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The Writing Conference: An Ethnographic Model for Discovering Patterns of Teacher-Student Interaction

Tom Reigstad

Ethnography, according to Frederick Gearing, is a science that is both descriptive and analytic of human behavior.¹ The fascination of the ethnographer with what seems to be mundane, everyday, routine behavior involves applying specific procedures to identify the array of classes of things (roles, people, activities) and to analyze a scene or event. Some general research practices used by the ethnographer include: a long period of orientation to and absorption of a community or culture; a gradual acceptance of the researcher/observer by the subjects; the development of a schedule of questions to ask of subjects; and the narrowing of a well-focused study before beginning to identify classes of activity and persons.

Ethnography has recently found its way into research on composition. Investigators such as Donald Graves, Susan Florio, Sondra Perl, and Sandra Worsham have observed writing activities occurring in classroom settings.² And Ken Kantor has acted as a participant/observer while conducting a study of a high school creative writing class, in order to examine "course expectations, individual processes, classroom interactions, and teaching strategies."³ The process of one particular writing-centered social context, however, the teacher-student conference, is a little investigated area. A systematic examination of what occurs between teacher and student in an individual session is particularly necessary in order to help inform staffs of writing centers. Despite the many variations among such labs—some are drop-in tutorial services, some are referral centers for remedial writers, others are connected to credit-bearing composition courses—they all depend on being able to make optimum use of the interaction time between a writer and a respondent. My account of one systematic investigation into the conferencing process ought not only to provide in-



sights into the nature of such face-to-face meetings, but also to suggest a scheme for other researchers to follow when conducting on-site studies at their writing centers.

I plan to explain the procedures I used for a study of how ten different college and university writing teachers, who are well-published writers themselves, conduct individual writing conferences with their students.⁴To learn about what happens during one-to-one writing sessions, the study relied on observation and audiotapes of tutors and students at work in conference situations, interviews with participants, and examination of written products that formed the basis of the talk of each tutorial meeting. In order to carefully describe the process of the writing conference, I borrowed from the methodologies developed by ethnographers for composing case study reports and for analyzing occasions of face-to-face interaction.

Paul Diesing's model for assembling a case study provided me with a framework for the main steps of the study.⁵ According to Diesing, the first major step of a case study consists of *prior preparation*, in which the field worker acquaints himself with the subject area by reading published reports, securing letters of introduction, talking to people, reading multiple theories that relate to the subject, and developing checklists of things to look for. The next step, *activities of the field worker*, includes scheduled activities (administering questionnaires, interviewing informants) and unscheduled activities (making oneself acceptable to everybody). A third main step in a case study is *discovery of themes and interpretations*, during which stage the investigator immerses himself in the steady stream of data pouring in from the observations and scheduled activities, and begins to look for recurrent themes that reappear in various contexts. The next step, *testing themes and interpretations*, tests themes and interpretations by comparing them with evidence. Three tests suggested by Diesing are for: reliability, by determining whether or not different investigators using the same data can agree about their results; validity, by determining the extent to which different instruments or parts of an instrument agree when applied to the same event; and, kinds of evidence, by cross-checking to determine how several data-collection means—observation, informant statement, documents—might converge on the same theme. Then, once several themes have been discovered, interpreted, and tested, the case-study investigator moves on to the next step, *building a model*, by connecting the themes in a network or pattern. Finally, the case study *report* itself, which describes each stage in the investigation, must be written.

Prior preparation—before beginning my study, I familiarized myself with literature on writing conference models and on theories of tutoring in general.⁶ These accounts suggested some points that I might look for when observing and describing conference sessions. For example, after becoming acquainted with a variety of published reports on writing conferences, the behavior of the tutor as a facilitator or as an authoritarian seemed useful to watch for, as did how that behavior might relate to the main events of a session and talk about specific aspects of the composing process. Also, several of the writers/teachers participating in the study provided cues for what to look for in their conferences by having published on the subject.⁷

