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THE IMPACT OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND BELIEFS ON THE LEARNING AND TEACHING OF PEER CONFERENCING

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When I finished drafting this chapter, I knew that it would be sent to a reviewer or two who would read it and write feedback that I would be expected to take into account when doing revisions. I would never see these reviewers and we would not have a conversation. I would not have the opportunity to ask them to clarify their comments or to focus on a part of the text that I'd found particularly challenging to write. I would not know if they had frowned over my draft or chuckled out loud or lingered over my language. I would take their feedback and do my best to interpret their meaning, as they had done their best to interpret mine, in isolation from each other. In this situation, the focus is constrained to be solely on the writing product, not on the writing process.

As teachers of writing, elementary school teachers focus on the writing products of their students, but they must focus more on the *process* of writing. They are responsible for teaching their students *how* to write. As a teacher educator, I am responsible for teaching *my* students—all preservice teachers—how to teach *their* students how to write. In order to do that effectively, I must make explicit how writers work. I must help my students engage in the talk that writers use as they make sense of how they work. One of the ways that writers talk about writing is by participating in discussions, focused on their writing products, with other writers. In the lexicon of writing process at the elementary school level, this is commonly referred to as peer conferencing.

USING PEER CONFERENCING IN WRITING WORKSHOPS

In the mid-1980s, scholars in the field of writing instruction began calling for more focus on the process of writing. They advocated the use of writers' workshops in which students would compose writing pieces by working through the steps of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Graves, 1983). Along the way, students confer with their teachers and peers about the work in progress. While it is important for students to confer with teachers, it is also important for them to discuss their writing with their peers, either in pairs or in small groups. This is a time when writers who are working at approximately the same level can share ideas, provide and receive constructive criticism, and learn from each other. Students need the opportunity to get regular feedback on their writing so that they can keep moving forward (Ray & Laminack,

2001), and by learning how to ask each other questions, they learn how to ask themselves questions about their own writing (Calkins, 1986).

This writing process has continued to take hold in classrooms at all levels. As evidenced by Bobbie Solley's (2000) edited collection of elementary and middle school teachers' reflections on writers' workshop, teachers are still invested in the use of this frame for writing, including using peer conferencing. They realize that students need their modeling of successful conference strategies (Robertson, 2000; Brookens, 2000), including ways of speaking to each other respectfully and helpfully. If students can't trust each other, conferences will be useless (Atwell, 1987). Students need clear guidance in terms of language and process for conducting conferences, learning to give and receive feedback (Brookens, 2000; Marchisan & Alber, 2001).

Over the years, there have been several studies that show the benefits of peer conferencing for students. Students help each other generate ideas, revise drafts and gain greater awareness of audience. These benefits have been shown for early childhood (Kissel, 2008), elementary (Kos & Maslowski, 2001), middle school (Brookens, 2000), high school (Simmons, 2003), and college students (Topping, 1998). There have also been studies that show benefits for learning-disabled students (MacArthur, Charles, Graham, Schwartz, & Schafer, 1995), and English Language Learners (Berg, 1999). A study by Althaus and Darnall (2001) even showed a positive correlation between the quality of peers' reviews of other students' essays and the final grades of the reviewers' own essays.

RESEARCHING PEER CONFERENCING

I was one of those elementary school teachers in the late eighties who was committed to using the writing process with my students. Although I felt confident in guiding students to use various prewriting strategies, to keep moving through drafts, to use editing checklists, and to engage in various other aspects of the process, my students' peer conferences always seemed to be less productive than I thought they should—or could—be. I was frustrated because I had read about the benefits of peer conferencing, but I didn't know how to teach my students to engage in such conferences successfully.

Now I am a teacher educator in literacy, teaching undergraduate students seeking elementary teaching certification how to teach children literacy skills and strategies. In order to learn how to teach something, I believe that you need to understand as a learner whatever you're teaching. This is the kind of deep subject matter knowledge that is crucial for teachers to know (Darling-Hammond, 2007). A writing teacher needs to understand writing, and understand how people learn to write and practice writing. When teaching someone else how to write, teachers need to remember what it was like to learn this skill so that they know what steps to teach and can anticipate the learner's concerns and questions. They need to pay close attention to all of the things we do as we write.

