

3 Conference Activities

Writing conferences have goals but not predetermined directions. Like any other conversation, conference talk can follow one path for a time and then curve down another as we interact with writers. What happens during that talk? We listen, we ask questions, we observe, we demonstrate strategies, and we respond with necessary information or answers to questions. All of this, of course, goes on in the classroom, but in the conference the one-to-one situation permits a very different kind of interaction because the teacher does not (and should not) totally control the agenda. With student interaction comes the kind of unpredictability that makes lesson plans or syllabi inappropriate—and useless.

Student input in topics for discussion is also, according to Sarah W. Freedman and Anne Marie Katz, close observers of conference talk, “what makes conferences an optimal setting for learning to write.”¹ As they explain, the structure of conference conversation is a cross between classroom discourse, with its preset rules for who speaks when and for how long, and natural conversation, in which speakers agree on the spot as to who speaks when. The conference, as Freedman and Melanie Sperling elaborate, is also a dialogue in which each person exercises some topical control over the flow of discourse, raising issues, shifting topics, and encouraging or discouraging elaboration.² In this dialogue teacher talk includes several general activities: listening, questioning, observing, showing, and telling. Because these activities are essential to the conference in different ways, let us consider each more closely.

Conversational Activities

Listening

Standing in front of their classes, teachers necessarily exert some measure of control. Even when they encourage the most freewheeling discussion, it is not conducted in a setting of total anarchy, because of the general understanding that, finally, the teacher is in charge. We

all know the rules, even if some students are reluctant to abide by them. And for teachers, peer tutors, and students, the mutual acceptance of those rules presents problems in the conference. After years of playing by classroom conventions, students know quite well who's in charge. How, then, can we encourage them to become active participants in the conference conversation? Confronted with the student who maintains the "OK, you're the teacher, so you're in control" attitude, we have to demonstrate that the conference is indeed a dialogue. A highly effective way to do this is to listen, thereby showing students that they can talk while we listen, that we'll listen closely to what they say, and that they can set the agenda for what we listen to.

Though listening is a necessary activity in a conference, it is also difficult. As Donald Graves reminds us, listening "is more a deliberate act than a natural one."³ We have to put aside our personal preferences and listen to topics we aren't interested in or even that we disagree with. We also have to suppress a sense of uneasiness that too much time is passing while students go on at greater length than is needed to make a point, fall silent while mulling over what has just been said, or decide what response to make. And because those of us who choose the conference format usually also enjoy conversation, we have to stifle the urge to contribute frequently and to leap in the moment silence takes over. If we've asked a question, we must wait and listen rather than rephrasing the question or offering clues to fill the silence. Graves's recommendation (99) to wait at least fifteen seconds after asking a question may seem trivially easy until we realize how long fifteen seconds actually is. In the normal give-and-take of an ongoing conversation, a fifteen-second pause leaves most of us feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed for whoever was supposed to respond and didn't. But allowing for such pauses in a conference is crucial. Students need time to think, to weigh options, and, say Freedman and Katz, "to internalize the substance and procedures necessary for writing."⁴

In a conference we listen partly to hear answers to questions we have raised, and partly to hear writers talking about their writing and raising questions of their own. They may also mention problems they are having, as well as evaluations of a piece of writing at whatever stage it has progressed to. And they will talk about—or try out—their topics, a useful precursor to writing and a beneficial means of practicing academic discourse. As Thom Hawkins explains, such talk offers the student "the opportunity to use oral language in . . . intellectual discourse." Using "such discourse helps teach students the skills and judgment necessary to revise."⁵ From Hawkins's experience, peer

tutors are particularly successful at helping their students practice using language because of the “intensely personal characteristics” of the social contract between tutor and student. Caring about the student’s welfare, being a receptive audience, establishing the sense of mutual effort between friends, creating a feeling of closeness, providing the generous amounts of time needed to practice verbalizing—all foster the kind of setting in which, as Hawkins points out, language learners can take risks and gain the kind of language experience they need.

To develop the kind of listening needed, we have to become adept at learning how to involve the student, how to create a personal, nonthreatening, informal atmosphere for conversation that permits the student to participate actively. Establishing a nonjudgmental setting where there is no penalty for trying out ideas is as important as showing a genuine interest in what is being said. Being a good listener is, obviously, an art to be rigorously cultivated, so much so that it is surprising that the field of composition offers so little theory or research to guide us. However, we can dip into the literature available for therapists, counselors, social workers, and others who work primarily in one-to-one situations with clients. Borrowing from such sources, David Taylor recommends specific skills useful for establishing ourselves as good listeners in students’ minds:⁶

1. *Paraphrasing*: restating the student’s message in similar but fewer words. Hearing one’s point restated by the other person is a powerful assurance that the message has been received.
2. *Perception Checking*: guessing the student’s basic message and asking for affirmation of that guess. As illustrated in the conference excerpt below, this is helpful in getting a student to bring vague thoughts into sharper focus:

Teacher: You have lots to say about hospitals. Let’s try to bring it together. What would you say is the thesis of your essay?

Student: About how most people are afraid of hospitals because they’re afraid of what doctors might do to hurt them.

