented perceptions of what a piece needed that were independent of
the writer’s stated need if she felt the writer could thoughtfully contemplate them without
blindly accepting or rejecting them. As this conference continued, she suggested that David
might use the friends’ relationship to create conflict, which she felt was missing from the
story. David responded that he already had an idea to bring in another character to create
tension. In David’s assertion that he already had an idea for conflict, Linda ascertained that
he was in control of his writing and she could therefore offer even more pointed
suggestions. They began to discuss different possibilities, and Linda concluded the
conference by summarizing her suggestions:
LINDA: That’s where your conflict might be, with something going wrong in the splicing. Yeah, I’d like to hear what you do with it. So, I’m going to write, “What if something goes wrong with future projects in splicing?” (she writes on David’s conference sheet). And maybe the conflict could be they each blame the other one. So, those are the only two things that, if you could do that: what does this tin shelter look like and what could they continue to do with this splicing that kind of reflects what has happened with this iguanoid.

Linda hoped David would use at least some of her suggestions because they represented an informed, professional opinion. But in the long run, what mattered to her was that he thought about them carefully. If he chose not to use them but could give legitimate reasons in his Case History for the choices he did make, Linda would count that most in her own evaluation.

Explanations

Explanations, one might argue, are the core of traditional classroom instruction in the United States. A teacher’s lecture provides an almost unending stream of explanations about a topic. Explanations offer students potentially new information and resources that help them better navigate the world. Explanations are the teacher’s presentation of her knowledge, ideas, opinions, speculations, interpretations, clarifications, analyses, and evaluations.

For Linda, Orienting Explanations provided context and supplied background information that helped students understand subsequent questions, suggestions, or explanations. They included: statements that indicated Linda’s understanding (“Oh, I get it,” “See, I don’t know how to help you”), which signaled the student that he or she either could analyze or discuss a topic with a renewed sense of competency or needed to clarify ideas and expressions before continuing, and declarations or assumptions of fact that provided background information for subsequent statements (“You said you went on that roller coaster seven times”).

Information and Analyses Explanations provided new subject matter—the teacher’s knowledge, opinions, evaluations—and helped guide students’ thinking about their work.
They generally took two forms: short answer responses to questions or statements ("Yes," "no," "that’s fine) and long answer explanations. In this example, Gretchen has written a piece addressed “to those who really don’t believe the Holocaust happened.” After Linda praises Gretchen’s topic selection and use of repetition for emphasis, she makes a suggestion and then offers a subsequent explanation to help Gretchen comprehend the suggestion:

LINDA: What I would suggest that you do here is put an epigraph, which is just a...
GRETCHEN: A what?
LINDA: An epigraph is just like a sentence or two, almost a statement from those people, so that we read this epigraph saying, “We no longer believe the Holocaust happened. That’s a bunch of malarkey.” And then the reader knows that everything you’re going to write here is an answer to that epigraph.

6) Closing the Conference

When the conversants recognized that the writer had new insight with which to continue writing they closed the conference. Usually Linda gave the final word, ending the conference with a word of praise ("This looks great. I’m really glad you did that."), a question to verify that the student was on track ("Okay, so you know what you want to do with it?"); a final suggestion ("But tell us something about this creek"), or a final evaluation ("It’s ready").

The rest of Linda’s conference statements fell into the categories of requests, and interjections and back-channel responses. Requests were statements of command different from directives in that they applied to logistics and procedures rather than the content or ideas of a student’s work ("Why don’t you read this to me?"). Interjections and back-channel responses were short utterances that expressed emotions, filled speaking hesitations, acknowledged the speaker’s talk, or solicited acknowledgement from the listener ("Oh!“ "Wow!").
A Numerical Analysis of Linda’s Conference Responses

I conducted a numerical analysis of what Linda said in conferences for two primary reasons. First, I examined the general subject matter of her statements in order to confirm what academic issues were more important to her—ideas, mechanics, or logistics and procedures (McCarthey, 1992a)—and to learn in what proportion she discussed them. Second, I examined her conversational approaches that I outline in her conference “formula” (questioning, suggesting, explaining, and praising) to learn which seemed to be the most important to her overall approach, whether she used them differently as the year progressed, and whether she used them differently according to the student’s sex. I analyzed twenty-one transcribed conferences: six first-quarter conferences and five third-quarter conferences with males, and five first-quarter and five third-quarter conferences with females.

Linda’s Conference Subject Matter

To reveal the general subject matter of Linda’s conference talk, I categorized each of her utterances. I defined an utterance as a full, understandable sentence. However, when a sentence clearly contained more than one unit of meaning (for example, a sentence of independent clauses joined by conjunctions like “because”) I divided it into separate utterances. I placed each utterance into one of three categories adapted from McCarthey (1992a): 1) ideas, which “related to the expression of the content of the piece of writing including references to events, character, setting, or related ideas” (Utterances in which Linda asked students about their lives, which in her mind surely led to text creation, I coded as ideas), 2) mechanics, which referred to “punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, spelling, or grammar related issues,” and 3) logistics or procedures, which “related to getting materials, reading or sharing a piece of writing, or classroom management and organizational concerns” (“Can I continue reading your story?” “You can get another piece of paper or scissors or whatever you are comfortable with”) (p. 56) (I coded directives such as “Tell me the story” as logistics/procedures).
I did not code fifty-eight utterances in which Linda read students' texts out loud, nor did I code back-channel responses. I also did not code about one percent of the off-topic utterances, which were not intended to further students' work in any way.

Table 5-1 shows the percentage of each of Linda's coded utterances:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5-1: Subject Matter/Content of Linda's Conferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Teacher Utterances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Mechanics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Logistics/Procedures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Linda's conference talk focused overwhelmingly on ideas rather than mechanics or logistics/procedures. Percentages were consistent between first and third quarter conferences as well as between males and females (Some totals do not add up to 100% due to rounding-off).

Linda's Conference Conversational Approaches

I calculated the percentage of speaking turns within which each type of Linda's speaking approaches appeared. For instance, if a speaking turn contained five explanation sentences, two suggestion sentences, and a question, each approach would be credited once for appearing in that turn. I then added the number of turns in which each approach appeared and divided by the total number of turns to get percentages.

I calculated in this manner for two reasons. First, I recognized that a question usually stood alone in one sentence while full explanations and suggestions were often made up of many sentences. Comparing utterance types according to speaking turns more accurately represents the weight Linda gave to each type of approach.

Second, to check coding reliability, an independent rater coded all utterances in four of the twenty-one conferences. We obtained about an 80% reliability rating. We attributed some of the differences to an original misreading of the category definitions, but other
disagreements occurred in longer speaking turns, which contained combination of explanations, suggestions, and/or questions. Though we sometimes differed on where one approach ended and a new one began, we agreed in almost every instance about what types of utterances each speaking turn contained. When we coded approaches according to whether or not they were included in a speaking turn, our reliability was 92%, 92%, 96%, and 100% for the four conferences. Table 5-2 shows the results:

Table 5-2: Conversational Approaches in Linda's Conferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>1st Quarter</th>
<th>3rd Quarter</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Conferences</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Teacher Speaking Turns</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Speaking Turns with Questions</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Speaking Turns with Suggestions/Directives</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Speaking Turns with Explanations</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Speaking Turns with Praises</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5-2a. Conversational Approaches in Linda's Conferences (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male, 1st Quarter</th>
<th>Male, 3rd Quarter</th>
<th>Female, 1st Quarter</th>
<th>Female, 3rd Quarter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Conferences</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Teacher Speaking Turns</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Speaking Turns with Questions</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Speaking Turns with Suggestions/Directives</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Speaking Turns with Explanations</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Speaking Turns with Praises</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notable, especially at the beginning of the year, Linda asked a large proportion of questions. In the first quarter, almost half of her speaking turns contained a question, meaning that students were offering her a great deal of background and analytical information to which she could listen, learn, and adapt her approach.

The chart also shows consistency in her conversational approaches between the first quarter and third quarter conferences save for one case, a large drop in the percentage of speaking turns containing questions in third-quarter conferences from 48% to 31%. My in-class qualitative observations revealed a possible explanation. As Linda got to know each
particular student through the course of the year, she had to ask fewer questions at the
beginning of each conference in order to learn his or her tendencies, tastes, styles, and
thinking processes. In fact, as the year continued, Linda’s beginning-of-the-conference
questions to the students we both considered to be enthusiastic and receptive, dropped off
precipitously. With these students she would sometimes launch almost immediately into
suggestions or explanations. In conferences where Linda was not, for a variety of reasons,
as familiar with the student or his or her work, a larger percentage of speaking turns were
still questions.

Likewise, Linda’s conversational approach patterns are consistent when comparing
males and females, except for a greater percentage of questions in conferences with males
(In the next chapter I discuss the effect of gender on Linda’s general conference approach,
and its possible influence on her questioning approach).

Linda’s conference “formula” offered her a foundational context for conducting
conferences. This patterned approach came from her experiences of what had worked, in
general, for students. Yet at the same time the inclusion of students personal lives and
passions brought with them unique perspectives and ways of negotiating that generalized
response could not address alone. The next chapter depicts how Linda establish another
condition—that of rapport—to create more open, harmonious conversations between her and
her students, which better informed their texts.
CHAPTER VI

CONFE R E NCE REL AT I ONSHIPS: MOVING BEYOND FORMULA INTO RAPPORT-BUILDING

The biggest discovery of my research was the profound effect Linda's personal relationships with students had on the ultimate success or failure of their conferences. In this chapter I reveal how, for the teacher Seeking Diversity through students' individual lives, a formula was not enough. First, a variety of factors contributed to many students' inability or unwillingness to express their diversity to Linda. She had to build relationships with them that overcame powerful resistances.

Second, when students did begin to share, Linda then had to recognize and address the unique dynamics of their individual personalities during teacher-student interactions. In both situations, not only did Linda have to attend to the cognitive domain, attempting to enhance students' thinking and evaluative processes, but also the affective domain: the emotions, moods, feelings, attitudes, motivations, and self-perceptions that affected literacy activities.

In essence, Linda tried to develop a relationship with each student that matched, as closely as possible, the productive socio-academic relationship student-friends had with one another. For most students, a prerequisite to successful communication with Linda was rapport with her: a sense of social and emotional (as well as academic) comfort and trust between them. Rapport allowed discussion of the personally relevant topics that drove the curriculum, giving Linda material worthy of listening to. At the same time, rapport made Linda more willingly receptive to each student's unique passions and problems, further enhancing her listening and response. Acknowledging that literacy is socially constructed, this chapter examines the influence of teacher-student rapport on the success of that construction.

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Tapping the Writer's Interest: The Prerequisite for a Productive Conference

There was a standard prerequisite for a productive conference (a conference in which the student leaves with a clearer direction in which to take her piece and a new willingness to move forward through revision or other necessary activity): the student had to have an interest in what she was writing. If she knew what that interest was at the beginning of the conference, she had to be able and willing to articulate it to Linda. If she could not identify her interest but nevertheless desired to continue the piece, she had to be willing to articulate her desire and explore possibilities that arose out of what intrigued Linda.

If a student showed no interest in a piece at the beginning of a conference, Linda helped the student unearth or create an interest by examining the important aspects of the student’s life. Sometimes Linda described her own interests to inspire hidden or immature interest in the students. If neither Linda nor the student could tap an interest or shape one into articulate writing, then the conference could move no further on its own. At these times Linda often said to students, “If there is nothing there, then go on to something else.” But lack of forward progress with one piece did not necessarily mean lack of success. It meant the student could let go of where there was no interest and move forward into a place where there was.

Helping a Student Find His Interest

At the beginning of the year many students had difficulty finding writing topics, at least some of the time. When Linda sat down to confer with Andrew, he could not tell her specifically how she might help him, only that he didn’t know what to write about. Linda had not taught Andrew as a seventh grader and she knew little about him. The first thing she did was ask him to read the goals he had written for himself on his Reading-Writing Survey. “I need to work on liking to read,” said one. Linda took that as a starting point:

LINDA: Have you ever read a book you absolutely loved?
ANDREW: Yeah, I found some....
Andrew’s voice trails off and Linda seems to conclude from his lack of enthusiasm that she might learn more about him by shifting focus to his trouble writing:

LINDA: What has been difficult for you as a writer?
ANDREW: Just writing a lot. I like to write; I just can’t write that much.
LINDA: So, don’t worry that much about quantity.

* * *

LINDA: Do you have anything you want to write? A letter…
ANDREW: I could write a story…. About sports.
LINDA: Why don’t you write a page that starts, “I think I’m going to write a story about sports.” Don’t worry about the writing right away.

Andrew’s response reveals much to Linda. That he says he likes writing focuses her response: she immediately tried to erase the obstacle that apparently stands in his way, his stated inability to write a lot. In her effort to keep Andrew moving forward, she tells him not to worry about writing a lot.

Then it is back to her primary focus. What does Andrew care about? His speculation that he might write about sports is the first time he has been able to articulate a possible topic. But there is no conviction in his voice. Linda senses that he is unsure about this topic. She suggests he write down what he is going to write about, which may spur an idea.

Linda doesn’t leave the conference yet. She chats informally with Andrew about his other work. He tells her that he’s copied some poetry into his journal and wants to know if it counts toward his weekly requirements. One of the poems is by Shel Silverstein and begins, “I never rode a Brahma Bull…” It is a poem about desires. Linda reads it and seizes upon the concept. She suggests stealing the beginning, “I never…” and writing a piece that includes that phrase. She continues to probe for what is important to Andrew.

LINDA: What is it you absolutely want to do?
ANDREW: Skydiving!
It is the first time Andrew shows any enthusiasm during the conference, and it is only at this point that Linda stands up and ends the conference. As soon as she leaves, Andrew begins to write.

This was the conference that first opened my eyes to the focus of Linda’s listening. What stood out was Linda’s patience and gentle persistence. When Andrew hopefully suggested that he write about sports, she didn’t leave the conference as I had expected she would. She kept looking at his journal, asking him questions, and making suggestions. She reacted to Silverstein’s “Brahma Bull” poem immediately, exploiting it to find Andrew’s true passion. When Andrew almost shouted, “Skydiving!” she knew that this idea held infinitely more promise for him than a sports story. Only then did she get up and leave Andrew who, free from his writer’s block, could now create.

Reviewing my notes after the conference, I wrote in the margins, “Is this a pattern in Linda’s conferences? Does she wait until she sees excitement in the writer’s eyes and hears it in his voice? Is this what she listens for?” Linda wrote back, “Yes! Something that catches in the writer’s throat— a spark!”

A spark. Linda listened for a spark. Until she caught that spark, crackling out of the student’s already burning interests, or ignited into existence with her help, her further instruction held much less promise.

Teacher-Student Rapport: The Flint for the Spark

The difference between Linda’s listening approach and that of a teacher relying on a more traditional approach like Initiate-Reply-Evaluate becomes clear. While the latter teacher listens for an answer she already knows, Linda listened to learn a right answer as evidenced by the student’s enthusiasm and commitment to it. But herein lay the rub. The optimum conditions under which students were willing to discuss their passions and emit sparks—personal, sometimes intimate flashes of epiphany—existed within a certain relationship between them and Linda. The students who gained the most from teacher-student conferences were those who had developed rapport with Linda. While rapport
didn't guarantee a successful conference, all successful conferences contained some element of rapport.

The nature of this rapport relationship was complex. It had to let them risk and reveal important thoughts without fear of humiliation. It did not necessarily require an extraordinary amount of friendship or social camaraderie, although most relationships contained them. Instead, the mutual trust and respect upon which it was based (Oye, 1993) created an understanding on the student's part that the teacher was a resource and ally as well as an evaluator, and an understanding on Linda's part that the student was sacrificing some time-honored self-protective behaviors in order to move forward. In order for students to be willing to discuss the matters that were most important to them, their relationships with Linda had to be free of intimidation—had to feel safe and comfortable.

The result was a conference that often looked and sounded most unacademic. The image that comes to mind is that of a book club where people chat amiably, sometimes passionately, about writing from an informal, personal perspective. In a teacher-student rapport relationship, the social dialogue often fueled the academic agenda.

As Linda and I talked one day, I asked her to give me her perceptions of this phenomenon. Talking about the complexity I was seeing in her conference relationships I said,

It appears to me that the most successful conferences are the ones where the academic is almost shunted aside, and you start talking in a very conversational, very informal tone that draws the student in through the back door. It's almost like you say, "I don't even want to focus on the academic. I want to find out who this person is as a person. And as soon as you start talking in a conversational tone they latch onto something eventually because they're talking about themselves. The thing that this always reminds me of is Dale Carnegie. You know those books like How to Win Friends and Influence People? (1981) His whole theory is you just tell people, "Tell me about yourself," and then you listen carefully.

Linda thought, and replied,

I guess what I'm thinking is that, when you talk about the social aspect of it...I've had people say to me when they're watching a conference, "It's almost like you're acting like a psychologist," and I'm not really sure what they're talking about
because I’ve never even had a psychology course. But, I think you are trying to gain some relationship with that person so you can truly understand what they’re writing about, because writing, even if it’s an essay, should be very personal. It’s what they think, believe—not necessarily what they feel, which I think is what some people mistake all writing for: your deep inner feelings. It certainly is your ideas and your beliefs, and that is personal. So I think you are trying to make a link with them.

I was thinking about this the other day when [student aide] Mary Nazarro was talking to me about quilting. I said one of the things that I think is missing today—and maybe it’s why everybody goes to therapists all the time—is that there are no quilting circles where women get together and chat as they’re producing something. I guess that’s what I think of conferences. It’s a good healthy chat as you’re producing something. And you have a hard time committing yourself to that production of something if you don’t feel comfortable in the place that you’re producing it.

But beautiful things happen even in a casual way. Quilts turn out to be the most beautiful pieces of artwork, but people weren’t concentrating so much in the product as they were forming that relationship with each other and listening to each other. And they’re still stitching away. I never thought about it that way, but I think in a way that’s kind of what a conference is like.

And yet the purpose of that good healthy chat is getting that writing to be the best that it can be, the same way with a quilting group. The whole purpose is they enjoy each other’s company, so they get together. But they want to also be producing something at the same time, and that seems to be the major focus. The subtext is that conversation that’s going on, that relationship. I really don’t think people have thought a lot about the relationship between the teacher and students when you’re talking about conferencing. If they don’t know you’re really interested, which comes from that chat, then you’re probably not going to get them to really move. And the more I focus on academics first, the less I get them to move, I think.

Linda’s comments reveal the intensely socially constructive nature of her pedagogical vision, and her comparison of herself to a psychologist struck me. I had noted similarities in her conference style with Carl Rogers’ person-centered psychotherapy approach (Rogers, 1951, 1961, 1969), which several writing teachers have examined as a potential influence on effective conferences (Camicelli, 1980; Taylor, 1993; Thomas & Thomas, 1989). In Rogers’ approach, the therapist is a facilitator rather than director, someone more responsible for creating and organizing a proper environment in which people can reflect and express themselves free of fear or embarrassment. Instead of taking a role as a scientist or evaluator, which may objectify a client, the therapist establishes a personal, subjective relationship with him or her. Instead of directing the client toward the proper course of action, the therapist removes obstacles and creates situations that allow the client
to self-evaluate and move toward independence and self-direction. These were Linda’s goals. Her approach certainly wasn’t as non-directive as Rogers’, but she did provide the same acknowledgement and reiterative feedback to what students said, letting them make self-realizations.

Linda’s approach fell somewhere in the middle of Rogers’ definitions of a non-directive approach and a directive approach. Her social conference talk tended to be more non-directive, letting students discover personally relevant issues through “a good healthy chat,” while her academic talk tended to be more directive: questioning, suggesting, and explaining concepts as well as introducing them to matters of technique, expression, and concerns for audience that they might not discover for themselves. Her quilting metaphor introduces her vision for a proper balance between the two approaches. Months later, talking with a group of teachers who had come to visit her class, she again pondered this dual relationship:

I’m learning so much from looking at transcripts of the questions Doug asks. I almost can’t have an academic relationship until I’ve got a social relationship with the kids. But that social relationship can’t be pushed, it can’t be pushed so far that it’s a playful relationship. You’re always walking a tightrope of social, academic, social, academic. I think those kids that you saw just now trust me not as a friend so much as a learner, but it’s a balance of both. They trust me as a friend, but they trust me as a teacher and then trust me as a learner. Somehow, they’ve come to the understanding that I can be all of those things to them.

...[Conferencing is] much more confusing than I ever thought....[Doug] had recorded one conference right after another. When I started listening to it I thought, “God! All the things that you have to keep in mind about each of those kids, going from one conference to the next!” You have to know them: you have to know the kid, you have to know their work, you have to know what stops them writing, what keeps them writing. And you know that if it’s true for this one, it will be the absolutely wrong thing to say to this one. When conferences go long, it’s because you’re not really listening to those kids and remembering all of those things—that history that they bring that you already are aware of.

Linda, in short, focused first on being a good conversationalist. As soon as she oriented her approach in this way, students accepted and entered more readily into the conversational performance. Working in a relationship of camaraderie, she was better able
to elicit and recognize the things that interested them. Then she could then say to the writer, “Look at what you just said. Get it down on paper!”

**The Purpose of Rapport: Creating Comfort to Create Discomfort**

Once established, rapport—this sense of emotional and intellectual comfort and security built on social connection—enabled Linda to fulfill her role as a prod. By gaining their trust she could begin to create a sense of *discomfort* within students, challenging them to expand their intellectual boundaries by trying new approaches and taking risks. Given our definition of effective listening as response that produces “a continuous process of reconstruction of experience” (Dewey, 1963, p. 87) which pushes the listener forward, this discomfort provides the impetus. Linda told a class early in the year, “I’m trying to respond to [you] so I can push your thinking a little bit.” For example, Marty had written a draft about mountain biking. As Linda sat next to him she asked, “What are you trying to say in this piece? What’s the content?” She read the draft. “Ah, this is excellent,” she exclaimed. Then she pointed to one section, “What are you trying to say here?”

Marty described his great passion for mountain biking and Linda asked him to specify his love. Marty said he had never been competitive in sports, but he now wanted to compete in mountain biking.

**LINDA:** Why do you want to compete?
**MARTY:** It seems like the thing to do. I’ve never been competitive. I really like this sport. I have a lot of natural ability in acting. I don’t have to work as hard, but with *this* I’ve really had to work hard to get as good as I am.

Marty was animated and spoke with passion and intensity. His classmates often teased him about his endless prattling about mountain bikes. Importantly, he was comfortable enough with Linda to discuss with her, also. His passion indicated to Linda she could begin to prod—create the discomfort and tension that would force him to extend his thinking and evolve his work.
LINDA: Everything you’ve just said goes in here....This is pushing your limits. Tell us why you like doing this, put us on the bike. What does it feel like sitting there? I think you’re taking us too much through a day that doesn’t matter.”

At all times Linda had to monitor her pressure to ensure that it did not become miseducative, actually halting the student’s thinking process or initiative. At the beginning of the year, for instance, she could not nudge as hard as she could later, when students had grasped the concept of writing as thinking and had successfully exercised their own thinking skills. Linda said, “At the beginning of the year my eye, ear, and heart see things kids could do to make their writing better, but I realize they may not be ready yet.” She believed that at any given point of time one could challenge students only so far from their current foundation of experience and ability, and that pushing any further would fail until they had gained more experience. This, in fact, is the practical application of students’ zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Her decisions for action were sometimes quite difficult, when working with both confident and reluctant writers. She discussed one confident writer, Sonja:

She writes all the time. She’s got notebooks filled with writing. Because I had her last year I know what she’s capable of. She spent the summer writing, she’s had a lot of terrific experiences in her life, and I know that sometimes she’s willing to revise [and] other times she’s not. She likes some of the stuff the way it goes down and so sometimes I have to accept what it is, depending on the body language she gives me. It’s kind of her eyes and face and the way she responds to something I might ask her. I know I have to let it go and just let her keep it the way it is. But with Sonja, because this is the second year I’ve got her, I want to push her thinking a little bit this year. In seventh grade I let them enjoy what they’ve written and be comfortable with it. But I don’t want her too comfortable. I’d like to make her a little uncomfortable and push her thinking.

But as she pushed, she had to be careful:

For all I know she might read something to me that I go, “Wow, that is an incredible piece of writing.” And I just have to be careful with Sonja that I don’t not do that—I want her to know that she does do some very fine writing, some very fine thinking and I have to be careful that I don’t push her too hard.
A balance between the two, she believed, would lead Sonja, and others, to surprises. She said, “I want her to surprise herself with language as much as she surprises me. I guess that’s what I’m looking for in kids. The ones I know, the ones I don’t know, I want them to surprise themselves.”

Linda also touched on the aspect of trust that seemed essential to the development of a rapport: “[Sonja’s] family trusts her, so she trusts herself, and that’s why she’s very confident in everything she does, including her writing. So I just have to push her thinking a little bit, but I also want the balance....”

Her great care had to go into her relationships with reluctant writers also. Hugh, an unconfident student, had completed one of his first pieces, a poem about a girl who had broken his heart. He drew an accompanying illustration of a crying girl, a drooping flower with tears falling from its petals, and a heavy weight. He had hand-written his final draft and drawn a dark black border around the poem and picture. His writing was difficult to read and his marker lines looked sloppy, but on closer inspection I could see that he had carefully traced straight lines in pencil so his border would be square. Linda liked the poem and the illustrations very much, but because of the messy parts she couldn’t decide if it was quality enough to present on a wall. In a conference she suggested to Hugh that he type the poem and paste it into the final piece, but he refused. She went so far as to type his piece at home and bring him copies. He told her he wanted it in his own handwriting. Linda was concerned about Hugh’s stubbornness, but acknowledged that despite the draft’s relative messiness, it was the first time she had been able to read his writing. It was clear that he had done a lot of work and was very proud of it.

The conference posed a most interesting dilemma for her. How should she respond? Should she say, “Good work” and put the piece up on the wall on the grounds that it might be the hardest and best work he had done, or should she again encourage him to clean up his piece so that it met her standards of show quality? What would move him forward and improve his subsequent work? If she rejected what might have been a breakthrough effort
from him, would she stop his growth? As I talked with her she still had not made up her
mind as to what to do, but three days later Hugh’s hand written draft hung on the wall.

Her decisions varied in different situations with different students, and Linda found
these decisions one of the most difficult aspects of teaching. “It’s a lot of work making
kids accountable for improving their writing,” she said, “It’s a lot of work to say, ‘I’m not
going to accept first draft writing.’”

**Successful Social Construction of Text: The Writer Co-opts and Internalizes Ideas**

Recent research, much of it arising out of the works of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Bakhtin
(1981), and Bruner (1986), maintains that composing processes are socio-cultural events
(Bruffee, 1984, 1986; Dyson, 1992, 1993, 1995; Floriani, 1994; Flower, 1994;
according to McCarthey (1994) assumes that knowledge and knowing arise out of social
interaction, that learning moves from interaction between individuals to an internalization of
knowledge within an individual (Vygotsky, 1978), and that “language mediates experience,
transforming mental functions” (McCarthey, 1994, p. 201). In the case of writing, this
interaction and social construction of knowledge is also performed, translated, and
documented on the page. As Linda and student engaged in the social episode of a writing
conference, her continual nudging and the tremendous amount of dialogue that arose from
their comfortable talk produced empathic epiphanies and compromises that guaranteed co-
creation—a social construction of the student’s text. Linda knew she could not completely
separate herself from a student’s writing—that by responding to it she inevitably
collaborated, influencing it for better or worse.

The influence she exerted usually arose out of her own passions—the elements in the
student’s text that she found most intriguing. Hers was a more viscerally driven response
than one coming from a seemingly objective notion of what “correct” writing was. For
example, when John read her his futuristic story of a United States wracked by depression
and impending war, Linda nudged him to discover his own solutions, but also shared what
had most affected her, stating, “The interesting part to me, John, is the bomb shelter, because it always struck me why people would go into one of these and then come out to nothing.” She reminisced about her relatives in Switzerland, forced by the government to build bomb shelters in their houses.

... The thoughts and emotions that John’s story aroused came from her stance as a captivated reader of a text, not as an academic evaluator looking for flaws. She allowed the story to affect her aesthetically before she responded. In the same way that each individual brings his or her own life to a book, constructing a unique interpretation of the text influenced by personal experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978), Linda constructed a vision from John’s rough text built from what she considered most worthwhile. In the case of the writing conference where the text is still malleable and in process, the reader’s (or listener’s) vision can change the final physical product. Linda’s statements now challenge John’s own ideas as well as offer him new perspectives. He may take at least some of her ideas and use them to alter his text.

The questions I began to ask while observing conferences were these: Where is the line between authentic social construction and teacher appropriation of the text? How does one determine whether the student has moved forward intellectually or has blindly obeyed the teacher’s “orders”? The answer appeared to lie in the student’s final perception of the teacher’s information. Linda and I often witnessed an important phenomenon. At the end of each quarter I asked students where they had gotten ideas for their pieces. I asked about aspects of the texts that I knew had been influenced by Linda’s conference suggestions. In most instances where we had considered the conference productive, the students conveyed they had arrived at the ideas on their own. In most instances where we had considered the conferences unproductive, the students said, “Mrs. Rief told me to put it in.” In essence, writers’ retained control of their socially constructed text by co-opting Linda’s ideas and internalizing them as their own. I speculate that this phenomenon occurred when students knew their own writing and intentions well enough that they could clearly recognize when a
teacher’s idea matched those intentions or when it somehow provoked other personally relevant ideas. They internalized the teacher’s idea more readily because the idea already fit into their own preconceived vision of the text or it connected with other personal schemata. Effective listening, then, can be looked at as any response the student can connect to a personal conception or schema, internalize, and use to move his or her work forward. The students in these cases had intellectual and/or emotional control of Linda’s ideas. Linda said, “The skill for the kids is when they are ready to take our suggestions and know what to do with them, and have the ability to accept them or reject them for the right reasons.” These students had that ability.

Obstacles to Developing Rapport

Yet shaping that ability did not come easily. Most students needed a strong rapport relationship with Linda before such synchronized communication and subsequent student epiphany occurred. And developing rapport between the teacher and the student was often a complex, tricky affair. Some students took an instant liking to Linda, and their burgeoning social relationships nurtured their academic ones. Others developed trust in her gradually through the months, after they had learned her tendencies. Still others never developed rapport with her. Some who respected her as a teacher, or even said they liked her, never felt comfortable enough with their writing or with her to open themselves up to a true dialogue with Linda. There were a number of factors that appeared to discourage social rapport-building:

Gender

Linda admitted, “The kids I’ve had the toughest time with have all been boys.” She said, “There’s still an incredible resistance on boys’ parts, [who say], ‘I am not gonna write about that!’ Our society says to them, ‘You shut up anything that has to do with your life.’” Linda often amended my statements when I discussed students who wrote about “personal” issues because of the connotations the word held with many boys. It was not necessarily the “personal,” she wanted them to write about...
LINDA: It’s what matters. I mean, that’s where I have a problem with some of the kids, and especially some of the boys. They think that what I’m after is something personal. When you use the word ‘personal,’ they misinterpret that.
DOUG: As touchy-feely...
LINDA: Yes!
DOUG: ...emotions...
LINDA: Right! And it doesn’t have to be that. It’s what are you angry about or what do you care about? What matters to you? Is football the biggest thing in your life, and, God, you’d kill to get to a professional football game, or do you love being at Fenway Park? But try and get some of those kids to do that—and this really applies to the boys. But it’s what matters to them.

Other general gender differences that seemed to influence rapport-building were classroom behavior and desire to form a personal relationship with Linda. Linda’s students of both sexes were very well behaved and friendly to her and their peers. But my notes reveal two general tendencies. First is the greater number of notes in which I observe boys “goofing around” or talking during times where the rest of the class is working, which contrasts with the greater number of notes in which girls work “silently” or “diligently.”

Second is the greater number of notes in which girls engage in social interaction with Linda—coming in to eat lunch with her, telling stories about their personal lives, asking her questions about her own life. The “lunch-bunch” was made up of enthusiastic and diligent students who thrived on their personal relationships with Linda. It was also totally female.

Finally, a gender difference in genre preferences sometimes influenced Linda’s conference effectiveness. Boys were much more prone to write science fiction, fantasy, or action stories—genres that did not appeal to Linda as either a reader or a writer. Her own preferences for more emotionally-based genres that might be classified as romantic (Newkirk, 1997), which most boys did not care for. On occasion this made it more difficult for Linda to enter into boys’ literacy worlds, and vice-versa. Because Linda focused on helping students discover their own solutions to problems, genre choice was not usually problematic; she focused on the person, not the topic per se, and her questions drew out solutions from the students themselves. However, when the student couldn’t
find his own way out of a writing dilemma despite ardent attempts, Linda had more trouble helping him. For instance, Linda’s conference with Tom was by far the longest I observed—twenty minutes—because Tom had difficulty articulating his problem and Linda couldn’t conceptualize it for herself. Tom had written a long and detailed science fiction adventure. He was committed to it, but had written himself into a hole. “I don’t understand this. This is confusing,” he said. Linda asked Tom question after question, to which he replied, “That’s what I don’t know yet.” Linda finally said,

LINDA: Oh dear! See, I don’t know what to do to help you, Tom, because I don’t know that much about science fiction stories. I don’t know.

Linda suggested he develop his character more to make him more empathetic, but Tom’s problems lay in his plot structure. Tom tried to give Linda more information by comparing his piece to a science fiction television show Linda had not seen, and this gave her a small clue as to where the piece might go. “It sounds like a TV script,” she said, and made suggestions as to how to move it in that direction. But that was all she could offer.

So, I don’t know how to help you. I mean, he’s got to come up with some way of either defeating or being stuck in checkmate. I mean, maybe he gets wiped out or, if you wanted further adventures, then you’ve got to get him out of this. And I don’t know how to get him out. I have no idea. That’s your dilemma as the writer, and I don’t know how to help you do that other than tell you it’s the action of what he does that’s going to be the most important thing that drives this story.

Linda’s incomplete grasp of Tom’s topic resulted in a suggestion that did not contain her usual confidence. Tom had, however, gotten an idea somewhere during the conference...

TOM: I mean, I have a slight idea. I think I could do something with it, but I’m just afraid that if I do something and it turns out bad I’ll ruin the whole story. And then I’ll feel bad; then I’ll kind of like get myself messed up.
LINDA: Well, really, just try it. I’d just try to see how he gets out of this. There’s a TV program where somebody’s very mechanically adept and they always [use] coat hangers and make escape hatches and all kind of stuff like that. Maybe that’s what this guy can do. It sounds like a TV script, and if you want to keep it going that way, then it’s this action that’s going to drive the story. So you have to come up with an ending for it. And he’s either going to get wiped out or he’s going to wipe them out. Or, you’re going to end up leaving us kind of hanging. If he gets out of that
situation, but we know there's going to be another episode. And that’s your decision. I don't know what else to tell you. I don't know if that helps you at all. You’ve got good dialogue in here. I don't know where this is, though, so I'm having a hard time picturing it.

Her lack of confidence may also have influenced her listening and attention. Note how Linda did not ask Tom to elaborate when he announced he had “a slight idea.” A cue like that usually prompted her to have the student talk the idea out, letting it flower in oral expression before he committed it to the page.

Conferences like this, I posit, account for the difference in the percentages of questions asked between males and females in the analyzed conferences. Situations like Tom’s compelled Linda to ask many more questions as she searched for the elusive educative response.

These difficulties were not drawn in absolute lines between males and females. Many girls, too, hesitated to write about personal things, lost focus, or sometimes disrupted class while many boys had no trouble expressing their passions and working with consistent diligence. A great many boys did form close friendships with Linda, while some girls did not socialize with her. Some girls wrote in genres or about topics that were more difficult for Linda to handle, while Linda felt wholly comfortable with many of the genres and topics boys chose. Just as many boys succeeded in Linda’s classes as did girls. What I observed were tendencies that showed a general demarcation between the sexes. Those tendencies, whether possessed by a male or female, made rapport a more complex state to attain.

