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## Review: Between Talk and Teaching

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## Reviews

**Laurel Johnson Black.** *Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference.* Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1998.

*Rebecca Schoenike Nowacek*

Since its publication in 1998, Laurel Johnson Black's *Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference* may easily have been overlooked by writing center tutors and scholars because it does not seem to focus directly on writing centers. But to miss it would be a grave mistake. Both Black's careful analyses of conference talk and her theoretical framework make *Between Talk and Teaching* one of the most helpful books that writing center instructors and administrators can add to their shelves this year. If the mantra of writing center instructors is that we aim to produce not just better papers but better writers—and that we aim to do so by engaging students in talk about writing that will expand their thinking—then this book helps us achieve that aim by directing our attention not to the text but to the *talk* of our conferences.

Although she studies the conferences of classroom teachers rather than writing center tutors, Black's analyses illuminate the work we do in the writing center. Throughout her book, Black focuses on fourteen transcripts of conferences, using a "critical discourse analysis" perspective to look carefully at how the conferences actually unfold. In her first two chapters, Black lays out the sociolinguistic and critical pedagogy theories which undergird her analyses. In the next four chapters, Black focuses on the particular issues of "Power and Talk," "Gender and Conferencing," "Cross-Cultural Conferencing," and "The Affective Dimension." She concludes with a chapter that explores the implications of her study. In each chapter, Black develops an argument particular to the issue at hand, but the overarching thesis with which she binds the book together is this: both the scholarship and practice of writing teachers are premised on the (sometimes explicit, sometimes tacit) assumption that in conferences we can just sit down with our students and have a conversation. This assumption is, according to Black, deeply problematic. Throughout her book, Black maintains an optimism that one-on-one conferences can be an invaluable teaching and learning opportunity, but demonstrates

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how the assumption that we're "just having a conversation" can have profound consequences.

To demonstrate those consequences, Black puts the minutia of conferencing under the microscope. In her chapter on "Power and Talk," Black reports that teachers overwhelmingly dominated the conferences she analyzed. Student participation levels ranged from a low of 2.3% to a high of 40.2% of the conference. Although the lowest of these numbers may seem extreme, the general finding that teachers dominate conferences will not surprise many writing teachers—particularly writing center tutors, who (perhaps more than most teachers) are keenly aware of writing conference dynamics. However, Black goes on to offer an extended close analysis of talk—one that helps us understand exactly how teachers come to dominate conferences so thoroughly. In particular, Black examines the use of verbal markers like *and*. Teachers use *and* in two powerful ways: to forcefully hold the floor and to string together ideas. *And* indicates that more speech is coming, and because of the difference in power between speakers, students are reluctant to claim the floor even if there is extended time after the *and*. Teachers used that time they had created to think ahead and ultimately to string together sometimes rather disconnected ideas into a narrative of knowledge, a story of learning that didn't always include the student (42-3).

Black's argument that little words like *and* can exercise such power in conferences is premised on the belief that individuals use very subtle verbal and non-verbal cues to negotiate—often at an unconscious level—how a verbal exchange will proceed. And throughout her book she builds on the sociolinguistic belief that certain patterns of exchange are associated with various contexts; that is to say, there are genres of verbal exchange that are constructed by these subtle cues. For Black's purposes, the two most important genres are those of classroom talk and of conversation. Black reviews previous research which has established that whereas the genre of classroom talk often falls into patterns of teacher initiation-student response-teacher evaluation (IRE), the genre of conversation involves no set boundaries as to who will initiate the conversation, who will introduce the topics, what the turn-taking order will be, etc. Black points out that the two genres assume very different power dynamics and that "[i]f one participant thinks a conference is a conversation and the other thinks it is teaching, then there is going to be confusion: Who speaks when? What topics are appropriate? What role should each play?" (13). It is for this reason that conferences are rarely just the "conversations" we would like to think they are.

In Chapters Three and Four, Black explores how gender and cultural identities further complicate these conferencing dynamics. In "Gender and Conferencing," Black draws on the work of Judith Butler and

of sociolinguists to argue that gender is performed (though not always at a conscious level), and that one important way of performing gender is through patterns of talk. Black carefully documents the use of discourse markers and other gendered patterns of conference interactions, noting, for example, that female students “us[ed] the phrase ‘I don’t know’ 22 times with males, but only twice with the same number of female teachers. . . . [and] overlapped cooperatively with male instructors almost four times more frequently than with female instructors” (64). Although these patterns may look bleak for female students conferencing with male teachers, Black questions whether the female students are being dominated or whether they are simply being savvy: “Fully aware of the response they would elicit by performing in stereotypically feminine ways, [the female students] gambled that the rewards would be greater than the punishment, that their cooperative and supportive behavior would prompt the teacher to provide more information about the ‘right’ interpretation of the text under discussion, as well as more guidelines and conventions to ensure that their next revision or paper would meet with approval” (65). Ultimately, Black concludes that when institutional roles and gender roles come into conflict (and they often do), “the roles of teacher and student seem to dominate, while gender roles complicate” (69).

