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Talking It Over: A Qualitative Study of Writing Center Conferencing

Willa Wolcott

Individual student-teacher conferences form a primary teaching tool in most writing centers. The key role such conferences play is conveyed in Mary Croft's statement, "Our greatest asset is the fact that the conference method is the heart of writing center teaching—and the individualization provided by the conference holds the key to success with reluctant writers" (172). It is further implied in Stephen North's comment that the main purpose of writing centers is to talk to writers and in Elizabeth Rorschach's claim that students' compositions are the only materials a writing center needs. In the Writing Center at the University of Florida, conferences are the means by which students from many different courses can obtain individual help on specific compositions. In addition, the conferences provide a "last chance" for those students struggling to pass the essay subset of the state-mandated College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST). Because of the variety of students served by center conferences, I undertook to study what such conferencing in a writing center entails. I wanted, first, to examine the dynamics of conferencing to see whether any of the conferencing models identified by Thomas Reigstad in his dissertation "Conferencing Practices of Professional Writers: Ten Case Studies" apply in a writing center context; second, to explore the content of the conferences themselves to see whether they focus on discourse- or surface-level issues; and finally, to determine how effective the conferences are perceived to be by the tutors.

Rationale

The context of the writing center makes conferencing an especially demanding form of teaching. Not only may the students using the writing
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center range from freshman basic writers to graduate students, but the courses for which they seek help may be equally diverse. In addition, students often use the center on an irregular basis, thereby minimizing the possibility of having one tutor monitor their writing development. Most important, perhaps, they come to the center with concrete expectations. They want help on a given composition and often resist discussions of such larger issues as invention or organization or coherence unless these areas directly impinge upon their existing product.

The tutors themselves occupy a unique position in a writing center context. Unlike course instructors who generate the assignments, center tutors are "middlemen," hearing about assignments secondhand; then, too, they are unfamiliar with the standards of a particular class or with the material emphasized. Moreover, they must deal with a variety of essays immediately, with no time allowed for prior reading or reflection. Because of these complexities, conferencing in a writing center can be a far different experience from that of conferencing in a classroom context.

Previous Research

Previous research has primarily compared conferencing in a classroom to more traditional methods of instruction. For example, studies by Maddox (1981) and by Smith and Bretcko (1974) directly compare classes which emphasize conferencing to classes in which other instructional activities are used. In still other studies, such as those by Armstrong (1979), Sutton and Arnold (1974), Budz and Grabar (1976), and Tomlinson (1975), conferencing, as part of an overall instruction method, is indirectly compared to other teaching approaches. Other works, such as a dissertation by Fritts (1976) and a study by Kates (1972), examine the extent of writing improvement made when conferences are used instead of teacher comments.

The more recent qualitative studies of Thomas Reigstad (1980), of Sarah Warshauer Freedman and Melanie Sperling (1985), and of Carolyn Walker and David Elias (1987) analyze what occurs within the conference process itself. For example, Freedman and Sperling examine the initial conferences of an experienced teacher with four classroom students to determine whether the level of the students' achievement affects either the interaction between student and teacher or the focus of the conference itself. In a similar vein, Walker and Elias study ten conferences which have been rated as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory by both the participating students and tutors to determine the reason for the ratings. They conclude that the agenda of the conferences—the evaluation of the student's work—is more important than the amount of talking the tutors do.
In his dissertation, Reigstad observes the conference practices of ten professional writer-teachers working with four students each, and he records his subsequent interviews of both students and faculty. He proposes the following three conferencing models: In the teacher-student model, the teacher is the expert and does most of the talking and the work; in the collaborative model—the most common one—the teacher and student work together to solve the writing problems; and in the student-centered model, the student determines the direction of the conference and does most of the work (Reigstad and McAndrew 28-33). My purpose in the present study was to determine whether these same patterns apply to conferencing in a writing center context.

