Gender and Conferencing

RECENTLY, A GROUP OF STUDENTS IN MY FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION class ran a game in which three teams competed for a prize of candy by correctly answering questions about grammar. Members of each team signaled their readiness to answer by shouting "Bing!" There was no penalty for a wrong answer except that another team could then try. I realized, as I watched a team of all women competing against a team of mostly men, that the women, all of whom I knew to be very competent students, rarely shouted out "Bing!", while their male counterparts shouted it immediately after the question had been asked, even if they didn't know the answer to the question. The female team came in last. Why, I wondered, were they so reluctant? Being wrong had no penalty. Why did they wait until they were positive they were right? It took me awhile to rethink the question. What other kinds of penalties or losses would they suffer if they shouted out? If they were wrong? What was there to gain? Was candy enough? What risks did this game have for them that I had not considered?

It was a simple game. I hadn't predicted this response when the students ran it past me for advice. But conferencing is supposed to be simple, too. As I'll discuss later, there *are* penalties for women who shout out in class, and after years of schooling, we have learned them well. And winning? There is a dark side to that for women as well. As the presenting group members exhorted the women to try harder, I thought about how hard they might be trying already—to meet one or another contradictory expectation.

In none of the conferencing studies we considered here—including those that use sociolinguistics—has the issue of gender been more than a matter of a "variable" if it has been considered at all.

Why not? The tensions between conversation and teacher-talk that we've examined in the first two chapters aren't merely about the structure of language or academic hierarchy; they are tensions about the structure of knowledge, of power, of access to learning and authority. Studies that examine the content and structure of conferences without considering the location from which the participants speak appear to accept the neutrality of language and the myth of the classroom as a great equalizer. We all want to believe that we treat our students equally, regardless of their class, race, age, gender, or other characteristics, regardless of our own. After all, we've been educated out of those prejudices by our participation in classrooms where we've been given "the truth," where we've read widely, where we've come into contact with all kinds of people. Our students also accept the idea that classrooms are neutral spaces, for at the slightest sniff of some perceived inequity there is an outburst of anger. It is as if teacher and students meet to speak and learn free of the effects of their lives, their gender, their race, even somehow free of the language they use and value, free of the kinds of academic patterning that results from years of participation in an institution dedicated as much to socializing as "educating."

I remember re-reading the transcripts of my own conferences and being struck by how tentative the women were in speaking with me, how confident the two white males were. I realized that even as I was reading I was feeling that the female tentativeness meant those students weren't going to be able to revise their papers, that they needed more help and that even if I gave them that help, they wouldn't know what to do with it. I believe some of those assumptions came from what was almost a refrain in the conferences with women—over and over, they said "I don't know." They used the phrase to refer to their ideas, to my direct questions, to their developing interpretations of the literature we were reading, and to their plans for revising papers. Instead of seeing this uncertainty as a kind of scholarly positioning where claiming a lack of knowledge keeps options open, where tentativeness leads to questioning and developing knowledge, I saw it as defeat, frustration, avoidance, and resistance. When I had time to reflect, to think hard about the context for each declaration of "I don't know," I remembered an incident in a class with Dr. B. I had finally offered a response to a question, and Dr. B., perhaps sensing some latent insight in my answer, began with a series of questions to attempt to lead me to new knowledge. Frustrated after struggling to

answer only a few of these, frightened by the attention of the teacher and my classmates, feeling put on the spot, I finally blurted out: "Beats the hell outta me!", a response simultaneously submissive—a retreat from questioning—and yet aggressive in its use of profanity. Trapped, I was angry and scared. I remember how my classmates turned away from me in shock, and Dr. B., momentarily silent , narrowed one eye and tilted his head in a look that I read as disgust. He turned away, and I have no memory of being called on or speaking aloud again in that class. Even now, understanding more about teaching and learning, power, gender, and class relations, I can feel the humiliation of the moment and the relief of silence, can feel the sense of disgrace that I believed I carried about me like a shroud of failure for the rest of the semester.

With nowhere to go in a conference, my female students retreated as I had into "I don't know." I don't have videotapes of these conferences, so I can't say what my face registered. My voice registered frustration, for unlike Dr. B., I didn't have a class to turn to. The women disavowed knowledge, ability, and direction more than once—they had to, for I had only them to badger and they had no class to hide in.

My male students used a different linguistic approach, heading me off at the pass, so to speak. After telling me what they were planning to do with their drafts, they indicated no uncertainty, only enthusiasm. I mistook their confidence for ability and knowledge, and didn't even think, as I was speaking with them, about the benefits they might experience from questioning their decisions. They had answers to my questions; whether they were well thought out or not, I didn't take the time to find out. It was enough that they had answered, for then I could continue on in a teacherly march to cover their papers (I certainly wasn't *dis-covering* anything new about them, for I didn't allow students to pursue in any depth any topic that concerned them). I sensed during the conferences that there was a momentum with male students, a feeling of progress that didn't occur with female students. Here is that linear movement again, the need to press forward coupled with an almost unconscious gratitude and positive response for students who help that happen.

In my colleagues' conferences, questions about gender arise in many ways. The counts of features that served as a jumping off point for more reflection indicate, for example, that while certainly teachers control talk in conferences, gender alters that control in interesting ways. Taken together, these features create a remarkably complex picture.

