

DEVELOP COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND A WRITER'S VOICE

21ST CENTURY SKILLSET: LISTENING, SPEAKING, VOICE

EXTRACTS FROM CHAPTER 4, "WRITING THE FUTURE", KAYE LOWE, PETAA, 2019

At the risk of overstatement, when writers have something to say, they want to communicate it. Whether they are five or 55, writers understand the importance of writing with clarity and coherence to get their meaning across. They don't write in gibberish, hoping someone will understand their meaning. Readers, however, demand more than just a clear, concise message on the page or screen. Readers want to know that there is a person behind the words. The writer's voice must connect; it must go to the heart and mind of the reader. Without a voice, writing is lifeless and withers on the page.

When writers achieve their goal to communicate with verve, writing is revered. It takes on, according to Lamott (2018), a presence in and openness to the world. When writers can't find their voice, they stultify and can even shut down. Writers who communicate effectively entice their readers into the script. The reader feels enriched for the experience and the writer feels validated.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE GAPS?

In The global achievement gap, Wagner (2014) names seven skills that the upcoming generation will need to survive in an increasingly competitive, global economy. The ability to write is paramount in two of these survival skills.

In discussing the increasing need for students to develop effective communication skills, Wagner (2018) cited interviews with several hundred corporate leaders who complained that 'new hires' had difficulty being clear and concise. He noted that it was hard for these young workers to create 'focus, energy and passion' around the points they wanted to make. Business leaders who were interviewed did not complain about grammar, punctuation or spelling. They complained about 'fuzzy thinking', and stated that new staff did not know how to handle the flow of information nor know how to access and analyse it. Employers complained that their new recruits failed to write with 'a real voice'.

Wagner highlights that effective written communication will be even more significant as workplace teams become more diverse. How can students be supported to develop communication skills? Start with helping children understand why they write and for whom.

Wagner's research was preceded by the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003). It was specifically focused on writing and called for a 'writing revolution'. It recommended children double the amount of time they spend writing in classrooms, and that their repertoires of writing be expanded to include writing arguments and information texts.

DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Children's self-esteem, wellbeing, identity and friendships play a pivotal role in the development of communication skills. Their capacity to express feelings and be understood, and their thinking skills, all develop and strengthen through communication. From birth, children's first gestures and actions signal the beginning of communicative competence. In the very early years, spoken language emerges in response to role models and a supportive learning environment. Significant others who spend time in one-to-one communication with very young children, verbalising and conversing with them, assist vocabulary development and understanding of how language works.

The development of writing skills follows a similar trajectory. Children need access to the tools of writing and the support of significant others who model how it is done. Children's initial attempts to communicate through writing look like art in the shape of 'chicken scratchings'. Their marks develop into recognisable symbols as they gain greater control of fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination.

Through the demonstrations of others and interactions with others, they pay attention and begin to understand why we write. They make rudimentary attempts to communicate and attach meaning to what they produce. Their growing independence and risk-taking is reinforced by the responses of significant others who 'pretend' to read their writing attempts, and respond to it in positive and affirming ways. With this comes a sense of achievement, increased risk-taking and growing competence. In the early years, they have a desire to communicate: to write the names of those they love, to write their own names and the names of siblings, extended family and pets. They strive to communicate in the way they see those around them communicating in print and using digital devices.

The foundation for written communication is oral language. Children who do not experience regular, extended conversations in the home and community are exposed to as many as 30 million fewer words, by age three, than their counterparts (Hart & Risley, 1995). The implications are profound for students' abilities, confidence and effectiveness when communicating their thoughts and ideas. Without practice, multiple exposures to words, and systematic opportunities to use words, children are not likely to acquire the vocabulary and conceptual linkages to knowledge at the pace needed to narrow the achievement gap. Writing is dependent on students' competence to operate in the world of words – oral and written.