Before my final list of ten writers/teachers was confirmed in February of 1979, I spent nearly three months contacting various professional writers whom I felt were suitable subjects for the study. The ten teachers who participated were selected because they are well-published writers of poetry, short and extended fiction, and non-fiction who teach non-fiction writing courses in English departments at colleges and universities. These teachers also require not only non-fiction writing of their students, but periodic attendance at individual writing conferences. The participating teachers were: Roger H. Garrison, Westbrook College; Diana Hume George, Pennsylvania State University, Behrend College; Walker Gibson, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Mac Hammond, SUNY at Buffalo; Donald M. Murray, University of New Hampshire; and Thomas Newkirk, Rebecca Rule, Mary Peterson Strater, Sue Wheeler, and Ron Winslow, from the University of New Hampshire.

With the exception of Hammond's composition class, I did not select the students who participated in the study. Because I was located at the same campus, I was able to talk with and choose the four students from Hammond's class to observe, tape, and interview. In the cases of the other nine professional writers/teachers, since they were situated at distant universities, the scheduling and selection arrangements were usually made for me to coincide with the timing of my visit. In almost every case, the students whom I observed, taped, and interviewed were scheduled for conferences during the time of my visit anyway, whether I was present or not. In a few cases, the writers/teachers made an effort to handpick certain students for my observations. However, they were usually selected not because they exemplified a "model tutee," but because they represented, in the teacher's view, a cross-section of his or her students.

Some of the time, the students were forewarned by their teachers that I would be present during the conference. However, in several instances, I was simply introduced to the student when he or she reported for the conference and the student was asked if he objected to the session being taped. Each student was willing to participate. In all, I observed, taped, and interviewed forty students (i.e., forty separate one-to-one writing conferences). Twenty-four of the students were female, and sixteen male.

Activities in the field—the writing conferences which I observed were held at the same point in the spring semester of 1979, i.e., mid-April or well along into the semester. By that time, students had already gone through three-quarters of their writing course and had already experienced some tutorial sessions with the teacher.

By pre-arrangement with each teacher I was able to set up at the conference sites (Garrison and Hammond held conferences in classrooms; the others held conferences in their offices) just before the tutorial session. I would seat myself so that I had a full view of the physical behavior of teacher and student and so that I could hear their dialogue clearly. Next, I would position the tape recorder (a small, portable one) on the table or desk, between the student and teacher, but pushed back so that it did not intrude upon their work space.

As a student arrived at the conference site, I would turn on the tape recorder and sit back to observe the proceedings of the one-to-one session. I used an observation sheet to help focus my note-taking. At the top of each observation sheet, I kept a record of the beginning and ending clock time taken up by the conference, the date of the session, and the code number which I assigned to the particular conference. Then, also toward the top of the observation sheet, I would draw a rough sketch of the seating relationship of tutor and student. Finally, on the rest of the sheet, I tried to note impressionistically, as I listened to and observed the conference, key bits of dialogue and major phases or changes in direction of the conference talk. Although for the majority of cases, I functioned as a neutral observer, there were occasions in which I was a participant-observer when I was drawn briefly into the conference talk by a teacher who asked if I knew the meaning or spelling of a word or who explained to me the subject of a particularly well-written student essay.

The forty writing conferences (four per teacher) which I observed amounted to nearly seven hundred minutes, or approximately twelve hours of tutorial sessions in total. The briefest conference was three

minutes; the longest, forty-seven and one-half minutes. The average length of the forty conferences was sixteen and one-half minutes.

Immediately after the termination of each individual conference, I conducted a brief interview with the student without the presence of the teacher. I used a list of questions which I posed to each student in the same sequence. I asked questions related to the student's perception of the reason for the conference, what occurred during the conference concerning the student's draft, whether or not the student was aware that the teacher was a well-published writer, and what the student's attitude was toward that particular conference.

At some point in my campus visit, but always after I had observed and taped all four conferences, I interviewed each writer/teacher. I employed an interview schedule consisting of twenty-seven questions asked in the same order for each writer/teacher. The questions were grouped in sets directed toward getting information from the teachers on how one-to-one teaching fits into their overall instructional methodology, on their attitudes toward conferencing, on whether they share their own composing processes and professional experiences with students, on how they perceive the structure of their conferences, and on how they perceive their role(s) during conference sessions.

