

## *The Affective Dimension*

*Through our talk about things, we sustain the reality of them. We are choosing what parts of the world we will orient to, and we are defining what aspects of reality are most important. The question of who controls topics in our conversations is partly a question of who controls our view of the world.*

P.M. Fishman, "What Do Couples Talk About  
When They're Alone?"

I LOVE TEACHING. I LOVE TO READ BOOKS, I LOVE TO READ STUDENT papers, and I love to read, period. As a undergraduate, I "hated" *Portrait of a Lady*, but I "loved" *McTeague*. T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens interested me, but Robert Bly, Sylvia Plath, and William Stafford moved me. I was embarrassed by my writing in an introductory fiction class, to the point where I still remember most of what I wrote and how shallow and awkward it seemed next to my more talented classmates' work. I felt proud and special in my poetry workshops, loving this poem, frustrated by the next, but feeling talented because my professor told me he liked what I wrote.

I am talking about feelings here, about emotions that mingle with factual knowledge. Most of us who have gone into teaching have done so because there is something about it that we love; there is some need it fulfills. And while some may conference with students because it is required, most of us conference because there is an affective dimension to teaching and learning that is important to us, and conferences seem to be one way to address that dimension for ourselves and our students. We come into conferences feeling something about this student, something about the texts at hand, just as our students come into conferences full of feelings. And when we ignore this dimension—as I believe we so often do—we miss what prompted our students to write or what kept them from writing what they wanted; we miss developing the trust that comes from sharing feelings as well as facts and writing strategies; and we are frustrated by what has remained unsaid, unexplored, or unresolved.

In the long and frustrating conference I taped with my student, Felicia, the important issue became her feelings: her fears about writing and about how I would respond to her as a student and a person. After I had questioned her into a corner and she stammered out that she didn't "know how to say things," it was clear to me that she didn't understand the revision strategies I had suggested, didn't understand the point of my asking these questions, didn't understand where I thought I was leading her. I was thinking there was some particular kind of knowledge that was hidden in her head like cached treasure and that I could trick her into revealing it or help her remember the way back. Then, voila! I would "see the light in her eyes," and we would make this wonderful paper together.

"I don't know how to say things." What a courageous admission to make to someone who so values exactly that knowledge! I remember how her voice shook and how she tried to make a little half smile and then turned away. Everything in her tone and body language told me that she was not asking for another lesson on how to say things, though she would have been happy for me to tell her exactly what to say at that moment and end the torture. We were talking about a lifetime of humiliating conferences and comments on papers; Felicia was afraid and anxious and knew the stakes were getting higher with each class, each year of school. Yet I didn't want to deal with it nor did I have the time to do so. For Felicia wasn't the only student who needed something from me, and we'd already used up our twenty minutes. So I resisted the way she had suddenly begun shaping the conference, resisted speaking, too, of my own fears of having the wrong words years before and even now. I told her quickly a few things she should do to improve her paper, thanked her for coming, and sent her on her way. Ignoring the topic she had offered, I told her, in essence: "This is the academic world, Felicia, and it doesn't involve feelings, particularly student feelings. Get over it." I place my conference with Felicia in my column of worsts; I am ashamed of using my power as teacher to silence Felicia and tell her, in ways subtle and not so subtle, that her feelings didn't count, weren't valid, didn't even warrant acknowledgment.

Students Say . . .

When I've asked students to write about their best and worst conferences, it's clear that the emotional aspects of a conference play an important role in their choices. Students are afraid, nervous, excited,

or uncertain about themselves and want to talk about those feelings, want to establish a relationship with the teacher that goes beyond the classroom. One student described how he felt when his teacher bracketed conferences with personal questions.

He'd begin by talking about the area that I live in, and since he, too, has been to the Washington, D.C. area, he could relate to me in that aspect. I think by talking about something totally unrelated to English I was able to relax more, and feel like this teacher who I had a conference with was my good friend....After we were done talking about the papers, he continued to talk to me further about other things I am interested in, like baseball. I think by talking about these things helped me to respect my teacher and his ideas, and to feel like he was my friend instead of my teacher who I was conferencing with.

Another student writes that she came from a small high school and feels the “need to be noticed.” She seeks out conferences with her teachers, especially in classes in which she is doing poorly. “I have found that those conferences have helped the most, if not in learning the material then just to relate to the teacher and ask questions. I feel that these conferences are quite helpful and often give me better confidence and more interest in class.” Clearly, the goal for conferencing can be either or both writing/revising a paper and establishing a relationship with the teacher that is comfortable for the student. One student is willing to forgo learning course material in order to “relate” to the teacher, for her confidence in her ability depends upon her relationship with that teacher. Another student wants her teacher to talk a lot—but in very particular ways.

A good conference is when the teacher does a lot of talking—makes you feel comfortable. Many times when I go to see teachers I am very nervous. When they are friendly and outgoing I feel more comfortable and can discuss my problems. Many times they act cold and I find myself just wanting to hurry and get out of there ASAP. I can't be myself and I don't get my problems solved. All teachers seem to intimidate me.

When we talk about writing without talking about feeling, we abstract a set of skills and a string of words from what has been a personal process, a human connection. What makes certain memories of conferencing so strong for me is not whether I got the advice to rewrite a particular paper and get a good grade, but whether I felt

welcomed or humiliated or valued or threatened. I don't ever recall a teacher asking about my feelings, being concerned about my confidence or fear. They might have been, but there was no space to talk about those feelings, or perhaps neither of us knew how to make that space.

