Building on a rich tradition of student talk, this article explores how audio recording can help us understand our students and their writing.

With only a couple minutes remaining in a 30-minute writing workshop, Alex (all student names are pseudonyms) stared at three sentences on his page. A quick glance around the table at his friends’ full-page writing brought a big sigh. He’d started a couple more sentences, but erased them. With eyes focused on his work, nose wrinkled, and pencil close to the page, Alex wasn’t writing. Other than a few words scribbled in the margins, there wasn’t much evidence of what he was thinking.

Across the table, Emil took a different approach. He had written more than Alex, but he’d spent most of the writing workshop checking in with peers, shoving his draft in front of a classmate’s face, and letting out exclamations of celebration or exhaustion. Given the chance, Emil might have spent the entire writing workshop talking to his classmates.

Despite their shared space in a 5th-grade classroom, Alex and Emil approach writing in radically different ways. As teachers, we can carefully observe, but it’s impossible to know all the thinking behind the blank space on Alex’s page or Emil’s jaunty peer check-ins unless they talk about what they’ve been thinking and deciding.

Space for Talk

Student–teacher conferences seem like the obvious choice to help Alex overcome inertia and to help focus Emil on the most important parts of his writing (Camfield, 2016; Graves, 1994; Hawkins, 2016). Teachers have long relied on student talk—often in conferences but also in other parts of the writing process—to figure out what students know and to re-see student decision making (Graves, 1994; Hawkins, 2016; Silby & Watts, 2015). For Marissa, a 5th-grade teacher, large class sizes mean that students like Alex and Emil might have to wait behind 26 other students before they can conference again. As teachers, we are reaching out to digital tools for additional ways to prioritize the student talk that helps us understand our students as writers.

Over the past several years, we have added independent student audio recordings to the traditional writing workshop. Throughout the writing process, students record spoken responses to prompts and questions about their work, and we listen in afterwards. Although students can choose to make an audio recording at any time, we usually suggest at least one recording before finalizing a piece of writing. This year, Marissa partnered with Karen, a researcher and fellow writing teacher, to analyze formally the many audio recordings that students produce. The recordings do not take the place of conferences with the teacher or peer feedback. Rather, they add a space and structure to support students’ uninterrupted, independent talk about their writing.
Huddled in a quiet corner of the class, students respond to the following purposefully generic prompts that can apply to any writing project:

- Describe what you’re working on.
- Describe what you’re doing well or what improvement you’ve made.
- Describe what you are struggling with in your writing or what you need to improve.
- Describe your upcoming goals.

Despite the simple prompts, student responses are anything but basic. With the relative privacy of an inexpensive recording device and their notebooks, students unfurl their personalities, goals, and writing prowess. Unlike conferences or peer feedback sessions, they are not interrupted or redirected. This space for talk is entirely their own.

For our part, we can listen to the audio recordings outside of class. The function is different from a conference in that we cannot respond immediately. But what a student says about her own writing free from teacher or peer interruption holds exciting possibilities for seeing our students in surprising and instructive ways.

Alex

Consider Alex. In the few sentences of his draft, Alex describes himself getting on his bike in the driveway and then running into his brother. Without his revisions, it’s not clear if he purposefully slammed into his brother or if a more innocent accident occurred. The following excerpt, recorded with Alex hunched over a handheld classroom recording device, is Alex’s play-by-play of his paper on the floor in front of him:

I’m trying to improve it, like, um there are some parts that the readers don’t really understand, so I’m trying to make them clearer. . . . Like “when I was 8-years-old”—they didn’t know when exactly, so I said, “when I was eight years old and working.”

Alex’s recording helps us understand what he was wrestling with when he sat staring at his paper a couple days before. Instead of frustration over how little he had written, we could see the sophistication in some of his details. While the context isn’t yet precise, his subsequent drafts show that his brother was also on a bike, and the words “accidentally” and “late” are scribbled in the margin. Suddenly, a memorable sibling mishap appears as Alex describes himself hurrying to help his dad work in their family store. As listeners, we gain the backstory on Alex’s approach.