To help my students better attend to what they do as writers, I involve them in learning experiences similar to those in which they'll involve their future students. I want them to experience as learners the instructional activities they'll employ as teachers, something that other teacher educator/researchers have done with preservice teachers in areas such as literature discussion (Williams & Owens, 1997) and learning the importance of scaffolding instruction (Jay, 2002).

I realize that my students participate in these learning experiences from a unique perspective. They cannot abandon their intention of becoming teachers, so that perspective will undoubtedly color the experience. They also bring with them the "baggage" of their own learning experiences as students for over a dozen years. Research has found that our attitudes, beliefs, and experiences shape how we learn and teach, and therefore shape how we learn to teach (Bransford & Schwartz, 1999). In a study researching connections between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices, Powers, Zippay, and Butler (2006) cited eight other studies supporting the connection between teachers' literacy beliefs and their instructional practices. Ignoring these influential factors is detrimental in a teacher education program.

As educators, we need to talk about the rationale that guides our pedagogical decisions (Servage, 2007). Surfacing our attitudes and beliefs, sharing our experiences, and learning how these may contribute to shaping our teaching practices are among my responsibilities as a teacher educator. I know that my own negative experiences in using peer conferencing as a teacher in an elementary classroom affect my ability to teach preservice teachers how to use peer conferencing. Since I believe in modeling my decision-making and problem-solving strategies for my students (Jay, 2002; Loughran & Berry, 2005), I decided to tackle the problem of peer conferencing with them. My research focused on two main questions:

- What are the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of preservice teachers about the use of peer conferences in writing instruction?
- How do preservice teachers' experiences, attitudes and beliefs about peer conferencing influence their participation in peer conferences?

DATA COLLECTION

Participants in this study were drawn from the students in two sections of RDNG 300, Early Literacy, a course required of any student seeking elementary teaching certification. In this course, students engage in cooperative learning experiences, based on the socio-constructivist theory of learning. One of the course assignments requires students to compose a paper that pulls together various concepts from the course. Students complete these papers individually, with only informal opportunities to talk with classmates about this process along the way. During the winter 2009 semester, in which this research was conducted, I decided to have students participate in two peer-conferencing sessions during their work on this project.

Because peer conferencing was an instructional strategy used as part of regular course instruction, all students participated in such conferences, but any notes about their participation in those conferences were used only if the students had granted consent to participate in the research study. Conferences were audiotaped, and separate consent was obtained to use the tapes. Because one of the goals of the course is to make students better analytic, reflective practitioners, all students completed surveys regarding their attitudes and beliefs about peer conferencing, but data drawn from those surveys was only used from students who granted consent to participate in the research study. Out of 41 possible participants (the number of students in the two class sections), 35 agreed to participate, with two of these participants denying use of audiotaped conference data. Consent forms were not seen by me until after I had submitted final grades for the course.

Data were collected in several ways and at several points during the semester. At the beginning of the course, students completed an **initial survey** of questions (see Appendix A) focusing on their previous experiences with, attitudes toward, and beliefs about the use of peer conferencing in writing instruction. This survey was completed in class, even if students claimed they knew nothing about peer conferencing. Thirty-five surveys were completed by student participants.

During the process of working on the assigned paper for the course, students participated in two **audiotaped peer conferences**. Before experiencing their first peer conference in RDNG 300, students received no direct instruction about this strategy; however, the conference took place during our sixteenth class meeting, when students had become accustomed to doing small group activities and discussions. As often happens in classrooms, students sat at tables with the same peers in each class session, so they were quite familiar with the people at their table. Because I understand the importance of building community, I wanted students to be as comfortable as possible during this first conference, and therefore opted to allow them to remain in table groups. Each student had been told to bring the source materials (five self-selected children's books) that would form the basis for their writing assignment. Only a few students had anything drafted; most were engaged in prewriting activities—selecting source material, generating ideas, formulating writing plans, etc. They were

directed to share their present thinking about their books and their papers, taking this opportunity to receive feedback and help from their peers. They received no other explicit instruction from me regarding the nature or structure of this “feedback and help.” This was intentional, as I wanted to see what kind of discussion would ensue when they were left to interpret the best way to give feedback and provide help. I was available during this time to check in with groups and answer any questions they had. Each group, ranging from 3-5 students, audiotaped their discussion of approximately 30 minutes. Out of ten groups, eight conferences were analyzed by me. Two conferences were recorded on a defective tape, and were therefore unusable.

