1 A Rationale for One-to-One Teaching

Conferences, opportunities for highly productive dialogues between writers and teacher-readers, are or should be an integral part of teaching writing. It is in the one-to-one setting of a conference that we can meet with writers and hear them talk about their writing. And they can also hear us talk, not about writing in the abstract, but about *their* writing. This conversation should not be viewed as merely an adjunct to group instruction, for some of the more vocal advocates of writing conferences consider the conference to be the prime method for teaching writing:

> Perhaps the most successful practice in the teaching of composition has been the regular conference to discuss the problems and progress of the individual student.
>
> —James Squire and Roger Applebee[1]

> We should spend nearly all of our time conferring with individual writers. That seems to be what they need most—supportive response and help with their problems in the particular piece they are working on. The writing process demands it. Discourse theory calls for it. Research on writing supports it. I don't see any way around it.
>
> —Charles Cooper[2]

> We have tried conferences for three years, and we are convinced they represent the most valuable innovation in the enrichment of the high school curriculum in English.
>
> —Janet Emig[3]

Studies of groups of teachers have turned up a similar enthusiasm. In a national survey of exemplary teachers at the elementary and secondary levels, conferences proved to be the only type of feedback during the writing process that the teachers consistently agreed was helpful.[4] And a survey of some of the students of these teachers at the secondary level showed that students found talking to their teachers during the writing process to be the best technique for helping them to write. In addition, in a study of freshman composition programs

around the country, conducted by Stephen Witte and others,[5] composition directors considered conferences the most successful part of their teaching programs.

Why such interest in and enthusiastic endorsements for what some teachers might dismiss as time-consuming or anxiety-producing conversation? Those of us who include conferences as a regular part of our teaching know from firsthand experience how effective and even essential the one-to-one interaction with a writer is. We tend to express not just enthusiasm but also a bit of evangelistic fervor for such teacher-student talk. Listen to a group of teachers asked to air their feelings about holding conferences with student writers:

> "Why do I confer with my students? Why not? It's the best way I teach writing."
>
> "How else can you get to know students and their writing? Talking to a whole class is just not efficient. After reading their papers, I know that each one needs different kinds of help."
>
> "In five minutes I can tell a student so much more than I can write on a paper. The student can also tell me what's on his or her mind, and—best of all—I don't have those horrendous stacks of papers to grade at night."
>
> "Other teachers ask how I can afford to devote so much time to conferences. How can a writing teacher afford not to?"
>
> "We're dreamers or dolts if we think all of our students read those comments we spend so long writing on their papers. A few minutes of talking is far more effective in getting their attention."

But all is not rosy optimism. Some teachers see disadvantages or problems:

> "How can it be done with thirty students per class, a fifty-minute period, and students who must disappear as soon as classes are over?"
>
> "My students need to learn from others' mistakes. And my comments may be less valid than comments from their peers."
>
> "What a tiresome way to proceed! I don't want to say the same thing over and over to each student."
>
> "It simply takes too much time. Besides, what happens to the other students while I'm meeting with one student? My classroom would become chaotic."

> "I think I'd be uneasy with some students, especially the quiet ones. They'd probably be just as uncomfortable with me, especially if I'm trying to show a student why a paper is weak."

Any teaching method that arouses such a range of reactions among teachers deserves our attention, but the conference is particularly worthy of consideration because of its popularity and because it raises important implications for how writing should be taught.

Listing advantages and disadvantages is one way to consider the merits of conferences with student writers. Another way is to step back a bit and contemplate the role of conferences in the teaching of writing, for conferences can be—and are—a part of teaching writing to students at all levels, from kindergarten to graduate seminars, and a part of teaching writing in a variety of instructional settings. In the elementary school, frequent short meetings with first or second graders as they write can be an integral part of a language arts program (as in the Australian project described in Jan Turbill's *No Better Way to Teach Writing*).[6] In the high school, conferences can be an accompaniment to classroom instruction (as Emig describes), the primary method used in a writing workshop (see, for example, Collins and Moran),[7] or a way to individualize a classroom by using a writing lab (see Sorenson).[8] And, finally, in college, conferences can be periodic meetings in addition to classes (as described by Carnicelli),[9] the primary way to structure class instruction (see Garrison),[10] or the characteristic teaching method of writing labs that supplement writing programs (see Bamberg).[11] The conference can have a place in all formats for teaching writing, but how does it fit in and what does it accomplish?

