Conferencing and Literacy Desiring

Trusting Students as Writers

Conferencing with students during workshop, listening and coaching as 4th-graders produced writing that reflected their own goals, constituted the majority of my time in Mr. Allegro's classroom. Students regularly sought interaction with adults, and conferences usually emerged organically as 4th-graders requested support or as we checked in with individuals and pairs. Getting to all students who wanted a conference was a bit challenging, even with volunteers, and students understood that they could not always access an adult for feedback. Per our blue sheet process, which provided a guide for steps to take in developing a piece of writing (see Chapter 1), students were directed to conduct peer conferences before requesting an adult conference. However, meeting with an adult often seemed to be a preferred mode, and an adult conference "waiting list" became a regular feature on the classroom whiteboard. Students would write their names on the board—first come, first served—if they wanted feedback. Conferences themselves could be as brief as a few seconds, amounting to a quick brainstorm around new writing, an affirmation, or simple suggestion—or they could last 10 minutes or more, especially if we were privileged enough to have additional volunteers.

No matter the interaction, great discipline was required on the part of adults to listen to what kids were saying and doing. Indeed, in conferencing, I found it easy to crowd out students' concerns with my own, and I observed numerous times when volunteers did the same. Navigating between what I thought should happen in writing and what a student might be thinking was a humbling, powerful daily exercise in our workshop. It required apprenticing to the worldview of a child, decentering my own perceptions. Calkins et al. (2003) assert that a key step in any writing conference is to "weigh whether you want to accept or alter the child's current plans and processes" (p. v). Such "weighing" is precisely what I found complex. There were intricacies in "accepting or altering" a child's plans in a workshop driven by participation, play, and exploration.

Becoming better at listening is a deceptively difficult practice. In listening, we are often guided by our own expectations of acceptable endpoints and outcomes. Our perceptions are mediated by the "official" curriculum,

which, as Dyson (2013) suggests, makes it difficult to perceive the intriguing "unofficial" writing practices of students. Olsson (2009), an early childhood educator, points out further that we tend to look for what we already know as we imagine children—for what we expect "should be" there. We use preset goals, personal assumptions, a belief in knowledge as given, or trust in child development itself as an orderly set of stages, to project onto children what they should be doing and learning. When we do not see what we expect, and when student energy and desire go in unexpected directions, we surmise that something is wrong. I myself found it hard to escape the logic of these beliefs as I worked with students, which the vignettes below reveal.

In this chapter, I introduce an unconventional term, *literacy desiring*, which some theorists (Kuby & Gutshall Rucker, 2015, 2016; Leander & Boldt, 2012; Olsson, 2009) have employed recently to expand our usual perceptions of language learning. Literacy desiring emphasizes the holistic, in-the-moment, full-bodied ways in which students are drawn into and energized by a range of textual engagements. The term *desiring* resists more common figures of speech such as literacy *skills*, *abilities*, *products*, and even writing *processes*—that focus on design, tools (for the future), and endpoints. The term *desiring* also challenges our habitual language regarding student "needs"—which are typically understood as deficits.[1] By contrast, Kuby and Gutshall Rucker (2015) write:

> The literacy desiring we conceptualize is about the present processes of producing —a force, a becoming, a coming together of flows and intensities. . . . Our intent with literacy desiring is to focus on the intra-actions of people-with-materials, -movements, and -surprises while creating, not necessarily a future end product. (p. 315)

Here, attention is drawn to "flows and intensities" of literacy engagements, and to the "surprises" that occur as children engage in writing. Teachers and researchers seek to understand the ways that students exhibit energy, emotional resonance, and bodily engagement with and around texts. Leander and Boldt (2012), from this perspective, emphasize the phrase *affective intensities*—moments of heightened connection and engagement, even excitement—as central to literacy practice and research. Such a nonconventional perspective calls us to place greater value on when and how literacy "intensities" and "desiring" emerge, to better understand what such moments consist of and what students are accomplishing through them. (For a related point with respect to reading practices with older children, see Wilhelm and Smith [2014].)

Olsson (2009) argues likewise that teachers and researchers must start "from the idea that things are already going on [with children] and that one's task is to go in and try to latch on to these things" (p. 181).

Teachers must learn to attach to the energy and motivation already present—walking *with* student motivations, seeking to understand the problem already at work—rather than simply replacing it with an adult goal or standard. Such a stance emphasizes that we engage with more than isolated writing skills when we conference, and that such skills are always part of a set of interconnected interests, purposes, actions, and material realities—or what philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as an "assemblage." Texts become "participants" in the world (Leander & Boldt, 2012); they *do* things—writers "use them, move with and through them, in the production of intensity" (p. 25). This view of texts invites us to recognize the presence of multiple overlapping forces in writing events, as literacy desiring is pursued. In conferencing, we should prepare ourselves for the fact that we may not know everything about writing—that we have things to learn—and that surprises will occur.

