Conversation, Teaching, and Points in Between

The Confusion of Conferencing

I BEGAN STUDYING MY OWN CONFERENCING PRACTICE MANY YEARS ago, while I was still a graduate student. I'll admit that I chose that particular project for my research course because I was smug in my belief that any examination would show the professor and my classmates how fair, honest, critical, thoughtful, reflective, and even nurturing I was. It would show that I could connect with each student individually and personally. But what I learned from analyzing transcripts of my conferences is how great a distance lay between my image and my words, my goals and my practice. Despite any perceptions I may have had about the "personal" nature of student-teacher conferences, the academic patterning of the classroom and the cultural patterning which the classroom reinscribes carried over to my conferences and undermined my efforts at equalizing power and engaging in real conversation and cooperative learning.

I looked at only six of my conferences, but my first response was horror. For example, two female students who came in with ideas for papers and detailed plans repeatedly dismissed their knowledge and work with "I don't know." One said she was "running off at the mouth." I rather feebly said, "Oh, no, these are good," but I didn't spend any significant time exploring or addressing their negative self-generalizations; I had other things I wanted to get to. Female students didn't use much of the disciplinary terminology I'd worked so hard to make a part of the classroom talk; substitutes for a simple word like "paragraph" were "right here" or "parts" of the paper, and "support" was "put more stuff in." I found that, in return, I didn't use any of that language with them. When they asked for help, asked for clear and specific direction, I didn't give it to them. I made them jump through the same hoops I'd had to jump through. One young

woman admitted that she didn't "know how to say things," an admission that covered both the paper we were discussing and our discussion itself. I let it hang in the air, and in frustration, ultimately agreed with her. Male students didn't have to ask for help—I offered it. One threw about disciplinary-specific words like rice at a wedding and I responded enthusiastically to him. Later examination of the transcript seemed to reveal that he didn't have much idea what the words meant. Another confident student I praised as a "Writer" with a capital "W," even though his ideas and writing weren't significantly better than one of the more hesitant women. Yet a black student seemed to anticipate challenges to his ideas, immediately justifying them even as I opened my mouth.

If my first response was to be shocked, my second was to attempt to mitigate my shame and embarrassment by thinking, "Surely others conference as badly as I do!" This led me in two directions. One was to ask, "What's going on with conferencing?" and begin gathering tapes of conferences from willing colleagues and students, analyzing them critically to begin describing conferencing. The other direction was to go back, to try and determine what had led me to my own practice. I went back to the images of conferencing that fill the pages of books and articles in composition and which helped me to construct a picture of my conference practice that, unfortunately, existed only in my head. I realized that many of these descriptions of conferences were visionary, that they drew pictures with such broad strokes that I had retained the outline of the image but provided a substance drawn from my own previous conferencing experiences, my own locations.

The widespread disciplinary assumptions about conferencing appear to be that conferences are either conversations about writing— casual, comfortable, rapport-building sessions—or a form of individualized teaching, sensitive to the needs of the student in the chair across from the instructor. What I want to show is that these assumptions and the images of conferencing that emerge from them are at best naive, and at worst, potentially harmful. One way to do this is to become conscious of and understand the linguistic structures of conversation, teaching, and learning and the ways in which these structures are part of larger cultural and social structures. Conferencing is an asymmetrical language interaction, drawing its rules from both the discourse of the classroom and from casual conversation. But teaching and conversation are (and create) very different and often problematic

contexts and relationships. In a profession dedicated to both preserving tradition and effecting change, it's not surprising to find such a contradiction. But, simply put, the structure of conversation and the structure of traditional teaching talk are quite different: the purpose of communication is different, the speakers' roles are different, and the status of speakers is different. We cannot simply move from one to the other. It is not a mere physical act like shifting from one foot to another. If one participant thinks a conference is a conversation and the other thinks it is teaching, then there is going to be confusion: who speaks when? What topics are appropriate? What role should each play? I'd like in this chapter to examine the contradictory nature of those speech structures and thus our images of conferencing, and to offer some suggestions to teachers for using what they learn about conversation, teaching, and genres of speech. To do so, I'm going to consider how conferencing is conceived of in typical composition and pedagogy sources and how theories of social constructionism and sociolinguistic approaches to conferencing might help us reconsider and understand some of our difficulties with this practice.

Generations of Conferences

Our understanding and conception of writing conferences is poised on the brink of change after a long period in which it has remained, beneath the surface anyway, fundamentally untouched by the changes in writing instruction. Why do writing teachers conference with students? We conference because it is efficient: we can say more about a paper than we can write in the same amount of time, and we can deal individually with the problems of a student and thus not impede the progress of an entire class or even a writing group. We conference because we believe it is effective: students learn more from oral responses than written ones; if a conference is timed appropriately, the teacher can intervene in the writing process at the points where help is most needed; it gives students an interested listener and a chance to discuss their writing with the real audience for it; and it provides motivation. We conference because we believe it will help our students discover "things" about themselves and the world around them, because we have something to say about that world of which we are a part and we can't say all of our piece in a classroom.

Conferences also make more visible processes that are usually hidden from teachers or students. We ask students what they were

thinking about when they wrote this line, when they suddenly switched to a new topic or changed their writing voice. Conferences help demystify the process of evaluation for students as the teacher reads through and responds in a variety of ways to the draft while the student listens and watches. Finally, we conference because it helps us get to know our students better. In conferences, students can express both academic and personal concerns, can tell us the stories of their lives as they discuss what prompted and informed their writing. As teachers, we can respond to those personal elements confidentially and with feeling that we may not care (or dare) to show in the classroom

Such claims for the success and value in conferencing are broad and long-standing. More than two decades ago, Squire and Applebee (1968, cited in Duke, 44) asserted that: "Perhaps the most successful practice in the teaching of composition has been the regular conference to discuss problems and progress of the individual student" (254). More recently, Witte, Meyer, Miller, and Faigley (1982, cited in Freedman and Katz, 60), state their finding that directors of first-year writing programs nationwide believe conferences are "the most successful part of their teaching programs."