Gender and Conferencing: Female Students

In almost every case, discourse markers are used much more fre-
quently with female students than male students. Although a higher
frequency of use with female students is to be expected, given that
there are two more female students in this study than male students,
the differences are striking: *and* is used twice as frequently with
female students, *you know* occurs five times as frequently, and *well*
almost three times as frequently. Female students were more tenta-
tive about their knowledge when speaking with male teachers, using
the phrase "I don't know" 22 times with males, but only twice with
the same number of female teachers. They were slightly more likely
to ask a male teacher what he thought than they were to ask a female
teacher. Furthermore, female students overlapped cooperatively
with male instructors almost four times more frequently than with
female instructors. In doing so, they indicate not only the strict
attention they are paying to the male partners but their willingness
to assist the male teacher in continuing to speak. In all these
instances, female students perform "feminine" gender with male
teachers in ways that correspond to traditional sociolinguistic folk-
lore, such as "women speak more than men do": their cooperative
overlaps register consciously with male teachers as support and
encouragement. Talk by women students averaged 24.4% of all talk
in conferences with male teachers, but only 13.6% of conferences
with female teachers. Asking more qustions, denying their own
knowledge, and asking for the male teacher's opinion and knowl-
edge all helped to position the teacher as an active male expert and
the student as a passive female learner.

If female students are speaking in stereotypical ways to their male
teachers, it would seem difficult for these teachers to respond in any
less traditional ways. In order to be appropriately responsive, the lis-
tener is predicting and constructing the speaker, drawing on previ-
ous experience both with this particular speaker and with the
community the speaker represents. It is not surprising, then, that
male teachers are more likely than female teachers to interrupt
female students. Male teachers are more likely to use the discourse
markers *well* and *but* with their female students than with male stu-
dents, both frequent indicators of disagreement when applied to
another's speech and of complication and repair when a speaker
uses them to respond to his or her own speech. Male teachers are

also much more likely to use the relationship markers *you know* and *I mean* with their female students than with their male students. While *you know* can assume shared knowledge and thus be a form of praise, it can also be—as we've seen—a way to force students into a cognitive relationship they find difficult to resist. The use of *I mean* can mark not just the attempt to clarify speech, but a preoccupation with the speaker. *I mean* also functions as a place holder, keeping other parties from self-selecting, from joining in the talk. Thus, depending upon the interpretation, *I mean* indicates either a concern for the listener (explaining a belief that she doesn't understand) or a lack of interest in the listener.

My first, gut-level reaction to this data was to see it as double domination, teacher/student, male/female: male teachers dominating female students, controlling their speech, disagreeing with them, forcing them into a shared position and simultaneously reinforcing a hierarchy based on their educational capital. My second response was to ask why female students would participate in such a situation (if such a situation did exist) unless they felt they gained something from it. But as I thought about my own experiences as an undergraduate, I realized that I didn't see myself as an active participant in such social and power relations. Rather, I saw the traditional relation of teacher and student as "right" and "natural." Positioning myself within those structures, I willingly participated in my own domination, only occasionally and vaguely aware I was doing so.

Perhaps, too, female students didn't feel disempowered and dominated, but performed a role that would get them what they needed in order to be successful in their writing classes. That is, they felt that if they could not control the classroom or the university, they could at least control the conference. Fully aware of the response they would elicit by performing in stereotypically feminine ways, they gambled that the rewards would be greater than the punishment, that their cooperative and supportive behavior would prompt the teacher to provide more information about the "right" interpretation of the text under discussion, as well as more guidelines and conventions to ensure that their next revision or paper would meet with approval. If that sounds manipulative or conniving, even unbelievable, I only have to think about the number of times students have told me how they get the teacher off track in class by asking the right kind of question at the right time. I only have to think about graduate school and calculating, like my peers, how I would handle

an upcoming conference with a demanding or intimidating profes-
sor. I got advice from people who had experience—"Here's what you
do...." So I won't completely discount any of these possible responses
and interpretations of the data. I think they are all both problematic
and occasionally valid.

Consider in the example below how Dana's tentativeness elicits
help from Eric, and how he interrupts her to provide that help. In
this excerpt, Dana has been telling Eric that she is concerned because
when she writes, she uses exclusively an organizational structure she
learned in high school.

539 Dana: An I (tapping paper) THIS is an example of it, I mean, cause
540   like I took a I took e- um, a paragraph for each woman, and
541 Eric: ⌊Mm-hmm
542 Dana: that's the kind of structure we stuck to in uh in high school, but
543   then I guess I guess there's a difference though in the type of
544   paper I'm talking about, because last semester the papers were
545   more um, like personal stories, that kind of thing, and so I don't
546 Eric: ⌊Yeah
547 Dana: know, there were things that come up like in in conferences
548   with, I had a grad student last semester, and um, she was like
549 Eric: ⌊Yeah?
550 Dana: you know, this is very, uh what's mechanical or something and
551   and but I knew that if I'd taken it to maybe like, a freshman high
552 Eric: ⌊Yeah
553 Dana: school teacher she would have liked it⌈And, I mean obviously
554 Eric: ⌊Yeah   ⌊Yeah
555 Dana: there's a there's a difference in you know, maturity in writing
556   but--
557 Eric: ⌊Well, uh okay, I mean, it should sound like the, the paper
558   should sound like i- it comes from a person, I mean, your paper
559   shouldn't sound like Heidi's or Ben's papers, or somebody else,
560 Dana: ⌊Mm-hmm
561 Eric: I mean I should know who's writing the paper there should be a
562   a person in the paper, and so one meaning of "this is very
563   mechanical" uh, could mean that the, that you know the
564   language is so abstract, that there's so many impersonal verbs,
565   there's so many passive voices, I don't know what that, I uh it's
566   hard to think of a person as having written this rather than my
567   insurance company talling me how much money I have in my
568 Dana: ⌊Right   ⌊Mmm
569 Eric: account by way of a computer. Okay.

Eric goes on to explain that in a literature class, students need to create an argument, and suggests ways of laying out that argument.