I made arrangements to collect copies of student drafts which formed the basis of the conference talk, either by making duplicate copies while I was on campus or by having teachers send me copies of their students' drafts. I also made arrangements for students to send me copies of the revision or final version of the draft discussed in conference, by providing them with self-addressed, stamped envelopes. In all, I collected drafts from thirty-seven students, and a total of twenty-one revisions.

Discovering themes and interpretations—once I had observed and taped all forty conferences, interviewed thirty-nine of the forty students, interviewed the ten writers/teachers, and collected copies of student written products, I began studying all of the information by listening to the tapes over and over again, by preparing the material for analysis, and by developing a system for describing the process of tutorial sessions.

From 1979 through 1980 I asked several different typists to transcribe the tapes of the conferences. Whenever a typist submitted to me a completed transcript of a taped conference, I would verify the accuracy of the transcribing by listening to the entire tape while following the transcript, correcting or adding when necessary.

Throughout this time period I also coded the student drafts and revisions. I read through these pieces of writing, trying to notice the types of changes made from draft to revision.

As I listened to tapes of conferences, with their transcripts at hand, I began to jot down marginal notes on key exchanges between student and teacher, on what seemed to be parts of the structure of various conferences, and on what talk dealt with specific acts of composing (particularly revision). As I listened to tapes and read transcripts, I also referred to the observation sheets I had kept in order to help provide more insight to my impressions. Eventually, as I would finish studying one set of conferences for a particular writer/teacher, I would jot down some general thoughts on similarities and differences among the conferences conducted by that teacher.

After immersing myself in the data and looking informally for patterns and recurrent themes, I began to develop a more systematic method for describing the conference processes. Three main categories for describing what happens during the one-to-one writing conferences were suggested to me by applying current research in ethnography, the composing process, and conferencing models: major phases; activity structure; and role structure.

Much of the recent ethnographic literature on describing face-to-face interaction divides the occasion for talk between two people into two major categories of activity—event structure and role structure.⁸ In event structure, researchers often refer to how a single occasion for one-to-one interaction consists of major phases. These phases can be identified in terms of the temporal organization or stages of the interaction, in terms of general segments, shifts, or changes in the direction of the interaction, also referred to by Madeline Mathio as “parts, phases or strings of move clusters,” and by Erving Goffman as “shifting streams of frames,” or by changes in the topic of conversation.⁹ With this sense of describing “segments,” I set about analyzing transcripts and identifying the major phases of each one-to-one session. As I partitioned the conferences into their major component stages (by marking them off on transcripts), I also recorded the amount of actual conferencing time covered within each major phase.

Next, I proceeded to describe the activities that occurred during each major phase. Starkey Duncan and Donald Fiske suggest breaking up transcriptions of face-to-face interactions into smaller units of activity within a larger event or phase.¹⁰ Among the sub-phases or units which they suggest looking at are conversational tying procedures (chains of questions and answers, elliptical utterances, and utterances or extension and completion). As I read through the transcripts, I identified tutor questions in two ways: whether they served as initiators or sustainers of conversation;¹¹ and whether they fell into one of the follow-

ing categories—rhetorical (calling for no answer), closed (calling for yes/no answers, or short, succinct responses), open (calling for broadly inclusive statements, assertions, narrations), probe and prompt (asking for more detail), and leading (answering itself and “leading” the respondent to parrot information already known to both him and the interrogator).¹²

Another kind of sub-unit of activity within each major phase of a conference which I attempted to describe was talk centered on specific aspects of the writing process. Using a model developed by Anthony Petrosky and James Brozick, I read through transcripts and labelled discussions about student drafts as they related to rhetorical strategies, intellectual strategies, and syntactical strategies.¹³ As I identified conference talk according to how it fit into this scheme of the composing process, I also noted for each of the three composing strategies the specific kind of revision on the draft talked over by student and teacher, by using the nine types of revision developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.¹⁴