But these claims for success need to be examined more closely. Certainly, our own experiences tell us that conferences are not always so successful—but what are the criteria for success? If we follow accounts of conferencing over the last three decades, what we see are largely narratives, exhortations, and guidelines presented uncritically. Lad Tobin (1990) helps us consider the slowly-developing conference structure, making a distinction between what he calls "first generation" and "second generation" conferences, and looking ahead to a third (or perhaps a "next"?!) generation informed by recent theories and debate about the social construction of knowledge and the acquisition of language. First generation conferences, he argues, follow the lead of Roger Garrison and other early supporters of "one-to-one" teaching—brief conferences held regularly with students as they work on papers individually. These conferences are highly directive, with teachers setting the agenda and dispensing information to students who receive it passively, rewrite their work, and return for another brief conference. Descriptions of conferencing during this early period make clear how powerfully the teacher controls the event. Garrison writes that "It is better for a student to be an apprentice at your side for five minutes than a disciple at your feet for five

months" (69). Knapp (1976) echoes Garrison's imagery, referring to the student as an "acolyte" and the teacher as a "priest" (47). Hiatt (1975) problematizes easy claims for success and learning in one-to-one tutorials, but still posits a conferencing relationship with students that is clearly teacher-centered, with all agency given to the instructor. "Willing scholars" receive passively the few comments on grammar and mechanics that they need; the "unwilling scholar" must be "captured" and tamed. Without attention to differences in knowledge and terminology, such a student is "held at bay" (39).

Second generation conferences are—theoretically—non-directive; Tobin sees Donald Murray as the exemplar of this approach. Tied to the growing use of a process approach to writing, second generation conferences are student-centered and focus on active learning as opposed to passive absorption. In such conferences, the goal is to let the student set the agenda and do the talking, while the teacher asks the right questions to help students discover their topics and evaluate their own writing. Like first generation conferences, these are problem-solving meetings; however, the problems are identified and solved by students, with the expert guidance of the teacher. But, Tobin argues, the process approach to conference teaching rather quickly became "ritualized." The text of conferences became as idealized as the written student text instructors had in mind in first-generation conferences. And, in fact, Murray himself (1985) states that "Students need to know *the* dynamics of *the* conference: the student is expected to say something about the draft; the teacher is expected to listen, read the draft, and respond to what the student said; the student is expected to listen to the teacher and respond" (152, emphases mine).

Duke (1975) for example, draws on theories and practices of Rogerian reflection and questioning in his discussion of conferencing. He argues that if the conference is "truly student-centered and non-directive," Rogerian questions will help a student see where she should go next in a writing a paper.

> This kind of structuring, or focusing . . . provides a sense of security for the student; he no longer has to worry about the direction of the conference and he is given a specific task on which to focus . . . also avoided here is the unplanned, rambling monologue which all too often characterizes the meeting between student and teacher and only results in confusing the student further. (45)

Somehow, the non-directive teacher has retained all the agency in this conference; he structures it, provides security for the student, relieves him of worry, gives him a task to focus on, and ensures that he is not confused by either his own talk or the teacher's.

Dissatisfied with both these paradigms, Tobin looks forward to an evolution that acknowledges the complexity of conferencing, that sees "dynamics" less as a boilerplate for interaction and more as a social relationship. He calls for "an approach that takes into account the dynamic aspects of each writing conference: the student's relationship to the text, the teacher's relationship to the text, and the student and teacher's relationship to each other" (99). Tobin's tentative description of a third generation conference shares common elements with the relationship Donald Murray calls a "trialogue," where the text is the focus point of the conference, and the student and teacher speak of the text and check responses *with* the text (Murray, 1985, 150). But Tobin's vision goes beyond that, certainly, in its concern for the student-teacher relationship, the tension that results from the differences in power and expectations of participants, and in its call for the "careful studying of our students and ourselves" (100).

If a third generation of conferencing has appeared, it is keeping a low profile. What *has* appeared over the past decade are examinations of conferencing that begin to apply theories of feminism, collaborative learning, and social constructionism, and which apply sociolinguistic methodologies and findings to critique the anecdotal portrayals of conferencing that have provided the foundation for further practice.

Tobin's diachronous distinctions between generations of conferences are clearly tied to changes in composition pedagogy, from traditional approaches emphasizing the unproblematic transmission of knowledge to process approaches emphasizing the social nature of knowledge to even more recent approaches asserting the social construction of knowledge and denying the "nature" of anything. But the differences he sees between the first two generations seem superficial. While the metaphors of priest and acolyte, civilizer and barbarian change to those of counselor and client, master and apprentice, the power relations these metaphors speak to remain unchanged and largely unexamined, and issues of gender, race, and class remain invisible. The evolutionary spin which Tobin puts on his history of conferencing touches positive chords in readers: we *are* getting better, we think to ourselves in relief, we *are* sensitive to changes around us

and adapt to them as needed to be good teachers and citizens. In its new clothing, however, the conference DNA still twists in a familiar double helix, genetically unchanged.

Cognitivism and Social Constructionism

One reason, perhaps, for the lack of critical examination of conferences is that until recently, many teachers have brought with them to conferencing the assumptions of a traditional cognitive theory of knowledge. This could be so for a number of reasons. While recent, more critical research on conferences and pedagogy draws on theories of social construction and social reproduction, many students of secondary education and most English department teaching assistants receive little to no training specifically focused on conferencing. The social constructionist theories they read about and may experience in some classrooms are not applied to other situations connected to teaching. Thus cognitive theories remain the "default" for many teachers as they consider their conferencing practice.

Ken Bruffee (1986) offers some helpful distinctions between cognitive approaches to knowledge and learning and a social constructionist approach. When we speak in cognitive terms about knowledge, we make several assumptions. One, of course, is that with the "mirror and inner eye" which are part of the human brain, we can "see" what is "out there" and then contemplate it: "The mirror reflects outer reality. The inner eye contemplates that reflection." Another assumption is that processes that occur within the mind are objectifiable, measurable. A third assumption is that "the individual self is the matrix of all thought." Finally, a fourth assumption is that knowledge is problematic and incomplete, for there is a gap between the mirror and the inner eye. Bruffee reminds us that "cognitive work is based on the assumption that writing is primarily an individual act. A writer's language originates within the inner reaches of the individual mind. We use language primarily to express ideas generated in the mind and to communicate them to other individual human minds in the 'social context'" (776-77, 784).