### Discourse and Affective Topics

As I examined other conferences, I explored topic change and kinds of topics. I divided them into broad categories: discourse topics were primarily about writing, affective topics primarily about feelings (and in these conferences, that often meant feelings about writing), and a category of "other" topics, most of which dealt with the surface of the conference or a course—when papers were due, what changes had been made in the syllabus, etc.—made up the rest. Teachers, who controlled conferences generally, not surprisingly also controlled topics. Their topics were primarily discourse ones; for teachers, feelings are usually expressed only in the form of either praise or criticism. They are firmly part of teaching, barely different from the discourse topics that make up so much of conference talk: "I really like what you've done here," "I remember feeling badly when I gave this [paper] back to you in class because I should've said that about the central metaphor the first time around." Even for students, feelings were rarely offered unwrapped, naked. Instead, they were clothed in concerns about what the teacher wanted or liked. When students did offer up their feelings as possible topics, teachers found it difficult to respond to them, to help students articulate or explore those feelings. And in the case of a teacher who expressed personal feelings about his job with a student, the student was not in a position to respond as an equal, was not prepared to bridge the gap between teacher and student, between classroom and colleague.

Mary and Rick met to talk about Rick's paper, which Mary had found so vague and unfocused that she requested the conference. Rick has had a great deal of difficulty with a poem, and as the two worked their way through the poem, they came across some coined phrases: one in particular, "wanwood," stopped them.

168 Mary: I never heard of wanwood

169 but I thought it was just because I was (2 sec) not very educated

- 170 (Laughs).
- 171 Rick: I never heard of a lot of em, but.. I guess I'm not educated either.
- 172 Mary: Well
- 173 Rick: I shouldn't be here, what am I doing here.
- 174 Mary: Oh, that's not TRUE! (Laughs)
- 175 Rick: Sound like Scott now. ]
- 176 Mary: ]WELL, if he's gonna be makin up
- 177 words, you know, I mean he has to expect people to feel those
- 178 Rick: ]To explain em, right?
- 179 Mary: things, right? Okay, so we have a sense, general, vague, maybe
- 180 but a sense--
- 181 Rick: ]I don't even know why I picked this poem, I was just--
- 182 Mary: ]You don't
- 183 know why. ]
- 184 Rick: ]I was just looking through it.
- 185 Mary: It's--
- 186 Rick: It caught my eye.

For Rick, this task seems overwhelming. His frustrated exclamation that he doesn't belong here seems to imply not just this conference about this poet and poem, but "here" in the university generally. Mary refutes his self judgement, Rick compares himself to someone else they both know, and Mary goes on to offer her support for Rick, pointing out that Hopkins should expect people to feel this way as they approach his creative language. It's interesting that she doesn't address Rick's concerns directly, but shifts the focus to the poet. She might have said, "It's perfectly natural to feel as frustrated as you do; you're dealing with lots of new information at one time, not just in this class, either." Instead, she asks Rick to think about the poet, not himself. With her one sentence, she feels she has responded to his affective topic and shifts quickly back to the discourse topic, marking that shift with *Okay* and a summary of what they've accomplished in the minutes before this. But Rick's frustration hasn't been addressed, and he interrupts her to reassert his topic. This time, she is more aware of the depth of his fear and frustration, and helps him develop his topic more fully. Rick goes on to say that, coming from Canada, he would have had one more year of school before entering a university, would have read different authors before dealing with these. He's not sure that having missed that year, he was prepared for school. But she is still intent on getting through THIS poem, and again, she tries to shift the topic.

- 227 Rick: See if I woulda gone back to grade thirteen we woulda had to do  
 228 Frankenstein. In the thirteenth grade this year.  
 229 Mary: O:h. The- there were thirteen grades in your school? In your  
 230 high school?  
 231 Rick: Yeah. In Canada, you have to go thirteen grades.  
 232 Mary: O::h.  
 233 Rick: It's like first year university, so.  
 234 Mary: A:h. We::ll, you missed something there. So I guess what we  
 235 have to decide, you have to decide first is which poem do you  
 236 wanna use.

Rick goes on to begin to develop a paper idea, but his sense of being overwhelmed re-emerges near the end of the conference. He wants advice on how he should start his new paper.

- 376 Rick: Dyou have to be, be creative?  
 377 Mary: (Laughs) Do you have to be creative?  
 378 Rick: (Little laugh) I don't wanna be creative now.  
 379 Mary: Well, I think you--  
 380 Rick: [Everything- Everything's goin on, / ? /  
 381 Mary: [I know, there's a lot  
 382 going on, life is very tough these days.  
 383 Rick: An we're always doing something with the /hockey [team/  
 384 Mary: [Do you  
 385 have a um, a computer, or are you using a typewriter.

Rick's worries about time management, his own skills, his fit with the school all underlie this conference. They keep resurfacing, and despite Mary's attempts to deal with them quickly, they will not go away. For Rick, his feelings about school and his ability to succeed are clearly more important than the necessity of writing a paper. At the end of the conference, as Mary is attempting to get him to commit to finishing the paper soon, he brings up his grandmother's gallstones and her hospitalization—he has already told Mary how important his family is to him. His feelings run like a cross current that constantly threaten to pull the conference in a direction that Mary does not want to go.