Between the first and second conference experiences, I provided direct instruction about the use of peer conferencing in elementary writing settings. I was unable to devote as much class time as I would have liked, but I wanted to address some key points about this instructional strategy. To begin my lesson, I reminded students that I try to have them participate in learning experiences as students that I hope they’ll use with their own students so they can reflect on the experience from the learner’s perspective. In trying to make those experiences as authentic as possible, I engage them with texts appropriate and authentic for their own context. That’s why we would be looking at peer conferencing in conjunction with their RDNG 300 final paper assignment. I structured the remainder of my lesson into these sections:

- What is peer conferencing? In this section of the lesson, I described peer conferencing as a structured form of peer talk, in which students share their work in progress and receive suggestions from peers. I noted that this can happen at any stage in the writing process, since it is not just about peer editing. I also stressed that this conferencing should not be a replacement for teacher conferencing with student writers.
- Why is peer conferencing beneficial? Drawing from the research cited earlier in this chapter, I noted how peer conferencing provides benefits for students at all levels of school, and these are benefits for the writer and the reader. Students who participate in peer conferences learn to anticipate readers’ questions and therefore approach their writing with a heightened awareness of audience. They are more thoughtful and critical about their own content and organization.
- How do you do it and teach kids to do it? I described how students would meet in small groups or pairs, sharing writing pieces by alternating the roles of writer and “receiver” of the piece. Unless a conference is specifically designated as an editing conference, the “receiver” should not look at the writing piece. The writer should read the piece aloud so that the focus is on content. I reminded students that when they look at a writing draft, it’s too easy for spelling and other mechanical errors to command their attention. I also described the need for teacher modeling, guidance, and practice. Conference feedback forms were introduced as a way of structuring the discussion. For instance, students might complete a form on which they note things they like about the piece, things they question, and suggestions they have for the writer. The form may also include space for the writer to record his/her action plan for next steps. Using a form reminds conference participants of their focus, and gives the writer something to take away for reference during revision. I shared four possible conference feedback forms from which students would need to choose one to complete during their second peer conference, scheduled for the next class session.
- How will you do it in the next class session? I instructed students to bring two copies of their rough draft—one for me to keep, and one for them to use during their conference. They were told that they would be paired up to take turns acting as writer and receiver of their writing pieces, with the focus placed on the content and organization of the paper.

My lesson also included a video segment of children engaged in conferencing. Ideally, I would have modeled a peer conference in my classroom, but using a video segment enabled us to discuss the moves we saw the children making successfully during their conferences, and to infer what moves the classroom teacher must have made to guide them in learning how to conference.

The second peer conference was conducted in pairs. Students had been directed to bring rough drafts of their papers, for which final drafts were due in two weeks. These drafts were in various degrees of "roughness" ranging from little more than outlines to fully-drafted papers. I assigned partners from within table groups, since these students would have been part of the same peer conferencing group from the first conference experience. I conducted a lesson with half of the class, while the other half left the room to conduct their conferences elsewhere. After 30 minutes, the groups switched. This meant that I was unavailable to work with conferencing pairs, or even to see them at work. Each pair audiotaped its conference, and I analyzed the tapes for emerging themes. Eleven conferences were analyzed for this round.

Another piece of data was not part of my initial plan but was the result of an unexpected event during the second round of conferencing in one section of my course. One pair of students disagreed so vehemently and vociferously during their conference that they turned off the tape recorder. Although I did not witness the conference, I heard about this experience and sensed it had a disruptive quality for the class. Because I am first and foremost the course instructor (with my researcher role coming second), and because I believe in modeling appropriate and effective teaching behavior for my students, I did not feel I could ignore what had happened. I thought about what I would do if this happened in my elementary school classroom, and realized that I would seek more information about what had happened. Therefore, I asked all of the students in that course section to write a **reflection piece** (in class) about this second round of conferencing. These short papers became another source of data for me.

The last data source came from a **final survey** (see appendix B) that mimicked the initial survey, with some questions now focused directly on the peer conferences experienced in RDNG 300. This survey was conducted through e-mail, and students were granted one extra-credit point (valued at .01% of the overall points accumulated for the course) for completing and submitting it. Fourteen student participants completed this survey.

