

1-1-1989

"A Dialogue of One": Orality and Literacy in the Writing Center

Daniel T. Lochman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

Lochman, Daniel T. (1989) ""A Dialogue of One": Orality and Literacy in the Writing Center," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1198>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

“A Dialogue of One”: Orality and Literacy in the Writing Center

Daniel T. Lochman

The empowering of writers touches close to interests common to writing centers—no one associated with one-to-one conversation can ignore the benefits of collaboration, the reality and effects of interpretive communities, and the intellectual respect and consideration owed to students by teachers. Yet empowering writers should mean more than simply acknowledging social backgrounds and encouraging self-disclosing discussion and listening (though both activities are of course vital). It should also create opportunities and methods for students to speak powerfully in discourse appropriate to the academy.

Often students lack fluency in such discourse. They may be inexperienced in methods of sophisticated analysis, evaluation, and argument even though they may excel in the generation of narrative, summary, and other genres close to orality. Transition from skill in oral culture to sophisticated literacy requires the conjunction of the text-creating voice of the writer with the critical voice of the writer-as-reader, the two together creating a dialectic capable of disclosing ideas clearly. The writing center offers one means of fleshing out and drawing together what Donald Murray has called the writing and reading selves of a writer; effective written expression demands an astute and wary critical voice on the part of the writer (“Teaching” 165), a voice that acts as a kind of alter ego in the act of revising, a voice that takes over the role of an oral respondent. The dialogue that occurs in writing centers permits students to internalize their reading selves in the act of revision: the dialogue of two becomes “a dialogue of one.”

The phrase “dialogue of one” is found in John Donne’s lyric “The Ecstasy,” in which it describes the transcendent unity of a lover and mistress, each transfixed for a day in a “negotiation”—a transaction or



communication of souls effected by the juncture of lines of sight between their locked eyes. Donne's speaker proclaims that the communication relies on the "soul's language"—speech so powerful that it could move even an uninvolved onlooker to sympathy by its purity and goodness. It concludes with a metaphysically complex distinction between the corporal love observed by "weak men" and spiritual love available to those who have loved "such as we" and who have heard this "dialogue of one" in its truest form (Gardner 239-242). Though a great deal could be—and has been—said about the poem, I am interested here in its description of intellectual communication as a unity of disparate voices that produces a new, unified creation. The speaking and hearing voices merge through their "negotiation," with the result that the persona's singular first-person pronouns change to plural at the poem's conclusion. Communication becomes creative; its participants unite to form a "new soul" that is more powerful and independent than its individual constituents. This process of creation through communication is analogous to the learning which occurs in the one-to-one conference at the writing center. The lines of vision in Donne's dialogue mirror the voices of writing counselors and students who seek collaboratively to create a new, third voice capable of critical evaluation and editorial practice.

Writing counselors, peer or professional, provide alternative voices for student writers. Though at times they assume a teaching voice to clarify principles, counselors model a reading voice, an external reading self, an alter ego, a knowledgeable source of reflective, back-looping questions. As Muriel Harris observes, effective counselors refrain from assuming the role of teacher when students volunteer responses (55-64). Though tutoring may be required for specific problems, counselors should avoid emphasizing their knowledge at the expense of maintaining a view of students as intelligent participants and collaborators in the act of solving writing problems (see Murray, "Grant" 175-176; Harris 57; Singley and Boucher 14). Counselors bring to the dialogue an informed voice capable of posing questions, directing attention to the text, encouraging evaluation, and sharing the frustrations, fears, pleasures, bad ideas, and good ideas that go into the creation of effective writing. Like classroom instructors, they serve as audience and critics, but they also serve as readers proximate to the point of utterance (Brannon and Knoblauch 44-46; Harris 13-14; Hawkins 64-67). They define areas requiring improvement, model effective ways of reacting to writing, and teach students to distance themselves from their drafts; they encourage students to engage in decision-making processes, to make imaginative predictions of audiences' responses, and to develop problem-solving strategies. They model and stimulate recursive and analytic patterns of revision leading to reader-based prose. While the classroom instructor sometimes plays the role of some "other" (*alter*) as an evaluating, judging

audience, the counselor usually plays the role of "another self" (*alter ego*), empathizing with the writer while presenting linguistic, logical, and rhetorical requirements specific to the academic community. The voice of the counselor provides a model of the critical mind at work—a model that a student might plausibly emulate while attempting to discover and articulate ideas.