Not only students but teachers bring with them feelings that affect the shape of conferences. But because of the power relations, students find it hard—if not impossible—to ignore the affective topics that teachers raise. Because they cannot leave and must



- 32 Lyn: Well I don't see why you wouldn't.  
 33 Don: Well I think it's a necessity. So um... Well but but it would be  
 34 Lyn: Mm-hmm  
 35 Don: good just t'know y'know just some a the y'know the issues that  
 36 are out there for us as teachers that's all. But I think it would be  
 37 st strange I think we'd be we'd be all very self conscious like I  
 38 am right now about this being recorded or filmed. (5 sec)

A few turns later, Don rereads his comments on Lyn's paper and confesses that he read it at two-thirty in the morning and couldn't really give it a "thorough shakedown." Don's frustrations with his situation arise again when he instructs Lyn to speak directly into the tape recorder and share with me her opinion (which he supports) that the student guide to first-year composition is useless, knowing that I played a large role in that year's edition.

In the competition between Don's anger and Lyn's concerns, Don's frustration takes precedence and Lyn's concerns about her paper and her questions often go unanswered, receive contradictory answers, or provide more opportunities for Don to explode again. When Lyn tells him that this paper was hardest to write because for the other papers, "all you had to do was an analyze what you read n n spit it back out," Don responds: "Yea:::h everyone says that. That's right n I get tired of reading things that people spit up on a paper." Both then laugh, but Don's anger, like Rick's sense of inadequacy, continues to erupt.

As Lyn searches in her folder for a different paper to discuss, Don yawns and sighs. When Lyn tells him "You ripped on my grammar /and things like that/"; Don is taken by surprise.

- 314 Don: Huh?  
 315 Lyn: My grammar /?/  
 316 Don: Did I hammer ya on that?  
 317 Lyn: Oh yeah (laughs).  
 318 Don: (2 sec) Well I'm hammering everybody on that. I'm probably gonna use  
 319 Elements of Style next.. semester in 111 just cause I  
 320 think it's  
 321 Lyn: I don't think I was ever really taught any of that (laughs) and if  
 322 I was it was something we breezed over. Cause I as I think that's  
 323 how I write  
 324 Don: You know I I haven't come up- uh across any paper that I'm just  
 325 bored to death with that I think are you know (2 sec) completely



new antagonist, one they can share: bad teachers who don't give students the grounding that Don feels they should and that he must now compensate for. They are both relieved of responsibility for the poor performance, and Don is positioned as a "good" teacher, one who can and unfortunately must rectify his students' flawed education. If Lyn pays for the sins of her classmates as Don reads her paper, they are both paying for the sins of the teachers who came before. Lyn will be unable to receive a thoughtful answer to her questions until Don has dealt with his feelings. But her responses ultimately seem to satisfy Don, who then goes on to discuss in more detail both the book and the movie the class is dealing with.

Don's frustration grows from caring about his students. He is angry that he can't spend the time he needs to on their papers; he is angry that he has to spend so much time on mechanical things that he knows most students don't care about when he wants to spend time on the kinds of reading and writing that excited him, that made him choose this field. He is like Rick in that "so much is going on" that he feels paralyzed, exhausted. The conference, with its surface of conversation and its underpinnings of asymmetrical power, allows him to voice his anger. From a critical perspective, what is "wrong" about this conference is not so much that Don expressed his feelings, for certainly Lyn will take away from the conference a better sense of Don as a human, as a person struggling within a web of forces and demands much like she is. But she did not have the power to withdraw from the conference; she did not have the status to insist that her topics be treated with the same respect that she treated Don's; her requests, both overt and implicit, that Don help her become a better writer, went largely ignored, and she did not have the power to contest or reshape the conference.

Because first-year writing classes are often among the smallest classes that students experience and because teachers often ask students to share personal narratives, students in those classes see the teacher as someone who knows them, someone they can approach about problems outside of class. Rick hints at having difficulty beyond Mary's class, as does Dave in his conference with Carl and Dana in her conference with Eric. And in each case, the response is the same.

239 Carl: (turn continues) Any  
240 questions or comments about that that you wanna make? That's  
241 your best paper.

- 242 Dave: yeah ([laughs] I was--  
 243 Carl: [That's your best paper.  
 244 Dave: I was pleased. I wasn't expecting a grade like an A or anything  
 245 (little laugh).  
 246 Carl: It's a good paper. Hope you do that well on your next one.  
 247 Dave: I do too.  
 248 Carl: You'll be in good, well you're already in good shape, I mean  
 249 /you're not in any danger in class or /?/  
 250 Dave: [I wish it was/ just like  
 251 that in my other classes. (Little laugh)  
 252 Carl: Well, good, Dave, you take this with you.]  
 253 Dave: [All right [Okay  
 254 Carl: And I have to do one more of these right away.  
 Conference Ends

What happens in our classes as we teach sometimes spills over from one class to another. When an office partner or a colleague asks us how classes are going, we may suggest a cup of coffee and try to get some good advice to improve a class going sour before we go into our next class angry and frustrated. Yet in conferences with students, when students bring up their concerns about other classes, slipping them in at the very end of the conference (how have we made room for them anywhere else?!) we may ignore those concerns, pretend the topic has not been offered, or give lip service to the problem. These problems may be spilling over into the student's performance in our classes, may be at the heart of difficulties we are otherwise at a loss to explain. If students feel insecure, afraid, unable to make the adjustment we assume they will make and let those feelings out in conferences, what does it say to them when we ignore their concerns? When we exercise our power to close down the conference, when we say goodbye, when we deal with their topic glibly? Imagine our anger and frustration if a department chair or a dean responded to fears, insecurity, concerns about teaching or tenure or the many other aspects of our lives by saying, "Thanks for sharing. It was good to talk with you. You have to go now. Goodbye." Rick insists that Mary at least *acknowledge* his affective topic, his feelings. Dave is hurried out the door. Felicia's introduction of her feelings prompted me to give her the "quick and dirty" advice she needed to make some improvement in her paper and then I dismissed her and moved on to the next student. We are not counselors, but we are speaking partners. And speaking partners do

not usually ignore topics offered for discussion or dismiss them as a matter of practice.