Below, I present two conferences with students, from different years, arguing that conferencing interactions were crucial opportunities for students to make unique writing practices visible, and for adults not simply to "help" but to work on listening and "latching on" to the complex motivations and desires of students.

LEARNING TO LATCH ON TO STUDENTS' GOALS

February 12, Year 2: 9:30 A.M. As I arrive today, the kids are well into a Valentine's project. Mr. Allegro is modeling for students how to glue two pieces of black construction paper cut out in the shape of hearts. He has kids glue these two pieces with colored tissue paper between them. He says, "Remember: Don't glob, just glue," then shows students how to trim the edges of the tissue paper. He alludes to the fact that workshop is coming up soon and says the next step in the Valentine's project will happen later this afternoon.

Students gradually transition to writers' workshop. There is no minilesson today. A few students get classroom laptops from the cart; a few partner teams go outside; pairs form, talking about ideas. I overhear Terence and Steven talking animatedly: "We're going to work on 'Super-Leprechaun' for St. Patrick's Day . . . and read it *on* St. Patrick's Day!" Another student who is listening chimes in: "I love St. Patrick's Day." A holiday focus has permeated writing this year, something that didn't happen last year. There are three volunteer parents today—me and two moms, one holding an infant. One volunteer asks if I can help her son, Cameron, bind (publish) his story. He is proud of his accomplishment, "Laser World." It's about seven pages, neatly typed and well edited. His mom is right there and celebrates with him as I finish the binding process. She's had a positive hand in this, especially with the typing.

9:53 A.M.: I pause and take note of what the kids are doing. It's hard to capture the multiple worlds at work, and I know I'm missing a great deal. Terence is reading a story idea back to Steven. They have filled in a planning page, and Terence reads a summary of what the plot will be. I guess that Terence is doing most of the actual writing, but Steven—who seems to talk a great deal but write little—is clearly offering a lot. They seem content, even excited, to be working together. I overhear, "We can have guest appearances by Super Santa!"

Cameron is already back to work. He and a partner are making a title page for a new story, called "The Valentine Boys and the Big Bad Heartbreak." Several students are involved in drawing. Vicky is looking through a cartoon-technique book and is drawing a few figures rather than writing. My guess is that she's working something out for a story—I will need to check with her. Mandy is drawing an image with her colored pencils. Calvin asks me about a picture he's drawn: He asks if it looks like a pot, and I say yes. I learn later that this is part of a story he's working on about zombies, but Cameron's mom, a consistent volunteer, points out that he's been drawing for the past 2 weeks and hasn't written anything without an adult pushing for this or writing with him. She's concerned.

I overhear Steven saying to Terence, "Once we write the story, we'll see what happens after that."

Mr. Allegro is working intently with Kent, reviewing what's written on a laptop screen in front of them. Michelle is still putting together her Valentine project. Ronny is typing intently on a laptop. Isabel is working across from him, rereading her work. Next to me, Damien is writing a story and reads part of it to Vicky, who's sitting across from him. They are playing with words. I overhear him saying the word *flashback* and Vicky giving him ideas. She says, "It could be 'Flashback, applejack'. . . ." In Damien's story, titled "Cat Got Your Tongue?," the narrator writes the word *Flashback* as a subtitle, as if to lead into a flashback memory, but then a cat named Jack interrupts the narrator, because he thinks he's being spoken to. "Flashjack?" the cat interjects.

How Much to Revise on Valentine's Day

10:05: Isabel and Angel ask for a conference. We run through the blue sheet process, and they report that in a peer conference Vicky liked the story and gave them just a few surface corrections to make. I suspect that the peer conference has been cursory, but rather than send them back, I invite them to read to me. Angel and Isabel take turns reading their story aloud. It's about a girl who writes a special Valentine to her "secret crush," but the message gets lost in translation. The boy who was supposed to get the Valentine assumes it came from a different girl—from the most popular girl

in the school, someone they have fictionally named Kate Henderson. The narrator is upset; this was not her plan. However, in the end things work out. The secret crush eventually comes by the narrator's house and gives her a Valentine. The twists and misunderstandings in the story are what make it work, along with themes of mistaken identity and hidden desire. The girls mark it a 5 on the blue sheet, the highest score they can give (see Chapter 1 for a description of the rating system).

