Power and Talk

MANY OF THE PROBLEMS THAT OCCUR BETWEEN STUDENTS AND teachers in conferencing arise because of the difference in power between participants. In classrooms, that power difference is indicated in many ways—for example, in the geography and use of physical space. In most classrooms, one teacher occupies the front third of the classroom, while in contrast, 20 or more students occupy the other two-thirds of the space. The teacher controls access to the chalkboard or overhead, and even controls how students will seat themselves. "Teacher talk" is also an indicator of power difference. It is very tempting, as we learned in the first chapter, to think that because the physical context has changed, because there are now just two "people" who "converse" about writing or literature, that everything has changed. Unfortunately, it takes a conscious effort on the parts of both participants to effect a significant change. Often, conferences are marked by silence on the part of students as teachers assert their perspective. Sometimes, students make it very easy for us to do that, even encourage teachers to tell them just what they need to know. Either way, it is the teacher's talk and the teacher's interpretation of a text that counts.

Drawing on the same theorists as Kenneth Bruffee, Peter Mortenson (1992) argues that talk is the negotiation of the social world that speakers inhabit together. Working from the notion of discourse communities, he states: "Since talk involves both consensus and conflict, to document this is to document negotiation of both consensus and conflict that constitute communities. These negotiations determine nothing less than who is allowed to say what to whom, when, how, and why—the social construction of texts" (120). Taking a broad view of what constitutes a "text," we can say that talk

involves the reproduction or reconfiguration of social organization at both the micro and macro levels. And it is this tension between, on the one hand, the reproduction of social organization—teacher and student, male and female, Caucasian and African American—and the reconfiguration of it on the other hand—student and teacher as peers, fellow writers—that continues to provide both impetus and confusion to the study of conferencing.

These social relations are also power relations. Most of the conferences I hold with students are those I have initiated. I have the power to make students "come and see me" in the same way that I felt compelled to go see Dr. B. (And think about the use of the word "see!" Students are forewarned that they may be silenced!) I think we have to consider this fundamental power because it lies beneath much of the talk in conferences, particularly with first-year students. Students acknowledge that power by coming to conferences, even if they challenge it both subtly and openly, as I did in my conference with Dr. B. These power relations are also marked in language.

Who Gets to Talk?

One concern of critical discourse analysis is access to and participation in discursive events, particularly those events which have the power to affect lives in important ways. As Teun van Dijk points out, most people have very limited access to public discourse on important issues. They may discuss them at home or with neighbors, or perhaps participate in a demonstration, but they are not in the board rooms, at negotiating tables, in legislative sessions or budget meetings. In fact, he argues, most people have no preparation to speak in such situations and feel that it is in their best interest *not* to participate—an example of hegemonic control. We agree to let others speak for us. In many ways, this is also what occurs in traditional classroom settings. Teachers speak for all kinds of people, not just their students, and students accept that singular voice. Teachers reinterpret what students tell them, rephrase their words, select which ideas will be discussed and for how long. Most students accept this as natural, as do most teachers. It is a rare student who, like the student in Ulichney and Watson-Gegeo's study, steadily resists the dominant interpretative framework of the teacher, for the results can be institutionally and personally devastating. Who gets to speak in a conference? It is, in some ways, the "back room" of teaching, where advice is

given, evaluations made, and decisions rendered that usually don't occur in the classroom. There is a great deal at stake for a student: don't speak enough, speak at the wrong time, talk too much, and you can be negatively evaluated. Say the "wrong thing," and there is nowhere to hide.

Consider how conferencing affects social identity and relationships. Imagine that an enormously important person gives a presentation at your institution. Many people listen to the lecture, but only a few have the "opportunity" afterward to speak briefly with the noted expert. Were I one of those people, I would speak about it afterward as a chance to "meet" with the speaker, to "talk" with the speaker, to "learn" from the speaker. To be honest, it's doubtful that I have learned anything more from our "talk" after the lecture than I did by hearing the lecture. What has changed, however, is my identity and my relationship to the issue or knowledge that was the focus of the lecture. I feel lucky or elite or awed or perhaps embarrassed at my inability to say anything "important," and I now have a "relationship" with someone important and so perhaps the sense that I have or could have a role in further constructing or reconstructing the world that person represents. Our students don't speak of "meeting" their teachers in the classroom, but they do "meet" for conferences. The social relationship has changed, and the opportunity exists for the student's relationship to the issue or the writing to change as well. Teachers and students are both aware of this change and the possibilities it offers—it's part of why we conference.

But how much of a role do students get in constructing knowledge? In actually shaping a conference? A word count in the fourteen conferences I examined after considering my own conferences indicates that, overwhelmingly, it is teachers who talk. (See Appendix C.) The conferences ranged in length from just under fifteen minutes to somewhere over thirty (in Don's conferences with students Lyn and Eva, the tape ran out near the end of the conference). Student participation ranges from a low of 2.3% for Lily as she speaks with her teacher, Nina, to a high of 40.2% for Rick, whose conference with his teacher, Mary, we've seen a part of already. Nina's conference with Lily is the shortest of all the conferences, only 1922 words (in comparison to Eric's conference with Dana, totally 6739 words). Lily spoke only 45 words, and almost all of those were to indicate acknowledgment or acceptance of the teacher's speech: *uh-huh, okay.* It's important to remember that both students and teachers found

these conferences typical and successful. Yet, in sheer volume, talk is distributed in a radically uneven manner, one which falls clearly along the lines of status, generally reproducing in the conference the kind of teacher control that characterizes most classrooms. If what we are hoping for in a conference is genuine conversation, meaningful interaction, and a reshifting of traditional roles, we apparently will accept far less in lieu of that.