DATA ANALYSIS

All data sources were examined carefully for emerging patterns related to experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), data were coded according to these emerging patterns. Points of focus included:

- The nature of students' past and present experiences with peer conferencing
- The perceived impact of peer conferencing on the writing product and process
- The potential effect of preservice teachers' experiences, attitudes and beliefs about peer conferencing on their participation in RDNG 300 peer conferences
- Any changes in students' attitudes toward peer conferencing after their RDNG 300 experience
- Students' attitudes and beliefs about peer conferencing as prospective teachers.

Where relevant, students' actual words from written or audiotaped artifacts were transcribed to serve as supportive examples of patterns as well as anomalies. After conducting a broad analysis of the participants' written and oral artifacts, I decided to direct a more focused lens on students for whom I saw evidence of

connections among their past conferencing experiences, their attitudes and beliefs, and their conferencing experiences in RDNG 300. I present six case studies below. These six students formed three conferencing pairs for the second peer conference. One pair had an extremely successful conference; one pair had mixed feelings about the success of their conference; and one pair had the somewhat disastrous conference referenced above. All students' names are pseudonyms.

KARLA AND WENDY

Karla and Wendy were members of the most vocal table group in the class. This group had sat together since the first day of the semester, always talking congenially and participating actively in both small and whole group activities. Neither of these students ever seemed reluctant to speak in class, but their initial survey responses revealed that Karla and Wendy had had very different previous experiences with peer conferencing.

Although Karla did write about enjoying conferencing in elementary grades, she focused more on her college experiences with peer conferencing. These were not positive. When asked to describe experiences with peer conferencing, she referred to being required to take papers to the writing lab to be *edited*, and said she doesn't like doing that because she is "uncomfortable sharing my ideas/thoughts with strangers." She continued to equate conferencing with editing in her other survey responses. When asked about her feelings when receiving peer feedback, she wrote, "When a paper was returned with red marks or 'x's all over it I felt like I was a bad writer; big blow to my self-esteem." Supplying feedback was seen as correcting, as evidenced by her statement, "I always try and be supportive and understanding of what I read, but often feel bad trying to make corrections on another's ideas."

In thinking about the effect of conferencing on her writing products, Karla had the strongest negative response of any of the students surveyed. She said, "Since college it may have made my papers worse! I feel too insecure to share my work and hear what others think." Luckily, this has not caused her to hate writing. She claims, "I love to write! It's just made me dread sharing my work with classmates." It was apparent to me that Karla was not likely to look forward to conferencing in class.

As noted above, Wendy's experiences with and attitudes toward peer conferencing were quite different. In discussing her feelings when receiving peer feedback, she said she usually felt "quite good. I enjoy writing and most people seem to like reading what I have written." Although she acknowledged preservice teachers "need to be able to accept and give constructive criticism without offense," her previous statement suggests that she feels good about receiving feedback when the supplier of feedback likes what she's written. She did not discuss how she feels if her peer dislikes or disagrees with what she has written. Perhaps she only equates feedback with what is positive, since her response about supplying feedback was, "I am always positive in my responses." This does not indicate a depth of understanding of "constructive criticism" which she earlier stated as important to be able to receive and supply. When describing the effect of peer conferencing on her writing process, she stated, "I find I am more politically correct when p.c. [peer conferencing] is involved." In a puzzling seeming contradiction, she described the effect of conferencing on her feelings about writing in this way, "I think I have the tendency (now) to 'lay it all on the line' and be as honest and forthcoming as possible." While she may be honest and forthcoming in her own writing, her responses suggest that this may not be the case when she provides feedback to other writers.

Given the different positions assumed by these students, I was curious to see what kind of constructive criticism Wendy might offer during the conferences, and how Karla would respond. In the first conference, conducted within their table group, the conversation was on-task and comfortable. Unfortunately, this group did not manage its time effectively, and not all students were able to share their work. Karla and Wendy were active in supplying positive suggestions and feedback to other writers, but neither of them shared their work with the group. Their second conference, conducted as a pair, gave me the opportunity to hear their interaction as recipients and suppliers of feedback. Karla and Wendy had apparently read each other's papers before

