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## Review: Teaching One-on-One

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## Review

### Muriel Harris, *Teaching One-on-One: The Writing Conference* (Urbana: NCTE, 1986)

Diana George

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Muriel Harris' work in Purdue's Writing Center has given her what I am going to call the courage to talk about the tough stuff. In her most recent book, *Teaching One-on-One: The Writing Conference*, Harris asks the following tough questions: What do we actually *do* when a student sits down next to us, pulls out a paper, and asks for help? What do we *DO* when a student seems to have nothing to say or no way of understanding us? What do we *do* with foreign nationals who must struggle through our language to say what they could easily say in their own? What do we *do* when classroom instruction has failed to reach our students and we have 30 students per class and we want to teach them as best we can?

Writing centers are used to addressing the hard questions. They are places we send our students when we are stumped, and Muriel Harris is the kind of person those students encounter when they walk through the door. Harris reminds us that during one-on-one instruction no one can hide. We cannot pretend or hope that a student's errors will disappear with another draft if we do not address ourselves to ways of correcting those errors. *Teaching One-on-One* is a book that gives teachers a true understanding of what it means to teach writing by conferencing.

The book's audience is a broad one: new writing teachers; old writing teachers who do not currently use one-on-one instruction or have tried it unsuccessfully; tutors in the writing center; and high school English teachers

who must work within a rigidly prescribed structure. The attempt to reach such a diverse audience can cause problems in a text, for there are clearly times when Harris is talking to one group and not another. Yet the book is thorough enough and intelligent enough in its investigation of one-on-one instruction that diversity is one of this text's real strengths.

Harris' text offers practical advice on how to run an effective writing conference: What can you cover in fifteen minutes? What happens when a conference runs overtime? When should conferences be scheduled? How should student and teacher sit? (Sit side-by-side, Harris says. This is not a confrontation; it is a collaboration.) How do we train new teachers to conference? The practical advice also includes some strategies for teaching composing skills and grammatical correctness to students and practice activities for teaching one-on-one to new instructors.

The real power of this book is, however, not in its practical side. More than anything, *Teaching One-on-One* is a book about the nature of one-on-one instruction. Harris carefully examines both student and teacher in this very delicate relationship. Students may be resistant or shy; teachers can be either evaluator or collaborator. She encourages us to know what role it is that we are playing each time we conference.

In her discussion of these roles, Harris is careful to remind us that there is no one way, no clear set of rules which will carry us through every conference. If there is a rule at all for Harris, that rule seems to be, "Stay flexible." It is a rule that comes straight from the writing center experience. Historically, tutors have had to be flexible in their dealings with both students and teachers. After all, tutors work with assignments they have not designed and with teaching strategies they may not embrace. Their job is to focus on the student: How might we help this one student sitting right here, right now?

That flexibility has led Harris to remind us of the many differences we might encounter in our own classes. For example, Harris cites Mike Rose's study on writer's block which indicates that students have various cognitive styles. Besides cognitive differences, the teacher might encounter cultural differences and differences in personality. In other words, students are not all alike. The conference situation gives us the opportunity to individualize instruction in a way that the classroom does not readily allow.

More than the practical, however, Harris has carefully set out the theoretical bases upon which one-on-one instruction rests. Her discussions of theory and practice reveal the plurality of her approach. Like a good tutor, Harris is willing to work within the diversity of the writing and teaching community. She draws on the work of Roger Garrison as well as the work of Don Murray. She lets tutors speak, and she lets students speak.

Harris' book opens with a description of the theoretical concerns of one-on-one instruction. She points out that "when we incorporate conferences into composition teaching, we are also making a number of assumptions about what writing is and what the writing teacher's role is" (5). A composition class structured around the writing conference assumes that writing is a discovery tool, that revision can be taught as a part of the process of writing, that writing does not only occur between writer and text but is a social interaction among writer, text, and reader.

Although Harris does not dismiss peer critiquing in classrooms, she does remind us that an instructor can provide feedback that peers cannot provide. Whether we use the conference as the sole means of writing instruction or as an addition to classroom and group work, Harris insists that what students can get from instructors in a one-on-one situation is invaluable.

I found her discussion of written versus oral feedback particularly powerful. She talks, for example, of the kinds of comments we often write on students' papers: "interesting," "nice work," "be more specific" (19). "In the conference," Harris reminds us, "confusion can be dissipated by talk . . . Areas of misunderstanding on both sides melt away, and what might have been an adversary relationship turns into a helping one" (20-1). Written comments, she finds, tend to focus on correcting mechanics. Oral comments do not as frequently address mechanics but rather address larger issues. And oral comments rarely rely on the jargon we must use as shorthand in written responses. Her discussion draws on the work of Peter Schiff, Dean Memering, Charles Cooper, Barry Kroll and others who have studied both conferencing and responding to student texts. In fact, this text can now stand as an important resource for anyone studying the history of scholarship on conferencing and on responding to student writing.

Throughout her book, Harris relies on the words of students, on excerpts from student conferences, and on sample conferences. Those words serve repeatedly to draw us back into our own conferences and remind us of how very human we all are. Our students can often be as perceptive as we are about writing problems. What they seem to need is the opportunity to interact with someone who can respond to their questions or ideas and who is truly interested in hearing what they have to say.

Sample conferences range from conferences with Roger Garrison and Don Murray, acknowledged specialists in the field, to conferences with peer tutors who are very likely in the process of discovering a great deal about writing, about teaching, and about themselves. The sample conferences also remind us of the potential diversity of writing conferences. They are all different because students, tutors, and situations are all very different. A single model simply will not work here.

*One-on-One* is a book useful for new teachers and old. Its practical suggestions make it an invaluable resource for new teachers. Its careful scrutiny of the writing conference as an integral part of teaching written composition should make it a powerful tool for those of us who have been teaching writing for some time now.

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