Another dimension of my system for describing the process of one-to-one writing conferences involved considering the predominant relationship between the writer/teacher and student and the specific roles adopted by the writers/teachers. As I studied the transcripts, I marked off instances of informality and occasions of teacher (authoritarian)-student or conversant-conversant relationships between writers/teachers and their students. I also used a scheme devised by Patricia Beaumont to assign appropriate role categories to the tutors as they revealed themselves throughout a given conference: evaluator, expert, initiator, interested reader, learner/student, listener, partner in writing, and rule-giver.¹⁵

Testing themes and interpretations—as I completed examining each of the forty writing conferences for their major phases, activity structure, and role structure, I identified patterns that emerged in the conferencing practices of each of the ten professional writers/teachers. My own descriptions of conference process themes needed to be tested, however, by comparing them with other evidence. Therefore, I used a series of cross-checking devices to add to my personal analysis. The devices used to help authenticate my findings can be called *kinds of evidence and multiple observers*.

Through informant statements provided by interviews, I could compare the perceptions of the writers/teachers and the students of what occurred during the conferences, with my own observations. And five months after I had observed the conferences, I randomly selected eigh-

teen of the participating students (at least one per writer/teacher) and mailed them a letter accompanied by a follow-up questionnaire which asked them to write out their reactions to the one-to-one conferences and to describe the general structure of those conferences. I used this questionnaire to help guard against a "halo effect" governing their responses to my initial on-the-spot, post-conference interview with them. The student written products (drafts and revisions) which I had collected also served as a kind of evidence to cross-check and substantiate my version of activity specifically dealing with the composing process. I asked two readers to compare the drafts with the revisions by identifying the types of revisions made on the final versions. And in order to help confirm my impressions of what happened during the conferences, I asked two other investigators to respond to the same data. These outside investigators wrote out their reactions to selected tapes and transcripts.

Building a model—after constructing a many-sided, lengthy description of each teachers' conferencing practices, I identified the variance among the ten cases in terms of three general conferencing models:

Model One (teacher-centered)—The first general conferencing model, a teacher-centered one, seemed typical of the tutoring sessions conducted by Roger H. Garrison and Mac Hammond. It is characterized by the teacher doing most of the talking and, at times, much of the work for the student. Students often sit passively as tutors read through their drafts and, pen in hand, correct mechanical errors or supply alternative, improved sentence and paragraph versions for the student. In this model, tutors ask few questions of students. When they do, the questions are usually closed or leading. Often, too, even if it is an open-ended or probing question, the teacher either answers it himself, or the student has no opportunity to respond. Tutors in this model sometimes issue directives for specific revisions to be made by students. There is some talk about ideas, usually to allow students to clarify a point, but this off-the-paper student talk is restricted and the focus of the conference is kept on the paper. The tutors are in full control of initiating movement from one major phase of the conference to another. The predominant tutor roles in this model are expert, rule-giver, initiator, evaluator, interested reader, and partner in writing. And the prevailing tutor-student relationship, with a few momentary exceptions, is that of teacher to student.

Model Two (collaborative)—the second conferencing model, a more collaborative teacher-student one, seemed to typify the sessions conducted by the majority of the professional writers—Diane Hume

George, Walker Gibson, Thomas Newkirk, Rebecca Rule, Mary Peterson Strater, and Sue Wheeler. This model is characterized by a more flexible tutorial posture in which the teacher moves in and out of teacher-student and conversant- conversant relationships and from on paper to off-the-paper talk several times in a given conference. The predominant tutor-student relationship in this model is conversant to conversant, as tutors draw students out often, via open and probe and prompt questions, to engage in off-the-paper, exploratory, idea talk and to expand upon undeveloped ideas in their papers. Tutors in this model not only treat students as conversational equals, but involve them in problem-solving as well. When tutors suggest solutions, they often qualify their directiveness, and customarily leave final decisions up to students. Tutors in this model are generally in control of moving from one major phase to the next. The predominant roles characteristic of tutors in this model are interested reader, listener, partner in writing, and initiator.