Adolescence

To teach eighth graders is to witness in wonder the beginnings of astounding transitions into adulthood as students discover aspects of themselves and the world they previously could not have imagined (Siegel & Shaughnessy, 1995). It is also to experience frustration as their moods pitch and yaw, as they search for their own authority by questioning others, as their attention ricochets in a variety of directions.
Adolescence is the time where the physical and bio-chemical changes of puberty, the emergence of a new sense of sexuality, great strides in cognitive development, redefinitions of social roles, and, often, an abrupt transition to a completely new style of schooling (Eccles, et. al., 1993) intersect to contribute to tremendous social, emotional, and intellectual volatility. One characteristic of adolescence is a powerful, intensive preoccupation with peer socialization accompanied by a testing of the definitions of the child-adult relationship, which leads to an apparent withdrawal from this once most powerful bond (Ianni, 1989). All who have lived or worked with adolescents can attest to the silent figures who refuse to engage with teacher or parent but who suddenly transform into bright, lucid, articulate participants when friends come around. As they test their independence from their protectors, adolescents also feel a tremendous need to conform with their peers. What results is a child sometimes unwilling to break the implicit rule that authority figures are not to be trusted. Their reticence to jeopardize new-found autonomy and risk social stigma is not an insurmountable barrier and not always a significant factor in teacher-student relationships, but, in general, it increases the student’s hesitation to share the most important experiences of their lives.

The effects of adolescence were often apparent in conferences:

LINDA: How can I help you?
JADE: It sounds really stupid, but don’t say anything... I’m having a major block with my favorite books... I’ve only written down twelve, but I have fifty [favorite books].
LINDA: Well, why don’t you list and list and list? That really tells something about you as a reader.  
  *  *  *
LINDA: Why don’t you read this [your autobiography] to me?
JADE: No!
LINDA: Why not?
JADE: Because it’s stupid! It makes me sound like I don’t have a life.

Linda attributed one of her most difficult weeks to some incidents arising from adolescence. David cried inexplicably as Linda handed him his portfolio. Jade was sullen and withdrawn, and when Linda asked her what was going on she cried and ran away.
Damon cried when Linda joked with him about putting a piece of paper on a computer screen. Bart’s parents wanted him moved to another table because “he can’t work with those people,” But Bart refused because “Meg and I don’t get along.” Julia talked back to the secretary over the intercom.

Linda speculated on the adolescent personality traits that sometimes complicated the development of social rapport, one’s willingness to carry socio-academic talk into writing, or one’s ability to write about some issues.

I think it is one of two different things. They’ll talk about things and then they’ll go, “You already know that. Why would I write it down?”…They don’t see it as important. Or, it’s too important. There are a lot of things going on in kids lives that [are] so important to them and so close to them…they can’t even write them down yet. They’re not far enough away from it....

A lot of these things these kids don’t know how to deal with, or what they even mean to them, so they’re not going to write them down, yet. Also—I think that’s where this is really complicated—There’s that trust factor again.

She also saw some students’ reticence to write as arising from a newfound sense of independence and ownership:

They own this information; if they write it down they give it away. I think that’s something to think about, too. We do give stuff away the minute we write it down, and it’s ours so long as we are keeping it to ourselves. And in the adolescents, particularly, it’s this in and out all the time: “What do I keep for myself? What do I give away?”

The vital characteristics of the age, though, could powerfully influence her and her students for better as well as for worse. Her approach needed to value their social worlds in order to develop trusting relationships with them, where they were willing to share their world with her through their writing:

Everything matters to adolescents. It matters what you’re wearing, it matters how your hair is, it matters who you’re sitting with at the table, it matters who’s standing at your locker, it matters what you’re eating for lunch, it matters if you’re going or not going to the dance. Every single thing they talk about is important in their lives, and...it’s important to let some of that talk go on! Because then they know that you value them as a person and that what they’re thinking really is valuable....If you don’t let some of that talk go on then you’re not going to hear some big things like, “Where do I fit in this world?”...If we don’t know how they
think about themselves as adolescents, as young women or young men—the things they’re concerned with—then the big things that we want to talk to them about—the way we deal with each other as human beings, the way we treat each other—they’re not going to listen to; they know you’re not listening to what some adults may think are the little things in their lives. Those are traumatic to them. Just somebody calling on the phone and a parent saying, “You can’t talk to them; you’re not allowed to,” that’s traumatic to that child. They don’t want to disappoint people, but they’re so into friends and the little things that we think are minuscule, and we laugh at them. But they weren’t minuscule to us when we were adolescents. I think you’re never going to hear about the things that we think they should be concerned with, and teach them some of those big things in life, if we don’t pay attention to and value the little things that are important to them.

**Previous Relationships with Writing and Teachers**

Many of the students identified by teachers and specialists at the beginning of the year as having had difficulty with reading and writing in the past were the students who tried to avoid conferences, resisted engaging in detailed conversations, and thus developed less rapport with Linda as the year progressed. I never witnessed some students initiate a conference. Their previous histories with literacy seemed to contribute to their unwillingness to ponder teacher questions and suggestions, either accepting or rejecting them out of hand. Some students spoke of negative experiences with former teachers, which had affected their attitudes.

JOE: I didn’t have any positive responses [to my writing] except 7th grade. LINDA: What did that make you think
JOE: That I wasn’t good.

Dean told the class, “My third grade teacher turned me off writing. All she did was correct my spelling.” Julia said:

I think it was sixth grade. [Our teacher] told us, “Okay, now I want you to write a mischievous story that happened to yourself, and you have to write it sort of like Mark Twain.” And, you know, it’s just like, “What?”...She was trying to help kids try different styles of writing so they could find their own, but the thing is...you learn to write by your style, by reading everything and mixing it together. That was disastrous because...you know. Especially when you’re asked to write about something that happened. Because sometimes you just don’t feel like you’ve had anything that’s really funny happen to you; that’s one of the biggest things I had, and I was just like, “Oh my God. What funny happened to me?”
Many reluctant students spoke of textbook work, assigned topics, and spelling tests that “got old.” But perhaps the best indication of how some resistant students viewed the typical language arts class came in an exchange I had with Damien as I surveyed the class. One of the questions was “What makes a teacher a good listener?”

“I don’t get question three,” said Damien.

“Well, what does a teacher do to listen well?”

“But teachers don’t listen to us. We listen to teachers.”

Some prior experiences weren’t necessarily defined as negative by students, but had engendered expectations that conflicted with Linda’s own expectations and teaching style. Peggy panicked at the beginning of the year because Linda did not read each of her drafts. Said Linda, “She’s been taught that you write, hand in a piece, get it back.” It appeared Peggy lacked trust in her own writing and needed immediate confirmation to move on.

Peggy, as did most of her classmates, adapted to the class’s customs and characteristics and developed strong rapport with Linda, but some others resisted, relying on old habits that required less thought and engagement. Cate was astonished when Linda would not accept her final draft that was simply a neater, better-spelled copy of her first draft. Linda’s class could be a frustrating experience for students who had been taught to measure success by quick creation, quantity of product, and neatness, rather than by the thinking process that went into writing. Linda told me the story of a former student who had hated her for weeks because Linda wouldn’t accept her first draft writing. At the end of the year, grateful that Linda had challenged her, she wrote a piece about the experience. Stories like this reveal the sometimes long-term nature of rapport-building and literacy learning, and warn us to be patient.

Linda knew of the historical factors that influenced students’ willingness to engage in literacy, for she had experienced some of their frustrations herself. She often discussed with her classes the teacher comments that had inhibited her writing when she was young. She told me,
I don’t think I have a really significant history as a reader/writer. In high school it was more spitting back—taking notes, and writing the paper that spit back everything....Cliff Notes, too, for evidence of everything that you did to support what you said. None of it was mine. Ever. I think when I finally got into teaching [I said] that’s what I don’t want to happen for kids.

Basic Personality and Agenda Differences

Sometimes rapport-building was difficult for no other reason than that Linda and the student had different personalities and interests. Linda said she had had students who simply did not like her: “I’ve had kids who told me to fuck off, who have stomped out of the room, who have slam-dunked their portfolios into the wastebasket.” Sometimes their personality clashes stemmed from home lives Linda could not control, sometimes from a simple dislike of language arts that went beyond their previous experiences with it. Linda said,

There will always be kids who don’t value reading and writing, and I am the example of everything they hate....There are kids that I had a fine rapport with, who hated math, and Michelle stood for math. They hated her and said things to her that were brutal, and would be kind as anything when they walked through this door. And I had kids who would do just the opposite. They hated it so much in here. They did beautifully in math class. They loved the math class...and the other teachers couldn’t believe the way I would describe those kids treated me.

On the other hand, Linda’s attitude toward the student had just as much, if not more, to do with successful rapport-building. She admitted that every year she had one or two students that 1) she just plain didn’t like or 2) she liked personally but whose overt disdain for language arts made it difficult for her to ever feel close to them on anything more than a superficial level. She knew it affected her instruction.

I can be patient and calm with the kids I like. I am not patient and calm with the kids I don’t like. I can name the kids I have been patient with—that it took until March or April for them to come around—who then said, “Thank you for not yelling at me,” and then they started working. And it was like, “What! What do you mean? I just...I liked you.” Maybe that’s the bottom line: “I liked you so I was willing to wait.”
With students she didn’t like, she said, “I can be as mean to [them] as the next person.”

I can yell at them because I lose my patience. I can say things that I know, the minute they’re out of my mouth, I should not have said— that they were hurtful to those kids. We just forget that they’re adolescents. We forget they’re children. We want them to like us as much as they want us to like them, and we forget that sometimes.

**Strategies for Building and Maintaining Rapport with Students**

Teacher-student rapport was dependent upon Linda’s ability to foster a sense of comfort within the students so that they were motivated to discuss socio-academic matters openly and critically, thus allowing her to listen and respond to the topics they deemed most important. The predictable sequence of Linda’s conference approach, her question “How can I help you?” her praise, and her displays of genuine interest all contributed to rapport-building. Other elements of her teaching and conference approaches also helped establish rapport. Some of them were conscious acts, some arose naturally out of her personality. Always, the maintenance of rapport was a delicate balance of subtle strategic moves, instinct, and an awareness of the students’ multiple and rapidly changing needs through time.

**Living the Life of a Student**

Linda’s participation in the activities she assigned to her students—sitting among them, reading when they read, writing when they wrote, sharing her work, participating in interviews and taking part in authors’ workshops—not only demonstrated skills and processes, but also promoted student trust that carried over into conferences. At the end of the year when she asked her students to evaluate what worked and what needed improvement in class, many commented on its impact. Ashley wrote, “It...opens up the room for other people to feel more comfortable to read their pieces as well.” Kim wrote, “Your writing and reading matter a lot. I love listening to your pieces. Sometimes they give me ideas or make me think. It also reminds us that teachers do work too.” Ivan
commented, "It tells us who the teacher is, and you feel as if the teacher is involved with
the process also. You feel more or less an equal." Fiona wrote,

I think one of the best things a teacher can do is put themselves in the student’s
chair. You take us seriously because you want us to take you seriously. You show
you’re not only a teacher, but also a reader and writer. I really enjoy it when you
share with us.

Kelly said,

[It shows us] what we need to do and helps us feel more comfortable because we
know she’s not giving us an assignment and she doesn’t do it. I mean, when she
does it makes us feel equal instead of her...giving us all the work, and not so
unfair. It’s a better atmosphere for everybody to work in, and if she shares her
writing then we feel more comfortable to share our writing.

At other times, Linda’s in-class work had the effect of making her invisible to me and
the class. I wrote one day,

Does it say something about Linda’s teaching that almost every time I look up from
my notes I can’t find her? She’s usually blended into the rest of the classroom,
kneeling at a table, tucked into a corner with a student. Sometimes, perhaps, she’s
not even there, but the class continues, busily humming.

Students often lost her, too. Aaron looked up one day and asked, "Where’s [Mrs.
Rief]? Oh, she’s sitting over there. She looks like everyone else.” Not only did her
modeling make students more comfortable by establishing a sense of fairness and a sense
that the work they were doing was valued and valuable, it also seemed to indicate to
students that she trusted them enough to not watch over them at all times. The effect was
reciprocal. Once Linda entered a conference she was already more trustworthy than she
otherwise might have been.

Engrossment

It was a general rule that one could not interrupt Linda when she was conferring with
another student. I first noted her deep absorption as she participated in an assignment
where pairs of students interviewed each other. She teamed up with Julia, whom she
didn't know very well, and the two went out into the hallway. Linda sat with her back to
the classroom and immediately blocked everything behind her out. Within minutes she and
Julia were laughing and writing together. The noise behind her rose and fell as people
worked but she seemed oblivious to anything except her conversation. I wrote in the
margins of my notes, “You really get absorbed!” She responded,

I should have had Julia’s back to the class but I wanted to start off right with [her]
and let her know I really cared about her and all she had to say—individual
attention. With my back to the class I could ignore them—still knowing you were
there and wouldn’t let anyone do anything really dangerous!

Although she usually noticed when students’ voices rose above a “working hum,” on
one occasion, as she conferred with Kim, Mike and Marty began to wrestle a table-length
away. Mike eventually pulled Marty’s shirt over his head and, as Marty stood bare-chested
in the middle of the room, the two laughed hysterically. Linda didn’t notice. She was
listening to Kim read.

Here we see how Linda’s deep listening served commensurate roles, with the first role
enhancing the effectiveness of the second. The rapport her engrossment helped develop
encouraged the “sparks”—the personally relevant topics students related enthusiastically.
This was the important subject matter to which she could then give the pertinent,
individualized responses that defined effective listening.

Body Language

Linda’s consistent body language during conferences also indicated her deep attention.
She never stood, but either knelt on the floor or sat on a chair. Kneeling brought her
directly to eye-level with most students. If sitting, she often hunched over slightly and
leaned forward so that she was at eye-level with the student and appeared focused. She did
not sit opposite students. Rather, she sat next to them or at the adjoining side of the table
so that she could scrutinize their text without taking it from them. Sitting near or next to the
student, sitting at equal height, and having the student keep physical custody of writing are
all strategies that Graves (1983, p. 98) suggests show to students the teacher in the role of “advocate” rather than the role of “adversary.”

Graves also discusses the power of eye contact, saying, “Now in the conference if I look away, not wanting to see the child’s hurt, the child may think I don’t care for him” (p. 98). Linda looked at this strategy from her point of view. Speaking of her eye-contact with one student during a conference she said, “It’s the only way I know Randy is listening to himself and I’m listening to him.”

But Linda’s body language revealed a more complex dynamic. I noted another phenomenon when Linda interviewed Julia. As she asked Julia questions she looked Julia directly in the eyes, but as soon as Julia began to speak Linda put her head down to take notes. She kept it down, but occasionally looked up and smiled when Julia said something amusing. Julia’s voice became more animated and Linda eventually stopped writing and looked up for an extended period. When this happened, Julia’s language pattern changed. She replaced words with facial and hand gestures. Her sentences became less coherent and more interspersed with the intensifier/interjection “like.” Linda’s initial avoidance of Julia’s face had forced Julia to be more articulate. Linda already recognized that she spent much time looking down as she wrote what students said, but it’s effect surprised her. Later she said,

I think there’s a big difference in who’s doing the talking. The person who is doing the talking is clearly doing the thinking. People slammed me for not looking at kids during conferences. But I think it really makes them talk differently. They have to use words.

However, Linda consistently re-established eye contact with students when: 1) she talked and questioned and 2) the student said something that surprised her, made her laugh, or moved toward personal or off-topic aspects of the student’s life. In other words, to establish rapport during conferences, she looked at students during the social moments of their talk because eye contact engendered a sense of kinship and social connection. But her intense, head-down note-taking indicated her deep value of their work: an academic respect
for their words. Her listening stance, this time manifested in her body language, provided effective response according to the subject matter and the situation.

**Indirect Speaking Style**

Linda’s directives often took the form of suggestions. “You might want to go out in the hall to finish that,” she would say. She softened other directives by using a passive sentence construction, as in “There shouldn’t be any talking.” In conferences she softened her statements in the same way:

LINDA: (reviewing a student’s piece) Okay, you’ve got this quote and that’s from you....And who’s Trent Reznor?
JOE: He’s the lead singer in Nine Inch Nails.
LINDA: Okay, so you might need to put the group that he’s part of, okay?

In this instance, since Linda wanted Joe to clarify a fact rather than revise ideas, her statement was more a directive than a suggestion. However, her sentence construction softened the charge, making Linda appear not to be establishing hierarchical control, although both participants knew she was.

Tannen (1986, 1990, 1994, 1996) has documented indirectness as both a cultural and gendered phenomenon. For example, most men use “report-talk” as “primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. This is done by exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance such as story-telling, joking, or imparting information” (1990, p. 77).

On the other hand, most women engage in “rapport-talk,” in which language is...

...a way of establishing connections and negotiation relationships. Emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences. From childhood, girls criticize peers who try to stand out or appear better than others. People feel their closest connections at home, or in settings where they feel at home—with one or a few people they feel close to and comfortable with—in other words, during private speaking. But even the most public situations can be approached like private speaking (1990, p. 77).
Linda’s indirectness, then, could create a sense of comfort within the student, implying shared control of the situation as well as more assurance of continued listening. Tannen explains the benefit of indirectness,

If you get your way as a result of having demanded it, the payoff is satisfying in terms of status: You’re one-up because others are doing as you told them. But if you get your way because others happened to want the same thing, or because they offered freely, the payoff is in rapport. You’re neither one-up nor one-down, but happily connected to others whose wants are the same as yours. Furthermore, if indirectness is understood by both parties, then there is nothing covert about it: That a request is being made is clear (1990, p. 225-226).

Her style was problematic in one area. Delpit (1995) quotes research that finds white and middle class teachers are more likely to use indirect speaking styles than black or working class teachers when giving directives, and that both white and black working-class students are disadvantaged in classroom where teachers are indirect because they misinterpret directives as suggestions. However, in Linda’s primarily white, primarily middle-class classroom, her softened directives were not misinterpreted. Instead, the opposite misinterpretation occurred: students who had little say or autonomy in previous classrooms often took her many more frequent suggestions as directives. The rapport that her speaking style was designed to enhance took longer to establish if a student did not learn the difference between a suggestion and a directive.

Linda was ambivalent about her sometimes indirect approach. “I wonder if I’m too tentative by doing that, and is it effective?” She recognized that for students with different backgrounds (and I speculate this also applies to some males in her class) her approach might have the opposite of its intended effect.

Maybe we need to be directive with kids who are ‘free to roam’ as [Delpit] says so many inner city kids are. Maybe our choices send all kids without some structure in their lives the same message “You don’t care about me either!”
As Linda repeatedly said, caring made any style of teaching more effective. Noddings (1992) defines caring as an engrossment (similar to that which Linda demonstrated) and motivational displacement that results in a desire to “respond in a way that furthers the other’s purpose or project” (p. 16). This definition, similar to my own definition of effective listening, enhances the cared-for’s receptivity, recognition, and responsiveness. Linda’s concept of caring, outlined in Chapter Three, corresponded to Noddings’s but also emphasized a demonstration of like and friendliness to students as well as empathy and attention to their non-academic concerns. In terms of developing rapport it meant that, with students who hated language arts or were intimidated by teachers, she sometimes had to prove her care, friendship, or respect before she could address academics. The last section of this chapter and the case studies in the next chapter examine many of the dynamics involved in this caregiving.

Successful Conferences: Signs that Teacher and Student Have Developed Rapport

Rapport usually resulted in a productive conference in which the student left with new perspectives, a clarified direction for further work, and a renewed enthusiasm. Several conditions were present in the conferences that I, Linda, and students considered to be productive. A conference did not have to contain all of these conditions to be productive. Instead, the conditions strongly indicated that the conference would be productive.

The Student Initiates the Conference

Linda initiated many successful conferences, but a student-initiated a conference was an excellent sign that the conference would be productive. It indicated that the student could either articulate a specific concern or, if he couldn’t articulate it, that he valued the piece enough to seek response. Furthermore, it indicated comfort in interacting with Linda. The student trusted her enough to initiate a dialogue and seek her specific feedback.

For example, Lacy was a reluctant student who often cut her classes. For the first couple of months she interacted little with Linda academically, though the two got along
well socially. In conferences, Linda had to work hard to pull words out of Lacy’s mouth. But one day after class, Lacy handed a poem to Linda, telling her that once she wrote things down she couldn’t figure out what she was trying to say. Linda read the poem, told Lacy she did a wonderful job, and said they would go through it together in class to correct spelling and punctuation errors. This conference was a long-term success. Although Lacy still participated infrequently during class, she wrote poetry for the rest of the year outside of class and often sneaked back into the classroom to share it. Her willingness to enter Linda’s class after hours and initiate a discussion was the first sign that Lacy trusted Linda.

The Student Shares Control of Conference Conversations

Students had an investment in productive conferences, which gave them co-control. They negotiated a conversational course with Linda that took into account their agenda as well as hers, and thus they were better able to get their specific needs addressed.

First, students not only initiated the conference itself but also initiated and owned many conference topics, which Sperling (1990) found was necessary for a collaborative teacher-student relationship to develop. If the student didn’t, the conference turned into a teacher-dominated forum similar to an Initiation-Reply-Evaluation approach (Dunn, Florio-Raune, & Clark, 1985). The student contributed fewer ideas, opinions, and emotions to the relationship, thus discouraging rapport. When Linda controlled all the topics, students exhibited less investment.

Second, students discussed and challenged Linda’s statements more often, clearly articulating their own visions for their work. They felt comfortable saying no to Linda and presenting alternatives. In conferences where Linda and the student had not developed rapport, the student either simply agreed with Linda’s suggestions without discussion or resisted any suggestions without articulating reasons or alternatives.

Third, students usually talked more. Researchers suggest that students who are more engaged the conversation, who share control through their amount of talk, have more successful conferences (Fletcher, 1993; Harris, 1986; Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Sperling,
This willingness and ability to sustain talk also indicates rapport—a comfort level that allowed the student to dominate, at times.

Here is an excerpt from a conference that exemplifies shared ownership. Linda, the student, and I all considered it productive; the student left the conference motivated and with a clear direction for revision. The conference resulted in extensive revisions, which incorporated both Linda’s and the student’s ideas: Sonja has read a draft of her new poem, “Sunset.” Linda praises her descriptive words: “wait for the night,” “muffled,” “fade,” “Queen of the night,” “cloak.” then begins to challenge some of the vagaries:

LINDA: Okay, somehow you’ve got to get something... You say “Dark mountains.” Well what does dark mean? Does that mean blue, or black, or purple? (reads) “Beside an array of wondrous....” What’s a wondrous color?
SONJA: Well, I don’t really like listing the colors. Maybe if I have one color and then, like...I wouldn’t want to say, “Reds, oranges, and yellows”...
LINDA: No.
SONJA: I’d want to say, “as red as the cardinal’s wing,” or something like that.
LINDA: Yeah! Yeah.
SONJA: List the colors like that. Specify colors [uc]...

Sonja is not afraid to challenge Linda’s suggestions and offer her own legitimate alternative visions. When Linda implies that the piece might need more descriptive imagery to highlight the “dark mountains,” Sonja perceives that she is suggesting adding a list of colors and immediately counters the idea, saying, “I don’t really like listing the colors.” She then offers an alternative vision that both feels more plausible to her and addresses Linda’s concern about lack of description: “I’d want to say, ‘As red as a cardinal’s wing,’ or something like that.”

LINDA: You talked about how they become “muffled,” and they get covers thrown over them. So, how are they blending together? It’s that blending...
SONJA: Yeah. I have actually the same sort of thing in a different piece that I was doing. I was just sitting by the window and describing what I was...writing what I was seeing. (she reads an extended passage from her journal about looking outside at a “gloomy, foggy, silent morning,” contemplating her future, and noticing the amazing array of vivid colors). And then (looking for yet another poem), this was another...
LINDA: Wha-whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa. Okay, that’s one, right?
SONJA: Yeah.

LINDA: If you’re going to do something with that, you’ve got to get us back to decision. Because the whole point of this staring into space is about decisions. So, somehow you have to get us back to that.

SONJA: And then this was the next day. There was...this is part of the next day’s, where it was like almost the exact same kind of day. (she reads another extended journal passage about the cold fall wind: “...I love this kind of day--cool, misty, drizzly, and refreshing to spirit and soul.”) And then, some other [uc].

LINDA: I like that. You know what, Sonja? I think all the pieces that you’ve read, you’ve got some really strong lines in each of them, and it’s almost like you need to work to get all three of these...

SONJA: Yeah. I figured this one and the one before could all go together.

LINDA: Yeah. I mean, it’s not like you need every line, but particularly, definitely, these two go together.

SONJA: Yeah.

LINDA: So you might...

SONJA: And I thought that “Heaven and Harmony” and “Sunset”—they both came from very similar pictures I had. Like, “Heaven is Harmony” came from that one (points to picture in her journal), and then (flips through journal)...this...then the “Sunset” came from that one. They’re very similar.

LINDA: Yeah, they are. Well, you know what? Those might even be...

SONJA: They might be part of a major.

LINDA: Yeah. Definitely. And you might even take these pictures to a finished draft, too.

SONJA: But I think this one could go a little longer, too, the one that I read aloud in the group. I added some more verses to it, too.

LINDA: Yep. I’d just play with those. Then you might have these that go with your drawings or illustrations, and these might be combined to be one piece. That would work pretty well. Okay.

SONJA: So that could be a...so I could do...I could do a minor with this one...

LINDA: Yep.

SONJA: ...and I could do a minor with the misty ones...

LINDA: Yeah.

SONJA: ...and then, I could...

LINDA: Well, you could...

SONJA: ...end up with another one to make this into a...

LINDA: Yeah. And you could end up, if you combine that with a more finished draft of a couple of those illustrations...

SONJA: That would make a major.

LINDA: And that could make a major.

SONJA: Okay.

Noteworthy about this excerpt is its back-and forth nature—Sonja’s initiates, owns, or co-owns the discussed topics much of the time—when she insists on reading pieces other than the original conference piece and when she suggests how she can combine smaller pieces into bigger “majors.” Note, also, how Sonja wrests topic control from Linda by either cutting her off or anticipating what she is about to say, and finishing or re-directing
her sentences. Whether or not Linda was going to suggest combining pieces into a “major” piece, for instance, the possibility became Sonja’s, and she began to speculate on how she could arrange her pieces for final draft.

According to word count, Sonja and Linda speak almost exactly the same amount in this passage, not including Sonja’s reading of her two journal entries. Those add another 281 words, and one can argue that they should be accounted for when determining who controls the tone and agenda of the conference: one of the reasons students read their own work was so that they controlled the writing and held the floor. In this case Linda did not even ask Sonja to read her two entries, Sonja thrust them into the conference to satisfy her own agenda.

While Sonja shares control of this conference, she also clearly hears Linda. Her subsequent drafts all showed Linda’s influence as well as her own refinement of her personal visions.

The notable exceptions to the trend of co-ownership of talk within productive conferences were some conferences in the second half of the year, where Linda clearly dominated. If a student already had strong rapport with Linda, he or she might initially request Linda to indicate, for example, “stuff that you don’t like.” In these cases, Linda sometimes immediately launched into specific suggestions or explanations. Their rapport gave the student a more open ear and allowed Linda to dominate when requested to.

The point is important because of the studies that imply that a teacher dominated conference is necessarily less effective. However, Walker and Elias (1987), suggest that how much a student talks is not necessarily a key determinant of a successful writing conference, as long as the teacher continues to focus on the student’s agenda. From my observations, I speculate as to the reason for the different findings. Walker and Elias studied college students, who might, in general, have more investment in their work than the general population of younger students. Their willingness to engage in a constructive
academic relationship with a teacher is probably greater, as is their willingness to accept
information out of direct, teacher-controlled instruction.

But when the middle school student develops rapport with the teacher, she better
understands that the teacher has valuable knowledge. She, too, develops the willingness to
engage in a more teacher-dominated format if she determines it meets her needs. In most
successful conferences teacher and student shared control but, importantly, rapport allowed
the successful conference to take a wider variety of forms, each of which could address
students’ unique needs in different, context-specific ways.

The Student Takes Suggestions as Suggestions, Not Directives

Early in my research I noted that while some students misconstrued Linda’s suggestions
as directives, many others did not. What emerged was that the students whom Linda and I
identified as having a good rapport relationship with her were those with the most ability to
interpret correctly her myriad suggestions as suggestions-statements of experienced, well
informed opinion meant for serious consideration, not blind adherence (Fletcher, 1993).
Students who had not developed a rapport relationship with Linda more often complied
with her suggestions without reflection or refused to revise without reflection.

Sonja’s working relationship with Linda illustrates this point. Sonja had written a poem
draft, entitled “Second Heaven.” She gave it to Linda, who responded in writing the next
day. (numbers added for reference)

1 When one thinks of heaven,
2 One may think of the storybook version.
3 But I have come up with my
4 Own picture of heaven.
5 I don’t see angels and pure
6 White puffy clouds

7 My image of heaven has no
8 Shape or form.
9 Heaven is a feeling.
10 A feeling of complete bliss
11 And happiness
12 Of contentment where
13 There are no more “wants,”
14 And all needs are fulfilled
Upon its return from Linda, Sonja revised her draft. I interviewed her about her revision process, asking her, "What comments made you change things? What comments didn't?" What follows are Sonja’s revision responses to Linda’s five written comments (in italics):

1) LINE 2: “What else?” (and an arrow suggesting she move line 5 to below line 2) SONJA: I did this. I put the lines together.

2) LINE 10: “What gives you complete bliss?” SONJA: I couldn't really describe what complete bliss was. It just didn’t make sense in the poem. (She did not use the comment to revise or add.)

3) LINE 13: “What do we spend too much time ‘wanting’?” SONJA: (tried to clarify by adding the line “For unneeded possessions.”)

4) LINE 16: “How would you describe ‘job well done?’” SONJA: It would be too long and wouldn't work in the verse. (she did not revise.)

5) THE LAST FIVE LINES: (a star corresponding to them.) SONJA: [Mrs. Rief starred this] because she thought it was really, really good. She stars stuff she likes. (Sonja kept these sections as they were.)

Sonja used two of the comments to change her draft, ignored two others, and acknowledged the last comment as praise, which identified what she should keep. She also made unsolicited revisions, changing “payment” to “gift” (line 15) and moving part of “a state of beauty and peace” from line 18 to line 17 after getting rid of “piece of mind.”

DOUG: You know how she works from having her last year. When she gives you comments does she push your writing forward?
SONJA: It means it [the writing] still needs work. If you're close to a final draft she'll just tell you what [mechanics] to change. She won’t write those comments.

DOUG: So her first comments don’t “tell” you what to change?
SONJA: No, they're suggestions.

DOUG: Have any of her comments frozen you up and made it harder to write?
SONJA: No....She's easy to get along with, but you don't want to be on her bad side, either.
DOUG: I was wondering, because a student in another school once said to me that a teacher stopped him from writing with her written comment because he thought the teacher was trying to tell him what to write.

SONJA: No, she's not like that. She doesn't get upset if you don't use them [her suggestions]. They make you think.

Linda's suggestions served their purpose, making Sonja think without intimating that they necessarily held correct answers. Sonja told me, on average, she used “about half” of Linda’s suggestions. When I asked other students I identified as having rapport with Linda how often they used her suggestions, “about half the time” was the most common answer. They felt comfortable to self-evaluate and make decisions without fearing some covert teacher’s agenda.

The Participants Talk About Ideas Rather than Writing Conventions

Transcript analysis showed that Linda talked about ideas 82% of the time in the coded conferences, and any number of the transcript excerpts shown here demonstrates this emphasis. However, one notable phenomenon of some less successful conferences was that when Linda could not encourage the student to discuss ideas, she began to focus on mechanics in a last-ditch attempt for progress. This was her unconscious fallback strategy. It was a strategy of frustration, perhaps even failure because, philosophically, she wanted to address mechanics only after ideas had been organized, clarified, and enhanced. Linda reflected on her tendency:

DOUG: I've noticed in some of these conferences [where students are resistant to talk and write], you start focusing on the mechanics or grammar.

LINDA: Right.

DOUG: What do you think a teacher needs to do in those situations, or what do you find yourself doing?

LINDA: Uh, (laughs). Good question. I don't know if I have an answer to that. I think I focus on the mechanics and the academics more because I can't get a handle on anything else.

She speculated that the solution was to work harder to form a relationship with the kids.
The Participants Speak Animatedly, Move Animatedly, and are Full of Humor

In productive conferences, the participants’ voices and bodies were more animated. Their eyes focused more intently on each other and the work. In less productive conferences, voices were often more monotone with less verbal emphases. Eyes more often scanned the room.

Productive conferences more often contained elements of humor; participants joked more often with each other. Though this joking wasn’t an infallible sign of a successful conference (students sometimes joked to avoid focusing on their task), productive conferences contained more laughter. One saw those ritualistically social activities that often made conferences appear like “chats” rather than academically focused events. Although some rapport relationships were built simply on a trust that allowed participants to focus solely on the academics, in many conferences, exuberance, informality, and camaraderie not only indicated rapport but also nurtured and sustained it.

The Evolution of a Text Within a Rapport Relationship

Here I show the impact of a strong rapport relationship on a piece of writing of one invested student. Laura is a committed writer who had Linda last year and knows her well. She and Linda constantly joke and tease each other, but Laura knows the line between informality and disrespect. She is exuberant and outgoing with almost all of her peers. Linda feels Laura is a great writer, but also says, “She doesn’t think she’s good. She has to work very hard at it.” However, Laura usually overcomes her insecurities to explore her thoughts and succeed at writing.

Early in the year Laura tries to piece together her autobiography. She has written a bit:

Laura was born February 10, 1983 at Exeter, New Hampshire. She has grown up at Durham, NH. All of her life she has lived in the same house. When she was two and a half her sister started playing the violin. Everything that she did always looked so good to her that she wanted to play also.
But she is stuck as Linda sits down to confer with her:

LAURA: This is really boring. I don’t know what else to write. I thought maybe about my violin, but I didn’t know.
LINDA: (reads what Laura has written) Yeah, you’re right, that is really boring.
LAURA: Thanks, Miss Rief (laughs).
LINDA: You’re welcome (laughs). Well, you want the truth, don’t you? (laughs)
LAURA: Yes.
LINDA: What do you do that...you’ve done nothing in your entire life that was really interesting.
LAURA: (whispers) I stuck a carrot up my nose! (laughs)
LINDA: You stuck a carrot up your nose.
LAURA: Yeah. How many times are you gonna have to repeat that?
LINDA: That was the most interesting thing you’ve ever done in your entire life.
LAURA: No, I started playing the violin when I was two-and-a-half.
LINDA: That’s really interesting! Okay, what got you into the violin when you were two-and-a-half? Did your mother make you do it? Did they lock you in a closet and say, “You are to play the violin,” or did you say, “Oh, wow! This looks so interesting!”
LAURA: I don’t really remember! (laughs)

Evident is the great sense of social camaraderie these two share. Because they know and feel an affinity toward each other, they are already aware of each other’s needs and boundaries. Instead of leading off with praise, Linda has no qualms about immediately teasing Laura—“Yeah, you’re right. That is really boring”—and Laura has no problem understanding the tease and laughing with her. Lack of praise at this juncture of the conference was very rare, indeed. Rapport is already firmly established; they are unusually comfortable with each other.

Linda, however, is there to help Laura with her piece. She segues into a gentle provocation: “You’ve done nothing in your entire life that was really interesting.” Laura jokes again, but when Linda persists in searching for a potential topic she clarifies her original idea—not only did her sister start playing the violin when Laura was two and a half, Laura did too! Linda is fascinated. She cannot help but assume that violin playing is a passion of Laura’s. She wants to learn more.

LINDA: All right, do you still play the violin?
LAURA: Yeah.
LINDA: What do you like about playing it?
LAURA: You can get your feelings out.
LINDA: Okay. What are some of the favorite melodies or compositions that you do, or your favorite composers?
LAURA: I like to play Meditation from Thais and Pachelbel’s Kanon.
LINDA: All right. And, how much do you practice every day?
LAURA: Forty-five minutes.
LINDA: Where? Think about, when you get your violin, where do you go to play?
LAURA: Well, my sister has a stand in her room, but usually I wander around.
LINDA: And just play.
LAURA: Just playing? Well, it’s different between practicing and playing.
LINDA: What’s different?
LAURA: Playing, you just play, and practicing, if you get like a note wrong you have to go back and fix it.
LINDA: And, when you’re playing, if you get it wrong you just go right by it?
LAURA: Yeah.
LINDA: Okay. Why don’t you start with the sentence, “I’ve been playing the violin since I was two and-a-half.”

