

**AN EXAMINATION OF DISCOURSE  
IN WRITING CONFERENCES WITH ADULT LEARNERS:  
THE MONOLOGIC-DIALOGIC DYNAMIC**

by

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## ABSTRACT

One-on-one writing conferences are used in many classrooms from primary to post secondary as a way for teacher and learner to discuss student writing. As this method is used at the adult learning centre where I teach English 11 and 12, I initiated this study to explore the discourse used to negotiate learning in my conferences with students. Specifically, I wanted to investigate the ways in which verbal interplay during these instructional conversations might influence the participation and understanding of learners, with the goal of gaining insight into which kinds of discourse either facilitate or inhibit student learning.

I tape recorded my writing conferences with three students for a period ranging from two to eight weeks, then transcribed and coded the recordings according to emerging themes. I gathered photocopies of the writing being discussed and kept a journal of my perceptions throughout the process. Using Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, two excerpts from each participant were selected for analysis here--one representing rather monological, conventional teaching practice and the second reflecting more dialogical interaction.

I found that my discourse patterns influenced student participation in both negative and positive ways. Negative influences occurred when I pursued an unspoken agenda, interrupted, lectured, and asked known-answer questions; positive influences were seen when I used authentic questions, uptake, supportive filler, and paraphrasing. It is important to note, however, that I did not possess complete control of the conference. The students also exhibited the ability to influence the type of discourse--through surprise, ignoring, interrupting, setting the conference agenda, and appearing to be "stuck." In many conferences a crucial turning point was evident in the monologue-dialogue dynamic, in which either the teacher or the student could influence the direction of the interaction.

Based on the assumption that learning requires the active participation of the learner, teacher discourse that inhibits student participation may also be seen to inhibit student learning. Therefore, I suggest that teachers create some assignments in tandem with learners, that conferences proceed with a mutually negotiated agenda, and that teachers foster more student talk and join in conversational rather than interrogational or recitational discourse.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

Improvement in the teaching of writing goes on in the schools and colleges, but at a very slow pace; meanwhile, far too much writing instruction remains teacher centered, reading dominated, rule bound, grammar ridden, and product oriented. Writing research has fallen on rocky soil in most conventional settings. (White, 1989, p. xiii)

### *Objective*

As an English instructor at an adult learning centre, my teaching interactions with students in its self-paced program are predominantly one-to-one, much like tutoring. In such an environment, effective instructional conversations are seen as a key element in the support and development of students' literacy skills. The objective of this research was to investigate my own pedagogical practices and discourse patterns during one-on-one writing conferences. My goal was to improve my teaching by becoming more conscious of what transpires during teacher-student instructional exchanges, and, as Bakhtin has emphasized, to investigate "how verbal interactions shape the understandings and thinking of the conversants" (Nystrand, 1997, pp. 7-8). Overall, I wanted to examine how conference talk unfolded, identify factors that seemed to influence conference participation, and explore the ways in which student learning may be mediated by conference discourse.

Much of the literature on teaching composition indicates writing conferences are a potentially effective tool for improving students' understanding, performance, and independence as writers (Fassler, 1978; Graves, 1976; Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Morrow, 1991; Sperling, 1990). Conferences are also seen as a "felicitous adjunct to classroom interaction" (Freedman &

Sperling, 1985, p. 107), and “a practical format for the effective delivery of individualized instruction” (Walker & Elias, 1987, p. 266). As such, studies of conferencing and the kinds of instructional talk that transpire within them are particularly relevant to the pedagogical model used to teach writing at this self-paced learning centre.

Despite these positive views of conferencing, however, many questions remain about the most appropriate approach, format, and discourse to use during these interactions. For example, Harris (1986), Morrow (1991), and Murray (1985), encouraged student leadership in conferences and the use of non-directive teaching strategies. On the other hand, Newkirk (1995) and Delpit (1988) have criticized such approaches as indirect and ethnocentric, and Wilcox (1997) suggested teachers should “subtly lead” students. Still others focused on the need for mutual negotiation between student and teacher (Sperling, 1990; Tobin, 1993), where both co-construct the process (Denyer & Florio-Ruane, 1991) with the student’s full participation (Spellmeyer, 1993), and where teaching and learning to write are seen as processes which are “multifaceted, evolving, and unfinished” (Ritchie, 1989). In contrast, several researchers have argued conference talk tends to resemble the unilateral communication found in lessons (Florio-Ruane, 1990; Freedman, 1985; Jacob, 1982). Finally, research on classroom discourse indicates student engagement and learning varies with the type of instructional script used by the teacher (Alpert, 1987; Gutierrez, 1994; Nystrand, 1997). Clearly, this body of research is not definitive regarding how to go about engaging in writing conferences. In fact, in an overview of the existing conferencing research, Florio-Ruane (1990) stated, “[w]e know little about the kind of pedagogical knowledge it takes to achieve successful conferences” (p. 370).

In my own teaching, I too have struggled with issues of leadership and the use of effective discourse during conferences with students. This difficulty can be linked to several factors which are explored later in this chapter, but

perhaps the most significant revolves around the ideas put forth by contemporary language philosophers, linguists, and feminist epistemologists who encourage us to see language development--and, by extension, the discussion and development of writing--as “a necessarily intersubjective, highly social phenomenon” (Anson, 1989, p. 8; see also Bakhtin, 1981; Bizzell, 1995, and Lauer, 1995, both cited in Kennedy, 1998; Floriani, 1994; Florio-Ruane, 1990; Green & Harker, 1988; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Lave, 1988; Taylor, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978). Bakhtin (1981), for example, viewed language as dialogic, seeing it as continually structured by tension as one voice “refracts” another. According to Nystrand (1997), Bakhtin argued it is this struggle among competing voices that “lies at the heart of understanding as a dynamic, sociocognitive event” (p. 8). Vygotsky (1978) also places the genesis of language within the dynamic processes of social interaction. According to this sociocultural perspective, issues concerning the give-and-take interactivity between pedagogical participants are central to the development of language and literacy. This view contradicts many traditional notions of language learning, presenting challenging new perspectives for classroom teachers (Langer & Allington, 1992; Nystrand, 1997). As a result of my own struggles and questions concerning effective literacy teaching, I chose to examine the discourse that occurs during writing conferences--and to reflect on the diverse outcomes of such instructional talk--to help me clarify factors that influence the participation and learning that transpire there, with the ultimate goal of investigating how instructional conversations about students’ writing could be more powerful and effective.

### ***Background***

My reasons for undertaking this research centered around my growing dissatisfaction with the common methods and curriculum used at the learning centre to teach composition to adult students enrolled in English 11 and 12. One

of my concerns was that the conventional approaches to teaching writing that were most prevalent in my experiences as a student and teacher did not generally take into account the particular needs, skills, interests, and goals of my adult students. I had inherited most of these practices, described below, from my own school and university experiences and, later, from colleagues. They were the teaching norms I saw around me which are often categorized as *current-traditional*, a philosophy of writing instruction that emphasizes form over content, and transmission of information over construction of knowledge. According to such practices, the curriculum and the final written product take precedence over the students' individual needs and the processes involved in producing and discussing text.

These still common, "traditional" teaching methods include practices wherein it is the teacher who most often dictates what the students will read, write and think about. In addition, both research and my own experience show that teachers' written and verbal responses to student writing are often limited to the formalist axiology, focussing on what is wrong grammatically with the writing while largely ignoring content (Rosen, 1987; Sommers, 1982); Applebee's (1984) study, for example, demonstrated that "the chief function of writing in schools is seldom heuristic and is usually evaluative, to test mastery of subject matter or conformity to institutional rules" (cited in Ritchie, 1989, p. 159). Furthermore, during group and individual discussions, the dominant pattern of most conventional classroom discourse is the model that Mehan (1979) called IRE in which the teacher *initiates* talk (usually by questioning), pupils *respond*, and the teacher *evaluates* (see also Cazden, 1988; Nystrand, 1997). These teacher-dominated approaches, "though common in American classrooms and well-suited for recitation [are] of limited utility when trying to teach higher order skills and concepts such as the crafting of meaning as one writes or interprets text" (Denyer and Florio-Ruane, 1995, p. 539).

Nystrand (1997)--borrowing from Bakhtin's terminology--classified such teacher-controlled classrooms and discourse as "monologically" organized instruction, for the textbook and the teacher's voice are the main voices. In these classrooms, "authoritative, official discourse monologically resists communication, seeking to extinguish competing voices" (*ibid.*, p. 12). This perspective is based on Bakhtin's argument:

Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and responsibilities. . . . Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any *decisive* force. . . . Monologue pretends to be the *ultimate word*. (1984, pp. 292-293; emphasis in original)

When teachers prescript known-answer questions, control discussion, dictate writing topics, and treat written texts as "autonomous" documents that contain fixed meaning apart from both the writer and the reader, they are striving for monologism. For the purposes of this study, monologic genres of conference discourse also include asking leading questions, eliciting recitation or reports of remembered information, seeking to transmit information to a passive recipient, and talk in which the text and the teacher's voice are the main voices. These traditional forms of communicating are forces of centralization and unification; they are the "centripetal forces" that strive to make things cohere (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272), and they are the common approaches to assigning, evaluating and discussing writing that I have seen in many classrooms as both a student and a teacher.<sup>1</sup>

Although product-centred, teacher-driven methods have been critiqued in both theoretical and professional literature for over three decades, researchers such as Applebee (1986), Cazden (1988), Nystrand (1997), and White (1989) have shown that these approaches to teaching and discussing writing still dominate in

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<sup>1</sup> Centralizing, "centripetal" forces are, however, in constant conflict with "centrifugal," decentralizing forces that seek to keep things apart--making language always dialogic. This concept will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

most classrooms, from primary to post-secondary. Clearly, these conventions are wide-spread and deeply entrenched. Applebee (1986) recognized the persistence of such classroom traditions even in the face of contradictory research, when he noted that “there is almost always a gap between educational theory and educational practice” (pp. 97-98; see also Langer & Allington, 1992). In the field of composition, Lundsteen, for example, noted a possible twenty-five to thirty-five year time lag between the discovery of new knowledge and putting that knowledge into action (cited in Whitmore, 1991). Reid (1998) also found a gap between the theories and perspectives found in the university community and practices in high school classrooms. For instance, she found high school teachers were unfamiliar with names of Soviet theorists, the concept of Zone of Proximal Development, and sociocultural theory in general--topics commonly studied in university education departments. One wonders if it is simply a matter of time before such research eventually reaches the classroom, or if there are other factors at work helping to maintain the status quo. Crowley, for example, argued that current-traditional rhetoric continues to dominate in composition classrooms because “it is compatible with academic notions of authority” (cited in Daiker, 1996, p. 1).

Given the proliferation of criticism for teacher-centred methods and the persistence of these same methods, it would seem that changing one’s pedagogical practice may require more than merely being exposed to new theories and research, or to critique of conventional practice. For my own part, I felt an emerging conflict within myself while I taught. Through workshops, books, and graduate courses, I was growing increasingly aware of alternative views of text, more student-focused, process theories of teaching writing, and views of language learning as a socially mediated process, yet I found it difficult to incorporate such approaches completely into my teaching and to abandon my own stubbornly entrenched, predominantly teacher-directed practices. I still seemed to find myself using more traditional, directive methods while

conferencing with students. I worried that if I did not directly tell students what to do and how to change and correct their papers, I would not be teaching, and they would not learn or improve. In effect, I did not know any other way to teach. I felt *stuck*, uncertain how to change my practice despite the theories and classroom practices I had read about.

### ***Monologue as the Default Mode***

Research shows that other instructors also find it difficult to change their traditional teaching methods. Denyer and Florio-Ruane (1995), for example, examined the potential for transforming the conventional teacher-led classroom and its accompanying IRE discourse. These researchers observed the continuing influence and power of familiar monologic classroom talk, even among teachers whose conscious goal it was to learn different ways to communicate with students. This kind of inherited, traditional classroom discourse can be seen as a powerful and resilient “default mode” (Cazden, 1988), arising when teachers forget their student-centred goals or do not have the tools or procedural knowledge to achieve these goals. Florio-Ruane (1990) explored this default mode, highlighting the impact of “basic, normative assumptions about teaching acquired by . . . teachers during their prior socialization to schools” (p. 381). Denyer and Florio-Ruane (1995) added to this research, suggesting the importance of the acquisition of a beginning teacher’s “identity kit” which is necessarily limited to the vantage point of her own experiences as a pupil and comes “replete with ways of organizing the classroom, orienting to text, communicating with learners, and construing her rights and duties” (p. 540). Thus, students have already “learned” the conventions of classroom teaching before they even begin their teacher education, and years of participation in a traditional educational setting may entrench attitudes, expectations, and classroom “teacher identities” beyond the reach of a relatively short teacher-training program.