Dana uses a double *I guess* in line 543 and *I don't know* in line 545, searches for a word in line 550, and hedges on her descriptions of a different reading community in lines 551 and 556. She indicates that her teacher last semester was a graduate student, perhaps a way of indicating the teacher's knowledge was questionable next to Eric's, a full professor with 25 years of experience. In fact, Eric responds with interest to that information, with a full questioning intonation to his "Yeah?" Dana's use of *but* in line 556 indicates that she is going on to problematize her "obviously" in line 555, just as she used *but* in line 542, second guessing her statement of knowledge. All these are ways of indicating uncertainty, and Eric responds not just with a discussion of voice and passivity in writing, but with a lesson on framing an argument—all valuable information for a first-year student struggling with her writing. How much of this dynamic structure Eric and Dana are aware of I can't tell. But just as we learn that we need to speak in particular ways to parents or peers to get certain responses and results, in our many years of schooling we learn patterns of speech that are "appropriate" to gendered academic interactions and are designed to elicit the responses we want.

Consider the ways in which Cari's overlaps with Bill in the transcript excerpt we looked at in chapter two urge him to continue to speak; she is so interested in what he is saying that she is attempting to predict it, to move it ahead. Cooperative overlaps indicate shared knowledge (if not agreement), and Cari may be trying to indicate her understanding of Bill's reasoning, though she is not always successful in doing so. In her conference with Don, Eva's initial question about her paper goes unanswered for almost the entire conference as Don considers aspects of the novel that interest him. Eva does not interrupt him; she insistently yet carefully asks questions about the material, indicating an interest in what he is saying yet turning the conversation slowly back to her original question. In fact, as the tape runs out, she is asking another question. Questioning can be very powerful, particularly if you ignore an answer and repeat a question, thus dismissing the answer. But it can also function more subtly. We ask questions when we are interested in a story. When the questions consistently connect to the material, we are encouraging the speaker to continue. So Don talks at length with Eva as she moves the talk in a large circle back to what she needs to know. With Don, Lyn suddenly

shifts, the tone of the conference to conversation, catching Don off guard as she makes a statement with the tone of a question that she likes the book they had discussed. Don responds with "Huh?" but goes on to develop the topic, and Lyn supports him, as she has throughout the conference.

My sense of these conferences between male teachers and female students mirrors in one aspect my sense of all conferences—that control and performances shift from moment to moment in an intricate dance between participants. But these are congenial, full of advice, and the control of the teacher is not challenged; rather, it is supported.

But then a question arises concerning the ways in which female students interact with female teachers. Do female students not perform in stereotypically female ways with female teachers because there's no reward in doing so? Because there's no punishment for not performing in a way that a female teacher will recognize as a performance—in other words, they don't need to "perform" in order to avoid punishment? Feminist theorists have often claimed that speech between women is cooperative, supportive, non-competeitive, nurturing, and recursive. This claim has been made across a variety of contexts: women's studies seminars, women's gossip sessions, meetings between women administrators or managers. But these characterizations often rest on a fundamental gender binary that has been called into question and on the cultural descriptions of women that result from this binary: if male speech is often full of conflict and challenge, female speech will be the opposite; if women are non-competitive, then their speech will be non-competitive.

These conferences and my own experiences in conferencing do not provide such a simple picture. In terms of word count alone, female teachers dominate female students just as male teachers do. Female teachers are less likely to interrupt their female students than male teachers are, but they are also less likely to cooperatively overlap their speech. Female students initiate fewer revision strategies to female teachers and hear less praise from female teachers. Finally, they hear and use less discipline-specific terminology with female teachers than male teachers. All this together does not add up to the picture of cooperation, support, and shared control that is often presented as characteristic of female-to-female speech. However, the data may also indicate that in this setting, female students don't feel they have to work as hard in conferences with female teachers. They

may feel they don't have to introduce as many topics, they don't have to be so cooperative, they don't have to prove they are serious about their writing by offering as many strategies for revison or using the terminology that demonstrates their "fitness" for the community represented by the teacher. In one important aspect—their gender—they are already a part of the community represented by the teacher.

But because conferencing so closely resembles teaching, not conversation, the roles of teacher and student seem to dominate, while gender roles complicate. In Erin and Leah's conference, for example, Erin's role as teacher and her desire to see Leah's paper move in a particular direction is foregrounded, not the connections perhaps possible because both participants are female.

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314 Erin:                    (Continuing turn) And you're right he
315          he does use the fact that Marx is becoming more more vulnerable.
316          (2 sec) You might wanna work in here too why Marx is more
317          vulnerable. You know, why:.. Is he taking stock of his religion.
318          in a way that he seemingly hasn't. At least I get the impression
319          that it's been a a number of years since he's even thought about
320          it.
321 Leah:   ⌈Alright./
322 Erin:   ⌊And ki- kind of in an ironically it's Grossbart who who makes
323          him--
324 Leah:   Right, right
325 Erin:   So in a kind of twisted way he is defender of the faith, wouldn't
326          you say?
327 Leah:   (2 sec) Yeah I guess.
328 Erin:   So because of so because his his um behavior
329 Leah:   /Nye:ah guess/
330 Erin:   prompts Marx to re-evaluate his own stance about his religion.
331          That's something you can explore. Kay.
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Leah's "Alright" in line 321 is very soft, tentative. She interrupts Erin, indicating that she knows where Erin is heading with this. On the tape, her voice is exasperated. After Erin offers her interpretation of who the real "defender of the faith" is, she adds a tag that attempts to force agreement—"wouldn't you say?" But Leah continues to resist, while Erin presses her point using *so* with conclusive force, as if agreement has been met. Leah's original interpretation has been discarded by the teacher, and her response to the enforced agreement is essentially to withdraw from the conference. For the next 110 lines of

speech—almost to the end of the conference—her responses are minimal unless asked a direct question.