Linda asks several questions in a row, drawing out specific details about Laura’s playing. Laura answers easily and enthusiastically. She is simply chatting about the thing she loves.

Information accumulates with each of Laura’s answers. When Linda feels there is enough to push through Laura’s block, she makes a suggestion: “Okay, why don’t you start with the sentence, ‘I’ve been playing the violin since I was two and a half.’” This exchange exemplifies effective listening as I define it in Chapter One: Linda adopts a deeply receptive stance, asking many questions to which she really wants to know the answer. The information she learns produces a response that directly meets Laura’s stated need: “I don’t know what else to write.” The response, as we shall presently see, moves Laura’s writing forward, documenting a richer sense of her experiences and new growth in her thought. Linda’s suggestion is specific but framed in a slightly indirect, softened fashion. Note that the suggestion comes directly out of Laura’s own oral story. It is easier for Laura, as it is for most students, to tell her story rather than write it. Essentially, Linda tells her to copy down what she just said. Linda’s mentor, Donald Murray, states that conference teaching is most successful “when the teacher helps the student realize what the student has just learned” (1982, p. 164).
Laura responded to Linda’s suggestion: “Okay. But I started on a cardboard box, like this big.” This revealed she accepted Linda’s suggestion, but was still excited to continue her story.

LINDA: Well, that’s great! You started what? What do you do with a cardboard box?
LAURA: I had a ruler attached to it and I thought I was playing beautifully!
(laughs)
LINDA: (laughs) And did anyone mention to you that you were playing beautifully?
LAURA: My mom, probably. My dad’s so tone-deaf he probably thought I was playing beautifully! (laughs)
LINDA: And is that when you were two-and-a-half? (Laura nods, yes) You know what? Everything that you just said: “I started playing the violin when I was two-and-a-half. I started on a cardboard box with a ruler...”
LAURA: Yeah.
LINDA: “...my dad was so tone-deaf he never complained about it, and my mom was always encouraging, telling me what a beautiful job I was doing.” And then talk about what you do now with the violin. Show us the kinds of compositions that you’re doing.
LAURA: Like, what part shows, like...
LINDA: Well, just name some of those that you really like to do.
LAURA: Okay.
LINDA: But start with the violin and take us right through the violin. Because that’s a real important part of your life.
LAURA: I also play soccer and I play the piano (laughs), and I do a lot of other things.
LINDA: Right! And you could add that at the very end. But you want to focus on the violin. That’s a very special, unique thing that you do. And what else do you do?
LAURA: I row. Like crew.
LINDA: For crew? How do you fit all that in?
LAURA: I don’t (laughs). I don’t do my homework! (laughs) Just kidding!
LINDA: Really! (laughs) All right, start with that and then just tell us everything you can about you playing the violin.

Again we see the confluence of social and academic as Laura and Linda joke with each other. Linda asks in mock incredulity if anyone found Laura’s cardboard box-playing beautiful and Laura teases her father. Linda continues her effective listening, again suggesting that Laura simply write down the story she just created. Laura again accepts and again shares more of her story. Though Linda attempts to focus her on one topic, Laura’s enthusiasm indicates productivity and growth of experience: she continues to create potential subject matter for her writing.
Laura immediately begins writing as Linda leaves. In a few minutes she has a new paragraph:

She started on a small, about an inch thick by 9 inch by 9 inch box with a ruler coming out of one of the sides. It slightly resembled a violin. Of course, no noise came out but her mother and father would tell her how wonderful it sounded.

Laura started the Suzuki method. She studied for 6-7 years with Heather Abendroth but she moved to Concord. Her family made the commute for a year but finally realized that it was too hard. So she found a teacher in Exeter, Caroline Smalley. She only studied with her for one and a half years because she moved to Chicago Illinois. Caroline by far was her favorite teacher. She taught her all sorts of new violin techniques and had her play much prettier music than Suzuki. Right now Laura is studying music with Sandi Miller. Laura's favorite three pieces are La Foria, Meditation, and Pachelbel's Kanon.

In addition to violin, Laura and her sister are very close. Laura is very committed to soccer, rowing crew, swimming, and her schoolwork. She hopes to get into the Exeter Orchestra and get a scholarship for either violin, swimming, or crew and go to a really good college and become a physical therapist.

The conference unblocks Laura. She moves forward, documenting major events in her life, confirming the effectiveness of Linda's listening and response.

Linda does not expect these autobiographies, written at the beginning of the year, to become pieces of writing students put in their final portfolios. Instead, they are an exercise to create more potential topic material. Laura's autobiography serves this very purpose. Almost two months after she writes it, she approaches Linda, journal in hand. She has written three almost identical drafts she thinks might lead somewhere. The third draft reads:

Violin

My music is a part of my life
My music is a part where I couldn't not pay attention to or brush away
My music is everything, it is my mood my talent and my hobby.
My music is my family and my home
I can play and nothing else is important.
It is special and it lets my mind wander into beautiful trances of happiness and peace. It is where no one can touch me or my feelings.
My music is a part of my life.
My music is a part of me.
Laura shows Linda a beautiful close-up photograph of Laura's hand on the neck of her violin with sheet music as a background. She wants to incorporate the photo into the piece. She reads her third draft.

LINDA: “It is my mood, my talent, and my hobby”: I love this line. (reads) Oh, I love it! “It is my family and my home.” It's kind of like a metaphor... I like the peacefulness and the whole mood of it... That’s a beautiful picture Emily took. See how Emily moved in incredibly close to the hand and the music? You need to move in close with your writing. When you say “mood,” how do you describe it?

LAURA: Aggressive...

LINDA: What kind of music do you like to play?
LAURA: Vivaldi and Bach.
LINDA: What does that mean? I know nothing about music....How would you describe the mood of Vivaldi?
LAURA: (has trouble explaining)
LINDA: Do you have special words for how you hold the neck or the wand. What’s that thing called?

Laura's rush to Linda with her draft indicates her commitment to the piece and rapport with Linda. There is no need for Linda to help find a topic of interest Laura has a “spark” in her throat as she talks.

Laura also shares control of the conference. She launches into extensive monologues and dialogues about how to hold a bow (complete with drawn pictures), her ability to play notes, music terminology, playing fast to release frustrations and fears, losing herself while playing, and what it feels like to play. She is animated through the entire discussion, and she and Linda focus exclusively on ideas. Linda then begins to offer suggestions.
LINDA: All the places where you say, “It’s my mood,” you have to get into those moods.

LAURA: (tells Linda that when her parents get into a fight with her she sometimes goes and plays a fast piece on the violin)...Sometimes I’ll play a piece and I haven’t even thought about it. I’ll be thinking about what’s out the window....

LINDA: (tells Laura what she should do before she writes another draft) Start with every line. Say everything you can about that line. (reads) “Music is a part of my life.” What do you mean by that? Go down through every line. We want to hear about your “mood,” your “talent.”...You want to explain this in as much detail as possible....“It is special and lets my mind wander.” We need to know, wanders to where?...What’s going on in your head when you’re playing? We want to get as close to the music as Emily got to you.

LAURA: (referring to her last lines) Is that a good way to end it?

LINDA: I don’t know until I see what else you write....You need to add sounds: “Pianissimo,” “forte.” There are no sounds in here now.

LAURA: (discusses what it’s like to play—she says that when she plays it’s like her fingers are walking.)

LINDA: Your fingers—“It’s like walking”—Now you’re getting into the sounds of poetry.

Linda again formulates her responses out of what she has heard in Laura’s talk. Laura, as is the classic situation in most conferences in the beginning of the year, expresses herself with generalities (referring simply to “my mood”). Linda requires specifics. She suggests Laura take each one of her lines and fill it in with more details. As Laura describes what it feels like to play, Linda recognizes wonderful poetic imagery of fingers walking, which gives her a strong suggestion—again simply embracing Laura’s own words—with which to end the conference.

The next day, Laura, has written two more drafts. The first one has some significant changes:

Violin (draft 4)

My music is a part of my life
My music is a part where I can turn to it. The music is everywhere I look and everywhere I am
My music is in every thought I have. Everywhere I turn music is within me.
I can rest my hand on my violin and reality disappears.
My life is now circled around my feelings and my thoughts.
My mood is brought out by every note on the page. The notes flow into a ocean of rhythms and each note lapping and swarming upon each other like a wild ocean.
Calm and relaxing one minute and intense and alarming the other.
I sway with the motions of my fingers
Laura did not adopt all of Linda’s suggestions. She does not incorporate new music jargon or musical sounds, for instance. But she does use Linda’s suggestion to attend to the mood of the piece, crafting an ocean metaphor and noting music’s ever-changing personality. Finally, she uses Linda’s last comment in the conference, ending the piece with the motions of her fingers.

Linda clearly influences this draft, but she has not overwhelmed it. Laura made the decisions. She also continues to move forward independently: she ponders Draft 4 and recognizes some new lines with real potential. On her own, Laura sees a new lead buried in the middle of the draft. She re-drafts and substantially changes the feel of the piece, expanding the metaphor of music as a journey through nature and weather. The piece moves forward, translating a richer sense of Laura’s violin-playing experiences.

(draft 5)
I rest my hand on my violin and reality disappears.
I am free with my emotions and feelings.
I blow through the wind, circling through the branches and down waterfalls and brushing against every grain of sand in the desert.
I roll through the mountains and valleys and swim through puffs of clouds and glide across the smooth ice plains into beautiful fall leaves of New England.
Every note on the page brings out another emotion. The notes flow into an ocean of rhythms and moods, each note lapping and swarming upon each other like a wild ocean.
Calm and relaxing one minute and intense and alarming the other.
I sway with the motions of my fingers growing more and more in depth as the music goes on.
I have captivated myself deep and deeper into the pages and pages of the song.

The draft is much different now. Laura tells me it really is like another piece to her. She needs to get Linda’s perspective again and rushes over for a conference. The two look for more ways to tie music images into ocean images. Laura marks changes on her paper and Linda writes down notes and suggestions on a conference sheet. Linda asks Laura to think of words that describe grains of sand against your body. Laura comes up with “burn” and, then, “sinking.”
LINDA: Great word! Because you sink into the music the way you sink into the sand. (Linda writes the words that Laura has come up with onto Laura's draft.)

* * *

LINDA: You've got the emotion [in this piece], now you just need to find the words.

* * *

LINDA: (composing out loud) "...and tumble into the fall leaves of New England." Okay. what are the sounds and smells?
LAURA: Crunchy?...I can hear it...
LINDA: You are so good at sounds.
LAURA: Crackling?

* * *

LINDA: I don't know anything about notes.
LAURA: (tells her about different kinds of notes: half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes. She claps out the rhythms to help Linda understand)
LINDA: What are the emotions? What are the words you would use? Is it ever anger, or is it only wonderful emotions?
LAURA: It's anger. It's every emotion. Calm, happy...not happy...
LINDA: Contentment?
LAURA: Contentment.
LINDA: Do you ever feel envy?
LAURA: When I listen to my sister....My teacher doesn't think I give myself enough credit. (Laura listens to her sister play in an orchestra, but she doesn't want to play in it. However, she can't stop listening to the orchestra—she can't take her eyes off of it. The music sends chills down her spine “I have a passion” she says, “I feel really sorry for people who don’t have it.” She says her sister and her father understand, but her mother will listen to music and, when the rest of the family becomes moved at something, she will say, “What!? What is it that made that better than something else?!” She badly wants to hear and understand what the rest of them are hearing and understanding, but she can’t.)
LINDA: (writes on Laura’s draft as Laura talks) I’ve written down every word you’ve just said: anger, calm, content, envy, chills, moved, sigh....Take us through all of these sounds, but one of these stanzas has to have the words of music: highs, lows....At the end [of the piece] you might be watching someone else playing.

LAURA: What if I say I was at a concert?
LINDA: It doesn’t matter. Remember yesterday when you said you were playing and you said you just went out the window? It doesn’t matter where you are....I love when you said, “I feel bad for people who don’t have this passion for sound” You’ve got this piece! I don’t know why you don’t [think you] have it.

There is a slight shift in the tone of this conference. Where previously Linda helped Laura search for more general concepts and ideas—an attempt to get hold of “moods”—here the two begin to refine, searching for specific words to highlight the moods. The piece has a better shape and they sculpt the details. Laura is able to generate a whole list of mood-enhancing verbs, adjectives, and nouns—specific “sights sounds and smells.”

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Note how Laura at times takes over the role of teacher, as she had previously done when she drew a picture to explain the workings of a violin bow. Here she teaches Linda about notes and rhythms. She claps out rhythms while Linda tries to copy her. By teaching Linda—drawing on her life experiences and carefully formulating a representation of them—Laura learns about herself. Again Linda can say, “You’ve taught me what is important. Now write it down.”

Also notable is Laura’s extraordinary “I have a passion...” monologue. Her rapport with Linda allows her to speak with ease, and her ease allows her to say extraordinary things that might otherwise go unsaid, and thus undiscovered.

This speech, in fact, inspires a new ending to her piece. Leaving the conference, she buries herself between two bookcases and writes. By the end of class she had a sixth draft:

(draft 6)
I rest my hand on my violin and reality disappears.
I take a deep breath drawing in down my lungs and through my body. I bring my bow to the violin and begin.
I am free with my emotions and feelings.
I race with the wind circling the tree trunks up to the outstretched arms of their branches.
I slope down, riding, tumbling through waterfalls. I brush and sink into every grain of sand in the desert.
I swim through puffs of clouds and glide across the smooth glaciers. Rolling up and down mountains and valleys, falling through the raked leaves of New England, crunching and stomping in the pale to brilliant leaves of yellow, orange, and red.
Every note on the page of music turns into a thunderous stormy ocean, crashing, lapping, and breaking upon each other, each growing to a climax and falling rapidly into a slower allegro and building itself faster into a forte of my feelings.
I sway with the motions of my fingers, growing intensity as they pound down on the strings, bringing out my aggressiveness with every placing on the wood.
I draw my bow to a close, never shutting the door completely of my emotions. They are trapped inside of me until I turn the page to another piece.
I am moved and have chills from the music that was played.
And in the window seat I am glued. I feel bad for those who don’t have the attraction, passion, and love for sound as I do.

The piece now races along with sharp verbs, a large palette of colors. It splashes the reader with specific mood. Laura also, finally, incorporates Linda’s repeated suggestion to use music terminology, a suggestion that I feel weakens the line somewhat. It seems forced and it is perhaps why Laura did not take Linda’s suggestion in the previous
conferences. However, Laura still clearly controls the piece. The rest of the words have come out of her mouth; Linda simply repeated them back and highlighted her views about them.

But Laura is not done. She types another draft at home, making more revisions to her ending, including a line where she sits in a seat and listens to someone else playing. Again she comes to class and approaches Linda. This time the conference has a different flavor than the previous ones:

LINDA: All right, (reads) "I rest my hand on the neck of my violin and reality disappears. I take a deep breath, drawing it down my lungs and through my body. I bring my bow to the violin and draw it across the strings." Okay. "I am free with my feelings and emotions. I race with the wind..." That's lovely. "...circling..." How about if you just say, "Circling tree trunks"?

LAURA: Okay.

LINDA: And, if you're having to go up, what are you doing, especially when you...what's the word?

LAURA: I'm riding the wind?

LINDA: All right...what do you do to a tree, though?

LAURA: Hmm, um...cuddle it. (laughs)

LINDA: Well, you...

LAURA: Hugging...climb in it.

LINDA: Oh, climbing! (composing out loud) "Circling tree trunks, climbing or hugging your outstretched arms of branches," or, "Climbing to their outstretched arms."

LAURA: Ooh, I almost did that! (laughs)

LINDA: Okay, (reads) "I slope down, riding, tumbling through waterfalls. I brush and sink in every grain of sand in the desert." That's really nice, too. "I swim through..." How about just "puffs of clouds," not "the puffs"? (reads) "...puffs of clouds and I glide across smooth glaciers, rolling up and down mountains and valleys." What are the words from music that mean up and down? Is there a word that's smooth?

LAURA: A crescendo is kind of like, um...

LINDA: And what's a falling? Is a crescendo up and down? Okay, even if you just drop the word "crescendo" in there and see how what sound...(reads) "rolling up and down mountains and valleys." I don't know. Maybe that won't work. "Falling through fresh raked leaves of New England, crunch..." Probably a comma there. "...crunching and stomping..." Is it "stomping" or "kicking"? In the music, what is it more like?

LAURA: Nah, I was thinking stomping was kind of like the staccato, like doon-doon-doon-doon (she taps out the beat on the table with her pen).

LINDA: Okay, good. Good. "...on the pale to brilliant shades of yellow, orange, and red. Every note on the page of music turns into a thunderous stormy ocean, crashing, blackening, breaking upon each other." This is where you might use the words, of all the ones that were here. "Staccato," "crescendo." I mean, you drop some words in here that you have not used
here. Just words that show this gliding is \textit{up}, it's down, this rolling, and this \textit{stomping}.

LAURA: Mm-hm.

LINDA: “Crescendo,” “allegro...” See, I don't even know what they all mean. I just know they're words. And, put them right there in between. “My music grows to a climax and falls rapidly into allegro and rising to a forte of my feelings.” So, if you drop the words there—all words, but not \textit{those two}.

LAURA: (writing) “...a climax...and rapidly...”

LINDA: Okay, “I sway with the motions of my fingers growing \textit{intensely}...” Is that what you mean? Or, “growing with intensity”? Because that could be “with intensity.” (reads) “...as they \textit{pound} down on the strings, bringing out my anger and aggressiveness with every placing of my fingers on the wood.” Is it just anger and aggressiveness? This whole piece sounds really positive, and anger and aggressiveness throw me off.

LAURA: Okay.

LINDA: What else could it be?

LAURA: Like, um...mm....It had, like [uc]

LINDA: I think you had it right. You had words on the other draft.

LAURA: (reading from notes on a previous draft) “Anger, calm, content.”

LINDA: I don't know. You might even want to have, like, “Bringing out my contentedness, my anger, my aggressiveness with every placing...” You need one calm word there.

LAURA: Mm. (composing) “My calmness....” I don't know what to use.

LINDA: Yeah. I know. But all you need to know is you need a positive word in there. (pause, reading) “I draw my bow to a close.” What does that mean? What do you do with the bow?

LAURA: Lifting it off the strings.

LINDA: Okay. (composing) “I lift my...” Then, why don’t you say that? (composing) “I lift my bow off the strings...” comma, “never shutting the door on my feelings...” See, this kind of slows this down: “that-still-will-be-with-me.”

LAURA: Yeah.

LINDA: How about if you just say, “That stay with me?”

LAURA: Oh, that’s what I was looking for! (softly, slowly, as she writes) “That stay with me.” How about, “until I turn the page”? 

LINDA: Yeah. Good. All right, now you’re going to put a double space here...

LAURA: So, like a double paragraph. Like a double...

LINDA: Yeah, just white space that’s doubled. I would just put, “I \textit{adore} music.” Period. (reads) “Chills trickle down my spine. I am \textit{truly} moved.”

LAURA: Maybe I should take out the concert.

LINDA: I think you might take that out. Because, this is all about you. Because that’s how it happens for you. (reads) “I am truly moved. I feel bad for those who don’t have the attraction,” comma, “the passion, and the love for sound, as I do.” It’s ready.

This conference focuses on very specific ideas, concepts, and on mechanics. Here, Linda takes much more control, asking fewer questions, and making more suggestions. The suggestions focus on smaller details: refining word choices, cutting unnecessary
articles. Linda feels less uncertain about offering more directive statements and taking over the conference because they are dealing less with Laura’s larger ideas and more with details, but also because of the inherent security in their rapport relationship.

We also see that Linda, for the third conference in a row, encourages Laura to add more music terminology. She makes another suggestion: soften the word “aggressiveness,” which stands out like a sore thumb in comparison with the rest of the piece, by supplying other mood words. Laura, however, is not passive. As they talk she discovers that her new line about sitting and watching a concert doesn’t work. She is still thinking independently.

Laura leaves and soon writes two more drafts, one incorporating the changes inspired by this last conference, and one to edit some minor grammatical errors. Here is her final draft:

I cradle my violin under my chin. I rest my hand on the neck and reality disappears.
I take a deep breath drawing it down my lungs and through my body. I bring my bow to the violin and draw it across the strings.
I am free from my feelings and emotions.
I race with the wind, circling tree trunks, climbing up to their outstretched arms of their branches.
I slope down riding, tumbling through waterfalls. I brush and sink into every grain of sand in the desert.
I swim through puffs of clouds, and glide across smooth glaciers. Rolling up and down mountains and valleys. Falling through fresh raked leaves of New England, crunching and stomping on the pale to brilliant shades of yellow orange and red.
Every note on the page of music turns into a thunderous stormy ocean, crashing lapping and breaking upon each other. The music grows to a climax and falls rapidly into an allegro and rising into a forte of my feelings.
I sway with the motions of my fingers growing with intensity as they pound down on the strings, bringing out my contentment, happiness, anger and aggressiveness with every placing of my finger on the wood.
I lift my bow off the string, never shutting the door of my feelings that will stay with me until I turn the page of music.
I adore music. Chills trickle down my spine. I am truly moved.
I feel bad for those who don’t have the attraction passion and love for sound.
As I do.

Again we see Laura’s control of her piece. She does not incorporate more music terminology. She does, though, use Linda’s suggestion to expand upon the emotions
music brings out of her, not just anger and aggressiveness but also contentment and happiness. She excises the line where she sits and watches, stating instead, "I adore music."

"Violin" became one of Laura's portfolio pieces. In her Case History she wrote:

When I first started this piece of writing it was a totally different form and all it started out with being [was] "My music is a part of my life." It was nothing like my final and there were no emotions in it. I decided to take the different parts out that I did because it really added to the story. I made every sentence a closer so I couldn't add on to it.

This piece makes me think of standing in my living room on the blue carpet and after walking away leaving my two tiny to big to bigger foot prints on the rug after standing there for awhile.

My first draft is in my log with what I started from. I have my interview [conference sheet] in with this piece because it helped me make if the piece that it is. Sometimes when I think about this piece I want to send it to a publisher and make it a picture book. I wish I could draw.

Another thing about this piece is I know that I liked it and enjoyed writing it because after every draft I wanted to share it with you (Mrs. Rief). I could tell I was happy with it because of that and how proud I was to be able to write what the piece ended to be.

She gave herself an A for Process ("I went draft through draft to make this piece of writing."), and A for Content ("I think this was a effective piece of writing because of the way I worked so hard on it. I made it the BEST that I could and even now enjoy reading it to my family.") and an A- for Mechanics ("...I have done endless amounts of rough drafts, fixing sentences that according to me ‘didn’t fit well.’"). Nowhere in her analysis does Laura mention Linda's influence on the ultimate content. She has internalized it and adopted it as her own. Laura had recognized a passion; that passion became the driving force in an intensive process of analysis and creation.

I identify Laura as someone doing exactly what Linda wanted students to do in class: find their passions and use writing to explore them. Laura did, as evidenced by nine drafts, her deep thought, and her drive to craft her piece. Fueled by both personal motivation and careful relationship-building, she gained a powerful rapport with Linda that allowed her to share control in her conferences. Linda's agenda did not overpower her. Instead, the two worked together to co-construct the piece. Laura was the driver, secure
enough to listen to her guide, Linda, but also controlling the direction her piece would ultimately take. The social relationship she built with Linda allowed her to discuss freely, to engage in "a good healthy chat" where interesting ideas flowed.

These conferences were also a testament to the profound influence oral language has on written language. Nothing is so powerful an antidote to writer's block than the ability to talk about one's interests with an interested other. All the listener then has to do is reiterate and clarify that which had already been spoken.

A Speculative Epilogue: Why We Don't Talk Enough About Relationships and Emotions in Teaching, and Why We Should

In this chapter I asserted that rapport between Linda and her students promoted the conversations in which students spoke with "a spark in their throats," enthusiastically discussing personally relevant topics that became the subject matter of their writing. This is the material for which Linda listened and to which she wanted to respond, relating it back to students so they could better hear themselves. Inherent in this concept of rapport is the participants' deeper attention to interpersonal relationships that move beyond cognitive, intellectual connections into affective connections, as well.

In terms of reading and writing instruction, there is some literature about teacher-student interpersonal relationships—the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, expectations, we have about each another and the resultant interactions we share, which powerfully influence our classroom triumphs and failures (McLeod, 1995; Tobin, 1993)—but it is remarkably sparse. There is a little more literature addressing the related issue of the influences of affective states, including emotion and internal motivation, on the student literacy learner (Brand, 1987, 1991; Fleckenstein, 1991; McLeod, 1987, 1991, 1995), but again there is a relative paucity.

It is surprising, because much of the theoretical foundation upon which modern literacy instruction rests strongly implies that emotion is inextricably tied to our activities and interactions. Brand (1991) suggests that there are two psycho-theoretical approaches that
have strongly influenced current composition theory: the cognitive psychology of writing and social construction theories. Cognitive theories, by definition, focus on the organized, systematic processes of writing and literacy learning, dichotomizing them from the affective domain. But surprisingly, social construction theories of writing also seem to give short shrift to affect, lumping the terms “social” and “affective” synonymously. “Emotions seem to be there,” says Brand, “but composition theory (and writing courses) apparently shouldn’t much bother with it” (p. 400).

But affect has been an integral component of almost every psychological and developmental theory that literacy teachers and researchers cite as influences, including social psychology (upon which social constructionist theories are built). Erickson, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bartlett, Kohlberg, and others have all noted the necessary role affect plays in social, cognitive, and moral development (Brand, 1987; Fleckenstein, 1991; McLeod, 1991). Speaking of the relationship between intellect and affect, Vygotsky warns,

Their separation as subjects of study is a major weakness of traditional psychology, since it makes the thought processes appear as an autonomous flow of “thoughts thinking themselves,” segregated from the fullness of life, from the personal needs and interests, the inclinations and impulses, of the thinker (1986, p. 10).

Drawing off a proposal by McLeod (1991) to establish a series of working definitions of affective states that would create a shared language among cognitive and affective researchers, Fleckenstein (1991) creates a model of an “affective continuum,” which demonstrates the integrative nature of the affective-cognitive relationship (what she calls “the cognitive-affective dance”). On one end of the continuum lie, in order, the experiences of emotions, feelings, moods, and preferences—which are most affective in nature. Next, in order, are attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and evaluations, each generating a progressively more powerful cognitive stance (see also, Brand, 1994a, 1994b). Fleckenstein likens this conceptualization to Rosenblatt’s (1978) description of the difference between aesthetic reading (where the reader centers “directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text,” attending to “associations,
feelings, attitudes and ideas that these words arouse within him” [p. 25]) and efferent reading (“reading for the information to be acquired, the logical solution to the problem, the actions to be carried out” [p. 23]). Just as no reading experience is ever purely aesthetic or efferent, no human experience is ever purely affective or cognitive. Instead, each is a combination of both in varying proportions. Fleckenstein’s model is useful when used to examine the listening teacher’s pedagogy. It helps us expand our sense of what types of responses we may use to help move the learner forward to enhance Dewey’s educational ideal of “a continuous process of reconstruction of experience.” Linda’s teaching style, philosophical roles, and expectations are integrative, spanning the entire continuum from most affective to most cognitive. Her expectation that students write about the personally relevant necessitates that they tap into their emotions, feelings, moods, and preferences to one extent or another; that their attitudes, beliefs, and motivations help determine how and what they write; and that they will engage in continual cognitive evaluation of themselves and their work. In another classroom, we can imagine, the entire spectrum of affective-cognitive states might not be given such blanket coverage. In a classroom with a subject-matter oriented curriculum, for instance, the affective end of the continuum will certainly not receive as much attention. The listening teacher, devoted to valuing students’ voices, naturally expects them to recognize and exploit their affective dimension more than the teacher who controls the subject matter of the class.

But in this we again have to return to the listening teacher’s momentous responsibility: by inviting in the personally and uniquely relevant, one invites in twenty-seven sets of emotions, feelings, moods, and preferences. She must attend to them all, lest they wither from neglect.

Yet, quite often, once the affective realm is invited in it is ignored. The teacher says, “Now that you have brought me your precious life, I will teach you the process of how to craft it,” and focuses only on the cognitive aspects of literary creation. Though affect has entered as her insisted-upon guest, she treats teacher-student relationship as purely
academic. Sometimes they can be, but more often students’ lives need to be dealt with emotionally as well as academically before they can be crafted into text. When the teacher pretends that students’ spoken or written words are somehow disembodied from the emotion that carried them, treating them as emotion-neutral bits of intellectual information waiting for sculpting, she discovers that they students become unwilling to reveal what is important to them. They recognize the full meaning behind their words is not being valued.

What are the reasons we so often shy from examining relationships and affect both in research and classroom practice? Brand (1991) suggests that emotions, which “make their bed in social psychology,” are often perceived as needing to be “corrected” or “cured,” which sullies their reputation. She also believes that they are off-putting in social models of psychology and literacy because “they are experienced internally and individually” (pp. 400-401). I speculate that there are two other reasons. First, affect, by almost all measures, is still considered a slippery, nebulous concept, notoriously indefinable (or at least still not completely defined). We do not have stage or process models of the inner-workings of affect the way we have cognitive models of writing processes (Flower and Hayes, 1981, for example). We have not yet quantified or conceptualized affective dimensions to our satisfaction. We view them as less known and less knowable. And what is less known and knowable is more threatening.

Second, both politically, and psychically, acknowledging and examining affect in the context of our classroom teaching makes us extraordinarily vulnerable. It is dangerous to discuss emotions and feelings, both our students’ and our own. It opens us to others’ charges that we are playing amateur psychologists. It flies in the face of our cultural definition of professionalism. It reveals that our teaching cannot be as efficient as a cognitive model or a chart demonstrating “the” writing process portrays it. It opens us up to charges of subjectivity. It forces us to confront our subjectivity and biases that are, in fact, there: our weaknesses, our pettiness, our powerlessness when dealing with people we don’t particularly like. It forces us to acknowledge the impossibility of having a hundred-
and-ten happy, productive, idyllic relationships with one hundred-and-ten students. If we share our own work—that which is most important to us—we run the risk of disdain from our students. All of these dangers as Goffman (1959) would note, wreak havoc on our self-perception of our own competence, something we try desperately to preserve. In short, recognizing affect and the complexity of interpersonal relationships in classrooms highlights the impossibility of being the invulnerable Super-teachers we secretly desire to be—and often believe we have to portray to critics outside our classroom walls.

But one can’t have it both ways. One cannot invite students lives into the classroom and then ignore the affective dimensions they bring with them. The listening teacher must address her fears and confront both her students’ and her own emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and biases head-on in the same way she expects students to do in their own talk and literary creation. It is never easy, but it is essential. As Tobin (1993) states:

Traditionally we have considered the quality of the relationship in a writing classroom to be an effect of a student’s success or failure as a writer. I think that it is often the other way around, that writing students succeed when teachers establish productive relationships with and between their students. It makes sense, then, for a writing teacher to focus as much on questions of authority and resistance as on invention heuristics and revision strategies, as much on competition and cooperation as on grammar and usage (p. 10).

Undeniably, as Tobin points out, the classroom composing process and the teaching of writing occur within the context of the interpersonal relationship. Ignoring the undeniable seems fruitless, so it makes sense to finally attend to the nature of the interpersonal relationship and all the emotional baggage it carries—or that carries it.
CHAPTER VII

CONFERENCE CASE STUDIES: LINDA'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOUR VERY DIFFERENT STUDENTS

This chapter focuses in more detail on the tremendous challenges the teacher faces as she welcomes more multi-dimensional perspectives of students' psyches into the classroom, recognizing affect as well as intellect. It presents four students with four very different sets of approaches, passions, problems, and needs. It illustrates not only how rapport, or lack thereof, helped determine the success or failure of a writing conference, but also the highly complex nature of interpersonal interaction in a classroom built on different students' unique personalities and proclivities. Each encounter with each student was original and had to be approached on its own terms. Gone was a simple curriculum that easily determined the teacher's next step. In its place was a complicated chess match of moves and countermoves, each influenced by the moves that preceded it and, in turn, influenced by those that followed.

In this light, Fleckenstein's "affective continuum" is also a useful model to consider as one observes individual students within the context of their writing conferences, for each student's personality can be seen as residing on a different place on the continuum. Some students generally navigate life and literacy from a more emotional perspective, some from a more ordered, intellectual one. In deciding how to respond to each student in conference, the teacher must consider the relative position of the student on the continuum at that time and alter her approach correspondingly.

The importance of doing so can be seen through the lens of Goffman's (1959) contention that social encounters are performances fueled by the performers' desire to appear competent to others. In this sense, any social situation can be quite threatening as there is always the possibility that one will be found out as incompetent or
unknowledgeable. The individual therefore creates a standardized “front” for herself, hiding some personal proclivities and revealing others, depending upon how they will make her look in the eyes of others.

Classroom interactions, including writing conferences, between the teacher and the student are such social encounters. The traditional role of the teacher is as the person with the answers, able to pass down knowledge and expand students’ knowledge. Ironically, the student’s idealized role is also as someone with the answers, able to meet the teacher’s challenge. Newkirk (1995) talks about the paradoxical position a college student in a freshman composition class is put in, “needing to appear comfortable in a role, as he or she is learning it” (p. 194). In any learning situation where the teacher is accepted only in the role of knower, not learner, she has an immediate and absolute advantage over the more novice student in terms of appearing competent in performance. Add to this the disadvantage the middle school adolescent faces—having to appear competent in a number of competing situations at a time when cognitive, biological, and social forces may undermine the ability to judge what is competent-appearing behavior and what is not.

In light of the special circumstances in the middle school classroom that make competent performances more difficult, I hypothesize that students and teachers often perform roles that are more standardized and simplified than they might be in other social situations in order that both may more easily maintain a consistent front. The result may be a classroom where teaching is done by formula, through strict adherence to a predetermined curriculum, universal rules of student behavior, or treating all students “the same” or “equally.” These formulas make the performers’ roles more static, and therefore simpler to maintain. To achieve socially acceptable classroom performances the teacher mistakenly focuses less on the more complex realm of individual personality and more on the simplified, highly formulaic script. In doing so, she abandons opportunities to bring personal creativity into the classroom.
Linda, however, attempted to move from scripts much of the time. At the core of her teaching was her belief that good writing came from that subject matter that was most important to the individual student, and which the student was able and willing to articulate in detail. Linda defied formula by asking students to show their diversity, their uniqueness, at a time and in a place when everything else in their lives screamed at them to conform. She asked students to take on roles that were different than the ones most of them were used to. She asked them to drop their old performative masks and perform new roles that were potentially dangerous to their public fronts, for the more they revealed, the more possibility they would deviate from the idealized, socially accepted roles they were trying so hard to maintain.

Linda's performances with students, then, had to make each feel safe—ensure their competence—in this new, highly risky context. Rapport, then, may be seen as a relationship that defines the teacher as a figure the student trusts to not undermine or exploit his sense or portrayal of competence if he reveals information potentially discrepant to his front.

But, as I have suggested, the teacher-student relationship is still unbalanced in that the social situation is thrust upon the student. In most other social situations a performer has more autonomy to opt out of a performance or avoid a performance altogether. The middle school student, however, is obligated to attend this social situation despite any dangers to his or her front and his or her accompanying (sometimes wildly acute) misgivings.