In contrast to the other chapters—which are filled with original data and supplemented by the work of others—Black’s chapter on “Cross-Cultural Conferencing” offers primarily a review of other people’s research. Ultimately, Black concludes that “Without a set of shared assumptions or knowledge of each other’s cultures, both parties in a conference will feel dissatisfied, frustrated” (94)—a conclusion she fleshes out by drawing extensively on the work of bell hooks, Shirley Brice Heath, Lisa Delpit, and others.

In her chapter on “The Affective Dimension” of conferencing, Black returns our attention to the consequences of confusing a conference with a conversation. In example after example, Black shows us how instructors shut out the emotional dimensions of students’ writing by transforming affective topics into discourse topics. That is, when students tried to talk about their *feelings*, teachers changed the subject to issues of *writing*. In this chapter, Black again asks us to recognize the conflict between the genres of conversation and of teaching. If we truly want to be conversational partners with our students in conferences, Black reminds us, then it is incumbent upon us to behave as good conversational partners. Yet, we consistently ignore the topics—particularly expressions of frustration, self-doubt, or emotional tumult—that students introduce: “We are not counselors, but we are speaking partners. And speaking partners do not usually ignore topics offered for discussion or dismiss them as a matter of practice” (131-2).

Throughout these chapters, Laurel Johnson Black offers practical insights into the verbal give-and-take of conferences—insights we can apply to our conferences in the writing center. Yet, as writing center tutors, we may believe we do not face the same challenges that classroom teachers do when they sit down to conference. Because we do not give grades and do not occupy the same institutional position as other teachers, we often believe that students will have significantly different conferencing experiences when they come to the writing center—that we can have a conversation with our students even when classroom instructors cannot. Black’s research, however, challenges us to reconsider that belief. Drawing from Bakhtin’s concept of the “chain of utterances,” Black gives us a way to understand why engaging in conversation rather than traditional teaching talk can be so difficult in conferences—in the writing center or elsewhere:

I have often felt . . . that somehow my power as a teacher would melt away miraculously when I sat down alone with a student. It is easy for me to forget that what I am saying to a student is part of Bakhtin’s “chain of utterances,” that the student has a history of teachers and teachers saying certain things and that whatever I say becomes by default a part of that chain, is seen in the context of that history. (54)

From her observation we might extrapolate the following point: although talk in writing center conferences has the *potential* to be different than traditional classroom talk, that potential can only be *realized* if *both* individuals recognize and develop that potential through subtle cues and patterns of talk. Because students and teachers negotiate those subtle cues largely unconsciously and because their negotiations are inflected by the chains of utterances both individuals bring to the conference, it is no surprise that writing conferences rarely become genuine conversations.

Although I have praised much in this book, *Between Talk and Teaching* is not entirely without its limitations—the most serious of which is this: throughout her book, Black explicitly argues that conferences are not always the conversations we think they are, and implies that conferences would be better *if they were* more like conversations. However, Black never fully interrogates that claim. Certainly, conversations can lead to *different* kinds of participation and learning—but will conversations inevitably lead to *better* learning? Black never examines the advice teachers gave their students, nor does she examine the revisions students made. To be fair, this is not an oversight on her part; her focus is on the structure of talk rather than on papers or their revisions. But *Between Talk and Teaching* might have benefited from a consideration of the extensive writing center literature on the merits of more and less directive confer-

ences. Are there situations where teacher talk is indeed more valuable than conversation? And how do we determine when those moments are? Laurel Johnson Black takes a solid first step by analyzing the talk of conferences, but I anticipate that future research which joins her focus on talk with an analysis of text and revisions will greatly benefit writing teachers and tutors.

Even with this limitation, *Between Talk and Teaching* is an extremely important book for writing center tutors and administrators. Although Black traces the many ways in which our conferences can go unexpectedly wrong, she never allows the book to become merely an exercise in handwringing. At the close of every chapter and in the final chapter of the book, Black offers concrete suggestions for how we might improve our conferences. Because Black is convinced that we cannot change our conferencing behaviors without also changing our classroom behaviors, many of her suggestions rest on classroom activities and are therefore not directly practicable for writing center instructors. Nevertheless, her injunction to pay more attention to the often subtle elements that shape our conference talk has clear implications for writing center tutors. Guided and inspired by Laurel Johnson Black's careful analyses and arguments, we can perhaps get one step closer to our aim of engaging students in talk that will help them grow as individuals and as writers.

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