Marked Dominance

Consider some other markers of teacher dominance. Discourse markers help distinguish boundaries of talk (Schiffrin, 1988). For example, Rick and Mary discuss his developing understanding of a poem for a long stretch until Mary says: "So, that might be something you'd like to explore in the paper: what you learned about yourself." The *so* serves both to introduce a summary and to close a larger segment of speech. Stubbs (1983) demonstrates that markers allow us to predict not the syntax of the utterance which will follow it but the content. If, for example, I suggest a revision strategy to a student, and she begins her response with "Well," I will already (probably unconsciously, as marker knowledge and awareness are so deeply ingrained) be predicting that she is going to disagree with my suggestion or question it in some manner. Discourse markers, then, are ways of positioning a speaker either in relation to the information or another speaker, of responding to an earlier utterance, even of gaining the floor when speaking turns are contested. Returning to the example of the student who begins her response to my revision suggestion with "Well," I might interrupt her in anticipation of her rejection of the suggestion and begin a defense of it before she even gets a chance to offer her own. On the other hand, if she began her utterance with "I agree," I might be more likely to let her speak, even if she immediately followed her cue of apparent agreement with "but" and then made a counter suggestion. Discourse markers, then, are one important way in which we create coherence between units of talk, connect ideas, and shape the speech event at utterance, discourse, and even social levels.

Given the dominance of teachers in simple word count, it is no surprise that they dominate the talk in other ways as well (see Appendix D). Teachers use *and* in two powerful ways: to forcefully hold the floor and to string together ideas. *And* indicates that more speech is coming, and because of the difference in power between

speakers, students are reluctant to claim the floor even if there is extended time after the *and*. Teachers used that time they had created to think ahead and ultimately to string together sometimes rather disconnected ideas into a narrative of knowledge, a story of learning that didn't always include the student. Teachers used *well* in the same way, to hold their place. But *well* is also frequently an indicator of disagreement or disjunction between request and response or marks a change in topic. Teachers' frequent use of *well* in these ways creates almost a constant opportunity to disagree or to delay answering a question. This is a powerful position to occupy—to not answer when someone makes a request or to openly prepare to disagree with a speaking partner. For some teachers, the other speaking partner sometimes appears to be themselves, the *well* referring to one of their own utterances that they now question. In this way, they are verbally constructing knowledge, which may be worthwhile for students to see modeled, but they are not constructing it cooperatively, with the student. And, significantly, *well* appears frequently in the conferences where knowledge and power are contested. Other markers—*so*, with its conclusive force; *but*, a contrastive; *you know* and *I mean*, with the relationships they forge between speakers and knowledge—all indicate the power teachers wield in speaking with students.

Webs and Narratives

Let's look closely at two conferences that show how two different teachers control and dominate their students in a conference, even when they mean well and are excited by the material they are dealing with. These teachers share the same goals: to improve their students' writing skills and their written work. But as the written work and the ideas that produce it are being reconstructed, the students are playing little role in the talk. In the excerpt below, Bill and Cari are discussing Cari's response to the novel *Beloved*. Bill speaks softly, slowly in conference. He reads the paper through first, then his usual strategy is to ask students what strengths they see in the work or what problems they would like some help with. Cari speaks clearly and with enthusiasm. This segment picks up not long into the conference.

209 Cari: That's what I was trying to decide as I wrote that.
210 Bill: Mm-hmm
211 Cari: What I was thinking.

212 Bill: I think that's a good way to write. I mean to write in ORDER to
213   figure out ⌈what it is that you wanna focus on. And then you
214 Cari: ⌊What I'm thinking
215 Bill: know, Cari, it's possible you could deal with both questions?... If
216   you think most readers if you think a lot of readers are gonna
217   have both questions in mind was she sane was she insane? Was
218   it an act of love? I don't know what the alternative would be
219   there, an act of anger? An act of selfishness?
220 Cari: Okay / ⌈? /--
221 Bill: ⌊Uh that another thing you do touch upon whether it
222   was a selfish act or you and you say it's a selfless act.⌉
223 Cari: ⌊Mkay.
224 Bill: And see that in of itself (3 sec) is a really interesting is⌈sue.
225 Cari: ⌊Issue.⌉
226 Bill: ⌊I
227   guess the selfless selflessness and the love really fit together?
228 Cari: Mm-hmm ⌉
229 Bill: ⌊Someone does something for you that's selfless you
230   you can usually say it's /on the basis/ of ⌈ove of some kind.⌉
231 Cari: ⌊Love   ⌊Yeah
232 Bill: Um (2.5 sec) but I still see two issues at work.
233 Cari: Okay.
234 Bill: And maybe you can deal with both of them or maybe you wanna
235   focus ⌈n one. It's gonna depend on what happens as we rework
236 Cari: ⌊On one.
237 Bill: it.
238 Cari: Okay.