### Transforming the Personal

It is common for teachers to take a student's affective topic and transform it into a discourse topic. We resubmerge the feelings in something safe, something more clearly about writing or reading or skills and move away from feelings. In the long excerpt below from Eric and Dana's conference, Dana struggles to articulate her fears and concerns about her performance in another English class, and Eric struggles to respond. Her faith in her abilities has been shaken by this first year in college, and she needs some help in reseeing herself as a competent student. Like most students, Dana waits until near the end of the conference to discuss her feelings and ties it to a question about grades.

- 613 Dana: What kind of grade would you give this?  
 614 Eric: Oh that's a that's a good solid paper, now just let me think.  
 615 Dana: / ? /  
 616 Eric: That's probably on the line between a B and an A.  
 617 Dana: Okay that's good to hear. I'm glad because I was I was real  
 618 Eric: | Yeah  
 619 Dana: skeptical, s- skeptical at the beginning of the semester | when I  
 620 Eric: | Yeah  
 621 Dana: think because my first paper I I mean, I mean, I lo- I mean I was  
 622 obvious after you pointed out some things that you know that,  
 623 know I could see why why it you recieved the grade it did but, I  
 624 don't, not that English has been one of my stronger pofints but, it  
 625 Eric: | Yeah  
 626 Dana: I mean, you know I thought it--  
 627 Eric: | No it's a very readable pa- it's a very readable, um, uh,  
 628 it's a readable paper. If was no trouble reading that, it was not an  
 629 Dana: | Kay  
 630 Eric: ordeal to read that paper at all. I liked reading it. | Uh, and there's  
 631 Dana: | Mokay  
 632 Eric: good content there. You know, it could be um (2 sec) the content  
 633 Dana: | Right  
 634 Eric: doesn't push into the terrain of (little laugh) great insight or I  
 635 mean I'm not going to uh kid you but it's it's useful. | It's worth  
 636 Dana: | Mm-hmm  
 637 Eric: saying.

638 Dana: Okay. ]  
 639 Eric: [Could be pushed a little more.

Eric addresses Dana’s fear that the earlier, less successful work she had done in his class may have been more indicative of her abilities than this recent one. This piece is a strong one, and his tone is reassuring as he tells her how he felt as he read. Despite the increasing qualification of his praise as he speaks (his assessment goes from a solid B/A paper to “very readable” to “useful”), it is what Dana needs to hear. Eric establishes himself as both appreciative of Dana’s abilities and honest in his response (“I’m not going to kid you”). Feeling a bit more secure, Dana continues.

640 Dana: Alright. I’m taking um 142 ( a literature class) this semes[er, / ? /--  
 641 Eric: [Uhkay, this  
 642 semester ]  
 643 Dana: [Yes  
 644 Eric: [Yeah  
 645 Dana: an um, I don’t know, I’m not doing as well in there as I’d like,  
 646 I’m very borderline B C right now [and um, I don’t know, it’s  
 647 Eric: [Okay  
 648 Dana: it’s just it’s kinda hard for me to like pinpoint my problem and,  
 649 I I just I just like almost wanna ask /the guy/ /?!/ can’t can’t  
 650 even think of his name now he um, his name is on the cover  
 651 of one of the books, the the book we use. (2 sec) The hardback  
 652 book. ]  
 653 Eric: [A man?  
 654 Dana: Yeah.  
 655 Eric: Well, it’s let’s see, Robert Dean? Ian Morley?  
 656 Dana: Ian Morley. ]  
 657 Eric: [Awright. ]  
 658 Dana: [That’s it. Couldn’t remember his  
 659 name.  
 660 Eric: [Okay.  
 661 Dana: An um, um, I I’m really enjoying the class I [like the piece] that  
 662 Eric: [Yes [Yes  
 663 Dana: we’re read[ing, but at the sa- but it’s just like, like the last um, the  
 664 Eric: [Yeah  
 665 Dana: last test we had was a take home exam [and um, I wrote uh a  
 666 Eric: [Yeah  
 667 Dana: short essay on um, “The Yellow Wallpaper?” ]  
 668 Eric: [Yeah  
 669 Dana: [Which is a