The Role of the Conference in Teaching Writing

When we incorporate conferences into composition teaching, we are also making a number of assumptions about what writing is and what the writing teacher's role is. Talking with students as they write or prepare to write indicates that we view writing as a process of discovery in which we can help the writer learn how to shape a piece of writing as it is taking form. Moreover, since the writing teacher talks with the students and reacts as a reader, students can see that writing is primarily an act of communication in which the needs of the reader are crucial considerations. The role of the teacher in all this is to assist in the process, to help each writer move through draft after draft of the writing and focus on his or her unique questions and

problems. The teacher's role is also to respond as an audience or reader, to identify problems the writer may be having, and to teach the writer strategies for moving through the writing process successfully. Let's examine each of these assumptions:

Writing as Discovery

Textbook instruction telling students to formulate a main idea, develop an outline, and then write a paper has generally been discarded as having little to do with reality. Instead, we readily acknowledge the chaos of composing with statements like "I don't know what I think until I see what I write," or Lester Fisher and Donald Murray's "The writer finds out what he has to say by writing."[12] From this perspective, the act of writing is viewed as an exploration of what it is we want to say and as a discovery of the meaning that emerges as we write. Words on the page, formed and reformed until they approximate a message the writer wishes to convey to the reader, become the written communication.

The teacher's conference role here is to encourage this exploration, to help students move through the process of discovery by talking with them, asking questions, and generally keeping up the momentum of exploration. This is especially important with writers who mistakenly think of finished papers as mere transcripts of what should have been in their heads beforehand. Such students often think—or have been taught to think—that competent writers are those who don't need to do much "scratching out." If these student writers are forced to show their rough drafts, with all the messy reality of erasures, inserts, crossed-out material, and arrows, they are prone to apologizing for their inability to "get it right the first time." Teacher help here is particularly beneficial whether it is brief conversations while walking around the room as students write or the extended conversations of writing lab tutorials in which the tutor offers positive feedback to writers unsure of where their papers are headed. A tutor in the writing lab where I spend most of my teaching time reinforces this point with a metaphor, as is evident in this excerpt from a conference transcript:

Tutor: What shall we work on today?

Student: Well, the problem is that this paper isn't coming out right. What I thought I was writing on, what the assignment said, was to talk about what a particular sport means to me—one I participate in.

Tutor: What sport did you choose?

Student: I'm on the soccer team, and last year I wrestled, but I decided to write about cross-country skiing.

Tutor: What are you going to say about cross-country skiing?

Student: That's the problem. I thought I would write about how peaceful it is to be out in the country.

Tutor: So why is that a problem?

Student: As I start describing how quiet and serene it is to be out in the woods, I keep mentioning how much effort it takes to keep going. Cross-country skiing isn't as easy as some people think. But that's not part of my thesis, that cross-country skiing takes a lot of energy, so I guess I should leave it out. But now I don't know how to explain that feeling of peacefulness without explaining how hard you have to work for it. It all fits together. It's not like just sitting down somewhere and watching the clouds roll by. That's different.

Tutor: Then you'll have to include that in your point, that the peacefulness of cross-country skiing is the kind you earn by effort. Why leave that out? Part of your point you knew beforehand, but part you discovered as you wrote. That's common. It doesn't just happen in writing. Take shopping, for example. If I want a tape of some new group's album, I go to the store with the best prices and get it. I know where I'm headed, and you would too, right?

Student: Yeah, I guess so . . .

Tutor: But if I'm thinking about upgrading my stereo system, I might need to look in several places. I might even change my mind as I go or think of some alternatives that I didn't know about beforehand, depending on what I saw and learned. That's exploratory shopping, and it's like the exploratory writing you're doing right now. You don't exactly know what you'll wind up with, but it would be a shame to toss out what you found out as you went along. So, sometimes we know where we're headed, and sometimes we learn as we go. As for me, I do a lot of exploring first in writing. So, if you're like me, you need a lot of browsing time.

And so, until there is some prose on paper, the writer may have only a general sense of what is going to emerge. When writing is truly

acting as a mode of discovery, we find ideas developing and taking shape before us as words are found and ideas connect or lead to other ideas. In James Moffett's terms, the writer is moving from "inner speech" to the page, inner speech being that uncertain level or stage of consciousness where material may not be so much verbalized as verbalizable, that is, potentially available to consciousness if some stimulus directs attention there. This material is capable of being put into words because, as Moffett explains, it is language-congenial thought.[13] The stimulus can be the writer's own discovery process, but we need to realize that it can also be the gentle prodding of questions or suggestions from a teacher. Inner speech, then, is something the teacher can tap when talking with a student during a conference. "Tell me about this," or "What else comes to mind here?" are probes the teacher can use to help the student draw upon material that has not yet emerged in writing.

