

# CONFERRING

The Keystone of Reader's Workshop

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*Foreword by Debbie Miller*



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## Introduction:

# Why a Keystone?

This book is about conferring. Conferring with young readers.

For me, conferring has always been at the heart of my reader's workshop, much like the keystone has been important to stonemasons and bricklayers throughout history. Long before I began writing, I thought the keystone was a perfect metaphor in which to shape and construct my thinking. I have used it often as I've talked to colleagues about the importance of conferring. Regular opportunities to confer with readers must become a daily ritual in our reader's workshops.

Why compare conferring to a keystone? Recently, I was talking to my oldest sister, Joy, about my students. During our visit, our conversation turned to our father. She reminded me of Dad's talent as a bricklayer—a true craftsman. Being the youngest of ten children, I turn to Joy for family stories (she's thirty-one years older). "What you're describing, this work you're doing, it's a craft in itself. I always knew you were a lot like Dad—both fine craftsmen." After I hung up the telephone, I thought a little more about my father's craftsmanship . . .

Dad was born in 1904 in Ness City, Kansas. Ness City is famous for its limestone. If you drive through this country hamlet, the landscape is speckled with white stone posts holding barbed wire tight and straight. Outcroppings of limestone are abundant on the treeless plains, just under the sod, and these unique posts have dotted the prairie since the 1870s. Like many resourceful pioneers, the settlers used what they had and made the most of it. As lasting proof of pioneer ingenuity and creativity, limestone posts and buildings remain—important foundations to regional history.

The windows of the Ness County Bank Building are arched. Each arch contains a keystone—a symmetrical, wedge-shaped stone at the center of each arch. The central voussoir of an arch is said to hold the arch's weight. The truncated keystone is often the final stone placed to close the arch. The keystone is the reason we are able to see craftsmanship that has endured for decades.

Dad became a master bricklayer and stonemason, and the fact that he was born in Ness City is an ironic coincidence. Our environment often influences our learning.

Throughout Kansas, California, Utah, and Colorado evidence of his skill as a craftsman remains; intricate walls of homes and buildings stand firm and straight, walls that he helped build. These walls serve as a testament to his craft. The walls survive because of his dedication and commitment to his craft.

When Dad turned seventy-two, he decided to build a chimney up the side of our house for a wood-burning stove (much to my mother's chagrin, he planned to remove one of the living room's only two windows). I remember sitting with him at our worn kitchen table as he sketched out the chimney plans, pulled out his supply list, and looked at the notes he'd compiled in his pocket-sized notebook. He read his notes to me and thought aloud about the process of bricklaying. He shared his drawings and talked through his supply list in detail. I listened and watched.

Then he turned to me and asked me one question: "What do you think?"

What did I think? What did *I* think? I knew nothing about bricks and mortar. I couldn't tell a London trowel from a Philadelphia trowel. I didn't know a "running bond" from a "course." The only time I had used a level was when I walked around the house watching the magical bubble move mysteriously in the glass window as I placed Dad's wooden level on various surfaces around the house; I didn't understand the level's real purpose, I just thought it was cool. But, his sketches intrigued me (though I had no idea how the chimney would eventually look, let alone any inkling about its construction), and I was curious.

He looked me in the eye and asked me a second time, "What do you think?" And he waited. I sat there perplexed—thinking and wondering what he wanted me to say.

I knew absolutely nothing about bricklaying. There I was, sitting at our kitchen table, looking into the eyes of my father. He waited patiently for my answer. The spark in his brown eyes told me that he was expecting a response. There was a sense of sincerity in his inquiry.

"I'm not sure what I think," I said. "It sounds like a lot of hard work. I like the drawing, and I think the chimney is a great idea. I think that having a woodstove in the living room on cold winter days will be nice. But I have so many questions. There's so much I don't understand."

"Are you willing to learn?" he asked.

"I'm willing to watch," I said. "And ask more questions! Then maybe I'll learn."

"You think about your questions and maybe jot them down. I'll try to help you find the answers," he replied. "But just remember to ask them. We'll see how this project goes. I haven't built anything in a while, but this will be a lot of fun! Kind of an adventure." He was so enthusiastic.

It was the first time I remember him asking me to work side-by-side with him on a project. "Okay," I said. "When will we start?"

"Well," he replied, "we'll start tomorrow. Be up and ready at 7:00 A.M. and we'll get this project going."

At that moment, I got nervous and queasy. I realized he was inviting me into unfamiliar territory. He was sharing unfamiliar content and stretching my intellect into a new realm. He was ready to apprentice me to something he'd spent his life perfecting. He was genuinely

interested in my opinion, my thinking, my understanding. He sincerely cared about my ideas. I trusted him.