Teacher: So, the thesis is “Fear of hospitals is caused by fear of pain.”

Student: That’s the big part. But also there’s just not knowing what will happen to them.

Teacher: O.K. Is that a part of the thesis? A second reason for the fear of hospitals—anxiety or fear of the unknown. Is that part of it too?

Student: Sure, you're in danger, at least so far as your health, and you're afraid of not getting well. It's hard when you don't know, waiting there. (14)

3. *Leading:* inviting verbal expression from the student along lines we prefer. *Indirect leading* gets students started and keeps responsibility on them for keeping the conference going. Thus, an indirect lead might be "Tell me more about . . ." A *direct lead*, on the other hand, asks students for precise information and might start off with "Give me a specific example of . . ."
4. *Interpreting:* By adding our understanding to what a student has already said, we can help the student see thoughts more clearly. When interpreting, we might start off with "so what you're saying here, then, is that . . ." (Donald Graves reminds us also that interpreting is needed because students sometimes say so much they lose track of where they are. Giving them back a summary or a main idea helps them to focus.)

This kind of listening involves hearing both what students say and also what they don't say. As Taylor reminds us, so strong is the tendency to impose our own structure or meaning on what someone else says that we need to make a conscious effort to be open to the reality of what that person is saying. Sometimes it is our own preferences that cause us to hear what we want to hear, and sometimes our cultural or societal biases. Edward Hall, the cultural anthropologist, records such a problem that occurred when a Japanese psychiatrist, who had been observing his American colleagues, concluded that the Americans were unresponsive to their patients' needs. The Japanese psychiatrist, more attuned to certain elements because of his group-oriented society, heard patients expressing a need to rely or depend on others. The American psychiatrists, on the other hand, didn't hear their patients express such needs because they were looking for individual problems such as depression.⁷

In a similar fashion, we are likely to overlook or ignore what we are not disposed to hear from our students. Freedman records such a problem in a writing conference in which the teacher and student, reviewing the student's responses to a questionnaire, are talking about the student's past writing courses. The teacher, assuming that the student has a good sense of how to write a paper, does not really hear the student's response. In fact, instead of probing to find out what the student means by being "weak" in English, the teacher forges ahead, following her own agenda:

Teacher: But you /um/ feel that you learned some specific things. In other words, if you looked at your writing, you would

have a sense of what kinds of things you need to do to produce a /hmm/ fairly good expository essay.

Student: A little bit. But I'm really, I'm pretty weak in English.

Teacher: Okay, oh what is, oh BCA, broadcasting, yeah, that's your major. How about in the creative writing class. Did you pick up any good techniques of writing in there?⁸

Yet another instance is recorded by Meg Hess Seckendorf, from a writing lab tutorial. Here, as Seckendorf explains, the student has been saying repeatedly that she cannot move beyond a paragraph until she thinks it's perfect. Despite the student's reiteration of this major problem, the following exchange takes place:

Teacher: And, by the way, this is, what you're doing here, I've noticed, on your rough draft, you've got a lot of scratching out and things written in the margin. That's great.

Student: Um, this was, when you see these crossouts, it was sort of, it was me saying to myself, "Just write and get down the ideas." But then I would go back. . . .⁹

The teacher here, who obviously values heavy revision, is attempting to reward the student, who, on the contrary, sees such revision as part of her problem.

As these excerpts indicate, we need not fear that students will refrain from telling us what their concerns are. Freedman's conclusion from her study of student-teacher conferences is that in a given conference, students usually have one or two top-level concerns about their writing which they will bring up repeatedly. Citing the results of similar studies of the discourse between psychiatrists and their patients, Freedman notes that these studies also reveal that "patients repeat over and over again their main concerns when talking to their psychiatrists."¹⁰

When we are listening closely to our students, what are we likely to hear? Students may explain the major problem(s) they are having with a paper, ask questions about the assignment, point out places where the paper is weakest, express a desire for some evaluative comments from the instructor, request help in figuring out what to do next, or ask for information (e.g., What goes in an introductory paragraph? How should a persuasive paper end? How is dialogue written on the page? When should the thesis statement be introduced?). It is fairly easy to hear what students are saying when they voice these kinds of concerns, but other matters aren't articulated so clearly. When these other concerns fill the student's mind, we have to listen more closely to hear what is being said "behind" the words. Listed

below are but a few of the myriad possibilities that aren't likely to be said directly, but that need to be heard:

