

Conferring to Develop 21st Century Literacy

by Savanna Flakes and Kristen Painter

Teachers and researchers have long understood literacy to be essential in achieving academic success and career mobility. In the 21st century, literacy is the threshold for accomplishing tasks and achieving goals in virtually every aspect of life. Students must develop strong reading, writing, and thinking skills to address multiple contexts online and in print.

Academic and career success today relies on assimilating large quantities of informational texts. Often complex, these texts require readers to: link new information to related sources and prior knowledge; apply skills acquired elsewhere; express understandings in writing and verbally; use new information immediately; and draw from new knowledge to contextualize and apply further information. In daily life, informational texts guide nearly every goal and encounter: assembling a desk; finding a rescue pet or life partner; keeping up with the news and friends' lives; growing assets or vegetables; and choosing a bank or a home or a shaving system.

Pleasure reading, too, has exploded in availability, content, formats, and complexity. For those with strong literacy skills, reading and writing offer entertainment that can expand imaginations, deepen interests, and facilitate creative expression.

Most digital texts are immediately interactive and are influenced by multiple parties' agendas. While a person reads an online text for one purpose, machines are reading that person—with that person's digital history and those of other people just like that person—to adapt the text to meet commercial goals.

Today, humans and digital content sources each play both of the traditional literacy roles: as readers of texts and texts to be read.

That is why students must become good independent readers/writers and great thinkers. Beyond the traditional language skill-sets—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—21st century literacy encompasses mastery of the thinking skill-sets: comprehension, understanding, synthesis, analysis, metacognition, and judgment.

Teachers can guide students to mastery of 21st century literacy by routinely using methods that effectively and efficiently build and reinforce strengths across the language skills and up the knowledge taxonomy. Conferring is just such a method.



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Conferring: Defining the Method

The infinitive verb to confer means to consult with one another, exchange opinions, converse on a matter, and collaborate. Rich conversation focused on a shared goal, conferring deepens meaning, strengthens bonds, heightens motivation, and strongly increases the chances of a successful outcome.

Specifically, we are writing about a teacher and a student conferring together deliberately to strengthen that student's reading, writing, verbal and thinking experiences and skills. The two-fold goal is:

1. Build, in each student, superb literacy/thinking skills, and
2. Move each student through increasingly challenging, satisfying, and independent literacy experiences.

Conferring has the power to make what feels impossible—uniquely educating each child—into a classroom routine that efficiently, effectively roots strong literacy skills in every student. Conferring points clearly to the most useful next lessons for small groups and the entire class. It supports students as independent readers and high-order thinkers. It gives them opportunities to share strategies and connections, affirm their own growth, and learn from one another.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR CONFERRING

- **Opening Question (each time):**

“How’s your reading going?”

“How’s your writing going?”

- **Deep Dive Follow-up Questions:**

“Show me where you’re doing that deep work.”

“How’s that strategy/idea working for you?”

“What about that is making you a better reader/writer?”

“What about that feels challenging?”

The Conferring Cycle

Step 1: One-on-one, rich conversations—With preparation and a listening stance by the teacher, these take a few minutes each. The teacher opens with, “How’s your reading (or writing) going?” This open-ended question signals that conferring has begun. Because it becomes familiar, students can mentally prepare what they want to bring to the conference. Based on the student’s response, the teacher asks relevant follow-up questions that explore the student’s interests, reading or writing experience, connections to the content, and progress toward a personal goal set by the student. The teacher may then offer something new to consider, invite the student to set a new goal, or revise their strategy.

Step 2: Data Collection—The teacher jots notes during or right after each conversation, not waiting until later when rich particulars will have faded. With reflection, these notes become the data on which to base next steps.

Step 3: Data Synthesis and Analysis—The teacher prepares next steps by reviewing the data collected about each student. The data informs instructional choices for individuals, pairs, small groups, and the whole class. Each day’s data-set informs decisions she’s making anyway, such as where to confirm and deepen, where to fix a misstep, where to increase the challenge, where to give more practice time, and when to transfer responsibility to each student.

Conferring Roles & Responsibilities

TEACHER	STUDENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Open with the same open-ended question. ✓ Facilitate making meaning, finding connections, and developing/using thinking strategies when reading (predictions, visual representations, etc.). ✓ Notice the student's patterns. ✓ Listen to the student talk about strategies, successes, and current struggles. ✓ Confirm successes and extend the student's reach. ✓ Find ways that the student stimulates the teacher's thinking, e.g., modeling academic discussion. ✓ Take notes with each student to capture and recall data while it is fresh. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Mentally plan ahead what to bring to the conversation. ✓ Make connections between the reading and their lives/other reading and content. ✓ Reflect aloud about their experiences, skills, and thought processes. ✓ Prepare and follow up with research relevant to the discussion. ✓ Assess and articulate progress toward current goals, and set stretch goals. ✓ Consider their reading/writing strategies and explore how to refine them. ✓ Acknowledge and celebrate achievements / successes. ✓ Take ownership of their own learning.

Step 4: Differentiate Instruction—The teacher uses balanced literacy structures to act on these decisions. She may deliver a mini-lesson and assign station practice for students who need fluency tips and practice. Next time she confers with these students, it may be over a basket of books assembled to reflect their interests. The next academic discussion after a read aloud may focus on predictions, because the teacher knows that three students are developing the skill; two have become skilled at it; and three haven't yet caught on.