Writing as discovery is fun—sometimes exhilarating. It is also frustrating and messy. To acknowledge that it will take some writing to find out what the writing is going to be means that the neat, orderly sequence of attempting to write a paper in one draft is less than productive. It means that draft may have to follow draft or sentences be written and rewritten as the idea is refined and reshaped. We know what this reshaping is and can talk about it, but too often we fail to help students learn how to revise because we abandon them when they are most likely to need help. Students given back drafts to revise and then left to their own devices will, as we know too well, fall back on what they know how to do, correct spelling errors or change a word or two. In a conference, on the other hand, we can work with students, helping them do the kind of revision that good writing requires. Writers don't need to be kept company all the time, but as they advance through more complex writing tasks they need to experience the use of some revision strategies with a helper at hand. Then they can go off on their own with some sense of what should be done.

Writers also need another kind of help when revising—some support and encouragement—because the messiness of working and reworking a paper can lead to surprise and dismay as a topic falls apart or changes direction during writing. Novice writers need to learn how to persist, and they need some encouragement to do so. A teacher conferring with a student during these redrafting and revising efforts is offering all-important help and support. By comparison, responding as a grader to the finished product is far less valuable to the writer, and comes at a less useful time. When the writer is in the midst

of moving through drafts, even a few minutes conversing with a teacher can be productive, encouraging the writer to rethink ideas, reinforcing the idea that multiple drafts are necessary, and providing needed encouragement to continue. As one teacher explained, "Personal attention is magic. It gets them going again when they've hit some rough spots, and it makes them want to write again. Sometimes I don't even offer any assistance. Just an acknowledgment that I sympathize helps a great deal."

Writing as Process

Like any cliché, the one that proclaims that writing teachers teach the process of writing is a tired statement in need of fresh insight. But how does a teacher teach a process? We can *talk about* processes in a somewhat theoretical way, perhaps like a lecturer describing continental drift, or we can *demonstrate* processes, like a chef in a cooking class. Or we can *participate* in processes, like a tennis pro talking with a player as they practice backhands together. The writing teacher in a conference is like a coach working with the writer through all the "-ings" of writing—thinking, planning, drafting, revising, and editing—even when these occur almost simultaneously.

The conference permits teacher and student to attend to the student's own writing and the student's own processes, which may or may not be adequate for the task. Generalities from the classroom or textbook can be brought down to the reality of a specific piece of writing. For example, we can teach the process of organization far more effectively by actually helping a student organize a draft of a paper than we can by discussing with a class ways to organize or the need for organization. Besides, abstract discussions about the need for organization are pointless and unnecessary. No student ever seriously wondered whether or not writing should be organized, and dissecting a model essay to study its organizational pattern is not the best possible help for a writer confronting several pages of paragraphs that won't fall into some logical order. What produces those pages of jumbled prose is the writer's inability to impose order on chaos. The student needs help in learning how to see what is contained in that unwieldy mass of material, to see what goes where, and to realize what's missing and what should be discarded. Going through the process of organizing with the teacher at hand is far more beneficial to the writer and more easily understood than reading or hearing generalities about organization.

Working *with* the student as writing goes on can be far more valuable than classroom discussion or any other activity that precedes or follows the actual process. As Charles Cooper explains:

> What we know about composing as a process encourages us to use response-to-writing activities. We would be naive to think we could improve a complex verbal-cognitive-experiential process like composing with pencil-and-paper, fill-in-the-blank exercises or with the pre-teaching of rhetorical and usage rules. Writers are not helped by being told in advance what to avoid. They need to write, to get immediate, supportive, helpful response to what they have written, and then to write again.[14]

Abstract lists of "dos and don'ts" issued in the classroom are not only ineffective, they are hard to keep in mind in the midst of composing and can be a source of distraction for less skilled writers. Should a writer in the midst of considering what an audience needs to know about a topic really stop to consider whether his or her sentences are also a bit wordy? Textbooks that discuss audience awareness are prone to overloading the writer with long (and sometimes incompatible) warnings:

> Ask yourself what your readers may know beforehand about your topic. Explain to your readers what they may not know.
>
> Acknowledge viewpoints that your readers may have but that you don't share.
>
> Don't bore your readers by giving them unnecessary information or even unnecessary phrases and words.

Lost in such thickets, a writer might try to keep all those bits of textbook advice in mind and find him- or herself editing phrases when he or she should be considering content.

What Does Conference Talk Accomplish?