WRITE TO COMMUNICATE

Writing as a means of communicating has two possible interpretations: knowledge telling and knowledge transforming. The distinction is a matter of goal orientation. When writers write for knowledge telling, they write to express what they know about a topic. Novice writers tend to concentrate their efforts in this direction. Writers who view writing as a means of transforming knowledge write with the reader in mind. Flower (1994) makes the distinction on the basis of experience and expertise, and refers to writers as 'novice writers – writer-based' and 'experts – reader-based'.

According to Locke (2015), those operating from a writer base focus their attention on 'knowledge telling' and ask:

- What do I know about this?
- Does this sentence correspond with the idea I want to express?"
- What else do I know about this?

Those who write from a reader base focus their attention on transforming knowledge and say:

- If I want to achieve this, then the first step I need to take is ...
- I can do this by saying ...
- Having said that, what I need to do next ...

What does this mean for the classroom? Teachers work with students to ensure they know the purpose of their writing and why they write. Without purpose and a sense of audience, students revert to regurgitating content and recalling information with voices that are barely recognisable as their own.

LISTENING

The way to help children figure out who they are is to listen to them. Listening plays a critical role in writing and its importance is often overlooked in classrooms and in life. Children who are read to on a regular basis pick up the nuances of language and tune in to the rhythm, rhyme and wonder of words. They develop an ear for words and expression. It starts with listening.

In this day and age, there is a need to put down digital devices and turn off the television, to stop, make eye contact and listen. Listening is so basic that we take it for granted. We all crave for someone to pay us attention, take an interest in what we have to say, show us that they care, acknowledge that we exist, and appreciate us and our uniqueness. Listening connects us to others. Listening is validation for our ideas and feelings. We are assured that what we say matters; that we matter. In order to feel connected and secure, and to know that they belong, children have to be heard. It is a keystone to writing.

Genuine listening demands taking an interest in the speaker and what he or she has to say. Listening well is often silent but never passive. Listening serves two purposes: one, to take in information and corroborate with others' experiences; and two, it allows listeners to step out of their frames of reference (even if only momentarily). Nichols (2009) says that unfortunately, most of us think of ourselves as better listeners than we really are.

Why listen well to others	How to listen well
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nourishes their sense of worth • Satisfies the need for self-expression • Helps them to clarify their thoughts and feelings • Confirms that we all have something to say that's worth listening to • Makes them feel valued and validated • Leads to mutual respect – children are receptive to what we say when they know we listen to them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give control to the speaker • Turn off your filters – tolerate differences • Give the speaker time • Be open to listening and discovery • Show empathy – avoid sentimentalising or giving unsolicited advice • Be a witness, not a judge • Avoid interrupting to tell your version of the story

MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

The feeling of not being heard is a painful human experience. It leaves the speaker feeling unappreciated and small. When children experience this on a regular basis, their worlds contract, as does their sense of self-worth and vitality. Being listened to spells the difference between feeling accepted and feeling isolated. Wolf (1980) defines solitude, especially psychological solitude, as the mother of anxiety and he explains that how people respond to us as well as our connection to others is vital for our psychological well-being.

Not being heard has detrimental effects and long-lasting implications for learning. When those we care about most don't listen to us, it's painful to realise. According to Goffman (1961) 'There seems to be no agent more effective than another person in bringing a world for oneself alive, or, by a glance, a gesture, or a remark, or shrivelling up the reality in which one is lodged.' Aloneness and insecurity lead to poor communication and vice versa. The world of writing expects the writer to speak up.

Effective communication isn't achieved just by taking turns when talking. It takes a concerted effort to achieve mutual understanding. Mutuality is being present to another person in the context of respect and equality. Together, speaker and listener co-author the conversation. Effective listening is the basis for getting to know others and to learn about them, and is the precursor of relationships.

Establishing a balance between expression (talking) and recognition (listening) creates the context for conversations to be on an even footing. In classrooms where teachers move away from their desks and sit with students in one-on-one conferencing situations, mutual respect and quality listening are evident. In such situations, teachers do more listening than talking. They pay attention to students and ask questions to elicit insights into how they can improve their writing. Listening allows the teacher to understand the students' thinking processes, and assess what they know and don't know about writing.