Step 5: Debrief—The teacher facilitates small group and/or whole class debriefs. Using a focal visual, such as collaborative charting, the teacher has students identify the interests, progress, understandings, and goals that arose in this round of one-on-one discussions. The teacher models academic discussion then shifts the discussion to take place among students. This encourages them to become resources for each other (“Oh, try X, it really helped me...”), confirm and spark each other's imagination (“I didn't even think of that!!!), and stretch each other's critical thinking (“But when I read that, I thought....”). Students practice reflection and meta-cognition. The debrief helps students deepen content and vocabulary meaning-making while confirming each other's strengths and sharing strategy tips. This process also weaves reading, writing and ideas into their peer relationships.

Step 6: Reflect and Refine—To sustain and deepen the process over time, the teacher should meet regularly with a collaborative partner (peer or coach) to: discuss conferring strategies and how to refine them; open new opportunities; reflect on data; review progress toward current goals; set stretch goals; celebrate successes; and take ownership of her ability to strengthen every student's literacy and thinking skills.

Best Practices for Conferring

Build a personal relationship with each student. Use early conferring to build rapport and establish a baseline of skills. This helps you facilitate the student's own goal-setting, monitor their progress, and confirm and support their successes. Ask about their interests and strategies. Explore the connections they make to their own lives. Discover what they want to accomplish.

Plan the Gradual Release of Responsibility. Start explicitly articulating the purpose of the conversation. Model and talk through strategies. Describe—do not just praise, describe—what they're doing well. Offer and model fix-up strategies. Gradually hand each of these roles over to the student. Guide them to develop metacognition, assess their own progress, and set new goals. Shift from showing/telling them, to inquiring of them, to letting them lead you through the conversation.

Judge your pace individually, as you do with all skill scaffolding. For example: Student A may need concrete, explicit support around predicting while Student B is strong there, but needs clear guidance to make connections between this and previously learned material.

Collect data immediately and in writing. Do not wait for later—we all know how details grow fuzzy by day's end. These notes become the data that informs your choices of mini-lessons, centers practice, group debriefs, and further literacy lessons. Keep stretching each student by glancing at your last set of notes before the next conversation to refresh your memory.

Find the note-taking tool and style that works for you. The two criteria are: You can use it easily to take meaningful notes during or immediately after conferring and you can decipher the notes later well enough to use them as data about that student. Concise note-taking is key, so that you spend more time conferring and less time writing about conferences. Find a short-hand that works and don't give up searching for and trying tools and a short-hand system until you find the one you can—and will—write in easily and understand/analyze well. The method falls flat very quickly when it relies on memory.

Confer with a coach or peer. Conferring in isolation is like performing a duet alone: possible, but almost certainly not great. Collaborative thinking is as powerful among teachers as it is between teachers and students. It will help you celebrate successes and set goals. The collaboration will energize and stretch you. For those without a coach, peer-to-peer conferring works very well for this, and helps both partners grow. When choosing a peer thought-partner, ensure that you are honest and supportive of each other, respect each other, enjoy time together, and don't already agree about everything.

Invite a colleague who teaches parallel to you (same content, different students) or one who teaches different content to the same students. If choosing the latter, you can help your partner build ELA-reinforcing skills for their lessons. He or she can introduce you to strengths/interests that your students demonstrate in her lessons, which will give you ideas to help your students connect with ELA content and apply their skills across disciplines.

Tips for Getting Started

Be patient with yourself and persist. This is a learning process. Keep refining your skills in conferring, note-taking, and data-analysis. Confirm and reinforce your strengths. Fix up missteps. Take on new challenges. Articulate and aim toward new goals. All, preferably, with a thought partner who can stretch and motivate you.

Optimize your classroom's physical space. Show that this conversation is collaborative by moving to where the student is reading or writing. Settle down so you can speak together eye-to-eye.

Apply and reinforce routines/classroom expectations. Explicitly share the value of conferring. Define the class's responsibilities while you focus with one student at a time. Collaboratively describe what the classroom should look and sound like when a student and you are conferring. What does a student do if they get stuck, or finish their work, or need to use the bathroom, during another student's discussion time? When/why may a student interrupt a 1:1 discussion? Post signs around the room—and explain them—on how to make choices and solve problems before turning to the teacher: "Ask 3 then me," "Use your resources," etc.

Continually learn more about your students. The better you know them, the more effectively you can help them become great readers, writers and thinkers. Use early rounds of conferring to set skill/interest baselines and develop a warm rapport. What are they reading? Writing? What do they wonder? Enjoy? What strategies do they already use for literacy, thinking, and life? Discuss and note their strengths and areas for growth. Review recent data before every new conversation, to confirm and stretch the skills they're working on and turn their attention to new skills, content, and standards. Periodically, review your full data-set to pick up threads of interest or progress that you may have dropped, and to decide what new skills are ripe for introduction.

Start small. A narrow focus will allow you to acclimate yourself and your students to the process. Once you've established routines and rapport, start stretching your students. Pick one standard or skill. Limit your follow-up questions to one or two that focus on only one area. These small 1:1 collaborations will naturally restrain the scope of early group debriefs.

Conclusion

You may wonder when you'll find the time to work one-on-one with each student. Again we say: start small! Set a goal of conversing with each student once a week, then twice a week as the routine sets in nicely, and onward. (Another reason to keep immediate notes is to remember which students you've already met with.)

Take advantage of balanced literacy routines to meet each student for 2-4 minutes during a center task or independent reading/writing. The more time your students spend actively learning—rather than watching or listening to you—the more time you will have to confer one-on-one. You'll almost certainly find that conferring will accomplish some of your past goals for small group meetings.

As for the data collection, analysis and planning—by clarifying each student's next steps, these will ultimately make quicker (and more effective) work of instructional planning, differentiation, and formation of pairs and small groups.

Each of your students can become a strong independent reader and writer and a great thinker. You can become a great facilitator, coach, and guide to all of them on this journey. Be as patient, persistent, collaborative, open, and reflective as you would have them be. You and your students will get there together.

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