Methodology

To ascertain what transpires in writing center conferences, I observed twelve individual conferences given as part of the non-credit, open-time program of the University of Florida Writing Center during two six-week summer terms in 1987. One limitation of my study is my involvement in the center; as I have coordinated the writing program there for a number of years, my viewpoint is not completely objective. However, the tutors, who knew I was there for research purposes and not for evaluative reasons, did not appear to mind. Previously, they had completed a questionnaire on conferencing, and during the summer they met with me individually for private, 40-minute interviews. The seven tutors, six of whom were males, were mature graduate students ranging in age from their early thirties to their mid-forties. All experienced teachers, they came from different disciplines.

In addition to teaching two credit-bearing writing center classes for Special Admission students, each tutor's duties included conferencing several hours a week in the non-credit, open-time program available to any student in the University. The tutors did not participate in any training program, but they were required to study a graduate manual and to read essays, such as Donald Murray's article on conferencing or chapters by Steward and Croft. Conferencing practices were frequently discussed at regular staff meetings as well.

Although my sample was not quite as diverse as I had hoped it would be, fifty percent of the students observed were male and fifty percent, female. They included whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians; a little over half spoke English as a second language, a slightly higher percentage than the 46% of international students typically using the center.

The students represented three different programs—a technical writing course, composition courses ENC 1101/1102, and a special preparatory
program for students who had failed the essay subset of the state-mandated College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST). Each group of students had distinct characteristics and different writing requirements. For example, the technical writing students were usually seniors or fifth-year students, often very concerned about passing a difficult technical writing course. Though not directly referred, they had been encouraged to work in the center. Moreover, because they were not allowed to make many errors before failing an essay, the students were aggressive about seeking help.

The ENC 1101/1102 students were generally freshmen or sophomores, taking the two required composition courses—"Expository and Argumentative Writing" and "Writing About Literature." Some had been referred to the center, but others came voluntarily to receive help with their writing problems. Only two of the twelve conferences I observed dealt with these courses, as the courses typically have smaller enrollments during the summer terms than they do during the regular academic year.

The third group was comprised of students who had failed the essay subset of the state CLAST exam necessary for graduation. They were required by the Registrar's office to attend the writing center on a regular basis, thereby showing a genuine effort on their part to improve weak writing skills. The students for whom this program was compulsory were generally juniors or seniors, and many spoke English as a second language. They had a weekly writing center conference on their timed writings as part of their preparation to re-take the CLAST essay.

My study focused on tutors' conferencing experiences with these three groups of students who comprise a major portion of the center's student body. Because I had previously given the tutors an open-ended questionnaire to complete (as shown in Appendix B), they had already reflected on their conference experiences. In addition, several tutors had voluntarily logged ongoing entries into a small journal on the conference table. Their interviews, together with the questionnaires and log, confirmed many of my observations and gave new insights into what I had seen occurring.

Discussion and Results

The Dynamics of Conferencing

Almost all the conferences began in a business-like manner, with no attention to social courtesies. Neither the tutors nor the students bothered with greetings of any type; rather, with such comments as "Do you have a paper you want me to look over?" they settled down to the work at hand—namely, the students' texts. When the tutors discussed in their interviews the way in which they opened their conferences, several referred
to the business-like quality of the conferences. Tutors One and Two, for example, felt that it was important for students to know they were there for a purpose, and Tutor Six said that it was also essential for tutors to show they took students’ writing seriously. Tutor Four noted that it was frequently the student who brought a business-like quality to the discussions. Her views were corroborated by Tutor Seven, who attributed the seriousness of the atmosphere to the thirty minutes allotted for conferences, as well as to students’ general dislike of writing and subsequent eagerness to “get through” the conferences. Perhaps the maturity of the tutors added to the business-like tone.

Despite the business-like atmosphere, the actual conferences did not reflect any tension or strain. Generally, the students showed through their non-verbal behavior that they were relaxed, and often laughter—though sometimes self-conscious—could be heard. Occasionally, the tutor would make a personal comment or casual reference in the middle of the discussion; only in three of the twelve conferences had the tutors previously met the students with whom they were working. Upon leaving, the students typically expressed their appreciation and received a “You’re welcome” or “Glad to help” in return. As Tutor Two observed, it was important to end on a friendly or warm note. Thus, the conferences could be broadly characterized as polite, efficient, and business-like.