Bill praises Cari's writing process in line 212 and clarifies that praise (*I mean*) immediately. He continues with a topic he introduced several turns previously, beginning his utterance with a coordinating marker (*and then*), although it is not linked to the praise it follows. Tagged immediately onto this coordinating link is a bid for a shared perspective, marked by *you know*. In line 214, Cari has attempted a cooperative overlap with Bill, predicting that he will praise her for writing to figure out what she is thinking, since she's told him already that was the purpose behind her writing. Bill, on the other hand, ignores what she's told him and praises her method of writing as a way of finding a focus, which seems to be a step ahead of where Cari envisions herself in the writing process. Disregarding the stage she indicates, Bill continues with his vision of how she can rewrite, reintroducing a topic he himself brought up several turns earlier. The *you*

know in lines 213 and 215 asks Cari to share and accept Bill's version of the rewritten paper: he asks her to know as he does what the possibilities are for this paper. He works his way through the questions he would like her to address in her rewrite, and when she accepts (*Okay*) but goes on to say something else, he interrupts her to continue, reasserting and holding his place as speaker with *uh*. With the floor his, Bill returns to Cari's paper, using another *and* to tie the issue of selflessness to her text. Cari's backchannel (*Mkay*) is interesting. It is more indicative of accepting something given to her than of acknowledging or affirming the correctness of Bill's summary of her assertion. It may be that Bill has paraphrased her main point, and Cari is accepting the words of this paraphrase. Or perhaps Bill's paraphrase changes slightly Cari's point, and she accepts this version in place of her own.

Bill continues to hold the floor, beginning his next utterance with *and*. His directive *see* in line 224 once again asks Cari to share his vision, his opinion of what's interesting to explore and what isn't. He continues to work through his topic, holding his place with another *um* in line 232. The floor is so clearly his that Cari offers no topic or backchannel for 2.5 seconds (a long pause in talk!). Bill then problematizes the resolution he has tentatively reached and returns to his idea of dual topics, using yet another *and* to link what he "sees" to the strategies Cari can follow. He has created an ideal text that Cari can construct for him when she turns this paper in again.

In another example, Erin, a graduate assistant, and Jeff discuss in their conference Jeff's revision of a paper on Joyce Carol Oates's short story "Four Summers." Erin speaks quickly and energetically.

303	Erin:	Let's see. Um, I think maybe I would just move this second
304		paragraph then somewhere towards the end.
305	Jeff:	Okay.
306	Erin:	And, you talk about, in in the end of your introduction you talk
307		about (reading) "I believe that nothing will change in Sissy's life
308		when her child is born." And I might go straight into this, I can't
309		blame Sissy for wanting her life to be different. And explain
310		why, uh, you talked about how you feel sympathy for Sissy in
311		your introduction, you talked about how um, nothing will
312		change. You can start setting your reader up then, by: sketching
313		out like you do here that, that (2 sec) the empathy you feel for
314		her, and you can't blame her for wanting her life to be different
315		and then sketching it out a little bit in the questions you ask.
316	Jeff:	⌊Okay.

Erin's use of *and* not only controls the amount of speech Jeff can contribute but sets up a powerful narrative of revision. Each step is linked equally to the one before and the one that follows. Further, although it is difficult to tell from this brief excerpt, Erin's views on this story are becoming part of this narrative of revision. The "you" in line 314 is just as much Erin's larger "you-as-anyone" as it is a paraphrase of Jeff's text. Near the end of the conference, this blending of the teacher's voice and the author's voice is again made clear, when Erin says: "I don't- it's not that simple, that's that's my whole message that's Oates' whole message in this story."

There is a sense in these conferences that teachers are a part of a powerful narrative. Their use of *and* is pervasive, integral to their speech. It connects disparate ideas in ways that iron out seams and close possible ruptures where another voice, another narrative might be inserted like rib-splitters. Notice, for example, how in the excerpt below—also from Erin and Jeff—Erin uses *and* to connect what she presents as fact to what she presents as personal opinion.

390 Erin: Um (5 sec) so you might
391   want to complicate that a little bit and and talk about how (3 sec)
392   social class isn't isn't a biological given, uh, social class is
393   socially constructed for reasons, um
394   (16 sec, reading?)
395 Erin: And I like your ending a lot better this doesn't sound that kind
396   Miss America-ish stuff that
397 Jeff: Yeah
398 Erin: You know.

The *and* in line 395, after a 16-second pause in which she shifts topics, indicates that Erin sees larger connections between her utterances—some kind of structure external to the conference itself—than any microanalysis of a few exchanges will demonstrate. It is a dynamic structure, like a spider's web, sensitive to whatever touches it, changing its shape in subtle ways—responding to damage, new opportunities for stronger connections—and repeating itself again and again from one instance of creation or evocation to the next. We recognize it as much by its purpose—to catch and hold—as by its structure. A fly becomes entangled in a web and the spider begins to wrap strand after strand of silk around it. Soon, the fly is connected

to all parts of the web, and though no less a fly than when it first entered the web, it is now also something else. The spider depends upon holding that fly, keeping it entrapped, making it a part of the larger structure. And while certainly teachers don't feed off their students in the same way that spiders do off flies, we depend upon them and have as much at stake in making them a part of our web. Unlike the fly, the student will walk away, but once part of that web, we believe they will never *not* be connected again.