When these assumptions are applied to composition and particularly to conferencing, we can see how they affect the ways we perceive the function and structure of a conference. Jacobs and Karliner (1977) write that one function of the conference is to help the student "discover and develop ideas" (489), while Rose (1982) states that

"in a live encounter, students can sometimes be prodded to discover more about what they really have to say." For Rose, the conference also "provides an opportunity to actually see minds at work" (326). Freedman and Sperling (1985) argue that "the student presumably is to come away from a conference having been given at least something from the teacher" (111-12). These statements indicate just how strongly the cognitivist tradition shapes our interaction in conferencing. The reification of knowledge—its conceptualization as an object that can be given—runs through such accounts of conferencing. Metaphors which would help readers reconceive the conference along lines that are more concerned with the construction of knowledge than the transmission of knowledge are rare.

This is a hard mindset to shake. Like so many of us teaching now, I am the product of the practice such theory helps create. Urgings from professors to "think deeper" and maybe "discover" what I really thought about subject "X" always made me close my eyes to the world around me and try to look inward to learn. But in fact, as I recall conferences with professors, I realize that I did the eye-closing thing after much discussion, and when I responded with my "discovery" it was almost always to say, "Thanks, I never thought about all that in those terms before." My knowledge of "X" had not been discovered deep within, but had been constructed by reconsidering personal beliefs in a new context provided by my meaningful contact with a teacher. That "thing" that was my knowledge was constantly being socially constructed.

Bruffee juxtaposes cognitivist assumptions and social constructionism in order to underscore their differences. Social constructionism challenges the assumption of foundational truths and argues instead that knowledge, ideas, theories, and "facts" are constructs of language which represent the consensus of beliefs held by particular communities. It denies "ownership" of knowledge or ideas; rather, it "understands knowledge and the authority of knowledge as community-generated, community-maintaining symbolic artifacts" (777). The problematic nature of knowledge as understood by traditional cognitivists is no longer an issue if language and knowledge are seen as one and the same. Finally, and most importantly for my movement in this discussion of conflicting paradigms of conferencing, Bruffee asserts that when we talk about the process of thinking, of seeing the mind at work, "such terms do not refer to anything universal, objectifiable, or measurable. Rather, they are a way of talking

about talking. Social constructionism assumes, that is, that thinking is an internalized version of conversation. Anything we say about the way thinking works is conversation about another conversation: talk about talk" (777).

Here, Bruffee is drawing on Lev Vygotsky's concept of thought as "inner speech," as internalized conversation. Vygotsky's theory is one of language acquisition; social constructionists see this as synonymous with knowledge acquisition. Our inner speech is the result of many conversations; when we re-externalize that speech (in writing, for Bruffee), we construct it to take part in a particular community, to "know" what they know. Social constructionist work in composition is "based on the assumption that writing is primarily a social act. A writer's language originates with the community to which he or she belongs. We use language primarily to join communities we do not yet belong to and to cement our membership in communities we already belong to" (784). In accounts of conferencing that focus on the student's written text and the consequences of conference talk on that text—that is, the majority of literature on conferencing—the dynamics of the speech event are subordinated to the goal of the event. But in a sociolinguistic approach, the talk becomes the text. Bruffee reminds us that "collaborative learning is related to social construction in that it assumes learning occurs among persons rather than between a person and things" (787).

Speech ethnographers, sociolinguists, and social constructionists support in varying degrees the belief that the "self" is as much a linguistic and communal construct as any other concept. As I type these words, I am reminded again of my conference with Dr. B., of my conferences with other professors in which I wanted to use the language that would mark me as a member of the academy, or at least of being worthy to enter that community. Simultaneously, I was ashamed of and yet clung to the language that identified me as "poor" and "provincial." Even now, as I speak with family, I speak in ways that remind us of my ties to them and my role as part of their community. I am reluctant to use the language I use with my colleagues. This is not simply because it is so similar to the language my family has always associated with groups of people who have oppressed and insulted them (lawyers, bankers, bureaucrats of all kinds), but because it is confusing to me and confuses "me," highlighting the multiple selves that I usually conceive of as a unified self. I belong to communities that do not usually overlap, and must

find some language to bridge the gaps between what is "true" and valued in each community.

When I was younger (and still today), one of my heroes was Jacques Cousteau. And as I tried to enliven the after-dinner chores of my two older sisters and myself, I would reach down into the sink full of dishes, swirl my hand around, and narrate, in my best bad French accent, "Phillippe dives quickly. In ze depps of ze merky watta, he discovehrs lost tweashehre. Carefully, he bwings up an ain-sient, encwusted fook, ze wehmains of a final, watery deenah." Although I was the youngest, I suddenly had all the status. No one could "do" Jacques Cousteau like I could. I was the focus of atten-tion. No insults, no teasing, none of the sibling snubbing that I often endured. What I could do with words changed the way we inter-acted; I had, momentarily, reconstructed our relationship. (Who knows how this paragraph has reconstructed my relationship with readers!) Sociolinguistics takes as its focus the talk between parties: how that talk is constructed, why it is constructed in certain ways, and how that talk reconstructs the relationship between speakers, and speakers and their communities. It takes only a small jump for me to move from social constructionism to sociolinguistics—and critical sociolinguistics at that. I was eager to find conferencing stud-ies that considered talk-as-text and context. But what I have discov-ered is that most studies of conferencing still do not apply what we've learned from sociolinguistics, despite the obvious: conferences are identified more by the talk that occurs than the written texts under discussion.

Conferencing, Conversation, and Teaching

As a discipline, we are clear that conferencing is not just a part of teaching, it *is* teaching. It is "individualized instruction" (Carnicelli, 1985), a way of "teaching" students to react to their work (Murray, 1979), and a "popular and seemingly effective pedagogical event" (Freedman and Sperling, 1985). Regardless of what we may know about our students or they about us, no matter how many times we have met them outside the classroom, in the conference they are usu-ally learners and we are teachers. These roles may shift slightly: Murray writes that his students teach him, that he is a learner in many cases, but he writes this with some astonishment, with the tone of someone who is happily and continually amazed to see the traditional

relationship between teacher and student reversed. However, what is also clear in his narratives about conferencing is that students do not see *themselves* as teachers, only learners.

