



Raising Confidence and Engagement through a Framework for Functional Writing, Focusing on Conferencing

**– A Joint Project between Denny and St Mungo's High Schools' English and
Social Subjects Departments.**

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Raising Confidence and Engagement through a Framework for Functional Writing, Focusing on Conferencing – A Joint Project between Denny and St Mungo’s High Schools’ English and Social Subjects Departments.

A lot of ground work had already been done by various other projects and Scrutiny Reports in Social Subjects and, indeed, English have already identified the need to improve Writing at 5 – 14 levels. For busy teachers it was important not to waste time reinventing any wheels

Since the Edinburgh Conference, at which preliminary discussions took place, the group had further meetings to clarify and refine the project.

At this point it is important to acknowledge the help, support and advice from members of the group from Falkirk High and Carmuir Primary School, who, whilst not directly involved in the delivery of the project, had a great contribution to make to it.

Rationale

The project stems from and seeks to contribute to Falkirk Council’s Literacy strategy:

- it employs methodologies found in the good practice as detailed in the North Lanarkshire Writing Pack
- it also seeks to build on and share the existing good practice which is found in our Secondary schools across the S1 curriculum
- as well as further develop the awareness of certain strategies which have been used successfully in the primary schools surrounding independent learning and peer assessment.
- Also, through further refinement and future development, it could be used in conjunction with the Falkirk Framework for English which is being developed under separate cover.

Early Progress

At our first meeting, **27th September 2005**, we discussed the similarities and the differences in our approaches to functional writing in our subject areas; as well as our differing expectations for the lengths of pieces and the time that the pupils should be allowed to prepare for, and to complete functional writing tasks.

It was agreed that there could, indeed should, be more commonality in our methodology and approaches to what is essentially the same type of writing and that cross curricular reinforcement would only be of benefit for the pupils and their attainment in Writing generally.

This in itself was an extremely interesting and beneficial exercise. With so many different subject areas, and both primary and secondary teachers at the same table, it was rewarding in itself as much reflection on practice was done by all teachers. There was also the sharing of good practices, not necessarily within the remit of the project, and the exercise was found to be thought provoking for everyone.

We also considered the methodology contained in the North Lanarkshire Writing Pack (NLWP), which seemed to encompass much of what we discussed, and which already has the benefit of being coherent, organised and is accepted as being successful. We looked at this as a possible common methodology which both Departments (in the first instance) could employ in approaching the various kinds of functional writing that we require the pupils to undertake in the various subject areas which were represented.

Within this, it was essential that conferencing be considered in terms of its aims, objectives, benefits and, indeed, its practicalities. In general it was felt that there should be awareness raising of this concept. It was also felt that a clear statement on conferencing should be produced and given to the members involved in the project. This statement, attached (Appendix 1), was produced, disseminated and discussed at Departmental Meetings.

There then followed much discussion on where, in the writing process, conferencing should be used, particularly with regard to pupils' project work. The NLWP suggests that conferencing is best employed just before a final piece of work is presented. It was pointed out, and accepted, that project work was usually long term work and that conferencing, just prior to presentation of this work, might not be practical given the pupils' efforts already invested in this type of work. It was felt that conferencing could be better employed at another part of the writing process – planning, for example.

It was decided that it was the exercise of conferencing, this sharing and discussion stage, that was important and it would be beneficial at any point in the process. In practice, however, much of the conferencing was done during the planning stage, with only some conferencing being undertaken in the English class at the Proof reading and Publishing stage.

A further meeting was held in Denny High School on **6th December 2005**. At this meeting we were joined by representatives of Denny High's English and History Departments, as well as St Mungo's Modern Studies Departments, who were keen to be involved in the project.

Further consideration was given on the NLWP, as well as the discussion of tags for the pupils work. A presentation was drawn up (available for download) for the delivery to staff in order to raise awareness of the writing process.

The presentation was delivered in its entirety to the staff at St Mungo's during the in-service days and extracts were discussed at meetings with those members of the working group.

During the in-service days there were unexpected approaches from several departments, including Art and Physical Education, who expressed interest in the methodology to support essay writing in their subject areas.

Practicalities Surrounding the Introduction

Tags (Appendix 2) for the various pieces of work were important. There was also particular interest in the tags on which traffic lighting was used and there was the feeling that through a system such as this we could monitor the pupils confidence and engagement in the task. This would allow evaluation of the impact of this project. Timing of the project was also an issue due to rotations in Social Subjects.

It was, however, decided that a common tag sheet would be beneficial. At our next meeting, tags would be brought, discussed and decided upon.

In preparing tags, it is fair to say that it was difficult not to make the tags too busy. They were felt to be best used as a working document, which reflected the stages that the children would go through from inception to completion of a piece of written work.

For the traffic lighting system to be a truly effective measure, there would need more than the red, amber, green approach, and would therefore not strictly be traffic lighting.

If we had to design the tags again a different measuring system would need to be adopted as what pupils appeared to do was:

- tell us what they thought we wanted to hear, and
- automatically colour the next box after completion, correction and teacher comments.