Stimulating Independent Learning

In *No Better Way to Teach Writing,* the report of an Australian project that taught writing to first and second graders by means of conferences, Jan Turbill offers her definition of what is achieved in teacher/student conversation: "[A conference] is a talk between a teacher and a child or group of children about their work. It is time set aside for that purpose. It is an incomparable means of individualizing the teaching-learning relationship. And though in one sense it is simply 'a talk,' it is also, for the teacher, an art—chiefly the art of drawing forth ideas and fostering thinking, by asking questions."[15]

The emphasis on independent learning in Turbill's description is particularly important because some critics of conference teaching see the conference as a setting where the teacher is likely to do the student's work. Writing labs, especially those with peer tutors, often face such criticisms, and some teachers are reluctant to send students to the lab because they assume that the discussion will be one-sided, that the tutor will do the thinking for the student. This can be a pitfall, but, as Turbill says, the conversation in a student-teacher meeting is an art, and the teacher who is adept at it knows that conference talk leads students into doing their own thinking.

Asking questions is one way to help students find their own answers. Another form of help that teachers and tutors can provide is offering students the opportunity to talk about writing—to articulate problems and to explain what they are doing. This ability to talk about writing is important to students' progress as writers. Without it, they are too often unable to proceed, unable to represent to themselves the problems to be solved. "There's something wrong with my paper, but I don't know what it is" is a typical lament of less-skilled students. Asked to explain, such a student might counter with "The paper just doesn't flow," and having said that still be stuck, incapable of knowing what to do next since "flow" is some intangible quality the student often can't describe. The teacher's task here is not only to help identify actual deficiencies in papers but also to help students acquire a vocabulary that permits them to talk about their writing.

In the following conversation between a writing lab tutor and a student, we can see how the tutor's questions provide the means for the student to figure out his own answers. (The tutor is deliberately acting a bit dense here, a good tactic to help a writer realize the need to inform readers of what he or she knows.) The problem being worked on is a portion of a paper that needs some specific detail to develop its general statements. At first, only the tutor uses terms such as "specific detail" and "example" (highlighted here with italics), but as the tutorial progresses the student also begins to use similar terms—a necessary first step for revising. By the time tutor and student progress to the last sentence of the paragraph they are working on, we see that the student has acquired the words he needs to talk about his writing.

The paragraph that the tutor and student are looking at is as follows:

> The most exciting thing about being a baseball pitcher is you are always in control of the game. Your performance has a direct influence on the outcome of the game. After winning a game and knowing you produced when it counted is a great feeling.

Tutor: So what you're saying here is that the pitcher is . . . that the game is controlled by the pitcher. Is that your point?

Student: Sure. It's the pitcher who really counts. His influence . . . his performance is what counts.

Tutor: Why? I can see that that's your conclusion. But why is that so? I thought batters are important too. They make the points, the runs batted in. I guess I need some *specifics* here, something that will *show* me what you mean. Can you give me an *example?*

Student: One thing is that the pitcher is there all the time, and batters keep changing. And the pitcher can give the game away if he's not careful.

Tutor: There's a problem here. I don't know that much about baseball, so I don't know *specifically* what you mean about "giving the game away." Could you give me some *details* here? Something that would let me *see* what actually happens in a game?

Student: Something that you'd *see?*

Tutor: Sure. Good writing uses *specific detail* to help the reader get down to the *concrete* stuff, where we really begin to understand, not just the *general conclusions.*

Student: OK. So . . . ah . . . *for example* . . . in a tight situation where there are runners on base and only maybe one out, that's when the pitcher can't give the batter the wrong kind of ball, one he can connect with for a double or something.

Tutor: Great! That's the kind of *detail* that helps me understand your point. That's good. What else?

Student: Another *example?*

Tutor: Sure, if you can, or go back to that first thing you mentioned about the pitcher being on the field all the time. I didn't realize that. I mean, I know it, but I didn't realize it until you reminded me. So the pitcher . . .

Student: The guy at bat keeps changing. The pitcher, he's the one on the field tossing the ball to all the batters. He controls the ball while the batters, they come and go.

Tutor: These *details* are exactly what I need to really understand your point about being in control. Be sure to add them in your next draft. Now, what about the last sentence in the

paragraph? "After winning a game and knowing you produced when it counted is a great feeling." I bet you can tell me what's missing there.

Student: You need an *example?* I guess I could be *specific.*

Tutor: *Specific* about what? What phrase could you explain with an *example?*

Student: OK. I could talk about producing when it counts. I would probably have to explain that with an *example* maybe. Yeah, so you could understand.