Because work on the papers began so quickly during the conferences, I examined how students became actively engaged in the process. The first observations suggested that student engagement was tied to gender, as two female technical writing students, a white and an Asian, took several minutes longer than their male counterparts before they began to ask questions or respond with more than monosyllabic answers. However, the sex stereotype was not maintained, as I subsequently observed a black female ENC 1101 student actively participate in her conference from the very beginning, while conversely, a black male CLAST student took many minutes of “warming up” before becoming involved with his paper. In still other CLAST observations, both a Hispanic female and Hispanic male actively participated in the discussion.

None of the tutors interviewed felt that the passivity or activity of the students hinged upon gender. However, two believed that a partial link might exist between the program that students were from and their involvement in the conferences. For example, Tutor Seven, whose views were echoed by another, pointed out that some of the CLAST students’ passivity might be due to their demoralized attitude about writing. A different viewpoint was offered by Tutor Four, who noted that some CLAST students became defensive about their writing and argued about their work.
Still other tutors cited personality types or cultural attitudes toward authority as potential factors affecting student involvement.

The issue of student involvement bothered the instructors to varying degrees. Tutors One and Six, for example, seemed unperturbed by the passivity of some students, with Tutor One noting that students' very appearance in the center—the CLAST compulsory program notwithstanding—signified some degree of motivation. Other tutors expressed more concern, such as when Tutor Four noted, "Some students sit there like knots." The most frustration occurred for Tutor Five, who stated, "I try to be outgoing with those who sit passively. I'm uncomfortable with anyone who just sits."

The tutors used a variety of strategies to elicit their students' participation. Questions—either open-ended or closed—were often a central means for engaging students in the dialogue; the questions covered both surface features and discourse issues. Tutor Five, for example, explained in his interview that he typically asks, "What is this assignment for?" or "What are some areas that you're having problems with?"; similarly, in one conference, Tutor Two asked, "Is there anything in particular you don't feel comfortable about?" while Tutor Seven inquired directly about a flawed sentence.

Although the tutors actively sought to engage all the students, some of whom were more assertive than others, the tutors, without exception, directed the conferences. As Tutor Five explained, it is the tutors who "drive the conversations." Both in the range of problems the tutors addressed and in the way the tutors limited discussions either to students' texts or to the writing process itself, the conferences closely followed the teacher-student model identified by Reigstad. Although some tutors made an occasional personal comment during a conference, general conversation, or what Reigstad and McAndrew label "off-the-paper, exploratory talk" (30), was rare.

At the same time, the teacher-student model was not entirely applicable to the writing center tutors. Unlike the teacher-centered model described by Reigstad, in which the tutor typically does much of the work, the writing center tutors deliberately tried to have the students make the changes. For example, in one observation with a freshman composition student, Tutor One explained the function of topic sentences and then sent the student back to her desk to try writing her paragraphs again. Similarly, when another ENC 1101 student wanted the tutor to supply an alternative phrase, Tutor Five responded, "Think it through. Think of four or five phrases that might work."

In their interviews, questionnaires, and log, tutors stressed the need for having the students do the work. Noting that the purpose of conferencing is
to bring students to an awareness of their problems, Tutor Three observed that it was important for students to understand in order to be able to find their own answers. Other tutors expressed concern about striking a balance between helping students deal with complex problems, such as tangled sentence structure, and making them responsible for their own work. Tutor Five articulated a common solution:

Some of what I do is model what a good sentence would look like. There is no use in being Socratic or playing guessing games with such little time. I build a bridge of my words with their words. In any kind of writing there are solid points you can bridge over and show the student how it would go. . . . I think that's useful and I get a sense of comprehension. As an ethical point, I can only do this a little. I can't do it all.