I struggle with what kind of feedback to give them. I certainly like the story, but I want to push them a bit. We've told students that a 5 means they should expect feedback and be prepared to revise and improve their work. For example, in this story, they seem to rush to the resolution too quickly. There is room to enrich the scenes, to build up the overall tension, to add descriptive detail. The problem, however, is that revision takes time. Angel and Isabel want this piece to function *today*, not next week, when Valentine's Day is past. They are not especially interested in revising, which might technically "improve" the story but only in an abstract, adult-oriented sense. Such "improvement" is seemingly distant from their own sense of quality, which is connected to *timeliness*, to the energy of today.

We reread page one aloud, and I decide to ask them questions that come to me, initially focused on detail: "So why didn't the narrator write her name on the Valentine?" (The obvious answer—it was a "secret crush.") "How old is your narrator?" I discover that she's in 4th grade, but Isabel argues that no detail here is needed. She says that readers will be able to *tell* this is 4th grade, because, as she says, "2nd-graders wouldn't think this way, and 6th-graders probably don't do Valentines." The girls express a great deal of social awareness, and I suspect they have another reason for not disclosing the grade level—perhaps not wanting to spawn audience suspicion that the story reflects their own affectionate interests. I ask if they want to give the "secret crush" a name, but they say it's better to be mysterious. I'm struggling to pose useful questions, although there is certainly room for writing growth, for better crafting of this piece.

Yet, too much emphasis on "revision" itself seems to be part of the problem. Revising eclipses *their* goal. This isn't just about writing skills; it's about an event, *today*, Valentine's Day (which occurs on Saturday this year), and beyond that, it's about emerging and compelling social realities in their lives: sexuality, gender, attraction, relationships—new territory. They're giddy about this piece. And they've put good work into it. The time to strike is now. Angel and Isabel want my approval, but even more than that, they want me, in Olsson's (2009) words, to "latch on" to their excitement and energy (p. 181).

I'm not so great at this in the moment. But we do reach a compromise. We finally agree that they can work on revising a bit next week—that we won't bind or publish now—but that it's definitely good enough to read aloud today during sharing time. This works for them. Sharing time

is powerful. I write down that their goal for next week, before publishing, will be to focus on adding details—one or two significant additions, something to enhance the plot and vividly strike their readers. Next week, we'll look at some "vivid phrases" we've been posting on the board as models. Yet, even as I write this, I'm aware that the "secret crush" story is *already* vivid to them. Indeed, the story would make an amazing and timely text for a 4th-grade discussion, raising questions about "liking" people, mistaken identity, gender, status, name-calling. It's rich territory for second-semester 4th grade.

Helping Students Continue in a Flow

My goal here is less to explain "how to" conduct a conference and more to revisit assumptions about what students need from us in writing interactions. What kind of expertise is most valuable? For me, I tend to forward my own writing knowledge and instincts, trying to get kids to reflect on writing by posing questions and seeing their writing from an outsider's or reader's perspective. I try to make my own "cognition" visible, hoping that students will glean strategies from my modeling, that they will adopt similar questioning practices themselves. This approach aims less toward perfect or accurate "form" in writing and more toward strategic thinking on students' part, which can lead to more in-depth writing.

The tension I experience above is whether Angel and Isabel should, in fact, work to "improve" their piece of writing on these terms, or whether I need to "latch on" to *their* purpose and energy. I struggle with this. How easy it is to take the wind out of a writer's sails! Or simply to miss the wider range of what their writing might mean to them. This doesn't imply that I should never draw on my expertise or that we should never revise. But it does suggest a different kind of awareness on my part, the need for new considerations. Perhaps my hallowed questioning practices are limiting, even demotivating to students—tone-deaf to the moment, to the literacy desiring that is at work—making these 4th-graders wonder how and when writing is *ever* valuable, and for whom.

A stance that respects literacy desiring shifts our gaze from predetermined expertise. As Dahlberg and Moss (2009) suggest, the focus is, rather, "to follow how the learning processes proceed and their power to continue" (p. xxii). This stance emphasizes "following" learning in the moment, observing how energy is "continuing." Beyond asking ourselves "How can writers improve their coherence, detail, or point?" we must also ask: "What helps them continue in a flow?" This seems especially important given the common exhaustion that writers can feel through their writing efforts. Meier (2011) explains that children often resist editing and revising because they "are physically tired and lack the energy to go back and revise" (p. 100). Workshop, in this respect, has not magically motivated students to

want to revise their papers, but instead it helps make visible the multiple components that feed Angel and Isabel's energy—the dynamics and presence of a holiday; emerging awareness of sexuality, gender, and attraction; their own friendship and partnership, the fact that they are exploring this territory *together*; narrative as a tool; and a larger classroom context and audience that might be interested, to whom they hope to display their newly charted reality. The "text" here is *one* item among many pieces in an "assemblage," and our preoccupation with just one piece, the abstract "quality" of the text, might miss the larger event that is going on.