Rapport building is complex in a classroom like Linda's because social interactions are influenced by each student's now accepted unique qualities. Linda could not take a singular idealized role of "teacher" and expect to build rapport with each student. Instead, she had to listen to discover what approach would let each reveal their diversity without undermining their public fronts. Linda built rapport by adjusting her role to complement each student's role in every individual interaction. In this sense we can extend the definition of effective teacher listening to include the act of not committing to a performative
role until one has learned what role the student takes. To take Goffman’s analogy of societal interaction as performance a bit further, we can say that a writing conference where the teacher focuses on predetermined subject matter or a formulaic approach is like a scripted play where the performers’ roles are also predetermined. If the student, for whatever reasons, refuses to enter the performance, the script offers no compromise by which to negotiate a mutually acceptable entry. Linda’s conferences, on the other hand, might be considered improvisational theater. There is certainly a framework—a general script—with which to begin the, but conference performers always bring unique, often surprising, life material to each performance. At the same time they have to react to each other’s surprises in such a way that maintains a coherent plot line and moves the performance logically forward.

This chapter of four case studies shows four different performances. These conferences show what Linda listened to, how she listened, how she sometimes failed to listen, and how she succeeded in situations with four students who had very different personality types, attitudes toward language arts, and expressed needs.

In his own study of teacher-student interactions in conferences, Newkirk (1995) examined 1) the difficulties students experienced in the conversational roles they were expected to assume in conferences, 2) How conference participants accounted for moments of difficulty, 3) What strategic adjustments occurred when the student experienced difficulty with a performative role (pp. 197-198). I, too, examined these questions except that I focused more on the difficulties the teacher experienced in her role. I focused primarily on how she accounted for moments of difficulty, and what strategic adjustments she made. Moreover, I was concerned with what proactive and reactive steps Linda took, or failed to take, to establish rapport in order to minimize difficulties that might lead to non-educative or mis-educative experiences.
Meg: A Comfortable Social Relationship Engenders Academic Success

Linda’s conference with Meg depicts classroom rapport founded on a strong personal relationship, which in turn engendered a productive academic relationship. In Meg’s individual case, Linda’s teaching would not have been nearly as effective if Meg had not perceived her as a friendly, caring person. Linda’s attention to their personal relationship allowed Meg to trust Linda to guide her on a more academic level, seeing Linda’s comments more as resources and challenges than mandates.

Linda, for her part, had to approach academic situations with one eye on how her words might affect their social relationship and Meg’s confidence and motivation. She also had to give Meg’s natural exuberance its place without letting it supersede academic work. Of the four case studies I present, this relationship best defines the even balance and integration of social and academic concerns, which so often led to better writing. With this integration, significant social aspects of writers’ lives were more accessible fuel for the page.

Meg was friendly and exuberant in close social situations with friends, speaking rapidly and excitedly about a variety of adolescent concerns: relationships, clothes, sports, schoolwork. She loved her family, the ocean, Lake George, coffee ice cream, her dog, water skiing, and miniature golf. She hated headaches, people asking stupid questions, swimming in cold water, waking up in the middle of the night, not having anything to do, bugs and snakes, and fighting with friends. She played piano and included several sheets of music in her final portfolio.

Tall and athletic, Meg especially loved playing ice hockey. She began skating at eighteen months and playing hockey at age six. She played defense on a team that had made it to the national championships in Minnesota, a trip she called one of the most exciting of her life. In her final portfolio she wrote, “My most important work does not have to do with school, it has to do with hockey. That is why I put in some of the best things I have done in hockey.”
As outgoing as Meg was with friends, she seemed shy in academic settings where she had to speak in front of many people. She rarely volunteered her ideas or opinions in whole-class discussions. In her year-end self evaluation she wrote, “What I would like to do better as a speaker is not to be afraid when I go in front of the class to talk.” In early days she seemed somewhat hesitant in class.

But in one of her first conferences with Linda, where she told Linda she was a hockey player, the ensuing conversation revealed to Meg Linda’s acceptance of social conversation and personal concerns in academic situations. Sonja, overhearing the conference, told Linda she, too, played hockey and the three of them launched into an informal conversation about hockey. Two other girls at the table were figure skaters, and excitement rose as the group discussed skating. Linda, who was contributing to the conversation with questions, comments and stories of her own, finally laughed, “Wait a minute, I’m losing this conference here!” But a social rapport had formed between Meg and Linda, which enabled Meg to talk easily in subsequent conferences.

Meg’s View of Herself as a Language Arts Student

While it may not have been her “most important work,” Meg appeared to enjoy language arts. She told me she considered herself to be a writer and reader:

When I was in first grade our teacher had us write a lot, and she would read through these little books where we’d write about something and she’d bind them as books. So, I wrote a lot of those little books when I was in first and second grade. And she always had us do vocabulary words, so that always helped with my writing, and I just liked to read a lot. I couldn’t go to sleep unless I read a book and so I’d stay up ’til past midnight reading a book and then I’d finally fall asleep. And that’s about it. I did some writing during third, fourth, fifth grade. I read a lot of books in fourth grade. I remember that. Once I got to middle school, I didn’t read that many books because we had more homework.

At the beginning of the year she listed “poems and stories” as her favorite writing genres and felt that she did her best writing in “research papers and sometimes poems.” She said that her best piece of writing may have been “a story about imagination, but I never finished it.”

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Meg worried about her writing, feeling that she was not a very good speller and didn’t have a large vocabulary. She claimed she had great difficulty transferring her ideas to the page:

I always have these great ideas for writing, but they never seem to come out [right]. I am very surprised when one of my pieces of writing comes out well. It is always hard for me to think of good ideas of what to write.

She also quoted author Robert Jordan, who had written a letter to a previous year’s class, saying, “No one can learn to write by thinking about it or talking about it or by listening to someone talk about it. The only real way to learn is to do it.” Meg responded, “I always think about how I write and nothing ever comes out good. So I am going to try what he said and just write. I’m not going to think or talk about what I want to write.”

Meg felt that good writing “should make the reader interested” and that writers “have to let their writing flow” and “have to enjoy what they’re writing about.” She often noted that good writing had good “description.” These were the qualities she strove for in her own writing.

Meg’s Performance as a Language Arts Student

Meg’s reading and writing topics did arise from what was personally important to her. For instance, she chose for her author study Robert Louis Stevenson because as a young child her father had read Stevenson’s poems to her every night, and they evoked wonderful, nostalgic memories. She loved Stevenson’s use of descriptive words. She noted, “All of his poems are based on dreams and having fun” and “The poems he writes are always about happy and wonderful things.” Her own early writing echoed many of these themes: carefree days, bucolic settings, fun, dreams, and warm moments. As the year progressed, though, her journal writing and portfolio submissions revealed more troubled thoughts about struggles for popularity, boys, and the phoniness she perceived in some of her classmates. “I am lost in a sea of tears, not knowing what to do,” she jotted down in a later journal entry as she searched for a lead to a new piece.
In language arts, Meg wrote mostly poetry, but her portfolios included a variety of genres: a cartoon, a book review, a series of short observational essays, a fantasy story begun in seventh grade, and research papers from science and social studies.

The sophistication of Meg’s journal writing increased greatly over the course of the year. Her early responses were short and somewhat superficial:

The one thing that gets really annoying is when you have already read the book that your reading. I read *Treasure Island* in 6th grade, but I’m reading it again because I love the way Robert Louis Stevenson writes.

But a few months later, Meg was supplying much more analysis, much richer detail, and more personal connections with books. In response to *Walk Two Moons* (Creech, 1996) she wrote,

...It made me laugh and cry. Throughout the whole book it was really funny to read about Phoebe and her so-called lunatic. She really worried a lot. At the end of the book Sal found out that her mother died in a bus crash. The only living person was Mrs. Cadaver. Mrs. Cadaver was sitting next to Sal’s mom on the bus ride. Mrs. Cadaver lived and Sal’s mom died. Sal’s father never told her this because he though Sal would hate Mrs. Cadaver....

If my mother died and the person sitting next to her lived I would probably be mad. I wouldn’t be mad at the person, but mad that she lived and my mother died. I wouldn’t be mad forever, probably for awhile though.

At the end of the story I figured out what “Don’t judge a man until you’ve walked two moons in his moccasins” meant. It meant that Sal’s dad wanted her to go through the same trip that her mother went through, like visiting all those different landmarks.

She used her journal the way Linda intended students would. When she found a striking quote or passage in a book she would mark it with a pencil, then return to it to respond in her journal. New writing ideas often came out of her journal responses:

When we did the thing about the Holocaust, I was reading in Anne Frank—I forget which one—and I found this really neat paragraph, and so I put it in there. And later, when I read [another author] it gave me an idea for that [art] square you had to do—it gave me an idea what I was gonna draw. Reading *The Cage* [Sender, 1988], I went back and read the poems that she wrote about how it was living in the ghetto. I wrote two poems about that, and so it does help to write down things about books because you get ideas.
In general, her draft writing also changed markedly. During the second quarter author study she drafted some sketches of characters for a story she wanted to write:

Hey, Waz up? My name is Steve. Howz it going? I'm Steve and I live in downtown New York City. It's pretty cool there. Central Park is real close to where I live. My friends Sue and Tim are really cool. We go down to Central Park every weekend and play roller hockey. Let me tell you a little about me. My hat I have on my head is one of my favorites. My favorite sports to play are roller hockey, basketball, baseball, and soccer. I have no sisters or brothers. It's just me and my mom and Needlenose. Needlenose is my cat that I got when I was 5. Oh, I forgot, I'm 14 years.

Compare this with the sophisticated description from a fourth quarter essay she submitted in her final portfolio:

He stands there leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets and left foot up against the wall, making it so his knee bends at a 90 degree angle. When the girls see him they start to walk fast and when they have passed him they start to giggle. How shallow. He looks at them and grins, showing his white teeth that sparkle in the light. If he sees a girl he likes he'll take her by the arm and tell her to meet him at 7 for a movie. Just like that he gets a date. He thinks he is god's gift to the world. His smooth black hair shines from the grease he uses, just like his black leather jacket shines in the light. Every day underneath that jacket is a crisp, white tee-shirt that is stiff from ironing. And every day in one of his jacket pockets is a mustard color comb that by the end of the day has black strands of hair in it. If you ask me, the grease is making his hair fall out. You will never see him with light blue jeans, always dark blue. The same goes with girls. You will never see him without a girl by his side.

Clearly, Meg's writing in Linda's class greatly improved over the year.

Meg's View of Language Arts Class

Meg had positive views of language arts class:

I like it because there's no spelling tests. It's fun, it's different from any of the other ones I've had, because you have more choice, kind of, of what you want to do. And it's just fun to be in....

In sixth grade we were restricted to write certain things, and some things I can't write. I'm not that good at writing stories, and so it was hard. But here in this class you can write anything you want and she doesn't really assign you to read any book, she just tells you what books are good to read or not. And in her classroom she has a lot of choices for books.
When I asked Meg what changes could be made to make the class better, her biggest concern was the lack of one-on-one time with Linda:

Well, it’s kind of hard because our class is really big, but if our class was smaller than twenty-eight people, it’d be good if she could go around during writing or something, and have individual attention during stuff, or something like that. But it’s too hard because her class is so big.

Meg stated that “you still learn because [of] what’s around you,” but still wished she had more time with Linda. She felt peer feedback often did not give her the honest response she desired. “It’s kind of helpful,” she said, “but some of them...your friends are too afraid to say if something’s wrong because they don’t want to hurt your feelings.” She said she often responded to her own friends with disingenuous praise in order to preserve friendships.

Meg did, however, feel she benefited from some classroom talk among friends. Sometimes it was hard to write when students talked about subjects other than writing because background noise made it hard to concentrate, but she also said, “When I read what I’m writing to the person [or a friend] who’s sitting next to me, or we talk about ideas, it helps a lot.” Meg felt that there was probably more social talk than work talk going on during writing times and said, “I don’t know when, but it helps sometimes. Like with other people around you. We talk about stuff and they’re like, ‘Oh, that’s a good idea,’ and they start writing about it. So, that works.”

Meg felt the work and goals of this class were different than those of her previous language arts classes. She told me she had not enjoyed sixth grade language arts, so I asked her to compare the classes. “What do you think Mrs. Rief wants you to write about?”:

MEG: I don’t know....She wants you to write, but she doesn’t tell you what you have to write about.
DOUG: If someone came up to Mrs. Rief and said, “All right, I’m a teacher and I’m new to teaching, and I want to learn from you. What do you want kids to write about?” what do you think she would say to that person?
MEG: Probably like experiences or ideas or dreams or something like that.
DOUG: And if you were to ask the question to your sixth grade teacher, what would she say?
MEG: I don’t know. I probably wouldn’t ask (laughs). I don’t know. I don’t know.
DOUG: What kind of topics did she give you?
MEG: We had to pick an author and we had to read one of his books and we had to write a newspaper about what was happening. She had us write like a newspaper. Every week we had to write a book review about the book we read, and we had to read nine books in four weeks, or something like that. We had to write about the book. I guess she would assign them, so she’d give us a choice of books that we had to read, and she’d have you write about the book, and there’d be this little visual project thing. So we didn’t do much writing in sixth grade. We did some.
DOUG: That’s interesting because in this class you had to do an author study for a whole quarter. Was [the sixth grade assignment] different?
MEG: Yeah! Like the [sixth grade] author study, we just had to read one book, and it wasn’t really a study. You just picked an author that you liked and a book that you liked by them, and you had to read it and just write what happened in it in like newspaper form.
DOUG: So it was like the summary of the book you had to write?
MEG: Yeah, kind of. It was like events that happened in the book in the newspaper way, so we didn’t really study how [the author] wrote. So, it was different.
DOUG: What were all the things you did with Mrs. Rief?
MEG: We had to look for techniques, how he described character or characters, or made plots, and, if you were doing poems, how they set up the poem, or how they used their words, and stuff like that.

Though the assignments appeared similar, Meg saw Linda’s assignment as being built on a much richer analysis of technique, character, structure, and word usage.

Meg’s View of Linda

Meg had high praise for Linda in almost all aspects of her teaching. Describing Linda, Meg said, “She discusses about what she wants you to write and so it’s easier for you to think about it.” Her other teachers hadn’t discussed their assignments in class, which made it “harder to think about things that would relate to that topic.” Meg also appreciated that Linda read and wrote along with students. “It’s good to see the teacher doing work in class, too. It’s kind of different,” she said.

It keeps the class, I guess, in what they’re doing because they see the teacher doing it....She reads a lot of books. She gives you some ideas, sometimes, when she writes quick-writes. And it’s really interesting to see what the teacher writes.

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Most importantly, Meg focused on her relationship with Linda. She liked the way Linda interacted with students. She said, “At lunch time she’s really friendly to everybody who’s there. She’s really fun to talk to,” and stated that her friendliness happened in the classroom, as well. Talking about the previous day’s class, Meg said, “She interacted with us,” and was impressed that “she would talk with the students and everything.” For Meg, the social factor of friendliness, a potentially vital component to rapport-building, drove Linda’s success. She indicated that a good social relationship often deeply influences an academic one:

DOUG: Tell me about Mrs. Rief as a teacher.
MEG: Well, she’s really nice to the students and she helps you if you have trouble with ideas or what you want to write, and she’s easy to talk to about your writing. So, that’s good.
DOUG: Is she different than other teachers you’ve had?
MEG: Yeah.
DOUG: In what ways?
MEG: She’s a lot nicer. Because the teachers I’ve had were really strict and kind of mean, and they don’t really care about what you’re writing about. So she’s a lot nicer than the other teachers I’ve had.
DOUG: Is it important for a teacher to be nice?
MEG: Yeah. I know in sixth grade our teacher, everybody was afraid of her because they thought she was really mean, and so it’s important for a teacher to be nice because then the students don’t feel threatened or afraid to talk.
DOUG: Do you think that if a teacher is nice that somehow the class gets out of control?
MEG: If they’re too nice it gets out of control, but if they’re just in the middle between...kind of, it’s all right.
DOUG: So, where’s Mrs. Rief in there?
MEG: She’s in between the differences.

For Meg, friendliness did not just offer social comfort but supported academic endeavors, as well. It indicated Linda’s care in her work, and without the sense of comfort it fostered, Meg would have been “threatened or afraid to talk.” Her answer cuts to the core of the importance of rapport in bridging the social and the academic. At the same time, she recognized a need to balance niceness with authority and saw Linda finding that balance.

Meg thought Linda was an excellent listener.
She listens like she cares about what you’re writing, and some of the other teachers just listen to you because they have to, kind of. It’s their job. Yeah, she listens differently. She actually cares about what you’re writing, and so it’s a lot easier to read your writing to her.

She compared her to a previous teacher:

We’d sit down and she’d just be listening to me, holding her pen, just turning it around. And it seems like she’d be dazing off sometimes. And then, when you ask her what she says, she always complements you and everything and doesn’t really correct it that much.

Meg associated care with listening. When Linda listened because she cared, Meg responded differently than she did to the teacher who listened because she had to. Linda’s caring made Meg receptive to a more directive teaching approach. When Meg perceived Linda cared about her and her work, suggestions and directives were no longer orders but signs that the teacher had, in fact, listened carefully. They became valued as truly important advice. Meg said she appreciated Linda’s corrections as well as her praise.

She sits down and she listens to you, and after [she listens] she tells you things that you did good, but she also tells you what needs working on and she helps you with that sometimes: about what needs to be changed....She corrects the spelling and punctuation for you. And, if you’re writing your poems, she helps you add things in or set it up differently, so it’s a lot easier.

Meg said she felt only occasionally obligated to use Linda’s suggestions, but when I asked her to give me an example of a time she did, her answer indicated she still had control over Linda’s suggestion to combine two poems.

I didn’t want to put [them] together at first because I thought the poem was perfect the way it was, but then I kept on reading it over and over again with that part, and it sounded good, so I decided to use it.

Though Meg said she felt obligated to follow Linda’s suggestion, she immediately describes the thought she put into the revision—how she “kept on reading it over and over again.” She realized the new version sounded good, “So I decided to use it,” indicating the
decision was her own, not Linda's. I pointed this out. "Yeah," Meg replied, "She's just trying to help you but you don't have to use them."

Meg saw nothing wrong with Linda's conferring style. "She listens and really helps you. If you have a problem, she can help you with it...She's just really friendly and helpful during conferences." Meg said there was nothing she would change to make conferences better.

The Conference

This conference occurred late in October during the first quarter. As I arrived, Meg had just read one poem about apple picking to Linda which began:

How 'bout this tree
or
maybe that one,
which I can't decide.
I want to pick the best red apples anybody can ever find.

How 'bout this tree
or
maybe that one,
which I can't decide.

This one over there has 1 big apple,
but the other one has 9....

Linda was giving her first response, a praise.

LINDA: I like the repetition, too, Meg. "How 'bout this tree, or maybe that one. Which, I can't decide." What I love about it is that's how I always feel like.
MEG: I know!
LINDA: Because every time you look over you see another tree that's got bigger apples on it.
MEG: We went apple picking a while ago, and we got the biggest bags you can get. We got two of them for my brother and I, and we were having a contest to see who could find the biggest apple and everything. And we could never find one that...we found this tree at the very end; our bags were almost full, and the tree had apples way up high, so I had to climb the tree, get the apples; it almost fell on my head, I remember that, and like went, "Foom!" and it bounced right off!
LINDA: (laughs)
Immediately apparent is the personal quality of the exchange. Instead of beginning with
text analysis, Linda responds emotionally to the poem, empathizing with the feeling of
searching for the perfect apple. Meg responds with an enthusiastic “I know!” and an
uninhibited story, which reveals the personal, non-academic inspiration behind the poem
and causes Linda to laugh appreciatively. Linda told me what she had learned during the
exchange.

Just some more information about what the actual setting and context was for the
piece she was writing. She gave me more information, which was really kind of
fun to hear—about this contest. She’s given me a little bit of information....It just
suddenly interested me, and I thought, “Ah, this is a place I could try and grab her
thinking.”

While Linda addresses writerly, teacherly concerns, she reveals she has connected
aesthetically with the piece: it was “kind of fun to hear.” It is her initial aesthetic reaction
that fuels Meg’s enthusiasm.

The rapport established through Linda’s more emotionally-based response set the tone
for the rest of the conference, establishing “a good, healthy chat” that I suggest enabled
Meg to create oral language during the subsequent conversation that ultimately changed her
writing radically. In this type of comfortable, informal conversation, “the sights, the
sounds, the smells” that personalize and transform writing were more common.

Meg felt her first poem was good and had read it only for Linda’s confirmation, but she
next produced another poem, which she felt really needed work.

*MEG:* I wrote one this morning. I was sleeping, I was half awake and then I just
thought of this really good idea for a poem.
*LINDA:* All right, let’s hear that one.

Meg read her poem, “Dreams and Nightmares,” which had been inspired by a collection
of Stephen King short stories she had read, entitled *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* (1994):

As the sun sets behind the mountains, the sky turns a jet black
The children close there eyes.
The stars come out and the moon shines down through the windows of the children
letting them dream happy dreams

But when the sun sets behind the mountains, and the sky turns jet black the children’s eyes close. And the stars and moon don’t come out, the children cry. They cry in their dreams, no longer is there a dream, but a nightmare.

But the moon will come out and the stars will come out and will shine on the children and happy dreams will start.

*LINDA:* What do you think you did well in this? What are the places that you like?

I asked Linda what she was looking for from her question to Meg. She responded,

It was a pretty weak piece of writing, and I want her to tell me first what she sees as the strengths, because I don’t want to dive in. I want her to be the first one to tell me what’s working, so that I can get a sense of, “Does she already know this?” If I confirm it am I going to destroy her or help her recognize that she already knows this? Because she’s got a couple of good lines in it, but it’s pretty weak. I mean, you can even hear it in her voice that it’s kind of boring for her to read it.

Linda’s first concern after she sees weakness in the piece is to maintain their social rapport, finding an approach that will not “destroy” Meg and compromise her ability or desire to continue to move the piece forward. Although Meg had already identified that she saw the piece as weak, Linda treaded lightly when it came to constructive criticism. I played Meg’s answer:

*MEG:* I liked how I describe like the sun setting behind them and the jet-black sky. I like that.

*LINDA:* Yeah.

*MEG:* The ending’s good, but the middle’s kind of weird, I think.

Meg’s answer told Linda a lot.

It tells me that she can already identify the strongest line. That is the strongest line. And she already knows that, so my hope is that she’ll figure out “What do I do with this line,” and abandon a lot of the rest, or start to really revise the rest. But at least it’s got a thread to hold on to.
Meg statement that, "The ending’s good, but the middle’s kind of weird, I think," also allowed Linda to agree with her, softening Linda’s subsequent constructive criticism and helping preserve the social integrity of the performance. Linda could then launch into a series of analysis questions and suggestions that provoke Meg to create ideas for revision:

**LINDA:** Yeah, I noticed even as you were reading it, you were having a hard time reading it seriously. (Meg laughs). I think I agree with you. I like this part best, too. What do you think about the...if you just cover up this part, and you read this part to yourself, and this part, about the sunset and the jet-black sky. What do you love about the sun setting or the night sky?  
**MEG:** It’s just really pretty, like at the sunset, they’re trying to...like, there’s purples and pinks and peaches and stuff. I think it’s really pretty, and then all of the sudden it’s just jet black. And it’s just really neat, and really pretty.

**LINDA:** Just the way you just said “Pinks and purples and peaches.” Those are beautiful images, and you’ve also got the “p”s, the “p”s, the “p”s: “The pinks, the purples, the peaches.” And then all of the sudden it turns jet black. If you can somehow get that surprise in there. Just see if you’re doing this: (reads) “As the sun sets behind the mountains and the sky...” Where are those colors that you just told me? Have you got them in?  
**MEG:** No, I didn’t. I was gonna put them in there, but then I just didn’t.

**LINDA:** All right, maybe that’s what you [do]. What made you decide not to put them in there?  
**MEG:** I don’t know. I guess I was just in a rush to get out, because in the morning I’m usually late.

**LINDA:** As the sun sets behind the mountains: pinks, purples, peaches—and the sky suddenly turns jet black...what do you wonder? Or what do you think?  
**MEG:** Well, it’s like really pretty and all of the sudden it just turns dark, kind of. It’s like with the pinks and peaches you think like it’s really like happy hour, but then with the jet black.

**LINDA:** But does that jet black scare you?  
**MEG:** Not really. Well, kind of. If they were like little kids it would.  
**LINDA:** But you. Talking about you.  
**MEG:** No.  
**LINDA:** It wouldn’t scare you. You like that jet black.  
**MEG:** Yeah.

**LINDA:** If you just keep those two images, and then there are all different directions you could go in with this. You’re talking about night. It might even be getting ready for bed. I know, probably there’s nothing I like better than on a cold night that you’re falling into flannel sheets, and reading an incredibly good book. So maybe that’s the direction you head in. What’s happening during this jet black night? Where do you see other directions you can head with this? I mean, even just with a sentence or two.  
**MEG:** Well I remember when I was, like, with my friends, we’d always go underneath the covers and get a flashlight and just like draw or read, or something.

**LINDA:** You know what, Meg? That’s a great ending for that. You’ve got the images of the night, it’s jet black, and my friends and I grab flashlights,
crawl under the sheets, and color...peaches and purples and pinks. It's a beautiful poem. Doesn't that sound much stronger?

MEG: Yeah.

This is the seminal exchange of the conference. Linda gave her reaction to it:

First I'm trying [to get] her to get the images in there. She’s got this wonderful line about the sunset, and when she can describe it—when she describes it orally with these purples and pinks and peaches—I am trying to get her to see the sound of those words and that it does create an image in your head. She doesn’t quite have yet that poetry creates images. So that’s the first thing I’m trying to do.

The second thing I was trying to do with her is...I think good poetry gives you a surprise in the end, or makes you see something in a fresh way that no one else would describe. She’s got the image but, now, what does that image mean? That’s where I’m trying to get her to describe what’s happening on this night: here’s the night. Okay, so what? When she suddenly says to me about crawling underneath the covers with a flashlight [to] draw or read, that’s really exciting to me.

I feel really good about this conference. I had things to grab hold of. She had some good starts, but I could help her find some things that she already knew. And she had the purples the peaches and the purples. If I can get her to do that without saying, “Do this,” then I know that she’s beginning to get a grasp or an understanding of what poetry should do....I don’t know what she did, because I haven’t seen the final piece. If she doesn’t get it from that, then she’s not ready to get it, yet, but that’s what I was trying to do. I was trying to get her to see that for herself. I mean, it is a beautiful poem. It’s very short and tight, and my repetition of it back to her is hoping that she will take it on for herself now, because they’re her words that I’m just repeating back.

This exchange typifies how Linda used students’ own oral words as the springboard to text revision. The two critical junctures of the exchange come with Linda’s recognition of the value Meg’s spoken words—her beautiful, spontaneous alliteration, “purples and pinks, and peaches,” and her comforting imagery of lying under the covers with a flashlight and a friend, drawing and reading. Again we see the focus of Linda’s listening stance: she listened for the spark in Meg’s responses—the places where she spontaneously and enthusiastically reveals images and memories important to her. From there, it was Linda’s job simply to repeat and perhaps shape a bit what the Meg herself had said: “I could help her find some things that she already knew.”

It is in Meg’s ease in creating oral language and imagery of this quality and literary usefulness that we see the importance of the personal rapport between the two. Her perception that Linda listened, cared, and was a friend established a trust that allowed Meg
to converse colloquially, without constraint, and students almost always created more beautiful imagery when engaged in the easy talk identified with a social relationship than they did when engaged in drier academic discourse. Rapport encouraged oral poetry, which Linda could then present back to the speaker. Though Meg at this point had only spoken the words, Linda told me, “I did see it as poetry.”

The conference continued with Meg reading yet another poem. Linda usually did not encourage students to read more than one piece, but Meg’s enthusiasm and her unsolicited introduction of each piece caused Linda to continue to listen. Meg identified the piece as very weak, but liked some of the lines. Linda suggested she combine those lines with her original apple poem, which Meg considered, and did, a few days later. After listening to the end of the conference, Linda evaluated it.

I think this conference worked really well, because when I asked her questions she knew answers for them. She didn’t say, “I don’t know.” She had three pieces of writing in front of her, and she had already evaluated them. I think she does exactly what I would like kids to do: have a volume of writing in front of them and to be able to look at that and already be able to judge one piece is better than another piece. I think that worked really well. What I liked was that she was able to grasp hold of suggestions that I gave to her because they were her language. That’s why I think this whole conference worked well. I thought the whole thing worked very well.

For Linda, then, success was partially guaranteed before the conference even began because Meg had already thought carefully about her writing, was prepared to articulate her visions, and was willing to receive Linda’s response. Linda’s responses during the conference helped sustain the rapport that led to Meg’s continued easy articulation and motivation.

At the time of our interview, Linda had not yet seen Meg’s final draft of “Dreams and Nightmares.” I showed it to her. Meg had re-titled it “Under the Covers”:

As the sun sets behind the mountains
The sky turns jet black

My friends and I grab the flashlights
And duck under the covers
There we grab the markers and start coloring
Pinks, peaches, and purples

As the sky gets darker,
The colors get brighter

Linda read it and exclaimed,

Oh yeah! Wow! What a difference! To me, then, the conference really worked
because she took some of the images and she made them her own. She moved
stuff around. It’s different from the way I read it back to her, but she’s got all the
same images in there, and I love her last line, “As the sky gets darker the colors get
brighter.” And she’s got wonderful verbs in here now: “grab,” “duck”....She
could just really tighten this up, but it’s a wonderful poem, and she really did a
good job with it.

We next reviewed Meg’s Case History of the piece:

In my journal I wrote a poem about nightmares and dreams. The two different
subjects didn’t really fit together. So, I took some of the descriptive words I used,
and I put them in the beginning of my poem. I got the idea of the new poem from
when my friend and I used to pull all the covers over our heads and use a flashlight
to color or read. I took that and put the descriptive words in front and came up with
a short poem.

Linda remarked, “She has taken [control], and I am totally out of it. She doesn’t even
talk about the conference.” This was the sign of a successful co-construction of text. Meg
had adopted and internalized Linda’s ideas as her own because they made sense and fit into
her own vision for the piece. I presented this notion to Linda, who responded that it
embarrassed her when students said that she had made them put something into their
pieces,

Because I don’t want to be in there. And even though there’s a piece of me that
says, “Well doesn’t [Meg] remember that we had this long conference?” she’s
doing exactly what we want them doing. You’re right that maybe she’s internalized
this enough now that she can start to do this on her own and think about, “How
[do] I get these images from myself, and how [do] I use them?” Which is great.

Meg included “Under the Covers” in her final portfolio in June, and commented on it in
her year-end self evaluation, describing what she ultimately learned from the process of
writing it. She revealed that the topic had real relevance to her when she wrote, “This poem represents me personally, what I was like when I was little. From writing this poem I learned that I could write poems the way I pictured them in my mind.” She spoke of the lessons she took from writing the poem:

I learned that you could write something that you think is good, but still really needs work on it. I also learned that when you write a rough draft you can just like a sentence that you wrote and continue on from that.

...When I compare [my first draft to my final draft] I can tell that the first poem I wrote was choppy and that I didn’t really know what I was trying to write. But with “Under the Covers” I made it flow and I knew what I was trying to say and what I was really writing about.

Again, there is no mention of Linda’s help, but there is a clear self-awareness of her ability and growth. The lessons she learned were not lessons that were explicated in her conference with Linda. Linda had not told Meg that “Dreams and Nightmares” was choppy or that she suspected Meg didn’t know what she was trying to write, and Meg created her final stanza, “As the sky gets darker/the colors get brighter,” unassisted after the conference. Meg demonstrated that she has been thinking: analyzing and evaluating her own work carefully and using what she learned to evolve her text progressively. There is no doubt that Linda profoundly influenced the final shape of the poem, but it is equally true that Meg had the ultimate control of her work. She made the final decisions and her decisions were motivated primarily by her care for the poem, not slavish adherence to outside forces. Linda facilitated Meg’s sense of ownership by establishing a rapport relationship—built first on response that indicated her performative role as a listening, interested, empathetic, caring audience, not as a teacher—which balanced Meg’s social facility with the academic purpose of the conference. In doing so she engendered a trust and encouraged talk that promoted deeper student thought and motivation.

Jason: Lack of Rapport Makes Conferring Difficult

Linda’s conferences with Jason represent a relationship where the rapport necessary for academic collaboration does not fully develop. The complex tapestry of factors that
underpin any social interaction perhaps prevent us from identifying the sum of causes, but Jason’s and Linda’s conference interactions illuminate several prominent reasons. Jason’s prior academic history and his negative perception of himself as a writer and reader contributed to his unwillingness to trust the teacher. Linda’s love of language arts also made it difficult to establish rapport with Jason as easily as she did with other students more receptive to language arts. Her frustration grew.

Many teachers will tell you that every class has a Jason. Highly intelligent and possessing a wicked sense of humor, Jason often exploited his talents at times that weren’t appreciated by Linda and classmates. I found him to be engaging, very funny, and at times remarkably sensitive to others. Then again, I didn’t have to teach him. I have more observational notes about Jason than any other student because he was the most conspicuous, calling attention to himself in front of the whole class. He was the one who talked out loud while others worked silently, who didn’t pay attention, who responded to questions with sarcastic jokes, who covered his arms with pieces of tape during class, who attempted daily to escape to the bathroom or library. Said Linda,

I take a deep sigh and wonder what will it take to get him to care about language arts? Is he [ADHD] or just a young kid full of energy that isn’t connecting yet with chairs, desks, and listening? He has places to go—things to do.

Jason wrote about himself, “When I can’t pay attention I usually start to get fidgety and then I’ll start to talk with my friends and I won’t pay attention to what’s going on. I don’t pay attention to anyone, really.” But this wasn’t entirely true. In situations where he felt comfortable, Jason attended very well and contributed perceptively to class discussions. During one conference, I noted, “As Linda reads, questions, and suggests, Jason becomes very focused, elbow on table, head in hand, listening intently to her, looking at his draft, and answering her questions.”

Despite his sometimes disruptive acts, Jason was generally well-liked in class, and his peers usually gently tolerated his outbursts, which were hardly ever angry. He had a solid
group of friends with whom he spent most of his time in class talking, joking, and avoiding writing.

Outside of class Jason liked to hang out downtown or go bike riding. He was passionate about sports; he played soccer and basketball competitively. He loved movies and mentioned them constantly in class and in his journal. In his journal his list of “loves” was devoted to family members, birthdays, playing sports, watching TV, listening to music, and playing video games. His “hates” showed his disdain for school: “going to school, doing homework, losing a game, not getting what I want, first day of school, not hearing ‘yes,’ having tests, studying for tests, getting crappy CD’s, getting bad Christmas presents, being sick on my birthday, not having a birthday party, not doing [anything], not [being] able to go outside, watching bad movies, feeding the dog.” These topics were consistent themes in his journal.

These lists portrayed sides of Jason that everyone in class recognized. But a more hidden side, one deeply reflective, serious, and much quieter represented itself in a third list Linda asked students to write— a list of “wonderings.” Jason wondered, “Who made us, who made Adam and Eve, what molecules look like, what’s going to happen in the future, when I’ll die, what I’ll do when I grow up, what’s going to happen to me, will I have a lot of money, how will I die, are there genies, will I get AIDS, will I be married, how many kids will I have, will I have a pretty wife, will I have pets, when will my dog die, will I have a nice house?” He noted his hidden side in his year-end self evaluation.

I don’t think there’s anything in my portfolio that I haven’t had a chance to talk about that I want anyone to know about me as a learner. Well, I want them to know that I am a lot different at home. I am more soft-spoken and I like to reflect on what I have done wrong during the day....The only other thing that I want to say is that I am a quiet person who likes to read and I love to cook and play basketball.

However Jason rarely translated his reflections into formal writing, preferring to pull most of his topics from actual events in his life, fictionalize them, then simply describe their plots.
Despite his frequent condemnations of it, Jason acknowledged aspects of school that he very much liked. He deeply valued his social interaction with friends, he couldn't wait for school dances, he loved field trips and the environmental camp the class attended, and he enjoyed the playschool program where 8th graders took care of toddlers for half a day.

Jason also liked math, saying that it was more fun than any of his other subjects because of the way the teacher taught it and "probably because it's a better subject for me." His teacher, Michelle, was his advocate. She liked him and his humor very much, and enjoyed having him in class. She said he was a fine math student.