In a successful counseling session, the voice of the counselor-as-reader merges with the voice of the student-as-writer and encourages the writer to recognize possibilities of change and choice. What Linda Flower has called reader-based prose occurs when a writer successfully chooses among alternative means of expressing ideas for an intended audience (269). To complete this decision-making task, a writer must imagine possible expressions of an idea and select those that conform best to the knowledge, interests, and backgrounds of the audience. The proficient writer undergoes a process of objectifying the self through the eyes of the reader. Without that sense of audience, writers may remain locked in a solipsistic prison where writing is meaningful only to its creator (Ong 101-102). Counselors open the writer to testing and playing with ideas, and they work with the student to generate and make choices necessary to the creation of reader-based prose (Bruffee 14-15).

Yet writers may need to redefine a relationship with language in order to engage their writing and reading selves in productive dialogue. Students often enter writing centers with false assumptions about the language of the university. Sometimes they misjudge their audience by imagining that academic readers must prefer pomposity, jargon, or the stilted language of textbooks. Sometimes they err in the opposite direction by seeing little or no distinction between academic discourse and oral discourse used in electronic media and conversations with peers and families (Michaels and Collins 241-243). In working with students affected strongly by secondary orality, counselors must recognize that a social context extends beyond the domain of the writing center and the university. Writers from oral backgrounds are apt to hold contradictory assessments of the value of university education and its activities, including academic writing: even if highly motivated and committed generally to goals associated with higher education, they are apt to share with their non-academic peers negative attitudes about writing and intellectualism—attitudes related to factors of class, age, gender, and social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Students often draw a rigid line separating activities they deem appropriate to the schools from those appropriate to their lives.

Counselors encourage students with strong oral tendencies—e.g., preference for narrative structure, summary, paratactic sequencing, and the idioms of non-academic peers—to learn the literacy of the university

community, and they do so by showing how the monologic voice that creates writer-based prose is replaced in academic discourse by a dialogic interplay of writing and critical reading.

Through their merging of voices, participants in the writing center's "dialogue of one" can create something altogether new, a kind of intellectual "propagation" analogous to the intellectual creation effected by Donne's lovers. One need not be a Platonist like Donne's persona to assert that this something new is thought achieved through the exercise of inner speech, through internal dialogue and reflection. In *Mind and Society* Lev Vygotsky suggests that speech is essential to the processes of learning and discovery. Observation suggests that pre-literate children talk out solutions to problems. For Vygotsky, oral problem-solving is associated with inner speech or reflection, which he defines as the very act of thought. According to Vygotsky, language as thought "occurs when speech and practical activity . . . converge," and it signals "the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence" (24; Wertsch 108-128). Instances of oral speech used to solve problems are not limited to children; a similar use of oral language in problem-solving may be found in councils among both primitive and sophisticated peoples and in works that are close to roots in oral culture (see for example the *Iliad* XI. 407ff; XVII. 97; XXI. 562; XXII. 122, 385; Havelock 15-37; Ong 16-30 43-44).

No matter how far it extends into pre-history, the internalization of oral debate is a pivotal event in the development of human culture since it brings with it possibilities for objectifying, analyzing, refining, developing, and synthesizing disparate ideas within the self. And these means of thinking are crucially related to the act of writing (Vygotsky 105-119; Goody 43-48; Ong 78-138). When speakers learn to set language into writing, they also learn to debate the accuracy of written claims; they examine and alter structures, or imagine other ways of expressing and emphasizing specific points (Ong 105). Such debate works against the monologic voice of writer-based prose, even when writing is performed as a solitary act (Collins 85).

A taxonomy of discourse illustrates the range of oral and literate speech and permits diagnosis of students' literacy at writing centers. Counselors work with students at many different levels of contact with literate culture, different levels of development of the voice of the writer-as-reader. Major episodes in the spectrum of oral-literate use of language follow, though it should be noted 1) that I intend no correlation between levels of literacy and levels of intelligence and 2) that individuals may move facily from level to level in either direction, so long as they are familiar with the fundamental chirographic, logical, and rhetorical conventions assumed under each:

Pre-reflective discourse—conducted as an exchange of views (as in a council of leaders, drama, conversation), a statement of wisdom or verbal play (as in proverbs, aphorisms), and narratives (fairy tales, parables, epics, oral romances)

Inner speech—conducted internally as an accompaniment to action or as a process of thought; loosely structured, perhaps exercised unconsciously as a means of discovering appropriate reactions and solutions to immediate problems; implies a separation of the self from the flow of events

Reflective discourse—usually internal; speech given systematic form for a specific purpose; often distanced from immediate action; often consciously performed; manifest in analysis and evaluation