Workshop provides a way for me to navigate this dilemma—specifically through our sharing forum. Public sharing offers new layers for what "being done" with writing might mean. Reading the Valentine's piece aloud to classmates fulfills a key purpose for Angel and Isabel—one that likely outshines the written revisions they will make next week. Indeed, Angel and Isabel took turns reading their story aloud at the end of class, and even though a few students didn't listen well (a conflict between two peers emerged and became distracting, with one student staring in anger at the other), and although Mr. Allegro had to refocus the class and ask Isabel and Angel to read more loudly, by the end, students (at least those near the front of class) were highly engaged in the plot. There was good applause as they finished, although, sadly, no time was left for questions. Sharing writing in this way became another way of "revising" and "completing" the text—of having it fulfill an active function—and perhaps even of assessing whether enough detail existed.

For Angel and Isabel, growth and energy around revising may come when they sense first that someone can enter into their space with them—that an adult, in this case, "gets" or is willing to seek what they are after. In retrospect, simple mirroring affirmations, such as "Wow, the narrator seems to like him a lot" or "She's in a complicated situation, isn't she?" might have been more useful. Rather than posing questions (my usual approach), mirroring the emotional resonance of a piece can help writers feel heard, allowing for further talk, connection, and elaboration on students' terms. In this particular case, I suspect that a direct affirmation might also have been called for: "You *have* to share this today!"

Beyond affirmation, constructive feedback might best be situated—not based in general processes of what "all" 4th-graders need but connected to particular students and a particular moment. Rather than my usual concerns about descriptive detail, what questions might enter into the flow of the "problem" students are working on in this story and on this day in particular? For example, if Angel and Isabel eagerly wish to present this piece *today*, given the singular energy of the Valentine's holiday, how might my feedback work with this goal more directly? For example, what do they most need for the presentation to come off as they hope? What goals do they have for sharing time? To what extent might I need to let go of the need to

"revise" this time, at least as I conceive of it? Writing growth, and a desire to revise, I suggest here, may evolve as children come to direct their own intensities, shaping and experiencing, in the moment and on the right timeline, the value of their own literacy desiring in the classroom.

RESPONDING TO CONFUSING WRITING: MACIE'S STORY

Next, I track my work with one writer over several sessions during our fourth year of the workshop. Macie's writing followed a narrative mode that I didn't easily recognize. Trying to understand her work and "improve" her narrative skills brought me to wrestle with my own assumptions and starting points. Macie shares an evolving story that moves in eclectic directions and that she herself struggles to summarize. I listen sympathetically, but find it hard to know what steps to take and how her self-driven writing instincts can be both celebrated and nurtured in the direction of what I consider to be writing growth. I confront questions such as: What limits exist in following or building upon a student's own literacy desiring? What does "growth" mean for students whose skills seem especially weak but who are also learning what it is they want to say, and do, in a writing classroom? How does a focus away from endpoints, more grounded in participation and writing as exploration, serve a student like Macie? A challenging degree of listening was called for in this case, raising questions in me about what I was listening *for* and what was being enabled or hindered in the process.

Olsson (2009) encourages a broad view of children's sense-making, pointing out that incoherence and even "nonsense" are often "the very means by which we make sense" (p. 113). Young children, for example:

> play with language through inventing it again. . . . They invent new languages never before heard of. . . . This is often the approach that children have not only toward language but towards most things they learn; everything is potentially otherwise and not static. (p. 114)

This stance looks for "the production of sense" in a wide field, one that includes what we sometimes may think of as incoherence. Such a commitment, Olsson (2009) says, shifts everything for the child, who is no longer seen as someone "who always has everything wrong" (p. 182). Conceiving sense and nonsense, coherence and incoherence, as interconnected (rather than as mutually excluding) "makes it possible to re-evaluate young children's sayings and doings, to take them seriously and to see them as contributions to the world, to see them as added constructions of the world" (p. 182). Such a stance does not mean that adults and children engage in meaningless communication. What matters is that we are open to meanings that we may not initially follow—and to writing as an assemblage of actions not

confined to the text itself. We must be careful not to dismiss things that do not immediately fit into preconceived categories. This has implications, especially for the language expressions of nonmajority writers, new language learners, and alternatively developing writers, whose attempts may be less recognizable or less clearly coherent to adults.

Resisting a Ranking Stance

January 12, Year 4: Macie comes over to me silently as if she wants me to see her work, but she doesn't say anything. She's holding some writing, so I inquire. Her story is about a mommy cat and a baby cat. The top half of the page has scrawled handwriting and the bottom half has a drawing of two cats. I invite Macie to sit with me and to read the top half. "Mommy I'm so hungry! . . ." she reads from the page. The baby cat's voice is what we hear for a few sentences. There is minimal punctuation and no other voice. Page two then goes on to adopt a different narrative voice—one more distant, informative, outside the story, telling us "about" cats.