Promoting Interaction with Readers

The kind of talk that encourages independent learning also promotes interaction between writers and their readers, a kind of interaction that Barry Kroll, in "Some Developmental Principles for Teaching Composition," advocates as particularly beneficial to the writer in the prewriting stage.[16] Talk at this stage, explains Kroll, is vital for seeing where there are weak spots or a need for more information and for considering alternative approaches. Whether it is a teacher or a peer, the presence of the other person reminds the writer of the importance of writing from the reader's perspective. A writer who has had a chance to try out a subject on a reader can gauge the degree of interest that the subject holds and can begin to realize how much the reader may already know or how much the reader needs to know. Hesitant writers, writers who keep rejecting possible subjects for writing on the assumption that they have no value, benefit greatly from early expressions of reader interest or reaction to their plans and thoughts. As planning and drafting continue, the reader remains more vivid in the writer's mind because of their talk, and all through the drafting process reader reaction continues to be helpful to the writer learning to adjust to readers' needs.

When the teacher in a conference, rather than another writer in the class, serves as the reader reacting to the writer's developing text, there are several benefits for the student. First, the writer has an experienced reader who knows how to respond. Students can and should offer peer critiques of one another's writing, but some training time is necessary to get students to respond in useful ways. Left to their own devices, with no help in learning how to offer effective reader response, some students—influenced mostly by the need to be pleasant to fellow students—are likely to offer generalized compliments about whatever they read. "Hey, great stuff. I really enjoyed this paper" is a typical polite response. And there are other problems with student readers, as Lester

Fisher and Donald Murray remind us: "The classroom . . . often prevents the student writer from finding a sensitive reader, for some students don't read other students' writing sensitively and critically, some students can't yet understand what the writer is talking about, and some students have progressed far beyond the kind of writing and the problems faced by the writer."[17] Thomas Newkirk's study of how students and instructors differ in their evaluations of student writing suggests further limitations of peer groups in providing "a fully adequate response to a student paper."[18] Despite these problems, learning how to react more effectively is an important task for student writers, not only because other writers need the help that they can provide as readers but especially because of the value of becoming educated readers of their own texts.

Another benefit of having the instructor as a reader of the writer's text is that writers are more likely to move beyond mere word-level revisions when their readers offer nonjudgmental, useful responses. Two studies reported in Thomas Reigstad and Donald McAndrew's *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences* confirm this claim. One, by P. A. Beaumont, found that tutors who are listeners and partners, who limit evaluation, and who allow students to talk are most likely to evoke substantive revision in student writing. In the other study, A. Karliner found that when an instructor acts as an error detector and prescriber of remedies, students tend to remain passive recipients of information.[19] However, when the instructor assumes the role of a collaborator—an interested but sometimes confused reader who wants to help the writer articulate ideas more clearly—students respond by making more substantive changes in drafts. Clearly, reader response by teachers or tutors who do not pass judgment or correct errors is useful to writers during both drafting and revising.

Individualizing Learning

Teaching writing to groups presents special problems not faced by other disciplines, problems such as the variety of skill levels in any class. These differences occur partly because of individual differences among writers and partly because writing is not a set of skills that develop sequentially or neatly, from words to sentences to paragraphs and then to essays. Instead, writers jump in all at once, mixing talk with writing at an early age, writing stories before they even know what a paragraph is, constructing sentences before they know how to spell or punctuate. This happens, as Donald Murray explains, because "the writing class unlike the history class does not move from the

Revolutionary War to the War of 1812 to the Civil War; each student in the class is facing his own problems at his own pace."[20]

To make things even messier, not only do writers have different individual composing processes but different processes are used at different times. Research on composing processes has not yet given us close analyses of how such processes differ among writers or for different assignments, but we know that we do not approach all of our writing tasks in the same way. Some plans are made in our heads, some on paper; some writing follows familiar scripts, some seems amorphous and in need of models. We hear from some writers that they need to walk around and rehearse their writing before confronting a piece of paper (or computer monitor), and other writers describe the need for free-writing and brainstorming to get them going. Given this diversity, George Jensen and John DiTiberio remind us that if we advise all the students in a class to follow a single writing process, it will work for some students but not others.[21] And, while it may be useful to suggest that students try a variety of approaches, those who are confused about how to proceed may become even more confused by having options. Jensen and DiTiberio's solution to this is to develop as much as we can an understanding of how people differ and then to individualize writing instruction accordingly.

Given the diversity of students' skills and composing processes, it is hard to disagree with Judith Kollman's assessment that effective teaching in the traditional classroom structure is nearly impossible. Kollman's answer is the personal approach of the conference.[22] Working individually with a student permits us to become familiar with that student's weaknesses and strengths and with the student's uniqueness as a writer and as a person. In the company of a particular writer, we can no longer be content with doling out general prescriptions and textbook advice.