- 670 story I really like I read it in high school, I love that story, and I  
 671 Eric: } Yeah  
 672 Dana: thought it was--  
 673 Eric: } And we read it.  
 674 Dana: Yeah, that's right.  
 675 Eric: } Yeah  
 676 Dana: an um I I thought it was a fairly good paper, and then or or, a  
 677 a fairly good essay and then, I'm I have a real hard time with  
 678 Eric: } Yeah  
 679 Dana: poems and uh, he gave me a B for my poem essay and a C for  
 680 my Yellow Wallpaper well I thought it would be just the  
 681 opposite, it's just like, I don't know, I have a real hard time  
 682 Eric: } Yeah? } /Kay/  
 683 Dana: see like what it is I'm you know that I'm missing and I mean  
 684 it seems to be ki--  
 685 Eric: } Have ya talked with, didja talk with Ian Morley?  
 686 Dana: No, I haven't talked with him.  
 687 Eric: } He is a VERY nice guy. He is (little laugh) one of,  
 688 the most generous people in the entire uh de- uh department,  
 689 as well as one of the most intelligent, and it would be, it would  
 690 be worthwhile for you to go } talk with the guy/ it would be  
 691 Dana: } I think I think I should too  
 692 Eric: instructive. He's a fine professor.  
 693 Dana: I think I should. I have a tendency to be kind of, I don't, it's not  
 694 a very personal class, it's like five times as big as our class }  
 695 Eric: } Yeah  
 696 Dana: And so I'm I don't think he knows my name }  
 697 Eric: } Yeah  
 698 Dana: An }  
 699 Eric: } No, I've got one of those, too. But um, he's just a very  
 700 generous man, and smart. I would trust the grade. }  
 701 Dana: } Mm-hmm } Yeah.  
 702 Eric: I I would trust that they're sensible.]

Dana's confusion and concerns over grading are dismissed. How can she argue with the most generous and intelligent man in the department? Instead of explaining how grades might be arrived at, instead of clearing up a mystery that is affecting Dana's sense of self as a writer and a student, Eric steps away from his colleague's class, grading, and student, although they are all connected at this moment in the conference. Dana agrees that is it a good thing to talk with your professor—after all, she is talking with one now. But she is afraid, she has no connection, the professor in question doesn't even know her



- 722 also, are able somehow to synthesize a couple of those or use one  
 723 uh play off one point of view against another. And all of that  
 724 comes with time and part of the purpose of the class is I guess is  
 725 to sort of open up
- 726 Dana: Mm-hmm
- 727 Eric: other angles from which something can be, can be seen. So I  
 728 don't think it's a matter of insight or intuition, so much as
- 729 Dana: Mm-hmm
- 730 Eric: simply sort of ex experience with different sorts of contexts in  
 731 which a text can be taken
- 732 Dana: Mm-hmm
- 733 Eric: Up. Well--
- 734 Dana: For example,  
 735 have you read "Big Two-Hearted River."

Dana is not satisfied with Eric's response. In fact, she treats it much like an interruption in her story of coming to feel inadequate to the requirements of her literature class. She takes back the floor forcefully, with none of the hesitation she has shown earlier in this conference, interrupting Eric with "For example" as if she had never stopped speaking. She wants him to fully understand her experience of this class, the depth of her desire to "know" these books as her teachers do, to regain the sense of accomplishment and prestige that she felt back in high school. She does not want a distanced, conceptual explanation of learning; she wants a personal response to a personal problem.

- 736 Eric: No, I've never read that.
- 737 Dana: Mm-hmm
- 738 Eric: Sorry.
- 739 Dana: Ahright, tryin to think of another story. It was a fairly long um  
 740 story, and what I got out of it was that it was a man who went on  
 741 a fishing trip. I mean that that's what I got out of it (laughing).
- 742 Eric: Mm-hmm
- 743 Dana: An then we discussed it in class yesterday and he brought up  
 744 all these points and um, and it wasn't just him bringing up the  
 745 points there were other students in the class who who you know
- 746 Eric: Yeah
- 747 Dana: found something out, you know, that it was, you know, he it  
 748 going fishing, he was getting away from past worries, an an um,  
 749 I don't know, I'm sitting there like dumbfounded, like how did  
 750 you know that, you know what I'm saying? An um, I mean it
- 751 Eric: Mm-hmm

- 752 Dana: it was really, I mean after that the story seemed much more in  
 753 depth than I thought it ~~was~~ and I could s- it was an interesting  
 754 Eric: [Mm-hmm, mm-hmm  
 755 Dana: story and I'd like to read it again. You know whereas the first  
 756 Eric: [Mm-hmm  
 757 Dana: time I read it I thought that it was a long story about a fishing trip.  
 758 And so--  
 759 Eric: Well, I mean one (laughs), one sort one sort of way to  
 760 go, is to, is to, pick out any two items in a text, and ask what they  
 761 have to do ~~with~~ each other. No, um, uh (laughs) whatever the  
 762 Dana: [Mm-hmm  
 763 Eric: answer it's gonna be interesting. I mean if you if you can show  
 764 that they're redundant, that if the sense is the second one is the  
 765 first one over again in some way, you will be moving towards  
 766 the author's meaning, the author's intention, because we  
 767 Dana: [Mm-hmm  
 768 Eric: communicate meaning by redundancy, that is by saying the same  
 769 things in different ways.  
 770 Dana: Mokay. ]  
 771 Eric: [Okay. If you CAN'T explain what the two have, what  
 772 the two have to do with each other, then I mean there are two  
 773 possibilities. One is you yet haven't spotted the nature of the  
 774 redundancy, or secondly there really is a break in the text. And  
 775 there's a sense in which these two things don't have anything to  
 776 do with each other, and so the question then arises how to  
 777 explain that. That is, how to explain the break in the  
 778 Dana: [Mm-hmm  
 779 Eric: text. ]  
 780 Dana: [Mm-hmm  
 781 Eric: Okay. / ? / So I mean one way to go, well you say it's a long  
 782 story about fishing. (Laughing) A long story about fishing.  
 783 Well, you know, I what I say is, having any two details at any  
 784 distance from each other in the text, you can sort of interrogate  
 785 with respect to what they have to do with each other. And what  
 786 Dana: [Mm-hmm  
 787 Eric: a- whatever answer you come up with (2 sec) either you're able  
 788 to say what they have to do with each other or you can't say,  
 789 you're going to be off and running on a kind of  
 790 investigation. ]  
 791 Dana: [Mm-hmm. Mokay. Alright.  
 792 Eric: Yeah, so when you talk about in depth, of something in depth,  
 793 basically what you're talking about I mean people are either  
 794 able to show an author's meaning as redundantly substantiated