turning on the tape recorder. They engaged in extremely thoughtful, specific discussion about the strengths and possibilities for each other's pieces. They began with Wendy supplying feedback on Karla's draft. This was not surprising, since Wendy had had more positive experiences with peer conferencing. Also not surprising was the tenor of Wendy's comments—all were positive and affirming, except for a note to check on proper APA citation format, and an acknowledgement that both of them were wondering about what should go in a particular section of the paper. At the beginning, Karla responded to Wendy with repeated "okays," but as the conference progressed, and Wendy continued to give positive feedback, Karla began to ask questions. She sought advice about specific things she'd written, and admitted being unsure in certain parts. At one point, when Wendy had given several suggestions, Karla responded by saying, "Well, that's helpful. I wouldn't have thought to do that, but I will." When the pair switched roles, Karla provided specific, positive feedback for Wendy, moving section by section through Wendy's draft. Wendy mentioned a couple of things she'd struggled with, but did not seem to be seeking Karla's suggestions. She seemed more confident in what she had written, whereas Karla had even written a note on her own rough draft, "These will be extended in length... very rough draft!" This pair, at Wendy's suggestion, discussed conferencing once more before the final draft was due. Karla expressed enthusiasm for doing so. They finished their conference by remarking how much they enjoyed conferencing before having to submit papers.

It was a bit surprising to discover that Karla was so actively involved and enthusiastic in her conference with Wendy. In her reflection piece, she noted the importance of having the right partner, "I feel lucky that I was matched up with a partner I feel is a hard worker, and who knows what they were talking about." She ended her reflection piece by noting the pair's decision to meet at a particular future time to review their next drafts. Wendy's reflection piece was equally positive, and even more detailed in terms of the specific feedback she'd received. This conferencing situation was a decidedly positive experience.

VINCE AND SALLY

Vince and Sally came into RDNG 300 as friends and were members of the same table group as Karla and Wendy. Both of them were very vocal, and during the first conference Vince took up most of the group's time in sharing his book selections for the assignment. This was not unusual for Vince, who was never shy about speaking openly in class. His initial survey responses did reveal that he had mixed feelings and beliefs about conferencing. Although he noted that one's peer provides feedback and helps with suggestions, he started by saying that one's peer "should help with grammar and spelling errors." He didn't remember conferencing in elementary school but said, "In middle school, I remember thinking to myself that whatever my peer writes down must be correct and I must change my writing." He said that now that he is older, he realizes that not all feedback is necessary, and he has "decided to keep some things and then change some." Vince's early insecurity about conferencing was revealed by his language in his survey responses. In describing his feelings when receiving peer feedback, he said, "I felt dumb, but as it grew on me I felt that we make mistakes and I have opened up more for suggestions." Supplying feedback had also been difficult for Vince. He said he "felt scared that the information I was providing to my peer was wrong or stupid." He also "didn't want my peer to feel stupid." This theme of being "stupid" pervaded his responses. When asked how peer conferencing had affected the way he feels about writing, Vince replied, "I would say now as a college student it hasn't affected me at all. Now as a younger child it made me feel embarrassed because it showed to the class that I was 'stupid.'"

Sally never expressed feeling "stupid" but did express some feelings of frustration with previous conferencing experiences. She said, "A lot of the time I thought it was helpful.... There are many times though if the editor didn't take it seriously, it was frustrating." The notion of conferencing as editing had reappeared. Sally described conferencing as being "used for students to help other students find errors in their papers.... It also helps the students that are editing to read and find errors." Sally moved beyond the role of editor to

evaluator in her note that conferencing is also used “so the teacher doesn’t have to grade all papers.” I was interested in seeing if any of Vince’s previous feelings of insecurity or Sally’s feelings of frustration would manifest themselves in their RDNG 300 conferences, especially in the second conference when it would just be the two of them.

In this conference, they were both very businesslike. Vince began, and as he shared what he was drafting, he never paused to ask for feedback or any input from Sally. Sally had several specific questions as Vince was reading his draft, but she had to interrupt him to ask them. She was very much engaged with his text, as evidenced by her pointed questions for clarification. At one point, she contradicted Vince’s thinking about a book, and Vince revised his thinking to align with hers, noting that perhaps she could write that on his feedback form. After Vince was done sharing, Sally reminded him of her comments, gave him the form to see if he wanted to make any changes, and repeated, “It sounds good to me.” She also asked him if he had any questions about what she’d written on the form. Vince hurriedly replied, “Nope. We’re good.”

When Sally shared her draft, she also read straight through without any pause for feedback from Vince. As Sally had done when their roles were reversed, Vince interrupted her with specific questions and suggestions. He pressed Sally to explain her thinking and focus on her objectives. At the end of the discussion, Sally thanked Vince for his help.