Whitmore (1991) examined a specific factor contributing to the persistence of traditional, one-way pedagogy in writing instruction. He studied the impact that conservative composition practices at the university level can have upon the instructional practices of its graduates--especially those teaching writing. While he focussed on the issue of gender and the ways in which "male" ways of thinking dominate university practice and may alienate or marginalize "female" modes of thought and expression, Whitmore's observations about university practices are also significant in our increasingly diverse society. He found that at the university level

[C]omposition instruction continues to focus upon traditional essay structure and correct sentence mechanics while virtually ignoring that the psychosocial contexts and processes of some writers may conflict with those traditional forms. (p. 94)

Whitmore concluded, perhaps not unexpectedly, that the pedagogical traditions of the institutions that train future teachers are likely to influence their own approach to teaching. Likewise, Covino, Johnson, and Freehan (1980) found in their survey of faculty and graduate students in 31 Canadian and U.S. university English departments "widespread approval of a writing pedagogy grounded in respect for grammar and organization and stressing correctness over style and content" (cited in Whitmore, 1991, p. 150). These authors and others point to the trickle-down effect of largely Formalist attitudes at the university level which necessarily influence writing classrooms of the future (see also Tighe and Koziol, 1982, cited in Whitmore, 1991).

Another important factor that may contribute to teachers using monologic, product-focussed, transmission-based methods relates to larger societal norms: Western hierarchical constructs deeply influence our thinking, and "top down," directive models are still common in most of our institutions, from the work place to family life. Rogoff (1994), for example, examined the didactic parenting style of middle-class European-American families "where



young children's learning was treated as a product of adult instruction . . . [created by] an adult partner who directed rather than supported the children's efforts" (p. 215; see also Heath, 1983). Directive approaches to both parenting and teaching are so entrenched in our Western outlook that common responses to this observation among the general populace, including parents and teachers, may include comments of the order of "What's wrong with that?" and "As adults, we *do* know more than our children and students, so how else can we teach them?"<sup>2</sup> Scott (2002) also notes--if only slightly tongue-in-cheek--that telling other people how to solve their problems is a national pastime. Finally, the positivistic view that truth and reality exist in the external world and can be objectively observed appears to remain strongly entrenched in lay culture, if not in academe. Evidence of this perspective continues in composition classrooms in their still dominant current-traditional rhetoric (Glau, 1998; Nystrand, 1997). From these examples it is clear that there are several factors at work from school and university traditions to societal norms that help keep the monologic default mode deeply rooted in writing instruction despite the findings of many contemporary language theorists and composition researchers.

### ***Related Research--Conflicts in the Field of Composition***

In addition to the above-mentioned tensions between theory and practice, within the English classroom there are also conflicts which Applebee (1974) has identified as the constant tension between the two aims of English instruction: to preserve a "high literary culture" (thus focussing on the written product) and to develop a democratic society (hence focussing on students, their needs, interests, and learning and writing processes). Thus, the struggle I experienced between supporting students in their growth and interests as writers while also focusing on correctness and protecting "standards" reflects a division clearly evident in composition literature over the past few decades. In that literature,

<sup>2</sup> Rogoff indicates alternative participation models, such as those exhibited by the Mayan parents in her study.

there is an apparent continuum stretching between the models of teaching that favour student-centred, supportive, egalitarian, dialogic approaches and those more product-centred, teacher-directed, monologic approaches focussed on correctness and emulating academic models and standards.

A brief review of the history of the field of English composition reveals that one source of our current tensions and conflicting views may be rooted in the evolution and development of the field itself. In general, the study of composition in English-Canadian and American universities has shifted from oration in the eighteenth century, to belles-lettres in the nineteenth century--focussing on literary appreciation, transmission of style and culture, and correctness--and finally, in a modern curriculum, to the practical requirements of the emerging middle class including business and science (Graves, 1994; Horner, 1998). When the mid-twentieth century brought forward a more strongly student-centred philosophy, it came into serious conflict with more traditional approaches (Langer & Allington, 1992). Anson (1989) argued these historical roots of composition--and their related political and epistemological origins--continue to exert a powerful influence on modern day writing classrooms and inform "our common assumptions about [teacher] response to writing, many of which we have inherited blindly from the certainties of our educational ancestors" (pp. 7-8). The historical development of composition and its impact on current practices are discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

In addition to the unresolved conflict between text-centred and student-centred instruction, there are still other factors that contribute to pedagogical dissonance among teachers of composition. For example, as English Language Arts teachers in secondary schools, we are required to teach both literature and composition, yet few of us have been extensively trained in the latter, if at all (Gere, 1986; Mamchur, 1989; Stewart, 1978). Further, in post secondary education these two disciplines are separated, taught by different instructors, and it has been well documented that in those institutions, composition courses have

traditionally been “ghettoized,” and thus are generally taught by non-tenure track instructors, graduate students, and those who would prefer to teach literary analysis and criticism (Bartlett, 2003; Bizzell, 1986; Kameen, 1986; Murphy, 1989; Pullman, 1999; Schilb, 1997; Whitmore, 1991). Stewart (1978) explained:

Until very recently, composition research and teaching have not been considered intellectually respectable by those in power in college English departments in this country [USA]. For many, they still aren't. (p. 175)

The continued division between those teaching literature and teaching writing can still be seen two decades after Stewart's observation in the title of Schneider's (1998) article “Bad Blood in the English Department: the Rift Between Composition and Literature” (cited in Ferry, 1998). Overall, given that the opinions and recommendations in composition research and literature are often contradictory, training in composition is widely lacking, and the field itself has been seen as academically inferior, it should not be surprising that many English teachers at both the secondary and post-secondary level seem to prefer and feel more comfortable teaching literature rather than composition.

Add to these issues the further fact that the field of composition research is relatively new, and Gere's opinion that composition in general may be lacking an overall “coherent philosophy” (1986, p. 36), and some of the sources of the unresolved conflicts and tensions we face as classroom teachers become increasingly clear. Given our desire to help our students achieve the types of literacy skills required in this information age, it is understandable that so many of us hope for the discovery of a clear composition theory or model to help facilitate teaching decisions in the English classroom. On that note, Bartholomae stated “the failure of an alliance between ‘theory’ and ‘composition’ is, for some at least, disappointing” (1996, p. 18). Indeed, it is tempting to believe in the search for the “right” approach to conferencing and teaching composition. However, Langer and Applebee (1987) pointed out that “piecemeal changes in

pedagogical practice are rarely effective if unaccompanied by a basic reconceptualization of overall goals and expectations” (cited in Nystrand, 1997, p. 88). Anson (1989) also noted the price we pay when we attempt to circumvent tensions and complexities with the certainties afforded by simple procedures and the latest, new activities:

Instead of providing solutions, the urge for certainty has often created new problems by encouraging simpleminded, mechanical procedures for teaching or learning highly complex skills and processes. Guised in the cloak of reliability and efficiency, such procedures are instructionally very attractive, and teachers adopt them rapidly, often in spite of their deepest convictions about the complexities of the writing process. (p. 2)

Likewise, Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997) also pointed out the complexity of composing and conferencing when they concluded

[R]ecent studies have deepened our appreciation of the issues involved in conferencing research. They indicate that questions of student success or failure hinge on more complex factors than whether a given teacher deploys the ‘right’ conferencing strategy. (p. 54; see also Freedman & Sperling, 1985; Sperling 1990)

These authors argued that individual differences such as students’ abilities, language, culture and status, as well as complex institutional contexts were significant factors contributing to the outcome of writing conferences. Further, they noted conferences are increasingly seen as language socialization events in which instructional choices are mediated by social and institutional processes. Thus, the issues involved in writing conferences are obviously complex--not limited simply to the teacher’s conferencing strategies--and contribute to our on-going questions and uncertainties about teaching composition.

### ***This Is Where I Came In***

Given the above findings, it became evident that my own difficulties in adopting new composition methodology and acquiring new discourse for

writing conferences were not simply an isolated case but could instead be connected to more widespread issues. A final factor also contributed to the disturbing dissonance I personally experienced between my awareness of the kind of democratic writing conference theory espoused by teachers such as Donald Murray (1972, 1979, 1985) and my own more conventional teaching practices: when I first began teaching I had experienced an educational environment that was quite student-centred and focussed on whole language, the writing process, and mutually negotiated curriculum and methods. However, when I moved to a more traditional setting, I adopted more traditional teaching practices. Likewise, Applebee (1986) noted the importance of a supportive professional environment for successful composition instruction. He found there was “a common conflict between the institutional forces shaping instruction and the values implicit in successful process-oriented approaches to writing” (p. 104). My experiences in these two different teaching environments revealed both the power of one’s teaching community to help or hinder progressive change in teaching strategies, as well as the resiliency of the IRE teaching “default mode.” Ironically, both my teaching assignments were at the same learning centre.

## ***The Site***

### **My Early Teaching Experiences**

During the ten years prior to undertaking this research, I taught in three different departments of an adult learning centre in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The centre consists of four departments representing successive levels of literacy skills from early literacy to English 12. For the first three years I taught in two of the early literacy departments--one serving learners of English as a second language and the other comprised mainly of native English speakers. The pedagogical focus in both these self-paced departments was on encouraging and supporting adult students in their learning while emphasizing the use of whole language to write about real life experiences.

The student populations in both departments faced struggles and barriers to their learning: many of the ESL students were dealing with the difficulties experienced by most new immigrants including financial hardship, cultural and language adjustment, and family separation; the majority of the native English speakers had had quite negative prior school experiences, most were coping with one or more social issues such as poverty, abuse, and violence, many had learning disabilities and other special needs, and several had been institutionalized for a part of their lives. Given the experiences of this student population, an important instructional approach in these departments was to teach relevant material with lots of encouragement, thereby improving students' skills and confidence in a relaxed, amiable atmosphere. Significantly, the writing produced in these departments was never graded, often published, and always celebrated.

The students in these self-paced programs did not have to keep pace with one another, with a set schedule, or with an externally imposed, impersonal, preset curriculum. One reason I enjoyed my early work in those departments was that the students, by sharing their needs with instructors, directed much of their own curriculum on an individual, case by case basis, thereby ensuring its relevance to the learners. They also did not have to compete with each other for grades and were not tested on their knowledge. My teaching experiences in these two departments contrasts with both my own school experiences as a student and my next teaching assignment with its more traditional expectations and teaching methods.

### **The High School English Department**

When I later joined the group of instructors teaching the English 11 and 12 courses, I inherited course materials and assignments that had been developed by my new colleagues and their predecessors and were being used by all English students. In this department the students' individual needs and

personal experiences took more of a back seat to the mandated curriculum--the provincial Integrated Resource Packages (IRPs) with their wide-ranging Learning Outcomes. This new reality, combined with the requirement to evaluate student writing, made me feel less like a language coach or helping partner with the students, and more like a judge or an adversary whose approval was required. While drafting and revising were encouraged and efforts had been made to change the content of some curriculum materials to better suit the interests and experiences of adult students, the pedagogical methods, delivery, and evaluation were still fairly traditional.

The externally imposed requirements of curriculum and evaluation, perhaps understandably, made quite a difference in my approach to teaching. I felt myself reverting to that traditional caricature of how a high school English teacher behaves--picky and punitive. Although I continued to work one-on-one with learners in a self-paced environment, the students' freedom to explore their lives and ideas in writing was limited, replaced by a specified type and number of assignments, course requirements, and right or wrong answers. Perhaps most importantly, freedom to explore--and thus to make mistakes--was replaced by penalties for making errors. I adjusted and personalized some of the course materials after my predecessors left but never considered a complete overhaul. After all, the inherited curriculum did reflect much of my own traditional educational experiences of 17 years.