Analysis—that aspect of reflection that categorizes, defines, compares, partitions, separates topics; presupposes opposing points of view, with one thing set against another—"it is this because it's not that"; "it is this because it has this, which separates it from all others"; "this is caused by (or is the result of) this, as opposed to those"

Evaluation—that aspect of reflection that uses analysis to make decisions; "discourse of reason" that arrives at a conclusion, silencing opposing voices with a place of rest, however temporary or tenuous that may be

Though this list ranges from the strongly oral to the strongly literate, most freshmen in the composition program at my institution are relatively skilled in the use of pre-reflective discourse in oral and literate forms and have partial mastery of inner speech used to edit surface errors in writing. More uncommon are abilities generally associated with sophisticated literacy: 1) exercise of inner speech while reviewing paragraphs and larger units, 2) application of systematic patterns of analytic and evaluative thought to written discourse, and 3) development of style based upon choices derived from analyses of writing. For students in this state of transition between oral culture and sophisticated literacy, the writing center strives to increase the frequency and accuracy of the students' use of inner speech; it does so to develop editorial awareness of conventions and rhetorical effects expected of sophisticated literates. In this development, counselors model the voice of the reader to create the independent writer-as-reader.

Inner speech moves away from oral talk as performance and declamation. It presupposes an informed questioning of the self, a stopping of the flow of experience with a backward glance at causes, motives, reasons for doing something in the past, present, or future. Though nearly all practice some form of inner speech, not all are conscious of doing so or aware of the intellectual systems that govern it; in literate societies or societies influenced

by literacy, inner speech often becomes systematic as a species of reflective discourse—Platonic dialectic and Aristotelian logic are two examples. For many college-level students, however, language has not yet been analyzed reflexively or systematically.

Students strongly influenced by primary or secondary orality must become empowered to exercise inner speech in accord with the reflective and dialectical language systems of the schools. Universities presuppose acquaintance with reflective discourse, even though not all activities—I am thinking here of performances in music, dramatic productions, painting, or creative writing and narrative essays—necessarily involve analysis. Unfortunately, few students from oral backgrounds are aware of this hidden expectation when they enroll, and they may at first sense little contrast between oral and literate discourse. If they do sense a difference, they may overemphasize some superficial or apparent characteristics of literate discourse—such as the use of pretentious technical jargon—rather than acquire new methods of writing and reading their writing. Even if they are aware that oral patterns of expression conflict with the literacy exercised by instructors, students may be unable to control inner speech without the prompt of an impartial model such as the writing counselor.

For highly oral students the writing center has much to offer. For one thing, the non-pressured conversation at the lab may help orally influenced students become comfortable with academic discourse. More importantly, the skilled counselor at the writing center can in two pivotal ways help students begin to objectify their writing.

First, the counselor can occasionally model the thinking process for students who bring in drafts of papers. Rather than reading a student's writing silently, the counselor may read orally while the student looks on, developing the student's awareness of the relation between oral presentation and academic discourse. The counselor's reactions may demonstrate when inner speech should begin and how it should be used for revision. When, for instance, the counselor-as-reader cannot understand a point, a comment describing the problem or a puzzled look may encourage the student to engage in inner speech and to participate in a reflective thinking process.

Second, the counselor may foster the use of inner speech, show its relation to reflection, and demonstrate its practice in literate discourse. This latter exercise is especially important since it places the burden of generating reflection squarely on the shoulders of the student, forcing critical assessment of the written product. The student is made to see the permanence of writing; unlike oral speech in popular culture, modes of writing in the university often demand scrutiny and re-observation since the unchanging written statement implies commitment that the oral statement, falling into

the void of time, does not. The talking about writing that occurs at the writing center provides an oral context that helps highly oral students generate a clearer sense of the fixed, precise character of academic writing.

The transition from pre-reflective discourse to inner speech and reflective discourse may be observed in transcripts of counseling sessions. For illustration, I have selected part of a conference published by Joyce Steward and Mary Croft in *The Writing Laboratory*. Most sessions that engage the student in acts of revision follow a similar pattern.

In the example, Joe, a student, works individually with Linda, a counselor. The editors of the transcript note that Joe had attended the lab twice weekly and is revising a short piece assigned by Linda. The editors apparently hoped to demonstrate the effects of a counseling session on Joe's ability to revise. My interest, however, is located more narrowly in that portion of the transcript where Joe moves from pre-reflective discourse to reflection, since it is at this point that he is encouraged to depart from language rooted in oral culture and to engage the reflective thought processes associated with literacy. I include below Joe's first draft, which helps to define the context of the conference, and a portion of the dialogic exchange:

Joe's First Draft

Last Night's Stomach Aches

Last night I came down with a stomach ache from eating too much at the school cafeteria. It all started when I found out that Debot was serving fish with boiled potatoes and I like that alot. But after having three servings of the same dish and four glasses of Seven-Up and two tacos with cheese, lettuce and about six slices of chocolate cake, I felt like a pig after I finished eating all that food and drinking those glasses of pop. But when I usually eat at Debot I just take a couple bites out of whats on the plate and two glasses of milk and I just sit in the chair for about ten minutes and waite for the food to digest.