With this in place, we felt that we could go back to classes confident that we could employ conferencing as a strategy to raise confidence and engagement through a Framework for Functional Writing.

Evaluation of Impact of the Project

As stated previously, it became obvious relatively early that given the nature and the term of the project, evaluation would be difficult and would necessarily involve a great deal of teacher subjectivity in order to evaluate the project.

Having said this, it was still felt to be important to questionnaire the pupils. A questionnaire was duly drawn up and completed by 60 children who represented a cross section of abilities, and who employed conferencing in different subjects and in different schools.

The focus of the questionnaire was, of course, questions relating to confidence and enjoyment (a crude euphemism for engagement) and some interesting results showed themselves, as follows:

Did you expect to enjoy Conferencing?

| | | |
|-----|----|--------------|
| Yes | No | Wasn't sure. |
| 55% | 2% | 43% |

Did you enjoy Conferencing?

| | | |
|-----|----|-------------|
| Yes | No | Some of it. |
| 58% | 0% | 42% |

Do you feel more confident about your work now?

| | |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | No |
| 90% | 10% |

Did it help you enjoy completing your work?

| | |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | No |
| 79% | 21% |

Do you feel that it has improved the quality of your work?

| | |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | No |
| 90% | 10% |

Does it make you feel more confident attempting this work in the future?

| | |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | No |
| 88% | 12% |

Question (1) sought to assess if the pupils actually knew what was being done and why. The rules for conferencing had been explained and the purpose alluded to. It is clear from the pupils that they were very aware of the purpose, the desired ends and the benefits to them and to others.

This is reflected in some of their comments:

Please explain what you think the purpose of Conferencing is.

“I think the purpose of Conferencing is to allow people of mixed abilities to further their education as when you are in a conference with your peers it is easier to talk and share your ideas.” S1 Denny High School

“I think it is to plan or to discuss ideas” S1 Denny High School

“ I think the purpose of Conferencing is to get a lot more ideas from other people because you all think differently and you might not understand something and someone in your group could tell you and it would save the teacher coming away from his work” S1 Pupil St Mungo’s High School

“ I think it is for discussion and to try and improve our own work using other people’s ideas and changing things in our own work, but it is not copying!!” (sic) S1 Pupil St Mungo’s High School

“ I think it is to get better marks” S1 Pupil St Mungo’s High School

Interestingly no-one mentioned that there was increased enjoyment of the task and the concept of engagement, although obvious to the teachers delivering the project, was never mentioned or even alluded to in the comments. However, many did realise and did mention that one of the desired ends was for them to improve their grades.

When in the Writing process did you do your Conferencing?

All recognised that they were using conferencing during the planning stage – which was encouraging as it seemed to point to an appreciation of the distinct parts of the process they themselves engage in when approaching a writing task.

Did you enjoy Conferencing?

It is also quite significant to note that of those who said that conferencing did not help them enjoy their work, many still felt that it was beneficial to their work and to their attainment in various tasks.

There has been improvement in attainment as reflected in some of the National Test scores in English. But how far conferencing contributed to improved attainment is impossible to measure as there was no control group within the class or the year group.

It is also important to note that conferencing was not always enjoyed fully (only 42% enjoyed some of it). It might have been beneficial to have included another question about what was not enjoyed in conferencing and indeed by whom – the more able? The less able??

Perhaps the question - ***Did it help you enjoy completing your work?*** should have been ***Did it help you in completing your work?***

However, as stated previously, some measurement of engagement, however crude, was necessary.

Do you feel that it has improved the quality of your work?

Here the statistics are very encouraging. An overwhelming majority of pupils felt that there was a positive impact upon the quality of their work and teachers would agree that there have been improvements. However, as before it is impossible to measure just how far this can be attributed to conferencing.

What is perhaps significant is that the percentages of those who felt more confident and those who feel that the quality of their work has improved is exactly the same. Confidence in self, ability and the potential to succeed and quality of work produced would seem to be directly linked.

Does it make you feel more confident attempting this work in the future?

We felt that the answer to this question fell into the category of telling us what we wanted to hear. The strategies need to be employed over the longer term and measured far less crudely. How many times do you have to look at the recipe before you can make the cake unassisted?

This having been said, it should be remembered that many of the pupils – indeed, those who tended to be better at conferencing – have had experience of the methodology throughout their primary careers so there might be some merit in what the pupil have said here.

Finally pupils were asked to explain why they would feel more confident in the future:

“If I am stuck I might get an idea from someone in my group” S1 pupil St Mungo’s High School”

“Conferencing has made me more confident because when I know that my ideas are not rubbish when other people hear them it does not make me worry about using them in my piece of writing” S1 Boy St Mungo’s High School (Although we know that there are gender issues in Writing, the responses were not broken down into gender. I only know this has been written by a boy because I recognise his writing, but perhaps he touches on something that is worth further investigation?)