Vince and Sally had different reactions to their second conferencing experience. In his reflection piece, Vince reacted negatively to the use of the feedback form, despite having directed Sally to use the form to record when she contradicted his thinking. He said, “I felt that when my partner was writing things it was all negative aspects of the writing.” He did claim to like getting feedback, and stated, “The feedback my partner gave me was essential for me to change.” This is reminiscent of his middle school belief that he should change his writing as his peer directed, but contradicts a statement he made on his final survey, when asked how the conference affected his writing product. He said it had no effect on his product because, “I’m the type of writer that will stick to his gut feeling and might change something but it’s very unlikely for me as a writer to change my writing because someone else said so.” He repeated this idea later on the survey, saying, “I do not change the way I write do [sic] to someone else’s feedback.”

Sally thought the conference was a “very good experience.” Although she began by stating that she appreciated Vince’s feedback, her second sentence in her reflection piece read, “I think one of the problems I had with it was that there wasn’t someone actually reading my paper to catch all of the errors my paper possibly had.” Once again, Sally appears to be equating conferencing with editing. On a final note, she reiterated what Karla had said of the previous partnership, commenting on the importance of her relationship with her partner. Sally said, “I think that it was very helpful that I worked with someone whom I trust their knowledge, and work well with. Sometimes peers do not take it seriously, but he did.” While Sally appreciated Vince’s serious approach to their conference, sometimes conference participants take this to the extreme, as happened with the third, and final, partnership in this series of case studies.

LIA AND KELLY

Unlike the previous students profiled, Lia and Kelly were not friends. They had sat in the same table group all semester, but there was no evidence that they particularly liked or disliked each other. They had participated politely in group activities, but never were seen chatting before class or on breaks.

Neither Lia nor Kelly indicated having any experience with peer conferencing before high school or college. Like Sally, Lia described peer conferencing as something that “saves time of grading/proofreading by teachers,” noting that “several teachers had me proofread other classmates’ papers and give them feedback on punctuation, word choice, and language flow.” For Lia, conferencing apparently focused mainly on editing, and there was no indication that it involved meaningful dialogue around content. In response to the initial survey question related to supplying feedback, Lia replied, “I am a very good writer so I can critique other’s

writing well. I enjoy proofreading papers and giving feedback.” It was a different story when receiving feedback, however; as Lia said, “I get angry sometimes when peers tell me this is wrong especially if it is a particular person grading me. If it is someone I see as a level better than me, I will appreciate their critique.” For Lia, writing skill is viewed as directly connected to effectiveness as a supplier of peer feedback. On her survey, she also said, “I am usually ahead in writing than other students in my class so I typically received papers back with little to no errors.” She sees the more skilled writer as effective in supplying feedback, but not able to receive useful feedback.

Kelly focused more on the personality and work ethic of the peer partner than on that person’s level of writing skill in making conferences successful. On her initial survey, she said, “I hated it,” when asked about how she felt as a recipient of feedback. She went on to say, “My other classmates did not take it seriously and said that everybody’s papers sounded good when they did not. I did not get real feedback.” On the other hand, when Kelly was the supplier of feedback she said, “I was honest and said when a paper made no sense....” Although Kelly felt that she did not get “real feedback” in previous conference experiences, she said, “Writing has always been hard for me but I always listen to feedback.” She clarified that teacher feedback has always been more helpful for her. Bitterness toward peer conferences was evident in her statement, “Classmates took it as a time to show off new shoes, not listen to my paper.”

Despite some trepidation, I was interested to see if the strong emotions of Lia and Kelly, emotions expressed in terms of anger and hatred, would surface during their conferencing experiences. My trepidation was well-founded.

The first conference, conducted in their table group of four, went very smoothly. Each student shared ideas, and the group stayed on task throughout. However, the second conference did not go smoothly. At the beginning of their recording, Kelly noted that they’d each “skimmed” what the other had written. She referred to this work as peer editing, reminiscent of her previous experiences with peer conferencing. This was also a pair who began by speaking to me through the recorder instead of speaking to each other, referring to each other in the third person when describing strengths in the writing. This indicated a sense of discomfort in addressing each other directly. When Lia suggested that Kelly make a change in one section of her draft, Kelly became defensive and Lia turned off the tape recorder. When she turned it back on, Kelly was silent as Lia explained, “As you can see, I am looking at her work in a different way.” She quickly ended the recording. Lia stayed after class to explain why she’d shut off the recorder, and she was very upset because she felt that her feedback was being challenged or ignored.