Gender and Conferencing: Male Students

Male students challenged the control of female instructors in many ways. The proportion of student to teacher speech was slightly higher between male students and female teachers than male students and male teachers: 23.4% and 20.1% respectively. Further, with the exception of the markers *Oh* and *I mean*, male students were much more likely to use discourse markers to control conference talk with female teachers than with male teachers. Male students use *and* more forcefully to hold the floor, mark an upcoming utterance as possible disagreement with *well*, and are more insistent on their own perspective. Male students were much more likely to interrupt their female teachers than their male teachers. Female teacher-male student dyads were much more likely to produce cooperative overlaps than male-male dyads. However, many of these completions on the part of male students seemed designed to demonstrate their knowledge to the female teacher. In keeping with this use of the cooperative overlap, male students were less tentative of their knowledge in conferences with female teacher, less likely to say "I don't know" with them than their male teachers.

The female teachers' responses to these challenges to their power are mixed and very complex. On the one hand, the cooperative overlaps and the seeming lack of response to male students' use of controlling discourse markers (female teachers were no more likely to interrupt and gain or regain the floor with male students than male teachers were) appears to indicate that female teachers accept a more equal relationship with male students than they do with female students. And, interestingly, female teachers were more likely than male teachers to say "I don't know" when conferencing with male students. On the other hand, while the number of revision strategies and rules and conventions female teachers offer to male students is comparable to what they offer to female students, the lack of praise (less than offered to female students) may indicate a general displeasure with their male students' performance in writing—and perhaps with their performance in conferencing? It may also be a response to the stance of certainty adopted by so many male students; they don't need praise to build their confidence.

The response of female teachers seems to be a balancing act between the control that teachers conventionally exert over students and the deference and support that women are supposed to show men. Thus there is often a sense of struggle in the conferences between female teachers and male students that isn't present in conferences between these same female teachers and their female students. The control that female teachers exert over female students is never in question though it may not be welcomed, as we heard in Erin and Leah's conference. The control they maintain over male students, however, is often subtly challenged. In the excerpt below from Nina and John's conference, John both supports and challenges Nina.

188 John: Does it matter how much longer the papers get?
189 Nina: No. There there's no ma maximum length you know.
190 John: Oh, okay. Because   That's-
191   some classes like especially in high school well they said three
192   pages and they docked you if it's four
193 Nina: No
194 John: or three and a half.
195 Nina: No.
196 John: That's pretty much why well it cause it was kind of a condition. I
197   like to write like this. I like to (2 sec) I like to write scientific
198 Nina: Mm-hmm
199 John: and.. You know political science papers where I can just (makes a
200   noise like fast scribbling) this is what happened. This
201   caused this. And so it's really been kind of tough for me in
202 Nina: Right, right.
203 John: English to go on all my thought processes and drag things up
204 Nina: Mm-hmm
205 John: cause (voice trails off).
206 Nina: Right. Right. Well, I think it's just that it that question also it's
207   like you know cause you've gotta keep in mind that that the
208   person reading this paper doesn't have access to your mind or
209   access to your comments, to talk to talk you so you when you say
210 John: I know that
211 Nina: I don't like dogs it might be a good idea to give the reason why
212 John: Explain
213 Nina: you don't like dogs right. I doesn't have to be incredibly
214 John: /why/ Sure.
215 Nina: personal- (tape stops, then resumes). Okay, um so do you have
216   any questions then?

217 John: (2 sec) No. I know I have to go all over all my papers and.. read
218   it as someone esle. Uh distance myself.
219 Nina: It's also a good idea to have you and your roommate through and
220   have him mark by anything he doesn't isn't quite sure of you
221   know.⌉
222 John: ⌊Yeah it's I've had kind of difficulties with peer.. peer..
223   uh doing papers with your friends and stuff cause they a lot of
224   times they'll just say oh yeah it's a good paper--
225 Nina: I like it. I know.
226 John: And.. And it.. You know cause it's kind of hard to rip someone
227   apart.
229 Nina: Well I don't I don't know why people think of this in the sense
230   of ripping them apart when you say to them I d- just say to them
231   I don't understand this point. It's not like a personal attack like
232   you dirty dog you know ⌉
233 John: ⌊Well different people have
234   difficulties / ? /--
235 Nina: ⌊I know. Oh I know they're very people can be very sensitive
236   about their writing. Um.. Gee (2 sec) Well um so everything I
237   said to you you you it made sense to you right?
238 John: It makes sense to me now and hopefully it'll
239 Nina: ⌈Right.
240 John: ⌊I'll retain everything when I go uh make all my revisions.⌉
241 Nina: ⌊Do
242   you listen to the tapes again?
243 John: That helps a lot.
244 Nina: Okay.⌉
245 John: ⌊A lot.⌉
246 Nina: ⌊So
247 John: It's but still you know.. I do that and I do
248   everything on the tape and.. It still like doesn't turn out exactly
249 Nina: ⌊It
250 John: ⌈what I want/
251 Nina: ⌊takes time you know.
252 John: ⌊Oh I know I know
253 Nina: So.
254 John: But the tapes do help.
255 Nina: Yeah well then good good. Okay then I will (2 sec) It's the END
256   Laurel.
Conference Ends

John begins this segment by asking about page length, then inter-
rupts Nina to explain why he asked the question, perhaps concerned

that she will interpret his question as a complaint about having to write long papers. He continues to explain even as Nina tells him "no" twice. At this point, they are speaking simultaneously. Without any coordinating or contrasting marker, John abruptly switches the topic to the kind of writing he likes: scientific essays with the kinds of cause and result statements that he apparently finds easier to produce than the personal narratives with analysis that he's done in English (he doesn't say "in your class" to Nina, but it's understood). He refers to the process of supporting statements, which Nina has asked him to work on earlier in the conference, as "dragging things up." Although Nina acknowledges his feelings, she hints at displeasure or disagreement with his assessment and attempts to explain the needs of an audience (she has been the audience so far). John interrupts her in line 210 to assert that he already knows that, but Nina ignores his interruption and continues. This time, John offers proof that he *does* know what she means, by producing a cooperative overlap.