The strands are the language of the discipline, the particular structure of our knowledge. Erin tells Jeff: "Um: (3 sec) I'm not really sure how to tell you how to do this without giving you.. my sentences, but let's see." Later, she checks with him: "Now does that make sense? I've done more talking than you have, but um, I can see the paper taking shape." Jeff assures her it makes sense.

A conference is a web of ideas, beliefs, and values—a community shaped by its language and the knowledge it holds to be truth. Teun van Dijk (1993) points out that most effective power is cognitive, not physical; the power elite set out to change the minds of others in their own interests. Such change may not be openly manipulative but very subtle, part of the "naturalizing" process that makes inequality of power appear "right." Look at the weight of *you knows* and *I means* as teachers speak to students, creating and reshaping that community, defining it for a possible member. While *you know* can focus attention on upcoming speech (for example, "You know, I never thought about that until now, but..."), it can also mark shared knowledge, subtly forcing another speaker into a cognitive relationship that becomes a linguistic relationship that marks and cements the social relationship. If the penalties are too great for challenging that shared knowledge (it's a rare student who could or would say, "No, I don't know. What ARE you talking about?") and the options for other responses are slender, then we shape by force. The basic power structure remains untouched, for even as a teacher's *you know* forces a student into at least appearing to assent to shared assumptions, the use of *I mean* acknowledges the lack of shared knowledge, the teacher's ability to construct and reconstruct knowledge as the student struggles to follow. Eric, a full professor, and Dana discuss Dana's paper on *Jane Eyre*. Dana is lost throughout much of this portion of the conference, and yet knows that she must "get it."

347 Eric: You know, one way of letting people go is to identify yourself
348   with them.

349 Dana: That's a good point, I I yeah. I mean I didn't, I mean I I can
350   usually see what you're saying but I mean that's not something
351   that I, I don't, I was thinking I I could see what you're saying
352   about um Bessie was with her she was somewhat that way with
353   Adele
354 Eric: Yup
355 Dana: I I thought of that but, I mean obviously I didn't put it in the
356   paper but, I guess, I hadn't thought about um, let's see, how in,
357   I mean, you know what I'm sayin? / ? /--

Eric interrrupts Dana here to clarify the point he tells her she has made. She is obviously struggling to understand what Eric sees almost happening in her paper; she is unable to yet articulate his ideas. Finally, Dana summarizes Eric's argument, not as a concept she now understands and has considered, but as a point she must make in order to be positively evaluated by her instructor.

387 Dana: So you're
388   just sa- saying that it would have been, it would have been
389   beneficial if I had ju- I had gone to say that, I mean exactly what
390   you said, that that Jane internalized each of these three women and
391   and each of them contributed to her character [n that--
392 Eric: [Yeah I think that's
393   implicit in this paper and I would have gone on to make it
394 Dana: [Mm-hmm
395 Eric: explicit.
396 Dana: Nkay. Awright. I can see that.

Dana's use of the word "beneficial" underscores the power relationship that helps shape this conference. It's an odd word to use when discussing the revision of a paper, unless the speaker is more concerned with the grade than the text. In order to be the beneficiary of Eric's grade, which will be left to her in a grade report, Dana must make use of another of Eric's legacies: his words. She must say, as she notes, "exactly what [he] said."

Cooperation

One of the assumptions of critical discourse analysis is that there is rarely a clear-cut line between the dominated and the dominating: van Dijk (1993) argues that "one major function of dominant discourse is precisely to manufacture...consensus, acceptance, and legitimacy of

dominance" (255, citing Herman and Chomsky, 1988). The control Bill exercises over Cari's access to the floor in the excerpt a few pages ago is not—with the exception of his interruption in line 221—heavy-handed. Rather, it is with Cari's support. There are four cooperative overlaps in this one segment and three instances of backchanneling—agreement or support either latched onto Bill's utterance or positioned during normal pauses. It is a rare case in these conferences where the teacher overtly forces an interpretation on a student. Rather, the student agrees without any explicit urging to the teacher's interpretation.

That gray zone between force and cooperation is apparent in the following excerpt. We shape by cooperation—and force—when we follow a strategy of creating the "other" and then marginalizing that other. As Erin argues for a particular perspective in her conference with Jeff, she sets up two communities: those who agree with her and those who don't.