I couldn't wait to get started.

The next day I was up and ready to begin.

As weeks passed, our conversations continued. Each morning Dad and I would meet at the north end of the house, trowels in hand, wheelbarrow at the ready, bricks organized and stacked. Then we'd talk. We'd ponder. He'd demonstrate. Dad would question, assess, measure. He would think aloud as he worked. Side-by-side, I was learning a new craft from a master.

But what was he really doing? He had studied his craft for his entire life. Now he was building the foundation for me.

Over time he taught me how to mix mortar and carry the hod, how to set bricks and pay attention to the pattern, how to use the mysterious level . . . but it was the one-on-one conversations that became the keystone of our work together.

Purposeful conversations that provided me with meaningful instruction—rich in strategy, inquiry, vocabulary, and skills.

Purposeful conversations that stretched my thinking and monitored my understanding.

Purposeful conversations about the process and the product.

Purposeful conversations that made me want to learn more, to do more.

Purposeful conversations with a specific goal in mind.

That first question, “What do you think?” has stuck with me all these years. Now, some thirty-five years later when I visit my hometown, I drive past my parents' house, long since sold to new owners. I remember my last walk through the empty house with peeling paint and missing window screens. The once-green lawn is bone dry and covered with leaves. The trees are untrimmed and unkempt. The wild roses, peonies, and tulips lining the property have all but disappeared.

However, the chimney still stands straight and tall. It was the last thing I took a picture of before I said goodbye to my childhood home. It was no longer the home of my youth, but tucked deep in my mind was that time I had shared with my father, the learning we had done together.

So why reminisce all these years later? I remember not only the house and the environment, but also the conversations. Our talks were indeed the keystone, the strength of working together—of being together.

Isolated skills aside (and there were many), it was the rigor, inquiry, and intimacy that stuck with me. All the changes to the house and yard could never overshadow our work together on that chimney.

And, that indelible memory is what leads me to the idea of comparing the reading conferences we have during our daily interactions with young readers to a keystone. The very word *keystone* comes from the Latin *clavis* for “key.” *Key* meaning imperative, vital, essential. These are the same words I would use to describe the importance of conferring in the reader’s workshop.

I believe that the reading conferences we have with children are the strength of our instruction. So, as I sit to write a book about conferring, the keystone metaphor immediately pops into my brain. Thanks, Dad.

## So . . . What Do You Think?

This question not only permeated my initial thinking, but also will remain a mantra I use throughout this book. This text will comprise three main sections, each section highlighting specific constructs that strengthen my reading conferences. In turn, I hope conferring with readers will become the keystone of all our reader’s workshops.

Part 1: “What Brings About a Good Conference, Anyway?” describes my historical perspective of conferring and the role conferring plays in my reader’s workshop. In Chapter 1, “Counterfeit Beliefs About Conferring,” I investigate some of the myths we have developed around the notion of conferring. In Chapter 2, “Conferring Goals and Guiding Principles,” I explore my own burgeoning understanding of conferring and the role of reading conferences in the reader’s workshop. In Chapter 3, “Building the Environment for Conferring—Five Requisite Ashlars,” I focus on the environmental factors and classroom constructs necessary to make conferring become a living, breathing part of the reader’s workshop.

Part 2: “What Are the Essential Components of Conferring?” recounts the purpose and structure of my reading conferences. In Chapter 4, “The RIP Model—Bringing Thoughtful Structure to Our Conferring,” I propose and describe a specific structure I have developed to follow during reading conferences. In Chapter 5, “Cultivating Rigor, Nurturing Inquiry, and Developing Intimacy,” I focus on three specific contexts in which conferring can flourish.

Part 3: “What Emerges from Our Reading Conferences?” examines the specific outcomes of reading conferences. In Chapter 6, “Conferring Walk-Aways,” I synthesize several specific instructional points that result from making conferences an everyday part of the reader’s workshop. The final chapter, “Conferring Ain’t Easy,” examines several premises I’ve developed as I’ve grappled with reading conferences and the role they play in my classroom.

Throughout the book, I’ve interspersed “ponderings”: important questions that came to mind as I was writing. Thinking points. Ideas worth investigating. It’s my hope that opportunities to ponder will nudge you to reflect on your own teaching, define your own

beliefs, strengthen the foundation of your own reading conferences—perhaps even take a few minutes to write in your notebook.

I have also placed snippets called “keystone points” throughout the book. I hope that these points will provide insight into the interactions I have with the readers in my classroom or insights others have considered in terms of reading conferences. Perhaps each notion will provide a thinking point to help you contemplate your own reading conferences.

So, here we go. Let’s talk conferring.