Teaching Specific Strategies

Working with individual writers also means that we are more likely to tie instruction to the particular paper and to focus on what to do next, suggesting strategies for the writer to use rather than merely identifying problems. When grading papers we are apt to write "You need to limit your topic. It's not clear what your point is," but when we sit with the writer we *ask* what the point of that particular paper is. As a result, the discussion that follows may help the writer to define the topic. Or we can ask the writer to give us a brief summary of what the paper is about, another useful strategy for helping to

sharpen the focus or point of a paper. Solving problems at hand is best accomplished by finding strategies to deal with those problems, and the conference setting promotes this problem-solving approach. Teaching strategies to writers is such an integral part of conferences that chapter 5 is devoted to this subject.

Benefits of One-to-One Teaching

Having explored how conferences fit in with a process approach to writing, we now return to where we began in this chapter, considering advantages. Conferences may indeed be a natural component of teaching the writing process, but a rationale for this method of working with writers still needs to provide answers to the question "Do conferences benefit students and teachers?"

Improving Writing

In 1978 Peter Schiff summarized all the empirical evidence then available that demonstrated the effectiveness or value of conferences.[23] With so little to report, his list was far shorter than advocates would like it to be, and the situation has not improved dramatically since then. But despite the limited body of research on conferences, what is available generally supports the claim that one-to-one instruction has positive effects, though no one has yet attempted to analyze which contributing factors promote success.

In the earliest of these studies, conducted in 1971 by J. P. Shaver and D. Nuhn with fourth-, seventh-, and tenth-grade underachievers in reading and writing, the students were assigned to tutoring or control groups. Results indicate that the tutoring produced significantly greater end-of-year gains in all three grade levels, and that a greater number reached their predicted potential or better, a difference still present two years later.[24] In 1974 D. G. Sutton and D. S. Arnold studied the effectiveness of tutorial assistance in remedial writing instruction compared to the classroom lectures and discussions used for a control group. Sutton and Arnold's conclusion was that the highly individualized instructional methodology employed in the writing lab had a significantly beneficial effect upon the later English grades of the students.[25]

But not all studies show conferences as advantageous. Another study conducted in 1974, by Myrna Smith and Barbara Bretcko, which examined the effect of individual conferences on the performance of students in junior college composition courses, offers a qualified answer. The results of this study indicate that it is questionable to

invest the amount of time spent in six conferences during the semester, for beyond the first two conferences students conferring with their teachers didn't learn any more than those who spent the time in class.[26] While this confirmed that some conferences are better than none, a study conducted by Judith Budz and Terry Grabar in 1976 showed a negative effect for conferences. The pre- and posttests of two groups of students, one assigned to a classroom situation and the other to half a semester of classroom instruction and half of conferences, showed that the classroom students did better than the students who spent time in tutorials.[27] (An examination of the flaws of this study can be found in Sarah Freedman and Ellen Nold's response to the Budz and Grabar article.)[28] In yet another experiment in 1976, by Mildred Fritts, which involved the use of conferences in a program of college composition, one group of freshmen had weekly fifteen-minute conferences for thirteen weeks while the control group had no conferences. As a result, the experimental group showed significantly better writing achievement than did the control group.[29]

A somewhat different population of students, in a different setting, was the focus of Allan Gates's 1977 study. For Gates's experiment, twenty-two entering freshmen deemed "marginal" were given help with reading, writing, and study skills in the college's Learning Center. When compared with a similar group who did not receive such individual help, this experimental group was significantly more successful in college in that they earned better grades, were able to complete more credit hours, and had lower overall rates of withdrawal from individual classes and from the college.[30]

The use of conferences in large composition programs has been the subject of two studies. In one, conducted by Thomas Carnicelli, the data studied were the responses of eighteen hundred students at the University of New Hampshire enrolled in a freshman English program that included weekly or biweekly conferences. All of the eighteen hundred students who wrote evaluations found conferences to be more useful than classes, and students generally preferred the privacy of the conference to class scrutiny.[31] Another study of a programmatic use of conferences, conducted in 1978 by the Los Angeles Community College District, tested the effectiveness of the Garrison method of using conferences (a method described in chapter 2 of this book) in both freshman English and remedial composition classes. The results showed that students instructed according to the Garrison method showed greater gains between pre- and posttests, with the students in remedial classes showing even more gain than did the students in the standard freshman course.[32]

Saving Time

For some teachers contemplating the use of conferences, the greatest hindrance is time. They see conferences as requiring far more time than they have available. The assumption here is that conferences are an addition to the time already spent on class instruction, paper grading, and preparation. The equation doesn't quite work that way, however, especially if we acknowledge that paper grading is neither particularly efficient nor effective. Grading papers is a way to respond to student writing, but not the only way, and therein lies the great advantage—and time savings—of conferences. On a sheer time basis, John Knapp, a teacher who uses conferences primarily for evaluation, explains that with his system of fifteen-minute conferences, he spends no more time on evaluation than he did when grading papers at home.[33] There are also the arguments, offered by Barbara Fassler, that with oral feedback more can be said than with written (because we can speak more words per minute than we can write) and that oral feedback is more efficient because of the high level of concentration maintained.[34] As a replacement for paper grading, then, conferences can reduce evaluation time, and, as discussed in the next section, offer better feedback.