LISTENING AND EMPATHY

The essence of good listening is empathy. It is achieved by being receptive to what other people say and how they say it. Empathy requires an open mind, and sensitivity to other ways of thinking and expression. Good listeners accommodate diversity, appreciate uniqueness and tolerate differences.

By the time children reach four or five, empathy, or its absence, shapes how they relate to others. Children who have grown up being listened to understand that others are available and receptive to their needs. Preschoolers with a history of empathic listening are more engaged, more at ease with their peers and happier (Nichols, 2009).

When listening is genuine, the emphasis is on the speaker, not the listener. An empathetic listener is non-judgemental, attentive, restrained and mostly silent. The listener pays attention to the speaker without intruding or taking control of the conversation. Listeners deliberately make the effort to suspend their desire to speak long enough to hear what the others have to say. Empathic listening transforms relationships; it is a critical ingredient of the writing classroom. Writers need to listen attentively to each other and respond.

Most failures in listening result from the listener's need to say something; the focus shifts from what is being said to the listener's own experiences, opinions and judgements. This leads to reactions rather than responses. Pretending to listen while checking a mobile phone does not work.

ALREADY LISTENING

Listening is always co-determined. We hear the speaker from the perspective of already knowing what we expect to hear. We, the listeners, react with an 'already listening' response. When answering the phone, we respond and listen differently to a relative than to someone from the tax office. The credibility of the speaker (judged by the listener) influences how they are heard. A speaker's credibility is influenced by the clarity and relevance of the message. Bias, in the form of preconceived notions and expectations, impacts our listening. Those who listen while tuned into their own feelings, thoughts and reactions are in fact talking and listening to themselves. It stands to reason that those who don't talk to us in turn don't expect us to listen.

The obligation to listen can be experienced as a burden, and we all sometimes feel it that way. But it is quite a different thing to be moved by a sense that the people in our lives are eminently worth listening to, a sense of their dignity and value. One thing we can all add a little more of is understanding – respect, compassion, and fairness, the fundamental values conveyed by listening.

SPEAKING

Reading and writing float on a sea of talk. - James Britton

Speaking plays a significant role in the development of writing. Wells (2001) identified two types of speaking evident in classrooms: monologic and dialogic. Each impacts on writing in different ways. Monologic is the most common type of teacher talk, and it occurs when teachers leave few opportunities for interaction. The teacher is the giver of knowledge and students are passive recipients.

Dialogic, on the other hand, is based on an interaction between students and teacher as they share a common inquiry and jointly contribute to the learning. Dialogic talk engages students and teachers in genuine dialogue and inquiry. It promotes critical and higher-order thinking skills (Edwards-Groves, 2014). When talk is dialogic, knowledge and understandings are mutually constructed through collaboration, exploration and interaction. The inclusion of dialogic talk about writing facilitates students' understandings (Myhill et al, 2016; Love & Sandiford, 2016).

When talk is dialogic in classrooms, teachers and students interact with each other and students contribute to the decision-making process: teachers and students co-construct knowledge. Teaching is done 'with' students rather than 'to' students. Students know their voices are heard and matter. They are not mere 'consumers' in the learning process. They willingly share their growing knowledge either to test it or enable others to grow in their understanding.

It is in the context of talk that students explore and justify their own thinking. They ask questions of others and interact to figure out what they want to say and how to say it. When students are given opportunities to talk with their peers and to problem-solve, they are more motivated and self-reliant (Alexander, 2008). Research found that even small amounts of conversation (10 minutes a day) improved literacy learning regardless of the students' family background or their reading level (Nystrand, 2006).

There are three discrete phases in which dialogic talk benefits thinking and writing:

- During the generation of ideas – What shall I write?
- During the oral rehearsal – How shall I write?
- When being metacognitive (talking about the process of writing) – How do I write?

