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Close Encounters of an Ancient Kind: Readings on The Tutorial Classroom and the Writing Conference

Frances Martin

The scrambled student population of recent years has rekindled interest in the oldest, most individualized mode of teaching—the tutorial, or conference in American parlance. Though educators here have long admired the ancient British practice whereby each student attends weekly one-to-one sessions with a member of his college faculty, until recently our profession has dubbed this practice an elitist luxury. Tutorials, like crowns and castles, signalled a class society. However, in the last twenty years, many of our own schools and colleges have struggled to adapt the tutorial approach to the teaching of writing.

Why this change of heart? To a host of supporters, tutorial instruction appears to suit today's student better than traditional classroom instruction. At its best oral comment on student writing is at once clearer, fuller, more frequent, more timely, more appropriate, and more reassuring than written comment. Then too, most American tutorial programs boast a clear set of priorities and a logical model of the writing process to guide the fledgling author. This model shifts its focus from details of editing to the basic operations that produce good writing and insists on in-process revision, easing the toil of teacher correction. Whether in the frequent office conferences described by Donald Murray, in the tutorial classroom devised by Roger Garrison, or in the many types of writing centers, the trend supports more one-to-one contact.

As the tutorial gains ground, questions multiply. Most teachers and students lack experience in such encounters and must expect awkward if not painful adjustments to them. No wonder that an on-going

debate over conference strategy on the nation's campuses has loosed a flood of provocative new books and articles. Such pages offer answers to questions that face all teacher-tutors: When and where should the conference occur? What should the teacher say and do in such a situation? Should he just deliver orally the comments that he would otherwise write on the paper or adopt a new strategy? What kind of response from the student should he expect or elicit? What effects should this interaction have on student writing?

So far we have no consensus on these questions, but the debate has turned up novel and useful approaches, offering the teacher a wide range of techniques for dealing with individual writers. Veterans of the conference also agree on a number of points that should serve as guidelines for every novice. Such points include an informal tone, stress on the writer's strengths, discussion limited to primary problems, and student involvement. Unfortunately the absence of any concise, select bibliography on the tutorial has so far limited the busy tutor's access to this material. The list below aims to help him on his way. Though some of these listed works also contain information on peer tutoring, their inclusion rests on what they have to say about the one-to-one encounter between teacher-tutor and student.

1. Arbur, Rosemarie. "The Student- Teacher Conference." *College Composition and Communication*, 28 (1977), 338-342.

Using the social work interview as a model, Arbur proposes a seven-stage program for the conference. Her program includes engagement, problem exploration, problem identification, agreement to collaborate on the problem, task assignment, solution, and termination. Each stage builds on the success of the previous one. Stressing the need to reassure the student and share decision-making, she advises the tutor to shed the roles of expert and critic. A helpful piece for inexperienced tutors, this article shares much ground with advocates of student-centered conferencing.

2. Beach, Richard. "Self-Evaluation in an Activity-Oriented English Classroom." *English Journal*, 64, No. 3 (1975), 59-63.

Though this article makes no direct reference to the writing conference, Beach details three stages of self-evaluation—describing, judging, and predicting—that could prepare the student for a useful discussion of his writing. Tutors who want their students to take an

active role from the opening of the session may find Beach's format one way to approach that goal.

3. Bramley, Wyn. *Personal Tutoring in Higher Education*. Guildford, Surrey: University of Surrey, 1977.

Though written to guide tutors in English universities, this volume has relevance to all tutoring. Unlike some authors on this list, Bramley rejects the analogy between tutoring and counselling. But like most advocates of student-centered conferencing, she urges teachers to encourage students to develop independence by learning "the gentle art of shutting up."

4. Budz, Judith and Terry Grabar. "Tutorial Versus Classroom in Freshman English." *College English*, 37 (1976), 654-6.

These authors challenge the tutorial concept in this report of a controlled experiment at Fitchburg (Mass.) State Teachers College. There traditional courses produced more improvement in student writing than courses including tutorial sessions. (See Freedman and Nold below.)

5. Burns, Rex S. and Robert C. Jones. *Two Experimental Approaches to Freshman Composition—Lecture Tutorial and Team Teaching*. ERIC ED 015 214.

In their account of six-minute tutorials grafted onto a lecture course, Burns and Jones report at length on student anxieties aroused by the novelty of one-to-one contact. Yet they found that the majority sensed the value of even such limited personal attention and asked for longer sessions.