This was the conferencing experience that led me to add a reflection piece as an in-class assignment for this section, thereby allowing me to ascertain how these two students perceived the situation. In her reflection piece, Lia said, “I felt the conference went horribly. I felt there was a lot of tension, arguing, and anger within the conference.... I feel the conference was pointless and caused more stress in my life that day.” She went on to say that she doesn’t like Kelly because “I feel our opinions are too different and she criticizes me [sic] work or books too much.” Kelly also was not happy with the conference, and acknowledged the effect of prior experience, “When I heard we were going to do peer conferences I felt a little nervous due to my experience with them in the past.” She, too, cited difficulty with having to work with Lia. She said, “I came to class open-minded and hoped for the best. When I heard who my partner was I began to stress because I knew I would not receive the feedback I needed for my paper.” She referred to Lia as being more laidback and never prepared, which made it “very hard for a student who is prepared and takes their work seriously.” I was again shown the importance of careful partner matching.

DISCUSSION

I hoped that by surfacing preservice teachers' experiences, attitudes and beliefs about peer conferencing before they participated in conferences in my course, I might discern the possible influences on their participation. As the cases presented above suggest, students' previous experiences and associated beliefs about a learning experience do color the ways in which they participate in and reflect on a similar learning experience, even when they are approaching this experience with the added perspective of being open-minded, prospective teachers.

LIMITATIONS

As does any research study, this project had limitations and is not meant to present conclusive findings that are generalizable to other writing or teacher education classrooms. It is meant to encourage other teachers and teacher educators to think carefully about the influence that our experiences, attitudes, and beliefs as learners have on our own learning and teaching. Certainly, one limitation of this study was that I was also the course instructor. Despite all of my precautions to ensure that participation in the study was not revealed to me until after the course ended, it is possible that students responded or behaved in particular ways simply because of my role as "grade giver." A second limitation involves professional disposition, in that students may have responded to survey questions as they thought *teachers* should, not as they really felt. There is also the factor of memory's alteration of events. We frequently remember events differently from the ways in which we originally experienced them. This would affect students' reports about their previous conferencing experiences.

An additional limitation was due to time constraints. I know that students need plenty of scaffolding when learning how to conduct successful peer conferences. I did not have adequate time to devote to the direct instruction, modeling, and guided practice around peer conferencing that would have been ideal. Despite the limitations, the results of this study hold interesting and important implications for stakeholders in the areas of writing and teacher education.

IMPLICATIONS

Regardless of what level is being taught – from elementary school through higher education – teachers using peer conferencing in writing need to keep in mind the key elements of purpose, partners, and process when designing peer conferencing experiences for their students. Issues related to these three elements arose throughout my students' written responses and behaviors when conferencing.

PURPOSE

Teachers need to clarify the purpose of conferring with peers. It appears that peer conferencing is often viewed as peer editing. It's important that teachers provide experiences in using conferencing at other stages in the writing process. A disturbing perception of peer conferencing as a tool to remove the onus of grading from teachers was revealed by participants in this study. Teachers need to be clear – for themselves and for their students – that peer conferencing is first and foremost of benefit for the student writers. It is an opportunity for a writer to receive feedback from an authentic audience of peers without the shadow of formal evaluation or assessment of the writer or the writing product.

PARTNERS

The configuration of peers involved in conferences is critical to their success. Students expressed feelings of nervousness, embarrassment, inadequacy, and frustration at various times, connected to their peer partners. If teachers want peer conferencing to be more than gossip sessions, and if they want these instead to

be constructive opportunities for students of varying writing abilities to benefit, they need to give careful consideration to social and academic needs of students when establishing conferencing guidelines related to who is involved.

PROCESS

Peer conferencing can take several forms, depending on the writing task and the level of student writers. Regardless of what form the conference takes, teachers need to provide clear guidelines and modeling before expecting conferences to be successful. No one is born knowing how to give and receive constructive criticism. Teachers need to give students the tools for doing this kind of work. Using a conference form as a way to capture written feedback can be a useful tool to better ensure that peers stay on task. Whatever the process, this needs to be a consistent part of the writing routine in the classroom.