**Jason’s View of Himself as a Language Arts Student**

But Jason did not consider himself to be a writer and reader. He said, “I’ve always rebelled against it,” and, despite what he had written in his self evaluation, stated plainly that he just didn’t like reading and writing. He had once enjoyed them, in first grade. “It was fun because we just did coloring and just drew. It wasn’t really for a grade.” But now, he felt, writing for a grade “kind of rushes you to write.” He said he enjoyed writing less than anything in school, declaring, “It takes up too much time.”

He said that thinking up plots and stories was the easiest part of writing for him but that “making the book interesting” was the hardest. Tellingly, to the question “Why do you and other people read?” he responded, “Because we’re forced to.” But he clearly enjoyed a least some reading. Throughout the year he transcribed several poems—short, rhyming, humorous—into his portfolio. Shel Silverstein was a particular favorite.

Jason identified a good writer as someone who could spell well and who had a good imagination. His spelling concerned him a great deal, and becoming a better speller was one of his goals at the beginning of every quarter. Interestingly, Jason did not hesitate to use complicated words in his writing. Though he misspelled some of them, he used them in a grammatically correct fashion and in the proper context.
As did Meg, Jason said that good writing “flows well.” It also made thoughts clear to the reader, kept the reader in the story, and had a good plot. His own best pieces, he wrote, flowed well and had better spelling and punctuation than usual.

Jason’s Performance as a Language Arts Student

Where Meg generally wrote more autobiographically, pulling topics directly from her own life and writing more often in the first person, Jason more often wrote short fiction in the third person. In the final quarter, his genre selection changed; his final portfolio pieces were two poems. One was a gently mocking “ode” to his small hometown. The other, written in secret during Spanish class, detailed in rhyme his dislike of Spanish class. In his poetry he said he focused most on “making sense” and “rhyming.” Other portfolio contributions included a cartoon, a myth he had written the previous year, a book review, and an illustrated journal entry about his love of the tall buildings in Providence, Rhode Island and New York City.

In general, Jason used his journal to write “what I did in the day, what I read in the book,” but most responses were perfunctory. He often responded vaguely to the books he read with simple adjectives like “pretty cool” or “awesome.” An early entry typifies his focus on plot summary rather than analysis or interpretation:

Today I read Jurassic Park for half an hour. It’s a wicked good book. So far I’m at the chapter Malcom. The plot so far is that a person is making a park on a island in Costa Rica that has real living dinosaurs. There on there way to the island right now.

However, some entries, like his list of “wonderings,” show his ability to think seriously about serious subjects. On occasion, he also produced nice imagery, as in these two entries:

I see a green plant that looks very good. It looks really green and looks like it’s in good shape. It looks like rivers of colors joining together. I imagine that it’s a plant that eats people.

I’ve been trying to look for a quiet spot to read, but I haven’t been able to find one. Well today I found the spot but I think it’s a little too quiet. I hear the silence
sound, like birds chirping, the house creaking. I hope the spot tomorrow is a little bit quieter.

"Like rivers of colors joining together" and "The silence sound" were the types of phrases that Linda picked out and asked students to consider for their draft writing. But Jason did not carry this type of imagery into his final drafts. He said, "I just think of something to write up. I don't usually take from my journal and then write it."

Jason's journal writing improved in February. He began to write every day and his entries got progressively longer. A response to *The Giver* shows a new willingness to explore issues and present opinions on paper:

I think that living in a world with no memories, no love, no color...is not something I think is worth giving up just so there's no poverty, disorder, or pain because I think that every person needs to once in their life feel or see the pain or poverty. If there wasn't ever the feeling of pain [or] the thrill of doing something new or feelings, you would never feel love or caring or hate for another person. Because of not feeling these things I believe that you're not a full human being. Why would you want to give up the things that make you feel good or feel pain just so you don't have to face poverty or crime? I think that is not a way to live. Living a perfect life that has no ups and downs is boring and is too plain. It's just black and white.

Many of his entries, however, appeared to have been written quickly for the sake of getting the daily assignment done. His final draft writing, too, often seemed rushed.

Jason summed up his own feelings about his writing in his year-end self evaluation:

[T]he things I have learned are...my writing process really has not changed. I still will write one draft and then revise it and make it a final. The content has gotten a little better. I still need help on the way to make a story flow good and to have a good plot. The mechanics of my writing...is okay. I still need a lot of work on that.

While it was true that Jason still usually performed only perfunctory revisions, some of his later portfolio contributions show a more personal, immediate, thoughtful topic selection and tone. A third quarter letter he wrote to Miep Gies, the woman who hid Anne Frank from the Nazis, shows some of this growth. It was clear and honest, stated a pertinent viewpoint, and asked legitimate questions.
My class and I have been studying about the Holocaust for about a month now and we have heard about you hiding the Franks from the Nazis. As a matter of fact, we just saw the whole story of you hiding the Franks. I believe you are a very brave individual for what you did with the Franks and other people. I think I would have been so afraid to hide people from the Nazis, especially after you know what they would do if they found out. I admire you for how long you helped the Franks and the other guests that were staying there, because you helped to keep the people alive a little bit longer with people they cared about and who they loved.

What made you so brave? How could you live with the agony of keeping them safe? What thoughts do you have for whoever told the Nazis you were hiding the Franks? And how did you work past your fears?

Much of Jason’s best and hardest work, in fact, came during the third quarter unit on human rights and the Holocaust. The subject matter intrigued him and he loved the books he read, especially Night, by Elie Wiesel (1982) and Diary of a Young Girl, by Anne Frank (1996). The structure of the unit seemed to fit Jason’s tastes and talents better than any other. Linda showed several movies, one of Jason’s areas of expertise. There were also many more whole-class discussions, which appealed to him enormously. When the class discussed the movie Schindler’s List Jason talked more than I had ever heard him; he was one of the two primary responders, contributing extremely observant, relevant information. His confidence in the subject matter and it’s medium revealed a previously hidden talent for oral communication. Linda was impressed:

It was phenomenal listening to him. He was more with me and more with the discussion, I think, than most anybody in the class. He’d really watched that movie! And he was able to articulate what he saw, what he thought. He was able to think what some of those things meant. He was listening harder and he was reformulating ideas. I could see it in his eyes, and I was really impressed with that. I value him for his ability to do that, and don’t worry so much about the writing. [I can’t] be so possessed or obsessive about him making that writing better and better and better. It’s adequate and so maybe I just have to accept adequate in that way.

It feels very comfortable for him. He’s more interested in talking out his ideas and thinking them out, so it’s just offering all those different opportunities for kids to show what they can do with language in many different ways. I hope he got the message from me, subtly, that I was really impressed with what he was saying, the thinking that he was doing. It’s almost like a conference, but it’s in a whole class. You’re nodding and saying, “Yeah, tell me more. Wow, yeah, that’s really interesting, I really like what you said there.”
But, when conversations turned to his own writing, Jason did not expound. He
responded perfunctorily in conferences and was reluctant to reveal personal thoughts,
which limited his writing options all year long.

Jason’s View of Language Arts Class

Jason did not view language arts class enthusiastically.

Well, we get to read stories and stuff out loud in class. Sometimes it’s boring
because sometimes there’s nothing to do...like when you’re just not in the mood to
read or write, or you’ve done your story and today is like the last day to write and
there’s nothing to do if you don’t feel like reading. So, you just sit around and
that’s boring.

He said the worst thing about language arts was “reading every day for half-an-hour.
And having to write in your journal,” but some activities did appeal to him: “Watching the
movies about the famous plays and playwriters.” He also liked reading books out loud,
together as a class. His views on how he would make the class better show his penchant
for more visual learning:

I guess there weren’t a lot of field trips to places. I guess [I would] show them
visually what it would look like. I don’t know if we could do anything about what
happened with the Jewish and the Nazis people, because we can’t go anywhere,
really, that’s close around here....

[Mrs. Rief] always talks about these people drawing and stuff, like these second
graders and stuff. Maybe we should go to some places and look at the pictures and
see what they look like...maybe do a Museum of Fine Arts or something like that:
show people what the things are like.

Jason saw differences between this class and his previous language arts classes, but
unlike Meg, he did not view the changes as positive. He liked last year’s class better:

[Mrs. Rief] doesn’t talk as much as Miss Heyliger did last year. And Miss
Heyliger had like a weekly [assignment]...Miss Rief has a daily [assignment].
Miss Heyliger...would give us four assignments that would be due in like two
weeks....Miss Heyliger would have us do like a journal entry every two weeks,
and then we just really read a lot and we did a lot of creative activities. We’d do
posters and stuff, and then we did the newspaper. That was fun.

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By daily assignments, Jason was referring to his nightly half-hour of reading and journal response, but he also had a problem with Linda’s writing expectations, citing their lack of structure. He liked his seventh grade teachers’ more directive approaches, saying, “They come down and tell you what you need to write, so it was easier that way.” Then, he said, he knew exactly what to do.

Jason saw both positives and negatives in the students’ freedom to talk among themselves while working. “It’s fifty-fifty. It helps a little bit and, you know, it’s distracting when people are just talking to you. But it helps because sometimes it gives you ideas.” He gave an example:

Well, once when we were talking about animals and stuff, I know we had to write something for that timeline thing, and so it gave me an idea on one of my timelines. But we really weren’t talking about timelines. We were just talking about a subject and it just came up. But it helped me because I remembered something about my guinea pig....So I just wrote that down.

It was distracting “when you’re trying to think and then everybody’s just talking to you and stuff, or just everybody’s talking, and that’s distracting because you try to think of something to write about.”

Jason’s View of Linda

Jason was more critical of Linda’s teaching than were most students. He felt that she gave too many assignments at one time. “Maybe spread ‘em out over a period of time, make it easier for the person writing,” he suggested. He had another pointed criticism.

JASON: She likes people to write like she does. Like the way she has it.
DOUG: How do you think she writes?
JASON: I don’t know. She writes good!
DOUG: Does she have a style that you’ve noticed?
JASON: It flows easily.
DOUG: So, do you think it’s a good or a bad thing that she likes people to write like her?
JASON: I don’t know. I guess it’s kind of a bad thing because not everybody’s going to be able to write like [she does]. She’ll tell us to do one thing and then she’ll want us to do it like the way she has the writing, and then it’s harder because some people can’t write like her. Like, I’m not that great a writer because, I don’t know, I just don’t enjoy it. So, I’ll try to write
something and then she won’t like it, or something, and then I’ll have to fix it. I’ll have to fix it like five times before she likes it.

Though Jason wished Linda would take more control over what he was supposed to write in class, if she directed him to improve the product he had made, he then had to analyze again. His apparently contrasting complaints both came from the same motivation to avoid writing.

Jason did find one thing better about Linda’s teaching in comparison to previous teachers:

She let’s us do more free stuff. Like, we’ll be open just to do whatever we want. In the other classes...the teacher will be in front of the class and talk to us a lot. We don’t usually have those days; every day you can just go around and talk. That’s what’s good about the class. That’s fun.

Jason claimed Linda’s conferences and individual help were the best things about her teaching. He gave an example of when a conference had helped him: “I was wondering about a birthday party and stuff. She helped me get ideas in there for what I should put in, like the birthday setting and stuff like that. That was helpful, I guess.”

I was initially surprised that Jason considered Linda’s conferences valuable, but his answer again fits in with his ambivalent view of teacher help. When Linda offered just one or two suggestions that he could easily perform, he felt she helped. But if her direction pushed him to make extensive changes and engage in the writing as a thinking process, he again resisted. He documented a dislike of criticism, which fed his insecurities about writing, when I asked him what made for a good conference:

JASON: Giving the person ideas. Not telling them the story’s bad, but saying that, “It’s good. Just maybe take out one or two things to make it better.” So you never really be negative, always be positive about it.

DOUG: How does Mrs. Rief do in that respect?

JASON: I think she does so-so. Sometimes she’ll be like, “Oh, I don’t like this piece of writing. Try harder on it.” Then that makes the person feel bad and then they get mad, or something. Then they don’t want to do it. But if you always be positive to ‘em, I guess, then it makes ‘em feel better. Just say, “The piece is awesome and just take out one thing and it’ll be even better.” Then just tell them that way.
Jason, unlike Meg, perceived much criticism in Linda’s response to his writing. Where Meg saw Linda offering helpful information, Jason saw her condemning the writing. In all my notes and transcripts I don’t find one instance of Linda telling a student she didn’t like a piece of writing, but Jason’s perception is important. He believed it and it affected his rapport with Linda, making him reticent to open up to her, to reveal any concerns or self-perceived weaknesses in his writing, self-evaluate, or thoughtfully revise. He gave as an example of her negativity, Linda’s response to his letter to Miep Gies:

I guess she kept saying the story was not that great, yeah. So she kept telling me to fix it. So then I didn’t even want to do it, but then the quarter was ending so I had to finish it...And then I wrote it up again and then she said she didn’t like it, so I wrote it up again and she said she didn’t like it, so then I just like put it in my binder and I just forgot about it until like the last day of the quarter. And then I typed it up and brought it in to school.

Ironically, Jason was expressing what Linda had told the class about herself time and again, that negative comments stopped her writing and praise kept her going. She had vowed to put all student writing in a positive light, even while suggesting major changes. But Jason still perceived her commentary as negative. Tellingly, Jason did not equate good listening to academic response, but to respect. In his answer to the survey question, “What makes a teacher a good listener?” he replied, “To be able to respect the child that she’s listening to.” He may have perceived Linda’s challenges as a lack of respect, which inhibited their rapport-building.

Jason said that he almost always used Linda’s conference suggestions. Where Meg saw Linda’s suggestions as possibilities, Jason saw them as orders and chose to follow them (as we shall see) as perfunctorily as possible.

Revealingly, when I asked Jason if Mrs. Rief’s reading and writing in class influenced his own work, he said, “I’ve never even see her do it.” It appeared that his relationship with Linda went little beyond the realm of here-and-now academic interaction. In general, Jason wanted and expected from Linda a relationship where she would offer praise, give
some simple, direct advice on how to improve his work, but do so without igniting his considerable insecurities about writing. His were not unreasonable expectations. Someone who is scared of revealing himself through writing will obviously put up a much larger performative mask to hide what they perceive to be their failings in order to preserve their aura of competence. Jason revealed little because he did not trust his writing skills or Linda.

In a strange way, then, Linda and Jason’s relationship was purely academic. Jason only attended to Linda’s straightforward academic suggestions, which limited his need to reveal too much. However, it was in the interaction of a rapport relationship—which was now more difficult to develop—that the magical qualities that made academic work special most often revealed themselves.

Two Conferences

One Conference. The first conference I present occurred in October. Linda had told the class that everyone would have to confer with her within a few days, and Jason initiated his conference by signing his name on the board. The conference began with Linda’s standard opening:

LINDA: Okay, how can I help you with this?
JASON: I want to read a story to you and see [uc].
LINDA: Okay. All right.
JASON: I don’t know which one to read, “The Bike I Love” or “The Farewell.”
LINDA: All right, which one do you think is going better?
JASON: Well, everybody says this “Farewell” is really good, so...I’ll read it to you?
LINDA: Okay. And how can I best help you with it?
JASON: Um, maybe revise it a little bit. Maybe you can say, “Oh, you can go on a little bit more with this,” so maybe it can go a little longer.

Jason’s request highlights his expectation that the conference should give him a little information to add without forcing him to revise extensively. He picked “The Farewell” to read for the pragmatic reason that it would be easier to finish: “We needed [a piece] due for the end of the week.” he said later, “I wanted to get something that people say is good, that would be close to final draft work.” He didn’t see a need for revision: “I thought it was
really good as it was. I didn’t really think it needed anything. I just wanted to know. Before I put it into final draft, I wanted it to be the best it can be.” His primary objective, he said, was to see if he could get it a little longer so that he might hand it in as one of the “major” pieces that Linda had required.

Linda’s motivation at this point in the conference was somewhat different. She asked Jason to tell her which piece was better because she wanted him to begin to see some writing as more effective than other writing, and then use the piece in the conference for deep thinking.

I want kids to start evaluating from the moment that conference starts, even before the conference starts, all the writing that they’re doing, but I think they already know what they need to do to it to make it better.

When this happened, she could become the “sounding board” off of which students could hear their own thought processes and begin to analyze.

Their conflicting motives led to subsequent conference conflict. Jason, satisfied with his piece, simply wanted quick material that he could implement easily. Linda, on the other hand, expected the conference to be an analysis exercise for Jason. Neither yet knew the other’s motive.

The conference continued. Jason read his piece, which he had written in a workshop with a visiting author, who had assigned everyone to write a story that include a pie:

Dear Journal,

Today is August 7, 1986. Today me and my family are leaving this house we have lived in all our lives. My mother is making a pie for us for our farewell. We are going to eat it outside on the picnic table in the backyard. Good night journal. Have a safe trip. Then Johnney put his journal into a box marked Johnney’s things. Then Johnney grabbed the box and went down the stairs through the living room, through the kitchen, and finally out the door where a white and orange truck was marked Uhaul. He put the box in the truck and then the driver closed the back door and said “that’s it!” Johnney went back in and he saw his family running around looking for things. Then he turned his head to the left and saw the pie on the table out side. He went through the kitchen and out the back door. He walked over to the table and took a piece of the pie. Then he heard his dad yell from the car “come on Johnney it’s time to go!” Then Johnney ran to the door and went through the house into the car. The car drove off and sat out in the backyard waiting for somebody to take it inside.
Linda noted with surprise Jason’s reading fluency, and she liked the inflections in his voice. “He clearly enjoys what he’s written. So, part of the reading aloud is giving me some clue that he likes this, just from the way he reads it.”

*LINDA:* Okay, you know what I like?
*JASON:* No.
*LINDA:* I like that he’s writing in the journal about leaving, also the description of the U-Haul truck and the driver who slams it shut and says, “That’s it.” You do a nice job with that. And, also, I’m really curious about this pie. Now, why are they leaving the house?
*JASON:* Because they’re moving. It’s, like, too much for them to keep the house.
*LINDA:* Okay, the house is too big or something?
*JASON:* Yeah, maybe it’s too expensive. I don’t now, I never thought I had to get into the house. But, they’re moving.
*LINDA:* Well, I mean, I am curious as to why they’re leaving.
*JASON:* It’s too expensive?
*LINDA:* All right, that could be built on. What makes this pie special?
*JASON:* It’s like a piece of the house, [uc] taking the house, like they’re taking a piece of it with them. Like, he takes the piece of the pie...
*LINDA:* Oh, so he takes...
*JASON:* Yeah, he takes a piece of the pie and he goes into the car with it. And it’s like he’s bringing part of the house with him.
*LINDA:* What does he love about this house?
*JASON:* I don’t know, he’s grown up into it all his life.
*LINDA:* And so how is this pie like taking a piece of the house with him?
*JASON:* ‘Cause like the pie’s the house and, like, and he takes a piece of it. It goes off with him.
*LINDA:* Okay, in what way is the pie a piece of the house?
*JASON:* All the good times they’ve had? I don’t know.
*LINDA:* Because, does he love pie? Is that...
*JASON:* I don’t know, he just... they made a pie, like to eat, because they’re gonna leave.
*LINDA:* What kind of pie?
*JASON:* It’s probably a pumpkin pie (laughs).

Her questions, Linda said, were ones to which she really wanted to know the answer. “If I’m really trying to move the kids forward then I am asking questions if I think, as a listener, there are gaps in information. And those are the things I wanted to know more about.” These analysis questions then prodded Jason to search for what the pie represented. Linda was sick of pie writing, since every student had written a draft during the author workshop; she remembered why she never assigned students a blanket topic. “I was beginning to tell kids that the exercise that the writer took them through was an
exercise to help them find a piece of writing, and that the piece of writing may not be residing in the pie.” But she continued the conference with Jason because:

He seemed to like it from the way he read it to me, and he seemed to understand metaphor even though he couldn’t quite say that. The pie was something that he really liked, and he didn’t want to leave his house, and so the pie was kind of a metaphor for a piece of the house. I don’t know if he really understood metaphor, but he understood a piece of something, so I was trying to get him to clearly explain that metaphor a little bit better: what did that pie represent? I wasn’t quite sure because I don’t know Jason that well to know if he could do that.

But they were getting a little bit too lengthy. I should be able to just give him a question or two. I mean, the piece is not real rich. I don’t know how well he can write and I don’t know if this is a really good piece of writing for him. The conference went on too long and I didn’t feel like I was having an awful lot of success with the line of questioning that I had, and I guess I was still searching for directions to go on.

What is missing from their exchange is the easy, free-flowing enthusiasm of “a good healthy chat,” so evident in Meg’s conference. Linda’s many questions indicated she wasn’t satisfied with Jason’s answers. And Jason’s answers, while straightforward, are much shorter, more tentative, and less self-evaluative than Meg’s. But, while Linda began to feel frustration, Jason was meeting his own objective of obtaining more information to lengthen his piece: “She put more quotes into what would I miss if I had left my house today. And so then I just put that into my story.” Linda, though, “still searching for directions to go on,” continued to question.

LINDA: So what makes this pumpkin pie so much a part of his memories of this house?
JASON: Mmm, maybe they had pumpkin pie once, and...I don’t know! I don’t know why this should be such a big thing for him. You just told me to put pumpkin pie in it, so I did it that way.
LINDA: Well, what do you like about this piece of writing?
JASON: Well, one...I don’t...
LINDA: It is fluent. I mean, it follows really well, Jason. You read it very well, it’s very easy to listen to, and very easy to read. You need to think about, though, what makes you like what it has to say. For instance, think about your own house. If you had to leave your own house, what would you really miss about it?
JASON: Umm...my back yard. All my friends.
LINDA: All right. What’s special about your back yard, friends...
JASON: It’s big, we play football all the time.
LINDA: And what’s special about your friends?
JASON: I don't know, I'd miss 'em, I guess, because we always do stuff together.
LINDA: Like what?
JASON: We always went to, like, Deerfield Fair. We'd always go to fairs together. It's like everybody on our street would always call up somebody else if they're going somewhere. Everybody's like always together. We'd always play football games together, basketball, stuff like that.
LINDA: Okay, and a lot of these things like football, for instance, and Deerfield Fair, all these things take place in the fall, which might have something to do with this pumpkin pie. Maybe this boy bought the pumpkin at the Deerfield Fair, and that's what makes this pumpkin pie really special. Would that make sense, that you could say something about that? Because somehow in a piece of writing, Jason, you've got to figure out, "What is it I want to get across to a reader in this piece of writing?" It's not just the pie, there's got to be a reason for this particular kind of pie, and how it's a piece of the house.
JASON: Uh-huh.

I asked her what she was searching for through her questions and she replied,

I'm searching for...what in this piece of writing matters to him. I'm not sure anything in this piece matters to Jason. He's got an assignment to get a piece of writing in to me...I don't know what his tie to this is, and I'm searching for something that I can get him to tell me about himself. I listen to this pie thing and I don't know a single thing about him. I am searching for him. The trouble is, some of these questions I wish I could have gotten to a lot sooner. I should have said immediately, "What do you like about this piece of writing?" I think I did, but maybe he didn't get to it soon enough. But that's where I start saying, "If you had to leave your own house..." That's a key question for me, and I wish I could have gotten to that a lot sooner. And when I say here a lot of these things like "football, Deerfield Fair," I feel like I'm writing for him.

In the passage, Jason clearly does not want to explore the metaphor of the pie, and Linda felt his "uh-huh" at the end was a brush-off. "He has no idea what I'm talking about," she said. But it is nevertheless a significant and potentially positive series of exchanges because Jason does, for the first time, reveal what he truly values: his backyard, playing with his friends, and football. His description of going to the Deerfield Fair with his friends is his longest turn of the conference. It is the first time he talked about his own life, and the first time he has a conversational, enthusiastic tone of voice. He offers Linda the personally relevant.

But Linda is less patient and more heavy-handed with Jason than she was with Meg. She quickly cuts him off when he can not formulate an immediate answer to her question.
“what do you like about this piece of writing?” effectively interrupting his thought (Johnson, 1993). Note also that although she recognizes the significance of Jason’s comments about his friends and the Deerfield Fair (as she had recognized the significance of Meg’s oral alliteration and under-the-covers imagery), her response to them is much more specific, directive, and focused on product creation rather than idea exploration. Linda pointed out to Meg the beauty of her language, gave general suggestions to work with what she had already written, and shared an empathic personal account of herself “falling into flannel sheets and reading and incredibly good book.” With Jason, Linda lamented, “I’m trying to put suggestions into his head.” She, in essence, begins to write for him—“Maybe this boy bought the pumpkin at the Deerfield Fair, and that’s what makes this pumpkin pie really special”—and then tells him, “There’s got to be a reason for this particular kind of pie, and how it’s a piece of the house.” She prods much harder than she did with Meg. Linda said, “He’s not even listening to me any more because I’m doing all the talking.” Jason has nary a chance to expound for himself about his friends and his fun at the Deerfield Fair.

In the more comfortable backstage area of my own interview with Jason, where both of us knew his answers would not lead to writing, Jason more easily revealed the connection of this piece with his life, describing where he had gotten the idea for it.

Well, we moved from an apartment to a house, so I guess I just like used a house from my house to another house....One of my friends is moving, so I was like, “All right, a house...go to another house. And like the people next door to us moved because their house was too expensive so, yeah, that kind of fit in.

But Linda did not tap into this potentially useful information in the conference and these autobiographical events did not continue to connect Jason emotionally with the piece or commit him to thoughtful revision. His detachment from any real purpose for the piece was evident: “I don’t really think there was a point to get across. Oh, I guess how people feel when they’re moving,” he said.
The conference continued.

LINDA: So, you've got a device, though, already set up for telling us some of this. Do you know what that might be?
JASON: Mmm, by how they're moving and the journal part...
LINDA: Absolutely!
JASON: It gets into it.
LINDA: Terrific! I mean, you could even...
JASON: I could just go on with the journal, saying, like, "I bought this pie that my mom is gonna bake at the Deerfield Fair..."
LINDA: Yeah! I mean, you could say something in this journal entry...
JASON: And I could just put it in there, "Well, we're gonna eat it out in the backyard..."
LINDA: Yeah.
JASON: Just add that in.

At this point Jason picks up on Linda's suggestions and taken co-initiative for creating new ideas for the first time ("I could just go on with the journal...") because it helped him to meet his own goal. Jason was getting what he wanted from the conference: short, simple, neat information from Linda. Then he could "just add on that stuff... Go back to my finished writing part and put all the stuff in and make it a final draft. Get it done."

Linda's praises and suggestions indicated to him where he should add.

The journal, she said that it was a really good part in the story. It started off when it put you right to the subject: they all were moving, and how he puts it away and then he goes to the U-Haul truck. So, if I just added on to that, it made it more detailed to tell the reader more about what's happening at the house.

Jason was successfully meeting his own goal, but Linda was not so happy with herself.

I can hear myself talking in the conference, and I know I want to shut up because there's only so much he can take in. But I still continue talking. . . . I think in my head I keep thinking, "Okay, if I throw a million things out maybe he can grab hold of two." And I wasn't ready to say to him, "I don't know where you're going with this piece, and I'm not sure you want to continue with it." Because I didn't know. I still don't know how confident he is. The only thing that distresses me is I talked-- it would be interesting to see how much--more than he did, but it's pretty clear it was a lot more!

When Jason avoided deeper conversation to protect himself from extensive writing it hindered Linda from formulating an effective approach that might make him feel more
comfortable writing. But he had offered her some openings. Linda, however, did not exploit Jason’s comment about having fun with friend by becoming a sounding board and then asking him to think about its significance, nor did she seem to recognize that he had begun to offer his own writing suggestions. Instead, she continued to write for him.

LINDA: And maybe that would be where...you got it at the Deerfield Fair. These are all the things that you’re gonna miss. And you might even just list all the things that you’re gonna miss so much. And your mom forgets about the pie, everybody else forgets about the pie and they leave it outside, but you want to take a piece of that pie with you. And now it’s got some significance to it—that it’s part of all the friends, the fall, the football...and you’ve already got it set up for yourself. It’s that journal entry, and maybe all you have to do to add to this is put an actual journal entry about Deerfield Fair, football, friends, as if, “This is what I’m gonna miss.” And you might say it as simply as that. “This is what I’m gonna miss.” And tell us if you had to leave your house, what you would miss. Is that possible for you to do?
JASON: Mm-hm.

Linda responded,

I hate it! All I should have said is, “If you had to leave your own house what would you miss,” and left it right there. This should not have been there!...I’ve wasted a ton of time. I said way too much...I’m writing the piece for him, and that’s ridiculous. I should have said, “Leave the pie on the table!”

LINDA: Okay. So what if you use a journal entry to tell us about what you would miss. I mean, this is fiction, but you’re gonna think about what would you miss, and that becomes part of this fiction piece. (writing on Jason’s conference sheet) So, it would be fall, Deerfield Fair...
JASON: Friends.
LINDA: ...friends, what else? Football.
JASON: Sports?
LINDA: Sports. I’ll let you...you want to be as specific as you can. And, the important thing is, when you think of a pumpkin pie, what do you think of? I mean, do you like pumpkin pie?
JASON: (shakes head “No”)
LINDA: Oh, you don’t like pumpkin pie? Oh, so this is really fiction! Um, think about...
JASON: I like apple pie.
LINDA: Okay, let’s make this...how about an apple pie instead? Because you’ve got the apples. And what do you love about apple pie? Let’s do this apple pie, because that would be easier for you. What do you love about apple pie?
JASON: It’s good (laughs).
LINDA: What’s good about it?
JASON: Umm, I like how the apples are sweet.
LINDA: Okay, you’ve got sweet...
JASON: They're juicy.
LINDA: What's it smell like? (writes) “Sweet, juicy...”
JASON: Umm, smells good. Smells like apples.
LINDA: Mmm, I mean, just the aroma of cooked apples...(writes). Okay, all the things that are in that pie are all the things that you want to try and remember, that you put in this journal entry. So you want to set this journal entry up like you were really leaving home. And now you’ve got a reason. Now the reader can think about, “Wow, what would it be like if I left home?” and that apple pie has got some significance to it. Okay? All right, does that make sense to do?

JASON: Yeah!
LINDA: All right. If you get lost, you can just look through some of these comments.
JASON: Okay. So I just change a little bit of it, put like football and....
LINDA: Yeah!
JASON: ...apple pie instead of pumpkin pie.
LINDA: Yeah! And do you know how to add something to this without re-writing the whole thing?
JASON: Yeah, I can just, like, add on in little spots, like, put a line to where it should be.
LINDA: Yep. Or, you could put a little sign. I mean, you might put a star and then write. This would be your journal entry, and you could put the star over here, and this would be the whole journal entry; you’d write about the sights, the sounds, the smells....So you want to think about that. (writes) “Sights, sounds, smells, of fall..., of apples..., and friends. I mean, it might even be things that if you had to leave, what do friends say to each other, what do you play with each other, all of that. Okay?

JASON: Yeah.
LINDA: All right, so you want to work on that.
JASON: Yep!
LINDA: All right. Good job.

Listening to this last passage, Linda mocked herself derisively, groaning, “That was the worst conference I ever heard!” Not only had she overpowered him, it was also outlandishly long. That her suggestions had come from her recognition of things Jason had said were important to him offered her little consolation. She had forced the issue and had not seen him internalize how to exploit his interests. Her suggestions had not resulted in collaboration and co-construction. She wished fervently she had stopped the conference the minute he had mentioned the Deerfield fair; asked him to jot down everything he could about his friends, the fair, and football games, and his street; and then moved on.

This doesn’t feel good to me at all. I would think that the conferences that worked the best are where the kids are talking twice as much as the teacher is, and all you’re doing is really confirming what they say. I’m not being a mirror to Jason at all. I’m feeding him. And he doesn’t pick up, and when I see he doesn’t pick up, then I
should stop the conference! It's not a conference anymore. It's me searching for things to give him to possibly write about, and I could do that a lot easier in a lot quicker time. I think I'm searching so hard I'm not hearing what he's saying.

Linda concluded.

You know what I think? He read the piece, he liked it—he wanted me to say it was a great piece; it was finished. And he could've turned it in for a grade and then thrown it away....I guess in conferences I don't want kids to write writing they're going to throw away! I think that's why I keep talking to them, which is really kind of stupid, because if I don't figure out a way to get them talking sooner, it's not a valuable conference....Unless he's connected to it he's going to write it and throw it away anyway.

She then predicted, "He'll probably change the pumpkin to apple and then still have some kid leaving the house. I'm going to be really curious to see what he's done with this now, after this conference. No wonder teachers have trouble conferencing!"

She was right. Jason added exactly two sentences to story, both derived from Linda's explicit suggestions. His final draft is identical to his first save for the fact that he separated Johnney's journal entry into its own paragraph, gave it a different font from the rest of the piece, and added the two sentences (highlighted below in italics). Although perfunctorily, he had met his goal to add without extensive revision and obeyed what he saw as Linda's directives:

Dear Journal,

Today is August 7, 1986. Today me and my family are leaving this house we have lived in all are lives. I am going to miss playing football, basketball, and soccer in this neighborhood. My mother is making a pie for us for our farewell. She is using apples I won at the Deerfield Fair. We are going to eat it outside on the picnic table in the backyard. Good night journal. Have a safe trip.

Jason included the piece in his portfolio along with this Case History:

This writing came to be when we had that day of all the writers in and we stayed with them the whole day. Well, I had the writer who was in Mr. Nichol's room. Well, one of the things she told us to write was to write a story about why a pumpkin pie was out on the picnic table out in the back yard for a long time. I wrote the story in her class, then me and you had a conference and then we fixed some stuff and then I typed it on my computer. The decisions I made were to add
things I would miss if I were moving. That’s how I felt when I moved from Hampton here to Lee.

Note the stark contrast between this Case History and Meg’s. While Meg had wrested ownership of all conference ideas and had discussed her own extensive thought and writing processes, Jason focuses more on his teachers, explaining his idea came from the visiting writer and fully acknowledging Linda’s conference role in the shaping of the piece. It focuses on plot rather than thought; it is less self-evaluative. He does not portray himself as the one in control the way Meg does.

Another Conference. Two weeks later another conference occurred during the time that students had begun to put together their first portfolios. Among other work, Jason had included two pieces that Linda hadn’t yet seen: a short fiction piece and a myth, “Why Does Rain Fall from the Sky,” which he had actually written in seventh grade. Neither had any accompanying rough drafts but Jason considered his portfolio complete. When I reminded him that Mrs. Rief required students to confer with her, before they wrote final drafts, about any work they planned to put in their portfolios, Jason said, “She won’t know. I’ll type in a couple of mistakes and make a rough draft.”

Unfortunately for him, Linda came over later that period to confer with him and he was found out. Knowing that she would find his seventh grade paper, and trying to head off trouble, he said to Linda, “A teacher looked this over last year.”

“Last year!” exclaimed Linda.

“She said it was fine,” protested Jason.