1. *Fear of inadequacy*: Some students, anxious about having to share writing which they are sure is inferior either to the instructor's own writing or to the instructor's taste in writing, will begin with apologies and excuses. This paper isn't their best effort because of lack of time, lack of understanding of the assignment, lack of enough previous experience with writing, or lack of something else which kept them from producing a better product. What such students are really saying is that they are sure the instructor will find the paper weak. English teachers, after all, read Shakespeare and Melville, and most students—except for budding writers—recognize their inability to compete with “the greats.” These anxious students need reassurance that though we must all be able to write well everyone is not being measured by such elevated standards. A peer tutor is not as likely to hear the excuses of the insecure, because the tutor is not always perceived to be “one of them” (i.e., English teachers). But some students, overwhelmed by their own weaknesses, see even peer tutors as yet another audience ready to laugh at their poor papers.
2. *Inability to articulate the problem*: When Linda Flower and John Hayes explored the concept of writing as problem solving, they categorized writing as an ill-defined problem. Indeed, for some students, awash in confusion as to what writing is all about, writing is not merely an ill-defined problem, it is a totally mysterious process they are unable to fathom. Not having adequate words yet to talk about writing, they can't articulate very precisely what it is that they need or want help with. The teacher's first job in these cases is to help them find the words to give shape to their problems. “This paper isn't going right,” “Something's missing,” or “I don't know. It's just a mess” are typical opening statements of such students. They may need some conversation time to locate what that “something” is, or they might be asked if they can locate parts of the paper they dislike. They might also be helped along by means of some suggestions or even a list of possible alternatives for what that “something” might be, though there's an obvious danger here that students will grab at a suggestion, any suggestion, to end their free-floating anxiety.

3. *Mistaken notions of what teachers want:* Some students express concern about matters they think teachers care about; hence, they will ask how to “improve” (i.e., inflate) the vocabulary, lengthen the paper, correct the spelling, or whatever else it is that they think English teachers value. Such students may, if pressed, voice other—more serious—concerns about their writing, but uppermost on their lists, initially, are misconceived notions of “what the teacher wants.”
4. *Lack of interest in writing:* Because of a history of not doing well in writing, because of writer’s block, or because of any of the other reasons that cause students to dislike writing, a student might appear for a conference wanting nothing more than the easiest road to finishing the assignment. “What does this paper need?” such students will ask, when they mean, “What is the minimal thing I have to do to get this paper accepted?”
5. *Lack of familiarity with normal writing processes:* Some students, unaware of the messiness of real writing, mistake their groping for ideas in first drafts as an inability to write, or mistake the need to toss out or alter material during revision as being unable to get it “right” the first time. They will tell their listeners that they don’t know how to write or that they can’t organize their thoughts on paper when, in reality, they are merely going through the normal act of writing. In short, they will ask for help they really don’t need because what they do need is some acquaintance with what writing entails.

Such lists can easily be extended, but drawing up an all-inclusive list is not necessary as long as we remember to listen closely. Diagnosis is a process that depends heavily on skilled listening and questioning.

Questioning

The clarifying questions just mentioned, to aid our listening abilities, are one type of query to use in conferences. Another set of questions, offered by Donald Murray, can reorient students to the “natural hierarchy of editorial concerns.”¹¹ Such questions can range from “What’s the single most important thing you have to say?” to “What questions is the reader going to ask you, and when?” to “Where do you hear the voice coming through strongest?” Such questions are effective because they direct the student’s attention in early drafts away from the minor distractions of sentence-level editing to the major concerns of a writer. They are also effective because they are phrased in a way that invites

broadly inclusive responses. Such questions, classified as “open,” are the ones most likely to initiate real inquiry.

In contrast to “open” questions, Thomas J. Reigstad and David A. McAndrew classify other, less effective questions as follows:

1. *Rhetorical*: those which call for no real response from the student, for example: Shouldn't your introduction do more to interest the reader?
2. *Closed*: those which invite a yes or no or some short response from the student, for example: Is this example drawn from your own experience or from something you read?
3. *Probe and Prompt*: those which ask the student for more detail but which direct the respondent to the concerns of the person asking the question, for example: What did the house you are describing look like? How big is it? Was it made of wood, brick, or stone? Should those descriptive words be in that sentence?
4. *Leading*: those that answer themselves or lead the student to parrot information already known to the teacher, for example: What is a topic sentence? Why does your paragraph need one?¹²

It is easy to see how such questions can quash students' attempts at real conversation and make them feel that they are being tested rather than helped.

By contrast, open questions, which have the virtue of inviting fuller, more useful responses, are also the ones to use when we engage in real inquiry with students, searching for answers not yet apparent. When a student is mulling over a topic, considering ways to narrow it, seeking details to develop ideas, or weighing alternatives, we must ask the kinds of questions that indicate that there is an active search going on. If not, students assume that we are merely asking leading questions, questions we know the answers to. (This distinction is also phrased in terms of “real” questions, those we don't know the answers to, versus “exam” questions, those we are asking only to test students' knowledge.) When a student in a writing conference mistakenly thinks the teacher has the answers, all real thought ceases while the student begins searching or guessing for answers the teacher will accept. A distinct advantage peer tutors have is that students are more willing to believe that peer tutors may not know the answer themselves and are not there to quiz them.

When questioning young children in conferences, Jan Turbill advocates questions that are as specific as possible:¹³

“What words do you think you've used best?”

“Can you think of a different way to say this?”

“The words on the page don’t tell me that. How could you write it to let the reader know?”

“How did you end your last piece? Is this different?”

“What part do you like best? . . . Why?”