The directive teaching approach, combined with the specific demands of IRPs and provincial exams, though familiar, created a growing sense of pedagogical distance from my two previous teaching placements. I began to see my experiences there as a brief but pleasant exception to the educational norm. Even the attitudes of the staff of these different departments were quite distinct from each another. Those teaching the more academic courses seemed to feel they had no choice but to adopt more traditional, directive methods to "get through" the curriculum, while the teachers in the other departments experienced

more freedom to allow their students' needs to influence the curriculum. In an effort to make the curriculum more progressive and learner-centred, I implemented some techniques such as response journals, peer editing, learning logs, increasing freedom for students to choose their own topics, and encouraging students to choose a "focus" for our conferences. However, these activities seemed like mere lip-service to a more progressive philosophy, and they barely masked a basically traditional pedagogy in which I still told students what to do and what was wrong with their writing. It seemed that the few hours of contemporary teaching strategies I had been exposed to during my year of teacher training were not enough to overcome the nearly two decades of traditional practices I had experienced as a student. It was hard to access, let alone change the beliefs and philosophy that were the underlying source of my teaching habits.

While continuing my attempts to "fix" the particular curriculum assignments offered at the centre, I recognized that I did not have a corresponding shift in my teaching strategies for discussing the revisions of students' writing with them during conferences. I still found myself faced with uncertainty about how to comment more effectively on weaknesses I observed in their writing. Both current research and my intuition told me that red-penning errors was not the ideal way to help students revise their writing. This error-identification approach felt like such a punitive method and did not really seem to help students avoid making the same mistakes again. It also did not seem like I was "teaching"--I was merely correcting. The red pen method focuses on what students are doing wrong, on what they should *not* be doing, rather than on what they should be doing. It is reactive rather than proactive. I felt I was pulling weeds rather than helping to grow and fertilize flowers. Further, even when I was able to resist such editing until a final draft, I still found myself in charge of leading discussions of the content, organization, and focus of student writing. Finally, I found that when I did try to include students in discussions of their



writing by asking what areas they felt were strong or needed revision, they seemed to lack the skills or ability to make such observations. Despite my deep desire to alter my conferencing approach, I was still puzzled about how to change what I said and did during these meetings.

### ***Undertaking Research***

My increasing discomfort provided me with the original questions that focussed my Master's research. The purpose of this research was to help me to find ways to discuss students' writing with them in a manner that could encourage and engage them as writers while also increasing their awareness of the conventions of written text. I wanted to examine what seemed to work during our discussions and what did not help students move forward in their understanding of writing. I wanted to find other things to talk about besides the errors I saw. I also felt it was important to learn how to talk during such exchanges with the goal of encouraging students to participate more actively during conferences, and to increase their ability to direct their own writing and revisions. And finally, I wanted to read related research to find out how others were managing these issues.

Overall, I sought a resolution to the conflict in which I felt torn between my allegiance to upholding the standards of "the Senior English curriculum," and my dedication to helping my individual students succeed in achieving their literacy goals and gaining more confidence in and satisfaction from their writing. Unfortunately, these two teaching requirements seemed mutually exclusive, and I felt pulled in opposing directions. Anson (1989) also noted this "schizophrenia of roles," for we are expected to be peer and helper--by giving guidance and information--as well as gatekeepers of textual standards (p. 2). Most importantly, I worried that traditional teaching approaches could contribute to adult learners feeling a repeat of their previous high school experiences wherein evaluation was punitive and the curriculum was dictated and did not capture their interests. The

possible consequence of students dropping out makes the subject of traditional teaching strategies and course content relevant to teachers of both adolescents and adults.

I undertook this exploratory research with the hope that I could discover a communication style that would assist students in their journeys toward improved writing abilities. My main goal was to become more aware of my own discourse and teaching methods and to continue learning how better to facilitate the acquisition of composition skills by these adult learners while simultaneously encouraging their growth and fostering interest in reading and writing. As a method to achieve these goals, I designed a study that would allow me to investigate the language used in writing conferences. I focussed on examining the conversations I have with my students about their writing, so as to determine better what goes on during these conferences and, ultimately, to discover how I might conduct those conversations in such a way as to maximize students' opportunities for taking powerful control of their learning.

### ***The Method***

In order to focus on various kinds of conversations about writing, I selected three students, ranging in level from Communications 11 to English 12. For a period ranging from two to eight weeks, I audio-taped our writing conferences and photocopied the various drafts of the assignments we discussed. I also kept my own journal notes of the process. I then transcribed the tapes, making observations and looking for emerging themes, patterns of discourse, and appropriate codes. This exploratory, qualitative approach involved a process of discovery and reflection that I continued to write about while gathering and analyzing the data.

One of the areas that became most interesting to me was the key issue of leadership and agenda-setting during a conference. In other words, I wondered when--if ever--I should take on the more traditional role of "teacher as knower"

and presume a kind of omniscience about the best way to lead my students to a destination of improved writing; and when I should trust the students' vision and awareness of their own intent in their writing, encouraging them to lead or find their own way there. This seems to be a question in the order of "When do I *teach* and when do I step out of the way and let them *learn*?" Finally, I ultimately came to one of my root questions: when is my help actually *helpful*?

Despite the challenges and conflicts mentioned in this chapter at both the theoretical and practical levels in the field of composition, I hoped that by focusing on some selected individual conferences, I could gain perspective on my own teaching practices and clarity into my underlying theoretical assumptions. I also hoped to improve my understanding of the dynamics involved in writing conferences, the contributions made by both participants, and the perspective that "dialogue shapes both language and thought" (Nystrand, 1997, p. 8). I hoped that the opportunity for this critical reflection on my practice would help me to become more "awake" in my teaching and to continue to pursue methods that would encourage me to become more dynamically in tune with the needs of my students and open to an evolving theoretical perspective and awareness.

This flexible, open, self-reflective approach recalls the Freirean notion of praxis in which "teachers' critical reflection on their actual practice enables them to construct an ever-changing theory while in the process of changing that practice" (Ferry, 1998, p. 3). While Freire was writing three decades ago, contemporary compositionists also increasingly favour a dialectical rather than hierarchical relationship between theory and practice (*ibid.*). On this note, we are reminded of the notion that "[p]raxis is dialogue--between reflection and action" and "[r]ather than forcing students into some preconceived theoretical model . . . teachers must work with and for students to understand the reality they share, then to construct a theory together that will change that reality" (*ibid.*, p. 17). Overall, I hoped to improve my practice and knowledge of theory through critical

reflection on actual classroom discourse with students. Thus, rather than envisioning ourselves as standing outside of classroom learning and action, teachers are reminded that with each new class we can and should “become part of the evolution of the culture in progress” (*ibid.*, p. 17).

Finally, writing conferences offer an exciting opportunity to respond to student composition. Anson (1989) pointed out both the significance of this type of interpersonal response to writing, and the limits of our understanding of it when he stated

At a time when efforts are being made to understand the social and interpersonal nature of writing, we are beginning to recognize not only how important response is to the development of literacy, but also how little we know about it. (p. 1)

I undertook this research to increase my self-awareness, with a view towards ongoing classroom change. I hope this study contributes to a growing understanding of classroom discourse and the ways in which verbal interplay during writing conferences may influence the thinking and learning of both participants. I also hope this research helps others who are questioning their own inherited pedagogical traditions.

### ***Summary***

This chapter has outlined my struggles with traditional, directive, “monological” pedagogy and discourse during writing conferences. I suggested that my difficulty in talking about and teaching writing more effectively may reflect widespread systemic issues and conflicts in the field of composition. These tensions stem from, among other things, personal school experiences, the historical roots of the field, the policies and practices which prevail in most college and university English departments, and lay culture’s persistent positivist epistemology. In an attempt to investigate this situation, I designed a study that would allow me to look closely at instructional conversations during

teacher-student writing conferences with three adult learners, with an eye to examining the dynamics and discourse there, as well as investigating how these interactions may be more, or less, productive for the students. By focussing on the discourse used in conferences, I hoped to gain understanding and insight into the roles and participation structures adopted in writing conferences and to identify factors that may have influenced how both talk and learning unfolded.

Chapter 2 outlines further research and related literature on these issues.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

This chapter begins with an overview of some of the major historical developments in the field of composition over the past century, most specifically those that contribute to conflicts faced by classroom teachers struggling between the poles of directive, monologic instruction and collaborative dialogue. The chapter then outlines related learning theories and epistemologies. I conclude with a review of the major issues and developments in writing conference and classroom discourse research.

#### ***Historical Developments in the Field of Composition***

It has been well noted that two general pedagogical theories dominate North American education: one content or discipline-centred and the other student-centred (Applebee, 1974; Brossell, 1977 in Kameen, 1986; Gere, 1986). An examination of the developments in the theory and teaching of English composition during the past century also reflects this dynamic. As most scholars indicate, the discipline has a history of focusing on the end product, on classical, rhetorical models, and on the correctness of written texts (Babin & Harrison, 1999; Emig, 1971; Farris & Anson, 1998; Graves, 1994; Hairston, 1982; Murray, 1972). The roots of much conventional, product-centred teaching still commonly seen in North American classrooms can perhaps be found in the early traditions of Scottish rhetoric and English literature, and in several key events of a century ago that have influenced today's widely practiced composition pedagogy. A closer examination of the early development of the field of composition may help us understand the origins of some of the tensions and questions we still face in teaching writing.

### **The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century**

Up to and including the nineteenth century, the study of classical rhetoric in British and North American universities seems to have been one of the most significant influences on the writing curriculum (Berlin, 1984; Gere, 1986; Horner, 1998; Langer & Allington, 1992). Following the methods and content taught at British universities during the eighteenth century, the course work of many North American universities focused on examining the logical development of a classical text through the application of rhetorical principles based on Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (Graves, 1994; Langer & Allington, 1992). More commonly engaged in the classical study of oration, students generally memorized and applied rhetorical principles to professional models of writing, rather than actually engaging in writing themselves (Berlin, 1984; Langer & Allington, 1992). In fact, as Latin and Greek were the dominant languages studied, many faculty actively resisted the introduction of the vernacular, English (Gere, 1986). Harvard, for example, did not offer a required freshman English composition course until relenting to pressure in 1885, and resentful faculty tended to spend their time searching for ways to escape teaching composition rather than articulating a philosophy of the discipline (Gere, 1986). Similarly, in Canada during the nineteenth century, most universities were under religious control and maintained a focus on classical studies and preparing the elite to serve in professional occupations such as the clergy, law, business, and medicine (Graves, 1994). However, the advent of belles-lettres--the study and writing of poetry, fiction, drama, and the essay--challenged Greek and Latin as subjects of study, gradually replacing them with English (Gere, 1986; Graves, 1994).

Despite the resistance of “faculties everywhere” to English studies, university course offerings were changing (Gere, 1986, p. 35). The study of Aristotelian logic was rather elitist, limited to the educated few, and an increasing need for more functional education and practical skills in an industrial society--as well as a growing respect for individual consciousness and Romantic notions of

the role of the individual in a democracy--eventually opened up the study of literature to a wider variety of authors, both classic and contemporary (Berlin, 1984; Graves, 1994; Langer & Allington, 1992). Furthermore, by the end of the nineteenth century, material changes in society affected the way writing was used. New kinds of written texts were required such as reports, memoranda, and scholarly articles (Russell, 1991, in Graves). Changing technology also influenced the use of writing, including pens, printing presses, and typewriters (Graves). Finally, increasing enrollment, a shift from oral to written work, the emergence of a middle-class and the professions, and more open admissions policies resulted in larger classes, more diverse and less well-prepared students, and a need for change in composition policy and practice (Anson, 1989; Gere, 1986; Graves, 1994).

### **Toward Formalism**

Many scholars view Harvard's responses to these societal shifts as having negative long-term effects on composition instruction (Anson, 1989; Gere, 1986; Langer & Allington, 1992). First, the instructors of large composition classes were forced to find more efficient ways "to purge the new middle-class enrollee of his linguistic barbarisms" (Anson, 1989, p. 3). This resulted in a focus on grammar as instructors could not respond to the volume of student writing in a more thorough and meaningful way.<sup>3</sup> Thus, editing and correction symbols replaced responses of more substance (Anson, 1989; Berlin, 1984). Second, the "Harvard Reports" of 1892 proposed a simple solution to increased enrollment and the resources that became necessary to fund numerous composition classes: entrance requirements in writing were increased and high schools were to assume responsibility for teaching writing (Berlin, 1984; Gere, 1986; Langer & Allington, 1992). These reports had an astounding impact, considering they were

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<sup>3</sup> Graves (1994) explained that methods had to change as enrolments in Canadian universities rose "ten times over two generations" from the smaller classes which had allowed for more individual attention. He noted, for example, the graduating class at the University of New Brunswick in 1893 was 13 students.



written by a committee of three non academics who were appointed by Harvard's Board of Overseers to investigate the allocation of resources now required for composition instruction (Gere, 1986). The committee went on to *suggest* that "if schools did not devote more time to teaching writing, they could not expect their students to be accepted at Harvard" (*ibid.*, p. 36). Not surprisingly, private preparatory schools led the way in following the committee's recommendations.

