

Literacy Leads

The Writing Is Fine the Way It Is
March 10, 2010
By Karen Haag



Fluid Writing Circles Work With Expository Writing Too

The 8th-grade students wanted to help their peers revise but didn't know how. Luckily, I visited on a day when I could lend a hand. I gathered Daniel and 3 other students into a "fluid conference circle" - like a reading circle except that students analyze their writing rather than their reading. The 8th-grade team of teachers and the rest of Daniel's classmates also watched to learn how to run writing groups. Daniel bravely volunteered to let us discuss his paper, an essay comparing and contrasting two main characters.

I started the conference circle as I do in all grade levels. Daniel read the paper aloud while those of us in the group took notes. After the reading, we silently wrote final notes in our daybooks and gathered our thoughts. Then, each group member complimented Daniel on something he had written - a word, a phrase, an idea, his sophisticated thinking, the engaging beginning, etc. Daniel's known as a capable writer, so the students had no trouble picking something good to share. Two students agreed they liked his first sentence and his wide use of vocabulary.

In most circles the next step is to ask questions of the author, but Daniel's group members were puzzled. They wondered what kind of questions they were to ask since the paper seemed so perfect. I suggested they inquire about something that confused them or something they wanted to know more about. At that point, *all agreed the writing was fine as it was*. However, I knew that Daniel's clever writing had masked his failure to address the assignment, craft a main idea, or sequence his paper.

I offered to ask questions in their place so they could see what to do. "What is the main idea of your piece, Daniel?" I modeled. He didn't know. I asked the others in the group one by one. "What is the most important idea that comes through to you in Daniel's writing?" No one could say, so I pressed Daniel to see if he could explain a main idea. I asked him to tell me whether the two characters were mostly the same or mostly different in his mind. He hadn't thought about it. I taught: if no one knows the main idea of the piece, there probably isn't one. Since main ideas are critical, that's always something to listen for, compare, and share with the writer.

"Does anyone have a question now?" I asked the writing group. They didn't, so I asked Daniel: "What is the structure of your essay?" Daniel shared that he didn't know what I meant by *structure*. I said, "Authors first figure out what they want to say. Then they decide how best to reveal their main points and supporting evidence in a logical sequence." In writing circles, I teach in small bits about writing questions like this that bubble up naturally.

I asked Daniel if he made a plan comparing the two characters before he began to write. No, he hadn't, he said. Daniel explained his writing process: he writes a paragraph at a time as the ideas come to him. When he read aloud, I'd noticed that he'd written 5 paragraphs: 2 comparison paragraphs, then a contrast, followed by a comparison and then ending with a contrast paragraph. I wondered why. I pointed that out to Daniel and the group and again asked if he had done that on purpose. He hadn't. He was surprised that I noticed the sequence, because he hadn't.

Had he addressed the assignment, I asked him? He didn't know because he hadn't taken the directions home. I read the assignment

aloud. He was supposed to analyze the *motives* of the characters, noting how they were the same or different. Where did he mention the motives of the characters in his essay, I wanted to know? We all laughed because, of course, he hadn't.

Daniel's admission provided me the opportunity to clarify the purpose of the writing group. I told them, "When you work together in writing circles you have to listen carefully and take notes in order to give feedback to the writer. In this case, I hoped you would have noticed that Daniel never mentioned the motives of the characters. I really thought that *someone* would have asked Daniel about that. If what's missing is shared respectfully, writers will improve from listening to your reactions and acting on them. When any details or evidence is lacking, tell the author. Daniel's writing is very good, we all agree, but since he hasn't carried out the mission, you should have questioned him."

Daniel's enthusiasm remained high as we figured out what motive meant and sketched a Venn diagram to help him compare the characters, figure out his main idea, and plan what he wanted to write. As we worked, another question struck Daniel. "Do I have to get rid of all of this?" he said, waving his first draft.

I assured him that much of the evidence in that first paper could be used in his next draft. If I were his teacher I would ask him if I could use his writing to help others learn how to color code. I would put his draft under the Doc Cam, I explained, and underline the sentences and phrases in different colors to show how to organize the details by subtopics in his second draft. "Well, for the record," he said, "my teacher has my permission to use my paper that way."

The third step – making revision suggestions – was a no-brainer. Daniel already knew he had to write a main idea and then support his conclusions with evidence. We finished up quickly by reflecting on the lesson. I asked everyone, "What did you learn about helping others with writing today?" Daniel volunteered, "You really taught me how to revise my writing today and I appreciate it."

If I had not been there, Daniel would have walked away from the writing group experience without direction. As I look back on this session, I realize that I offered a lot of advice that surfaced in the course of the discussion. For one thing, writers know what they're writing about (in this case, the assignment). Writers either draft to determine what they want to say, or they make a plan. Writers choose a writing structure. They write the main idea clearly.

Fellow writing group members listen to see if all the pieces are in place: main idea, supporting details, and logical evidence to support conclusions. Students shouldn't be shy about sharing what's lacking in a paper. If they share their observations in good faith, a classmate's writing improves.

The teachers watching this demonstration observed that for the writing circle to be most effective, teachers must know their students and the curriculum in order to match writers with suggestions. They noticed that students do want feedback. Luckily, Daniel eagerly participated throughout the process. However, teachers and group members were cautioned to word questions carefully and watch body language to see if the writer was receptive. Since the teacher facilitates what happens, she can redirect the group with questions or suggest the writer wait till the others are finished sharing. Keep in mind that not everyone has to participate in a writing circle. Some writers may be intimidated and therefore benefit from conferring alone with the teacher.

Remember how Daniel's peers alleged that *the paper was fine the way it was*? The students only reached that conclusion due to their lack of experience. Modeling how circles work is the best way to show writers what to do. Practicing under the watchful eye of a teacher, students learn what to keep and what to revise. When teachers participate as adult mentors in writing circles, students learn how to help their peers write better. When writers are ready, they run the groups effectively on their own.

For more information on fluid writing circles, go to www.liketowrite.com under conferring.