What can questions accomplish? As already indicated, they can clarify for us and for students what problems the students are having, and they can move students away from minor editing by suggesting a more appropriate agenda of writing concerns. And they can also indicate that a real search or discovery is going on. Donald Graves adds the following to this list of what questions can do:

1. Open a conference: How is it going? What are you writing about? Where are you now in your draft?
2. Follow (or reflect) a writer’s information:

Mrs. Bagley: How is it going, Colin?
Colin: Not so hot. I can’t seem to get started.
Mrs. Bagley: You can’t get started?
Colin: No, I always jam up after I get two lines down. I’m writing about this pet turtle I had that got lost in our car. . . .
Mrs. Bagley: You lost the turtle in your car?
3. Deal with process: What do you think you’ll do next? How will you develop/organize/revise? If you were to put new information there, how would you do it?
4. Reveal the writer’s development: How did you go about writing this? How did you go about choosing your subject? What do you think of this piece of writing?
5. Deal with basic structures: What is this paper about? Is there anything else you might do with this piece?
6. Cause a temporary loss of control, to challenge a confident student to think through a problem outside the conference: What does your ending have to do with your beginning? Are you ready to handle a problem like this?¹⁴

Well-phrased questions are indeed a valuable teaching tool, but they are not—like some long-awaited wonder drug—an all-purpose tool. They are not, for example, the proper means for offering information or strategies. And they have disadvantages. In “Re-evaluation of the Question,” JoAnn Johnson builds on educational theory that views learning as something that begins at the point of dissonance or

felt need within the learner.¹⁵ Johnson concludes from this that the learner, not the teacher, should be the one asking questions. When teachers are the ones posing questions, they are choosing the area of concern, a misplaced felt need. Questions composed by students are derived instead from the students' felt need, which should result in more involvement in learning.

Johnson also views the question as an ineffective teaching tool because its structure gives it an inhibiting power. The person being questioned becomes more involved in an attempt to offer a satisfactory response than in any mental exploration of the matter under consideration. Education, Johnson comments, is the only field where the question is considered to be a stimulant for higher levels of thinking. Professionals such as pollsters and courtroom attorneys use the question to control or inhibit thinking. Johnson finds the imperative structure a more productive strategy for her tutors to use in a writing lab conference: "If a student is told to *explain* the assignment made by the teacher, *read* a section aloud, *point* to the places that are creating discomfort or *experiment* by writing an idea in different structural styles, then she will be dealing with her needs by elaborating, manipulating and developing strategies for the identification and solving of her writing problems, and that is the goal of a writing conference."¹⁶

Using the imperative may be a way to sidestep the problems of the question, but such a strategy still continues to place the teacher in the position of choosing the area of felt need, of directing the conference to the teacher's priorities and concerns. And those of us who continue to value the use of questions should be encouraged by a six-year study cited by Johnson showing that teachers got better responses from students by lengthening the waiting time for students' answers. With increased wait-time the length of students' responses increased, and there were also notable increases in students' confidence, in unsolicited but appropriate responses, in student questions, and in speculative responses. A decrease in failure to respond was also noticed. The results of such a study indicate that it is well worth it, when asking questions, to wait for the answers.

Observing

In the midst of a conversation in which a teacher is both listener and questioner, the teacher also needs to lean back and observe what is going on, to observe students in order to assess their progress and problems. Assessing progress can be a matter of comparing students' present questions and comments to those in previous conferences to see if they can more easily verbalize their concerns, if they are more

adept at locating trouble spots in their papers, if they have more options to explore, and if they are more aware of their readers' needs. After working with a student on several papers needing more context or explanation, a teacher can rejoice when the student casually says, "In this part here, I think I probably need to say more so you won't be confused." In this kind of observation we are placing students' present actions and words in a perspective that allows us to note their growth and progress over a semester or through a series of conferences. Instead of relying on written products, then, we should also assess the student's progress as a writer. When writing lab tutors note such growth, they can provide valuable assistance by communicating what they see to the classroom teacher.

Another kind of observing is concerned with diagnosis, a topic discussed more fully in the next chapter. Diagnosis involves watching for symptoms or causes of writing problems beyond those evident in written products. A major benefit of the conference is that it permits the teacher to look beyond the product to the person writing the paper. Thus, some papers will exhibit problems which students themselves can correct, if coaxed to do so. In the following brief excerpt, the student doesn't know the grammatical rule involved, but is able nevertheless to spot a problem and to offer a solution for a revised version:

Teacher: There's a problem . . . this sentence. Would you please read it aloud and see if you think everything sounds all right to your ear?

Student: "Calculus and modern history are two courses I signed up for, and they are of different hardness."

Teacher: How does that sound to you?

Student: Not so good . . . ahhh . . . I'm not sure what you call it. Can you say "different hardness"? I wasn't sure when I wrote it if . . .

Teacher: Well, try explaining that in another way that sounds better to you.

Student: I signed up for calculus, which is a hard course, and I also decided to take modern history, which is also hard, but in a different way.

At other times, however, papers have problems which students can't identify and therefore can't correct. Asked if anything didn't sound right or if she could spot any problem in the sentence "She was so overdressed with hair always encased in hair spray," another student was unable to offer any suggestions for what might be trouble spots

in that sentence. Similarly, students who use phrases like “bored of” something or “real well” probably also use such constructions in their speech and need to be told that these phrases are not correct usage. During the puzzled silence that usually follows in the wake of a correction, we can help by inserting a quick lesson on usage—a few sentences explaining that not everything we say or hear is correct, that textbooks list some of the more common confusions, and that we will also try to help the writer identify other usage errors.