6. Carnicelli, Thomas. "The Writing Conference: A One-to-One Conversation." In *Eight Approaches to Teacher Composition*. Ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. Mc Clelland. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1980, pp. 101-131.

Basically a brief for frequent conferences to ensure teacher intervention during the composing process, this article reports on a survey of 1800 student course evaluations from the University of New

Hampshire. An associate of Donald Murray, Carnicelli also lists six tasks that the tutor should complete in each session, including careful reading of the student paper, offering encouragement, asking questions that involve the student, evaluating the paper, suggesting specific revisions, and listening attentively to the student. He assures the reader, “A teacher who is willing to give up classes and written comments on student papers—no great losses educationally—can teach effectively by individual conferences even with large numbers of students.” The final section offers transcripts of both successful and failed conferences. These thirty pages add up to a persuasive case for one-to-one teaching in the writing course.

7. Cooper, Charles. “Responding to Student Writing.” In *The Writing Processes of Students*. Ed. by Walter Perry and Patrick Finn. Buffalo: State University of New York, 1975, 31–39.

Cooper argues for response to student writing in person, either by the teacher or peers, in order to provide guidance at all stages of composing. “Personal response always seems more supportive than impersonal, distanced, written comments or corrections.” This article also organizes the conference around three central emphases: rhetorical emphasis (persona, audience, purpose), intellectual strategies emphasis (focus, references to change, references to contrast, references to logical sequence, and qualifications) and syntax emphasis (syntactic maturity).

8. Dawe, Charles W. and Edward A. Dornan. *One-to-One: Resources for Conference-Centered Writing*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981.

Though the body of this text relies on rhetorical modes and might serve non-tutorial formats as well, the authors direct the instructor’s manual to teachers interested in the conference-centered approach. In addition to advice on running the tutorial classroom, they offer helpful tips on conducting conferences and a list of priorities for dealing with student writing. Lively and readable, their advice follows a short preface by Roger Garrison.

9. Duke, Charles. “The Student-Centered Conference and the Writing Process.” *English Journal*, 64, No. 9 (1975), 44–47.

Duke offers five tactics borrowed from counselling for use in

writing conferences: focusing, clarifying, promoting self-esteem, providing reassurance, and offering non-directive leads. He argues that a non-directive approach frees the student from anxieties that prevent him from solving his own problems. “The [goal] of the writing conference is...to help the student reach the point where he feels comfortable talking about his writing and where he becomes willing to examine it on his own, inside and outside the conference environment.” This often-cited article should also reduce the anxieties of anyone about to tutor for the first time.

10. Fassler, Barbara. “The Red Pen Revisited: Teaching Composition Through Student Conferences.” *College English*, 40 (1978), 186–190.

In agreement with the basic position of tutorial advocates, Fassler summarizes the benefits to teacher and student from the use of conferences rather than marking to assess student writing.

11. Fisher, Lester and Donald Murray. “Perhaps the Professor Should Cut Class.” *College English*, 35 (1973), 169–173.

Fisher and Murray sketch a course without class meetings, taught entirely by office conferences. In this account of their procedures, they urge the view of writing as a craft, teachable in an orderly, rational manner to students of all abilities. Though few teachers have the option to follow their lead in abandoning classes, much of what they say applies to any sort of conferencing.

12. Freedman, S.W. and Ellen Nold. “On Budz and Grabar’s ‘Tutorial Vs. Classroom’ Study.” *College English*, 38 (1976), 427–429.

Roused by an earlier study (see Budz and Grabar above) finding little value in the tutorial adjunct of a freshman composition course, Freedman and Nold blame the experimental design for these discouraging results. They find the report unclear and incomplete as well. In rebuttal, Budz and Grabar counter some of their critics’ claims and urge further research to clarify remaining questions. This dispute typifies the state of existing studies aimed at testing the value of one-to-one instruction. Lack of resources now guarantees that we will have few final, quantitative answers for a long time, if ever.

13. Garrison, Roger. "One-to-One: Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition." *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2, No. 1 (1974), 55-84.

This influential article summarizes and systematizes the movement toward the workshop classroom. With characteristic gusto, Garrison asserts the failure of traditional methods and describes his own practice. Though few teachers can hope to equal his pace of two- to three-minute conferences, most will find that his list of priorities and discussion of the way he uses them to deal with student writing answers many of their questions about the tutorial approach.