When Nina suggests a revising strategy in line 219, John at first appears to agree with or support her ("yeah") but actually goes on to disagree. This time Nina produces the cooperative overlap, but John continues, holding his place with *and.* When he suggests that giving peer advice consists of "ripping someone apart," Nina immediately disagrees with him. John defends his position, latching his own *well* onto Nina's *you know,* thus asserting that he does not share the perspective she has offered him. Nina asserts that she understands his position, but moves the argument to a more distant ground, to "people" generally as opposed to John and his classmates.

Near the end of the conference, John indicates his concern about his ability to revise. As I've noted, uncertainty when used by a student appears to be a successful way to provoke a helpful response, and Nina suggests he listen to the tapes she makes in place of written comments. He praises the tapes repeatedly, but complains that though he listens to them and does exactly what she suggests, he still doesn't produce the kind of paper he wants—or she wants; the conference tape isn't clear. This is a challenge to Nina's ability to critique, not a suggestion that John may not write well. Nina's response is to interrupt him and assert obliquely that John has unrealistic expectations. John, in turn, overlaps his speech, asserting that he *does* know that writing well takes time. He then goes on to restate how helpful the tapes are. Nina's response suggests she has to work herself up to

support John's final assertion, as it is no longer believable. The challenges to Nina's power as teacher are subtle but frequent.

In two of the three conferences between male teachers and male students, it seems as if the gender of the instructor may have combined with the power of his position to limit performance options available to the students. In many contexts, cultural constructs for males involve asserting dominance. In conferences with female instructors, the gender of the instructor undermines at least slightly the power of her position as teacher, thus permitting male students to perform in some dominant ways. When the power of the teacher is supported by gender, however, then performing dominance becomes more difficult for male students. Performing submission— or supporting dominance—while an option for many women, is not generally a part of the male repertoire. This perhaps explains why Ben and Dave accept Eric and Carl's criticsm and praise, neither challenging them nor playing an active role in shaping the form of their interpretations and evaluations. They cannot easily challenge a male teacher, but they cannot submit, either, and so their participation is limited. And because the teacher shapes the conference as teaching, not conversation, the students cannot imagine any other possible roles for themselves.

Mike, on the other hand, offers resistance at various points throughout the entire conference, responding incompletely or not at all to conference opening questions, disagreeing with Bill's criticism, and challenging the course grade even as Bill is constructing it. The two often talk over each other, interrupting and insisting on speaking rights. This conference stands out from the other thirteen for the extent of its opposition, both active and passive. In fact, as the conference closes, Bill tells Mike that at this point he's got a "B" in the course. Mike responds: "And I- well, okay, I don't see it going much further than that. Awright, that's cool." He refuses to participate in traditional ways, instead taking control of his grade by deciding how much work he is willing and able to do with this teacher, determining for himself the value of his time and writing.

What's the Outcome?

Significant issues arise from all this talk about gender: Students as well as texts are evaluated in conferences; assessment takes many forms, some of which are overt but most of which are much more

subtle; and assessment patterns and learning patterns appear to be connected to gender.

Until recently, I naively thought I was really only counting *attendance* at a conference as part of my students' course participation, and that "assessment" meant, finally and most importantly for the student, grades. And I continued to think so, even after conducting discourse analysis on my own conferences. It wasn't until I began to study conferences between other teachers and their students that I realized, as I read through pages of transcripts, in how many ways I was evaluating these students. And if I was doing so, so must their instructors, who will actually give them a grade, who will approach their writing and speech with a new assessment of the student after each conference.

It's easier—at least for me—to see more clearly what goes on in conference assessment if I think about the ways in which I've been assessed. For example, if I'm talking with a colleague about a teaching practice I've come up with, and the colleague nods and says, "Great idea!" that's clearly positive evaluation. But there are other ways of assessing.

One of the things I remember about Thanksgiving when I was young is that the little kids sat at the folding card table in the kitchen, and the adults got the big table in the dining room. I remember very clearly the first Thanksgiving when I was not only allowed to sit at the big table while we ate, but no one asked me to leave when the plates were taken away and the talk began. I sat there saying nothing but listening to the adults. No one "watched" their language, and while I may not have been an active participant, I was brought into a circle of adult speech and exposed to terms, concepts, and ways of interacting that acknowledged me as at least a marginal member of that group. That, too, was assessment; not as obvious as explicit praise, but a positive judgement that I was mature enough to be admitted to that community of adults.

We are all familiar with qualified praise: "You did this well enough, but..." In fact, as I've listened surreptitiously to students in peer groups, I've heard them mimicking me, mimicking other teachers, saying that same phrase with wide-eyed sarcasm and snickering with one another. Most of us would recognize, in our annual evaluation, that receiving a lot of such praise meant we weren't being praised at all. There are other kinds of negative evaluation. For example, while I was interviewing for a position years ago, one of the interviewers

asked me several times as I spoke if I could "back up a bit" and clarify something I'd said. While such a request indicates interest, it's also a negative assessment of my ability to gauge my audience's needs, to organize my material in ways that make sense to others.