Other than leaving the actual work up to the students, the writing center tutors, like the teachers in Reigstad's teacher-student model, were in charge. The tendency of the seven tutors to direct the movement of the conferences may be attributed to several factors. In practical terms, the tutors needed to read the papers before responding to students' concerns; given the limited conference time, they may also have wished to address the more serious problems first. Finally, they may simply have felt more comfortable with the teacher-as-authoritarian role rather than the teacher-as-facilitator role. Not only were all experienced teachers, but many were also conducting classes during the same term that I was observing them. They may not have been able—or willing—to shed the more formal role for that of the student-centered model in which the student assumes charge.

This formal, authoritarian attitude was perhaps both a cause and an effect of students' perceptions of the tutors' roles. When I asked the tutors how they thought students viewed them, virtually all the tutors believed they were probably seen as experts, if not as actual authority figures. Tutor Seven, for example, commented that students—especially those from technical writing—undoubtedly perceived the center tutors as authority figures who were there to help them, almost to “guarantee” them success. (The validity of his view was confirmed during one observation, when a technical writing student urgently inquired, “From what you’ve seen, I won’t get an F, will I?”) Others, such as Tutor Four, spoke of the respect that students typically showed her. Tutor One noted that students probably perceived them as “knowledgeable but not grade-givers,” a point he found especially gratifying; in fact, he likened his role to that of an uncle rather than that of a parent. Tutor Two also found this intermediate role—between that of peers and that of “stuffy professors”—to be a perfect blend.

Focus of the Conferences

A second question for this study was whether the conferences primarily focused on discourse-level issues or surface features. The observations,
interviews, and staff responses to the questionnaires suggested that the focus largely depended on an interplay of three factors: course constraints, students' needs—either implicit or explicit—and tutors' perceptions of important areas in writing.

For technical writing students, course constraints seemed especially important in determining the focus. Their assignments typically contained a stated purpose and audience and often required them to adopt a certain role, such as that of a production manager or a university official. Their conferences dealt only briefly with discourse issues. For example, one student asked whether the analytic approach she had taken was correct, and another asked whether she was being too general in a certain passage. Still another student inquired about the function of a conclusion and the use of excessive detail. However, all students, obviously driven by a real concern about failing their essays, also inquired about surface features—about correct capitalization, the punctuation of a title, or the structure of a sentence. In fact, the restrictive nature of technical writing conferences recurred as a theme in the interviews of all seven tutors, and several pointed out that the constraints of the technical writing papers made these conferences less interesting to them personally. Labeling these conferences as "fill-in-the-blanks," some tutors saw the focus as chiefly that of dealing with what one called "a text that is pretty archetypal, almost stylized." Because the students were seeking a specific kind of help, Tutor Two felt these conferences were less holistic than those involving other types of writing.

In contrast to the technical writing conferences, the two conferences on "Writing About Literature" focused almost exclusively on rhetorical issues. Tutor One explained to one student the need for topic sentences that tie into the thesis statement and drew a series of diagrams to illustrate these links. No mention was made of surface features at all in the short conference. In Tutor Five's discussion of The Color Purple with a young woman, he emphasized the student's need to clarify certain terms for her audience, to provide additional details, and to continue to think through her ideas.

During the interviews, most tutors again reflected similar views about these English conferences. For several, the chief focus of the conferences lay in helping students to see where their problems lay, to understand where they had misinterpreted the assignments, or to learn how to go about analyzing their materials. The tutors generally enjoyed these conferences because they could discuss the writing process in larger terms with the students and could interest them in the "story to be told."

Because the writing center conferences comprised the major instruction for weak writers preparing to retake the essay subset of the CLAST exam, these conferences, more than any others, typically were eclectic in focus. They emphasized what the tutors considered most important for a given
student at a given moment. The highly individualized nature of the CLAST conferences recurred as a theme during the interviews. For example, Tutor Five emphasized the importance of giving encouragement to those students who consider writing their enemy; likewise, other instructors said they tried to demonstrate what is involved in writing a good essay. Tutor One, envisioning four "levels of competence" that ranged from the generation and organization of ideas to clarity and accuracy of their expression, focused his CLAST conferences on the basis of the operating level of the individual student. Similarly, Tutor Six grouped related problems together into a "hierarchy of errors" as a basis for his discussion.