Conference

- Linda: They didn't serve tacos in the olden days when I stayed in the dorm.
Joe: It's practically the only good thing they serve.
Linda: And fish with boiled potatoes. . . . How do you feel about this paper, Joe?
Joe: It says basically everything I want it to.
Linda: I see. . . . Nothing more?
Joe: Well, I couldn't think of anything more.
Linda: Okay. . . .
Joe: But it isn't too exciting [Reads.]

- Linda: What's the most interesting part of this paper?
Joe: Where I talk about the tacos, cheese, and all that other garbage I ate.
Linda: I agree. Those are your strongest specifics. It's no wonder you were so sick. Those details are what made me see and understand what happened. Make sure you include those in your revision.
Joe: Okay.
Linda: Joe, how did you organize this paper? Did you have a little plan?
Joe: [Looking back.] First I tell about my stomach ache and then I tell what I usually do. Do you think I should turn that around?
Linda: Do you see a reason to?
Joe: It might be better in the order that it happened.

* * * * *

The rest of the conference repeats the process of identifying and resolving problems in the original, admittedly defective draft, and it culminates in a revision, itself not free from error but at least building on a more effective organizational frame than did the first. The draft and transcript reveal a movement toward analysis and evaluation as Joe, with Linda's voice as critical reader, reflects upon the fixed text.

The first draft is marked with many features characteristic of oral narrative discourse! The organization is generally chronological, though abrupt shifts backwards and forwards do occur; diction is formulaic in its reliance on cliché ("it all started when. . .," "felt like a pig") and colloquial usage and idiom ("came down with," "alot," "usually," "just take," "whats on the plate," "just sit"); sentences tend to parataxis ("I just take a couple of bites out of whats on the plate *and* two glasses of milk *and* I just sit in the chair for about ten minutes *and* waite for the food to digest"). As a whole, Joe's draft exhibits strong oral influence, constituting nearly a verbatim reproduction in writing of colloquial oral speech.

Linda begins the dialogue by sharing Joe's level of discourse: her first comments briefly establish a point of connection with Joe's speech community, and she phrases their common experience in dormitories in colloquial language which echoes Joe's ("the olden days") at the same time that she acknowledges their difference in age. She signals a transition to academic discourse with the question "How do you feel about this paper, Joe?" In so doing, she directs the original bond implied by her sharing of Joe's level of discourse to the analytic reading that Joe must accept if he is to think, write, and read in the academy.

Joe resists this transition, perhaps because his trust seems threatened when Linda moves to discourse that only she feels comfortable using. His defensive comments ("It says basically everything I want it to," "Well, I couldn't think of anything more") are anticipated by Linda, who forces the issue by trailing off into the silence following her "Okay." This vacuum

encourages Joe to reassess his opinion, to examine recursively the written text. In so doing, he begins to move from the fluid domain of pre-reflective discourse to acts of inner speech and reflection. This transition is signaled in the transcript when he comments evaluatively, "But it isn't too exciting." To arrive at this judgment, Joe must have 1) examined the written utterance, 2) recognized that the written text, unlike oral discourse, could be changed, and 3) imagined other, more exciting possibilities. Once having made this transition to reflective thought, Joe generally accepts his new role as self-critic, and he comes to rely on Linda as a sounding-board rather than a prompt. Linda at first encourages this perception of her by steering Joe to observe the paper's best feature and then redirecting the conversation to a major problem—organization.

When Linda pointedly intervenes to introduce the new topic ("how did you organize this paper?"), Joe returns briefly to his defensive posture with a neutral, non-evaluative response ("I just wrote it down as I thought of it"). Consequently, Linda takes a more directed approach by posing the kind of evaluative question that Joe must eventually raise on his own. She offers a pair of alternatives that require Joe's commitment: "Are you happy with the organization, or is there some other arrangement that might work better and be easier to follow?" The direction of Linda's question is so clear-cut that Joe cannot miss the point, and his response is most interesting. Rather than answering Linda's question directly or defensively, he assumes that the second alternative applies and re-engages himself in inner speech and reflection. He examines the text's organization recursively by analyzing its sequence ("First I tell about my stomach ache and then I tell what I usually do") and then offers a tentative decision hidden behind a question: "Do you think I should turn that around?" Here, Joe performs a mental operation similar to inner speech save that he formally addresses the question to his counselor, his *alter ego*, and not to himself. Yet his question is seeking confirmation rather than new information—it is a sign of weak confidence. Sensing this, Linda turns the question back upon him, recognizing that his confidence may be built through his successful exercise of independent judgment.