14. Garrison, Roger. *One-to-One: Making Writing Instruction Effective*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

Designed as the teacher's manual for the author's text, *How a Writer Works*, this booklet summarizes the operation of the tutorial classroom, including suggestions for keeping students working, recording conferences and completed assignments, overcoming student anxiety, and similar pointers for those who want help in managing this kind of instruction. His practical emphasis no doubt results from questions raised by readers during the seven years since the publication of his original article.

15. Gibson, Walker. "The Writing Teacher as a Dumb Reader." *College Composition and Communication*, 30 (1979), 192-5.

Proposing reader-centered comment on student writing, Gibson tells how he plays the role of reader to help the writer sharpen his sense of audience. Such a strategy dramatizes for the student how "dumb" the reader remains because he cannot read the writer's mind and can only respond to what he finds on the page. This witty account offers a useful device for aiding students in the final stages of revision.

16. Gutschow, Deanna. "Stopping the March Through Georgia." In *On Righting Writing*. Ed. Ouida H. Clapp. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975, pp. 96-100.

One of many eager to expand the student role in the conference, Gutschow urges the teacher to structure the conference as a dialogue. She feels such a conversation will train the student to talk to himself as

Readings on The Tutorial Classroom

he writes, thus imitating the self-critical habits of skilled writers. This article reminds the tutor of one of the long-range goals that should guide his practice.

17. Harris, Muriel. "The Teacher as Coach, Commentator and Counsellor," Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979. ERIC ED 172 223.

In this paper Harris sketches the writing conference as a complex performance in which the tutor must shift roles rapidly according to the student's need. Admitting that merely holding conferences does not guarantee better student writing, she combines features of several well-known models in her recommendations, which range from teacher-centered to student-centered strategies.

18. Hawes, Lorna and Barbara Richards. "A Workshop Approach to Teaching Composition." *Teaching English as an Addition Language Occasional Paper*, 1, No. 1 (1977), 1-16. ERIC ED 155 936.

Before explaining how the Garrison method works for students learning English as a foreign language, Hawes and Richards give one of the fullest accounts in print of Garrison's own classroom. They endorse his practice without reservation, even though it requires major adjustments for foreign students used to the highly directive teaching methods common to many of their homelands.

19. Hiatt, Mary. "Students at Bay: The Myth of the Conference." *College Composition and Communication*, 26 (1975), 38-41.

Questioning the value to the weak and defensive writer of the typical conference in the traditional writing course, this critique counters illusions about the benefits of conferencing. Faced with abstract prescriptions, the baffled student too often tunes out and schemes for early escape. Her analysis should prod every tutor to examine his own practice and his students' responses.

20. Jacobs, Suzanne and Adela B. Karliner. "Helping Writers to Think." *College English*, 38 (1977), 489-505.

Jacobs and Karliner conducted a revealing study in which they

analyzed two tape-recorded teacher-student conferences and compared pre-conference and post-conference drafts of student papers. They conclude that a directive, teacher-centered approach works well when students need straight-forward advice on organization, grammar, or diction. However, to encourage major revision of a paper's content, they advise the teacher to shift the initiative to the student. To signal this shift, the tutor can ask open questions, summarize what the student has said, or take notes on the student's comments. This phase may be full of stumbling utterances, false starts, non-sequiturs, or long pauses, but it results in more significant revisions in the final draft. Though their small sample may limit the value of their conclusions, most current writing on the conference supports them.

21. Knapp, John. "Contract/Conference Evaluations of Freshman Composition." *College English*, 37 (1976), 647-53.

Knapp describes a tutorial course with an unusual gimmick: students sign a contract to deliver their essays by a specified date. At that point they request a conference at which their essay will be read, analyzed, and either approved or returned for revision. Likely to work best with highly motivated students who have a fair grasp of the writing process, this kind of course limits teacher intervention to the final stages of composition.

22. Laque, Carol Feiser and Phyllis A. Sherwood. *A Laboratory Approach to Writing*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977.

This publication provides one of the early statements of a growing movement to combine the one-to-one method with peer tutoring in small groups. The authors bow to the Garrison approach but believe that the tutorial classroom should provide more kinds and combinations of readers.

23. Medicott, Alexander. "Cassette Commentary: An Approach to the Teaching of Expository Writing," Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979. ERIC ED 178 942.

By tape-recording comments on papers and returning them to students before the conference, Medicott can devote the entire session

to questions raised by the student. While this method allows the teacher to respond fully to student writing, it adds to teacher preparation time and may foreclose student exploration in the conference itself. What Medicott seems to propose is a compromise between written comment and the student-centered conference valuable to the teacher unwilling to abandon traditional response to student writing.