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141  Erin:   (Continuing turn)       What
142           I'd like to see you do in the introduction, um (4 sec) is talk a little
143           bit about why you think you might be sympathetic toward Sissy
144           and others in the class were complete opposed to her? I mean,
145           wh why do you think your response as a reader was on one side
146           when clearly half the class was for the other, from the other
147  Jeff:                 Okay
148  Erin:   side. You know, we heard the arguments, well, my parents, uh,
149           have always told me I could be anything I wanted to be, an you
150  Jeff:                                                         Yeah
151  Erin:   know, Sissy should just go, have gone straight to college instead of..
152           getting married and having babies, and th that's.. I think that's
153           a superficial reading of the short story.
154  Jeff:   I think it's like, well, the person himself / ? / say that. Like the
155           people that say like it's your own fault, they're shal- you know,
156           people like that are kinda almost shallow because they don't see
157           that other people are have problems like this because they never
158           did.
159  Erin:   Well, and they're kind of, that's the kind of the point I've been
160           making all semester, the the situation you're born into has a
161           whole lot to say about how far you go in a society and there's
162  Jeff:                                                           Right
163  Erin:   sometimes there are certain circumstances you can't overcome.
164           Now I'm not arguing that Sissy couldn't have had a different
165           life. What I'm trying to get people to realize is that in Oates'
166           short story, she points out certain aspects certain people in the
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167   society that just- (3 sec) we aren't all born with the same
168   chance..⌈of success, and I think that's what Oates is saying or at
169 Jeff: ⌊Right
170 Erin: least I think she wants you to consider that. Now you don't
171   have to agree with th⌈s and half the people don't have to agree
172 Jeff: ⌊No, I do
173 Erin: with that but what the I DO ask them to do is examine that..
174   statement ⌈hat that Oates is making. You could have written this
175 Jeff: ⌊Right
176 Erin: paper from the other side and and and looked at Oate⌈'s
177 Jeff: ⌊Right
178 Erin: argument and said well, you know, Sissy was incredibly / ? /
179   you know, I would have a hard time arguing that side but I'm
180   not saying it can't be done.
181 Jeff: Mn⌈-hmm
182 Erin: ⌊Because I happen to be sympathetic toward Sissy's plight.

Erin disagrees with a particular reading of "Four Summers" and
labels it "superficial." Jeff, wishing to distinguish himself from the
half of the class who shared that reading, picks up on Erin's deroga-
tory term and develops it. At first it appears that he will label those
"other" students as shallow, but he stops himself, marks that he is
merely sharing Erin's description (*you know*), and then hedges his
description: "kinda almost shallow." Jeff is walking a tightrope. He is
speaking of his friends and classmates, yet a lot hinges on his margin-
alization of them. Erin hedges her response, beginning with a marker
of disagreement, but following it with a coordinating marker as she
adds to Jeff's description. But she shifts instead from derogating
these particular students to the point she says she has been making
"all semester" to the class. Her emphasis on "all semester" is another,
subtle way of marginalizing that half of the class: they either have not
understood her repeated point or have chosen to challenge it. Either
characterization is negative. No wonder Jeff rushes to assert his
agreement with her point of view in line 172. Erin, perhaps realizing
what she has done, offers the idea that really, it doesn't matter what
you argue as long as you do it well, but she immediately undercuts
that by saying she would have a hard time arguing the point these
others want to make. (And if the teacher has difficulty, where does
that leave the students?) Notice the change in Jeff's responses to Erin.
They begin with a noncommittal *okay* and *yeah* but shift to actual
support: "Right" he says repeatedly.

In a similar vein, Don, a teaching assistant, tells Lyn that he assumes that students learn mechanics, punctuation, and syntax in high school, and that some of his students' papers "get so bogged down with bad writing and fractured syntax that...I just sorta throw the paper down, I can't read that shit." Lyn laughs with him, for of course, since he told her this so conversationally, it can't mean her. But what if it does? She can't sort out where she stands with him and these bad writers, so she suggests that her paper might be one of those, checking on her status in the class. Lyn accepts—at least on the surface—Don's assumptions about learning and even the way he says he responds to violations of his expectations. But it's a frightening thing to accept. If much of the way we connect to our students is through their writing and that writing is "shit" to be thrown down and ignored, what does that say for our relationship with students?

As Mina Shaughnessey (1977) points out, unless conventions are discussed and understood, many students will simply attempt to integrate all of them, producing writing that is confusing to readers. For example, Dana explains to Eric that she used commas around an *and* in her paper because she had learned in high school that no more than one *and* per sentence was allowable. But imitating the more complex syntax she was seeing in college, she'd used more than one *and*. She then applied a rule that setting a piece of text off with commas meant that it could be lifted out of the sentence—that it was, essentially, parenthetical. She explained that she'd used commas as she had to make it clear to Eric that this wasn't the real *and*. Eric is unique in asking why Dana chose to use commas oddly, but his dismissal of high school writing conventions is not. Over and over in these conferences, students are informed of the conventions of college writing, not just conventional readings of literature but conventions of form and position. Nina posits for Lily and Kate readers who will be upset if citations and non-sexist language aren't used appropriately, clearly a community much like herself. Bill tells Cari that to prove you know your text, you must quote from it. (To prove to whom? That you "know" it how?) Carl explains to Dave that in a model essay exam, the answer is "laid out" for the teacher, so that he doesn't have to search through the writing to find it. Nina tells Kate to "watch things like absolute statements." It's like telling a student to "watch out for speeding cars." There is something awfully threatening about this learning.