I want to support Macie in building her writing from the initial scene she's set, especially around the baby's hunger. I first ask if she wants me to ask some questions about the story. I am learning the importance of asking this simple question in workshop conferences—that is, checking in first to see if questions, in fact, are desired. Sometimes, other responses are more helpful: listening, mirroring back, rereading, reenacting, drawing, smiling, relating to the story ("Oh, that reminds me of . . ."), or affirmation. Sometimes it is the student who has the question or comment to make. Although I always have several questions to ask while reading a writer's work, young writers do not always enter conferences assuming that adult questions should be at the center. I've also noticed ways in which this assumption, on my part, has broken the flow of energy. I try to ask now: "What kinds of things are you working on?" or "Tell me about . . ." or "Are you interested in hearing some of my questions or thoughts?" Starting in this way seems to give writers respect as well as agency in how we might learn together and what they might learn from me. Indeed, to respond "yes," to ask for questions or feedback, is risky, opening young writers up to critical attention—something not every student (or even adult) writer is ready for immediately after composing.

Macie says she is open to questions, so I focus on the opening scene: "Why was this kitty so hungry?" I ask. Macie answers, and I record some of her response: "Mom tried to get her food but she couldn't because she had another baby in her stomach. So the baby kitty ran around trying to get food." I ask other questions, trying to get a feel for this story-world: "What did her mother do in response?" "Are the kitties wild, or do they have human owners who feed them?" After a brief conversation, Macie stops to write the following on her paper: "tring [trying] to get food."

Earlier that same day, I had worked with two highly fluent and confident writers. Amanda, for example, keeps a "Writers' Workshop Folder," which has an opening page with a "to-do list," under which she has checked off eight out of 10 items. Today, she showed me three pages of a delightfully written, single-spaced draft, "Mr. Penguin's Trip to Egypt." This is a new installment of a series she started last year on her own. Last year, Amanda tells me, she wrote "Mr. Penguin's Trip to France." Earlier today, I also worked with Rebecca, an unusually strong writer, whose early drafting offers rich detail and complex, interweaving plots around fantasy-oriented themes. The workshop gives Rebecca the space she needs to soar, and adults often stand back and simply encourage her exploration, with comments to other adults like "Wow."

As this day ends, I find myself reflecting on the difference between working with precocious students like Amanda and Rebecca and working with Macie. The stance I am working on is a respect for, and embrace of, each individual learner's space, rather than another stance that competes in my mind—namely, surprise at, or emphasis on, "ability differences," a kind of comparing or ranking stance. This is not an easy shift, but I'm trying to preoccupy myself less with ranking students along a single, assumed line of competence.

Macie Finds Her Own Way

January 26: Macie and I meet to talk about her writing. She is sitting at a small table that Mr. Allegro has cleaned off for the day. Macie reads me her work—the same kitty story—and there are now three chapters, plus chapter "½." The story has changed somewhat from the first version. On each page, something almost completely different happens. Page one is the kitty, now designated as a baby tiger, crying for food. Page two is the kitty being tired and wanting to go home and see her friend "Ticke." On page three, a comet hits the ground and the kitty gets burned. Then she sees a polar bear that tells her to go through a cave to save her mom.

The pieces are loosely related, but much of this appears to reflect a kind of "What next?" strategy—something that I learned in graduate school to be a common pitfall with narrative writing. In the "What next?" strategy, a writer generates an event but then simply keeps asking "What next?" to produce more writing, rather than aiming for a central impact, idea, or impression. Stories move forward from event to event, with little internal coherence and a less compelling effect on readers. We tend to be bored by such stories, or ask "So what?" Macie's progression here seems particularly problematic; the connections between scenes are hard for me to fathom. Macie rarely brings earlier material into new scenes—except in chapter "½." Here, Macie *has* followed up on what happened in Chapter 1, based on the questions I asked in our first conference. She has answered my queries—saying,

for example, why the kitty was hungry, who each voice represents (Molly is the baby kitty and Allie is the mom), and how the kitty usually gets fed. Chapter "½" is telling, however. The title fraction suggests that responding to my questions has been an aside from Macie's main thinking. It's not quite worthy of being a real chapter.

Unsure how to proceed, I tell Macie, "Well, one thing I see in your chapters is that they are surprising—I don't know what's going to happen next." Macie smiles at this. I mention that in my own writing, one way I come up with ideas is to look back to what's happened before, and then bring something from the previous writing into the new section. I want her to consider ways of linking things together. I give an example, showing how Ticke (from Chapter 2) might reappear in the story. But Macie isn't thrilled by this concept. She has her mind on a new scene—yet another "What next?" If anything, Macie values being able to do this on her own, making her own decisions and taking the story, such as it is, where she wants.