Emphasizing spelling, grammar, usage, and handwriting, the Harvard Reports came at an influential time since "the English course--and hence the first widely established curriculum in writing--was being institutionalized at the [American] high school level" (Langer & Allington, 1992, p. 689; Gere, 1986). The Reports viewed the "elementary instruction" of writing as properly belonging in grammar schools so that institutions of higher education could focus on their "proper functions" (cited in Gere, 1986, p. 36). In this way, Harvard contributed to the view of composition as a lesser discipline, one concerned with mere functional skills and mechanical correctness, viewing writing as "merely the habit of talking with the pen instead of with the tongue" (*ibid.*, p. 36). Gere further asserted that "[b]ecause composition instructors had no coherent philosophy against which to evaluate such statements, these limited views gained currency and shaped ensuing instruction" (p. 36). Thus, when other universities followed the lead of the influential institution, the focus on mechanical correctness became the goal of writing instruction and the domain of secondary and elementary schools, "not out of a clearly articulated philosophical tradition but in the absence of same" (*ibid.*, p. 37).

Clearly then, it was Harvard's prestige rather than an intellectual base that fed this current-traditional model out of proportion to other models. Rather than evolving from a well thought out philosophy or research-based theoretical perspective, Gere argued that the "dominance of mechanical features . . . in today's instruction derives from the lack of a coherent philosophy guiding composition pedagogy" (p. 34). Likewise, Farris and Anson (1998) also observed

that “composition studies has sought but never achieved a coherence made possible by a unified theory” (p. 2; see also Kitzhaber, 1962, cited in Kennedy, 1998).

In response to the Harvard Reports, “learning to write and learning grammar came to be seen as one” (Langer and Allington, 1992, p. 692). Berlin (1984) observed that the Harvard Reports encouraged a deeply mechanistic view of writing, an approach which then continued to influence instruction at all levels for several decades when influential Harvard faculty published textbooks on the subject (Babin & Harrison, 1999). Adams Sherman Hill, Fred Newton Scott, Barrett Wendell, and John Franklin Genung--called “the big four”--wrote most of the influential current-traditional textbooks from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. These texts, like current-traditionalism in general, emphasized rules, grammar, mechanics and spelling and were based on a rationalist philosophy assuming a knowable reality in which truth exists in the external world, independently of the human mind (*ibid.*). Form and surface correctness were emphasized as it was believed the writer could mirror reality in words. Without an articulated composition philosophy nor a well-defined pedagogy or curriculum to guide classroom practice, textbooks came to serve those functions and current-traditionalism took hold (Gere, 1986; Langer & Allington, 1992).

### **Alternative Views**

Despite the power and influence of Harvard’s policies, other perspectives about teaching writing existed at that time. For example, the National Education Association’s “Committee of Ten” in 1894 made much more progressive curriculum recommendations than the Harvard Reports, discouraging grammar drills and encouraging personal writing about students’ own experiences (Langer & Allington, 1992). However, Gere (1986) concluded that these progressive recommendations failed to succeed because they “competed with an philosophical and mechanical model in a period when the growing dominance of

science reinforced mechanics over philosophy” (p. 38). In addition, it is important to note there was--and still is--a significant difference between educational theory, text book recommendations, and the received curriculum (Langer & Allington, 1992). While progressive *theories* existed a century ago and continued to grow, college grammar handbooks were first published in the latter part of the nineteenth century and grammar remained a focus of college texts despite the recommendation that it be relegated to the secondary school level (*ibid.*). Berlin (1984) also revealed the power of publishing companies to influence their authors’ content when he found the publishers of three leading proponents of progressive, experience-centred teaching--Scott, Denny, and Buck--*insisted* that traditional exercises such as diction, grammar drills and sentence structure be emphasized in their jointly authored college textbooks.

Further, several studies of school texts published between 1900 and 1959 found that while elementary-focussed texts contained slightly more student-centred, progressive notions, most books still stressed the structure and mechanics of writing rather than the development of ideas, making the practice of composition merely an exercise (Bernhardt, 1963; Donsky, 1984; Lyman, 1932 cited in Langer & Allington, 1992; Lynch & Evans, 1963). Similarly, Bernhardt (1963) found threads of both traditional and progressive approaches in secondary school texts, concluding that there remained a tension between these two basic approaches. Overall, the debate continued without a theoretical or empirical basis for choosing between the two sides.

Despite the sporadic presence of progressive pedagogy in some textbooks and curriculum guides, Colvin and Meyer (1906) and Hosic (1912), who conducted studies of the actual writing curriculum in schools, both found that schools emphasized mechanical exactness to the detriment of student expression (in Langer & Allington, 1992). This “divided curriculum” has been noted in several surveys of classroom activity and textbook and curriculum content well into the twentieth century (Applebee, 1984; Nystrand, 1997; Smith, 1933; Squire

& Applebee, 1968). Many composition scholars agree that prior to the 1960s, nearly all the actual classroom study of written language was still focussed solely on the final end product and the correctness of written texts, rather than the processes by which they came into being (Babin & Harrison, 1999; Emig, 1971; Hairston, 1982; Matsuhashi, 1981). While theory and even curricular recommendations were shifting somewhat from the study of pure rhetoric and correctness, the focus of instruction remained on the final written product of both models and students' own writing, rather than on the steps and strategies needed to achieve the end results (Gere, 1986; Langer & Allington, 1992).<sup>4</sup> The relationship between composition theory and practice during the first half of the twentieth century has been summarized in the following way:

Thus, although theory moved the focus toward viewing all students as active language learners and users who learn rules through experience, the curriculum recommendations, materials, and activities in writing remained traditional, with few substantive changes and a consistent concern for correctness. (Langer and Allington, 1992, p. 703)

Clearly classroom teachers had not yet embraced “new” theories of learning and composition.

### **The Persistence of Positivism**

When viewed in the historical context of positivist epistemology, this persistent focus on correctness is less surprising. In this rationalist perspective, truth is “out there” and knowable from our “direct and unfiltered access to reality” (Dias, 1998, p. 285), while language is seen as a transparent window on reality, a conduit conveying truth. Faigley (1989) summarized “[r]ealism from classical Greece onward assumes that language can transmit directly what is signified” and it originates within the minds of individuals (p. 397).

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<sup>4</sup> In the U.S., criticism of the more progressive approaches heightened in the wake of Sputnik in 1957--they were seen as partly to blame for the Americans “falling behind” the Russians, an event which spurred one of the first “back to basics” movements (Langer & Allington, 1992).

Consequently, “[t]he universal ‘truths’ contained in great art and literature are [thought to be] available to anyone with adequate facilities to discern them” (*ibid.*, p. 397). According to this view, the text is seen as univocal, a static entity or document containing “the answers,” reading is seen as unproblematic, a one-way flow of information to an inactive recipient, the reader, while the task of the author is to represent reality accurately (Langer & Allington, 1992).

Classrooms organized from this perspective are dominated by lecture, recitation, worksheets, and tests. “Knowledge is treated as fixed, objective, autonomous; for students it is given, transmitted, and received” (Nystrand, 1997, p. 16; see also Williams, 1998; Johnston, Woodside-Jiron, & Day, 2001). Transmission-based teaching, called the “banking model” by Freire (1970), views students as empty vessels to be filled with information given to them by “expert” teachers, the authoritative knowers. In such classrooms the teacher controls the discourse with a minimum of interaction between the student and teacher and among students. The teacher’s agenda is followed, and recall of information replaces critical thinking and active, personal engagement. The IRE (initiation-response-evaluation) discourse structure dominates such classrooms and student participation is limited to recitation, creating classroom interaction “that is superficial and procedural since it typically fails to affect the substance of the discourse, which is prescribed by the teacher” (Nystrand, 1997, p. 18). Nystrand called such instruction “monologically organized” and found

The epistemic role of students . . . is limited to remembering what others, especially teachers and textbooks, have said, not figuring things out (aside from which answers are correct) and not generating any new knowledge. (p. 16)

Likewise, Johnston *et al* (2001) studied the relationships between teachers’ literate epistemological stances and those of their students. They argue that classroom “discourse environments have powerful effects on children’s epistemologies, over time changing the course of their development” (p. 231).

Despite the work of sociolinguists and sociocultural theorists (Cazden, 1988, Gee, 1996 in Johnston *et al*, 2001), extensive surveys of classroom practice show that these positivist practices continue to dominate classrooms (Applebee, 1984; Nystrand, 1997).

### **Shifting Epistemology**

Jean Piaget is recognized as one of several important figures contributing to a shift in perspective away from transmission models of teaching. His work as a cognitive development psychologist led him to examine the relation of the environment to learning and to recognize how context shapes knowledge (Babin & Harrison, 1999). According to Piaget, experiences are categorized into schemata that are then used to understand and interpret future events. New experiences either fit into the schemata or create dissonance and the need to change the cognitive structure. While Piaget's developmental model is rather fixed, what is most important for this discussion of the shifting view of learning is that children are seen as *actively* involved in the *construction* of knowledge, rather than passively absorbing it from an external source (Evans, 1973). Piaget is credited with helping develop the theory of learning known as constructivism (Williams, 1998). For constructivists involved in literate activity, "[m]eaning is not an independent reality, but is constructed by the reader based on understandings that are cognitive, developmental, social, and cultural" (*ibid.*, p. 46). Constructivists assume an interactivity between the reader (or writer) and the text and context. "In cognitive constructivist terms, the environment provides experience, but the brain constructs learning" (*ibid.*, p. 46).

A changing point in the field of composition that helped to spread these new views--particularly as they related to language learning--came in the form of the Dartmouth Conference in 1966 (Babin & Harrison, 1999). During the three week seminar, fifty leading British and American scholars and teachers shared their research in the teaching of writing and the study of literature and

linguistics. According to their view of knowledge development, “control of learning belongs with the learner, not the teacher” (Williams, 1998, p. 47). The participants concluded that student-oriented, collaborative workshops should replace teacher-controlled, skills-oriented classrooms. As a result, this conference encouraged an interest in cognitive psychology and helped signal the move to process-centred, expressionist classrooms in which teachers share classroom authority and encouraged students to write in authentic voices (Babin & Harrison, 1999).

### **The Mid Twentieth Century--The Process Movement**

While the conflict between student-centred and teacher-driven classrooms would characterize composition even into the twenty-first century, in 1963 writing research was poised for a important change--sometimes viewed as a paradigm shift (Hairston, 1982). Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer published *Research in Written Composition*, a landmark review of the field of writing (cited in Emig, 1971). In it they concluded the field was still dominated by product-centred pedagogy and comparisons of instructional methodologies that lacked theoretical underpinnings. They made several suggestions for future research, the most significant being a call to answer the question “What is involved in the act of writing?” (Hillocks, 1986, p. 53). Until that point, it seems very little thought had been put into the question, “What happens when we write?” In fact, Emig (1971) noted that of the 504 studies that are cited in the bibliography of *Research in Written Composition*, only two deal even indirectly with the *process* of writing among adolescents (p. 19). However, after this extensive review of the field, theory and research concerning composition began to change, and interest and attention shifted to empirical observations of the processes of writing (Hillocks, 1986).

The roots of the process movement are located in the 1960s, a time of political radicalism, increasing liberalism, and a rejection of traditional authority.

The shift toward process was influenced by a number of factors, including a reaction against the current-traditional approach with its focus on the correctness of the final end product. Process teachers began to emphasize content over form and encouraged students to take ownership of their writing (Babin & Harrison, 1999). It was believed that students would be less inhibited if there were less emphasis on the final product and more insight and attention were given to the stages of the writing process (Gere, 1986; Schreiner, 1997). Shifting the focus of writing instruction to the process of composing was thought to help writers to find their “voice” through thinking and prewriting exercises such as free-writing. This view of writing is based on the presumption that everyone is a potential author with something to say, and that people just need to be freed from the constraints that hold them back from being good writers. This desire to “free up” the potential within reflects similar shifting social attitudes prevalent in the 1960s.