Model Three (student-centered)—this conferencing model is typical of the sessions conducted by Donald M. Murray and Ron Winslow. It is student-centered in that the student usually does most of the talking, most of the work on his paper, and even determines the direction of the conference. Students usually are responsible for initiating movement to a new phase of the conference. And tutors generally ask open and probe and prompt questions. One conference began with the tutor simply asking, “So?” and the student describing for two minutes her work thus far in preparing a draft on health foods. Then, after talking about it with the tutor, the student initiated a shift in the conference talk to a different essay: “Okay, and I’ve had a few thoughts about my other one.” Once the discussion about the second piece of writing was apparently over for the student, she shifted the conversational topic to the first essay: “You don’t have any other suggestions about what I should do for that health food article, do you?” whereupon the tutor suggested some additional sources of information and helped sharpen the focus of the piece. The tutor in the student-centered model listens a great deal, especially early in the conference, asks a few questions, and often contributes personal recollections and associations to add to the student’s discovery of a subject. As with Model Two, when the tutor does suggest a revision, he emphasizes that the draft should be the student’s own work. The most common tutor roles in a student-centered conference are listener, partner in writing, and interested reader. And, except for times in which the tutor talks about course business, revision summaries, etc., the tutor-student relationship is consistently conversant to conversant.

Some common traits that existed across all ten individual conferencing styles were: each tutor adopted the roles of interested reader, evaluator, and partner in writing; conferences were usually comprised of three distinct phases; tutors spent most of each session working on one or two central problems; tutors often suggested strategies to help students; question-asking was a major part of tutor talk; tutors shifted in their roles and relationships (as teachers and as conversants); and, generally, tutors maintained a non-threatening, informal conference climate. I also found that students generally made most of the revisions talked about in conference on their final papers and that most students were well aware that their teachers were writers.

By borrowing from ethnographic research models for assembling case studies (reconstructing and testing patterns derived from multiple data, multiple theories, and multiple observers) and for analyzing occasions of face-to-face interaction (observing and collecting data from the people who interact and finding structural relationships among occasions for interaction), composition researchers can continue to inform writing teachers about the process of individual writing conferences. For example, context-dependent studies might be done which plant one foot in the classroom and the other in the conference session. The goings-on in both settings over a span of time could be observed, in order to explain the important connections that exist when teachers use group meetings and supplemental conferences during a single writing course. Or, ethnographic methods for describing and analyzing human behavior could be applied to conferences with basic/remedial writers or with superior writers only. There might be differences which result in the degrees of tutor directiveness, types of questions asked, and general phases, which could help inform teachers of such special student groups. By carefully mapping out strong regularities of behavior in classroom or in individual writing instructional settings, observers' hunches about effective teacher-student interaction can grow into certainties.

And writing center personnel should be alert to the potential of ethnographic, context-based, research for helping assess and describe their tutorial interactions. For example, tutors can be trained and the progress of their teaching skills monitored by such first-hand, participant/observer field research. Some findings of my study relate directly to the activities of writing center tutors: (1) as part of a training program, tutors might be taught the important shared features that existed among the ten writers/tutors—particularly, that they were supportive of their students and that they functioned more often as facilitators and

tried to minimize their authoritative roles; (2) beginning tutors might also become acquainted with the three general conferencing models to see which style (or combination) is their own most comfortable instructional stance. Students clearly evaluated the three models as being equally effective to them. And, even though the students taught by the "student-centered" conferencing model were upperclassmen enrolled in advanced writing courses, the students who responded so favorably to the first ("teacher-centered") type of conferencing were quite diverse (some were basic writers at a two-year college; others, a more skillful group of freshman writers at a highly selective state university); (3) tutors and writing center directors ought to be aware of the direct relationship that exists between conference talk about specific problems on a paper at hand and actual changes eventually made on that paper by students—students seem to follow closely the major suggestions for revision made during the conference. Directors might collect drafts and revisions and evaluate the effectiveness of their tutors by improvements made by writers on post-conference papers; (4) finally, tutors should write. Just by observing the significance of the partner-in-writing role in conferences by the ten professional writers, and by noting the frequent tutor and student statements about the importance of teachers practicing what they teach, it seems clear that writing center tutors should be active writers—perhaps, by forming their own "writer's circles" or workshops, wherein groups of tutors meet regularly to respond to each other's writing-in-progress (drafts of articles, pieces of fiction, business correspondence, etc.).