There is also the possibility of replacing class instruction time with conferences. In previous pages I have argued that working with writers as they write is far more effective than class presentations of abstract concepts and lists of "don'ts." If we eliminate or reduce time spent on such lectures and discussions, even more time becomes available for conferences. Should we feel that we are robbing the class of needed instruction, we can recall Roger Garrison's reminder: a class doesn't have writing problems; only individuals have problems saying what they mean.[35] And conferences do not have to be scheduled allotments of time, fifteen or twenty minutes per student; they can be even the briefest of conversations with writers as the teacher strolls around the classroom during writing or "workshop" hours.

Providing Better Feedback

> I honestly believe that the only consistently helpful and effective evaluation of student writings comes as the two of you sit down with the piece of writing, focusing directly on what's on the page. Extraordinarily successful teachers of writing have one thing in common: they spend very little time in isolation, reading and marking papers, and a great deal of time responding and discussing student writings with the writers themselves.
>
> —Dan Kirby and Tom Liner[36]

There is a generalized and obviously deeply rooted feeling that conferences provide better evaluation, but why? Why *are* comments made by a teacher sitting elbow-to-elbow with a writer better than those written on the page? Perhaps the most important answer, from the writer's perspective, is that conference comments are clearer than those written on paper. In a study conducted by Andrew Cohen of how a group of students from the State University of New York at Binghamton handled feedback on paper from teachers, 20 percent of the students reported that they attended only sparingly or not at all to the teacher's corrections. The students appeared to have a limited repertoire of strategies for processing teacher feedback, the most popular being making a mental note of the teacher's comments. Self-rated poorer learners appeared to have an even more limited repertoire of strategies. Cohen concludes that "the results show that sometimes [teacher feedback] may be too abbreviated in nature, too general, and possibly not focused enough in the areas where learners want feedback for it to have much impact on the learners."[37] Cohen's article also provides a review of other studies of the ineffectiveness of written feedback offered by teachers. Included in the category of feedback too general to be useful are uninformative comments such as "good," "interesting," or "nice work." Though they are meant as positive reinforcement, such appraisals offer students no insights into what worked well and no information that could be applied to future writing.

In another study of students' reactions to teachers' comments on papers, Mary Hayes and Donald Daiker note that students complained that one-word or short-phrase comments, such as "unclear," "explain," or "be more specific," were the least useful they received. In response to a teacher's note that a sentence was unclear, one student responded, "I would like to know why it's unclear, because it's clear to me and it would be clear to anyone who read the story!" In response to a marginal "What?" another student told Hayes and Daiker, "Uh, hmmm. Well, let's look and find out what that question mark and that 'What?' meant. I will—I mean I can't pay too much attention to it because I really didn't know what it's all about, but ah. . . . It's in between two lines and I can't figure out which it goes to."[38] In writing labs tutors exchange similar stories of students' confused attempts to figure out teacher comments. High on my list are instances of students' interpretations of two terms in our arsenal of jargon, "focus" and "coherence." One student, asked to revise "for a tighter focus on his subject," assumed that his paper needed sharper images in the middle (similar, he thought, to the focusing area in the middle of the viewfinder in his

camera). Teacher comments such as "Work on coherence" or "Try for more coherence" bring out amazing ingenuity in some students' interpreting abilities. "Maybe she wants me to sound smarter, ahh, more intelligent?" offered one student. Or "I know I write too much, and I suppose it was getting sort of incoherent, especially that technical part about how acid rain interacts with marble and stuff on statues. Maybe I'll just leave that part out."

The disheartening result of this misinterpretation, as we can see, is that when a teacher's comment is not immediately clear, students often spend considerable time and effort trying to understand it—and frequently fail. How badly they fail is evident in another of Hayes and Daiker's examples. In this case, a teacher had pointed out a fragment and written on the paper "Fragment, but it works stylistically, quite well in fact." Since the class had already worked on sentence fragments, even discussing examples of fragments that were used appropriately, the teacher would undoubtedly be startled to hear the student's interpretation, ". . . a fragment. Uh, I think it means something that—it's just—it isn't really related to the preceding sentences. It's just—it's out of place. It may be relevant, but it's just in the wrong place."[39] Of course, our terminology, if left unexplained in conferences, can be equally bewildering, but the conference presents an opportunity not only to see the blank, uncomprehending stare of a mystified student but also to ask if an explanation is needed and to explain, even if only in a few words. Writing out an explanation of a term while grading papers is far less common than offering one in speech; without the writer there, it is too easy to forget his or her confusion. With the student sitting next to us that can't happen.