When listening to students’ speech and asking students to self-correct, we can decide which students need proofreading strategies to catch their own errors and which students need information or some further study of whatever rules they are unable to apply. We also need to observe students as they write, to see whether they notice errors on the page, whether they stop too often to edit what they have written (thereby interfering with their ability to compose), whether they reread whole sentences as they revise, or whether they revise locally, leaving mismatched parts of sentences on the page, and so on. Whatever it is we are looking for, direct observation is an effective tool available to us during conferences.

In addition, we can also use the conference to observe whether students have necessary writing strategies at their disposal or are in need of some assistance. In a conference where a paper is being planned, for example, we can see whether the student needs more effective invention strategies and, if so, suggest better ones. Or, when students appear—as they occasionally do in the writing lab where I teach—with a shuffle of notecards, random bits of paper, and maybe a photocopy of a few pages from some book, we need to talk about ways to organize material before drafting begins. Watching students revise, even just a sentence or two, we can also easily spot those students who have no handy way of inserting new material on an overcrowded page. Intervening with some suggestions here can be of great help, the kind of assistance we are not likely to offer in a classroom. Similarly, when we observe students using ineffective proofreading strategies, we can share techniques that work for us.

Showing

Having carefully observed students in order to sense their needs, we can intervene in a number of ways, and one way to do so, as suggested above, is to *show* a student how to do something. The conference is a natural and easy environment for such demonstrations, especially when the demonstration includes an opportunity for the student to practice what is being shown. Demonstrating how to brainstorm, for

example, can usefully be done in a conference because descriptions of what is supposed to happen during brainstorming are often too vague or mysterious for students. Inviting a student to join us in a brainstorming session can be a far more productive first step than letting the student try it alone or with another student equally unsure of the process. Showing students what it's like to use various invention questions is another useful conference activity, as is making outlines or tree diagrams, taking notes, or using one or another proofreading strategy. Rather than talking about what these techniques are, it's easier—and clearer—to illustrate what we mean by actually taking the student through them. Anyone who has learned a process in the company of an expert (from playing a violin to flipping pancakes) can vouch for the benefits of having someone “go through the motions” with us.

When showing students what to do, we can accompany them, have them join in, or demonstrate for them. Demonstrating, or “modeling,” is a recognized teaching technique with an extensive body of research (summarized in “Modeling”)¹⁷ to support its effectiveness. Teachers who may be hesitant about their ability to perform successfully in the spotlight while students watch can be comforted by studies showing that the most skilled models (usually termed “mastery models”) are not the most effective teachers. On the contrary, when students watch models who are not very good at what they are doing but who become more confident as they proceed, they seem to gain more than they would by watching models who begin and end at the same high level of competence.

When modeling some aspect of writing, we can follow several guidelines to ensure better learning:

1. The model should explain what it is that he or she is demonstrating.
2. As the model proceeds through the process, he or she should comment on or call attention to the important features of what he or she is doing.
3. During or after the modeling session, he or she can ask the student to summarize what was observed.
4. The model can ask the student to practice what he or she just observed, and as the student goes through the process offer the student feedback on what he or she is doing.

Modeling can also be a classroom activity, of course, but it is particularly effective in the one-to-one setting of the conference because students can ask questions and get instant feedback when they try the

process. Moreover, in the relaxed, personal atmosphere of a conference, both the model and the student are relieved of the strain of performing in front of an audience. My own experience with modeling (described in "Modeling") proved to me both what an effective tool it is for conference teaching and how pleasant it can be for teacher and student to "play" together. In an attempt to help one severely blocked writer, I resorted to demonstrating free-writing as a way to show him how to overcome his preference for endless planning aloud rather than committing words to paper. As we gave each other topics and engaged in free-writing while speaking aloud the words we were writing (so that the other person could hear what was going on), we often bumbled in our haste to get words on paper. Tape recordings of these sessions indicate that a good deal of time was spent giggling at our own ineptness. This may seem like a waste of valuable time, but the result is a relaxed working relationship that greatly reduces the tension level for students, particularly those having major difficulties with writing. Clearly, too little attention has been paid to the merits of game playing and humor in the teaching of writing.

While modeling may involve lengthy (and repeated) demonstrations for major strategies, some techniques may require only brief sessions. Explaining how to proofread for misspellings or word omissions on a page, telling the student to slow down and read carefully, word by word, for example, is less helpful (and less vivid) than simply going through a few lines at an appropriate speed, with pencil in hand to point to specific words. Other techniques, such as sorting out and organizing unruly collections of ideas and notes for a paper, can be brief for some students but may require several demonstrations in order for other students to acquire a feeling for how to proceed. (Material for such demonstrations and practice is available in *Practice for a Purpose*.)¹⁸

But whatever it is we choose to demonstrate and to have students demonstrate back to us, showing is a valuable tool for conferences because it can bring alive for the student a writing process or strategy that has seemed shrouded in the mystery of textbook descriptions. A similar process is illustrated in one American's description of her experiences when training a group of Vietnamese to cope with the complexities of American life before arriving in the United States. Using diagrams and a lengthy verbal description, she tried to acquaint them with the process of using a coin-operated telephone. Patient repetitions seemed to produce little result, despite the people's eagerness to master the steps involved. Finally, in desperation, the teacher constructed a mock-up of an American pay phone, carried it to class,

went through the steps, and achieved resounding success with a thirty-second demonstration.