“Then have her grade you!” What ensued was a conference that was initially contentious, with a visibly grumbly Jason resisting every step of the way:

JASON: I don’t want to read it.
LINDA: All right, then we’re going to...um, what do you like about this piece of writing?
JASON: It’s...good.
LINDA: What’s good about it?
JASON: I like it. I like how it flows.
LINDA: What flows? What works well about it?
JASON: What?
LINDA: What is the plot? Can you describe the plot to me?
JASON: Why rain falls from the sky.
LINDA: Oh. Why does rain fall from the sky?
JASON: You gotta read the story!
LINDA: I did read it. I want you to summarize it for me.
JASON: Why does it?
LINDA: Jason, can you put your knees down and sit up, please?
JASON: Uh... Uh... A kid from a long time ago, he went up to the person of rain and thunder and he got him to rain.
LINDA: All right, why does he go up there to represent the tribe?
JASON: Because... he wanted to. (long pause)
LINDA: But what's the reason that he wants to? Why would he be the one selected to do that?
JASON: Because he's the main character. (pause)
LINDA: Okay. What's this guy's name? Diokles? Why is he not willing to give them rain?
JASON: Because he's a mean old man.
LINDA: All right, where do you say that in here?
JASON: You know he's mean because he doesn't do [uc].
LINDA: Well, I'm not sure... I'm not.... (long pause). You've got to tell us right here, you've got to tell us what kind of man he is.
JASON: Why?
LINDA: You said he's a mean old man. Why is he a mean old man?
JASON: Why is that important?
LINDA: It's important because there's got to be a reason that he won't let them have any rain.
JASON: There doesn't have to be.
LINDA: Yes there does! That's what this story does.
JASON: He could be tired.
LINDA: All right, he's tired... What's he tired from?
JASON: Air sickness. I don't know!
LINDA: Maybe he's sick of making it rain. Because nobody thanks him for the rain. Maybe nobody thanks him for the rain. Okay. Jason. You do have to add that to it.
JASON: Why!? It's like...
LINDA: Jason. All right. You know what? I'm going to tell you, you can't even hand this in to me. Either you talk to me about this and you... you let me tell you something that can be done to this, or you can just put this away and you're gonna have to write two new pieces.
JASON: I already have two.
LINDA: You need five pieces.
JASON: You said four.
LINDA: Five. Five has been there all along.
JASON: No, it hasn't. You said four to five.
LINDA: I think Jason... I'm not going to argue. Either we fix this or you don't hand it in at all. So, would you get a pen so you can start fixing it? (long pause as Jason looks for a pen)

A vicious cycle had formed in which both participants became more and more unwilling to listen to each other. There was a complete lack of rapport. Linda noted the edge she
heard in her voice as she listened to the tape. “I’m not as excited, I’m bored and I’m probably getting that same boredom across to him. I can’t hold on to this piece yet so my tone or stance feels not real receptive to him.” Her lack of connection with Jason led her to assume a role she did not embrace:

I can tell in my tone of voice that I’m kind of being a stinker with him. I’m being a teacher. I’m in charge, and he’s going to do what I want—that’s what I mean by being a stinker. I’m putting my back up, and I am saying, “Hey, I’ll tell you what you need to do. You’re not gonna put this in here and get away with it.” ...I’m being too teacherly, aggressive, and obnoxious.

I’m already becoming frustrated with Jason. I’m already thinking in my head, “Oh, great! Here’s another kid I’m going to spend the whole year trying to get to move. He’s going to take most of my time and he is not going to move.

With her frustration came an unwillingness to listen to Jason carefully. She became more insistent and demanding, causing Jason to close himself off from her. As a result, Linda then adopted what she perceived of as the fallback role of writing instruction: teaching material that was not open to interpretation and thus required much less thought.

She began to re-read Jason’s myth:

**LINDA:** All right. This is really good! You’ve got a really good beginning here. This is the god of rain and thunder. Where does he... All right. (she reads) “He climbed the sacred stairs.” Can you fix that? (pause) This shouldn’t be a capital, it’d be a small “t”: “...the god of Rain and Thunder.” So you put an “of” there.

She continued to read out loud, interjecting, “So you’re missing a ‘y’ there.... all right, capital ‘W’... comma...” She concluded the conference, saying, “All right. Good. You just need those minor corrections. And you need to not throw this draft away. That has to go back with it.” Listening to the tape, Linda reacted,

He’s got me resorting to mechanics. I want to move him with the content and what I’ve resorted to is the mechanics because I think that’s the only thing he can grasp hold of, and that annoys me. I don’t even know why I ask him to fix it. It should just be in there. Leave it as it is. It bores me to even listen to it. I guess I was trying to retrieve the conference by saying, “Okay, maybe I never told him what was good about it. I need to tell him this is a really good beginning.”
The results of the conference were almost identical to those of the first conference. Jason added exactly one line to "Why Does Rain Fall from the Sky"—"He was a mean old man, and sick of making it rain"—which corresponded with a brief note Linda had written on his draft as he had explained who Diokles was.

**What Was the Problem?**

As a student who didn’t like writing or reading, Jason was reluctant to trust Linda or develop the rapport relationship that would lead to conversation about them. Linda said, "When I think about the way he was looking at me, he was sitting kind of sideways to me. The more I talked the more he was sitting sideways. He wasn’t really looking at me." In conference conversation, he tried to hide what really mattered to him. Listening to "The Farewell" conference, Linda remarked,

> It’s the kids like Jason, in trying to find what really matters to them, that make conferencing so hard. Because I can’t seem to make it happen *quickly*. I mean, this [piece] doesn’t matter to him and it doesn’t matter to *me*. And it frustrates me that I spent that amount of time on this with him.

As frustration bred impatience, Linda began to do that which she could not get him to do:

> Talking and writing are thinking. *I’m* doing the writing for him, *I’m* doing the thinking for him. That’s what makes it not a good conference to me. *I’m* doing all the wondering and he’s not. He’s being the receiver. And he’s not even receiving any more. You shut it off when it’s not you doing the thinking.

It wasn’t until she had listened to the tape of the conference that Linda understood the implications of her more forceful approach:

> I didn’t quite get the connection that the more I talked the more I was pushing him away, because I think I was giving him *way* too much to consider. I was trying to get him back into the conversation, but I was still doing all of the thinking. I should have been phrasing things like, "Well, tell me about...." And I wasn’t....I gave him no *option*. I just kept giving him options of saying, "Uh-huh," because the way I phrased everything, that’s all he *could* answer. I wasn’t phrasing it so he could do the talking.

I asked Linda, "Why do you think teachers do that?" She replied,
I think I do it because I feel this *guilt* that I see something that holds potential in the writing, and if the kid doesn’t get it right away I feel like I’m not teaching unless I cover all bases and tell them what it is I see. I do that at the beginning of the year all the time....You see all the names that are on the board and you know that you’ve got to get to twenty other conferences, and you go, “All right, I can’t just sit here and just smile at him and say, ‘Tell me more about this,’ when he doesn’t say anything!” So I jump in after *two* seconds of silence with, “What if...” or “Have you thought about....” I think I do it in the name of speed, in the name of guilt, and in the name of wanting them to...do better in the writing. Even if they may not be ready for it yet. I think that’s why I do it. And maybe that’s why other teachers do it, too.

Adding to the complexity of her decision to push so long and so hard, Linda said she had, in fact, heard a tiny glimmer of interest from Jason in the way he initially read, especially in the first conference.

The only reason like I felt like I had to do that was maybe there was something that was a layer underneath the pie that he *really* wanted to be writing about....What I find at the beginning of the year in first draft writing [is] you write and write and write and usually the writing doesn’t really even start until the last sentence, or there’s something hidden in this piece.

Another motivation she had for continuing the first conference when she should have stopped it had to do with building rapport and a productive relationship with a student whom she did not yet know:

I liked the inflections in his voice. He seemed to like what he he’d written. I can’t remember if this was my very first conference with him, but certainly part of it is establishing some kind of rapport with him. I don’t want to have him read the piece to me and immediately go, “So! You talked about this, this, and this. If you had to talk about the one thing, what might it be?” and just dive in. Because I think he would be able to sense in my voice immediately that I didn’t like what he had written. So I was trying to focus on what he *had* written, just to establish some kind rapport with him so that he knew that I at least liked what he had down the first time. I don’t know if he’s never written a sentence before and this is the first time he’s written two full pages. But his voice and his face seemed to tell me he really liked this piece of writing, so I certainly couldn’t tell him, “What the heck? Is this another pie piece? So what’s with the pie, because I didn’t quite understand it.” So part of it was getting him comfortable with me, and really trying to find something that I could hold on to. to get him to talk more about.
But note that if Linda was trying to develop rapport in this early conference, she did it by focusing on writing, the one thing Jason disliked most. Here her agenda—her enthusiasm for writing—dominated his. She did not know him well.

I didn’t know him well enough and it just was his voice was the cue to me that he really liked this piece of writing. I don’t even know what his history as a writer is. I don’t know if that’s the first piece he’s ever written. I don’t know if that’s the most he’s ever written. I’m not sure if he’s hated writing before and he’s so proud of this because he got all these words down on paper. I do know he’s kind of young, and I’ve heard from other teachers that he struggles, so I guess I’m trying to make him feel good about what he’s done, but at the same time trying to move him forward. But he may not be ready to move, yet.

But moreover, she did not appear to listen to him as carefully as she did with almost all other students to find out more about him. This year, Jason was one of those students whom she liked but, because of his disdain for language arts, she couldn’t get close to. With Jason, who put Linda in an attitudinal limbo between personal regard and professional frustration, her responses became forced:

I did like him, which is probably why I worked harder with him than I should have, because I was way too patient with him in the conferences. I should have known in the conferences that they weren’t going anywhere and just let the writing go. I became possessed, or obsessed, with wanting his writing to get better, and he wasn’t ready to make the writing better. I should have just accepted the fact that he wrote something in the first place despite the fact he hated writing.

Linda was patient with Jason in regard to time spent; her conferences with him were usually longer than with others. But in reading the above transcripts Linda surmised she had not been patient enough in trying to learn about him and his interests outside the context of literacy instruction. Her ambivalent feelings about him—her detachment created by his aversion to her passions—may have discouraged her from trying to listen harder to him. She admitted, “I knew nothing and still know nothing about Jason personally, other than the way he behaved in class.” Only through knowing students well, she said, did she develop a lot more patience and understanding for them.
What Is the Solution?

When working with students who are not committed to the academic agenda, helping them move forward academically is the ultimate goal, but Jason’s conferences suggest it may not be the immediate one. While Linda tried to sustain a productive conference performance with Jason, its script still revolved around academic writing. Jason, feeling ill-suited to his role, usually remained unresponsive. So how might have Linda helped Jason fit into his role as a language arts student?

Linda might have taken a longer-term view of Jason’s situation and also recognized his desire for respect as situated outside the domain of his academic performance. Just as she had spent two months at the beginning of the year teaching students how to organize, she might have had to prepare Jason—and herself—to interact with one another inquisitively and respectfully outside the academic venue before his acceptance of the academic could take hold. With Linda’s style of teaching, her interpersonal relationship with students seems as important as the academic instruction, and more so with reluctant readers and writers. That she was more emotionally ambivalent about students like Jason simply meant that she had to make her rapport-building more conscious: she had to search more deliberately for what she could value about him and his interests.

Her responsibility in their relationship was to learn to appreciate Jason, no matter how difficult. She said,

Even if I knew nothing about him outside of school, [I should have said] to him constantly, “Jason, you have incredible energy and I wish I had half the energy you do,” so that he began to see, “Yeah, okay, that’s all right. She’s not going to yell at me because I’m bouncing around.

The work of this rapport-building is front loaded and it may not show results until much later in the year, but once it occurs learning may be exponentially greater.

In “The Farewell” and other pieces he wrote, Jason’s revisions all came from those brief moments in the conferences where Jason opened up and shared his interests. If Linda had more consciously addressed her ambivalent attitude toward Jason, abandoned her fervent
pulls to immediately improve the piece, tried harder to engage him in “a good healthy chat,” and only focused on his flashes of empathy and enthusiasm (as she had been able to do with the already receptive Meg) she may have distilled, highlighted, and better exploited the shorter academic lessons Jason was willing to receive. His performance in the long run may have benefited; he may have been more willing to accept eventually Linda’s prods, and the texts he began to revise may have demonstrated a more earnest commitment to his life and writing growth.

Ted: Rapport and Success Built on the Student’s Academic Focus

Linda’s conference with Ted depicts a rapport relationship built primarily on academics—on the cognitive end of the affective continuum. Ted’s confidence in his abilities and his commitment to his work allowed Linda and him to attend to his text almost exclusively. He viewed Linda’s role narrowly, as purely academic, and he was ready to discuss writing without taking the preliminary step of developing a more personal relationship. The academic trust and respect the two shared demonstrated that if the student’s and teacher’s academic goals are compatible and the student is confident in his own abilities to meet those goals, a more emotionally-based relationship can be peripheral: while it was important for most students, it was not for all. Ted’s attitude also ensured that Linda could make some tactical conference errors that might undermine the integrity of the conference relationship with another student.

While Jason was an ever-present force in the class, Ted’s was less obtrusive. I found him utterly bright and quite fascinating to talk to, but he went about his business quietly, efficiently, and well. He was an excellent student and had learned how to balance his many extracurriculars with his schoolwork.

Ted considered himself somewhat shy in larger groups, but he had an air of self confidence about him. He was extremely polite and self-effacing. One classmate remarked that he was the only person in class she couldn’t imagine swearing. He was popular with his classmates—one of those students who didn’t seem to hang out with a particular clique.
or “in” group but rather was looked upon by all groups as a friendly, fun, and decent person. He was also a star athlete: one of the best cross country runners in the school and recognized for his soccer skills.

His loves revolved around his family, sports, and doing well in school. but he also loved many of life’s smaller pleasures, including “taking hot showers,” “hitting the snooze button on the alarm clock,” and “waking to the smell of pancakes.” He hated sports-related disappointments, like “rounding the last curve in a race (only it’s not the last curve)”; school problems like making up work after being absent, forgetting homework, and “not getting the grades you feel you deserve”; and his (self-perceived) absent-mindedness. He also showed a whimsical side. He hated “finding coconut inside a good looking Halloween candy” and wondered “why sweat smells bad.” His major science experiment for the year was finding the effect of milk on different cereals’ sogginess.

**Ted’s View of Himself as a Language Arts Student**

Ted had one love, in particular:

> Quite simply, I love to read; no ifs, ands, or buts. I can read anytime, anywhere as long as I have a good book. I can also read fast and still get a good grasp of the story unless I’m reading a textbook. My fast style bombs, however, when applied to textbooks and I’ll need to work on becoming more proficient as a textbook reader.

However, disregard textbooks and reading is perfect. Not only is reading exciting, it has helped me tremendously. Before I read about the Holocaust I had been told about it. But thanks to books I was able to get a grasp of how terrible the Holocaust truly was. I’m not sure about the entertainment gained from those books but I’m so much wiser because of them.

Ted estimated he had read over seventy books during the school year and said he liked books with plot twists and surprise endings. He described himself as a reader and writer:

> I like to write letters to friends, pieces to express what I feel, or things [about] how I’m thinking on a certain point. When we read outside of school, I read basically to pass time. I like fantasy books, mostly medieval times, and I read for fun. And [I] find out by reading and writing your basic use of the English language is increased.

...I always liked reading. In earlier grades writing wasn’t really as fun. You always did these assigned projects, usually like, “Write about your family,” and “Okay, I have a mom and a dad and some brothers and no sisters and a cat.”
More than either Meg or Jason, at the beginning of the year Ted had an acute awareness of the influence his reading had on his writing. "Many, many of my ideas are spawned from books," he wrote, "This year in particular I've noticed more description in what I read and what I write." He said that by reading other authors he could pick out their styles and try them in his own writing.

Ted believed a good writer was good at revision. He said, "I like to read my piece and make changes 'til I like it." In the first quarter he described two things to which a writer had to attend to be good:

The first is the content. Does the story affect you? Is the writer arranging the words with meaning? What do you get out of the story? If any of these are positive or intentionally negative, the writer is doing good. The second is mechanics. Can you read the story easily and understand it?

Ted seemed to have more of a sophisticated sense of the technical qualities of good writing than did Meg or Jason. Later, his thinking evolved to include what he had learned to do to improve: "I have to write what I want to write. I start writing and then bend it to fit the requirements. If I write any other way it just doesn't sound like I mean it, my writing feels corny." In June he gave a reflective review of his year-long work:

Developing plots, characters and working on the emotions are all growing strengths in my writing. However, I can't write whole stories without weak "joining" scenes. This is the one area I'd like to improve most. I especially admire how Terry Brooks writes joining scenes because I notice some authors over-elaborate on these in-between parts and make the story boring.

Over-describing is probably my main weakness, though. In several pieces I confused the reader by over-describing something better left to a few description words. This can really cut down on the satisfaction a reader gets, trust me. I'm not the only writer with this problem. In contrast, if the author gets the description properly woven throughout the story, it greatly enhances the story as yeast enhances bread (I'm hungry in case you're wondering about that analogy).

All great writers can describe something for you so you can visualize and enjoy the writing. This is what I seek to do with my writing, however, as I mentioned earlier, the temptation is strong to over-describe.

Most of his writing ideas, "just sorta hit me when I think and brainstorm," but he also wrote, "I have a harder time with making [journal entries], just things to write. Writing is
hard for me unless I have an idea and begin to write....” He was somewhat concerned with his spelling and mechanics, but was confident in his vocabulary.

I have the advantage of a large vocabulary and my mind helps to fill in the blanks when I read. Also, I don’t just look for words, I like to skim the book and have it speak to me. If I pay too much attention to the words their meaning eludes me, and the book becomes a collection of words, not a whole new world for me.

Ted’s Performance as a Language Arts Student

Ted focused serious attention on the academic tasks of language arts. Where both Meg’s and Jason’s portfolios included many family pictures and a variety of artifacts devoted to their out-of-school lives, Ted’s final portfolio consisted almost exclusively of his writing and school work. He included eight completed drafts of writing in a “Finished Writing” section (genres included realistic fiction, science fiction, a letter/essay, stories and poems written in Spanish, two science reports, and a Social Studies fact sheet). Another section, “Rough Draft Writing,” included thirteen drafts in a wide variety of genres including a political thriller, a play, a futuristic fantasy, and a medieval fantasy. His other sections were also devoted to schoolwork: “Ideas for Writing,” “Reading” (which contained a list of favorite books, a book review he had written, and a letter to Donald Graves critiquing a book manuscript), and “Learning” (where he compiled of tests and homework from other classes). Ted did examine his social life in his journal, but his representation of himself in his portfolio reveals that his school life was an integral part of his overall self-view. He was someone who enjoyed school and took it seriously.

Ted did not use his journal writing as a direct source of draft material, but rather as a place for reflective analysis about human nature, critical commentary on the books that strongly affected him, and a place to practice good description. His style and genre choices were influenced more by the books he read than by his personal accounts evoked through quick-writes; none of his portfolio pieces were autobiographical. Most of his pieces contained characters who were clearly on one end or the other of the moral spectrum. The
battle between good and evil, a common theme in his fantasy and science fiction reading, dominated his writing.

While his journal writing didn't offer him subjects or plots for further drafting, it seemed to reflect the tone and message of his final pieces. His journal depicted his interest in the moral choices of man. The third quarter unit on human rights and the Holocaust was a perfect venue for him to ponder these issues. Responding to Elie Wiesel's *Night* he wrote,

I can't even begin to describe some of the horror that filled me when reading this. What, why, and how could these things happen? Sons BEATING their fathers to death for a fistful of bread? And people on the outside throwing in more bread because they enjoy it? What have we come to? Sons leaving their fathers behind because "They were too much bother." Too much bother?! This book connects where we can visualize, too much so. Can any of us visualize beating our father to death for a handful of bread? I find myself horrified as Elie desperately clings to his father, saving him from certain doom time after time, and then, so close to the end his father dies.

Through the heroes and villains he created in his own writing, Ted seemed to try to come to terms with human nature—trying to find neat categories for good and evil actions. An excerpt from his fantasy story, "Hobo," illustrates two characters in typical moral conflict:

It was always this way with his magic.

It all started when he was a boy. He and his cousin Rand. Only them. They were the only ones with it and Rand didn’t like that. Rand was always the popular one, using his skills to impress friends and always for his own benefit, he never realized the drawback and now it was too late for him. The magic had converted his mind and amplified what he used his magic for, creating the new creature. Bob had known it from the start, as he too tried to develop the skill that had been infused in him at birth and felt when the magic took advantage of his hatred, his anger. He experimented further and found the joy, the light, the flying excitement of using the magic for helping, to strengthen, and as he did so his will to do so increased, making him all the stronger, and causing problems.

As Bob grew in strength and stature, Rand sunk into jealousy, people grew afraid of the cold cloak that covered him, his magic had overcome him, infusing him with an unquenchable thirst for power and a deadly hatred for his cousin, Bob Hobokin.
While Ted met his goal to write in genres other than fantasy, most of his pieces still had some sort of moral struggle between the characters.

Ted's View of Language Arts Class

Ted said of language arts class, "I like it. We don't seem to focus on proper English. More, we get to practice and learn for ourselves, which I think helps because practice makes perfect." By "proper" English, Ted meant, "Just learning the right use of verbs, when to use this, when to use that, how you should structure your sentences."

In describing what he liked best about the class, he recognized one of the things Jason liked least about it.

I really like the free choice. You get to do what you want and when you're doing something that you like to do and want to do it's a lot better piece of writing, because it's what you think, what you want to write about and something else is a lot harder to come up with as good of a piece.

I asked him, "Do you think other students might be kind of stymied by that free choice?"

Well, if you really don't like reading and writing, I suppose there's not a lot you can do in this class because basically we read and write, which could lead to talking or not doing the assignments. But there's got to be some book somewhere or something you want to write about. It's just so broad of a world....

Ted's independence, confidence, and self-motivation invited the freedom Jason did not want.

Ted noted that most of the response to books came in the form of journal writing. He felt the class could be improved if the class had more formal discussions about books. He thought it would be a good way to get in touch with others in the class who had similar tastes in books. He saw some benefit from the student talk that occurred at tables: "When you're writing, you kind of don't know where to go or might not be sure how you get to some place. You ask some people, they're willing to respond back. We do seem to have a
friendly class this year.” But his answer was more qualified than others. He drew a sharper distinction between social and academic.

TED: There’s helpful talking and non-helpful talking. When you read your pieces and you talk to each other about your piece or recommend ideas, there’s a lot of helpful things that you can get, or just plain discussing books sometimes give you an idea on more things to write. But if you’re, say, discussing last night’s football game and who’s going to win, there are probably more productive things you could be doing.

DOUG: Have you ever found times when you’re talking about something social, like a football game, and suddenly you’ve figured out a way to use it in your writing?

TED: Yeah. Like I mentioned before, say [if] somebody was describing something they did, like an embarrassing moment or something. You think of an embarrassing moment for yourself. You write about that. You have a piece. But probably the majority of the time, if it’s not focused on your writing, you’re not going to just come up with a brainstorm. You’ll be more engrossed in the conversation than the writing aspect of it.

DOUG: Do you see that as a big problem if you spend a lot of time engrossed in non-academic conversation?

TED: Well, if you did, I can see where it would be a problem, but I really don’t think that we do. We spend most of our time reading, writing: doing what we’re supposed to.

What students were “supposed to” do—read and write—was clear and separate from social talk in Ted’s mind. Social exchanges, if handled carefully, might inform academic work, but more often than not they diverted attention from the real work at hand.

Ted’s View of Linda

Ted liked Linda’s style:

She seems to give you a lot more freedom and stuff than some teachers do. We haven’t had any tests or anything—quizzes type of thing—which we’ve had in other LA classes. She’s got a lot of books. She seems to have us respond a lot more than she telling us what to do.

In contrast to Meg’s emphasis on the importance of Linda’s friendliness to her work, Ted didn’t mention the importance of the personal aspects of their relationship. I asked him once if he saw any academic value in her more social interactions with students. He struggled for an answer, finally joking, “She’s good at recommending sports teams! I don’t know.” He then immediately turned his attention back to academics:
She’s good at conferences. [They] really help as a good experience in telling you where you can go and what to do....Basically, you read the piece to her and she tells you what she thinks could be better, and you decide if you like it or not. You change it.

Conferences gave Ted access to Linda’s academic insight. But, as with other confident writers, he also felt comfortable rejecting her suggestions if they contradicted his own visions:

I feel it’s still your piece of writing. She’s making suggestions about what she thinks would be good and if you don’t think it’s good, [you] see if you can maybe incorporate it a different way....

I kind of think it’s basically the way she talks to you. It’s not like, “Oh, you should do this,” or, “It’d be better if you did this.” It’s just like [a] “What if you tried this?” type of thing. Then you respond to her, saying, “No, I don’t think that’ll work,” and she says, “Okay, don’t do it.”

Ted’s only criticism of Linda’s conferences was a familiar one.

She doesn’t have a lot of time, and a lot of the [response] writing she does overnight. It’s a lot easier when she actually tells you than when she writes on your paper. I think that’s just a limit of there’s a lot of kids in our class and she needs to get around to everybody.

Describing Linda as a listener seemed initially difficult for Ted, perhaps because the definition of listening seemed obvious to him. It was not cluttered with the complexities of social relationship building, but was a simple tool for getting academic needs met.

How do you describe a listener? You listen to what the person says and you offer your input into what they say, maybe your opinions and stuff. She doesn’t seem to be discourteous or anything. She listens to you while you get across what you need to get across.

To Ted, listening was not necessarily a strategy where the teacher provided something to the student. Instead, he saw Linda the way she wanted to be seen: as the sounding board where students could express and listen to themselves. Ted was more concerned with being able to express himself with the aid of Linda rather than being told what to do. He was more concerned with what he was saying and thinking than he was in her literal
response. When Linda did respond with her own opinions, he saw her as thoughtful and full of unique ideas, someone who offered him new visions and perspectives but did not force them upon him.

I’m not sure if she’s trying to teach you something, but sometimes she comes up with different things than you were looking for. Like, if you were trying to see what was wrong with this, she might say she likes this and find something wrong with this that you thought was fine. But she doesn’t really seem to have an agenda like, “Oh, I want him to have better description,” and then, no matter what you say, she says, “Oh, you need better description.”

You might just kind of write something in because it’s fun to write, but it might not really go well with the story. It may be nice on its own, but it might not fit into the story, and she’ll tell you that. And, [when I] re-read it, I usually do pick up what she’s saying, actually.

Ted’s confidence in his writing and his view of Linda’s role made it easy for Linda. His implicit message to her was, “Help me examine my own writing for myself in a fresh way and let me get to work.” He simply wanted thoughtful input:

[Mrs. Rief] does listen. Input is generally basically what you need. You ask her, “I don’t know what I’m trying to do with this,” and she might recommend something like in my Gestapo piece. It kind of ended and she wanted me to bring it up to the future. She offered me several ideas on how I might try to do that, and it worked.

Ted also valued Linda’s sharing of her journal quick-writes:

It basically seems informative so you get an idea. Sometimes the questions seem sort of vague, like, “Write what this makes you feel.” Then she gives you an example. And it’s always easier to have something to kind of springboard off of—to have some place you’re trying to get to so you know how to get there instead of just kind of bushwhacking.

He appreciated that Linda did assignments along with students because it taught her which assignments were worthwhile and which were not, but Linda’s actual process of reading and writing while in class did not seem to serve as a model to Ted, perhaps because he was already prepared and willing to write. He said he didn’t usually notice her as she read and wrote. “I’m usually kind of in the thing writing. But, yeah, I suppose.”
As we shall see, for this student who was already “kind of in the thing writing,” a good conference relationship was easy to maintain because he viewed Linda as an academic source of new and important ideas for the text.

The Conference

This conference occurred in March. Many students were working on pieces that were influenced by their readings and discussions of the Holocaust. Linda had also given the whole class an assignment to create an “art square” that depicted some sort of message they had learned from their Holocaust reading. Ted requested a conference. As Linda approached him I followed behind, and she began by making a joke about my presence.

LINDA: (referring to Doug) We come in pairs.
TED: Teachers in general or...
LINDA: (and Doug laugh) Well, we need...
DOUG: We need to stick together, here, you know?
LINDA: ...supportive help. Right. Pretty scary, you know, teaching eighth graders.
TED: Just read it?

Ted’s response to our playful social introduction exemplified his focus on the academic. He was prepared to dive right into the work and responded to our banter with an anticipatory, “Just read it?” Linda immediately refocused and began the conference in earnest.

LINDA: Yeah, why don’t you just read it to me. How can I help you with it, though? What are some things that...
TED: Well, I decided to write to the Gestapo instead of to the other [uc] and I’m basically wondering if I’ve covered what I need to cover to make my point. Because I don’t want to overdo the point.
LINDA: Yeah.

Ted, comfortable with conferring, articulated a clear and specific concern. Linda noted,

That’s what I’m going to listen for. He said two things: he’s “wondering if I’ve covered what I need to cover”—is there enough here?—and also, “[I] don’t want to overdo the point.” So, those are two opposite things. “Enough or too much?”
In our interview, Ted elaborated on what he had expected from the conference:

I want to cover what happened, but cover it so that I can write my piece and get my point across to the reader [about] what I was thinking. And if I just stick too [much] “This is bad” type of stuff in, you kind of miss what I’m trying to say....I wasn’t sure if I covered what I wanted to cover—if I was focused too much in one area about things they were doing, or if I really covered the whole activity and a little-bit-of-everything type of thing. And I was looking for suggestions.

In the conference, Ted read his draft:

To the Gestapo

I’ve got a few questions I’d like to ask you. And I’d really like to know, why? And I really want to know if you can answer that.

So why did you start the Holocaust anyway? To create the “Master Race” you said. What made you the master race anyway? The fact you can stomach kicking helpless old men. The fact you enjoy gunning down innocent children, or maybe it was how efficient you were. How efficiently you could deprive Jews of everything they stood for. You said they were less than human, well I suppose they were after you deprived them of food, making them weak and dependent, deprived them of hope, making them unwilling to resist you, and deprived them of family, of love and support. Who could be human with these conditions?

Yes you truly had “Mastered” the art of abusing people. Oh, I’m forgetting, how did you say this helped to create your “Master Race”? You claim the Jews were unsuperior and couldn’t fit in, yet you still treated other groups this way. All of this so only the “Master Race” would survive, some master race. We all can’t wait to be part of this, so we too can throw people from their homes, separate families and boost our ego by hitting the hand that feeds us. Can you tell me what people saw in you, why people were proud of you, and why this was necessary? Did you really believe that you could solve the world’s problems like this?”

TED: And I sign it...
LINDA: Good. Wow. I love everything you’ve got so far. I mean, it should make somebody feel pretty guilty and pretty rotten.

Listening to the tape, Linda said she had been confused about how to respond to Ted’s stated need:

I’m really not sure what the points that he needs to cover are—if he’s got not enough of them or too much of them. I guess I’m trying to listen to see if he’s answered his own questions, and I’m not sure that’s what I was listening for at the time. I think “coverage” [means] he’s just trying to say, “Did I hit the right questions?”...I think I was still groping when I started to talk to him about what was it I should say to him.
However, Linda's response had already helped Ted. He now knew that his writing had achieved one of its purposes. He noted,

She liked it. And she told me why she liked it—what I had accomplished in this piece—and basically in my next line I'm responding that, yes, that was a goal and I did accomplish one of the things I was thinking:

**TED:** I think that was a goal.

**LINDA:** That was one of my problems; I wasn't really sure how I could, like, bring it to a close. I like what I've got, but I'm not really sure how I'm going to tie it all together.

**TED:** Yeah.

**LINDA:** What are you thinking might...

**TED:** That was one of my problems; I wasn't really sure how I could, like, bring it to a close. I like what I've got, but I'm not really sure how I'm going to tie it all together.

**LINDA:** Right. I love the repetition that you used because it just strengthens what they did over and over again. It makes me hurt, listening to what you've said they did. I'm wondering if somehow if you could tie it together by asking them questions as if they may still be around? There are people still...not really hiding. I mean, people know they're former Nazis. They're living in Canada. There are many living in the U.S. I wonder if you can tie it together by asking those older people some questions on, "Where are you now? How comfortable are you in your bed at night?" Do you sleep well?"

**TED:** "How do you live with it?"

**LINDA:** "Do you sleep well with the lights out?" And tie it together by bringing it to the present. I mean, you might just try that. And just leave it with those questions, because nobody can answer them. And the only people who could would be somebody who did that.

**DAVID:** (sitting at Ted's table) But most of them are dead.

This is an important set of turns for a couple of reasons. First, Ted had given a specific request to Linda to look for overkill, but Linda found a different problem with the piece: it is somehow not resolved or "tied together." Her response to Ted suggests that she had found something vaguely ludicrous about writing a letter to the Gestapo, something too disassociated with the here and now. To Linda's ear it made it the piece sound more like an exercise, and her suggestion tried to make the purpose of the letter more realistic—perhaps Ted could address it to someone who was still alive. In our interview she commented,

*We know historically this is such a horrific time, and I want the kids to write something that has meaning for them, but if you're writing to somebody that doesn't exist any more it's almost like what's the point? It's like saying, "Dear*
Hitler....” But...somewhere up here he talked about the guilt. (reads her words in the transcript) “It should make somebody feel pretty guilty and pretty rotten.” I think when I first said that, that’s where it popped into my head that there are some people who are still alive, who no one has found. They’ve been in hiding themselves in a way, hiding their histories. I think that’s what I was trying to get Ted to see: “What if you wrote to somebody that...” His writing could leave an impression on somebody. I’m trying to help him find who that somebody is, that it’s still, today.

Offering a suggestion not directly related to Ted’s initial concern may have been a risky move. Linda noted it was “more what I perceived as the problem, not what he perceived.” But his confidence and sense of ownership of his writing appeared to help him recognize its value. In fact, he comments that he had recognized that same problem. Linda had redirected the focus of the text analysis, but Ted’s response that he, too, wasn’t sure how to bring it to a close indicates they were still operating in syncopation. Ted also thought Linda’s initial praise of what she thought worked with the piece had helped his receptivity:

TED: When you write like a piece like that, you’re not really sure about it at first. You want to have some positive reaction to know that [it was okay].
DOUG: So, then she immediately goes into a problem or discomfort she has with it: “I’m standing on the edge of a cliff. I don’t know how you want to tie it together.” What did that say to you?
TED: That makes sense. I’d agree with that. It ends. I mean, it ends like, “All right, that’s not going anywhere.” But she helps me keep it flowing. The way it ends it just kind of trails off instead of actually coming to a close. I’d agree with her on that, that it does sort of trail off.
DOUG: So, although you had asked her to look for something else, you recognized exactly what she was saying as soon as she said this thing.
TED: Yeah. I might have. It’s a possibility that I could have picked it up if I re-read it several times, but she definitely helped make sure that I noticed that, so I know what I’m supposed to do.

This was one conference relationship where the student wanted to hear exactly what the teacher thought. Ted was getting what he expected from Linda. He considered her suggestions as vital to his thought process:

She recommended to bring it to the present, which at the time I wasn’t [ready to do]. I’d have a hard time just bringing it to the present if she said, “Oh, bring it to the present,” and went off and walked. I mean, “Present? What do you mean present?” By elaborating on what they did, how people fled to Canada, how they are living in the U.S., too, and how some of them are still alive, then I know what
I'm trying to do. I'm trying to almost aim it at them—their life up until now, and how they live....

Originally I wasn't sure if I liked that [suggestion]. I kind of liked how [the piece] ended: "Did you really believe you could solve the world’s problems like that?" But I tried writing it, because there was some time left in the period and it was kind of dull. I liked how it was sounding so I finished it up, and then I thought it sounded better than before, so I kept it.

This was the same type of collaboration that occurred in Meg’s conference. Linda influenced the text, but Ted retained control over which decisions to make. The retention of ownership was dependent upon Ted’s attitude and current ability to analyze Linda’s suggestions before using or rejecting them. Linda could make this same type of suggestions to another student and it might compromise the balance of the co-construction. The implication: the teacher might first listen for the student’s attitude and understanding before she responds in a given way. If she learns that the student is not ready for independent decision-making, she steps back to develop the proper attitude through rapport-building before she attends to the text.

The passage also gives insight into Linda’s thinking process during a conference. Initially unsure how to respond to Ted’s text—what advice might help him move the piece forward—she began to talk as a way to think. But she told me that as soon as she said, "It should make somebody feel pretty guilty..." she suddenly clarified a response. Only by talking out loud did she discover what she knew, the same way that a writer has to write to discover what it is he knows. She orally composed a subsequent response by first listening to her initial response.

The conference continued. Linda responded to Ted’s table-mate, David, who had said that most Nazi’s were dead.

LINDA: Well, most of them are, but there are a lot of people living. Matter of fact, on the news two or three weeks ago, they discovered a man in Canada who was one of the really top Gestapo, and he’s living in a complex with Jews who survived the concentration camps! Matter of fact, I’ve got the videotape. I probably should show it to you guys. Somebody videotaped out of the news for me. But maybe end with those questions so that we know that these people are all not dead. What you’ve done is great, so far, Ted. But it just needs something to...
TED: ...to bring it to an end.
LINDA: ...to bring it to a close.
TED: Okay.
LINDA: And I don't mean that it is brought to a close, because it may never be brought to a close, but it's at least brought to the present, which would bring it to a close.