February 2: Macie comes over and sits at the table next to me. She makes herself present for adult support, but does not directly ask for conferencing time. She has an illustrated reference book on animal life with her. When I eventually ask what she's looking up, she says, "I'm trying to find animals for my story." She wants Molly and Allie to meet some other creatures. She also says that the kitties will be poisoned. As she pages through the book, she comes upon a sizeable picture of a tarantula and says, "Ooh, look at that spider." The spider is large and gruesome, and I make a face. I then say, "Oh, what if the animal they meet is a spider!"

Macie says, "No, I don't like tarantulas."

I venture, "Well, what if the poison came from the tarantula?" I realize that tarantulas may not, in fact, be poisonous, but before I can retract the statement, Macie says, "Good idea."

I feel somewhat outside of Macie's writing process. It pursues its own logic, a logic I don't easily follow and to which I only incidentally make contributions. At the table, Macie turns a few times to plastic sea life figures on the nearby shelf and touches them. She picks up and shows me two figures of baby turtles coming out of their eggs. She then gets up and decides to show a peer the spider picture. "I'm gonna show Russell," she says. "Where is he?" Russell is away from the computer, over by his desk. Macie walks across the room, where she and Russell have an exchange. All I hear as she walks back is Russell saying, "You don't want them to die!" Apparently, Russell is concerned about the cats being poisoned, as if Macie is pondering a grave narrative mistake—killing off her main characters. Macie soon has the reference book open and is now showing the tarantula picture to anyone who might be interested. Not many are looking up, but Macie is walking silently through the classroom, displaying the picture.

Back at her desk, Macie says that Allie and Molly are going to meet a sea turtle and then get poisoned by a spider.

February 16: Macie is stapling together her five-chapter story of Molly and Allie, which she has finished over the past 2 weeks. She says Mr. Allegro has asked her to write a summary of the story. "I don't know how to do a summary," she tells me. We sit down to conference, and I learn that she is very ready to move on to a new piece of writing, but she is open to this last step, especially if she can type it on a laptop. Rather than leaving her to do the typing, I read the story aloud to her, and we work on summarizing things orally. I ask: "So what's this story about?"

Macie responds, "It's about cats who go on adventures." She goes on: "Molly meets a polar bear. She gets pulled into the ocean by a crab. . . ." She runs through the events of each chapter. I selectively record what she says. As I write, I let Macie know that summaries leave some things out in order to relay only the most important points. I reiterate these things aloud as I write. I remind her to think about what happens in the beginning. She looks back and says, "Oh, the kittens are very hungry." By the end, my written summary goes like this:

> It's about cats who go on adventures. In the beginning, Molly becomes very hungry. Molly meets a polar bear, gets pulled into the ocean, and she meets a mermaid. Her mom dies and she has to take care of her 4-year-old sister and two twins.

The last sentence reflects Chapters 4 and 5, which Macie has worked on recently. I've provided significant support for the summary, especially by recording only the main events and by reorganizing the order. For example, Macie had stated, "Her mom dies" last when summarizing verbally, but as she spoke I suggested that we place this episode earlier to reflect the story order. I also suggested the language, "In the beginning . . ."

To gain clarification myself, I make a little character map of what I think is happening at the end. Showing Macie the diagram, I say, "Allie is the mom. She had Molly and a younger baby, who is now 4 years old. But Molly is now a teenager and has twins herself. Right?" I continue: "Allie dies, and now Molly has to take care of her little sister *and* her own twins." I draw a circle around the 4-year-old and the twins to show who Molly has to take care of.

Macie says, "Yeah, that's right."

I say, "Wow, that's a lot of responsibility for Molly."

Macie nods seriously, and says, "Yes." Then she adds, "And she's only 16."

I invite Macie to type the summary herself now, suggesting that she can build from what I've already written. After a few moments, she types in her first sentence: "Allie dies." She says aloud, "I thought I might mix it up a little." After a pause, she elaborates: "I want the reader to know what happens to Allie, so they don't have to wait." I remind her that a summary identifies a "big picture" in its first sentence. I point out that readers will

not know if Allie is a person, friend, or cat—or if this story is about war, a family, or something else. I say that summaries also help readers know the story order, so it might be best to leave Allie's death until later.

Macie listens but does not seem particularly impressed. She keeps typing. Returning several minutes later, I notice that she has rewritten the summary substantially, taking some of my input to heart as well as moving in her own direction:

> A sumery of my story. There are cats who go on advenchers to save Allie. Molly meats a pollerbear who needs her to save Allie or she'll die. And the babby will never know her mother!