How do these kinds of assessments manifest themselves in a conference? One way is by the instructor's use of discipline-specific terminology, the words that have special meaning in a composition or literary context. For example, to support a claim in English is very different from supporting a beam in carpentry. Words such as "freewrite," "revise," "peer group," "develop," "substance," and even "interrogate" would be discipline-specific terms. Using these terms without any explanation indicates—like the Thanksgiving scene— that the speaker assumes the listener is a part of her community. Using and defining them indicates a willingness to help the listener become part of the speaker's community; not using them at all in a setting where we would expect them indicates that the speaker does not consider the listener to be a member of her community. Likewise, requests for clarification and extensive suggestions for revision or correction indicate an assessment that the writer has not organized or presented information in ways that are "conventional" or expected by the instructor.

All of this is really nothing new; I am aware that I am assessing when I write marginal comments, and I go back through to see if I have balanced my praise and criticism if possible. But in the real-time of conferencing, we rarely reflect on the structure of our speech or the "amount" of any particular kind of speech. We tend to function more unconsciously, aware of subtle shifts. For example, a student may begin to respond in single words as she resists a revision suggestion. We may eventually become aware of this pattern and respond, perhaps not changing our position but finding more to praise in the student's paper, perhaps allowing the student to speak and explain her own position.

Assessment and praise appear to be complexly linked to gender in these conferences. Female students are praised much more frequently than male students, particularly in terms of unqualified praise. Additionally, female students receive many more suggestions for revision than do male students, in both higher order and lower order categories, and propose or test more revision strategies than do their male peers. They are much more likely to hear discipline-specific language and use it in return in their conferences. Finally, female students are

more likely to be supplied with the rules, definitions, and conventions that help writers establish themselves in the discourse of a discipline.

It's possible to make connections here, to see some patterns developing. As female students suggest revision strategies to their instructors, instructors first respond typically by evaluating the strategy (usually involving some praise of one kind or another), and then by offering a counter-strategy, additional strategies, or variations on the student strategy. As instructors conclude their response, there is another evaluation (although sometimes the object of praise here is mixed, as they are praising their own strategies as well as the student's!). Because female students are more likely than males to put forth their revision strategies in the form of questions or in an uncertain tone or to devalue those strategies, instructors are more likely to respond at length, not merely to evaluate. They offer help in addition to evaluation. As instructors outline strategies, they use the terminology of the discipline, and as their responses lengthen, they move from text-specific commentary to the rules and conventions of the discipline. They may also move into new knowledge for themselves, working through an idea that has suddenly occurred to them; speaking largely to themselves, they use the language familiar to them. As female students repeat back these strategies and ideas or suggest new ones, they use the terminology they have just heard applied to their own papers and writing processes. And they leave the conference with a set of guidelines—that a good place to start a paper is with your own reactions to the text, assertions can be made with the proper evidence, one of the tests for meaning is redundancy—to help them rewrite this paper and move to the next one.

Male students, on the other hand, speak in ways that do not elicit the same kinds of language from the instructors as the female students. Male students ask fewer questions to clarify a previous statement made by an instructor, offer fewer revision strategies as questions and few revision strategies overall. Mike, Jeff, and John, for example, all defend the strategies they used in writing their papers. Instead of the cooperative development of instructor-suggested revision strategies that occurs more frequently in conferences with female students, the male students tended either to resist the suggestions offered by their teachers or to agree without extensive elaboration. So, in this small group of students and teachers, it appears that female students are entering conferences with interaction strategies that allow them to leave those conferences with

revising ideas and language that will help them succeed in their composition classes.

Gender Inequity

Acknowledging the traditional power relations between teachers and students and males and females, female students in these conferences receive the kind of guidance that both firmly embeds them in the conventional social structure and rewards them for accepting that position—even as it disadvantages them. Both teachers and students draw on their experiences in gendered classrooms as they meet to talk in conferences.

Gender inequity in the classroom is well documented, even to the point of appearing in popular literature. Not long ago, when an all-female college went coed, the newspapers carried accounts of the changes in classroom interaction occasioned by the entrance of men. Sadker and Sadker (1984, 1986) have extensively documented gender bias in the classroom. In a study of more than one hundred fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade classrooms—a sample that included urban, suburban, and rural schools, classes both homogeneous and racially/ethnically varied, and courses in languages arts, social studies, and math—they observed the "pervasiveness" of sex bias. Male students were involved in more interactions with their teachers, received more attention, and received more precise feedback on their responses to teachers—more remediation, more praise, more criticism.

But why this is so is not always clear, and it will surely take a great deal more study to figure out. In one study of an elementary classroom (Swann, 1988), the teacher adhered to a rule that she would call on whoever got their hand up first, thus supposedly allowing males and females an equal chance. However, after viewing videotapes of the class interaction, Swann noted that subtle clues from the teacher, such as eye contact, eyebrow raising, and body posture, cued male students first that a question was forthcoming. Consistently and unconsciously alerted, male students raised their hands before the female students. Thus, male students had more opportunities to interact with the teacher, to receive feedback, and to test their knowledge.

Follow-up studies on gender, teaching, and learning at the college level, both broadly based and narrowly focused, indicate that the

pattern of sex bias persists. These studies indicate such bias is both conscious and unconscious. Most women I've spoken to have some horror story to tell about sexism in the classroom; I have my own. And if the students I spoke with years ago when I first began studying my own conferencing had been more aware of language patterns, they might have been able to articulate their frustration with the gendered interaction of our conferences.

Sexism is about power, and power and gender appear to be (at the moment) inextricably intertwined. Many early claims about "women's language" have been reconsidered. O'Barr and Atkins (1983), for example, examined language use in the courtroom and found that the speech of defendants often manifested the same kinds of features that Robin Lakoff (1975) ascribed to "women's language." A number of research studies have indicated that "power differences masquerade as gender differences because women in this society usually possess limited power or status compared with men (Simkins-Bullock and Wildman, 1991).