24. Moore, Will G. *The Tutorial System and Its Future*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1968.

Moore gives an inside account of the Oxford tutorial method. He presents the goals, procedures, and unique features of the tutorial in a way that should aid American practitioners. Like so many others listed here, he insists “the tutor must not teach,” underlining the basic contrast between a lecture and the tutorial, where the student plays the central role. In his view, the skilled tutor casts himself as supporting actor rather than star in such a performance.

25. Murray, Donald. “The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference.” *College English*, 41, No. 1 (1979), 13–18.

Veteran of 30,000 writing conferences at the time of publishing this article, Murray describes the evolution of his teaching style. This highly personal account offers powerful arguments for turning the conference over to the student through use of key questions:

- What did you learn from this piece of writing?
- What do you intend to do in the next draft?
- What surprised you in the draft?
- Where is this piece of writing taking you?
- What do you like best in this piece of writing?
- What questions do you have of me?

Before long students know what he will ask and come to the conference with answers in hand. Murray sees the teacher as a fellow traveler on the student’s voyage of discovery. He believes the tutor must renounce his sense of authority in the conference and let the student take control of his own writing. One of the most readable and significant articles on this list, Murray’s tutorial autobiography has attained the status of a classic.

26. Murray, Donald. *A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

In this influential volume, a cornerstone of the tutorial movement, Murray offered one of the earliest descriptions of a writing class taught primarily by individual student-teacher conferences. Even before he came to depend on the office tutorial, Murray had developed his preference for letting the student kick off the discussion and carry the ball as long as possible. Seconded by Roger Garrison, most of his points have by now become commonplace, testifying to the impact of this work on composition teaching.

27. Newkirk, Thomas. "Read the Papers in Class." In *How to Handle the Paper Load*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979, pp. 35-41.

How can I read a paper for the first time and give the student useful advice in the short span of a classroom conference? This question comes up more frequently than any other when teachers first hear about the tutorial method. Meeting such doubts head on, Newkirk details a set of priorities that enables the tutor to diagnose problems quickly and helpfully. "A teacher who reads progressive drafts reads for different reasons at different stages of the process." To clarify this technique, Newkirk divides the reading of papers into three main stages (invention, arrangement, style or language) and provides five or more questions for the teacher to consider at each stage. At the beginning of a new stage the teacher looks first for the strengths of the draft and points them out to the student. Then he takes up each question in order until the paper satisfies him and the student moves on to the next stage. This article should score with teachers who must complete most of their conferencing during class time.

28. Reigstad, Thomas. "Conferencing Practices of Professional Writers: Ten Case Studies." Diss. Buffalo 1980.

This 365-page thesis based on transcripts of forty writing conferences by ten professional writers (including Roger Garrison, Thomas Newkirk, Walker Gibson, and Donald Murray) deserves the attention of every serious student of one-to-one methods. Reigstad groups his subjects according to three basic conference patterns: teacher-centered, collaborative, and student-centered. His categories remain debatable, but they accord with most thinking in the field and give teachers a chance to compare their own practices with those of noted peers. Though his terms may seem loaded to some readers, he defines each category carefully and resists ranking them according to

effectiveness. His early chapters give a useful account of the conferencing movement. This thesis includes a nine-page bibliography.

29. Reigstad, Thomas, Ann Matsuhashi, and Nina Luban. "One-to-One to Write: Establishing an Individual Conference Writing Place." *English Journal*, 67, No. 8 (1978), 30-35.

Aiming at guidelines for writing center tutors, these authors set up a basic conference format. In this format the tutor deals with student work according to a set of priorities, moving from general to specific concerns. Their priorities correspond to those of Garrison and many other tutorial advocates. They recognize that tutors must avoid exhaustive criticism of student writing and focus instead on the area needing first attention.

30. Schiff, Peter. "The Teacher-Student Writing Conference: New Approaches," Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, Kansas City, Missouri, November 23-25, 1978. ERIC ED 165 190.

Most radical of all writers on the conference, Peter Schiff offers a set of strategies that might succeed with those students whose verbal or emotional handicaps prevent their progress in one of the standard conferences. For example, the teacher may invite the student to watch him perform some stage of the composing process. With the student who cannot even face the contact with paper and pencil required by free writing, such an opportunity might help him overcome his illusion that a first draft must be flawless. Even if she finds these strategies unsuitable for regular use, every tutor ought to have a list of them in her desk drawer to consult in times of need.