- 795 in the text on the one hand, or else, are going to be dealing with  
 796 Dana: Mm-hmm  
 797 Eric: sort of ruptures in the text, and attempting to account for  
 798 that / ? / various kinds of explanation }  
 799 Dana: [Mm-hmm  
 800 Eric: / ? / one's interesting.  
 801 Dana: That's, those are good, um points. I mean I think I can use that  
 802 like in the rest of stories we read, I mean I can try to, I don't  
 803 know, look for, cause I mean there were things in the story that I  
 804 thought of um, since you haven't read the story you know I  
 805 don't wanna go into it, but I mean, there were things I kinda  
 806 questioned when I was kinda like, what is the author tryin to  
 807 say, that in fact were the things that people brought up, but it  
 808 was just like I didn't see what those things were supposed to say,  
 809 I just questioned them, whereas others in the class could be like,  
 810 hey, wuh well I think this means this. You know what I'm--  
 811 Eric: [Well  
 812 uh right, I I mean uh the proof for that, that this means this, has  
 813 always got to be, I mean, the showing of some sort of  
 814 Dana: [Right  
 815 Eric: redundancy, how B is A over again in some convincing  
 816 way.]  
 817 Dana: [Mm-hmm. Okay. Awright.  
 818 Eric: Other than that I mean there would be much, it would be, uh,  
 819 it's a very arbitrary matter, I mean this represents the /pea/ that  
 820 symbolizes order, well how do you know?  
 821 Dana: [Mm-hmm Right.  
 822 Eric: I mean it's like, what the color green a symbol for, well  
 823 anything you like, jealousy, hope and so on. I mean the the the  
 824 uh the test is, redundancy within the text.  
 825 Dana: Uh-huh  
 826 Eric: But then there's also the fact of the matter that texts are not  
 827 perfectly redundant, there are breaks that sort of open the text to  
 828 the rest of the world.  
 829 Dana: Ri:ght.  
 830 Eric: You know. Okay Dana, I'll see you then tomorrow.]  
 831 Dana: [Awright. [Okay  
 832 Thank you for your time.  
 833 Eric: Okay. See you later.  
 Conference Ends.

Eric offers Dana a strategy for “being insightful,” but it’s not clear that Dana understands how meaning is “redundantly substantiated

within a text.” She recognizes what he is trying to do, however, and thanks him for the advice. But her thanks and her small attempt to explain how she might use this strategy give way again to the narrative that she has been trying to tell Eric. This is the ending that gives her a bit of hope, perhaps prompted in part by Eric’s apparent confidence in her ability not just to read and interpret literature but to understand his discussion of redundancy and ruptures in the text. By the end of her story, she is seeing and questioning aspects of the written text, even if she doesn’t know how to create meaning like others in her class. She has been dumbfounded, shown up by her classmates who seem to have some special gift or knowledge, but she senses that if she can understand Eric’s advice, she might be one of the insightful ones in her course, might regain that sense of personal skill and ability that she has lost.

Dana seems, at the end, stunned into minimal responses by the strategy thrown at her; she has told her story and received an academic response. But at least it took time, the professor took time; for students, this simple aspect of a conference—that a teacher takes the time to talk with them—is almost enough to mitigate any disappointments or failures that might have occurred in that conference. Eric has addressed her fears only obliquely, has responded to her story with a lecture, has avoided the personal and emotional. He has failed to personally respond to Dana’s emotions, transforming them instead into a matter of learning a skill. He has ignored any discussion of the economy of the classroom, where participation and knowledge of a particular kind can buy you a spot up front after class, talking in more detail with the professor who will then know your name and mark you as “insightful.” And it is likely that Dana will fail in her attempt to use the strategy Eric offered in place of exploring her concerns; she can try to use it, she says with uncertainty, but she still doesn’t know exactly what to look for. Her uncertainty about her ability to use Eric’s advice leads her back to the fear, uncertainty, and frustration she felt in the classroom. What college teachers want and whether she can meet those expectations has been the emotional topic that has bracketed this entire conference but has not been the clear topic of discussion at any point throughout. Despite Eric’s understanding that meaning is made from redundancy, he has not apparently noticed the repetition of Dana’s topics: fear of failure, loss of self-confidence, frustration in learning. This final part of the conference, so important to Dana’s sense of herself as a student, has been wasted.

## Responding to Feelings

Learning is not always a rational, logical process. It is experiential, emotional, and messy. I didn't wake up one morning and say, "I think I'll become a feminist now. And I think I'll combine that with critical sociolinguistics." A series of experiences and emotional responses to those experiences shaped my perceptions, my desires, my curiosity, my needs. I found feminism and a critical approach to language and power attractive (not necessarily right or logical). I found reading books and talking about them to be fun, exciting, challenging and satisfying in ways that mathematics wasn't. I loved the way words could be shaped, the way I could write what I couldn't say, the time and space that writing offered me, and the acceptance and praise that came with success in that area. Our students are involved in that same search, that same process of shaping and being shaped, of choosing and being drawn toward ways of knowing, learning, making sense of their worlds.

