



# Eliciting

# JOY!

Exploring New Territories Through Reading Conferences

By Patrick Allen

“Reading conferences help me . . . we get to the point where we can show others what we know . . . believe it or not, there’s no such thing as normal. Everybody has things to say in their own way.” —*Kain, grade 4*

**K**ain is right—there’s no such thing as normal when kids interact about books. Each student says important things in his or her own way; the beauty of conferring is discovering those insights with individual students. Students like Kain help me be a better teacher of readers.

I owe it to my students to move beyond “normal,” beyond the status quo, to nudge students to discover passions, apply wise thinking behaviors, and strengthen understanding of who they are becoming as readers. I owe it to my students to listen to their decision-making processes. Students like Kain help me be a better teacher of decision makers.

Conferring in reader’s workshop has changed me and improved my students’ decision-making capacity. I don’t do much small-group work anymore—don’t have to—because through conferring and wise large-group instruction, I’m not compelled to group students based on a level or a number. Because I confer every day, I know that I am meeting individual readers’ needs in the most direct and effective way.

Reading conferences are the crux of my work with readers (Allen 2009). One-on-one reading conferences add power, strength, and consistency to reader’s workshop. Conferring must guide our instruction. Why? Because . . .

- Conferring provides an opportunity for my students and me to discuss and explore ideas together
- Conferring helps me uncover a reader’s learning in a manageable, thoughtful way and leads to documentable data that drive instruction
- Conferring helps me find out new things about the reader and provides an intimate opportunity for a shared “coming to know”
- Conferring naturally becomes a thinking routine that is valued and appreciated by both my students and me. (Allen 2009, 32–33)

There’s energy when we “make discoveries, hash out thinking, and wonder together!” (Allen 2009, 24.)

Lately, I’ve been thinking about the foundational constructs of reader’s workshop and honing my conferring practice. I’ve been pondering the following four questions about conferring.

## What role do flexibility and flow play in conferences?

Unambiguous routines in conferences provide predictability and encourage students to share learning with a wider reading community. Perhaps ironically, predictable conference structures also allow flexibility; they enable me to approach the conference with an open mind rather than a specific agenda ready to be rolled out.

Conferences always include: (1) time to talk about burgeoning understandings and celebrations, (2) specific instruction, and (3) a plan to ponder.

One student said, “I have a chance to ‘give out’ my thoughts to Mr. Allen . . . what’s going on in my head, what I am reading about, what I am doing, how I am using the strategies we are learning.” This “giving out” encourages flexibility. I can adjust the specific instruction and the plan to ponder in the moment. By listening, I can nudge students to share their thinking in our whole-class sharing sessions, which in turn makes sharing more powerful. The students “give” their thinking to other readers and challenge peers to apply new thinking to their own work.

**When I confer with readers, the conference elicits joy. When two readers feel safe enough to juxtapose their ideas, it moves readers into new territory . . . together.**

### How do stamina and sustainability manifest in the reader’s workshop?

Stamina evolves through authentic literacy experiences during reader’s workshop. My students learn with a spirit of endurance. Beginning-of-the-year whole-class discussions that focus on the “grit” shown by characters in literature help students build their reading stamina and fortify their identity. The ability to sustain thought plays a role in each reader’s identity, and characters from literature show the way.

I encourage students to be increasingly mindful and therefore independent as they take on purposeful work. As they become more engaged, I help them focus on the hard work.

### How can readers use juxtaposition and joy to propel themselves forward?

Juxtaposition (noticing contrasting ideas and discovering subtle contradictions within and across texts) helps keep students reading with intense interest and keeps conferences fresh. For example, fourth-grader Emily read Barbara O’Connor’s *Greetings from Nowhere* and noticed the relationship between Aggie (Sleepy Time Motel owner) and Loretta (whose mother died). Emily pointed out

that the vastly different characters had a common need for love. As we conferred, Emily explored commonalities and differences between the characters; she understood how the author had juxtaposed one character’s life upon another. Emily also revealed her metacognitive moves as a reader. The intellectual discourse we shared took on a synergy that moved the conference to a much higher level. I had to adjust my instructional goals to meet the reader and follow her lead.

The result? Joy. When I confer with readers, the conference elicits joy. When two readers feel safe enough to juxtapose their ideas, it moves readers into new territory . . . together.

### How do trust and truthfulness permeate a conference?

Conferences grounded in honesty prompt decisions about book choice, help correct misconceptions, and tighten students’ use of reading strategies. When I am direct and honest with a reader, I’m showing respect and flexibility, not forcefulness. I work to provide thoughtful, formative feedback, helping the child see patterns of strength and need over time. My truthfulness encourages the reader to share his or her thinking more effectively—but ultimately the child becomes the decision maker. If we are truthful with students, we can help shape readers’ self-efficacy and risk-taking, which in turn lead to better and more independent decision making.

The more I think and learn about conferring, the more I realize that there’s no better way to tap student potential. The more I develop strategies as a conferrer, the more I realize that conferences are, indeed, the crux—the keystone—of reader’s workshop.

Believe Kain: “There’s no such thing as normal.”

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Allen, Patrick A. 2009. *Conferring: The Keystone of Reader’s Workshop*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

O’Connor, Barbara. 2008. *Greetings from Nowhere*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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**Patrick Allen has over twenty-five years** of experience teaching second to fifth grades. He is currently an elementary school teacher in Denver, where his classroom serves as a visitation

classroom for the Denver-based Public Education and Business Coalition (PEBC). Patrick frequently hosts visiting educators who are interested in learning more about reader’s and writer’s workshop, comprehension instruction, and conferring. A published author, Patrick works as a national and international literacy consultant when he is not in the classroom working with young learners.

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