Teachers also were of the opinion that there was merit in the use of conferencing and as stated previously, albeit this is a subjective measure, there was evidence of an increased engagement with the task as well as an increase in the enjoyment of the pupils as they challenged other ideas and sought to explain, expand and sometimes defend them:

“ Pupils really enjoyed the process, thinking ideas through with their peers .. a sense of accomplishment was felt by many when they agree upon a coherent plan” J Proudlock, PT History, Denny High School.

“Many of the pupils marks improved, sometimes by as much as a level after taking on board effective feedback from their peers” A Farley, History Teacher, Denny High School.

“I could detect a tangible improvement in the quality of work done after conferencing had been undertaken. Throughout the exercise pupils remained on task, offered some quite mature ideas, challenged ideas that they did not agree with appropriately and with skill and reflected this excellent discussion in quality ideas in their written work.” J McWilliams Faculty Head, St Mungo’s High School.

What Happens Now? Next Steps

There was enough confidence in the merit of conferencing to begin to widen this out to other departments. It was felt that the methodology worked well in both the English and Social Subjects Departments across the two schools and that there was a continuity of approach that would benefit the pupils if they were having this model reinforced across the curriculum in the same school.

Denny intend to further develop the methodology in History and to refine the strategies before rolling out the approach to the rest of the Social Subjects department. They feel that there is the potential for CPD and cross curricular collaboration in order to look at common tag sheets across Social Subjects. They feel that a commonality of approach would be beneficial, particularly for their subjects in S1 which are rotational in their nature.

In St Mungo's the picture is similar. There is early discussion with the Social Subjects department in order to offer them in-service based on the English Department's experience of the NLWP and the project on conferencing. It is felt that this will be needed to protect 5-14 results due to the move to Standard Grade in S2. Here also, it is felt that it will be extremely beneficial to reinforce writing skills across the curriculum where Functional Writing is undertaken in order to support the successful delivery of Standard Grade in S2 and S3, as highlighted in the presentation for staff .

Appendix 1 – Statement on Conferencing

Introduction

Conferencing is the term given to the process whereby children in twos and threes read and discuss their own and other pupils' writing with a view to improving the piece of writing. The writing process as outlined in the North Lanarkshire Writing Pack offers a scaffolded approach which encourages pupils to take responsibility for their learning and develops a sense of growing independence. Conferencing is seen as a key part of the writing process.

Writing

Once pupils have been set a task and have been offered a model, and teaching targets/success criteria have been made clear, they should move on to the thinking and planning stage. It is at this stage that conferencing can be useful.

Why Conferencing?

Pupils can help each other see whether or not their plans will help them to meet the success criteria.

Conferencing encourages pupils to improve and develop their plans. In conferencing in this way, the pupils are expected to expand initial ideas offered and to receive feedback from their peers and from the teacher.

After Planning

After this, pupils should be allowed quiet time in order to encourage review and improvement and further quiet time for writing.

Once the draft or piece of work is completed, there should/could be another opportunity for conferencing.

Conferencing is recognised as being as tremendously important part of the writing process. It involves pupils in valuable self and peer assessment. The questioning attitude with which pupils regard other pupils' comments about their work means that they engage in a level of thinking and debate which is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate when the teacher has made the comment. It is interesting that pupils may learn more effectively from their peers than from the perceived expert (the teacher). There can be a tendency for pupils to cease thinking when a teacher passes comment because they accept the word of a teacher and do not see room for a debate.

Furthermore, the process whereby pupils are capable of assessing something which they cannot yet achieve independently gives the pupils a new awareness to take back to their own writing.

Thus the conferencing process encourages pupils to be analytical and to take responsibility for their own work. The important aspect of conferencing and of the peer and self assessment involved, is that they are **informed** – the pupils know what they are looking for in the pieces of writing.

Appendix 2 – Tags

Task

WILF

1)

2)

3)

Audience: Teacher/class/other _____

Purpose: explain feelings/check understanding/give opinion

Format: essay/report

Tone: Formal/Informal

Planning

I used : Modelling
 Brainstorming
 Mind mapping
 Paragraph plan
 Conferencing

Checklist/Review:

1. Introduced the work correctly
2. Recounted the main points/fact
3. Given my opinion/analysis/evaluation
4. Concluded properly
5. Acknowledged my sources
6. Appropriate presentation

Teacher Comment — you have done well with:

-
-

Next time try to:

-

Pupil Comment: _____

Appendix 3 – Questionnaire on Conferencing for Pupils

1) Please explain what you think the purpose of Conferencing is.

2) When in the Writing process did you do your Conferencing?

Preparing Planning Proofreading and publishing

3) Did you expect to enjoy Conferencing?

Yes No Wasn't sure.

4) Did you enjoy Conferencing?

Yes No Some of it.

5) Do you feel more confident about your work now?

Yes No

6) Did it help you enjoy completing your work?

Yes No

7) Do you feel that it has improved the quality of your work?

Yes No

8) Does it make you feel more confident attempting this work in the future?

Yes No