So conferencing is teaching. But its language is perceived as neither a lecture nor a discussion (in a teaching context, "discussion" seems to mean to both teachers and students the inclusion of more than two voices (Black, 1992)). Instead, we read that

> a writing conference is a conversation between a student and a teacher about a student's paper. Since it is, or should be, a genuine conversation, it follows no set pattern; it simply evolves as the two parties talk" (Carnicelli, 1985).

> Everyday conversation forms the substructure for interactive composition instruction; everyday conversational misfires form the context for confusions in student revisions. (Feehan, 1989)

> These conferences should have the tone of conversations. They are not mini-lectures but the working talk of fellow writers sharing their experience with the writing process. (Murray, 1985)

The paradigm of the "conference-as-conversation" permeates accounts of conferencing. As you can imagine, however, it does not do so without some tension. After all, consider immediately the differences between talk among teachers in the faculty lounge and talk between teachers and students in conferences. Warning bells should go off as we read about conference "conversation." But our desire to meet on more equal ground with our students muffles the sound. For example, Murray goes on to say: "At times, of course, they will be teacher and student, master and apprentice, if you want, but most of the time they will be remarkably close to peers, because each writer, no matter how experienced, begins again with each draft" (1985).

Murray's perception of the teacher having the power to control the nature of the conference is in opposition to his democratic impulse to flatten out status differences between students and teachers under the weight of the role of "writer." Along with the assumption of teacher control ("if you want") is the assumption that there are reasons why a teacher would shift from conversation to teaching. Yet there is no discussion of the benefits of one form of talk over the others for teachers, students, or both. Thomas Newkirk (1989) simultaneously warns teachers to set an agenda, "or a conference can run on aimlessly...So much student talk could be digressive" and writes: "Most conferences

seem casual, supportive...But the seemingly effortless, conversational quality of conferences belies their complexity, for both teacher and student are filling paradoxical roles" (317, 326). And Kenneth Bruffee makes the point that "productive conversation for all of us is most likely to occur with people we regard as equals, members of our own community. Conversation with members of another community is always somewhat strained, something of a performance" (1985, 4).

Our confusion between conversation and teaching has led to a variety of conflicting claims, warnings, guidelines, and questions that need to be answered. Conversations do not have "agendas" that we must be wary of straying from. How can student talk be "digressive" if there is no agenda? Why isn't teacher talk digressive? Are students our equals? Are we members of the same community in important ways? When I compare the kind of talk going on between my students (especially my younger students) as I enter my classroom to the kind of talk I have had in conferences with those same students, I find it difficult to say that I have had a conversation with my student in conference; I am sure that the two situations produced different kinds of talk.

Most research on conversation is based on the work of Sacks, Schlegoff, and Jefferson (1974). Working from extensive transcripts of naturally occurring conversation, they attempted to characterize its simplest form. For Sacks, et al., the turn-taking mechanism of conversation is both context-free (it always occurs, regardless of the context) and context-sensitive; that is, the length of turns and their order will differ between kinds of speech exchanges—debates, argument, ceremony—and will be shaped by social organization, as an "economy" in which parties may hold different speech capital and thus be permitted to speak at varying lengths. They list the following characteristics as fundamental to conversation:

1. Speaker change recurs, or at least occurs.
2. Overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time.
3. Occurrences of more than one speaker at a time are common, but brief.
4. Transitions (from one turn to the next) with no gap and no overlap are common. Together with transition characterized by a slight gap or slight overlap, they make up the vast majority of transitions.
5. Turn order is not fixed, but varies.
6. Turn size is not fixed, but varies.
7. Length of conversation is not specified in advance.

8. What parties say is not specified in advance.
9. Relative distribution of turns is not specified in advance.
10. Number of parties can vary.
11. Talk can be continuous or discontinuous.
12. Turn-allocation techniques are obviously used. A current speaker may select a next speaker (as when he addresses a question to another party); or parties may self-select in starting to talk.
13. Various "turn-constructional units" are employed; e.g., turns can be projectedly one word long or they can be sentential in length.
14. Repair mechanisms exist for dealing with turn-taking error and violations; e.g., if two parties find themselves talking at the same time, one of them will stop prematurely, thus repairing the trouble. (700-701)

This system provides the framework for a wide variety of studies: how mothers and fathers talk to children, how men converse with women, how peoples of various cultures converse with one another. We can also examine how people speak to each other in classrooms, courtrooms, doctors' offices and welfare offices. As I read through this list, I am checking off items that seem to describe what happens when I conference and those that don't. Unfortunately, it seems clear to me that no matter how badly I want it to be, my conference talk at the moment is not really conversation. But I recognize instantly the voice of the classroom in my conferences.

The Language of Teaching

Language use in the classroom has been extensively studied for decades, first primarily in British classrooms where issues of class predominate in the research, and more recently in the United States, where the focus has been more broad, concerning itself with issues of gender, race, age, class, pedagogical style, and social reproduction. Studies of classroom talk indicate that it is radically asymmetrical. In the traditional teaching exchange, initiation of a topic is the teacher's right. Students are required to respond, and the teacher may or may not choose to evaluate that response or to supply feedback: a typical initiation-response-evaluation (or feedback) exchange, also called I-R-E or I-R-F (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). Michael Stubbs asserts that "teacher talk" is metacommunicative, constantly checking on the flow of information and language. Teacher talk is characterized by very particular functions: attracting

and showing attention, controlling the amount of speech, checking or confirming understanding, summarizing, defining, editing, correcting, and specifying topics. He argues that "such a language is almost never used by pupils; and when it is, it is a sign that an atypical teaching situation has arisen" (Stubbs, 1983, 51-53). Stubbs draws on Labov and Fanshel's (1977) categorization of A, B, and A-B speech events to underscore the power of the teacher to control language—and knowledge—in the classroom. "A" events are those to which only the speaker has access, for they involve the speaker's (A's) emotions, experiences, and personal knowledge. Stubbs points out that "in school classrooms, a statement such as 'I don't know' may be the only one to which a pupil is not open to correction" (1983, 118). While we may not openly correct a student who says "I don't know," such statements certainly affect the shape of conferences, as I learned in looking at my own.