Although Joe relies on Linda's voice as a sounding-board and as a stimulant for inner speech and reflection, there is a victory in his reflective observation that his essay "might be better in the order that it happened." His judgment is ultimately his own, since Linda has done little more than set various features of the paper into play; as much as possible she leaves to Joe the task of analyzing and evaluating. Insofar as Joe duplicates this pattern of questioning in his own revisions, his inner speech may produce reflective, dialogic writing; he may begin to engage in what Plato defines as the "discourse of reason" within an intellectual community (*Republic* 7.533c).

The dialogue between counselor and student in the writing center forms a bridge between orality and academic literacy.

Often, preconceptions about academic life prevent students from seeing the act of writing as one involving engagement, reflection, the exercise of inner speech: to them, school often seems the domain of rigidity and inflexibility, and it contrasts with the more pleasurable, exciting fluidity of life in the family and social group, where orality is the principal means of communication. Students are often unwilling to invest their own ideas, their own reactions and self-questioning in the act of writing because decisions regarding topics and form are customarily made by others—teachers, administrators, school boards. As a result, many students seek release for linguistic spontaneity and freedom outside the school and its foundations in literacy.

The writing center's encouragement of a "dialogue of one" contributes forcefully to the reuniting of two seemingly disparate parts of students' lives—their academic and cultural selves. The counselor-as-reader and the student-as-writer collaborate to create a new way of reading what has been written—a method that encourages alteration, revision, experimentation, discovery, and the development of thought. By recognizing that one's own writing is subject to critical questioning and playful revision, the student at the writing center can learn what is in a sense a new language—the genuine and living language of intellectual discovery, the language appropriate to the literate community. Counselors can empower students to experience a literal "ecstasy"—a stepping outside themselves—as real as that of Donne's interlocutors, occasioned not by the language of love but by the distancing and objectifying of writing through new lines of communication and revision.

Works Cited

- Brannon, Lil, and C. H. Knoblauch. "A Philosophical Perspective on Writing Centers and the Teaching of Writing." *Writing Center: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984. 36-47.
- Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" Ed. Gary A. Olson. *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. 3-15.
- Collins, James L. "Dialogue and Monologue and the Unskilled Writer." *English Journal* 71 (1982): 84-86.
- Flower, Linda. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*. Ed. Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett. New York: Oxford UP, 1981. 268-292.

- Gardner, Helen. "The Argument about 'The Ecstasy.'" *Essential Articles For the Study of John Donne's Poetry*. Ed. John R. Roberts. Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1975. 239-258.
- Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1977.
- Harris, Muriel. *Teaching One-to-one: the Writing Conference*. Urbana: NCTE, 1986.
- Havelock, Eric A. *The Greek Concept of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978.
- Hawkins, Thom. "Intimacy and Audience: The Relation between Revision and the Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring." *College English*, 42 (1980): 64-68.
- Michaels, Sarah, and James Collins. "Oral Discourse Styles: Classroom Interaction and the Acquisition of Literacy." *Coherence in Spoken and Written Discourse*. Ed. Deborah Tannen. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1984. 219-244.
- Murray, Donald M. "Grant Your Students their Writing Rights." *Learning by Teaching: Selected Articles on Writing and Teaching*. Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1982. 175-176.
- _____. "Teaching the Other Self: A Writer's First Reader." *Learning by Teaching*. 164-172.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Singley, Carol J., and Holly M. Boucher. "Dialogue in Tutor Training: Creating the Essential Space for Learning." *The Writing Center Journal* 8.2 (1988): 11-22.
- Steward, Joyce S., and Mary K. Croft. *The Writing Laboratory: Organization, Management, and Methods*. Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1982.
- Wertsch, James V. *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of the Mind*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985.
- Vygotsky, Lev. *Mind in Society: the Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Ed. Michael Cole et al. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978.

Daniel T. Lochman is an Associate Professor at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas, where he has directed the writing lab for five years. His research interests include rhetoric and literature of the Renaissance as well as writing centers, and he has published articles in *Milton Studies*, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, and *The Writing Center Journal*.