Telling

While some aspects of writing can be shown, others are best explained. When working inductively, we ask questions to lead students from example to generalization, but some matters can be handled more efficiently and effectively in a deductive approach. If we want to call attention to a spelling error, explain bibliographic format, or review an assignment, it is not worth the time or effort to lead the student through questioning to the answer. Instead, telling the student the general principle is a more productive approach. And, sometimes, what we need to tell students is not a principle but some necessary information. For example, students who haven't provided enough specific details need to hear from a reader that what is offered on paper is too general. Organizational suggestions, explanations of some grammatical rule, even guidelines for what makes an effective title are also matters that can be introduced deductively by telling students some information that is needed before proceeding. Student and teacher can then work together to transfer this generalized information to the student's own writing.

The difficulty, of course, lies in knowing what is best to elicit from students inductively, what is best shown to them, and what is most effectively offered by telling them. People who lecture to large groups seem to have an easier time of it. They more often rely on telling, sometimes at great length, sometimes in an informative, memorable way, sometimes with aids such as slides, but always in the basic modes of telling and showing. In the conference, these are only two of a number of options. When teachers in conferences try to decide if telling is appropriate, they can gain a clearer perspective on this deductive approach by considering its use by counselors in therapy sessions.

Directive versus Nondirective Approaches

When counselors choose between directive and nondirective approaches in guiding therapy sessions, they do so in light of their purposes and goals. The directive approach, as described in "The Student-Centered Conference and the Writing Process," by Charles Duke, favors the didactic and prescriptive and operates on the assumption that a client has come for advice and help.¹⁹ Therefore, the responsibility of the counselor, who presumably has more expertise in the

field that does the client, is to identify the client's problems and to offer remedies. Such an approach can solve the client's difficulties, but it can also cause the client to resist any advice that is offered because he or she feels intimidated by the directness and often the bluntness of the advice. In contrast, the nondirective approach rests on the assumption that most people can help themselves if they are freed from emotional obstacles such as fear of criticism and fear of failure. The role of the counselor in a nondirective conference is to allow clients to relax and talk freely about how they might solve their own problems.

Though Duke cautions against drawing too many parallels between the writing conference and a counseling session, he recommends that we consider the use of some nondirective strategies:

1. *Focusing*: We can help the student understand what is going to happen in the conference, what is expected of each person, how long the conference will last, and, possibly, what the results will be. This can provide the student with some security.
2. *Clarifying*: We can help students understand what they have expressed in a paper and show that what they have said is appreciated.
3. *Using acceptance and approval words*: Because students too often view themselves as failures, we can offer signs of approval, even such simple affirmations as "yes" and "I see."
4. *Using reassuring phrases*: We can show students that they are not alone and that others share similar feelings and thoughts.
5. *Providing nondirective leads*: We can encourage students to talk about their writing by means of questions such as "Could this section be stated in more than one way?"

In Reigstad and McAndrew's description of the writing conference, the techniques of nondirective questioning and supportive comments can be incorporated into various stages of the conversation.²⁰ At the beginning of a conference, the teacher can use focusing and give nondirective leads to help the student understand what is going to happen and to let the student take the initiative in determining the direction of the conversation. Throughout the conference the teacher can use clarification, asking for additional information or restating what the student means, in order both to help the student understand what has been communicated in each draft and to show that the writing is interesting. Using acceptance words that reflect agreement, along with comprehension of what was said—without expressing value judgments—will foster a student's self-esteem. When students

appear to need more than acceptance or approval, teachers can offer reassuring phrases, expressing a shared feeling or thought.

The value of such nondirective techniques, as Duke concludes (46), is that they are an effective means for reducing teacher-centered talk and avoiding the traditional overdirection of teacher-centered conferences. Such an approach also encourages students to become more responsive to new ideas about writing and provides the kind of acceptance and approval that help to build writers' confidence. In addition, students are provided with live, responsive audiences for their writing and are encouraged to accept responsibility for their writing processes.

While advocates of using nondirective techniques for the writing conference are emphatic about the benefits of such techniques, they also note their potential drawbacks, especially the considerable time required for such conversation. And for teachers who see lack of time as a major obstacle to using conferences in the teaching of writing, conversation that takes the long way home may simply be a luxury they cannot afford. The counterargument, of course, is akin to that used by people who oppose America's infatuation with fast food: quicker is not usually better.

While the arguments for directive and nondirective approaches pertain to students we normally consider "typical," we also need to remember that teaching strategies appropriate for these students are not necessarily effective for other groups such as the learning disabled. As reported by Leone Scanlon in "Learning Disabled Students at the Writing Center," the learning disabled students who use the Clark University Writing Center, which she directs, expressed anxiety, frustration, and anger in response to the standard tutoring strategies of questioning students to elicit their responses.²¹ More guidance is necessary to reduce the anxiety they all too often feel in a nondirective setting. (Other suggestions for strategies to use in working with the learning disabled are described by Paula Gills, Jacqueline Lauby, Helen Mills, and David Taylor.)²²

Uses of Language and Other Forms of Communication

Verbal Communication

Yet another dimension of the conference to consider is the teacher's various forms of communication, both in spoken and nonverbal language. As we talk or listen, question or demonstrate, elicit responses or offer guidance, we depend on the flow of conversation to carry our

meaning. But other messages are being communicated in the words we choose, in our actions, in our gestures—even in what we do not do.