The difference between the forms and contexts of conversation and teaching is striking. The turn order in traditional teaching is fixed, as is, to some extent, the turn size. Discontinuous talk on the part of the student violates the expected I-R-E structure; if the teacher asks a question or initiates a topic, the student must respond. The work involved in constructing a conversation, on the other hand, is shared by all parties. While the structure of talk in teaching mirrors Freire's "banking concept" and indicates a hierarchy, conversation corresponds to the concept of collaborative learning Certainly, learning takes place in both collaborative and traditional teaching contexts, but in a classroom where the teacher talks and the student responds, where the teacher selects topics and students acquiesce, exploration and shared construction are not skills that students will learn.

Sociolinguistic Studies of Conferencing

There are researchers who hope for a productive pedagogical place for conferencing but who can see the problems with the contradictory accounts of conferencing that make up the bulk of work on the topic. Many are turning to the methods and questions that shape and drive sociolinguistics. Transcripts of conferences allow researchers to shift their focus from the revision of written texts to the structure of talk itself. Once that occurs, social relations are highlighted as well. Jacobs and Karliner (1977) for example, forward the

notion that conference talk "falls somewhere between classroom discourse and casual conversation and can draw its rules from either or both depending on the styles of the participants and what they perceive to be the function of a particular conference" (503). Freedman and Sperling (1985) also acknowledge the balancing act performed by participants in conferences. A conference, they say, "has at least the appearance of being spontaneous and personal behind its often somewhat planned and pedagogic nature. Teacher and student must operate at different levels—the conversational as well as the pedagogical—which may ultimately reinforce one another" (107-108). Problematized versions of conferencing acknowledge the conflicting paradigms and explore the ways in which participants negotiate the conflicts. Irene Wong (1988), looking for a situation where "genuine exchange" might result, analyzed conferences in technical writing between tutors and tutees. Two tutees were graduate students in engineering, and two were engineers, so all four brought a significant knowledge base with them. Looking for what she defined as idealized conference conversation—"discourse with a) balanced distribution turns and turn size between the participants, involving b) an exchange of information, in c) a context where both parties can determine the agenda of the discussion" (450)—she finds it occurs only 40% of the time and then when tutors respected the knowledge bases of the tutees and elicited information from them relevant to those knowledge bases. However, much of the time, tutors claimed expertise even in those areas where they had little knowledge. Speaking from the position of expert, they thus structured the talk in traditional ways.

Melanie Sperling (1990) uses ethnographic and sociolinguistic methodology to explore the collaborative nature of writing conferences in a ninth-grade classroom and the ways in which "participating in the explicit dialogue of teacher-student conversation, students collaborate in the often implicit act of acquiring and developing written language" (282). As she follows one white male teacher and six students of varying gender, ethnicity, and levels of ability, she concludes that "as conferences move across tasks and time, patterns of dominance tend to be tempered and teacher and student begin to participate more equally, perhaps more collaboratively, in initiating topics to discuss" (298). For Sperling, the form of conference talk and the process of conferencing itself is "protean" and "shifting." In all this, however, it is still the teacher whom

we often see engaging and sustaining the student's participation in writing conference conversation. The analysis, then, asks us to accommodate to the concept of a teacher-student collaboration what is seen here to be the teacher's special leadership role. That is, the analysis invites us to question commonly held assumptions regarding "ideal" conference interaction whereby the teacher, giving up decision-making power to the student, assumes a generally non-directive role. (295)

In such studies, we see the beginnings of an alternative, more complex description of conferences. Researchers do not assume that all students are equal, for example; rather, they consider particular aspects of students, such as gender, ability, preparation, etc. as important factors in shaping a conference. Freedman and Sperling, for example, examine whether high- achieving and low-achieving students elicit different responses from the same teacher during a conference. They conclude, after carefully examining transcripts from early semester "get acquainted" conferences, that high-achieving students elicited more praise, received more expository explanations delivered in a formal, "written-like" register of speech, and were offered more elaborate invitations to return for another conference. The researchers point out that the teacher in their study intended to treat all of her students equally; only when she could see through the transcripts how the conferences had been constructed by both her own and her students' talk did she realize what had occurred.

Ulichney and Watson-Gegeo (1985) describe teacherly control in their study of conference transcripts. Drawing on theories of social reproduction and constructionism, they examined conferences in two sixth-grade classrooms in which the teacher used a process approach to writing. What they discovered was that "pedagogical innovations, such as process writing approaches, may come to closely resemble familiar classroom routines as they are transformed by institutional pressures and familiar habits of schooling" (309). Ulichney and Watson-Gegeo used the analytic construct of the "dominant interpretive framework" or DIF, which they define as "the teacher's definition and interpretation of the ongoing situation and what counts for knowledge" (313). Students who successfully collaborated with the teacher and actively helped to construct her interpretive framework were positively assessed by the teacher. Even a student who resisted a correction offered by the teacher but was able to preserve the teacher's authority and dominance was evaluated as a "good" student. A student whose interpretation mismatched the

teacher's, however, found herself confused at first, then silenced. Her personal knowledge was questioned and corrected, and she resisted with silence all further attempts by the teacher to draw her into the interpretive framework. The teacher's assessment of this last student was that she had an attitude problem, that she "can't write." Ulichney and Watson-Gegeo point out that average to low achieving working-class and immigrant students receive instruction

> that discourages initiative and expression. Literacy, especially being able to write effectively, means having a voice that reaches larger audiences and is preserved over time—a prerequisite for social empowerment. When education processes distribute that voice unevenly, they inadver-tently perpetuate the inequalities of established power relationships between classes and society. When students resist the teacher's DIF, they may feel a sense of self-worth but they have effectively turned off what benefits school has to offer. (325-326)

Ulichney and Watson-Gegeo's research goes well beyond typical conferencing accounts. They are crucially concerned with the struc-ture and outcomes of talk, not just written products that result from that talk. And they pay careful attention to the roles that students and teachers play in constructing conference talk.