I'd like to return to this chapter's epigraph by Pamela Fishman. As we decide what will be talked about in these conferences—and it appears that it is, overwhelmingly, teachers who make that decision—we are choosing to orient ourselves to ideas, to skills, to texts but not to emotions, to humans. To be honest with you, I have not been in enough other teachers' classrooms to say whether this is a disjunctive behavior or a continuation of the classroom. I know that many of my colleagues search for topics and activities that students "like," issues that really "get them going," that get them "excited," that raise the emotional pitch of the classroom and involve students in discussion that counts to them. They want to connect their assignments to students' lives in important ways. Yet, aside from early semester "get to know you" conferences, the rest of the conferences are focused on texts, on improving skills with the written word, on raising poor grades by revising earlier texts. We set aside the joy of writing, the urgency of communicating with others, the anger or sorrow or fear or connection that generates writing in favor of a dispassionate examination of errors, lapses in logical thinking, and problems with textual focus. For as much as we may "feel" that conferences are about emotion as well as fact and convention, institutionally we are judged not on how good our students feel about writing but on how well they have mastered the conventions of writing for an academic audience, sometimes on discrete skills that can be tested quantitatively.

Many teachers schedule an initial conference during which they ask a number of questions about the student's experiences, goals, concerns, and background. I have done the same, and afterward, like many of my colleagues, have felt that since I now "know" the student and she has had a chance to talk about her feelings and get them all out, I can go on to focus intensely on writing for the rest of the semester. It's as if I was talking to myself, head buried in my student's text; it's so odd now to realize that I believed she would have no more new feelings or no resurgence of old ones over the semester, or even that I had "dealt" with all her concerns in a first conference.

I believe many students have difficulty finding ways to disrupt the teacher's narrative, the teacher's control of topics in order to introduce their own affective topics because they do not know either how to connect them to the teacher's topics or they cannot transform the discourse topic into an affective one in the same way teachers transform their students' topics. Teachers are usually polished speakers in many registers, but many students, while polished speakers with peers, have had little experience speaking in extended turns in a classroom or in significantly reshaping academic discourse. Further, when speakers of different status are involved in talk, the speaker of higher status and power usually has control over topic acknowledgment and development; he or she can choose to ignore or take up the partner's speech while the speaker of lesser power usually must acknowledge or take up the topics offered by the more powerful speaker. (Incidences where this does not occur provide the basis for humor or tragedy, particularly in British comedy or drama, where class and status differences are so readily acknowledged.)

### Making Space

So what can students ask about that will help them get the floor with an affective topic? Grades. It is not only an almost set-in-stone requirement that teachers respond to questions about grading, but it is also a permissible moment for students to express emotion about the grade. That emotional expression may also open the floor for an explanation, which may in turn open up the space needed for a narrative and the offering of other affective topics. So we hear Dana explaining that she was worried about the grade and pleased with what she received, *because*— and here she can tell Eric the story of

how she used to perform and how concerned she is now because of her other class, and so on. Grading is both specific—students can ask particularized questions—and subjective, open to debate. Furthermore, for most first-year students, grades are correlated with feelings: if they really liked the topic or felt good while writing the piece, then they believe it should receive a good grade. The text is not as important as the feelings. So a discussion of grades opens the floor for students to begin talking about a host of other concerns and feelings.

In the conferences I've observed, listened to tapes of, and done myself, the pattern is for the teacher not to bring up the topic of grades until the end of the conference or not to bring it up at all. If the teacher does not bring up grades and instead asks simply if there are any more questions, students are likely at that point to ask about grades. They may ask what grade they received, they may ask whether following the teacher's advice will improve the grade, or they may say that they aren't happy with the grade or some other variation. In any case, they have set up the structure needed to include a justification for the question or comment, and have gained the floor. But it is often too late. Most conferences cannot go on indefinitely, and once the teacher has asked whether the student has any questions, has completed her agenda, other topics raised may be given short shrift as the teacher worries about fitting in the next student and the one after that. Student topics appear to be less important, peripheral to whatever goal the teacher has wanted to achieve. And so those students who do not insist on their topics being taken seriously by reintroducing them after they have been dismissed find themselves, like Dave and Mike, being allowed a scant few turns of speech before being turned out the door. Rick, Dana, and John all repeatedly offer their topics until they are dealt with in more depth, and they do so through a larger portion of the conference. But they must work hard at disrupting the teacher's march onward through the preset agenda, and the response is slender.

One way to encourage students to speak more freely about their feelings is to consider those affective topics as valid and to address them squarely. There are two problems with this: sometimes we don't recognize a topic as affective, for it is bundled up in the clothing of discourse topics and we are focused on talking about writing and not feelings about writing. A second difficulty is that conferences are usually limited to a short period of time. If we have

recognized a topic as affective, then often we find ourselves deciding whether the time we have left will allow us to fit in discussion of both the student topic (and the topics it may lead to) and the topics we had preset in our heads as we began the conference. But often, if we do not address those emotions, all the advice we offer may not be heard or will be heard through the frame of those unaddressed concerns. It is a question of time, but it may be a more valuable use of time for both teacher and student to address their concerns in more than one conference.