Although all the conferences differed depending on student needs and program, one common thread running throughout was a concern for diction in its broadest sense. With the international students, the tutors focused mainly on idiomatic usage. The explanation Tutor Three gave to one student on the difference between "true to me" and "true for me" was typical, as was Tutor Five's discussion of the need to be sensitive to the meaning of prepositions and their exceptions. For all students, precision of word choice and the proper level of diction were emphasized. Tutor Two urged a technical writing student to find more formal words for good and bad, and another tutor advised a student to replace a "low-level word" with a better word.

Despite the frequent references to word choice, most of the students seemed unconcerned about this aspect of writing. In view of Lillian Bridwell's study in which word-level changes were found to be the most common revision made by students, this apparent disinterest among conference students was striking. Similarly, not all tutors perceived diction as a primary concern of their discussion. Tutor Seven, for example, stated that he had not generally found diction to be as pervasive an issue as other tutors deemed it to be. Likewise, Tutor One noted that he typically left diction to the last, considering it to be a question of "fine-tuning."

Tutor Two, on the other hand, viewed diction as the "centerpiece of conferences." Admitting that style was important to him, he stated that he desired to give students a sense that "writing is more than a grammatically correct train of words." Tutor Five also indicated that he tried to make his students aware of the levels of diction that can change for various audiences. To other tutors, diction was also significant. They attributed students' frequent difficulties with word choice to their unawareness of the different demands made by spoken and written English. Thus, the emphasis on diction that appeared in many conferences was, in fact, as important an issue to most tutors—albeit to varying degrees—as it was a source of disinterest to most students.
As can be seen, then, the conferences typically wove back and forth between larger questions of organization, development, and audience to surface features of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The focus of each conference depended on the course the students were taking and the students' needs, as well as the tutors' priorities.

Perceptions of Effectiveness

Interviews with the tutors were critical for providing answers to the third question—how effective the conferences were perceived to be. To obtain the tutors' insights, I asked what they thought the significance of the conferences was for students—that is, what students took away with them (see Appendix A).

Repeatedly, the tutors expressed frustration that some students were unrealistic in their expectations, that they wanted nothing more than proofreading with an assurance of a perfect product. They cited as examples those students who brought to conferences papers which were far too long or far too riddled with problems to be handled effectively in a conference setting. Convincing students that the purpose of the conferences was to help them become better writers and not to “patch up” their papers was not always easy. As this theme recurred in the log and in the tutors' answers on the questionnaire, it clearly was perceived as one of the biggest problems of conferencing in the writing center.

At the same time, the tutors felt that most students benefited from the conferences, taking away something broader than the papers they had brought for discussion. The nature of these long-term benefits varied again according to the perceptions and priorities of the tutors. Tutor Seven, for example, felt that students learned certain rules and their applications. Tutor Five expressed a similar viewpoint, indicating that many students liked to take away with them concrete rules that would eliminate “patterned problems” in their writing. In addition, he, like Tutor Six, believed students also left with a more positive self-image about their ability to write.

Although some tutors felt that it was harder for students to carry away with them an understanding of rhetorical concepts, other tutors believed that the real value of the conferences lay in the increased insight into writing that students obtained. Two tutors thought students left with a sense of the importance of writing, as well as some comprehension of the recursive nature of the writing process. Tutor One, for example, tried to link the writing steps to students' “normal mode of informal thinking” so that they could better understand that writing is actually a communicating process and not a rote, school task.