While approaches to the writing process vary, they are generally characterized by activities including brainstorming, journal writing, and other prewriting activities, as well as writing, revising and editing strategies. This approach shifts the focus of instruction from the final product to the production of written text. The promise of the method may give a feeling of progress and sense of control over the complex and challenging area of teaching writing; however, Applebee (1987) found that process approaches are not widely used nor effectively implemented, and he argued for a reconceptualization of the nature of the writing process to make it easier to implement. Gere (1986) agreed that the focus on the writing process was generally lacking a conceptual base. Indeed, when the various “stages” of the writing process are examined closely, distinctions between them become blurred. For example, since most people revise *while* writing, the difference between writing and revising are often indistinguishable (see also Trimbur, 1994). In addition, several scholars have pointed out the terms *process* and *product* should be used with caution (see



Coe, 1987), and that “the dichotomy between process and product is somewhat misleading” (Whitmore, 1991, p. 154). Finally, many so-called post-process theorists feel that there is *no* 4:54 PM process for writing (Kent, 1999), and that process scholars are “attempting to systematize something that simply is not susceptible to systematization” (Olson, 1999, p. 8). Instead, post-process theorists find that “writing--indeed all communication--is radically contingent, radically situational. Consequently, efforts to pin down some version of ‘the writing process’ are misguided, unproductive, and misleading” (*ibid.*, p. 9).

Though “process” has been more recently seen as “a slippery term, with no universally accepted definition” (Belanoff, 1997, p. 411), the process approach to composition showed tremendous potential in the 1970s and encouraged teachers to move beyond their singular focus on the end product. While there remains a continuing dominance of formalist methods in classrooms (Applebee, 1984), scholars and theorists have increasingly focussed on studying the processes and factors that influence the production of written texts. Conflicts between these two approaches to teaching writing continue to dominate the field, with current-traditional rhetoric still more evident in classroom practice, while student-centred, process theories are more pronounced in literature and theory.

### **The Move to Sociocultural Theory**

Where cognitive and individualist assumptions initially fuelled the process movement, in the 1980s scholars began to criticize these views for “not placing enough importance on the writers’ ‘situatedness,’ the cultural and political context, and for not recognizing the political significance of certain written products” (Babin & Harrison, 1999, p. 222; see also Fox, 1990). Bizzell (1982), for example, objected to the lack of social emphasis, seeing students’ problems with writing as resulting from social differences and lack of discourse community membership, rather than as arising from students’ cognitive

deficiencies (see also Bartholomae, 1993; McDermott, 1993). This perspective views language situations--including teachers' response to writing--in terms of their communal character "which necessitates a focus not on what individuals say but on what they say to one another" (Anson, 1989, p. 8). Thus, while it is certainly the responsibility of instructors to ensure that learning and growth continue in classrooms, we see that teachers do not have complete control over what transpires in a learning environment (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Sperling, 1990). Rather, from this perspective, knowledge and learning are mutual constructions, affected by the many social, contextual factors that come together in any classroom (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). Thus, social constructionists have "worked to disturb the discipline's harmonious image of the writing process as natural, asocial, and apolitical; they stress that no classroom and no piece of writing can ever be free from the problematic encounter between an individual and society" (Welch, 1997, p. 148).

While Piaget recognized cultural and social factors as partially contributing to a child's stages of development, his contemporary, Vygotsky, viewed them as essential (Williams, 1998). Much of Vygotsky's work focussed on inquiry into the social formation of mind and language. Vygotsky's perspective--often called social constructionism, or sociocultural theory--is based on recognizing the importance of sociohistorical and interpersonal social factors in human development and learning. Moll and Whitmore (1993), drawing on Vygotsky's theories, noted the "inseparability of sociocultural conditions for understanding thinking and its development," and they argued Vygotsky viewed thinking not as characteristic of the child only, "but of the child-in-social-activities with others" (p. 19). Language is key, for, according to this perspective, we cannot gain an unmediated view of the world; instead we see and construct the world through language. Vygotsky also argued that through the process of collaboration with a more competent person, a learner can achieve greater understanding by being helped to construct new knowledge within her "zone of

proximal development” (ZPD). Thus, meaning and thinking are socially constructed, and reading and writing are inherently social, contrary to the traditional view that they are solitary, individual acts (Bruffee, 1983).

This view represents a clear move away from Western notions of individualism and positivism in which knowledge is thought to be objectively verifiable and teaching is the transmission of information to passive learners (Forman, Minick, & Stone, 1993). Faigley (1989) commented on the effect of this shift away from a focus on the individual:

One of the most troubling ideas for the humanities and the social sciences in the last two decades is the ‘decentering’ of the individual subject from the atomic, rational consciousness of Descartes to a socially constructed self located in networks of discourses. (p. 396)

In sociocultural theory, language and knowledge are viewed as representations “shaped by discourse practices of institutions and communities” (Dias, 1998, p. 285). Ultimately, truth is defined by community agreement on a matter and can change (Babin & Harrison, 1999). In short, social constructionists see knowledge and learning as social, not cognitive, acts. For them “[k]nowledge is not the result of the confrontation of the individual mind with reality but of the conversation that organizes the available means we have at any given time to talk about reality” (Trimbur, 1989, p. 605).

Critics of this perspective, such as Thomas Kent, often point out that the theory leads to total relativism. Some Marxists and feminist scholars argue this notion of community agreement ignores marginal voices, and James Berlin (1996) faults social construction for failing to critique fully the power of existing economic and political institutions. Further, critics such as Donald Davidson argued against the concept of discourse communities and conventions, asserting language is not shared but rather each individual has her own “theory” of language, and writing is thus interpretation, a hermeneutical act (cited in Babin &

Harrison, 1999). Finally, others argue that social construction leaves out the human agent. Stewart (1992), for example, stated, “[t]he social constructionist lives in a world in which people lose their identities in collaborative uses of language” (p. 283).

Bakhtin (1981), however, argued that notions of a unitary self are antithetical to the dialogic nature of language and meaning. Dialogism expresses the social or shared nature of language use. Both Bakhtin and Rommetveit (1992) have asserted “the developing human mind is dialogically constituted” (both cited in Nystrand, p. ix). Charles Taylor (1994) also argued that “the genesis of the human mind is . . . not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical” (p. 32). For Bakhtin, language, or the “word,” is two sided, its meaning determined equally by the speaker and the listener (or the writer and reader). At the heart of his conception of existence and language is a “sense of opposition and struggle . . . a ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart, and centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere” (1981, p. xviii). Rather than viewing these forces in binary opposition, Bakhtin stresses the “fragility and ineluctably historical nature of language, the coming and dying of meaning” (*ibid.*). As such, Bakhtin theorized “the Tower-of-Babel” mixing of languages that goes on around any object (1981, p. 278). His term heteroglossia implies that no word is ever “pure,” but rather is affected by previous uses, changes according to its context, and arises from the conflict between official and unofficial discourses (Morris, 1994). The meaning of all utterances is, therefore, seen as a function of a matrix of contextual forces including social, historical, cultural, and physiological. Bakhtin argued

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated--overpopulated--with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (1981, p. 294)

Indeed, although some groups, such as authoritarian regimes, may attempt to enforce monologue and pretend to be the ultimate word, that attempt to deny the dialogic nature of existence cannot overpower the centrifugal force of heteroglossia, a force that ensures meaning remains in process, unfinalizable (Morris, 1994). Thus, language *socialization*, rather than language *acquisition*, indicates that the situated discourse of classroom talk and writing conferences plays a key role in the development of student learning.

### ***Conferencing Research***

Much contemporary learning theory is based on conversations between the learner and a more experienced member of the community (Florio-Ruane, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). In this view, as indicated above, learning is a social and dialogic event. Nystrand (1997) argued that Bakhtin has shown us “meaning and therefore learning--understood as the expansion of a personally coherent interpretation of information and events--are actively constructed and negotiated through language use” (p. 73). In other words, people learn by participating in communicative exchanges. As conversations between learners and a more experienced member of the community, teacher-student conferences are a potentially effective tool for improving students’ understanding, performance, and independence as writers (Fassler, 1978; Freedman & Sperling, 1985; Graves, 1976; Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Morrow, 1991; Murray, 1979; Sperling, 1990; Walker & Elias, 1987). Some studies, for example, found that students who participated in conferences earned higher course grades than those who received the more traditional written feedback (Kates, 1977, in Walker & Elias, 1987), while other research found students who participated in conferences had more favourable attitudes toward writing instruction (Tomlinson, 1975; Budz & Grabar, 1976, both in Walker & Elias, 1987). Despite these positive views, however, many questions remain about the most appropriate approach and discourse to use in writing conferences.

### **Shared Conference Goals**

While meaning and learning can be seen as shared, socially constructed events, of particular interest is the important question of whether the expert and learner actually share the same goal in any given teaching interaction or task. (Stone, 1998; Greenfield, 1984 cited in Stone; Moll & Whitmore, 1993). Biemiller and Meichenbaum (1998) asserted that most scaffolding<sup>5</sup> literature places “insufficient emphasis on the importance of establishing a shared task context” with the learner, as opposed to the student feeling this is “your task, performed by me” (p. 366). Palincsar (1998) agreed it is “essential that we understand the child’s definition of the task in order to fine-tune assistance” (p. 371). These views place the learner in a central position of importance in instructional interaction. Similarly, Butler (1998) found that students do not always interpret tasks the way adults or teachers intend. Butler observed that, when “young children did not share an adult’s vision of the task . . . they did not successfully interpret adult feedback on their performance, nor did they regulate their task completion on the basis of that feedback” (p. 375). As a result of such misunderstanding, students may be judged erroneously as having learning difficulties.

Butler further argued that providing “calibrated instruction” requires that a teacher interpret a student’s point of view, something that “requires not only coming to a shared task definition but also making effective moment-to-moment judgments about the focus of students’ attention” (p. 382; see also Donahue & Lopez-Reyna, 1998). This again emphasizes that the student’s active attention and participation are critical in a teaching/learning interaction (see also Forman, Minick, & Stone, 1993). The alternative is that an instructor may fail to attend to a student’s concerns, “focusing instead on what the instructor wanted the student to learn” (Butler, 1998, p. 383). The resulting dynamic when a teacher attempts to

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<sup>5</sup> Scaffolding, like other concepts of “guided practice” or “assisted performance” derived from Vygotskian theory and ZPD (Moll & Whitmore, 1993, p. 19).

transmit knowledge by dictating ideas and revisions is likely to fail to result in the desired learning and revisions (Jacobs & Karliner, 1977). Overall, this view emphasizes the active role of students in the design and construction of their own knowledge, and, as a result, scholars such as Butler argue that “children [should] have a say in defining both the task and the strategies that will be used to accomplish it” (1998, p. 383).

### **Conferencing with Adult Learners**

In research focussed specifically on writing conferences with adult learners (generally in college settings), several studies critiqued instructors for taking over conferences, for being too dominant and, thereby, preventing student input and active involvement. For example, Jacobs and Karliner (1977) found that when the teacher was in the role of authority, working through her own ideas about a topic during a conference, it put the student in the passive role of listener, and under these conditions students generally did little more in their revisions than parrot the teacher’s suggestions, in an apparent attempt to “do what the teacher wants.” Under these circumstances, students were left out and, it was concluded, were thus less engaged in the material on a cognitive level. Consequently, these authors argued that the nature of the roles adopted during conferences--either hierarchical teacher-student roles, or more like two conversants--“in large part determined whether the conference resulted in significant change in the cognitive level of the revision or merely in a patching of the rough draft” (p. 489).

Similarly, Walker and Elias (1987) found that tutor dominance of the agenda was related to low rated conferences, whereas conferences in which the student was allowed to set the agenda were rated highly even if the tutor seemed to dominate in terms of number of words spoken. They found that it was the *type* of participation rather than the relative amount of student or instructor talk that influenced how a conference was rated by both participants. Likewise, Madigan

(1988) found many of his students appreciated the opportunity to write things their way, not just to follow the teacher's instructions. One student praised his teacher's approach to conferencing: "I really felt like a writer, not just a machine cranking out copies of what the teacher wanted to read" (p. 76). On the contrary, when Madigan gave in to the pressure and temptation to just "tell a student what to do," he concluded, "I am amazed at the exactness with which the writer made my corrections" (p. 76). Clearly, the approach used to give feedback during conferences can influence both the revisions students make and their attitudes toward their writing.