We probably could have come to the same understanding of Alex’s audience awareness through a conference or through observations of peer feedback like the recorded versions that Lenters and Grant (2016) use. After all, any student talk offers rich information about what students are thinking. For us, recorded, independent student talk is an additional option for hearing students’ voices outside of regularly scheduled conferences or peer review (Leigh, 2015).

With audio recording, students can proceed in their own timing (Taylor, Skinner, McCallum, Poncy, & Orsega, 2013) and are required to rely on their own words, an especially important aspect for English language learners like the ones in our classrooms (Young & Miller, 2004). When a student like Alex takes long pauses or stumbles over a new word, he doesn’t get interrupted or prematurely redirected. This extra space for student talk offers new possibilities for seeing our students more clearly.

Emil

Unlike Alex, Emil doesn’t have to be convinced to talk. In writing workshop, he is rarely alone. He signs up for any extra conference spots and coaxes others into conversations. When we hear his eager, raspy voice as he darts from classmate to classmate, it’s easy to wonder if he’s doing any serious writing or just enjoying his friends.

In an audio recording Emil made early in the fall, he helped us understand his frenetic approach to writing workshop as a genuine attempt to improve. In the excerpt below, he describes why he seeks feedback:

I always get feedback. I don’t write it once and then like, I like it. I, like, write it once, let somebody read it, give me feedback, I’ll fix it up. And then right after I fix it up, I’ll tell Ms. King or someone. They’ll give me feedback, and then I’ll make it again. . . .
In Emil’s audio recording, we hear him explain a clear strategy that we might miss behind his enthusiastic, in-your-face style. He cycles through his process. “I’ll make it better,” he says over and over again. “I’ll fix it up.” Later, Emil offers a self-analysis of why he turns to feedback so quickly. “Sometimes I’m writing too fast,” he explains. As a result, he adds off-topic details and makes mechanical mistakes. His solution is to write a little bit, get feedback, and then try again.

To Emil, mistakes are unremarkable. When someone points out errors, he says, “I would just erase it or get another paper and start copying the good stuff onto that paper.” After listening to his account of why he seeks feedback and how he manages it, we can see him as a writer convinced that feedback at every stage of the writing process yields stronger results.

Making Audio a Routine

Although it’s now a classroom routine, Marissa started audio recording by training four students, now dubbed the Tech Team, to instruct classmates on how to make and submit audio recordings. We maintain consistency with a stable set of prompts that can be applied to almost any writing product. Students read the prompts from dog-eared 3”×5” cards that we use over and over again.

Like any full classroom, noise is a concern, so students take turns using a small number of digital voice recorders. We use voice recorders purchased for $20 online that transfer recordings to our computers with a USB cord. A cell phone recorder or Chromebook app works just as well. We don’t use fancy software or special headsets—the entire process is surprisingly low-tech.

Space matters, too. Especially for middle school students, a place that feels semi-private is helpful. In Marissa’s classroom, students often choose to record near a bookshelf, facing the wall, or curled up on a rug in a corner. First recordings can be a bit choppy and self-conscious, but as audio becomes a routine part of the writing workshop, student authors start to sound more like themselves.

Audio recording isn’t a new technology, but when used in the language arts classroom, it expands how teachers can study students and their writing. With audio recording, we can hear students like Alex voice what they know and think about their writing without anyone immediately present to correct or distract. Quiet students are heard. More social students like Emil can’t expect a friend to jump in to finish their ideas. And finally, away from the social atmosphere and feedback-getting-frenzy, we can hear Emil’s understanding of the writing process. Like Lenters and Grant’s (2016) work with recorded peer feedback, having students record themselves means teachers have a window into a world that we might not otherwise observe.

References


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