This emphasis on writing as communication appeared indirectly in the frequent references made during the observations to the role of the reader.
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Tutor Two reminded a CLAST student that the student was writing for an audience, while Tutors Five and One informed their composition students that a reader other than the tutor must understand what they had written. Tutor One emphasized that “being a reader and a writer at the same time is 90% of doing a good job.” Moreover, in their very act of responding to the students’ texts, of providing what Muriel Harris calls a “running summary” (109), the tutors actively modeled for the students the roles and needs of readers. Thus, even though the actual effectiveness of the conferences is not easy to determine since most students take their final revisions and products away, the interviews suggest that most tutors perceive conferencing to be generally effective.

Conclusion

As can be seen, then, a few basic patterns emerge from this study of conferencing. Within the context of the Writing Center at the University of Florida, the conference dynamics typically reflect the teacher-centered model of conferencing as described by Thomas Reigstad. Although the tutors and students tend to collaborate more as each conference progresses, the tutors are seen as experts and clearly direct the course the conferences take. Often tutors use the conferences to provide mini-lessons for students. Without exception, the conferences are task-oriented and business-like.

The conferences blend a discussion of discourse-level issues with surface features; in almost all cases, they include a mention of diction as well. The particular focus of any given conference seems largely dependent upon the requirements of the course for which the students are seeking help. However, the special needs of the students—especially international students—and the priorities of the tutors themselves also influence the focus of the conferences. The tutors perceive the conferences to have significance beyond the completion of the immediate task.

One final pattern that recurs throughout the observations is the theme of individuality; it is underscored by tutors’ emphasis on the “tailor-made” or “case-by-case” nature of the conferences. Each conference represents a unique blending of variables—tutor personality, tutor priorities, student personality, student background, and student text. As Tutor Six noted, conferencing is analogous to playing a game where the rules and procedures remain the same but each experience and each outcome are different.

Individualization is also important in terms of this study itself. That is, these findings illustrate the importance of conferencing as a tool in one writing center. The results do not necessarily apply to other writing centers, which may have peer tutors, a different student body, different institutional structure, and different goals. Rather, the complexity inherent in each
conference serves as a microcosm of the overall conferencing approach used by writing centers in general—at once affecting and reflecting the context of their individual schools.

Works Cited


Appendix A

Interview Guide

I. Explanation of the purpose of the interview
   A. Anonymity of participants
   B. Use of tape recorder

II. How do you generally begin your conferences?
   A. Do you allow time for social preliminaries?
   B. If so, who initiates the socializing?
   C. What tone do you think this sets for the conferences?
   D. Do the conferences end in the same manner?

III. How do you get students to participate actively in your conferences?
   A. Are there any strategies you use?
   B. Have you noticed any patterns of differences as far as students' participation is concerned?

IV. Do you find your conferencing task to be similar or different when you conduct conferences with students from various courses—with students from technical writing or students from CLAST, for instance?
   A. If the task is different, how does it differ?
   B. How do you deal with the differences?
   C. Are there different strategies you use?
   D. If the task is similar, how is it alike?
   E. What similar strategy do you follow?

V. What is the chief focus of the conferences you typically give—discourse-level or surface-level problems?
   A. Is there any variation to this focus?
   B. If so, to what do you attribute this variation—to the course, to the paper, or to the students themselves?

VI. What part does diction play in your conferences? Is it a common concern or not?
   A. If you frequently discuss matters of diction, what aspects do you focus on most—on precision, word economy, idiomatic usage, or what?

VII. How do you think students envision your role? Since you do not give grades, how do they seem to view you?

VIII. What do you feel is the main significance of the conferences for the individual students? What do you think they take away from these conferences?
   A. Do you feel they transfer any of the learning from this paper to others?
   B. Do you see any variations among groups of students in this regard?

IX. Do you have any problems or concerns about conferencing that we have not covered here?
Appendix B

Instructor Questionnaire on Conferences

Please answer the following questions as completely as your past experiences in the Writing Center allow:

1. What features do your conferences most often emphasize?

2. Are you able to discuss the writing process with most of your students? Why or why not?

3. Are you able to enlist the active participation of students in their conferences with you?

4. What are two or three problems that you frequently encounter in giving conferences?

5. Do you find it difficult to deal with papers from so many different courses? Is there any way of working around these difficulties?

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