Note that that as Linda said, "But it just needs something to..." Ted cut her off. He told me that he was trying to end the conference.

TED: Well, I was kind of ready to do something, you know. I had an idea and I wanted to work on it before I lost the idea!
DOUG: Right. So you wanted her to leave.
TED: (laughs) I knew what I was going to do, yeah.

Yet, surprisingly, Linda continued on.

LINDA: How about your art square?
TED: It's coming. Um...
LINDA: Yeah, that's a really good piece.
TED: Yeah.
LINDA: All right, let's see what...(pause as she looks at his art square draft).
TED: I had a hard time drawing. I know what I want to draw, but I'm having a hard time drawing it. Lately I've been trying to...
LINDA: What do you want to draw?
TED: Well, I wanted to have, like, basically the prison walls being made up of prejudice that was against the Jews. Our prejudice was what was really...
LINDA: Yeah. You mean...
TED: ...against them instead of...
LINDA: ...made up of the words "prejudice"?
TED: Yeah. Well, not the words "prejudice," but, like, the thoughts, the sayings, the...
LINDA: Oh! And have the walls have all those squares--have all those things on them. Yep. That would work really well.

Ted had much less command of his art square than he did his letter. He had not chosen to confer with Linda about it, and his explanation of his need was much more vague.

Linda's response strategy was different, too. After praising his letter, she had explained what she felt was missing and then offered a corrective suggestion. But here she asked Ted two questions: "What do you want to draw" and "You mean made up of the words 'prejudice'?" This is a telling example of how the student's attitude and preparedness affect the tone and structure of the conference. In the first conference, Ted conveyed clearly what
he was trying to do, so Linda could launch right into suggestions. Here, he can’t, so Linda must ask questions to orient herself and make him think. Linda’s orienting questions often indicated that a student had not yet conceptualized or articulated his or her writing needs.

Ted, for his part, recognized that the piece was not what he wanted it to be and, in fact, was not something on which he particularly wanted to work:

TED: I was really frustrated with the art square. I have a better time writing what I want to than drawing what I want to say. I mean, I had the idea, it just wasn’t really coming on. I was having fun working on the other piece, and the art square is just kind of like an assignment I was trying to fulfill. It wasn’t coming out right, so I was kind of, “Oh, yeah. The art square.”

DOUG: So did it frustrate you that you couldn’t get right to your writing then?
TED: No (laughs). She’s a teacher and I’ve lived with worse (laughs).

The conference continued, with Ted responding to Linda’s comment that his drawing concept, as she perceived it, would “work really well.”

TED: Except I was basically just having trouble [uc].
LINDA: It’s almost you have to build them. Yeah.
TED: ‘Cause I want to portray the fact that they were holding the people in. I also was trying to have, like, some of, like, Allies, like, almost opening the prison and, like, through the wall of prejudice to...
LINDA: Right. Well, how about if you build big, almost like cinderblock squares? And, if in every single block square there were just different sentences of things that were done against them. I mean, that’s gonna take some time, but instead of bricks, make it bigger, but it looks like cinder blocks. Maybe that would work. And...(pause) you know what? It doesn’t even have to be the real thing. What if it looked like the walls were made up of gravestones? You know how they used Jews’ gravestones to build roads, and they walked on them. It was just the ultimate insult...
TED: Yeah.
LINDA: ...in the camps. But maybe these bricks resemble gravestones, and you have different things that were done, different quotes that you pull from places, on those gravestones. I don’t know. That might...

At this point Linda started to offer suggestions in much the same way she offered them to Jason—she had formulated an idea that was interesting to her, and now began to dominate the conversation by explaining it in detail. Listening to the tape, Linda said, This conference is going badly. I’m doing more talking that he is and he is just going, “Mm, yeah, mm.” And when they do that, that’s a hint: get the heck out of
there! And let them either abandon or redo it or figure something out. Because I’m not helping him.

The pattern indicated by this conference and Jason’s conferences is that when Linda sensed students were unsure of what to do next, she sometimes pushed too hard and began to take over the writing for them.

However, the attitude behind Ted’s “yeah” was much different than that behind Jason’s “yeah”s. Ted was still invested in his piece, whereas Jason had not been. Ted’s “yeah” was a back-channel response of non-commitment while he carefully pondered the implications of her suggestion. It gave him time to continue thinking:

I was acknowledging what she said, but it’s kind of hard to draw a gravestone as a floor piece. I mean, I picture gravestones as just a circular hunk of granite or whatever rock they use, with the “RIP” written across the top and stuff about them. I was having a hard time picturing how I was going to stick that into my picture....I was having a hard enough time drawing my original idea. I wanted to make sure I had something okay at first, before then.

The conference was going badly in that Linda’s suggestions were arising more from her agenda than from Ted’s, but this conference demonstrates that the attitude of the student sometimes makes conferences almost foolproof. With Ted the confident writer, Linda could go somewhat overboard with her suggestions without swaying his intentions for his writing. We can imagine Jason hearing these suggestions, saying “Yeah,” and immediately adding a couple of gravestones to his drawing. Ted, on the other hand, gently rejected Linda’s suggestion.

TED: Interesting drawing, but...

Ted’s “…but....” was a badge of autonomy—he hadn’t simply shut off.

TED: I was trying to picture how I was going to fit it in. I was not overly enthusiastic about the idea, but like I said, in the last [conference] I wasn’t sure how [her suggestion] was going to work out and it worked out good, so I was just trying to picture if it might come out good or not.

DOUG: So, with these suggestions, you do give them a lot of thought even if you eventually dismiss them?
TED: Usually. Yeah. I wanted it to be a piece that I wrote.

But Linda’s exuberance was still getting the best of her. She apparently heard the “interesting drawing” part of Ted’s response, but not his “but...”. In the conference she responded,

LINDA: Yeah. Or, even, you can make the doors bigger so you’ve got less space...
TED: ...to fill up?
LINDA: ...to fill up. I mean, that might be better, too. You could also make this so big that there is no space to fill up, and it could be the gravestones as the path walking into this door, in some...

Linda did not like her response. She said, “I should be turning it back to him, saying, ‘How could you do that?’...and just sit there.” If she sat there long enough, Ted would think and create his own answers (Rowe, 1974). But, she admitted she had great trouble waiting out uncomfortable pauses. “I have to learn how to do that better because I’m doing the thinking for him.”

But Ted was still doing his own thinking. He next offered a thoughtful argument against her suggestion. Though he had trouble drawing the concept, he knew what he wanted his piece to represent and wasn’t afraid to tell Linda that her suggestion undermined his intent:

TED: I sort of...it’s walking into the door, kind of. I mean, the door’s supposed to be like opening through them.
LINDA: The door’s the freedom. Okay.
TED: Yeah. And it just doesn’t...
LINDA: And that doesn’t work, then. Okay. (pause) I don’t know. I’d just keep playing with what you’re doing. I don’t know how it will turn out, but I think I like the idea. You just might make this bigger so you don’t have to put any of those in there. What have you got for a quote?
TED: I’m not sure yet.

Linda responded to this passage, “See, he’s still doing the thinking, which is good. I mean, he’s getting a little irritated with me.”

Ted laughed, “I don’t think we were connecting”: 237
I understood that she wanted to have a door, but, like I said, my picture is not very easy to comprehend, and I think she was picturing something else. And I'm picturing what I have, as I see it, and that something else wasn't really fitting into it.

In the conference, Linda finally abandoned the art square:

**LINDA:** Okay. **What books did you read?**
**TED:** I read *The Rescuers* and, oh, I forgot what it's called. I think it was *Tell Them We're a Number.*
**LINDA:** Okay. So you've probably got plenty of ideas. All right. Okay, you're fine. All right, you don't have to give me anything, Ted. Just keep working on it this weekend.
**TED:** All right.

"Ah, *dumb* way to end it!" Linda exclaimed. She had not brought Ted back to his own ideas. "I could have said to him, 'So what do you think you're going to do next?'"

**LINDA:** I don't have the *foggier* idea what would help them, and if I would just walk away right at that point I could have saved myself a lot of time...said to him, "What might you try?"
**DOUG:** So that is kind of an important fallback. You're there to offer your expertise or information or a good idea if you feel you have one, but [here] you don't know. You're saying, then, that the important thing to say is, "You tell me, now."
**LINDA:** Yeah: "You tell me what you think you might do." Because I have to leave them being the active thinker, [instead of] saying to them, "Okay, you keep playing with it; okay, you still keep acting like an idiot here at the table; okay, you keep doing what you're doing." He's not having success, so it's not making him think, "All right, what could I do?" whereas just posing the question might help have him think what he could do.

Linda gave me her overall perceptions of the conferences.

The conference about the piece of writing I feel good about. I felt like I gave him a suggestion and that he finally got to the point where he could identify what it was that was weak in the piece, and that together we reached some conclusions about what some possible solutions were. I think that was a good conference.

The other one was just dumb. That's a good thing to wonder about. Doug: what are the percentages of dumb conferences that I have?...It's almost like they're really a waste of time and I should know better. I should never do *two* pieces of writing with the same kid one right after the other, because clearly one has more potential than the other and they're going to read the one with more potential to me. I watered down the first conference by talking about the second possible thing, and he could have gone right off to doing that.
Clearly I want to leave them with something really concrete that they’re going to start working on and thinking about and doing. And the minute I move to the next piece of writing, even though it was an art square, I’ve moved him off thinking about his [first] piece of writing. It’s good for me to listen to these because then I can see things that really stop the kids from writing—or stop the kids from doing something. The conference should keep the kids writing right at that moment when you leave.

Linda recognized the need for a student to use flashes of insight while they were still fresh. If they didn’t then they would lose the insight, she said, but then corrected herself: “I mean, I lose it.” With hindsight she read Ted’s sentiments perfectly. He had in fact wanted to go right on to his “Gestapo” piece and she had held him back. Ted gave his perceptions.

With the Gestapo piece I had something I was proud of, something I was ready for comment on. I had a need of comment. The art square I hadn’t actually gone to the conference for. It was kind of brought up and I’m like, “Ooohh, yeah! The art square!” and I showed her what I had, which was not coming along so well at the time.

I wanted to conference about the Gestapo piece, and she was there to help me conference. And I was not really ready [with], or mostly hadn’t really thought about, my art square. She brought it up because it was a piece I think other people had conferenced on. She wanted to give input on that to help me if I needed help on that, and I just wasn’t very enthusiastic about the piece in general. It wasn’t really going how I wanted it to, so I was more concerned about making the piece look how I wanted it to originally instead of adding a whole bunch of new things into it.

I don’t think the art square was at a point where it was ready to be revised. You don’t write one paragraph and then bring it to her to revise. You write a page--several pages--until you really need revision. The art square was not ready to revise.

Ted then suggested three elements he felt were essential for a successful conference.

In the Gestapo piece we both knew what we were talking about. We both were connecting. There’s some agreement between the teacher and the person on what they’re deciding about what is helpful.

The person has to want to do the conference. It’s not an arbitrary thing where she just kind of says, “What do you have for writing?” and then starts talking about it. I needed help on that thing, and she gave the help. If I didn’t need help, then help’s not necessarily helpful.

One more thing. Like she said, I thought it would have been helpful if I could have gone back and written that right away.
This conference significantly influenced Ted's final draft of "To the Gestapo." He did not forget the idea he had come up with. After making several minor changes to his original three paragraphs, primarily to tighten the language, he added a two-paragraph ending that "tied everything together":

So how did you escape? On a boat to Canada? Or maybe on foot to South Africa, I bet that didn't sit right, the "Master Race" walking. Who did you leave behind to pick up your mess, to try and explain your actions? What did you tell the customs officers to get yourself in? What have you done in the last couple of years? Do you still go out in public, proudly declaring your relationship to Hitler? How does it feel to live in hiding as you made so many live?

What do you think when you meet a Jew in a store? Do you still consider them inferior? Have 50 years been enough to see you're wrong? Can you really sleep with yourself at night? If a little child asks you, "Why were the Gestapo so mean?" what would you say? Can you answer these? Please, try, explain what happened to loved ones, why you were justified in your actions. What's wrong, doubting your actions? I would.

He considered the piece one of his best, including it in his final portfolio. He wrote in his Case History:

The writing originated after learning about the Holocaust. One is flooded with so many questions, so much disbelief and so much anger. A good way to get it out is on paper. I had all my ideas but I did have a little problem in expressing them in a complete piece. Through several conferences I got enough input on how I wanted to put my thoughts down and soon did so.

I feel this is an effective piece because it accomplished my goals of getting my thoughts out and it could be a letter. The piece is not very long and when finalized should have reasonable mechanics.

Ted recognizes the contributions of the different people with whom he had conferred, but note how he again retains control, stating, "I got enough input on how I wanted to put my thoughts down...." Others, again, are not primarily there to feed him ideas, but to help him clarify and enhance his own.

Ted paid little attention to his art square. He handed in a final draft, as was required, but didn't include it in his final portfolio and didn't mention it again in any of his analyses, which indicated it's lack of value to him.
This conference represents the stability of a conference when the student possesses the proper attitude upon entering the performance. A productive, academically-based relationship flourished because Ted knew what he needed and could listen to Linda’s suggestions thoughtfully, making informed decisions as to their merit. His conference indicates that with some students one may attend primarily to academics because that is what the student values, expects, and needs.

Yet Linda had an admonition. After the year ended she speculated that Ted, certainly a wonderful writer, might have gone even further if she had helped him tap more into his less academically-oriented moods and feelings. She implied the teacher might nudge academically-oriented students to explore their affect and intuition with the same vigor they nudge more social students to explore the academic. But gender differences again appeared to influence her instruction. She felt she had not developed a more emotionally-oriented rapport with Ted because of the generally more distanced nature of male student-female teacher relationships:

I’m a female teacher. Now, when I saw him talking to Don Graves, it was a totally different relationship. He really opened up to him, and he was fascinated with his writing. We really need models where we can see ourselves in the model.

When analyzing these four case studies, Linda’s greater difficulties in the two male conferences is not in itself generalizable. However, her difficulties did fit into a larger pattern we had both recognized throughout the year, and they may indicate that gender issues are something to which teachers might attend to more consciously when establishing working relationships with students. Linda felt her challenge was to do what she always tried to do: listen carefully to what was important to boys before responding, knowing that sometimes she might not be the perfect model. At the same time, she tried to introduce her students to a variety of authors who might serve as better immediate models. But, Linda said, she also wanted to help students like Ted find and exploit a wider array of personal
attributes they might not otherwise recognize, thus expanding the field of potential models within which they could see themselves.

The next conference shows a student on the other end of the affective continuum from Ted. This conference, which immediately followed Ted’s on that day in March, demonstrates the complexity of Linda’s job—the wildly different approaches she had to adopt with different students, often within a literal span of seconds. Elena wanted something very different from Linda than did Ted.

Elena: The Conference as Love and Care

Elena’s conference represents social, affective rapport: a meeting where a student found emotional sustenance and acceptance at a period in her life when things seemed bleak. More than any other student in class, Elena viewed Linda as a needed friend. Conferences for her were times to reconfirm and strengthen their social bond. Elena, a committed, prolific writer on her own, did not need—would not accept—academic feedback from Linda. Instead, she used Linda as an audience in thrall: a listener from whom only responses of amazement and approval were acceptable. She needed someone to hear her and to help her laugh; it was her laughter that kept her writing.

Elena was not a timid flower. Exuberant, talkative, and sometimes brazen, everyone in class knew at least part of her story. Born in India to an Indian father and Italian mother, her parents had separated and she had come to the States during her seventh grade year to live with relatives. She knew how to speak Italian, French, English, German, and several Indian languages fluently; she loved music and dancing and joking and teasing; and she was constantly falling in love. She was a born storyteller.

In fact, telling stories, orally or in writing, was what Elena most wanted to do. She searched out the people most willing to listen to her—usually Linda or me—and regaled them with intricate and fascinating accounts of her life. She went to great lengths to engage Linda in conferences, either blatantly praising Linda’s beauty in the hope Linda would cut another conference short or sneaking her name to the top of the conference list. When she
got her audience she did everything in her power to hold it. Linda recounted one conference:

Yesterday she grabbed me by the wrist and said, “No, you’re gonna listen to the whole thing,” and before I went over to conference with her, I watched her mouth every word of the seven pages. [She] had memorized. I think what she was doing was, if she could maintain eye contact with me then I couldn’t leave her….I think that was phenomenal what she was doing. It forced me to stay right beside her and listen. She wants someone just listening to her, and to feed back that it’s not just that she’s done some wonderful writing, [but] that “I’ve done something worthwhile that somebody else needs to listen to.”

It is tied to that social interaction that you have with another person, and I think you have to establish that. And you don’t establish it by standing in front of the class and speaking to twenty-five kids. You establish it by one-on-one eye contact….Yeah, it is establishing that rapport with the kids.

Two years previously, Elena had been seriously injured in an automobile accident. She was in a coma for three months and when she awoke she had to overcome major injuries. Formerly an excellent athlete, she now walked with a slight limp, her right hand sometimes shook, and she suffered from blurred vision and slowness of speech. She had also permanently lost a substantial portion of her short-term memory. Her recovery had been remarkable, but at this point therapists were unsure how much more she would improve. In a country she did not know well, living far from her parents, struggling mightily to overcome the ravages of her accident, Elena often felt overwhelmed and lonely. Her journal list of her “best” experiences was dominated by milestones in her recovery after the accident—waking up from her coma, swimming again for the first time, talking again for the first time, standing again for the first time, remembering things “that I think I would have forgotten.” Her list of “worst” experiences was long and troubling, revolving around nightmares she remembered during her coma, fears about never again living with her little brother, and incidents stemming from her parents’ separation.

Her seventh grade year had been enormously difficult for her. Still recovering from her injuries and unschooled in American culture, Elena had not found acceptance with many students. Now in eighth grade, her classmates had come around but were still a little puzzled by what seemed to them to be her exotic behavior. She had grown up in a variety
of cultures, had traveled the world, was articulate beyond her years, could use the English
language better than many native speakers and writers, talked about deep philosophical
topics, knew how to monopolize the floor during classroom conversations, and spoke
extremely personally about her accident. When she spoke, her words sounded like
languorous poetry—slow, rich, melodic, and flowing. She communicated more easily with
adults than adolescents. Her classmates, sometimes frustrated by her tendency to dominate
conversations yet also somewhat awed by her mature eloquence stood back from her a bit.
Fortunately, she did have one extremely close classmate, Diane, who was loyal,
thoughtful, and caring—a true friend who understood and respected her.

Elena’s other true friend was Linda. A close relationship developed almost immediately
at the beginning of the year. Elena had come into Linda’s room while her aide went to get
her lunch in the cafeteria. Linda asked her why she had no lunch and Elena replied, with a
grave look on her face, that it was a special holiday in her country and she was fasting.
Seeing Linda’s serious acceptance of her response, Elena burst out laughing. The joke
continued the next day as Linda watched Elena devour a candy bar. “Hmm, Elena,” Linda
remarked, dryly, “I see you’re still fasting.” Elena thought this was hysterical and for the
rest of the year pointed out her continued “fast” as she wolfed down her lunches. Months
later, Elena would write in her journal, “Mrs. Rief, you really and truly are my favorite
teacher. You make me laugh so much!”

To Linda, Elena revealed her deepest thoughts: her agony over her separation from her
parents and her belief that she was not living up to their expectations, her long list of those
with whom she was in love, and the deep emotional effects of her accident. Unlike some
students, Elena did not hide or temper deeply personal issues in Linda’s presence. While
almost always exuberant, flirtatious, and teasing in social situations with adults, in private
conversations and in her journal, Linda was the person with whom Elena could share her
despondency. She wrote, “I always look happy and joyful on the outside, but on the
inside no one knows how much I suffer.” For Elena, Linda was much more valuable as
the person who would listen while she poured out her heart than as a literacy expert. Elena meant it when she said that she truly loved Linda Rief.

**Elena’s View of Herself as a Language Arts Student**

“I’d say that I was a fabulous writer if I weren’t too modest.” Somehow she overcame her modesty time and again to tell Linda how good she was, and she was right. Elena wrote to Linda, “You know that I write just for the joy of writing, don’t you? Whenever I am sad or angry, or even happy, my [journal] is the best thing to help me empty my heart on.” She described herself as a writer: “I have lots of fantasies. *Lots.* I always daydream. Even while Mrs. Rief or any other teacher talks, I’m daydreaming, like imagining myself on some planet, imagining myself, my future, and all that stuff.” Her writing ideas came from a different place than did Ted’s. She said, “My *good* writing—which is all good—comes from my imagination, doesn’t come from the books.”

I get the ideas for my pieces of my writing from my ideas, thoughts, experiences, dreams, nightmares (I have a lot), and most of them come from the dreams I had while I was unconscious (in coma). Till I was about three years old, my life was fabulous. Fantastic. I had a father and a mother who loved each other. After I was three, my life became horrible! My parents fought from morning till evening, I started losing friends at school...my own writing also comes from that.

It was most important for a writer to have a good imagination, she said, and she had always had one, “Always, always, always.” In a darker moment she wrote that a good writer had to “live an ‘odd’ and ‘miserable’ life.”

Elena said that she did not revise. “I write anything. I write even inappropriate things, but I don’t revise at all. I just write it down. But later on, after Mrs. Rief has checked, I read it a thousand times over.” She claimed that most of her stories ended up “in the dustbin, though they’re usually good.” For Elena, who insisted that she wrote it perfectly the first time, revision and the final product weren’t as important as the *act* of writing and the feedback it elicited.

Elena was ambivalent about reading. Part of her discomfort, according to aides and therapists, was that her lack of short-term memory prevented her from putting down a book
and later being able to remember what she had read. But there were times that she enjoyed reading very much. She wrote, “I never ‘like’ reading. Sometimes I LOVE reading, sometimes I HATE reading. But mostly I read with my mind on some other planet.” Though she did not finish all the books she read, she read almost every day, on the bus to school and before bed.

Her favorite book was *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Dahl, 1985), the first book she read after awaking from her coma. She credited the book and its character, the highly active Willy Wonka, for helping her get better. “He was always jumping around and dancing while working. It wasn’t exactly jealousy that I had gotten, but a craving that I had for doing what he was. I tried, tried...tried...and got to where I am now.” She often described her total absorption—being sucked into her books. In discussing *Morning is a Long Time Coming* (Greene, 1993), a book she adored for its romance, she wrote,

I read so much this weekend! I almost finished the book. Patty is having a LOVE affair with this French man named Roger. (Calm down, Patty! You’ve already had three love affairs with: Anton, Michael, and Roger! You are only eighteen!)

Sorry, Mrs. Rief: sometimes I talk with characters in a book.

For Elena, reading was a form of escapism, as was writing. But while she had full control over her writing, her difficulty holding the context of a lengthy read seemed to make the act less pleasurable for her.

**Elena’s Performance as a Language Arts Student**

Elena’s work was different than other students’ in its intensely personal nature. Her journal looked more like a private diary than a public place to compile writing ideas for a class. As the year progressed, she wrote letters to Linda expressing her fears and sorrows. She also used her journal to vent her frustrations to her teachers and aides. In June, an advisor tried to prepare her not to expect much more physical improvement in the future. Now at the environmental camp that capped off the year for the eighth graders, she had been placed in a separate bunk from her classmates so that her aide could help her more.
In separate entries she wrote:

How do you think I feel DOWN HERE while my room-mates are all UP THERE?! DON'T YOU FREAKIN' UNDERSTAND?! The only way that I can become NORMAL again is by being treated like a normal kid. I don't need MORE help than other kids do! I don't freakin' want an aide! I thank you for all you're doing for me, but I don't want more than other kids! Obviously if I have an aide, I'll take advantage of her—But how did I manage at the beginning of last year?

I'm sorry, Mrs. Rief. But that really touched me. I'm NORMAL. Please, please, please don't consider me as NOT.

I say, "I'm sorry."
But do I mean it?
Yes, I do.
I am dying to be normal! Really dying!! Already a year, with an aide, and I still haven't learnt to be autonomous? No, that's not the word—not even independent. Responsible? No. Autonomous maybe is the best.

Mrs. Rief—Please try to understand why I treated you like I did in my log. I am a girl who always fought/fights to get what she wanted/wants. Please tell the other teachers not to tell me that I'll never become normal—I mean: like I was before. I believe that I will, even though I know that I won't. It is difficult to explain. It's like encouraging myself by believing that I will. If someone breaks that belief of mine, everything will go down the drain. Please tell that to all the other teachers.

Elena also used her journal as a place to write her drafts, blurring the distinction between it and her portfolio. If she wanted to include something in her portfolio, she copied it on fresh paper directly from the journal.

She had a good grasp of dramatic conflict; her autobiographical essays clearly reflected her personal conflicts.

MY RIGHT HAND
I cannot bear it any more! My right hand is controlled by the brain, the brain thinks, and I am telling myself: "Don't shake right hand...DON'T!".....But still, it shakes! How is it possible?! Do I have two brains?....One is thinking, "Shake, right hand. You will get more attention from everyone," and the other is thinking, "Don't shake, right hand. You will be considered more normal."

And who is the judge? Who makes the decision of which brain is correct? Do I have a third brain? The judge brain? And how does it make the decision? Do you believe in miracles? You better, after you read this story! Because this is one big miracle. And that too, is a true one!

The doctors I have seen say they can't say whether the tremors will stop, or not.

From this vignette one can already get a sense of her writing style. It was different from any other writer in the class. She always seemed to be having a passionate discussion with
someone imbedded in the page. Her writing was conversational but intense, and it always referred to things awe-inspiring or other-worldly. She infused her writing with words like "dream," "fantasy," and "mysterious."

Her lack of substantial revision made it more difficult to gauge evolution in her writing process, but throughout the year her writing remained consistently unique, mystical, mesmerizing, and touching. Her most frequent genres were poetry about fantasies or her life, speculative essays about the nature of life and the world, accounts of her experiences, and wild fantasy stories. Elena wrote for reasons far beyond any academic requirements. She had a more deeply personal and emotional purpose, exploring her fears and fantasies, as this poem to her brother and this speculative essay illustrate. She was a writer.

ARJUNA–LOVE
I have the craving—for living with you again
Like brother and sister
What have we been made for?
For living separated?
I love you, puppy mine
And I want for that day
Where we will be together again

RENAISSANCE: RE-BIRTH
Sometimes I wonder: “Does re-birth exist?” When I am not realistic I totally believe in re-birth...but when I am realistic, I semi-believe it. I mean, when you die, you die...I don’t think there’s such a thing as re-birth. What about your spirit? People that believe in a God believe that it goes to Heaven or Hell or Angel and Devil...or re-birth.
Where do people that die go? Do they truly disappear forever? Are they truly gone? What happens to the self?
You know—sometimes I have the feeling that I was alive when there were dinosaurs...And even this thought of mine that my family is going to get back together isn’t too realistic, right?

For her second semester project, Elena’s studied the work of poet Naomi Shihab Nye, a choice that she felt fit beautifully with her own writing. “She describes my life somehow. Because of the atmosphere in her poems,” wrote Elena. She wrote Nye a letter describing the connection between Nye’s poetry and her life. Her dreams while she was in her coma were similar to Nye’s poems. Nye’s concern with poor people and with nature, she said,
were also her topics. Elena used her school work to connect to a life both beautiful and harsh, a life with which she was trying to come to terms. For Elena more than anyone else in class, school work was a place to explore and learn how to deal with one’s personal life.

**Elena’s View of Language Arts Class**

Elena adored language arts. “I think it’s wonderful,” she said. “There is a lively spirit in the class, I don’t know. Kids are always bashing on each other!” She laughed. “I like the lively spirit.” She felt there was nothing Linda could do to make the class better.

“Nothing. I like her that much that I don’t have anything to say.”

**Elena’s View of Linda.**

But the best thing about language arts, she said, was Mrs. Rief. Mrs. Rief was language arts class.

Mrs. Rief, I don’t know, I find her very, very, very beautiful. I don’t know. For one day or two I was actually in love with Mrs. Rief. Seriously! I just thought of her the whole day....After that day I became really close to her. I’ve been thinking of her at night, not in any bad ways, but I think of us maybe going some place. I like Mrs. Rief a lot....I believe that she is my favorite teacher, but I want to keep this equality amongst all the teachers. So, I like this teacher, this teacher, that teacher, but I can convince myself that I like Mrs. Rief the best and that language arts is my favorite subject.

For Elena, the relationship with her teacher was intensely personal—her talk about Linda was usually devoid of any academic component. When I asked her to define Linda as a teacher she continued to offer social and personal qualities, and the emotional sustenance Linda provided.

ELENA: She is very funny, very. She has lots of humor with me, and we joke a lot. I talk to her about my problems. I feel very close to her. I just tell her everything....I just feel very safe with her. I think she acts very simply, she dresses very simply, and she’s beautiful.

DOUG: In terms of how she might help you with your reading and writing, what’s the best or most helpful thing that she does? Or does she help you?

ELENA: Since we joke a lot--we joke tremendously--that’s what helps me the most. Nothing else. I always was a good writer. Nothing else helps me besides the humor. The stories I have told her, she told me to write in my log or somewhere, to write it down--so that’s how she helps me the most.

DOUG: So she’ll help you kind of find an idea to write about or tell you “Oh, yeah, that’s a good idea...”
ELENA: Yeah! And also laughing with me about the idea.

Elena insisted that Linda’s friendship was much more helpful to her than Linda’s duties as a teacher.

This relationship of friendship appeared to influence Elena’s academic success in that a more analytical, removed approach from Linda would have halted her creative flow. I asked her if Mrs. Rief would be as helpful if she offered more academic direction and specific assignments, and Elena said, adamantly, “No. Not at all. Totally the opposite, maybe.” Her view influenced the shape of their conferences, for Elena firmly resisted suggestions from Linda, insisting instead that her stories be heard for what they were. Academic value came in the form of writing ideas for new pieces, which popped up from Linda’s responses.

DOUG: Are those conferences more so that she can hear your story?
ELENA: Exactly! When she gives any suggestions of how to improve the story, I will start arguing then. So, it’s more like for me to read it to her.

DOUG: Once you’ve heard what she says, have you ever gone back and revised something?
ELENA: No.
DOUG: You like it the first time, huh?
ELENA: Well, I try to think of it. Then I totally go into another story and start writing another story, so the thing keeps multiplying itself.

Elena thought Linda was a wonderful listener, again lauding her for bringing humor to their relationship. She said, “She comments on stuff, then I say something funny, then we both start laughing, then we make a joke out of the comment that she has given me. That’s the type of teaching that I like.” She kidded, “She jokes with me, and I guess I am her favorite student, too. She is my favorite teacher...no! She is my favorite student and I am her favorite teacher!”

Unlike other teachers, she said, Elena knew Linda listened to her in an authentic way.

I know she listens to me because I feel. I have a feeling that she is very interested in me and that she likes me a lot, and that she wants to know more because I have so many adventures to tell, out of which three-quarters of them are not true!
To Elena, the teacher’s reactions to the student were the most important thing. “I think that some of their reactions encourage. Mrs. Rief’s reactions encourage me tremendously….It encourages me to work harder in class.”

I like to write down all my adventures and all that stuff since she encourages me….I wrote the poem “When I Was Young at the Ocean,” which goes like this: “When I was young at the ocean/a place in India called Kovalam/I saw many beautiful shells/Mysterious shells/When I used to put my ear next to them/I would hear music/A silent place it was, the ocean at Kovalam.” She wanted to know whether the story in the poem was true. I said, “Yes.” Then, I started writing more true poems.

Elena always noticed Mrs. Rief writing and reading with the class and noted none of her other teachers had done that. I asked her if Linda’s reading and writing affected her in any way in the class. She straightened her shoulders and gave me a serious stare. “I feel very proud because I obviously know that she’s going to write something wonderful, absolutely wonderful, the most wonderful thing about me. And crap about everyone else.”

She began to laugh uncontrollably.

The Conference

Elena had written her name on the board and was eagerly awaiting Linda’s arrival.

Linda left her conference with Ted, walked across the room, and sat down with her. At this point in the year Linda had a substantial history with her students, and she knew what to listen for and expect from Elena in the upcoming conference.

LINDA: I know that I need a lot of time for her, that no matter what this conference is about, she’s going to direct it. She’s got her own agenda. I have to be prepared in a kind way to say I have to move on or somehow get right to the point….Lately I expect to hear a lot about swearing and obsessions with…who she loves latest….And I have to respond to it somehow.

DOUG: So, would you approach her in a conference [differently] than you might someone who’s either less accessible, less talkative, or has less of an agenda?

LINDA: Yeah. I guess I probably know without even thinking about it that that’s what’s going to happen. But I don’t know if I consciously gear myself up for that. I know usually in a conference those are the different things that [she does]. It is more social. It’s more she just wants to talk.

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As the conference began, Elena could not remember her exact reason for calling Linda over. However, she now had Linda’s attention and was determined to keep it.

ELENA: I, yesterday, finished [a] piece of writing with you. So, I did that and I forgot what I wanted to tell you.
LINDA: Okay, this one is all done, right? And that’s a great job. You did a wonderful job. All right.
ELENA: And I wrote a quote from the book.
LINDA: Yep. Excellent.
ELENA: And I wrote this story, which is true.

The story, from her childhood, was entitled “The Mischief I Did.” It began with an account of her father and her eating together. She had included several footnotes in her draft.

My father and I had just finished dinner at a restaurant named Aristo.
I had eaten Palak Panir (a cheesy sauce) with rice, and my father mutton curry (sauce with goat meat) and naan (kind of pancake).
After my father paid the bill for the food, we decide to go to Pondicherry (Pondicherry in English, the French colony I live near to)’s beach and enjoy an ice-cream. My father bought his favorite ice-cream and said:
“I scream
You scream
We all scream
For ice-cream.
Hmm…this ‘gelato’ * is good. What ice-cream did you get, Elena?”
--I got butterscotch Papa.
--Do you know what ice-cream I am eating?
--No wonder you married an Italian woman. You hoped she would make Tutti Frutti for you every day.
--Aah. What a smart daughterino ** I have. Assai. Ghello coribu ***. How did you guess that it is Tutti Frutti?
--You get it every time.
Then I jump into his arms, and he squeezes me tightly.
After we finish our ice-cream, we jump on the motorcycle and go home. It is about half an hour on the bike. We reach home and my father asks me: “Tonight there is a full moon. Do you want to go for a swim in the sea? The water is very warm at night.”
--Yes. And let us take Poncho **** with us.

* Ice-cream in Italia
** What my father calls me. Actually, it stands for daughter.
*** Come. Let me give you a kiss.
**** Our handicapped dog.
Unfortunately for Elena, Linda was already familiar with this piece.

LINDA: Okay. Now, wait a minute. You...now wait a minute. Is this the one I remember? Okay, you read part of this, yes...
ELENA: No, I, I, no!
LINDA: Yeah, I’ve read this, about the ice cream. You read part of this to me.
ELENA: I did?
LINDA: Yeah. Okay, which...
ELENA: I don’t think it’s possible.

Listening to the tape, Linda laughed at Elena’s adamant argument. “She just likes reading it again. That’s all.” Elena confirmed:

DOUG: Right here, you keep telling Mrs. Rief, “No! You didn’t read this!” and she says, “I read it.” Why were you saying that?
ELENA: (laughs) Because I wanted her to listen to my voice again!

But there was relief for Elena. Linda had only heard the first half of the piece.