While a great deal of research on classroom interaction has focused on gender relations, such issues are largely unacknowledged in conferencing studies. For example, in Freedman and Sperling's study of high- and low-achieving students, it seems important to me to ask why the high-achieving male, Jay, receives expository modeling in an academic register, while the high-achieving female, Sherry, receives expository modeling in a colloquial register. Hearing such modeling in an academic register, Jay is exposed to the use of high-value words—discipline-specific terminology—as well as the articulation of conventions of writing. Sherry, on the other hand, hears the conventions but does not hear the language that carries weight in a community that evaluates her not only on her use of those conventions but on her ability to discuss them. Jay receives an invitation to return to discuss his ideas or to ask for clarification on concepts the teacher may not have explained clearly. Sherry also receives an invitation to return, *first*, however, if *she* doesn't understand a concept or is confused (there is no indication that the teacher might have played a role in the confusion), and *then* if she has an idea to discuss. Unlike Jay, Sherry receives two warnings that she must keep up with the class work, although she is a high-achieving student. It seems important, too, that Jay's self-generalizations are positive, while the females in this study, regardless of level of achievement, make negative self-generalization. The possible relations of gender

and achievement and gendered response (both teacher and student) go unremarked.

We have so little information on conferencing and gender that it's hard to say why the male students in my research didn't receive the kind of discipline-specific language and academic modeling that the male student in Freedman and Sperling's study did. Perhaps the "get to know you" atmosphere of the first conference of the semester, which they chose to study, prompted more speech from the males and maybe a bit more tentativeness? Perhaps the teacher responded to her high-achieving male student as I did, considering him a "Writer" and making the same mistake I did—not recognizing the expertise of the high-achieving female.

Wong (1989), too, explores a relationship between tutor and tutee where power appears to be solely a function of participants' academic roles, where gender and other important social constructs apparently do not enter the talk. While I can identify the gender of the tutors, I am not positive of the gender of the student in two of the four conferences she examine. Nonetheless, it seems worthwhile to pursue the issue of gender, for the two conferences in which the knowledge of the tutee is recognized and respected involve the female tutor, while the two in which the tutee's knowledge base is ignored or co-opted involve the male tutor.

Again, in Walker and Elias's study of high- and low-rated conferences, gender is surprisingly a non-issue. In the lowest rated conferences, all but one is between a male tutor and a female tutee, and in the highly rated conferences, there is only one with a mixed gender. In a re-analysis of the transcripts, Gail Stygall (1998) argues that both high- and low-rated conferences are affected by gender roles and expectations. In examining topic control in both kinds of conferences, she finds that the male tutor remains in control throughout, repeatedly ignoring attempts at a topic switch by the female student in an exchange common to male-female talk across speech situations. Further, the male tutors both ask double or even triple questions, which Stygall notes is common in doctor-patient exchanges where there is a similar asymmetry of power. In the highly rated conference, the teacher dominates the amount of talk: 62% to the student's 38%. This figure closely matches the ratio of talk between males and females that Spender (1989) argues is comfortable for both sexes. Such a re-analysis, from a critically informed position, problematizes a relationship previously constructed on academic roles only. As

Stygall points out, socialization takes place both inside the classroom (and conference) and outside, and that includes socialization in gender roles as well as institutional roles.

Some conference studies point to simple turn-taking and the apparent opportunity for both student and teacher to initiate topics as indicative of conversational dialogue and horizontal power relations. But as we saw in chapter one, to assume that a conference is a conversation on the basis of turn-taking alone is simplistic, for conversation involves more than that, and most speech interaction involves taking turns of one kind or another. And to assume that students have the same opportunities to initiate topics as their teachers flies in the face of the very transcripts that are presented as evidence. In excerpt after excerpt, the teacher controls the topic and access to the floor. The same is true of conversation between males and females. Contrary to the folklore, numerous studies indicate that when men and women talk, men talk more than women. Women introduce more topics than men but rarely are they taken up for discussion (an aspect of the affective dimension of conferencing we'll take up in chapter five); furthermore, women have to do most or all of the necessary tasks to keep a conversation going—what Pamela Fishman (1977) calls "interactional shitwork."

In the conferences I recorded, institutional roles are foregrounded over gender roles; gender does not, however, go unacknowledged or unperformed. Rather, patterns of control and gender are closely and complexly intertwined, and examining these patterns and the results sheds some light why conferences may not be as successful as we hope. One issue to consider is "gender performance."

Judith Butler (1992) problematizes the traditional binary concept of gender by asserting that gender is performative. Most debates about gender parallel "nature versus nurture" arguments, considering gender as either a biological or a cultural construct. The line between the two becomes blurred, however, when we consider that no human is ever "out of" a culture. Ultimately, what is left out of this debate and the picture of gender that emerges is agency and the role of shifting contexts. Butler plays with the terms of this debate, asserting that we "perform" a "feminine" or "masculine" gender to meet external expectation or satisfy our "psychological gender." She points out that in many ways we "cross-dress" and perform another gender, but unless we are performing the psychological gender we feel, the cross-dressing is *not* the performance—the "conventional"

dress is the performance. She posits the possibility of multiple genders, growing out of the postmodern concept of multiple selves and multiple contexts. Our performance is tied to the context, to the reward for performing in a certain way, and to the punishment for performing in unexpected, unconventional, or undesirable ways.