In many classrooms, teachers dominate the talk. The talk is primarily monologic. The ratio of teacher talk to student talk is recommended to be around 20% to 80% for effective learning (Boushey, 2006). In practice, it can be more like 80% teacher talk, 20% student talk.

Speaking about writing in the classroom takes on many forms: teacher–student conferences, peer-to-peer conferences, author circles, whole-class discussions and collaborative groups, to name a few. Through talk, students express what they know and understand about the writing process, and interact around the texts they create. When teachers listen to writers talk about their writing, they can differentiate and tailor responses to meet the needs of each and every student.

Listening to students talk about their writing makes a difference to how they perceive themselves as writers. It also provides an opportunity to reinforce or set high expectations.

VOICE

Writers need to discover they have a voice if they are to communicate effectively and connect with their readership. Voice is the imprint of the writer on their writing. It appears at every stage of the writing process. Newkirk and Kittle (2013, p. 99) say to 'ignore voice is to present the process as a lifeless, mechanical act ... teachers who attend to voice listen to the person in the piece and observe how that person uses process components.

Voice is the writer coming through the words, the sense that a real person is speaking to us and cares about the message. It is the heart and soul of the writing, the magic, the wit, the feeling, the life and breath. When the writer is engaged personally with the topic, he/she imparts a personal tone and flavour to the piece that is unmistakably his/hers alone. And it is that individual something – different from the mark of all other writers – that we call Voice. (Education Northwest, 2014)

US author Stephen King says that ‘readers don’t come back for the content, they come back for the writer’s voice’. He believes it is this intimate relationship that voice engenders between the reader and the writer that has the reader looking for more. He goes on to explain, ‘You hear people talk about “voice” a lot when I think they really just mean “style”. Voice is more than that. People come back to books looking for something. But they don’t come back for the story, or even the characters. They certainly don’t come for the genre. I think readers come for the voice.’

It is not uncommon to find young children writing with voice. The following excerpts give a sampling of the different ways that children establish a voice in their writing, using humour and descriptive language to appeal to our emotions. Each excerpt gives a true sense that a real person wrote it.

Once there was a pencil. His name was Brown. One day, something happened. One day, he was sick. He had a-pencillitis- Ari, Kindergarten

... Right I’m still trying to write as much as I can. Now, mind you, this book will probably never be published because it’s not really interesting and I think I’ve spelt a lot ov werds rong. - George, Year 4

BURNING EMBER
A raging revenge
A cold blooded killer ready to burn
A fury ready to rise until breaking point
This is my fate. —Jack, Year 5

I froze, watching as the huge, scaly chest heaved up and down, in time with the deep rumbling of snores. Finally, I thought, I can prove to everyone at Dragon Academy that I can kill one. A dragon. I didn’t just become a knight because my father is the best one ever, the richest person of our time and headmaster of Dragon Academy. I unsheath my sword out from its holder, the silver blade and golden handle glinting in the moonlight as a slight ‘ching’ rang throughout the dark clearing. —
Madeleine, Year 6

Sport is a game that you play to have fun and compete against your friends, but it is also a game to bring everyone together, to bring everybody in as one - nations, regions, boys and “girls, men and women! But ‘apparently’, there are some ludicrous people out there who think that men and women shouldn’t play together in high level competition. I personally think that men and women should be brought together in competitive sport, and here’s why ... —Tim, Year 6

Voice goes beyond the individual words on a page – the writer calls you in. The distinctive mix of words tied together with conventions leaves the reader feeling satisfied. Voice gives writing its sound. Students learn what writing sounds like from what they read, from what the teacher reads and what their peers write and share. We tune our writing voices to the writing voices we know.

In order for students to develop a voice, it is imperative that they write about what they know. They have to choose topics that are significant to them. When students are asked to write about topics of little interest and about which they know very little, they write a minimum amount and what they do write is bland at best. Topics that are not theirs, or those that have passed their expiry date provide no impetus for the writer to step up and insert their voice.