LINDA: Yes, because I remember you reading, “Do you want to go for a swim in the sea?” Okay. (reads) All right, this part you didn’t read to me. Why don’t you read this page to me?
ELENA: Okay.
LINDA: I’ve heard all the rest.
ELENA: (reads) “So, I go up to my room and put my light blue swimming suit on. While we are swimming in the ocean, my father and I are having a nice chat. ‘Elena, do you remember...’” he has kind of an accent, “‘...do you remember when you learned how to swim?’ ‘Yes, Papa, you were working as a tourist guide and you took me for this tour. One day you took the people whom you were working with to see the different [Indian] things, and you left me in the care of the hotel manager. I was about five years old then. We were staying at a five-star hotel with a swimming pool.’”
LINDA: Whoa!
ELENA: “‘So, I...so I stripped...and jumped (laughs)...’”
LINDA: Yeees? Okay.
ELENA: “‘...and jumped into the pool...into the...’” Where am I?
LINDA: (reads) “‘So I stripped...and jumped in the fifteen-feet-deep...’”
ELENA: I think, since it was twenty meters high.
LINDA: Fifteen feet. That’s pretty deep. Whoa! Okay.
ELENA: No, it was ten meters high.
LINDA: Okay.
ELENA: So that must be roughly about fifteen feet.
LINDA: Well, a meter is [about] three feet, so it would...
ELENA: Oh, whoa!
LINDA: (laughs)
ELENA: So ten multiplied...so thirty feet deep!
LINDA: (laughs) Whoa, that would be pretty deep.
What struck Linda most about this exchange was the humor-filled relationship between
the two, which Elena had said all year was Linda’s greatest value to her:

Just laughing with her. That’s all that strikes me. Just laughing with her, knowing
that she’s going to ad-lib between every sentence she reads—that she has something
more to say but I can’t seem to get her to say it in writing. Every sentence she
reads, she looks up and tells me something about it. I would like to get her to put it
in writing, because I think that’s an incredible voice. But, she doesn’t do that,
yet. I didn’t tell her this, but I love the way she speaks like her father.
“Elenaaa.” She really accents it. She has an incredible voice. And it’s probably
because she speaks like eight languages.

As the conference continued, Elena read again, and again orally footnoted with
elaborations, as she did in every conference I witnessed.

\[ELENA: (reads) “‘So I jumped in the fifteen...thirty feet...’”
LINDA: (laughs)\]
\[ELENA: “‘...deep pool, so I had to learn how to swim. And I learned how to
swim! Since I was so proud of myself, I ordered so much stuff for
myself...’”--which is repeated, the word, in the same sentence, which is
wrong!—“‘...from the hotel manager, food and drinks.’” Food, ooh!
LINDA: (laughs)\]
\[ELENA: (reads) “‘When you got back from work, the manager gave you a bill of
five-hundred rupees.’” That’s about thirteen dollars, I think.
LINDA: Yeah.
ELENA: But that’s nothing for here. For India, it is like half a thousand rupees.
It’s a lot. You can buy two bicycles or two bicycles and a tricycle with...
LINDA: (laughs) Maybe you want to say that there.
ELENA: No.
LINDA: Okay.\]

Elena’s elaboration had sparked Linda’s interest, and Linda suggested she add it to the
piece. It was the only direct suggestion Linda would make during the entire conference.

Listening to the tape, Linda laughed at Elena’s response. “‘No!’ Ahem, okay. It’s a
trend. She doesn’t revise her writing. She wrote it and she’s done with it.” She
speculated why Elena refused to add.

\[LINDA: I think she’s impatient. I think that this injury has slowed her down and
I think she’s impatient to just get everything down and do it well. And
also, she believes she’s a perfectionist, and she doesn’t like to mess up the
page. She was pretty shocked at the beginning of the year that I would\]
even ask her to mess up the page...I don’t know if it’s cultural as much as what she’s learned through her previous teaching. Because she’s been in schools where they’ve been pretty severe and pretty strict. People have not been kind to her. I think there’s a very different kind of school. And that could be part of the culture. She’s trying to get it perfect the first time.

DOUG: Okay. And you let her go here.
LINDA: Yes. Sure.

In my interview with Elena, she conducted herself in the same way she did in conferences. I asked her to tell me about her refusal to take Mrs. Rief’s suggestion. Instead of answering my question she responded, “What was it...where’s my bag? Go get it. That’s an order.”

I followed her order. She pulled out her journal, and for the next twenty minutes she read me her favorite entries. I, too, knew Elena well enough to not stop her, for she would refuse to answer seriously any of the questions on my own agenda if I did not give her stories fair attention first. She read piece after piece. Each written story evoked new oral stories, which she deliciously savored. It was another afternoon listening to her fascinating talk and writing, an activity that had become almost a ritual. I was the other listener upon whom she knew she could count.

In the conference, Elena continued her aside about her illicit lunch:

ELENA: But it is sooo much for India. (reads) “You were furious, so were coming to beat me. But I stood up just in time and said, “Papa, you cannot beat me, I learned how to swim!” So you didn’t! Then we both cracked up. After the swim we went back home and slept.’ The end.”
LINDA: (laughs) You mean, when you cracked up you fell apart?
ELENA: (pause) Um...oh, but don’t worry, I brought a tube of glue with me!

Linda offered no academic question, no suggestion, no explanations—just a laugh and a corny joke. Listening to the tape, Elena smiled. “I would like to tell her how much I like her. Maybe today, if there is time.”

LINDA: Oh, good! (laughs,) So everybody got put back together again. Good!
OKAY, so, what you’re trying to tell us is...
ELENA: This is my finished piece of writing for today.
LINDA: Really.
ELENA: Yes.
LINDA: What if you have to do something to it?
ELENA: (pause) Umm, uhhhh....
LINDA: (laughs) No, no. It's fine. It's fine. I like the story of your dad, and he wouldn't really have beaten you, would he have? What do you mean "beat me"?
ELENA: I was beaten by my parents like my whole life.

There are two important aspects to this exchange. First, Linda gives a joking probe to test again Elena willingness to revise: “What if you have to do something to it?” It exemplifies how, despite the one-sided social nature of some conferences, Linda continued to look for tiny cracks—areas where she might still bring Elena’s wonderful talk into the writing without destroying subsequent talk. Linda said, “I guess I was just trying to nudge her to see if she would add some stuff to it. I sort of know she won’t, but I’m still trying to nudge.”

Elena, though, would have none of it. She was already getting what she needed.

DOUG: You’re making jokes back and forth, and you told me that’s important to you. Why is that important that you can make jokes with the teacher?
ELENA: So that we get comfortable with each other. And we talk other stuff besides school, so you sort of encourage yourself more to do a better job in the subject.
DOUG: And then, the second thing she does is she says, “What if you have to do something to it?” And you went, “Ohhh!” So you still didn’t want to revise anything?
ELENA: No, I didn’t. I’m a very, very, the most stubborn kid in the world, in the universe, in the planet.

The other notable aspect of this exchange is one that other teachers have noted as problematic when they begin to welcome students total lives into the classroom (Hall, Crawford, & Robinson, 1997; Hawkins, 1995): they begin to hear personal stories with high drama, which they may not be equipped or permitted to address alone. Elena was telling a life story with serious implications. Linda said,

I can’t let a kid write, “He would beat me,” and not ask her what that means. I don’t know what that means in her culture. I don’t know if it means he would spank her. I don’t know if it means he would just say, “You were naughty.” I can’t just let that pass. And it could lead me to do something else. I can’t project what would happen. If she told me some pretty graphic horrendous things in a
great deal of detail I would definitely have to go to somebody. But I think you have
to know the balance between what she's [telling you]...I mean, she's healthy kid,
she has a wonderful sense of humor, she's never looked bruised or beaten, she gets
angry but she can laugh. She doesn't get any angrier than any other middle
schooler or adolescent does. Maybe that's what happened over there, but she can
talk about it outright. If it were happening here now, I would press her to tell me
more about it....I don't want to probe into her personal life, but when a kid
mentions it to me I can't let it pass. It's just a statement of fact: "Tell me what you
mean by 'beating'. I want to know what you mean by that. And, you were five
years old..." I mean, my parents hit me with a fly-swatter when I did things, or a
wooden spoon, and I certainly wouldn't bring them up for abuse. So I'm just
trying to figure out what she means by that.

LINDA: What do you mean...
ELENA: No, since I was six years old. Actually, my father never beat me. My
mother beat me since...I was...(laughs) since I was...since I was two, or
something.
LINDA: Yeah, but what do you mean...
ELENA: She, like, gave me...
LINDA: ...a spanking.
ELENA: ...spankings and slaps, and that's pretty much it. Then, when I became
six years old, and we moved onto the land and the sea, I was thrashed.
LINDA: You were what?
ELENA: Thrashed.
LINDA: Trashed. Oh, thrashed.
ELENA: That's what I said at the first! So you said, "Hmm?" So I was like,
"Thrashed."
LINDA: (laughs) Thrashed with what?
ELENA: Thrashed with sticks, with hands, with different stuff.
LINDA: Why? For what?
ELENA: I was a very mischievous kid. Very. Very active. I always broke my
arms, I broke my two front teeth, I broke my jaw, I broke my head in the
accident. Anyway, I was...
LINDA: But why did someone have to thrash you if you already broke
everything?
ELENA: Well, it wasn't only that. This thing that I'm saying is because I was a
very active kid, so I broke lots of plates and all that stuff and, let's say
this, let's admit this--I trust teachers and I don't think that they'll think
anything bad of me--I used to steal, too.
LINDA: What? What would you steal?
ELENA: All sorts of stuff: money...
LINDA: From your parents?
ELENA: Money and food. No, not from my...
LINDA: From other people.
ELENA: From...our land is on the beach and we have, three huts that are for
renting.

Elena, as she did in almost every conference, began to reveal more, and more intimate,
aspects of her life. In our interview I said:
DOUG: You told her about you being beaten by your parents, and then you told her about your stealing. So you feel comfortable talking about very...
ELENA: Telling her. I told her, actually, every single secret of mine.
DOUG: Can you do that with other teachers?
ELENA: (sighs) No. I don't feel comfortable with [other teachers].

LINDA: So you would steal from people renting sometimes?
ELENA: Rarely. No, from people renting it was mostly their food.
LINDA: Yeah.
ELENA: The kitchen was in the open. I used to go sneak in when they were not there. They were in the city or something.
LINDA: But you know you would not do that now.
ELENA: I positively know that.

Linda contemplated the many elaborate stories evoked by Elena’s one piece of writing.

These are her stories. I don’t know sometimes if she’s telling me stories. She will look you straight in the eye and say something just to shock you, and then she’ll burst out laughing. I never know if what she’s telling me is the truth or not. So, if she’s not being hurt, if she’s not hurting anyone else, I have to accept these as stories. Maybe it is about her. And it probably is about her. But I’m just listening. I know she has never added anything back into it. I also don’t want to say to her every time she tells me something, “Why don’t you write about it?” I hate that!...I just want her to talk, and maybe she’ll find the stories for herself. And if she gets a reaction from people—they either laugh or they’re shocked or they want to hear more—maybe she’ll figure out for herself, “Hm, maybe that’s a good story to write down.”

I just wonder if, when you tell a story like that, you don’t really confirm it in your head or you tuck it somewhere in your brain. It might end up two or three years down the road that she can pull it back up again, because it was not only there as a memory, it was there as a story. So, she’s already gone through a first draft of it, and maybe it’ll come back again some day. Who knows when or where or even if the stories will come back, but I’m letting her take pleasure in the fact that somebody’s listening to her and learning about her without probing deeply: “Just tell me whatever you want to tell me!” I’m letting her go off on some tangents sometimes, but also knowing when I have to pull back. I really was enjoying listening to her, and I think some of that rubs off on kids, too. They know that somebody really listened to them. Maybe that sense of the relationship that’s forming there becomes part of when they bring the story back up again some other time.

Linda exhibited a patience with Elena she did not have with Jason. Yet she also continued to search for openings in the discussion where she might nudge Elena to revise.

When Elena said, “I positively know that,” Linda found a place of closure from where she could re-direct the conversation; she asked an analysis question:
LINDA: Yeah. Yeah. One question I would ask you about this piece, Elena: when you jumped in, what did you do to learn to swim? I mean, you said you jumped in this, so what do you remember doing?

Linda said,

I’m trying to help her make this the best piece of writing she can. I’m still trying to think of ways to get her into thinking about revising the writing, because there is going to be some time when adding information to it could make it a better piece. It was a little bit of a closure to all the discussion that we were having about stealing, and I really didn’t want to head off onto that tangent. We’d already gone to the beating and thrashing tangent and we were going to head off on the stealing tangent, and she’s not going to write about those things. We’ve talked about it and she said she would never [steal again] again. I feel in my ethical way that I’ve kind of tied that little piece of the conference up, so let’s go back to the piece of writing.

ELENA: I remember jumping in and, well, I hardly remember, but I guess that I jumped in and was forced to learn how to swim if I didn’t want to drown.
LINDA: Did you go to the bottom and come back up?
ELENA: No.
LINDA: Did you start moving your arms and legs?
ELENA: Yes. Yes. But I still don’t know how to swim properly. I still swim like a doggie, like a monkey, like a...
LINDA: (laughs)
ELENA: ...like a whatever. I mean, I could do this, but now that I’ve had the accident I have some problems with my left arm.
LINDA: Would that strengthen your arm, though, starting to do that?
ELENA: Very much. Swimming is, in fact, one of the best yogas.
LINDA: Do you do that?
ELENA: No opportunity.
LINDA: Oh. That’s too bad.

Linda’s question encouraged Elena to continue to tell her stories, which opened up other possible topic avenues about her accident, her therapy, her lack of opportunity to exercise. But Elena still was not prepared to connect her talk to revision. She simply did not want to analyze the piece, instead using it only as a starting point for the new stories that kept Linda listening to her.

I promised Elena I would not repeat the story she told next in the conference, which was inspired by her statement that she had no opportunity to exercise. It caricatured some people she knew. Suffice it to say, the story was wickedly accurate, it was rude, and it ended in profanity. It was also wildly funny.
LINDA: (laughing uncontrollably) Elena!
ELENA: (laughs uncontrollably)
LINDA: Okay, I'm sorry, I was not laughing. Okay, I was not laughing.

Listening to the tape, Linda laughed as hard as she had been in the original conference.

"See, now she knows! She's got this incredible audience and she's going with it!" The conference had turned into a showcase performance.

Elena explained why she had told the story.

Just for talking. I like talking. I find it a very entertaining thing to do. I like talking a lot; I always was a big talker, and in my French school when I was young, whenever I started talking...the whole class would go, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." (laughs) That kind of made me feel embarrassed.

At this point in the conference, class time was winding down and a couple of students came over to have Linda look at their work as Elena continued to laugh hysterically. Linda began to answer their questions and look at their work, still somewhat flustered by Elena’s brazen punch-line. Linda gave her impressions.

Well, number one, I think the kids are coming in because I've been sitting here so long with Elena that they're getting a little bit bent out of shape, and that's the problem with dealing with her. Actually, I was enjoying it quite immensely, so that's why I wasn't moving it. I couldn't believe that she was saying the things that she was saying, but she was having a wonderful time telling the story....

I think she's just trying to tell a story, and I think she was drafting in her head as she was telling it. I think she can't get things out at home. She's trying to shock. There's so much going on in that kid's head. She's not really a part of her adolescent culture because they...just don't pay attention to her, so she has to have attention from adults. She doesn't get a lot of attention at home, so she's developing stories. That's also part of her personality; from what everybody's told me she was always like that, but now she's found she's got a great sense of humor.

It's just listening to her. She went through three or four stories in the time I sat there with her. I don't know where that's going. I don't know if she'll ever write that stuff down. But I think writing and telling stories are to make people laugh or cry or feel differently, and she made me feel good about being in the classroom that day. She made me laugh, and a lot of kids don't make me laugh. And that's the fun of it.

As Linda began to address students' questions and look over their work, Elena attempted to connect with her one last time by asking the question that Linda, since the
beginning of the year, had said all students asked implicitly. Linda’s answer ended the conference.

_Elena:_ I definitely am your favorite student.
_Linda:_ Yes, you are. You are my favorite student. Absolutely. Definitely. I don’t want to be called biased.

Linda laughed and said, “Well, what do you say? ‘Of course!’”

Elena did not end up revising her piece, and she did not write a Case History for it, though she did include it in her final portfolio. Her primary goal in the conference, she reiterated, was to maintain her personal relationship with Linda: “I would like her to know more about my life and maybe [get her to] feel closer to me like I feel close to her.” While her lack of work on the piece after the conference might lead one to assume that the conference offered Elena little, Linda nonetheless considered it valuable: “I consider it a good conference because she got to tell a story….She got a reaction from people, which I think is what good writing does. I learned a lot about her.” She was unsure whether it had helped her with her piece of writing, but she described what she felt Elena gained from the conference.

Just feeling good about herself. Laughing. She left laughing, and that kid doesn’t have an awful lot to laugh about. I don’t think she was thinking about her writing. I don’t think it even occurred to her by the time she left. She wanted to confirm what other kids want to confirm: “Am I your favorite student?” They don’t ask it, but if you’re not listening to them then they think that you don’t care about them. But if you’re listening to them then I think deep inside they feel, “I must be her favorite student because she took the time to listen to me and shuts everybody else out around me.” If that’s what she left with, then that’s perfectly okay. I would hope that that’s okay for other kids, too. It’s just giving them, “You exist, you’re special in whatever way you have to be special.” I’m sure she left laughing, and in a very assertive, proud way. I can see her with that backpack…going to her locker still laughing, thinking about what she’d said to us that was totally inappropriate but she’d gotten away with.

The importance of this conference cannot be defined by the direct writing instruction delivered or the amount of academic information culled by Elena, but it still may be considered “educative” if we define the word as Dewey did, as an experience that led to
new experiences. I speculate that Linda’s listening influenced Elena’s writing progress a
great deal in this way: it gave her the state of mind and motivation to keep her writing, day
after day, when other personal circumstances might well have overwhelmed her literary
attempts. The relationship between Linda and Elena is an example of how social rapport
influences the student in ways that extend well beyond the realm of the text—ways that may
or may not have anything to do with language arts directly but are nonetheless vital to the
student’s emotional and academic well-being and growth. The conference served as an
outlet of emotion and a point of connection between friends. It kept the student happier and
mentally healthier. Linda saw many students needing this emotional connection.

I think with not just Elena but with a lot of kids, several of the conferences...are
really not about the piece of writing. The kids just want someone to tell what
they’re doing. It really is a social conference: “Here’s what I’m doing. What do
you think? I just want you to know that I’m doing some writing or this is what I’m
thinking.” And it really isn’t specific; it’s just not like Ted’s all the time.
I don’t know if it is important to their writing. It’s important to their being. It’s
important to their learning. It’s important to the relationship between us that I care
enough to listen, to take time to listen to what it is they want to tell me, even if it has
to be chickens or obsessions or swearing. They just want to know that they’re
being listened to, and sometimes there is no agenda....
I think kids only really work when they really care about what they’re doing.
And a lot of times that relationship between the teacher and the kid helps drive
whether they do their work or not.

These conferences, more personal than academic, set up the proper atmosphere and
attitude for future, more effective instances of actual instruction. Linda said, “Lad [Tobin]
talks about that in his book, Writing Relationships (1993). And very few people talk about
that. I think it really matters. If I can’t get to kids personally, it’s really hard to get that
stuff out of them.”

The point is crucial. The historical research focus has been on how conference
responses address the text on the page, but few besides Tobin have contemplated how
teacher responses had to set up the right relationship that could then lead to a more quality
look at the text. Linda said,
You know, I think that's what your whole premise is: if you're not listening to kids and they know you're not listening to them, and if writing... is really about you and comes from within you and you think writing is you, then if you don't develop some type of relationship it's very hard for those kids to get back to the writing or write honestly....

I guess it's helping the kids. There's a relationship there, but it's helping them write for themselves. They know somebody else cares so they can care about it themselves. I know sometimes what I need to do to a piece of writing to make it better. But I sometimes have to call Maureen [Barbieri] or give it to Don Murray and ask them to respond to it, just so I know that they care about it or that they heard me, before I can keep going with it. I don't know if that comes from insecurity or you just like to mirror what you've written back. They say it and it just confirms for you what you need to do. Sometimes you don't even talk about the writing.

I think for young kids who are just emerging as better writers, maybe you spend more time with the social aspect of saying to them, "Yes, you're heard. Yes, your ideas are important." We may not have gotten to the ideas yet, but they may be just testing the waters to see if you care about what they have to say. Even if they're not really saying much at all, it's, "I want somebody to listen to me."

But in reviewing the transcripts, Linda was also astounded at the complexity of this job.

I look at the difference between Ted's conference and Elena's conference. Until I can look at again, I don't even think about the wildly different ways they approach a piece of writing, and how you have to shift gears....

I can't even tell any more that I've set my mind for anything. But I know the minute the kid starts to talk there are probably a million things going on in my head about how I have to approach the kid. And when they're not going on in my head I usually have a bad conference because I'm not really listening or calling up all those things I know about that child. You have to shift gears so quickly. There is no time. I mean, it's like nano-seconds.

The complexity, of course, also occurred in recognizing one's sometimes subconscious dispositions toward students. With Elena, with whom she felt a reciprocal affinity because of the student's exuberance, receptiveness to her, and shared passion for language arts, it was easier to determine what she needed, even on the spur of the moment.
CHAPTER VIII

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE TEACHER WHO VALUES STUDENTS' VOICES?

This dissertation demonstrates how Linda integrated people's personal, social, and academic lives. Dyson found much the same phenomenon when she observed young children in a multicultural urban primary school. She posits that children live within, and have to negotiate among, a number of different, sometimes contradictory, classroom worlds. These include the "official" world, which is defined by the agenda of teacher and the school, and various "unofficial" classroom worlds, which are defined by the personal and social traits, situations, and agendas that students bring into the school. When a classroom teacher invites her students to share and use their own goals, interests, traditions, and genres, she helps to form a "permeable" or "dialogic" curriculum. The result is a classroom where students have a sense of agency and control, a classroom where students are individual decision-makers and influential social participants, a classroom where oral language builds relationships and students help author the content and process of the curriculum (Dyson, 1993).

But the construction of a permeable curriculum also raises new, unique challenges. Dyson writes,

The dialogic nature of the curriculum—the encouragement of individual assertiveness and group sensitivity, the inviting in of children and their points of view—did not give rise to classroom utopia. The children, after all, were in a different time and social space from [the teacher], indeed, from adults. No matter how strong the teacher—indeed, perhaps particularly with strong, assertive teachers—the act of teaching, like living itself, is a constant responding to the sometimes unexpected responses of others (1993, p. 43).

From the start I wanted my research to be eminently practical. I wanted to address these challenges and discover what essential components of instruction may be most overlooked by the language arts teacher who has struggled to move past formulaic instruction (such as
Initiation-Reply-Evaluation), give students authentic voices in the classroom, and create conditions for fruitful listening and response. In short, I wanted to learn how one feasibly created a permeable curriculum. Through the richer, more comprehensive communication that a permeable curriculum creates, one can better attain the Deweyan ideal of education: to help propagate "a continuous process of reconstruction of experience." A permeable curriculum exploits "the sometimes unexpected response of others," using them as new and ever-evolving learning (and teaching) opportunities.

I learned from a practitioner recognized as one of the best in her field. The answers Linda Rief revealed give insight as to what the struggling teacher might better attend. Two primary areas of her instructional dynamic may not have received the attention they deserve as factors of success. The first is a practice that promotes the development of a consistent and navigable classroom atmosphere: Linda’s intensive, long-term attention to (and teaching of) classroom organization and procedures. Students’ fluency with the layout and procedures of the class resulted in their greater ability to internalize her literacy instruction, which, in turn, led to a greater capacity to talk, learn, write, and meet Linda’s expectations.

The second practice has been examined much less. It is the attention we pay to the individual student-teacher relationship, not simply in the context of the student’s text or intellect (though these, too, are essential), but to the affective nature of it, as well. The development of rapport between teacher and student created the proper attitude and motivation in both of them to communicate and accept response. Students then shared issues of personal relevance, which became the curricular focus and the subject matter of the class.

In these two practices, the teacher needed to attend both proactively—in anticipation of general difficulties she knew would occur—and reactively—in response to individual students’ unique needs. My research suggests that we might refocus our instructional approaches a bit, particularly in the beginning of the year, by explicating these practices. Often we launch into a completely new style of instruction before we have prepared
students to receive and commit to it. We often come to our student-centered classrooms as converted zealots, breathless in the wonder of having time and choice: new freedom and new responsibility. Having seen the light, it seems so easy to us. This may be the Achilles’ heel of the language arts teacher who loves to read and write: we are so passionate about our work, and what is right seems so obvious, that we forget we often deal with students who are not converts and are not always well-versed in the requisites for assuming freedom and responsibility. What is obvious to us is often incomprehensible to many of them; what is glorious about choice and time is often mystical and terrifying. This dissertation shows how we may help students first be able to receive our messages. To highlight the practicability of my findings, at the end of the next two sections I relate them back to the roles Linda and her students took while working together in class.

Organization that Leads to Authentic Teaching and Talk

One of the mantras heard in most process and workshop-style language arts classes is this: “We give our students time and choice.” They are a fundamental aspect of our pedagogy, and for good reason: once students can accept and exploit time and choice they can learn for themselves, an attribute they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. For many teachers, offering time and choice becomes the focal beginning of our instruction.

My research suggests, however, that this focus may disadvantage many students without our co-requisite development of consistent classroom organizations and classroom procedures. Just as important, but perhaps less recognized, is our need to teach and model organization and procedures to the point students internalize them. Then choice has a framework that makes choosing possible (infinite choices mean no choices at all). Then students have both more time and the tools to schedule and exploit time effectively.

Linda’s mentors and colleagues, including Donald Graves, Mary Ellen Giacobbe, and a few others (Reutzel & Cooter, 1991), have indeed recognized the essentiality of a well-organized classroom. Especially in more recent works (Graves, 1991, 1994), Graves
stresses the necessity of a clear and consistent room structure and classroom routines. But this study suggests we should stress two related and amending points: 1) We should front-load our teaching of classroom organization and procedures: focus on them intensively at the beginning of the year and then maintain and adapt them as our students and classrooms evolve. 2) Teaching and learning organization and procedures are long-term processes in the same way that learning how to write and read are. When we forget this fact we become frustrated, and in our frustration we may abandon our necessary attention to them; we fear we are not teaching what we are “supposed” to teach: reading and writing. Successfully teaching organization and procedures is a daily, systematic, long-term proposition, and the danger of abandoning our attention to them too early is that we often spend the rest of the year haphazardly repairing our uncompleted job and still taking time away from our actual teaching and learning of literacy.

It is a testament to Linda that, despite her own frustration at not being able to attend more exclusively to reading and writing for almost two months, she did not panic and abandon her focus on organization and procedures. She kept at it and her diligence paid off. once students clearly conceptualized the seemingly more mundane aspects of organization and procedure they fully received Linda’s more direct modeling and instruction, and better controlled their time and choices. Only in November did they stop asking Linda “Can I…?” Only then did they internalize how to use journals. Only then did they manage their time without being told how, taking authentic responsibility for their own learning. The internalization of organization and procedures gave students a boundaried foundation within which they could control time and choice and learn as autonomous agents.

The internalization of organization and procedure also offered Linda new time and choices, allowing her to do the writing, reading, and other modeling that was her instruction. Equally important, it gave her the necessary time to listen to her students.
These points are crucial because they address a key frustration of many teachers who try to develop process- or workshop-oriented classrooms: a few years ago, high school teacher Karen Jost declared in *English Journal* that "high school teachers should not write" (Jost, 1990). Her incendiary article incited an avalanche of mail (*English Journal* 1990). Many letters criticized her position, but just as many, if not more, were wildly supportive. The most oft-cited complaint by Jost and her supporters was the lack of time and the superseding responsibilities of the language arts teacher. A practice considered a given to Linda obviously was not considered tenable by many others in the field.

In my own experiences with many teachers this attitude appears to be the rule rather than the exception. In most language arts classes I have attended, even those of teachers who consider themselves process- or workshop-oriented, the teachers rarely write with their students despite encouragement to do so in the literature they read.

Yet the commentary by students in Linda's classroom and the documented influences her modeling and listening had on their work overwhelmingly suggest that her writing, reading, and sharing profoundly affected their learning. Teacher modeling or, more accurately, "living a life of literacy," gave students a contextualized demonstration of her intellectual processes (as well as those of the students and professional authors whose works she showed) that helped them to explore their own processes independently. The lack of time Jost cites suggests that modeling and sharing authentic writing cannot be additions to our duties, they must be replacements. We must give up some activities for those we consider more essential. But I also suggest that the teaching of organization and procedures transfers many of our responsibilities to students, where they belong, thus freeing us to write, read, and learn under their watchful eyes.

To summarize these assertions, I hearken back to my Chapter Three outline of the roles Linda adopted in order to create a strong classroom framework. I suggest that her role as organizer was a requisite to students' abilities to exploit her provision of time and choice effectively. Organization (and teaching organization and procedures) provided the physical
and contextual framework for using time and choice effectively. When the students mastered organization and procedures (and thus mastered their use of time and choice) they became more receptive to Linda’s role as a reader and writer (model), which offered them intellectual insight into the processes of literacy. In this role Linda could also address difficulties that arose from her classroom expectations: topic-finding, writing in generalities, confusing quantity with quality, and uninterest in writing.

Linda’s doing and sharing of authentic reading and writing promoted the extensive student talk and storytelling to which Linda wanted to listen. Linda’s stories elicited students’ own life stories and they began to share. In sharing they helped create the classroom curriculum, gained independence, analyzed their lives, discovered points of interpersonal connection, and then transferred their lives to writing and art. In short, they assumed the roles that Linda envisioned for them as doers, knowers and growers, self-evaluators, and social participants.

**Rapport-Building. Cognitive and Affective**

Yet, organization and teacher modeling did not hold all the answers to success for all students. The ability and willingness for students to share their lives, particularly in their interactions with Linda, often depended on another component of her philosophical action: attention to interpersonal relationships and the affective states that influenced those relationships. Linda also had to build rapport with her students.

In Chapter Five I outlined Linda’s more generalized, “formulaic” responses during conferences. These responses, developed through training and experience, helped students to analyze and evaluate their talk and writing, which in turn helped them develop and enhance their texts through revision. Yet it was apparent that their words were not worth developing and enhancing if they held no meaning for them. Before Linda could fully exploit any formulaic strategy she first had to ensure that students’ words came from their genuine interest in the subject. Her first responsibility as a listener, then, was to find a “spark” in a student’s voice, something that told her that the words held personal value.
It quickly became clear that many students were reluctant either to search for or articulate their interests and passions with Linda unless they shared rapport with her, a mutual trust and respect that made them comfortable enough to risk revealing ideas that made them intellectually and emotionally vulnerable. Several obstacles contributed to difficulty in developing rapport: being male, adolescence, students’ previous negative experiences with literacy and teachers, and basic personality and agenda differences between students and Linda. (Given the current interest in gender and its effects on pedagogy and performance, future research into my findings about gender and conference relationships is a promising option).

If Linda and a student did not develop rapport, often the student would not fully reveal personally relevant stories. In those cases, Linda acknowledged, she could do only so much in terms of effective response. She asserted that she could still teach students with the more subject-centered approach she tried to avoid. She said, “I can work with those kids if I just give them information and they have to take notes and I test them on it, but I have a very hard time working with them on writing.” She noted that she had contemplated this approach for certain students, but decided that would violate her whole purpose for teaching, which was to help students to think and move forward for themselves.

I can’t do that because it just doesn’t feel like that’s teaching them anything, and that’s where I think you draw the line with responsibility. We do take a stance the minute we walk through that classroom door as to what we believe good teaching is. The problem is, if I give up on those kids—if I start doing things in the only way that I think they would succeed academically—I’m giving up what I truly believe is good teaching. That’s part of the dilemma and part of what makes me feel mad. I feel like maybe I should be doing it with them because that’s the only way they’re going to learn anything. But what they’re learning in that particular style seems to me to be pretty pointless, so what does it matter?

If the relationship between her and a student didn’t result in a discussion of personally relevant issues, then Linda’s conception of what constituted good writing could not be realized, or at least could not be helped along specifically by her. Therefore, she developed several strategies—some conscious, some intuitive—to build and maintain rapport with her students.
students. These included her reading and writing with students, which garnered students’ respect as well as taught them; deep engrossment as students spoke; body language that demonstrated her receptivity; an indirect speaking style that softened constructive criticism and commands; and a caring attitude. We might call all of these components of her listening style.

But at the same time, rapport-building was a mutual process in which some students were not immediately willing to engage. Similarly, Linda’s initial attitude toward some students, affected by personality differences, gender, and student indifference to language arts affected her listening. In fact, while lack of rapport inhibited students’ ability or willingness to discuss personally relevant issues, it was also the most important factor in diminishing Linda’s listening skills. The deep receptivity that allowed her to pick up on what was important to some students was missing with others with whom she did not develop a rapport relationship. While Jason, for instance, did not discuss personally important issues as much as many other students, he did so briefly in most conferences. However, Linda did not pick up on them nearly as well, instead presenting her own ideas and agenda in the fear that if she did not, Jason might not learn at all. Intellectually she knew this was unproductive, but lack of rapport with him diminished her receptivity. It was a vicious circle: if there was not immediate rapport between Linda and a student, the initial obstacles that inhibited rapport also served to inhibit the behaviors that might eventually lead to rapport. Thus, Linda had to attend to those behaviors more consciously.

My case studies reveal more about the nature of rapport development. First, they highlight the essentiality, in many cases, of attending not only to the academic and cognitive but also the affective domain when developing relationships with students. Jason’s case study suggests that with students disaffected from language arts we might first develop trust and respect with them before we fully emphasize academics. Meg’s and Elena’s case studies show how Linda’s affective friendship fueled academic growth by
engendering in Meg more receptivity to Linda’s academic suggestions and by offering
Elena the emotional sustenance that allowed her to continue to write on her own.

The case studies also show the wildly complex nature of Linda’s job. Ted’s case study
indicates that not every student needed or desired an emotionally-based relationship with
Linda. Linda had to listen carefully to each student in order to determine each one’s unique
needs. Assuredly, each student’s needs were different; their approaches to life and literacy
were scattered all across what Fleckenstein (1991) called the “affective continuum.” Some
relied on more on emotional skills, some on more cognitive—each student in different
combinations—to help them navigate the classroom day. And assuredly the affective
continuum is a simplistic construct, for there were countless more social and personal
factors that contributed to each student’s approach to language arts and to Linda.
However, this continuum does challenge us to examine how we might more
comprehensively attend to Dewey’s assertion that the teacher committed to continued
student growth “must...have that sympathetic understanding of individuals which gives
him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning.”

To summarize, I again turn back to Chapter Three, this time to the roles Linda adopted
in order to promote interpersonal interaction with students. My research suggests that for
many students Linda’s roles as caregiver and social participant were initially more
important than her more academically-oriented roles. Caregiving and social participation
helped engender a rapport with students that 1) made students more willing to discuss
important life issues (which became the subject matter of the class) and 2) created a deeper
receptivity in Linda that enriched her role as listener and responder—allowing her to react
more effectively to individual needs. Once this rapport was established, Linda could then
assume the more academically oriented roles of prod, transmissionist, and evaluator (which
created the responses that ultimately determined the effectiveness of her listening). students
were now more receptive to accept at face value Linda’s instruction because she respected
and cared, not only judged impersonally. As organization and the teaching of organization

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were requisites to more academically-oriented activities of general literacy instruction, caregiving, social participation, and other elements of rapport-building were, for most students, requisites to more academically-oriented one-on-one conference instruction.

In the past twenty years literacy instruction has made enormous strides, moving toward a style of teaching that places the responsibility for learning where it belongs, with the engaged student. But it may also be true that we have not completely covered the spectrum of necessary literacy instruction needed to first engage the student. Nor have we examined well enough our own attitudes and listening skills in relation to our students. While it is true that we give freedom and responsibility to the students, we may not attend well enough to teaching them how to use that freedom and responsibility. While it is true that we encourage students to begin to use their own cognitive abilities to examine and produce their work and to learn, we may not attend well enough to the other areas of the human psyche that also affect perceptions, motivations, receptivity, and learning—those of the affective states.

We have come to recognize that we teachers are now listeners. We now strive to value our students’ voices, examining what it means to be a listener and learning how to improve our listening on a daily basis. This dissertation highlights how Linda Rief, a listening teacher, successfully created a classroom that became wildly complex and rich through the multiple voices of her classroom. By showing her successes, her difficulties, and the careful introspection—the listening to herself—through which she has evolved her practice, it shows how we might all become better listeners.
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