I don't wish to argue that these rules and conventions are right or wrong, useful or trivial—I can see them as being helpful within this community. My concern is whether the uncritical presentation, enforcement, or acceptance of them results in a form of oppression, inequality, or marginalization. When we accept a rule as "right" or "good," when a convention is "just what is done," then we have set off a whole group of words or thoughts that are "not right." Thoughts that are not spoken, knowledge that does not count, acts that cannot be committed. And students who have not mastered the conventions are silenced, their papers lying in the pile of bad writing that a teacher can no longer bring himself to read. This is not just an academic game; the results are real. Consider the fate of the young student in Ulichney and Watson-Gegeo's study who challenged the teacher: she was labeled a "bad writer" and spent the year in silence. Consider Jeff's new relationship with his classmates, the difficulty of working with and respecting them in peer groups—the difficulty of respecting himself and his teacher—after derogating them in private during his conference. The desire to join this powerful community is powerful. Dana is upset and confused by her grades in a literature class with a teacher other than Eric, for in the past, she thought she was "pretty good at it." She can't even approach this teacher, for she doesn't know what to say. She tells Eric haltingly: "I just, I wish there was something.. I don't, I don't have a real specific question that I can just go up and ask him, I just, I just wanna say, tell me what to look for in the work that makes me BE insightful." Whatever it is she is seeing is not "insightful" enough. She wants not just his grade, but as the transcript shows, she wants to be a part of a community of students and teacher that IS insightful, prestigious, powerful.

Summary

Control of conference talk takes place at a number of levels. Teachers talk more than their students, and they hold on to their speaking rights not only through the power that their roles as teachers accord them, but by structuring the spoken text to create a powerful narrative. Instructors often seem to be speaking not just to their students, but to a larger audience, to other voices beyond the conference. Beyond the structural level, teachers use relational

markers such as *you know* and *I mean* to invite or evoke the concept
of shared knowledge and of the student's entry into the community
represented by the teacher. Simultaneously, they reinforce the status
differences by complicating and reformulating the very information
they just agreed upon as shared, marking their ability to complicate
(or clarify, depending upon where you sit) with *I mean*. Finally,
teachers sometimes replace the conventions and rules that students
bring with them from an earlier community, but more often they
simply add those appropriate to college English, to their own acade-
mic community, thus controlling not only talk about texts but the
students' written texts as well. And they usually do this without any
interrogation of custom and without discussion of the contextual
nature of conventions.

As teachers speak in such a way and students listen and accept,
together they build up what van Dijk calls "preferred models" of dis-
course, of social relations, of knowledge. In these conferences the
preferred form of discourse is linear, relationships are heirarchical,
and knowledge, though not always reified and given, is also not nego-
tiable. Those who demonstrate understanding and acceptance of this
model will find in return praise and acceptance; those who do not
understand or challenge this model will become the "half of the
class" Erin marks so clearly as "other."

In the real time of conferencing, we may sense that this isn't the
close conversation we wanted, but at least we have an interested audi-
ence and a bit of give and a lot of take with a student. And so we
often settle for that, hoping that at least someone learned something,
and we move on. The written product may be better, ultimately, but
whether the student is a better writer is debatable. And the student,
impressed that the teacher took the time to talk with her and consid-
ered her paper so thoroughly, leaves feeling like she was given a lot of
information to help her improve—now if only she could understand
it or remember all of it! Why is she so dumb? She looks at her paper
later that day, maybe a few days or even weeks later, depending upon
the class structure, and what returns? How much will she remember
when she has played so passive a role? When she has all sorts of new
conventions that she will simply add into the stock of conventions
she brought with her that have not been examined or discussed? She
turns in the paper, revised, and we shake our heads and wonder why
it has changed so little or has become so odd or confused.

Reconsidering Power and Status in Conferencing

The teachers in this study—like teachers who are my current col-leagues and friends, like myself—did not go into conferences intend-ing to dominate and control. They did not think that they would shut out a student's perspective. I have often felt, like them, that somehow, my power as a teacher would melt away miraculously when I sat down alone with a student. It is easy for me to forget that what I am saying to a student is part of Bakhtin's "chain of utterances," that the student has a history of teachers and teachers saying certain things and that whatever I say becomes by default a part of that chain, is seen in the context of that history. That chain of utterances seems to have injured more people than I can count. Probably most of us who teach writing have had strangers back off from us physically when we tell them what we teach and exclaim nervously: "Writing was my worst subject!" I remember a time when I was lying on a table in an emergency room getting my face stitched up, and the young woman doing this delicate work backed away in horror as I told her I taught writing. Curved needle in her hand, in control of my recovery and my appearance, still she stammered in fear and memory of humilia-tion that she didn't speak well. It is this power, where even if I have no history with a student, she brings one with her and attaches it to me, that invades conferences. Students make it easy for teachers to dominate conference talk; they encourage it in many ways.

If the asymmetry of conferences is going to shift, the asymmetry of the classroom must shift as well. If a goal of teaching is to "empower students" then how are our classrooms empowering? If they are not, then it will certainly be difficult for our conferences to be empowering. A critical review of classroom practice, implement-ing change after that reflection and continuing to examine our prac-tice critically, will make any disjunction or connections between teaching and conferencing practice clear.