In our verbal communication, we obviously need to monitor the speed and level of complexity of our speech, and we need to acquire a working vocabulary of terms students can understand. In each conference, this level must be adjusted to the particular student, especially if we think we need to refer to specialized terms of our field or some grammatical jargon. Can we talk to one student about “independent clauses”? Does another student understand “coherence,” or should we either explain the term or find a substitute? We ought to consider whether some students would profit from knowing a few basic terms so that they too can talk about their writing. And we should acquire a repertoire of words to convey reactions which are neither harsh judgments nor implied attacks on the student as a person. Journal articles drip with disgust over the use of such terms as “awkward” and “disorganized,” yet these denunciations continue to litter the margins of student papers and devastate the writers. “Teacher talk” is what Jay Jacoby calls jargon-laden and judgmental comments, a form of communication he helps the tutors in his writing center to avoid.²³

An added complication is that we need to monitor not only what we say to students generally, but also what we say to *each* student. As Sarah W. Freedman’s studies of conference conversation have shown, a teacher has different relationships with different students in the same class. The result, as described in Freedman and Sperling’s “Teacher-Student Interaction in the Writing Conference” (40-41), is different instruction. For high- and low-achieving students, for example, the teacher studied focused on different types of topics for each. She also gave more expository explanations and more praise to the higher-achieving students, who seemed to elicit it by their comments.

Because praise and positive reinforcement are so important, we also need to acquire a vocabulary of terms that convey to students that their writing has value and merit. Positive reinforcement, described by Hayes and Daiker as the most important tool available to enlightened composition teachers,²⁴ is needed to give the writer confidence to do some experimenting and courage to keep trying. But praise has other uses as well, because writers need to know what is working well in a paper. If they don’t recognize an effective part of a paper, they may delete it from the next draft.

Though praise is important—even necessary—for the development of writers, compliments may not always convey the intended message, especially with foreign students. In a study of compliments as perceived by non-native students, Nessa Wolfson concluded that what is

considered a compliment may differ greatly from one society to another. For example, one international student reported to Wolfson that the compliment which says to a person that he or she looks unusually good (for example: "Your hair looks great! I almost didn't recognize you!") can imply to someone not familiar with the convention that the reverse is usually the case. Wolfson also reports that people from cultures less open in expressions of approval are often extremely embarrassed by what they consider the excessive complimenting Americans indulge in. This is not to say that we cannot praise ESL students, only that we should monitor our praise to see that it conveys what we wish it to.

Nonverbal Communication

Because body language also conveys messages, we need to consider even the physical arrangements of a conference. The traditional teacher-at-the-desk and student-sitting-at-the-side arrangement conveys a hierarchy of control not likely to be conducive to an informal interchange of conversation, nor to promote the feeling that the teacher is a coach/counselor/editor. Much more effective is the side-by-side meeting of two people looking at a paper that is best kept in front of the student rather than the teacher. Nodding, smiling to show agreement, and offering other small but significant human gestures of friendliness and approval are additional means of conveying our messages.

Nonverbal Communication Problems between Cultures

Lest we get too caught up in worrying about nonverbal communication, Edward Hall, the anthropologist, warns us against attaching specific meaning to specific actions. His studies have demonstrated that "the meaning of a communication is always dependent upon the context."²⁵ But Hall's work in cross-cultural communication should also serve as a warning against imposing patterns of American cultural behavior on those of our students who do not share the dominant American culture (or, if teachers are not members of the dominant American culture, of carrying patterns of behavior from another culture into the conference). One example of difficulties that can arise in a conference between two people with different cultural orientations has to do with the distance between the two people. Americans, as Hall explains in *The Silent Language*, have a pattern which discourages touching and which avoids bodily contact.²⁶ Thus, Americans tend to keep their distance when speaking and may even back up

when another person comes too close. In Latin American cultures, however, interaction distance is much less, and people can talk comfortably at ranges closer than Americans would be at ease with. The result can be a conversation in which a Latin American moves closer to a North American in order to be at a more comfortable distance, thereby causing the North American to back away. As a consequence of this dance of retreat, the Latin American may think the North American is being distant or cold, withdrawn, and unfriendly.

Even the matter of eye contact differs among cultures. Eye behavior in a conversation is important because it signals whether the other person is listening and whether the speaker is being understood. Yet many ambiguities in conversation arise from different uses of the eye. As Hall has observed,²⁷ the English signal that they have heard by blinking their eyes, while Americans typically look the other person in the eye when they want to be sure that they are getting their message across. However, Americans are apt to be made uncomfortable by the intensity with which Arabs look at each other. Blacks, on the other hand, are less prone to using eye contact and have been misinterpreted by American whites as being uninterested and unmotivated because of lack of eye contact in job interviews.²⁸ When we consider the havoc of miscommunication that can result from such differences, we can easily realize why we need to tread carefully when using our own criteria to interpret nonverbal communication by members of other cultures.