There is a place for assigned topics and genres, but it is not in sustained daily writing time. Assigned topics could be the focus of literacy activities or teacher-led inquiries, or completed in other key learning areas where genres match the content. For example, in literacy activities, students could unpack and understand how to write a report. In science, they could write a report based on their scientific experiments, using the criteria developed in the literacy block activity.

In order to discover that writers have a voice, some mentors recommend adopting the voice of another writer as a way to begin. Lamott (2018) states that ‘it is natural to take on someone else’s style’ as ‘a prop that you use for a while until you have to give it back and it just might take you to the thing that is not on loan, the thing that is real and true: your own voice’. As much as she recognises the value in adopting another voice initially, she is adamant that the writer has to do what it takes to arrive at their own voice. ‘The truth of your experience can only come through in your own voice. If it is wrapped in someone else’s voice, we readers feel suspicious, as if you are dressed up in someone else’s clothes ... you are removing yourself one step further from what you have seen and what you know’.

Writing with voice is dialogic. That is, it is influenced by the sociocultural contexts in which writers write. The words of writers are influenced by “by audience, as well as the forms of writing accepted and valued by communities, and how

writers see themselves in that community. Kamberelis and Scott (1992,) state: 'A writer's voice is not created solely out of the depths of his or her individuality. Rather it is constructed out of the voices of the individuals and communities to which the writer has formed various kinds of social alignments' This has implications for how we create writing communities within our classrooms. Writers have to be encouraged to share, openly interact with others, and value the writing of their peers in order to experience and build confidence in the expression of their voices.

In order to tune in to the writing voice of others, writers have to care. If students don't see themselves as writers, they have no legitimate reason to search for their own writing voices in the words of other writers, nor do they have a commitment to write well.

PROMOTING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Classrooms that foster communication skills are characterised by:

Respect

We demonstrate sensitivity, understanding and empathy. Students embrace diverse opinions and different ways of knowing, show mutual respect and listen intently to one another. They appreciate the unique character of each writer's voice, and applaud the array of topics and interests evident in their writing communities.

Dialogic talk

Genuine dialogue dominates the classroom. Teachers and students jointly contribute to the learning. Together they inquire, ask questions of each other and accept different perspectives in response.

Authenticity

We write for real purposes and audiences. Students understand why they write and for whom. They publish on a regular basis. In Kindergarten, they publish every week or two weeks because this provides an invaluable source of reading material too. Other grades publish at least twice a term.

High expectations

Teachers inspire young writers not to lower their standards. Careful, encouraging praise where it is due can fuel the efforts of writers for a long time. A writing teacher looks for what is working well: a stand-out sentence, phrase or choice of word, a feeling engendered. The student who writes one sentence has an idea to be expanded; the student who has written just the date may be encouraged to write a diary. No writing effort can be wrong or bad, it is just unfinished, and all children – especially reluctant, resistant writers – need to know that they have a voice and it is being heard.

Communicating through writing is a social practice. Students need to share their writing with an appreciative audience if they are to grow as writers. Lloyd Jones, author of *Mister Pip* along with 15 other books, states that at the heart of writing is an author inviting a reader in: 'After all, language is an act of persuasion. Who are we trying to persuade? The phantom reader. How can I make you see this hill the way I see it? I will use language to create the picture so you can only see it the way I see it – an act of persuasion'.

COMMUNICATION SKILL STRATEGY: CONFERENCING

Teacher–student conferences, peer-to-peer conferences and author circles are the backbone of the writing classroom, with value resulting from attentive and responsive listening. Teachers and peers reflect back to the writer what has been heard, and prompt the writer to question, extend, elaborate, alter and make decisions about what has been written.

Conferencing is a conversation that supports the writer with new understandings and insights, which can be applied to future writing. Teachers follow each and every writer in their classroom to understand their intentions and how their intentions can be supported to completion. Ray (1999) highlights the long-term benefit: 'Know that the help you give a child on a piece of writing will outlive that piece of writing'.

