

## A Personal Conferencing Primer

### Making the Most of Student-Teacher Conferencing

The guidelines that follow can help make conferencing a powerful tool for learning and thinking. Included in the suggestions are some key tips from Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar, authors of *Teaching the Best Practice Way*, a very practical guide to core instructional methods across the curriculum:

- Explain the conferencing is part of daily classroom life – make it a normal practice that includes every student. In secondary schools, particularly, conferencing can easily be reduced to a strategy that is only used when a student is not learning or when a student’s unwanted behaviors have a negative impact on the group and the learning environment. Conferencing, first and foremost is a way for you to know each student personally, learn how each student is actually doing in your class, and witness students’ thinking processes in order to adjust your instructional approach for that student. Thus, students’ first conference experience should be part of a formal conferencing cycle that includes every student.
- Establish regularly scheduled conferencing at least two days every week for at least thirty minutes while students are engaged in independent work. Conferencing becomes much easier to sustain if you “bookend” your weekly Monday to Friday planning in a way that designates specific learning tasks and routines to different days of the week, week in and week out. Conferencing becomes an expected and natural component of the learning process. Daily informal conferencing goes hand in hand with the use of a workshop instructional model. (See p. 237)
- One caution is worth noting. If the group cannot function on its own, you can never facilitate conferences during class time. Before you set up your conference routine, decide on the habits of learning that students need to practice competently in order for conferencing to become a realistic option. (See pages 147 – 147.) Students, for example, must learn to work independently or in small groups for extended periods of time without distracting others or requiring your constant attention and monitoring. If this is a huge hurdle in the beginning of the year, introduce conference periods that last only ten to fifteen minutes, aiming for thirty minute conference periods by October.
- Share the goals of conferencing in general (see page 420) and let students know that conferences will usually have specific academic, behavioral, or personal focus.
- Explain the purpose of informal conferencing and check-ins. This kind of conferencing happens on a daily basis while students are engaged in guided practice, small group work, or independent learning tasks. The purpose is to assess what a student is learning, doing,

Excerpted from *Making Learning Real: Reaching and Engaging All Learners in Secondary Schools* by Carol Miller Lieber, © 2009 Educators for Social Responsibility, pages 415-417.

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thinking in the moment, at a particular point in a learning unit, or at particular stage of completion of a product or project. Informal conferencing usually takes place at a student's desk or work space. It can take anywhere from one to three minutes. Nancie Atwell, a writer's workshop pioneer, suggests that "a rolling chair should be standard equipment for a conferencing teacher".

- Explain that formally scheduled conferences have two distinct purposes:
  1. For ALL students, formally scheduled conferences provide a set of bench marks that help students assess their goals, progress, and performance in your course. A formal student conference cycle in which you meet with every student should not extend beyond two to three weeks. A pre-conference writing/reflection task will help students prepare for conferences. (See examples of assessment prompts on pp. 232-233.)
  2. For SOME students, formally scheduled "as needed" conferences provide the opportunity to identify and address specific learning gaps, map out high challenge work for high achieving students, or tackle behavioral problems or personal issues that are getting in the way of a particular student's learning.

Choose a space for formal conferencing that provides a modicum of privacy for more personal conferences and enables you to sit side by side with the student.

Formally scheduled conferences usually last around five minutes if they occur during class time. "As needed" conferences that focus more on diagnosis and problem solving can take longer, which is why they may need to be scheduled at other times beyond the regular class period.

- Be clear that conferencing provides an opportunity for you to see and hear what individual students are doing and thinking, so the teacher's role is that of a listener and question asker. When you ask a question, give students time to think before you charge ahead.
- Explain that sometimes – when a student is not meeting academic expectations or is having a difficult time becoming a high performing group member – conferencing provides the opportunity for assessing what's not working and making a plan for how to get back on track.
- Explain that sometimes a classroom incident will require urgent, emergency conferencing (immediately after the incident has occurred or before a student leaves at the end of class). If and when an incident warrants immediate action, you want students to know that you will need to step aside with a student momentarily, while the group is expected to continue working.

- Be sure to let students know that they are welcome to request and schedule a conference at any time.
- Although most conferencing will take place during class time, let students know that other times when you will schedule conferences: before or after school, during lunch, or during your prep or conference period.
- For conferences that are prompted by academic or behavioral problems, try to keep some general guidelines in mind:
  - During the conference share some hopeful expectations. *“This conference will give us a chance to clear the air and figure out how to move forward, so you can be successful in this class.”*
  - Provide the student with a clear purpose for the conference. Make certain the student understands why the conference was needed and what changes the student needs to make. Ask the student to restate any specific commitments or next steps before the conference is over.
  - Thank the student for his or her willingness to talk and listen and assure the student that you have confidence in his or her ability to make better choices/work harder/learn to \_\_\_\_\_, etc.
  - Follow up with several quick check-ins during the next two weeks.