While some research focuses on how teachers may dominate or influence conferences, other studies inquire into the ways in which students impact both the direction of conferences and the roles that teachers adopt. Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997), for example, investigated the structuring effect that students themselves had on conferences. They found teachers responded to weak students by being more directive and authoritative, whereas with stronger students they were more collegial. They also found weak students tended to follow the teacher's suggestions for revisions quite closely, almost verbatim. These students mainly *transferred* teacher input while stronger students *transformed* and reworked the teacher's ideas; the difference was described as imitation versus creation. While it is tempting to view the more directive teachers as excessively prescriptive with weaker students, the authors felt

[A] broader view of the social context, or the activity system, argues for a more generous interpretation: The teacher was matching her instruction to the students' needs, as measured by both their writing proficiency--the starting point of their ZPDs [zones of proximal development]--and by institutionally mandated course goals. (p. 86)

The instructors studied in this research felt they were in a double bind because weaker students were less familiar with the teacher's expectations and how to achieve the writing goals of the course, thereby requiring more direct instruction.



In this study, the teachers responded to these conflicts by adopting an “instrumental orientation,” elevating writing improvement over student ownership, and focussing on directly telling some students what to do. While this resulted in students mimicking teacher suggestions, the authors felt this was a legitimate step in learning the academic genre. Overall, in terms of who has the “power” to influence the direction, content, and roles adopted during conferences, the authors found “the divergent backgrounds students bring to instructional events have a structuring effect” (p. 86).

### **Leading a Conference**

On the topic of conference leadership, some instructors and theorists challenge the notion that teachers can or should direct student revisions. They believe teachers simply cannot lead a conference about a paper, cannot say what is wrong with it, because they do not yet know what the writer intended (Morrow, 1991; Murray, 1979; see also Tobin, 1993 for his discussion of teachers’ erroneous readings of student writing). Murray (1979), for example, asked “How can I change the language when the student writer doesn’t yet know what to say?” (p. 17). He asserted “You can’t go to work on a piece of [student] writing until it is near the end of the process, until the author has found something to say and a way to say it” (p. 17). Likewise, Morrow (1991) articulated the importance of the student’s intentions, stating, “when I hear a student read his paper aloud I am also aware of choices--of the thousand ways that particular paper could go. And I am also, nearly every time, aware that I don’t know where the paper *should* go” (p. 226). According to this view, the writer knows more than the reader about what the writer intends to say; thus, readers can mainly ask questions and give their reactions to what is there on the page (Sommers, 1982). In these conferences, students are encouraged to lead by reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses they see in their own writing and discussing their paper collegially with their instructor. Murray (1979) stated, “I guess what I’ve

learned to do is to stay out of their way and not to interfere with their learning” (p. 14). Shifting the focus of his job as a teacher from the product produced to the producer, he concluded, “I teach the student not the paper” (p. 15).

In contrast, Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997) found this approach worked with strong students but not with weaker students who may lack skills or familiarity and experience with teachers’ expectations. Such conferencing strategies are seen as indirect and they may allow teachers to simply mask their expectations, rewarding those students who figure out the teacher’s preferences without being directly instructed (DeJoy, 1999; Delpit, 1988). Several scholars found that indirect instruction particularly disadvantaged non-mainstream learners because they were uninitiated in the expectations the teachers had about both writing and classroom behaviour (Cazden, 1986; Delpit, 1988; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). It is argued that part of the problem is that implicit writing conventions are seen by many instructors as “natural” rather than as potentially unfamiliar *cultural practices* that need to be learned (Delpit, 1998; Newkirk, 1995). Pullman (1999) noted, “[i]t is often very difficult to convince people that what they call ‘better prose’ is simply more squarely in line with the conventions they are used to” (p. 25). Obviously, the issue of leading or directing a conference involves more than simply choosing between teacher and student.

### **Role of the Teacher**

The issue of leadership and cultural practice within conferences and classrooms raises the question of the ultimate role or job of the teacher. Several researchers and theorists hold the view that the role of the teacher is to initiate students into the realm of academic discourse, to teach them the rules of the game so they can succeed there (Bartholomae, 1983, in Ritchie, 1989; Bruffee, 1983; Delpit, 1988; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Shaughnessy, 1977). In fact, they view a teacher’s failure to do so as potentially detrimental to and disadvantaging of non-mainstream writers.

Yet other scholars critique this view of teacher as merely an initiator, and of the discourse of a given academic community as “a closed and unified system” (Ritchie, 1989, p. 152). Such critics state that the goal of the instructor should not be to teach students how to imitate the academic discourse nor acquiesce with the teacher’s wishes (Ritchie, 1989; Spellmeyer, 1993), but rather to help students to contribute to the evolving dialogue of the academic community, to engage in “hermeneutic reciprocity” (Spellmeyer, 1993), to translate the community’s discourse into their own voice, and, ultimately, to transform both academia and society (Bizzell 1992; Freire, 1970; Morrow, 1991; Ritchie, 1989). Walker and Elias (1987), for example, argued against turning students into perfect imitators of the conventions of written discourse, and Morrow (1991) asserted we cannot learn by parroting the dominant discourse; instead, these theorists argued the focus of the writing classroom should be on participation, appropriation, and transformation. For these teachers, the ultimate goal of education is democratic participation, political empowerment, and social justice (Bizzell, 1992; Ritchie, 1989).

In this contrast between those composition teachers who focus on reproducing and transmitting the academic genres of the discipline, and those who propose that our role is to help students find their own voices and to transform themselves, the discipline, and society, there are echoes of the same discipline- versus student-centred conflict of a half a century ago. As teachers of writing, the question continues to be recycled: do we *lead* conferences, teach writing *skills*, content, and focus on the end *product*, or do we view writing as a pathway to empowering and developing the personal and political voices of our students?

### **The Effects of Social Contexts and School Norms**

While several studies have found the roles adopted by both student and teacher affect the outcome of conferences, other scholars examine the

instructional set up and classroom context of writing conferences for their potential impact on student learning. While many current models of learning involve a dialogue between novice and experienced cultural members, the social contexts and relationships that impact classroom conversations have both inherent problems and promise (Florio-Ruane, 1990; see also Lave & Wenger, 1991; McDermott, 1993; Nystrand, 1997). For example, most conversations consist of a mutual give and take between peers, but classroom discussions between teachers and students do not generally follow such conventions (Mehan, 1979; Nystrand, 1997). Therefore, “writing conferences potentially alter the conversational rights and duties of teachers and students and, in so doing, change the range of language strategies available to students for learning” (Florio-Ruane, 1990, p. 369, citing Barnes, 1976). Many teachers envision a good conference as one in which students actively participate, lead, and take “ownership.” Indeed, in the “ideal conference . . . students and teachers are free to trade conversational places” (Florio-Ruane, 1990, p. 369). Likewise, Ritchie (1989) stated that the conference is meant to shift conversational and evaluative responsibility onto the student.

However, Florio-Ruane (1990), among others, questioned the possibility “of such a profound and localized shift in classroom task, talk, and text” (p. 369). Instead, she found that “prevailing school norms limit the conference’s possibilities as scaffolded dialogue” (p. 370). Clearly it is difficult for students to become more active and assume leadership during conferences when they are not used to this role--as it is difficult for many teachers to share their role as authority and to collaborate as peers. As a result, conference talk often tends to resemble the unilateral communication found in lessons in which teachers shape and direct conversations while students passively follow (Alpert, 1987; Denyer & Florio-Ruane, 1995; Gutierrez, 1994; Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). Morrow (1991), for example, found that during her experience as a writing centre tutor, “most students begin [a conference] by assuming the tutor

is in charge; most students come into the session taking a passive role” (p. 221). Research shows that instead of easily shifting from traditional school discourse to more collegial sharing of ideas, conference talk--like almost all classroom talk--is “radically asymmetrical” and is difficult for both student and instructor to change (Stubbs, 1976, cited in Cazden, 1986, p. 443). What these researchers argued is that the *potential* of conferences is often tempered by the *reality* of classroom life--such as limited time, IRE traditions, learned classroom behaviours, and other cultural and social factors that shape the talk that occurs (see, for example, Johnston *et al*, 2001).

### **Negotiation**

Increasingly, contemporary composition scholars attempt to dissolve the apparent dichotomy between a focus on structure versus content in writing, and teacher versus student direction. As we search for a model to guide us in teacher-student interactions, the term “negotiate” is frequently used to identify the genuine interplay of give and take between student and teacher (Ritchie, 1989; Sperling, 1990; Trimbur, 1994). Allington (2002), for example, notes that true conversation cannot be scripted or packaged. Likewise, Sperling (1990) concluded that there is “no fixed portrait of collaboration” but that rather there is a continuum in teacher-student collaboration in which the teacher assumes a special leadership role but this collaboration varies with participants and rhetorical circumstances (see also Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). In her study of a Grade 9 English class, Sperling found that at the more highly collaborative end of the continuum there were active negotiations between teacher and student characterized by mutual control. At the other end of the continuum, there was minimal verbal contribution by the student which, in effect, “bought” the teacher’s input, direction, and monologue. However, both ends of the spectrum were seen by the authors as legitimate styles of conferencing in which the student’s individual needs were met (see also Jacobs & Karliner, 1977).

Ritchie (1989) also addressed this implied dichotomy of discipline- versus student-centred pedagogy and argued that the role of teachers necessarily includes *both*. She noted that instructors struggled with, but ultimately could not avoid the role of authority and pulling students towards patterns of writing and thinking privileged by the teacher and the institution. While she found that teachers are inevitably normative and unifying forces, Ritchie also felt we must encourage stretching beyond traditional thought, to encourage our students to do more than parrot conventions but, rather, to transform them. Ritchie reminded us of Bakhtin's warning of the "false tendency toward reducing everything to a single consciousness" (p.171). Instead, we are encouraged to attend to the "multifaceted, evolving, and unfinished nature of the process of learning to write" (*ibid.*, p. 171). Indeed, she found that teachers are inevitably in constant conflict with the many competing forces in our classrooms, including students' skills, backgrounds, values and purposes, the academic and evaluative requirements of the institution, and the social context in each new class. Like Bakhtin, she found that it is from out of this conflict and struggle that new ideas, discourse and identities arise. This special balancing act requires that teachers be finely tuned to any given situation and all its many variables and factors (see also Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). Ultimately, Ritchie concluded, the writing classroom involves its participants in "a process of socialization *and* of individual becoming" (p. 153).

Drawing on the work of Bakhtin, Nystrand (1997) also argued against a polarized dichotomy of teacher versus student as the appropriate centre for understanding and meaning-making. Instead, he argued, it is "*the relationship between them*" which matters most (p. 6) as "[l]earning emerges from the interplay of voices" (p. ix). For Nystrand, instructional discourse that is negotiated and jointly determined engages students and validates the importance of their contributions to learning. It is the dialogically constituted nature of such classroom instruction, the struggle among competing voices, that

allows for collaborative co-construction of understanding. In his study of hundreds of lessons in 58 Grade 8 and 54 Grade 9 English classes over two years, Nystrand found that the character of pedagogical contracts or instructional scripts significantly affected student achievement. The literature test administered in his study to gauge student achievement included questions ranging from requiring simple recall to in-depth understanding. Nystrand argued the quality of student learning was closely linked to the quality of classroom talk as “[d]epth of understanding requires elaboration of the learner’s, not the teacher’s, interpretive framework” (p. 20). Nystrand found that “authentic” teacher questions, rather than test questions, as well as teacher uptake of student contributions during classroom discussion showed the most significant positive effect on achievement. According to this study, the bottom line is “learning to think requires effective interaction” (p. 72).

### **Good Writing**

Along with investigations into conference discourse, our underlying conceptions of what constitutes “good” writing should also be examined because such assumptions have direct effects on the teaching of writing. As classroom instruction and expectations are increasingly seen as cultural constructs, so too must we examine more closely the basis for our conceptions of what constitutes “good” writing. While it is the personal experience of many students that the expected writing style and format vary among different disciplines, research also shows that teachers within a given department cannot always agree on what good writing is. Instructors have been found to have certain preconceived but often unstated--and even unconscious--expectations, style preferences, and definitions for what constitutes good writing. McColly (1970), for example, found “[t]here is dramatic disagreement among . . . English teachers as to what good writing is and is not . . .” (in Harris, 1977, p. 176).