How *Is* Macie Learning?

What does it mean to work with a writer like Macie—especially if we draw upon notions such as staying "in the moment" and respecting the "flows and intensities" of literacy desiring (Kuby & Gutshall-Rucker, 2015)? I certainly wrestled with other impulses during conferences—for example, categorizing Macie simply as a student who is academically "low" or with serious learning "needs." At times, I wanted to teach her directly "how to" narrate more effectively, in effect erasing or substantially redirecting her own seemingly wandering story instincts. Latching on to Macie's writing process was counterintuitive to me. Was my listening stance sending the wrong message? Would Macie simply be left with inadequate skills, making her unprepared for future writing tasks, frustrating her future teachers?

Part of what I hope to do in this chapter is to read against such first-line, ingrained responses. I try to reread events from a new point of view. Lenz Taguchi (2010) talks about such perspective-taking as "re-installing" ourselves in learning events, which is not about "becoming the child" but is primarily a process of transforming ourselves:

> contrary to taking a position of someone else, or trying to become the other, this is about re-installing yourself in the event to become different *in yourself*; that is, to put yourself in a process of *change and transformation* to be able to experience the event differently. (p. 172, italics in original)

Such reinstalling does not mean that I fully understand or have figured out precisely what Macie meant in her story. Instead, the process is more about my own learning, pushing back from familiar routines, categorizations of children, and expectations. Lenz Taguchi (2010) writes that the philosopher Deleuze understood ethics itself to be "about a love for what is" rather than what "should be" (p. 176). "What we are interested in," she writes, "is what an organism, a child, a teacher . . . a learning event

can *become* in its intra-activity with the surrounding world" (p. 176). I am trying this stance on with Macie—and for myself.

How might I perceive more possibility in Macie's writing, and in this learning event, than I was initially able to see? Macie's process has a unique, unpredictable coherence to it, generated by her own energy and experimentation. Coherence and incoherence appear to operate together. This is not a story that she has mapped out ahead of time, for example. It morphs and moves. She creates and experiments, allowing things to emerge and bubble up. When I say that her writing is "surprising," she smiles. She likes to "mix it up a little." Indeed, Macie's process contrasts substantially with Amanda's, whose Mr. Penguin travel stories follow an established, reliable pattern. Macie's story has a less linear narrative structure, which some scholars connect with non-Western modes of storytelling (Gallas, 1992; Mikkelsen, 1990). Macie "intra-acts" with her environment (Kuby & Gutshall Rucker, 2016; Lenz Taguchi, 2010), engaging physically with material realities—picture books, classmates, and physical figures like the baby turtles. Searching for an animal for her story yielded the picture of a tarantula, which led her to a peer and then to a new initiative: walking around the classroom to display a gruesome picture to classmates—a picture of something she fears. The laptop itself energizes Macie, where her goal revolves at least as much around trying out technology and the act of keyboarding as it does around writing a summary. Macie follows her literacy desiring in an assemblage of actions. Writing, revising, and sense-making emerge along the way—following a coherence and sense that *she* makes, though almost certainly not in sufficiently acceptable form by official standards.

This perhaps is the central issue: whether we choose to measure Macie's work solely by "official" standards. Olsson (2009) reminds us that children "sometimes engage in a production of sense that leads to truths that we as adults can have a very hard time understanding" (p. 116). If so, what forms of coherence and learning recede from vision?

Macie's story, for instance, reveals a dynamic between childhood need, threat, safety, and adult responsibility. Molly the kitty is on a defining journey from infancy and vulnerability toward adulthood, undergoing a reversal and transformation, where Molly must ultimately take over for her mom. (I only learned later, a few years after the events described here, that Macie is an adopted child.) The story does not focus on "small moments" or a "slice of life," which reflect my own biases in narrative writing (I often encourage students to "zoom in" and "focus" on a single event and expand its details). Macie's scope is bigger than I'd imagined. She traces a major life sequence, advancing things on a grander, epic scale. The story tracks birth, sustenance, mothering, adventure, reproduction, and death.

Yet, it would be unfair and mistaken to fix any single meaning here. This wouldn't be true to Macie's own process, in which meanings emerge

and transform. As she types her final summary, she shifts things—from the loss of Allie ("Allie dies") to emphasizing the need to "save Allie" while highlighting the future stakes ("And the babby will never know her mother!"). It's not completely clear to me, from the story, which baby is referred to here. Is this the 4-year-old, Molly's "little sister"? Does it refer to 16-year-old Molly's twins? I'm not sure, but the intensity of the realization in Macie's summary is unmistakable.