Considering purpose, partners, and process are certainly all concerns of the teacher educator in facilitating understanding of peer conferencing among preservice teachers, but there are additional implications as well. Teacher educators need to be attentive to the understandings, attitudes, and beliefs that their preservice teachers bring to class with them, recognizing that these may very well affect the learning that takes place and therefore affect how these students teach in the future. They need to guide their students in thinking about the factors that affected them in their own peer conferences, and consider how they will address issues of purpose, partners, and process with their future students. For example, acknowledging that messages are delivered both explicitly and implicitly, teacher educators must guide prospective teachers in recognizing the power of their words. What does it mean to give critical feedback? What is constructive criticism? They need to listen carefully to students who use language about “correcting” or “fixing mistakes” in relation to peer conferencing. They need to think about the strong emotions associated with peer conferencing. They need to help their students recognize how their own experiences influence the way they themselves will teach.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Since 25 participants described experiences with peer conferencing at the college level, this study obviously has implications for higher education faculty, even if they are not directly involved in the teacher education program. Faculty should carefully consider purpose, partners, and process when constructing conferencing activities in order to ensure that these experiences are beneficial for students academically, socially, and emotionally. Rudolph Dreikurs said, “Until I can risk appearing imperfect in your eyes, without fear that it will cost me something, I can’t really learn from you” (Koehler & Baxter, 1997, p. 92). If students do not feel safe in conferencing situations, they will learn nothing from their participation.

CONCLUSION

Linda Darling-Hammond (2007) has stressed the importance of teachers’ reflection and analysis of their practice in order to become more skillful teachers. Studying my students’ experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about peer conferencing and their participation in conferences in my class has provided me with new insights about the complexity of using peer conferencing at every level of schooling and has caused me to think about how the long-lasting impact of prior experiences with an instructional strategy as learners may affect my students’ perceptions and practices as future teachers. Beyond that, it has enabled me to model the important act of teacher as researcher for my own students, hoping that they will embrace this as part of their future role as educators. As Darling-Hammond (2007) commented on powerful teacher education programs, “they envision the professional teacher as one who learns from teaching rather than as one who has finished learning how to teach, and the job of teacher education as developing the capacity to inquire systematically and sensitively into the nature of learning and the effects of teaching” (p. 94). I know that I have learned more

about teaching the use of peer conferencing from carefully studying my students' work in this study. I better understand the importance of purpose, partners, and process as teacher considerations for more effective conferencing experiences, and as I continue to analyze and reflect on my literacy teaching, I am sure that I will revisit these issues with growing understanding.

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APPENDIX A: INITIAL SURVEY

Please do your best to respond to the following questions with frankness and clarity. This will not be graded but is considered part of your class participation.

- 0.) What do you know about the use of peer conferencing in writing instruction?
- 1.) Describe any experiences you've had with peer conferencing in writing instruction during your ENTIRE educational career—from elementary school through your college years. Please be sure to include in your description some identification of the context (i.e., grade level, type of writing involved, frequency of conferencing).
- 2.) If you have experienced peer conferencing, what was the experience like for you as a writer?
 - a. How did you feel as the recipient of peer feedback?
 - b. How did you feel as the supplier of peer feedback?
 - c. How did the peer conferencing experience affect your writing products?
 - d. How did the peer conferencing experience affect your writing process?
 - e. How did the peer conferencing experience affect the way you feel about writing?
 - f. How did the peer conferencing experience affect the way you perceive yourself as a writer?
- 3.) What are your thoughts about peer conferencing from the perspective of a future teacher?

APPENDIX B: FINAL SURVEY

Please do your best to respond to the following questions with frankness and clarity. This will not be graded, but **by completing and returning this, you will receive 1 extra credit point for the class.**

- 1.) What do you know about the use of peer conferencing in writing instruction?
- 2.) Describe your experience with peer conferencing for writing in RDNG 300.
 - a. How did you feel as the recipient of peer feedback?
 - b. How did you feel as the supplier of peer feedback?
 - c. How did the peer conferencing experience affect your writing product?
 - d. How did the peer conferencing experience affect your writing process?
 - e. How did the peer conferencing experience affect the way you feel about writing?
 - f. How did the peer conferencing experience affect the way you perceive yourself as a writer?
- 3.) What are your thoughts and feelings about peer conferencing from the perspective of a future teacher?