Conference Type	Description
Teacher-student conference	<p>Schedule conferences with each student on a regular basis and establish a routine for how conferences occur. Teachers listen, asks questions and support students to problem-solve their way to solutions. Students keep control and ownership of their writing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen. Let the student lead. • Ask questions to understand the history of the piece of writing and what the writer brings to the writing situation. Try to understand how and why this writing is important. Acknowledge the writer’s journey and aspirations for the writing. • Respect the writing by not making corrections on the original. Make comments or suggestions on another piece of paper, post-it note or notebook, or create a new file with tracked changes. • Identify the teachable moment. For example, give positive feedback, suggest subtle changes, highlight the use of conventions, or explicitly guide the writer in the use of a text type. <p>Teacher–student conferences and teacher-led inquiries prepare students to conference with each other.</p>
Peer-to-peer conference	<p>Assign two students to each conference group, and change the pairings each week. In classrooms where students work in author circles, pair up students who aren’t in the same circle as this broadens each writer’s exposure to different audiences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writers maintain ownership of their writing, reading aloud something they have produced that week. Some writers in Kindergarten make up a story to match their early writing efforts and this is encouraged. • Peers listen in order to respond. The conference is an interactive dialogue between writers about their writing. • Teachers initially provide guidance on how to respond, and step back as students master conferencing dialogue. <p>Peer-to-peer conferencing and author circles provide different audiences for children to share their writing.</p>
Author Circle	<p>Create small groups of students (preferably three) who share their drafts and provide constructive feedback. Each member of the author circle is allotted time in which they read and get a response (three or four minutes is usually adequate in the lower grades). Use a timer to ensure everyone gets a chance to share.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writers choose a piece of their own writing to share. They ask their peers for help with any aspect of it. Students are enthusiastic about the process when they know their voices will be heard and they receive immediate feedback from an audience they value. <p>Teachers guide responses initially. They instruct students to listen and comment in a certain way (for example, to listen for words that make a difference or comment on the lead sentence, to point out what is working well and how the writer attracted your attention, to ask questions that draw out more information).</p> <p>Author circles are an opportunity for writers to receive constructive feedback from a real audience.”</p>

CONFERENCING CONSIDERATIONS

Levels of support and guidance teachers need to provide to conduct effective conferences varies from class to class. Routman (2005) advocates for less formal, teacher-directed peer-to-peer conferences. She recommends giving students time to respond spontaneously to the work of their peers. Research shows that students take the comments of their peers to heart and that peers demand greater clarity, accuracy and precision than teachers (Gillet, 2001).

The Author's Chair offers an opportunity for students to share their writing with peers at any stage of the writing process. Students receive constructive feedback, and in doing so build essential skills in communication and collaboration.

SENTENCE STARTERS FOR FEEDBACK

Feedback style 1: "I like the way you"	
Persuade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> gave an example of ... because ... thought about ... because ... convinced me to ... because ...
Inform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> told me about ... included details about ... included the diagram because ...
Entertain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> made me feel ... used the word ... described ... made me laugh about
Feedback style 2: ask the author a question	
Persuade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can you tell me more about ... ? What do you mean by ... ? Can you say that another way? What more can you say about ... ?
Inform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where did you get the information? How do you know ... is true? What else could you
Entertain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does this story remind you of other books you have read? How will you ... ? Why did ... ? What might happen next? Is there another way to include ... ?
Feedback style 3: give the author positive feedback	
Persuade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You convinced me ... The words ... stood out for me because ... You set it out ... and that helped me to ...
Inform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I learned that ... I would like to know more about ... I found ... really interesting Do you have more information about ...

The Chair invites my students to view themselves as authors and helps them understand their options as writers ... Not only does the Author's Chair assist in the children's developing sense of what an author (including themselves) does, it strengthens the classroom learning culture by fuelling a collective sense of engagement and motivation, enhancing the children's intentions as writers, and developing group cohesion.