Faigley (1989) also pointed out the difficulty in looking to assessment tools to find clarification for what constitutes good writing. He found many assessment tools merely expressed tautologies such as “An ‘A’ paper is one that ‘displays unusual competence’; hence, an ‘A’ paper is an ‘A’ paper” (p. 395). Further, instructors in one study found institutional mixed messages to both teachers and students regarding what constitutes good writing:

Teachers are to teach students to write, but they are to ensure that they copy the writing tradition creatively; learners are to learn to write ‘like a native,’ but they should hang on to their individual voices (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Johns, 1995; Reid, 1994). These are difficult tasks. (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997, p. 87)

Without more specific criteria it is not surprising that Harris (1977) found a disturbing lack of agreement among English teachers ranking a set of papers. He found that when teachers used their own idiosyncratic criteria to rank papers, there were often great discrepancies among a given paper’s various rankings. However, when specific criteria were given for ranking, this increased the reliability of the teachers’ decisions. Interestingly, Harris also found “an inverse relationship” between the criteria that the teachers *said* they thought were most important--i.e. content and ideas--and the criteria that they *used* most often in marking and correcting student compositions--mechanics and usage--revealing a dissonance between teachers’ philosophy and their practice.

While most teachers would deny that correctness is all that is required in good writing, studies show errors in mechanics are the most common focus of teacher responses to student writing (Rosen, 1987). Fulkerson (1990) summarized the contrast between what we say we value and what actually happens in classrooms:

Even in 1979, the formalist axiology was hard to find in print: *no one* writing in our scholarly journals defended the most basic formalist assertion that good writing is correct writing, although we had plenty of evidence of its classroom existence. (p. 412)



Thus, we see that the conventional focus on grammar and correctness continues to exert a strong pull on classroom teachers.

In contrast, Faigley (1989) investigated an alternative explanation for teacher preferences for “good” writing. He asserted that “writing teachers have been as much or more interested in *who* they want their student to be as in *what* they want their students to write” (p. 396). Faigley focused on the distinct assumptions made about the self in two writing evaluations given 50 years apart. First, he examined a 1931 external review of the College Entrance Examination Board’s 1929 examination in English, concluding that the “self” expressed by the students in the examination that was most likely to achieve a high evaluation was a self most reflective of the attitudes and tastes of the elite Examination Board. He suggested that “[t]he preservation of an asymmetry of literary taste among different social classes suited the purposes of the College Entrance Examination Board, whose member institutions educated the children of the elite” (p. 402).

Second, Faigley cited Cole and Vopat’s (1985) *What Makes Writing Good*, a collection of student essays judged as excellent writing submitted by 48 highly regarded teachers, researchers, theorists and linguists. Despite the range of diverse contributors, the vast majority of student writing submitted was categorized as personal experience essays or autobiographical narratives. Faigley suggested it was more than their engaging quality that qualified these essays for selection. Instead, he focussed on the teachers’ explanations for why the essays were chosen for submission: they tended to admire the student writers’ “honesty,” “authentic voice,” and “integrity.” However, Faigley challenged each of these modernist notions, questioning the underlying “assumption that individuals possess an identifiable ‘true’ self and that the true self can be expressed in discourse” (p. 405). He found that the examples of good writing submitted were those which created “the illusion of a unified and knowing self that oversees the world around it” (p. 408). Those making the selections seemed to favour essays that were effectively brought to closure and that reflected the

construction of a sensible, knowing self, a unified subject position that smoothed over contradictions and revealed “the truth” about something. Faigley pointed out the Romantic, individualist paradigm underlying the selections, and also asked, “why is writing about potentially embarrassing and painful aspects of one’s life considered more honest than, say, the efforts of [another student writer] who tries to figure out what Thucydides was up to in writing about the Peloponnesian War?” (pp. 404-5). Finally, Schreiner (1997) similarly argued that “the notion that the most credible form of literary expression is the expression of psychic pain or difficulty is central to a modernist aesthetic” (p. 95; see also Trimbur, 1994).

Faigley concluded that the essays judged as good writing in this study reflected the deeply held and likely unconscious epistemological beliefs of the scholars who submitted them. He argued that the self most evident in those essays, “[t]he unified, individual consciousness coterminous with the physical body turns out not to be the ‘natural’ self but a Western version with specific historical and economic origins” (p. 396). This view of the self is consistent with rationalist epistemology in general which privileges writing that is “assertion-based” (Olson, 1999, p. 9), and the philosophy of our schools in particular which “inculcate[s] propositional, procedural, and normative knowledge” (Florio-Ruane, 1990, p. 369). Thus we see that ideal student texts are shaped by the cognitive and social demands of both schooling and culture (Florio-Ruane, 1990, p. 369). Clearly, these demands are contextually specific and will not be “naturally” understood by a diverse class of students. Overall, it seems conceptions of “good” writing--whether judged by content or usage--cannot be separated from their cultural and sociopolitical context.

### **Epistemological Conflict**

Coinciding with and likely underpinning the conflict between much traditional classroom composition pedagogy, as outlined throughout this

chapter, and sociocultural theories of language and the production of text are differing epistemological views. Positivism, with its assumption that good writers can accurately transcribe reality onto paper, still seems to have a firm grip on much teaching practice, as evidenced by the continued strength of current-traditional rhetoric in most writing classrooms; whereas the sociocultural perspective is more commonly seen in research, literature, and theory. Several studies have outlined the relationship between teachers' epistemology and their teaching strategies. Nystrand (1997), for example, contrasted monologic and dialogic classroom discourse and analyzed the epistemological assumptions of each. Likewise, Johnston *et al*'s (2001) distinction between *received knowers* and *constructed knowers*<sup>6</sup> was based on teachers' literate epistemological stances. Both these studies found a strong relationship between teachers' underlying beliefs about knowledge, learning, and authority, and their classroom methods. More importantly, they also found a related connection to student achievement.

Finally, Olson (1999) argued that the Western preoccupation with analytical forms of knowing and its "rhetoric of assertion"--especially in the academic essay--are being called into question, at least at the theoretical level. In this view, the rhetoric of science and its "delusion of objectivity" have been revealed and critiqued by those who were previously excluded from knowledge-making, though many positivist assumptions remain in lay culture. Scholars are challenging and subverting our traditional ways of knowing by insisting on "the story-ladenness of knowledge, the story-ladenness of facts" (Haraway, 1995, p. 57). Thus, rather than attempting to obfuscate or normalize the authority structures--and our role as teachers necessarily lends authority--this author proposes we can instead foreground "the apparatus of the production of . . . authority" (*ibid.*, p. 12). She suggests we foreground our own situatedness in history, for "writing is always already ideological, always already political--

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<sup>6</sup> using Belenky *et al*'s (1986) terms

always saturated with questions of power and domination” (Olson, p. 12). While such theory indicates the potential for positive change for students in authority-laden institutions, Allington (2002) indicates we still have few interventions available that help teachers translate such notions and shifting epistemologies into instructional expertise. For the classroom teacher seeking to change her practices and engage students in authentic collaborative conversation, it seems that pedagogical change in the direction of dialogic, constructivism may be difficult because it appears to require change at the level of deeply held epistemological beliefs and assumptions.

### ***Summary***

The literature reviewed in this chapter focused on an historical overview of some of the major developments in the field of composition during the last century. It then examined some of the major learning theories and their underlying epistemologies. Finally, I gave an overview of some of the relevant writing conference research, emphasizing the complex interplay of social factors that influence these instructional conversations.

Chapter 3 outlines the school site, the participants, and the research methods and procedures.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This chapter describes in more detail the site of the research, the participants, and the researcher involved in this study. It then explains the methods and procedures of data collection and analysis.

#### ***The Site***

The adult learning centre is located in a large suburban municipality of the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The centre houses several programs that serve the needs of a diverse range of adult students including those with special needs, those learning English as another language, and those seeking to upgrade their basic literacy and numeracy skills. The centre also offers courses to help students prepare for the test of General Educational Development (GED) or to obtain their high school completion certificate. In all departments, the school offers self-paced courses, most of which include both one-on-one individualized instruction and some group classes. The traditional semester-long, teacher-led classes are also offered for several of the Grade 11 and 12 courses. Outside of those structured classes, the school uses a model of continuous intake in the self-paced courses, such that learners can begin and complete their courses at any time during the school year. Students must be over 18 to attend.

#### **The Adult Literacy Departments**

When I first began teaching in the ESL and adult literacy programs of the centre, one of the most important aspects of these two early literacy departments was that the learners' own stories were produced and read as the main source of

the curriculum. If the students could not yet write independently, instructors would transcribe the students' stories as they spoke, thus producing individualized, meaningful materials which students could then use to practice reading and writing. I learned these teaching methods first by volunteering and observing other instructors, then by teaching within the community. The program's founder and administrator explains its philosophy: "The literacy program . . . was founded on the principle that language learning best occurs when learners create their own text from the experiences, competencies, struggles, and triumphs in their lives" (Pharness & Weinstein, 1997, p. 388). The administrator of the program and its instructors also believed that "[t]he use of that [student created] literature as curriculum reduces the separations of teacher from learner, curriculum from learner, and both from community" (p. 386). The goals, then, went beyond the teaching of isolated literacy skills, to the creation of a community of learners in which the learners' lives and personal experiences become part of, rather than separate from their educational experiences.

Students' literacy skills were believed to evolve naturally or organically, simply from engaging in the meaningful activities of reading and writing about their own lives and experiences. By getting to know the students individually, instructors learned from them what they needed in order to develop their literacy skills. This two-way consultation gave the students a position of importance as they contributed to the development of their own literacy and numeracy skills. There was no set curriculum or series of exercises students were required to complete. Instead, instructors used varied teaching methods and activities with different students, approaching each student as an individual with unique skills, preferences, and experiences. Teachers generally tried to alter their methods to suit the students' needs, rather than forcing the students to fit our preconceived notions of teaching literacy. The belief that students could indeed learn if involved in genuine literacy tasks was ever-present. Rogoff (1994) noted a similar belief in people's natural ability to learn found in the Mayan culture. Her study

found that Mayan mothers “trust” that learning will naturally occur when children are involved in shared activities as members of the family, rather than setting up artificial, adult-run learning tasks, as was common in the middle-class European-American families she studied.

### **The High School Completion Department**

As was outlined in Chapter 1, the curriculum and delivery model in the high school completion department varied in its pedagogical approach from those used in the literacy departments when I taught there.<sup>7</sup> Provincial IRP requirements dominated the curriculum, and more traditional transmission methods of teaching stood in contrast to the student-centred approaches in the literacy departments. While the one-on-one instruction in the high school completion department resembled that of the literacy departments, the pedagogy varied immensely.

In the Grade 11 and 12 program, students share a large, open study area with the students in the Grade 8 to 10 Adult Basic Education (ABE) program. In this large learning area, students studying anything from fundamental arithmetic to Physics 12 sit together at 17 round tables in a room that seats approximately 70 students. Teachers from both these departments circulate around the area, generally sitting with the students at their tables to discuss or evaluate their assignments, answer questions, or to socialize.

Student-teacher interactions may be initiated by either the student or the instructor. In the case of students studying English with me, they may seek my help by getting my attention, or by signing their name on a wait list to indicate help is wanted. Alternatively, I may drop by to check in with a student. Some students ask for help infrequently, working quite independently, while others make use of the sign-up list on a regular or daily basis. The centre is often busy,

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<sup>7</sup> Note that since that time, increasing enrollment in the Literacy department has changed the instructional methods to some degree.

so it is rare for there to be no one waiting on the list. In general, students work on their assignments on their own until they choose to ask for help or ask the teacher to grade it.

### ***The Researcher***

My introduction to this learning centre occurred when, after completing my B.A. in English, I decided to volunteer in the beginner ESL department in 1991. I worked with these learners both one-on-one and in small classes of usually eight to ten students. Shortly thereafter I obtained paid employment at the site and was soon teaching full time between the ESL department and the adult literacy department. I later enrolled in the PDP program at Simon Fraser University to obtain my teaching certificate and returned to the centre in 1995 to teach English 11 and 12. At that time I began to work with two other English instructors who had helped develop the course curricula being used. Students were assigned to one of the three instructors but all students used the same curriculum, completing the same assignments. I undertook this research after teaching in the department for six years.