How do we know that conferences are successful? The first and second generation conference descriptions remained vague on that subject; the usual criterion was, given the textual focus, that if the student's paper got better the conference had succeeded. But Carolyn Walker and David Elias (1987) analyzed student-teacher conferences rated as either very successful or unsuccessful by both teacher and student. Their purpose was to find out "who was doing what" and to describe the ways in which successful conferences dif-fered from unsuccessful conferences. They concluded that in suc-cessful conferences, the focus was on the student and the student's work, with the teacher evaluating the work and both eliciting and articulating clearly the criteria for that evaluation. In low-rated con-ferences, however, there were a large number of questions and requests for explanations from both teachers and students: about the paper's content, about the student's writing process, and about the writing task. The focus of the conference remained on the teacher's expertise as a writer, with some teachers providing stu-dents whole paragraphs of the teacher's own words as part of the revising process. Finally, Walker and Elias hypothesize that time was

spent on clarification of various kinds at the expense of time for evaluation and articulation of criteria, thus violating expectations of both parties that "evaluation should be the primary focus of the conference" (275). For Walker and Elias then, while a student's paper may have improved after a conference (sometimes because teachers rewrote them verbally!), that doesn't mean that students or other educators would find such a conference "successful."

What these more complex sociolinguistic studies of conferences show us is how great a leap we have made from the studies that focused on the logistics of conferencing, provided without explanation or support guidelines or questions for instructors to ask that would not be directive, and painted impressionist pictures of students and teachers working together that seemed more clear the further we got from the canvas. Research that has as its focus the structure and content of talk allows us to interrogate the kinds of broad statements and assumptions about conferencing that have been the heart of most literature on the subject and that grow from and reproduce the unexamined assumptions that shape our teaching and our culture. For example, Walker and Elias note that the common finding in most conference research prior to the publication of their own (1987) is that "students *like* conferences" (268). I cannot imagine that Felicia, a student in one of my conferences, liked the frustration I so obviously showed in speaking with her; I can't say I liked the conference with Dr. B. that sticks with me; my students have no difficulty remembering conferences they didn't like over the course of their academic experience. Like their teachers, they like the *concept* of conferencing. It is the practice that frustrates both teachers and students. For conferencing is not a genre of speech that we are familiar with; it is something that must be learned.

Conferences as Speech Genres

Murray points out that for his students to be successful in conferencing, they must learn how to ask the right questions. (Note that Murray assumes teachers already know the right questions to ask—a claim my own experiences call into question!) Sociolinguistic research indicates that conference talk is not quite the teacher talk Stubbs describes, nor is it conversation. For sociolinguists, the "context" created by speakers, speech, and situation—the context that is language, in Bruffee's terms—corresponds roughly to the concept of "speech

genres." M.M. Bakhtin (1986) argues that speech genres are built on utterances, and utterances are intrinsically social, cultural, historic, and dialogic. For Bakhtin, an utterance is a unit of speech determined by a change in speaking subjects. In this way, it corresponds to what we usually consider a speaking turn. As such, it is inherently responsive; for Bakhtin, every utterance is a response to another utterance, is a "link in a chain of speech communion" (84).

> Any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances—his own and others'—with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another (builds on them, polemicizes with them, or simply presumes they are already known to the listener). Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances. (69)

It might be more appropriate to see utterances not just as a link in a chain, but as a link in a fabric of chain mail, connected historically and culturally—closely at times, more distantly at others—and always part of both an immediate situation and a larger context. Bakhtin writes of the "echoes and reverberations" of other utterances with the "communality" of the sphere of speech (91); these reverberations spread out in all directions, not just linearly.

Bakhtin's emphasis on responsiveness and the situatedness of participants in the community as speaking subjects differentiates his view of talk from the depictions of talk between students and teachers that we see in first and second generation accounts of conferencing. Bakhtin's metaphors evoke the kind of complexity of talk that is also missing from Bruffee, despite Bruffee's concept of the discourse community. For Bruffee, students belong to the same community simply because they are students. They are speaking subjects, but they are responding to the voice of a teacher and her peers, situated firmly in the classroom. He recognizes clearly the difference between teachers and students, but he is less clear on the differences among students. For Bakhtin, students would be responding not just to the immediate situation and the voices that are part of that, but to the "echoes and reverberations" of the respective communities of which they are a part, to histories of language that spin diverse narratives and offer multiple roles to each student. It was this din of voices that

in part silenced me in Dr. B's office, that I tried to untangle in the relative shelter of a restroom, that complicate and enrich my life now.

The disciplinary presentations of conferencing as simply "student" and "teacher" become more problematic when we begin to consider not the two roles that we are usually presented with but the talk between people. When I conference with my students, then, each conference is linked to all conferences I have experienced or read about, and what I say is linked to things I have said earlier (for example, in previous conferences with the student or in class, or even to colleagues or at presentations or to myself!) as well as things that have been said to me. It is the same for the student.

Bakhtin argues that we are "given speech genres in almost the same way that we are given our native language" (78). Speech genres are "relatively stable thematic, compositional, and stylistic types of utterances" (64). Consider, for example, condolences we offer after a death, or "welcomes" to large events, eulogies, talk with strangers while in line, and so forth. We learn from practice, from those around us; we learn in a context that teaches us simultaneously language, role, and possibilities. We use speech genres to organize our relations with others in both simple and complex ways, from greeting one another to voicing disagreement to expressing love. Our ability to function competently in a variety of speech (and thus social) situations depends on our familiarity with the speech genres which correspond to those situations. If we wish to "speak freely" in a variety of situations, we must paradoxically understand the many forms of speech that are demanded by and create those situations, including conferencing. When we begin to consider conferencing as a speech genre, not simply as a practice almost inseparable from teaching, we have to ask ourselves how we learn it and how we can teach it effectively to our students.

What Happens When We Don't Know
Whether We Are Teaching or Conversing?