Although I have made frequent use of student and teacher agendas created shortly in advance of conferences, it's also been my experience that students don't write down that they are angry or frustrated or scared and want to talk about that. They will write down that they want to talk about getting better grades or want to discuss the grade on paper number two or to get some strategies for revising that will help ALL their work. That usually signals me that my agenda should be short and flexible. Providing enough time when it is needed has meant for me that later conferences are more focused, more comfortable, and—judging from student response and textual changes—more successful.

Obviously, a simple strategy is to make space for affective topics earlier in the conference and more clearly before we have firmly set the conference shape in our heads. If students need to have a specific question to help them take the floor, we might ask them about their grading concerns earlier in the conference, or open the conference up to talk about their other classes. But questions and answers are usually syntagmatic; that is, a question compels an answer, especially when there is a difference in power and status between asker and answerer. So it is difficult for students to not answer the questions asked of them. Bill, for example, asks Cari early on in the conference what she “likes best” about her paper. But he doesn't follow up on it, moving instead to another question, which she must then answer instead of developing her first response.

When students submit personal papers, teachers often ask them about some of the incidents they describe. Students write sometimes to meet two needs, producing something personally important to them and then realizing that they must submit it to the scrutiny and critique of a teacher, much like the conference I described with my poetry professor. But it's important not to abuse the power we have to force students to respond when they do not wish to, instead asking

students questions that might allow them to move to whatever ground they are more comfortable on: "What would you change about this if you revised it? Why?" "Which sections worked particularly well for you?" And certainly we can offer our emotional responses to the writing; we are not dispassionate readers who find a piece "useful" to read. Often, doing so encourages students to share their own emotional responses to their writing, and they begin to speak of other concerns or feelings that have helped or hindered them in their course work—the kinds of feelings and history that also keep conferences from working successfully.

It is important also to remember that gender plays a role in the emotional aspects of conferencing. In the study conferences, female students brought up many more affective topics than male students, though they were roughly equal in offering discourse topics. In their written accounts of conferencing, female students emphasize the importance of acknowledging feelings in a conference. How well their feelings are attended to has an important effect on the outcome of a conference: "Some profs will act like your (sic) bothering them. They act very anxious, which makes you feel yucky so you leave just as lost as you were before." It doesn't matter if what the teacher said might have been helpful; because the student feels uncomfortable, no learning takes place.

Male students, of course, also mention feelings. It was a male student who commented on how important it was to him that his teacher asked him about his hometown and his sports involvement. Nonetheless, the feelings males indicate are often quite different from what female students reveal. Male students are angry when the conferences do not live up to their expectations; female students are discouraged and even more uncertain about their abilities. Male students are likely to see unsuccessful conferences as a violation of their right to know whatever it is the teacher knows that will be helpful to them; female students are more likely to see unsuccessful conferences as a lost opportunity to establish a better relationship.

These differences are consistent with important findings by researchers in women's cognitive development, such as Mary Belenkey, et al. (1986), Carol Gilligan (1982), and Nancy Chodorow (1978). In response to ethical dilemmas, males, these researchers argue, focus on the abstract concept of justice, applied equally to each individual. Women focus on the relationship of individuals to a larger system and to each other. They conclude that males are more

concerned with autonomy, females with community. These differing orientations affect more than ethical decision-making. Black, et al. (1994) found that when young writers submitted portfolios of work to anonymous readers, males positioned the readers as judges of individual work and saw the portfolio as a chance to “showcase” or present skills. Female writers, however, saw the portfolio as an extension of the self and positioned evaluators as trusted readers who had the power to hurt the writer through insensitivity to feelings. Understanding these possible gender differences may help teachers deal with the affective dimensions of conferencing, may help them understand student reactions and needs, even help understand their own needs and reactions. The emotional responses all participants experience may well be connected to gender.

I have been writing here about talking with students one-to-one about feelings. But it may not be just one student who is feeling frustrated or scared or even excited about writing or the course or their other coursework. A great deal can be addressed in class itself. I used to feel that I had to provide all the answers for all the problems; now I feel that I have to create an atmosphere where problems can be articulated and as a group we can offer solutions or changes. In first-year classes where many students are shocked by their poor performance by mid-semester, I have set aside class time for students to work in groups of their choice to voice their concerns and problems then share those as they feel comfortable. Students work in groups or as a whole class to offer solutions. In some cases, we have changed the structure of my course to provide more feedback or to examine (in the absence of a college-wide writing across the curriculum program) writing from various fields so that students could understand the difficulties they were experiencing in adapting to different contexts and demands. We spent more time looking at sample papers and talking about how they would be graded; I did a “spoken protocol” to show how I responded as I read and how I re-read and graded. I have opened departmental grading sessions (at least the training/calibration sessions preceding them) to students who return to share what they learned with classmates. And students who have personal problems—roommates, family, boyfriend/girlfriend, fraternity/sorority obligations or decisions—have often found advice from classmates or been urged to speak with particular people or support services. Dialogue journals read and responded to by classmates have provided a place to vent (for me as well!) and get responses ranging

from sympathy to clear-headed advice. In upper level classes, we deal with concerns about life after college, with job searches and graduate school, and tie writing and talk to those concerns. I am sometimes an observer, sometimes an active participant in these discussions. But it has always been apparent to me that in a goal-based class such as mine, spending class time in this way is crucial if we are to reach our goals; it is time spent identifying road blocks and charting new directions. We have a shared knowledge base and a place to begin that opens up conferences to talk about feelings, that ties conferences to classes in ways that are important and personal, not simply institutional. And it means that in conferences later, when a student says “you know,” I really do.