Footnotes

¹Fredrick Gearing, "On Observing Well," presentation to the Faculty of Educational Studies Learning and Instruction Research Group, State University of New York at Buffalo, February 2, 1979.

²Donald Graves, "What Children Show Us About Revision," *Language Arts*, 56 (March, 1979), pp. 312-319; Susan Florio, "Learning to Write in the Classroom Community," paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Convention, San Francisco, April 1979; Sondra Perl, "Creativity and the Composing Process: Making the Thought Visible," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Dallas, March 1981; Sandra Worsham, *A Naturalistic Study of a Basic Writing Program*, unpublished Ed.S. project, University of Georgia, 1980.

³Kenneth J. Kantor, "Ethnographic Research in Writing," paper presented at the CEE Seminar on Research in Language, Omaha, March 1980.

⁴Thomas J. Reigstad, *Conferencing Practices of Professional Writers: Ten Case Studies*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, SUNY at Buffalo, 1980. The research for this study was funded by a research grant from the National Council of Teachers of English.

⁴Paul Diesing, *Patterns of Discovery in the Social Sciences* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, Inc., 1971), pp. 142-168.

⁵See Rosemarie Arbur, "The Student-Teacher Conference," *College Composition and Communication*, 28 (December, 1977), pp. 338-342; Benjamin S. Bloom, *Human Characteristics and School Learning* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976); Charles R. Cooper, "Teaching Writing by Conferencing," in R. Bean, A. Berger, and A. Petrosky (eds.), *Survival Through Language* (Pittsburgh: Faculty of Language Communication, 1977); Carl Rogers, *Client-centered Therapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951).

⁶Roger H. Garrison, "One-to-One: Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition," in *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2 (1974), pp. 55-83; Walker Gibson, "The Writing Teacher as a Dumb Reader," *College Composition and Communication*, 30 (1979), pp. 192-195; Donald M. Murray, "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference," *College English*, 41 (September 1979), pp. 13-18; Thomas Newkirk, "Read the Papers in Class," in Gene Stanford (ed.), *How to Handle the Paper Load* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979).

⁷See Madeline Mathiot, "Toward a Frame of Reference for the Analysis of Face-to-Face Interaction," *Semiotica*, 24 (1978), pp. 199-220; Paul Epstein, "Girls, Girls! Towards a Study of Address and Reference," paper presented at the University-wide Student Conference on Communicative Behavior: Approaches and Research, SUNY at Buffalo, March 1979; and Dell Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1974).

⁸Matthew Speier, "Some Conversational Problems for Interactional Analysis," in *Studies in Social Interaction*, ed. David Sudnow (New York: The Free Press, 1972), pp. 397-427; N.A. Flanders, *Analyzing Teacher Behavior* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 159-238; Kenneth L. Pike, "A Linguistic Contribution to Composition," *College Composition and Communication*, 15 (February 1964), pp. 82-88; Mathiot, p. 209; Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 544.

⁹Starkey Duncan, Jr., and Donald W. Fiske, *Face-to-Face Interaction: Research, Methods, and Theory* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, Associates, 1977), p. 163.

¹⁰Speier, pp. 421-422.

¹¹A.H. Monroe and D. Ehninger, *Principles and Types of Speech Communication* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1974).

¹²Anthony R. Petrosky and James R. Brozick, "A Model for Teaching Writing Based Upon Current Knowledge of the Composing Process," *English Journal*, 68 (January 1979), pp. 96-101.

¹³National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Write Re-write: An Assessment of Revision Skills*, report no. 05-W-04, Denver, July 1977.

¹⁴Patricia A. Beaumont, "A Descriptive Study of the Role of the Tutor in a Conference on Writing," unpublished thesis, University of San Diego, 1978.