Beyond the confusion of jargon and arcane terminology, there is yet another kind of confusion that results from a thoroughly graded paper. As Roger Garrison explains, when a student faces a paper pockmarked with red underlinings and "sp," "punct.," "awk.," "comma splice," "not parallel," and the like, his or her reaction is apt to be confusion: Where do I begin to improve? What should I start with? Garrison's insistence on working on one writing skill at a time in a conference is his way of avoiding this type of confusion.[40] This problem is one that I have described elsewhere as a case of more being less.[41] Too much information causes a state of information overload in which the student is unable to attend to anything because everything seems to claim his or her attention simultaneously.

In the conference, confusion can be dissipated by talk. We can ask students if they understand, and students can explain to us what they meant. Areas of misunderstanding on both sides melt away, and what

might have been an adversary relationship turns into a helping one. "Why didn't that student complete the assignment?" becomes "What can I do to help her understand what the assignment is?" Even the mere use of a pleasant tone of voice softens to a suggestion what can sound on paper like a drill sergeant bellowing a command ("Split this paragraph in two!").

Feedback in a conference is not only clearer, it's quicker. Except for those teachers who heroically give up their evenings, weekends, and sometimes needed sleep and family life to get papers back quickly, most students have to wait for from several days to a week to read the teacher's comments on a graded paper. Conferences, on the other hand, permit brief meetings with writers while they are writing, short exchanges in which we can give writers immediate reactions to work-in-progress. And when we confer with writers as soon as their papers are ready for a reader, the writing is fresh in the writer's mind and the comments are still relevant. A week later writers are likely to forget what problems they had and what choices they made between alternatives. (For similar reasons an ad for a camera which instantly develops its pictures proclaims "You don't have to wait a week to see if you made a mistake.") But, then, any comments at the tail end of an effort are, as Garrison points out, far less effective than on-the-spot responses: "Working with individuals in the process of making a piece of writing is the best use of your time and energy. It is also pedagogically sound: the feedback between you and a student is kept close and recurrent. Helpful intervention in another's learning activity is a succinct definition of *teaching*."[42]

Changing the Teacher-Student Relationship

The helpful intervention that Garrison mentions is also responsible for changing students' perceptions of the writing teacher's role. Except for children in the earliest grades of elementary school who have not yet experienced the ordeal of "getting a paper back" and seeing a teacher's notations all over the page, most writers know what an English teacher is supposed to do—make colored marks on the page to highlight errors and weaknesses. By the time they get to college most freshmen fear composition teachers. The only way to overcome this fear, as Dean Memering reminds us, is through informal talk between teachers and students.[43] But there's no need to wait for college to establish a helping relationship between students and teachers. At any age when students are writing, teachers can be nearby, making suggestions, giving feedback, offering help, and showing interest. Even when evaluation includes negative comments, a teacher who accom-

panies them with a demonstration of personal interest in the student's improvement can reduce hostility or fear. Writing teachers who see themselves not as authority figures but as advisers, coaches, or helpers are not likely to hide behind a stack of papers to grade, and students who find teachers sitting next to them are quick to adjust their image of those teachers accordingly.

Helping Writers Critique Their Writing

Writers need to develop their self-critical powers in order to appraise their work as they progress. Without this ability to draw back from what has been written—to question its content, consider alternatives, or wonder what's missing—writers are less apt to revise in any meaningful way. Deanna Gutschow promotes the growth of this critical stance by engaging in dialogue with her students during conferences, a technique students then learn to internalize and use when writing alone. Said one of her students: "Once I started my paper, I found myself 'writing for my conference,' and trying to interpret what your questions and objections would be. . . . I'm questioning what I write much more now than I ever did before. That's really slowing me down, making me think a lot harder about what I'm trying to say." When students master this inner dialectic, they can, as Gutschow says, look "inward rather than outward for critical evaluation."[44]

Gutschow's experience with eleventh and twelfth graders suggests that they rarely know how to take this critical stance toward their writing unless shown. The conference not only illustrates and demonstrates this process, it also encourages writers to practice actually being critics, to hear themselves offering opinions. Donald Graves sees an equal need for writing conferences for young children because they too need to gain a sense of voice by first hearing themselves express ideas and opinions orally. To develop these self-critical powers Graves suggests conferences every five or ten days, conferences which don't need to be more than five to ten minutes long.[45] For writers at any age conference questions and dialogue contribute to their ability to become critics—and hence revisers—of their own work.

Notes

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