In conversation, we usually try to "match" our language to the language used by other speakers; it is part of the need to equalize the status of speakers, to minimize the "strain" that Bruffee points out. In my initial research on my own conferencing, I found myself doing just that. When students didn't use disciplinary language to describe their writing, neither did I. When students used it, I did, too. If I had conceived of the conference as a classroom, I would

have said, "I'd like you to try to become more familiar with the terminology used by professional writers, critics, and teachers. So I'll use that terminology as I have in class and I'd like you to do so as well as we work our way through this paper. I'll define anything that I'm not sure is clear, or if you use a term in a way I'm not familiar with, I'll ask you to define it for me so that we're on the same wave length." Such a statement would be out of place in a conversation. Yet, if conferences are goal-driven—and I'd argue that the vast majority of them are—those goals have to be made explicit by both students and teachers. If we make those goals clear, however, we also make clear that we are not really "conversing," and the sense of equality and freedom that both students and teachers like about conferences fades away. When I didn't use the language I valued with students who didn't use it with me, it wasn't a conscious decision on my part. I was simply adjusting to a conversational partner and minimizing difference. I was also, in many ways, doing those students a great disservice by not acknowledging those differences, talking about what the effects of them might be as the student attempted to enter the academic community and making clear that one of my goals—perhaps not immediate, not for this conference—was to help the student learn that language. Critical theory, translated into practice, teaches students and their teachers about the power and social structure of the communities they are in or wish to enter and helps them make informed decisions about entrance, resistance, accommodation or affiliation.

Sometimes, digression on the part of a speaker may mean that she has wandered onto a familiar path that she feels bound to follow again, like the stories that Aunt Ellie tells each time she sees us. But often, digression is exploration, is learning: reconstructing experience and knowledge. We've found ourselves going somewhere we didn't expect. I have had students ask me for simple explanations of a small part of a text and found myself figuring out with them something I hadn't realized was even a question I had. I'm not sure that my digression, unreflected on or reframed to fit the genre, was much help to them, but it was to me. What about student "digressions?" Teacher-talk in part assures that such linguistic wandering will not take place in a classroom. But without a willing audience, the learning that might take place as the student moves into unfamiliar territory will not occur. When a student is willing to learn and the structure of conversation—her right to self-select as a speaker, to

hold the floor as she thinks her way through a problem, her right to remain silent while she thinks and expect me to be silent while she is, to make a jump from one topic to the next without immediately explaining why—is overwhelmed by the teacher's perceived need to accomplish her goals using the language of the classroom to do so, then a valuable opportunity for active learning is lost.

It is difficult for talk that takes place in an institutional context involving a speaker deeply invested in that institution to break free of institutional restraints. So while the appearance of a conference may seem casual and conversational, beneath the surface is it often driven by the need for the teacher to cover whatever issues seem most pressing to her (particularly if she has initiated the conference) in the short time period most conferences occupy. If I am required to conference with my students a certain number of times and there are many more students after the one who is sitting with me at the moment, I am far less likely to respond personally to—if in fact I even hear—the fear and confusion in a student's words. If I do hear concerns deeper and more personal than the ones I have articulated or intend to, I may decide I don't have time to share my own experiences with her or ask more about her own, which, as a partner in conversation, I should. Or perhaps I choose not to make that time, foregrounding my role as teacher to any conversational role I could have chosen.

Juggling Talk, Encouraging Learning

What do your students expect from a conference? What do you? Is it an extension of the classroom, clearly tied to lessons learned there? Is it a place where students and teachers work to break down the kinds of institutional structures that both separate and bind them in classrooms and attempt to explore new relationships?

We teach students about poetry, short fiction, drama, and novels, but do we address in our classrooms the genres of speech that students need to be familiar with? Do we explore language as texts? If conferencing is a part of our practice, then we need to examine that part, teach that part, and reshape what happens if we don't like it, if it's not successful for both participants.

One way of addressing the conflict between conversation and teaching is to build into our curriculum an exploration of speech genres. Ask student teams to observe class members involved in

conversation and note how it is structured, how topics are brought up and developed or dismissed, how feelings are dealt with, and how learning takes place. How do questions get asked and answered? How do turns shift? Was there a "point" to the talk? What function did it serve, what was accomplished, and how? Experiment with role playing: how would a team member talk about a personal problem with parents? A friend? A sibling? A pastor? A teacher? In a monologue? Have students monitor and break down classroom talk: lectures, mini-lessons, discussions, talk while the teacher is writing on the board or has his back turned, talk when a teacher responds privately to her student while writing is taking place (a mini-conference held in class), talk in peer or writing groups. Sacks et al. and Michael Stubbs offer clear lists of the features of conversation structure and teacher-talk; with these characteristics, students can place these genres they are exploring on a continuum of these features.

After such experience, students and teachers can determine what they want to happen in conferences. Frank discussion is needed to determine whether participants are uncomfortable when the talk becomes more personal, more conversational. What are the benefits of conversation for students? For teachers? What are the benefits of teaching? If students and teachers have identified learning taking place in conversations, can that same kind of learning be replicated in conferences? Should it be? If we were to place conferences on a continuum of talk, it might fall between teaching and conversation, and individual conferences may slide further in one direction or the other. As Bakhtin points out, "genres are diverse because they differ depending on the situation, social position, and personal interrelations of the participants in the communication" (79). When we cannot distinguish our conferencing from our teaching, we are often blind to the individual differences among students; when we are engaged in true conversation, the important goals of teaching may be ignored.

If we are open to conversation, we should pay careful attention to story-telling. It is a time-honored way of teaching, but it also makes up much of conversation. Deborah Shiffrin (1988) points out that telling a story takes time; therefore the usual pattern of turn-taking is suspended. The listener must release the floor and must adopt the speaker's perspective, becoming an audience. How rarely our students have teachers as an audience! What happens when teachers make room for both ways of storytelling? In the many conference

tapes I've heard, extended stories were rare, but significant. One example comes from a conference between Mary, a teaching assistant, and Rick, a first-year student. They have struggled through an explication of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, "Spring and Fall," and Rick, obviously growing frustrated by what seems to him to be his stupidity, makes an awkward switch from a teaching segment to story-telling. Mary is open to what he offers. (For transcription notations, see Appendix B. Line numbers refer to original transcript.)