Of course, there are conflicting expectations and rewards. For example, when a boy "calls out" in an elementary classroom, he is often rewarded by being allowed to speak, to address the topic on the floor or answer a question without being selected by the teacher, even if he is also given a reprimand. When a girl calls out, she is more likely to be reprimanded and refused access to the floor—a double punishment. However, if she raises her hand, she risks not being called upon at all. Thus, while she avoids punishment by not calling out, she may also receive no reward for behaving in the expected manner—unless we consider the absence of punishment a reward in itself. To do so, however, seems clearly psychologically and pedagogically unhealthy. Likewise, I have had female students tell me that they are reluctant to challenge male classmates, to demand a speaking turn free of interruptions, to insist that the topics they offer be considered as seriously as those offered by males, and to request that their male peers share equally the work of critiquing a classmate's paper in a peer group. They understand the rewards of such behavior, but they fear the consequences—they they will be labeled a "bitch" by both male and female classmates. And so they perform "feminine" gender for the class, hoping that their classmates won't see it as a performance (which would have a negative result) and that I *will* (which hopefully will have a positive result, given what they perceive I value). Women are well aware of the linguistic and cultural domination of males and can "play the game," perform as expected—but at what price? Sociological and linguistic research shows that males, too, must perform, but performing from a culturally dominant position generally provides them with more options.

There are problems with Butler's argument. For example, the use of the word "perform" implies a consciousness of gender constructs, a premeditation that I don't believe is always present. Additionally, her focus on gender and performance doesn't adequately consider the interaction of gender constructs with institutional or other social constructs. For example, I don't always see myself as a woman teaching; sometimes I see myself simply as a teacher. My unawareness of

my gender doesn't mean that others are not aware of it, nor does it mean that it isn't affecting my teaching, but I am not consciously choosing to perform as a female teacher. Nonetheless, one of the values of Butler's argument is that it complicates a debate that has often been reductive and essentialistic. It forces me to consider students and teachers as active constructors of these conferences, as persons both aware of some of the linguistic options open to them as as male and female speakers and yet still deeply embedded in the constructs that shape our culture and these conferences.

Acknowledging Gender, Improving Conferences

Perhaps critical reflection on gender, power, and discourse is most difficult to achieve in conferencing. After all, we have been performing gender and culture all our lives in many ways, for many more years than we have been in the institutional roles of students or teachers. We are so accustomed to these roles that we can rarely see or feel them. In fact, despite the differences by gender here— female students receiving more praise, more suggestions for revision, more rules than males—both genders felt the conferences were successful. Perhaps what counts as successful is different for males than females; I don't think I have enough information to answer that. While cultural expectations for males and females might lead me to say that women are expected to be supportive and cooperative while males are expected to be dominant, aggressive, and controlling, that's certainly not how females and males consistently behaved in these conferences. Rather, their behaviors were constantly shifting. Is there then some set of gendered guidelines with which we all work, some boundary beyond which behavior is "marked" as unacceptable or which causes discomfort? Do we construct the behavior of our partners to fit these guidelines until they cross that boundary, thus reading women's requests for clarification, for example, not as possible disagreement or aggression or criticism but as cooperation and support? I have to admit that I initially read the agreement that Jeff offers Erin as "too much," and nicknamed him "the weasel" (only briefly, until I did some more thinking). I seriously have to consider that if it had been a female student offering agreement to Erin, I might not even have marked it, might have considered it "ordinary," supportive behavior from a woman. It's easy for me in this book to call for critical reflection on

gender during the conference, but when I find it so difficult to do so with tapes, transcripts, and the time to reflect, how difficult a task I and other teachers will find it to be in our own practice!

But address it we must. Teachers who explicitly discuss gender in their classrooms know that students will quickly offer them the folklore about gender and language: women's chattiness, male silence, gendered topics, women interested in talking about feelings and males avoiding it, etc. But articulating folklore alone will not generate change or awareness of the ways in which gender positively or negatively affects the shape or outcome of speech events. Most students reject research that challenges folklore or that asks them to rethink in important ways the structure that supports their self-constructions. So simply presenting research on male-female interruptions or topic development isn't enough.

It's important for students to test new claims, to experience research. They can listen to tapes of conferences, counting particularly important features, then, like researchers, offer an interpretation. They can take turns acting as observers as they watch pairs of students or teacher-student pairs wrestle with revising a text or constructing an interpretation of a literary text, again, paying careful attention to issues of gender and language just as they have observed differences between conversation and teaching. They can observe videotapes of students and teachers confering so that they have access to paralinguistic cues as well: body language, eye-movment, and facial expression. And they have access to all sorts of language interaction taking place around them at home, work, dorms, restaurants, etc. Identifying high-stakes, asymmetrical interactions and considering how gender is affecting those interactions leads to an awareness of language and gender as shaping forces in the outcomes.

Much of what we hear in conferences we respond to unconsciously, and in many ways, much of what we say is also not open to reflection, at least at the moment. If teachers have adopted a strategy of taping conferences, students and teachers can revisit those tapes to study and analyze their own language, just as we revisit written texts to understand what "worked" and what was less successful. After having students participate in some of their own research, I found that they were willing to listen to what I offered in terms of my conferences. Women especially were struck by and concerned with the use of " I don't know" and negative self-generalizations. As a class, we have spoken about conferences in relation to interviews, where the assessment

aspects are more clear to participants: the possible outcomes of negative self-generalizations, or of putting forth ideas without any indication that other possibilities exist. Students, aware of the power relations and high stakes that can be part of a conference, begin to see language and gender as linked in a larger structure of power relations. Who will get the job? Who will have access to money and power? Who will get praise and help? Who will have access to knowledge and other members of the community? And, of course, what does entry into that powerful community mean for each person?

Just as we cannot dismiss our power as teachers, we cannot shrug off our genders and the ways in which we have learned to perform them. But that does not mean we cannot understand the dynamics of language and power, nor does it mean that we cannot alter them once aware of them. As teachers who have chosen to conference in order to help students and to shift what seems to us to be a sometimes unhealthy relationship, we need to do whatever we can to accomplish those goals.