Workshop made a space for intensity, for Macie to pursue her own literacy desiring, which seemed to include touching base with elemental fears as well as forms of strength (surviving threats, saving her mom, being able to care for others). Indeed, throughout the sequence above, Macie was neither bored nor unmotivated. She was self-directed, intent, figuring something out. Her experimenting spirit was not closed off to outside input. She made herself available for adult support, quietly and graciously. She reached out. She listened. She also consistently showed agency. For example, when my suggestions and questions aimed for a certain kind of internal story coherence, Macie persisted on her own path, separating things that I would put together, starting narrative lines I did not easily track. To her credit, she did not simply adopt adult suggestions. She wanted to tell this story herself, perhaps wanting to know what such agency feels like in writing. Macie's coherence is, thus, less about what her story "means"—how the internal parts line up or how technically sound it is. Instead, it is more about what a young writer is "doing" and how she is "becoming" in a complex environment (Kuby & Gutshall Rucker, 2016; Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Olsson, 2009). She manipulates tools; she engages and manages the responses of others; she tries out language and story forms. Asking "What next?" is an act of creation for Macie, rather than a deficit strategy. She seems to say: What can I create next that is uniquely mine? Macie is trying on being a creator—she is becoming a creator.

For my own part, I am pondering a different shift, from constructing Macie's literacy and writing, and perhaps her very self, as failing to meet an expectation. I am asking: What might Macie need from adults as she develops a writing identity? How *is* she learning? After a few years of our workshop, I'm inclined more to listen and follow than to insist that Macie adopt my own notion of an effective plot. This is not without tension—and it does not mean that I never offer suggestions, critique, or feedback, or that there are not forms of writing in society that Macie will need to learn. But a key "becoming" for me is less in teaching Macie "how to" tell a story and more a matter of listening and engaging with what she is already doing. In this way, a writer like Macie is affirmed, rather than closed down, at her very point of risk-taking and emergence. Her energy continues, and I remain open, available, and able to engage with the new and unexpected.

RESPECTING THE PRESENT MOMENT

Conferencing with students is an ongoing and essential point of contact in any writing workshop. It allows us to get close to student writing; we seek to understand writer strengths and areas of growth. We provide tailored support. We also have a great deal of power. Our assumptions and expectations position students and shape their writing identities. In this chapter, I step back from simply assuming the positive benefit of my own expertise—that students should automatically implement my strategies and recommendations. Instead, I acknowledge that listening is deceptively difficult and try to expand my awareness of things that "are already going on" with students. I try to "latch on" and stay with a flow—that is, to accept and engage difference, those things I do not expect, appreciate, or even fully understand. I ponder places where my own instincts may have missed a larger picture.

Student writing in the scenes above, I assert, moves beyond textual "meaning" itself and is tied to larger events, relationships, and purposes—for example, to a Valentine's Day dynamic that expands beyond the technical features of Angel and Isabel's story—and to a process of participation, creation, and experimentation that itself may be more important for Macie than the actual writing outcome. My conferencing lens embraces literacy desiring, trusting and making room for students' "assembled" writing motivations and their energies in the moment. My aim is not to dismiss standards or conventional writing forms, which have their role to play. My concern is around a loss of perspective, an overfocus on where students "should be" rather than where they are.

Lenz Taguchi (2010) speaks of an "ethics of immanence" as having important consequences for children. The term *immanence* assumes the value of the here and now, the present moment, rather than looking to the expected future or standing outside or above. As an ethical stance, this affects our sense of whether children themselves are worthy of their own imagined worlds and learning processes—those they actually bring to and enact in school. An ethics of immanence, in Olsson's (2009) words:

> includes looking at the world and human beings without letting perception and affection constantly turn towards the negative by focusing on lack or need. . . . Rather, this style will enable us to ask the question of how desire deploys its forces in the everyday life of the [school] as well as within the academic system. (p. 125)

Such a stance shifts from a framework that tends mostly to stand in judgment—that *produces* deficit, almost exclusively for some children—to one that might also affirm emergent learning. This is partly what is at stake. Will Macie always lose in our constructed game of learning? Will Angel and

Isabel be asked to forfeit what is energizing about their Valentine's story? Rather than constantly turning "to the negative," an ethics of immanence gives students a chance to show us who they are as writers, where their motivations lie, and possible pathways to learning.

Questions for Reflection

- In what ways do you notice "literacy desiring" among your own students or among children, either within or beyond the classroom?
- What stance toward revision might best help Angel and Isabel grow as writers, in light of the energy they have in regard to their Valentine's story?
- What is the most important dimension, in your view, in terms of "listening" to Macie's process in writing?
- In what ways would stronger direction from adults help or hinder Macie's learning and development as a writer?
- In what ways might you look beyond the "text" itself in considering your students as writers?