436 Mary: Yeah. So I think that might be part of what he's
437   getting at here, that when you grieve you're always grieving for
438   yourself a little bit, huh?
439 Rick: ⌊See I might be- pl, I think we're alike in a lotta
440   ways cause we're both Catholic, an um..if I wasn't Catholic to
441   look at this maybe it'd be a totally different perspective.⌉
442 Mary: ⌊Mm-hmm   ⌊That's
443   interesting. Why do you think being Catholic makes a
444   difference?
445 Rick: Well, you know, mourning an all that, you know, cause my
446 Mary: ⌊Mm-hmm
447 Rick: parents are European so, whenever somebody dies, it's black for a
448   year an
449 Mary: ⌊Big deal mournings, huh?
450 Rick: Big funeral, you know⌈ and if someone doesn't show up they
451 Mary: ⌊Uh-huh
452 Rick: take offense to it, you know?
453 Mary: A::h, wow. Wow.
454 Rick: So, I mean.
455 Mary: Yea:h, yea:h.
456 Rick: Then you know you go tuh, uh..everybody shows up at the, you
457   know, funeral home an
458 Mary: Yeah, yeah.
459 Rick: So it's big you know
460 Mary: Big deals, right.⌉
461 Rick: ⌊I know the first time I went, uh, a couple of
462   years ago, my great grandfather died, and it was just
463 Mary: Blew you away, huh? (Rick makes a noise, Mary laughs.) You're
464   shaking your head there!
465 Rick: I was up there n I was like (Mary gasps) you know, my mother
466   and my grandmother they're like, like an Dad, they've been to so
467   many it's just oh my God, it's like another thing for em, you
468   know, eh, we're goin to the funeral parlor tonight, okay.
469 Mary: ⌊Right, right.   Get

470   dressed! (Laughs)
471 Rick: See you later! Have fun! See ya at nine! What are you doin,
472   you know? And I went out shaking, I couldn't stop shakin
             (turn continues).

Mary is clearly in control during the first two-thirds of this con-
ference. Rick's earlier mention of his grandfather leads Mary to sug-
gest that perhaps he might try a personal approach to the poem.
Suddenly, Rick changes the course of the conference, shifting into a
personal relationship with Mary, one based on shared religious per-
spectives, not on their student-teacher positions. Mary ignores
many opportunities to shift the talk back to the teaching structure
they had labored with before; in fact, this story-telling give and take
continues for another 43 turns! She supports his story by acknowl-
edging she is listening ("backchanneling" words such as *Mm-hmm*,
Uh-huh and *Yeah*) and cooperatively overlaps her speech to support
him ("Big deal mournings, huh?"). Ultimately, Rick completes his
story not only about his great-grandfather's death but his grandfa-
ther's as well, including information about how his younger brother
wept without knowing why, while Rick himself grieved differently.
Mary points out that realizing that might well help him make good
sense of the poem. Had she not been open to this story, had she seen
Rick's attempt to shift the way in which the conference was being
shaped as an interruption of her teaching, rather than an opportu-
nity for learning, he would not have had an opportunity to work his
way to a point where he might feel some control over the task ahead
of him in constructing his paper. And Mary would not have learned
about the ways that Rick's family and heritage shape his response to
course content and practice.

My own experiences have led me to begin tape-recording confer-
ences with students. Students provide the tape and take it with them
when they leave. This allows us both to reflect on the conference fur-
ther if we need to, and it has also changed something quite simple:
students no longer feel the need to take notes on their papers. Once
a student is taking notes, head bent down and attention on some-
thing other than the speaking partner, conferences quickly become
classrooms. The teacher's words become the law; students rarely
take notes on their own talk. If they are taking notes, they are
unlikely to initiate a story-telling segment; no one I know takes
notes during conversations and story-swapping. Taping conferences

has also allowed my students and I to track changes in conferencing patterns and to reflect on them at mid-semester and for the final course portfolios. What topics have resurfaced? What concerns have changed? What skills have developed?

If students like the concept of conferences, do they like actual conferences? How often do we ask them? Why don't we? What parts of the conference were most effective? What words did the teacher use that the student didn't understand? What questions did the student still have after the conference was over? What questions did the teacher have? Where did the conference seem to be working best? Why? What aspects of conferencing does each party want to work on for the next conference?

This kind of reflection and assessment can be built into course assignments and conferencing schedules. Leaving five minutes between conferences to jot down answers to these questions is all it takes. Students respond in writing and my practice is to keep a copy of that response in the file with their drafts and papers and remind students to review their response before the next conference so that we can prepare. A minute of review at the beginning of the conference helps us both remember what we wanted to work on or talk about.

When we focus on talk as well as written texts, we can track various kinds of successes and strategies. If a paper doesn't improve, student and teacher alike can search for a reason. It's common for teachers to talk about seeing the same paper a number of times; in all likelihood, they have also spoken to the same student a number of times. What did we say that helped improve this introduction? What have we said about this claim, that piece of support that hasn't seemed to affect the writing? How have we addressed or not addressed whatever fears, concerns, or problems that the student has that might have made all our teacherly advice about writing useless?

As teachers, we have to reassess what we "know" about conferencing. Have we absorbed an "ideal" conference structure from the materials we've read? What are the gaps in that picture? How have we filled them in with our own experiences? If we focus on talk and see all forms of communication as meaningful and purposeful, then can we categorize student talk as "digressive?" Or must we now see it as taking us down a different path from the one we prefer, but for a reason we need to understand? How does it change us—and are we open to and ready for that change—when we see students as *partners* in talk and learning? Real conversation demands partnership, and the

benefits of real conversation may be radical and frightening. If a student sees the talk as conversation and reveals something personal about him or herself in a conference, we have fled conversation and retreated if we do not offer a similar personal revelation: in conversation, stories build on stories and revelations on revelations in the same way that lessons build on lessons in the classroom. If we reveal something personal, when we return to the classroom, we are vulnerable in ways that as teachers, we are not used to: our students know us in a new way. Yet students who work in teams over the course of the semester and gradually share information about themselves tell us over and over that such sharing, such trust, is what ultimately makes the team work. We become responsible for each other's revelations and stories, and that fosters an attitude that makes us responsible for each other's learning.

We need to examine, with our students, the myths of conferencing and the way those myths deny the power structures that usually exist. And we need to explore whether we want to make those myths into a reality and if so, how we shall be able to do that.