When I first began teaching, the power of it all frightened me. So I grabbed onto some techniques offered in a pre-teaching seminar, not to empower students but to avoid empowering myself! I had students sit in a circle. I used portfolios not for all the skills and abilities they help students develop, but because I could put off final grades that way. I didn't even give grades until midsemester because I wasn't sure I could grade well enough. I told students to put themselves into groups large enough to give good feedback and small enough to get

work done in the time we had. I didn't assign topics. I didn't know if there was chalk at the blackboard because I'd never been up there.

Some wonderful things happened. Students didn't ask for grades but told me they liked how I responded on tape and talked like a real reader, not a teacher defending a grade. Some groups were three students, some were two, some were four. Group members switched around sometimes to get new readers. They gave each other topic ideas. Dutiful readers told me which chapters of the university-required book were good and told other students what to read and what not to read and why—and offered good reasons for their decisions to do or not do the work. Students told me what they needed to work on, what scared them, what they wanted to get out of the class. They worked toward those informal goals. They loved the course and I remembered how much fun learning could be. Wow! What a great class! I felt so good about myself and my students, I decided I was ready to become a teacher!

So over time, I became comfortable with assigning topics, giving grades, organizing groups, writing a syllabus that laid out the semester's work in relation to the goals I had set. I got a lot of praise from teaching mentors and institutions for what I now realize was extensive control over most aspects of the classroom: structure, talk, learning. I wanted to empower my students, too. I was convinced that the way to do it was to teach them to speak, think, and act in a way that was institutionally sanctioned, for after all, my power and prestige had grown as I'd "learned the ropes" of college. There was so much to learn, so far for them to travel that I didn't have time to explain it all, and if I did stop to explain something, I didn't question it. My students didn't see anything wrong with my teaching; it was just like most of their teachers. She really cares about us, they said, she wants us to be successful.

When I began examining my conferencing, when I studied in a critical framework the way I had structured the talk and set up the outcomes, I wanted to change how I conferenced, and I had to go back to the classroom to make changes there as well. So—my students sat in a circle for large discussion. Big deal. Who decided what was going to be discussed? So—my students worked in groups and could revise all semester. I decided who would be in those groups, I set up the guidelines for working in them, I set the tasks, and I evaluated the talk. They picked their topics, but I was really the only reader that counted. What I liked and didn't like about each essay was paramount. I

remember how a student translated my taped comment on a paragraph. I had told her that it had some problems in organization; she wrote next to it: "Teacher hates this part. Bag the whole thing."

What opportunities for real power do we create for students when we construct our classroom? What substantial decisions do they get to make? How much class time do we allot for discussion of student goals? How much flexibility do we build into a course to value those goals by accommodating them?

Changing practice is the topic of many books; in this small portion of a chapter, I can only make some suggestions for beginning to form a learning community where power is less asymmetrical. In many cases, I can offer questions that help in restructuring a class; the activities that answering such questions generate are myriad. In chapter one, I suggested that students and teachers study language together, that they consider the way that conversation and teaching differ and what it means for social relations. In the same way, the structure of the classroom and learning can be studied. Students can begin with definitions and categories of teachers and learners. We can do the same. We cannot erase the history that students bring with them of traditional classrooms any more than we can erase our own. But since we all categorize and define, we can examine what we put into particular categories and why—by we, I mean both teachers and students. For example, if I hear a colleague say about another colleague: "Oh, she told me how she was using that book in her class, and she is so retro!", I would probably ask for some more details in order to determine what her definition of "retro" is for the teaching of literature. (Not just because I'm interested in assessment and evaluation, but because I'd want to determine whether I'm retro, too!) My guess is that if teachers were to examine what they thought a "good" student was, they would find some conflicts: followed some rules but challenged or broke others? Thinks for self but accepts teacher's ideas eventually?

Discussion of these definitions and categories can be enlightening, a little disheartening, and exciting if we take them seriously. What assumptions need further examination? Where did we get these categories and definitions? How have they shaped us? Where does the teacher fit in? Where does each student fit in? What does that mean in terms of change? Students can bring in copies of syllabi from their various classes and examine them to determine what definitions of learning, teaching, and social relations are assumed by various professors. Your own syllabus is equally fair game for analysis.

What goals do your students have for their writing? For this class? How did they generate those? What goals do you have? Where do these goals match? Why? Where do they differ? I speak frankly with my students about some of the ways the institution I am a part of shapes my goals. Such discussion has made me realize where I have more power and discretion than I thought and has helped me understand the reasoning behind some of the guidelines that inform my courses. For example, if I am required to use a particular text, I tell them that. But does that mean that I must use all of it? That they can't select sections to read themselves that connect to their goals? And why *this* text? How long ago was this set in stone? Can we begin a process of change?