There also exists the possibility that our behavior will be misinterpreted by students from other cultures. Even the relatively minor matter of chair placement has proven to be a source of annoyance, as documented in Hall's work. In *The Hidden Dimension* (137-38), Hall describes Americans' preference for adjusting their chairs to the social situation; if need be, they will move their chairs to what they consider the appropriate distance for a conversation. Yet to the Germans Hall observed and questioned, this was upsetting, disturbing their sense of the order established in a room. For one German newspaper editor who had moved to the United States, Americans' habit of adjusting their chairs to the situation when they came to his office so irritated him that he had his visitor's chair bolted to the floor.

Obviously, we cannot foresee every possibility for miscommunication with students, especially since so little is known about cross-cultural communication and since even those differences noted by students of the field are merely general tendencies, not universals true of every person in that group. What is important is to remain sensitive to the needs and reactions of the students sitting next to us and to

be wary of absolute reliance on our own interpretations of other people's behavior.

Conference Problems

In addition to monitoring words and gestures, we also have to be prepared to cope with a variety of problems that can arise in a conference setting. Even experienced teachers find that the conference provides a fertile environment for a variety of difficulties to breed. The time problem is one such difficulty. Because a conference is usually not concluded by a ringing bell, it can easily run overtime when we forget to pace ourselves by means of an internal alarm clock which gauges not only the time allotted but also the length of the waiting line of other students. If we notice that we are prone to running overtime in general, we need to reassess our notion that we are holding fifteen-minute or half-hour sessions and schedule students accordingly. Keeping students stacked up like a doctor's waiting room does no more for their dispositions that it does for ours when we are caught up in such delays. Calling an end to a session with a student not yet ready to leave can also cause time problems. Acknowledging that strict schedules are difficult in such a setting is one way to deal with the time problem; allowing spare time between conferences to use if needed is another method.

Overburdening the conference with an agenda that is too long is another problem that can arise. Teachers used to marking all noticeable errors, weaknesses, and strengths in a paper may feel the need to do so in a verbal evaluation, especially with basic writers or international students who are more prone to having numerous surface errors in their writing. A page with multitudinous grammatical mistakes seems to invite a comment or explanation for each error, but this burdens the conference with too many matters for discussion, even if some are very brief. The conference loses focus, goes on too long, and is in grave danger of being totally teacher-dominated. Instead, it is important for us to remember that it is far more effective to concentrate on a thorough discussion of one or two topics than to range far and wide, touching briefly on much more than the student is likely to remember ten minutes after the conference is over.

Despite our best intentions, conferences can also go awry because of some difficulty on the student's part. A session with a passive, unresponsive, or indifferent student may never become the kind of instructional interchange that we hope for because we find ourselves

instead expending too much effort in coping with the student's reserve. Hostile students are usually so consumed by the cause of their anger that they cannot divert their attention until they vent some steam. With overly talkative students who keep offering extraneous talk or endless personal anecdotes, we may find it difficult to keep switching the conversation back to writing concerns. Other students are so eager to please that they respond with "I see . . . OK . . . I understand" long before they really do. And then there are manipulative students interested in getting us to do all the work. They wait for the teacher to do the thinking necessary to answer the question hanging in the air, and they are likely to keep prodding the teacher to show them not only what's wrong in the paper but also how to correct it. Though students—and teachers—in a conference are prone to all the usual human failings, such problems do divert our attention away from our larger purposes, and the challenge is to keep our goals in mind. Trading war stories (as tutors in tutor-training courses can do) is an excellent way of keeping our perspective, maintaining our sense of humor, and acquiring strategies for dealing with these problems.

For tutors who work with their peers, there are some added problems unique to the situation. Peer tutors, sensitive to the need to establish their authority as "teachers," are in danger of forgetting their great strength, that they are obviously helpers or coaches, not evaluators. Peer tutors I've observed focus too much initially on their fear of making a mistake or not knowing the right answer to tell the student. Peer tutors can only put aside these fears when they begin to realize that most students prefer working with a friendly helper rather than facing yet another authority figure who knows all the answers. Another source of comfort for peer tutors is knowing that help is available nearby from a fellow peer tutor or teacher. An atmosphere in which peer tutors are free to admit that they are not infallible and that they too are seeking answers is equally encouraging to students who then see that learning to write well is a quest in which we are all involved. Sharing in the search also reminds students that they too are expected to contribute and that they need not worry that they don't know the answers as they seek them. Reminding everyone of the old maxim "Only the truly stupid are too dumb to ask" helps considerably.

Despite the lengthy list of problems discussed above, those new to the conference approach will undoubtedly find themselves in situations not even hinted at here—and experienced teachers will have their own lists to contribute. But the conference offers no more

quagmires to the unwary than any other teaching situation. It merely has its own unique situations. The conference is nevertheless a setting with a more congenial atmosphere in which to deal with problems, for in the friendly informality of two people working together, situations can be dealt with in a more open, comfortable way.

Notes

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