When I accept that my students may have better ideas than I about how to reach my goals, then power begins to shift. And if I accept that their goals may be as valid as mine, then power continues to shift. Negotiation of goals means changing the structure of the course. It is empowering for students to help determine in substantial ways what will happen in a course. In most traditional classrooms, teachers don't have to justify why they use writing groups, or why they've chosen a text—basically, they don't have to justify anything about their practice, at least to their students. But when it is all up for discussion and "because I think it's best for you" no longer carries much weight, power shifts. In a community of learners, does it matter how you reach a goal? Whose idea it is? Yes and no. If all the "learners" were equal in status to start with, no. But if some of the learners are suddenly more powerful, have a higher status than before, have the opportunity to be truly active in learning, yes. It is empowering to be taken seriously.

Students learn quickly that sharing power means sharing responsibility. If students decide how writing groups will be organized—and maybe after trying them decide whether they want to continue with them—then they also are partly responsible for how well they work. As a member of that learning community, I have a responsibility to share with them any knowledge I have that will help them achieve their goals, but also to contextualize thoroughly that telling. What happens in such a classroom is that there is never just one way to do something or a "right" way of thinking, writing, or speaking. Instead, options open up constantly and decision-making and critical thinking become a crucial part of learning. What constitutes "good" writing from their past experiences? What constitutes it now?

What does that say about the two communities that evaluate writing? This leads, almost inevitably, to discussions of Shakespeare and Stephen King, greeting card verses and T.S. Eliot, student evaluation of student texts and teacher evaluation of the same texts. "My group said it was great but the teacher trashed it!" What standards can we not let go of as teachers? Why? What standards that our students hold should we consider seriously? Regular reflection on the class structure and readjustment of the syllabus and activities keeps everyone responsible for learning.

I use a portfolio now not because it allows me to put off grading but because it can afford students so much control over their writing. As a class, we discuss the portfolio throughout the semester as a working portfolio: students reflect on how their writing has changed, what they've learned, how they learned it, how it connects to their initial goals, and how their goals may have changed as they've written and read classmates' writing. Near the end of the semester, as a class we decide how much the final course portfolio should be worth in the course grade each student receives, and how much each of the other course activities should count. I do not assign specific values to them initially, for in one class, presentations may be more valuable than journals, in another, students feel that participation should count more than presentations. As a teacher, this is one of the most exciting class meetings I experience, as I listen to students talking with each other about the relative value of all the work they've done this semester, regardless of any grades they have received. I participate, too, but my voice by this time in the semester doesn't carry as much weight as most other teachers expect. Students and I decide what should, at a minimum, be in the portfolio and how much they can individualize it. By then we have read sample portfolios and discussed them and the reading and grading process, and so, like the decisions they make throughout the semester, their choices in constructing their portfolios are informed by experience, discussion, and an understanding of contexts and communities outside our own.

How does all this translate into a difference in conferencing? In the taped conferences I examined, students had constructed responses to texts that were, it seemed, inevitably challenged. Challenge is not necessarily a bad thing. But usually the teacher offered his or her own interpretation, without a great deal of support for that reading; it was simply a better reading because it was the teacher's. And over the course of the conference, teachers often tried to replace the student

text with their own. Sometimes students resisted, sometimes they eagerly accepted the teacher's text. In a classroom where something as apparently innocuous as a syllabus can be examined critically and the teacher must support or reconsider the text in light of student arguments and questions, it becomes difficult for the same students and teachers to sit down one-to-one and change that pattern. Students informed about the patterns and social relations assumed by conversational and teacher talk, students used to making substantial decisions and being responsible for their learning are less likely to accept without question a teacher's interpretation of a text. They are more likely to offer extensive support for the organization of a paper. They are better able to hold the floor in the conference because they have held the floor in the classroom and in significant group work. The structure of the critically informed classroom has been changing what feels "right" and "natural" to students and teachers. Something closer to equality has been replacing the asymmetry of more traditional classrooms. If we move back toward that asymmetry after such radical change, it may feel right and familiar (most of us have been participants in that asymmetry for a long time!) or it may feel suddenly very wrong. Either way, we will notice that disjunction as much as our students, and awareness is crucial for change.

When I studied my own conferences, I wondered at the way that students who worked effectively in peer groups, often in leadership roles, suddenly became silent or tentative in a conference. When I examined my classroom practice, I realized that substantial leadership was only possible when they were working with peers; in all other class forums, I retained power and leadership. There was only one teacher but many learners. So in conference with me, students who had been "teachers" in their peer groups abdicated that role; I was the one true teacher and they felt they could not usurp even the smallest part of that role. It didn't matter that I spoke personally, that I urged them to talk, that I created the surface appearance of conversation; they responded to the structure of the classroom and felt those same supporting structures beneath the casual surface of the conference. It is important, then, that in the classroom, there are also chances to interact with the teacher—not just peers—in ways that do not reproduce the traditional roles.

In chapter one, I urged teachers to think about speaking with student as partners, for when we speak with peers and partners, we value what they say, we listen to the substance of their ideas, and we

encourage verbal give and take. When we speak to colleagues about literary readings, we don't run over their ideas with a steamroller of words; instead, we listen to their interpretations, ask questions to help us understand their perspectives, and offer our own. When we compare that kind of talk, that kind of "conference" (why is it we "conference" with students but "discuss" with peers?) to what occurs between teachers and students, we begin to get a sense of what kinds of changes need to occur in our classrooms if we are going to change our conferencing.