### ***The Participants***

#### **Sandy**

Sandy<sup>8</sup> is a Canadian born woman with grown children and young grandchildren. She left high school as soon as she was old enough to take a power-sewing course--on her sixteenth birthday. She wanted to get a job in order to leave a difficult home life. Sandy returned to school in 1999 as a result of being injured at the tree farm where she worked. The Workers Compensation Board decided not to retrain or educate her, so she paid her school fees herself. At the time of the research data collection, she had already completed some upgrading

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<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms are used.



at the Grade 10 level, English 11, and had begun English 12. Sandy attended regularly and completed assignments at an average to above average pace. Her grades were average to above average. She was a full time, day time student. Since the time of this research she has obtained full time employment and has left her English 12 course for the time being. She felt the work she did while attending the centre and getting involved in the school community helped her to improve both her skills and her confidence, and she has attributed her successful employment, in part, to the time she spent with us.

### **Amy**

Amy is also a Canadian born woman with grown children and young grandchildren. She left school in Grade 10 in order to gain employment so she too could leave her difficult home life. She worked in various food and service industry jobs throughout her adult life and is currently on a disability pension. She returned to school in 2000 with the hope of improving her writing and perhaps finding some work in a writing-related field. On her intake form, Amy identified herself as having ADHD and mild dyslexia, as well as other personal health issues. She was enrolled in Communications 11 at the time of the data collection. Amy attended regularly and completed assignments at a relatively slow pace. Her grades were above average. She attributed her pace to her low confidence and self-proclaimed “perfectionist” tendencies. She was a full time, day student.

### **Dee**

Dee is a Canadian born woman with teenaged children. She was quite successful in her previous school career but left in Grade 12 because she found her English teacher “boring and unsupportive,” and she found she did not need Grade 12 to get a decent paying office job. She worked as a secretary for 25 years, returning to school in 1999. Dee was enrolled in English 12 at the time of

the data collection and attended during the evening session as she worked full time during the day. Dee's grades were very high while her attendance and rate of assignment completion were sometimes sporadic, partly due to work and family obligations, and partly due to her own "perfectionist" tendencies--a not uncommon trait among adult students.

### **Participant Similarities and Selection**

Each of the three participants in this study entered the high school completion program after being out of school for at least 30 years. They were all returning to school to complete their high school education. Before participating in the research, they had been attending the school for a period ranging from 15 to 22 months and were well acquainted with the researcher and the teaching methods at the learning centre. Though the three participants had had varying degrees of success in their previous schooling, all three self-identified as having very low confidence in their academic abilities. All three had also suffered from varying levels and types of abuse in their lives. Finally, given the stages they were at in their lives, the participants were mainly seeking the personal satisfaction of finishing their high school diploma, as opposed to pursuing goals of post secondary education or major career change. However, all three indicated some desire for possible employment change, with Sandy most obviously seeking new employment. These personal details are relevant because they reinforce the clear need in this particular school environment for positive and meaningful learning experiences.

These participants were selected because of their generally regular attendance, their apparent comfort level and history with the researcher, and their somewhat similar backgrounds. Though this is hardly meant to be a representative sample, it was thought to be easier to consider findings with participants who shared some common characteristics--such as gender, age, and ethnicity--as opposed to including some of the other major groups of students

attending the centre, such as, young adults returning to school after only a short absence, or middle-aged ESL students with more extensive and successful educational experiences in their home countries.

### ***Research Procedures and Data Collection***

Each individual was asked if she would be interested in participating in a study for the purpose of the researcher enhancing her awareness of the most appropriate language to use in helping students with their composition. It was emphasized that the focus of the analysis was on improving the teacher's instructional skills, rather than on analyzing or evaluating the students' skill level. All three readily agreed and signed the consent form (see Appendix A). After that point, I audio taped all teaching interactions with those individuals and photocopied drafts of the assignments we discussed. Tape recording occurred from early April to late May, 2001.

For two of the three participants the presence of the tape recorder did not seem to make a noticeable difference to the usual style of interaction and conversation between the teacher and the student. I did notice that one participant, Amy, seemed to explain certain issues in more detail than usual, perhaps for the purpose of clarifying instructions for the imagined "listener" of the recording. However, this behaviour seemed to fall away after the first few recordings. While it is difficult to say definitively that the presence of the recording instrument did not interfere with the usual conversational style and content of the teaching interactions--on both the part of the participants and the researcher--it is my opinion that the conversations did not differ significantly from the previously established patterns of their classroom interactions.

While the recording continued, I kept an on-going journal of my own reactions to the experience and also began to transcribe the recorded data. When the transcribing was complete, each participant was given a copy of their

transcripts for approval. They were invited to discuss the transcripts with the researcher and indicate any parts of the transcript they did not want used. Each participant approved her transcript in its entirety.

By the end of the school year, nine hours of conferencing had been tape recorded, which were then transcribed into a total of 200 typed pages. Sandy's relatively frequent requests for conferences led to 15 sessions being recorded for a total of 135 pages of transcript. Dee's less frequent requests for conferences led to six sessions being recorded which produced 35 pages of transcript. Finally, Amy, who joined the project later than the previous two, had five recorded sessions and 30 pages of transcription. This difference in the number and average length of conferences reveals that student access to literacy learning also varies. Sociocultural theories focus on how participating in literacy events shapes language and knowledge development; thus, if "social and linguistic knowledge are acquired through participating in a community's communicative practices," then the degree to which the student or teacher initiates instructional conversations may impact the learning that occurs (Gutierrez, 1994, p. 337; see also Freedman & Sperling, 1985; and Lave & Wenger, 1991). The difference in access to teacher-student literacy events apparent in this research is not surprising considering that some students request conferences daily while others rarely do so. I am uncertain, however, whether insisting on more frequent conferences is desirable. While some students may be shy or reluctant to ask for help, the findings in Chapter 4 reveal some possible negative consequences of insisting on a conference before the student is ready. This issue of equal access to communicative practice requires more study in this learning environment.

## ***Data Analysis***

### **The Struggle with Coding**

Once the recording and transcribing were complete, I began reading the transcripts and continued to make observations in my journal. I looked for

patterns and themes to emerge. While reading my transcripts, I tried out various codes to label the events I saw there, but I found that choosing my final codes proved a long and thought-provoking task and was one of the most difficult parts of the project. The process of searching for appropriate codes was an attempt to “see” and present my data in an organized and meaningful fashion. However, I found it difficult to create satisfactory codes as any labels I devised seemed quite one-dimensional compared to the complexity of the communication itself. Imposing a code onto a communication event was challenging as the data was so rich and multilayered that selecting and emphasizing a single interpretation of any given event seemed both difficult and limiting. At one stage I noted in my journal that breaking my data down into small, “codeable” pieces did not seem helpful. It appeared that the “whole” was so much more meaningful, and quoting small excerpts out of context seemed a disservice to the complex communication that had taken place. Coding appeared to over-simplify the rich data that offered many possible interpretations simultaneously.

As a result of this challenge, I changed my approach and began to pull out larger sections for analysis, and to expand my explanation and interpretation of the event. However, rather than simplifying and clarifying the data for my future readers, this approach only made my excerpts longer and more complex. I began to feel that a reader would have to read most of the entire transcript to get a real sense of the context and its rich multilayered possibilities. My focus had moved from too narrow to too wide and I wondered if I could find any meaningful pattern of coding.

Eventually, when this expansive approach did not seem to be fruitful, I also considered using codes established by other researchers, most notably Walker and Elias (1987, p. 271). However, their codes also seemed to limit my data. Finally, in an attempt to focus on useful data for analysis, I selected several episodes that I felt were quite positive and interactive and several others that remained more negative in terms of student participation regardless of the

number of times I reread them. I let my admittedly subjective impression of positive and negative episodes guide my selection of the excerpts in the hope that I might then see some patterns within these two general categories.

While this process reduced the amount of data I was working with, I still found my codes were unsatisfactory. In addition, the process of continually rereading the transcripts caused me to change my evaluation of some of the excerpts. For example, in the beginning of my data analysis process, I had judged some of the excerpts in which I was trying to make a point to the student as relatively “positive” if the student finally “got it” at the end of the session. However, I began to view this teaching method as sometimes too directive--an approach that came to seem increasingly negative, regardless of the apparently positive outcome. As I continued to read other research and theories and continued rereading my own data, I saw my transcripts in the ever-shifting light of these changing perspectives. Ultimately I came to wonder how I would judge when my “help” during a conference was ever really helpful to the student.

In addition, I continued to wonder about the ultimate value of the codes themselves since interactions could be coded so many different, yet equally plausible ways. The coding process eventually came to seem almost arbitrary as I found that several different or even contradictory codes could be used for the same excerpt. For example, I first coded a particular statement as “reassuring the student” and judged it as a positive teaching approach, but later, the same excerpt appeared to belong more in the category called “reiterating or repetitive” and I evaluated it in a more negative light. How could I choose between the two interpretations? Upon each rereading of the transcript, I would “see” certain interactions differently than I had before. What had once seemed like a relatively “successful” and helpful teaching interaction, later appeared too leading or domineering. Along with the question of how to code, I struggled with the question of how to distinguish helpful pedagogical approaches from potentially harmful ones.

As I read and reread the transcripts, I realized I was looking for a sort of epiphany, some kind of underlying pattern of “truth” that would finally reveal itself upon a close enough inspection. I found I was, in effect, engaging in a “close textual reading” just as my “New Critical” English Literature training had taught me to. Consistent with this rather positivist approach, I kept hoping that if I scrutinized the data closely enough some truth would emerge. What I found instead was that what I seemed to “see” kept shifting as my own perspective evolved; my observations and tentative conclusions about a given episode shifted from positive to negative, from helpful to harmful and back again. I sought some clarity, some conclusions, or at least some consistency. I eventually came to see I was engaged in a hermeneutic activity of interpretation more than an objective activity of labelling.

This inquiry into the rather subjective process of coding then raised questions about the apparently more objective nature of the transcribing upon which the coding is based. Baker (1997) found that, in fact, “the transcription process and its outcomes are by no means neutral” and that “recordings and transcripts have the potential to generate multiple and possibly competing analyses and thus to make possible resistance to singular interpretations” (p.111). Baker saw transcribing itself as a form of representation and proposed that choices are made throughout the process such that a transcript is not actually a literal record but rather a heuristic device, an interpretation. The transcript can thus be seen as “a reduction of what was potentially available to the transcriber to indicate on paper” and is actually “a *version* of the data which is the original actual interaction” (p. 111, emphasis added). The author further suggested that the transcribed text can be said to construct its own subject (p. 112). Such views problematize both the act of transcribing and, by extension, the codes which are eventually chosen to represent the transcription. The codes can be seen, then, as even more problematic, as one step further away from the original interaction--as an interpretation of an interpretation.

### **Moving Beyond ‘Absolute’ Codes**

Despite these critiques of both transcribing and coding, there were some observations I made of these conference records that remained relatively constant throughout this process. For example, the episodes where I interrupted students remained clearly apparent, if disheartening. The excerpts where the participants “surprised” me were also quite identifiable, if mainly to me. In addition, my, at times, long-winded, repetitious lecturing continued to annoy and puzzle me. And, finally, some of the more difficult and conflict-ridden interactions remained both unsettling and intriguing.

While the coding was problematic, the process of continually rereading and reconsidering my data was an invaluable reflective tool. Repeatedly reviewing my transcripts--in effect “re-living” the conferences--weeks or months after they had occurred, was an important exercise. With more time and distance from the original event, one can reevaluate the words spoken and the pedagogical directions taken. As reflective practice, I found that revisiting recordings and transcripts of my actual teaching exchanges was both humbling and enlightening. This exercise caused me to question many aspects of my teaching. I came to consider not only my discourse style during conferences but also the assignments themselves and my evaluation methods. It began to feel like there were very few “givens” about teaching that I could simply assume to be true; instead, everything I did was up for reconsideration. I was also frustrated by the dearth of answers available, both in my data and in the other research and publications I was reading. It seemed that even in the world of experienced researchers and respected academics, there were also very few givens.

At times, while reading my data and trying to interpret it in a meaningful way, I felt the common student desire for my advisor to just “tell me the answer.” But I also recognized that she could not do so. I ultimately realized and wrote in my journal that “there isn’t one right thesis, hiding among all these weeds, waiting to be revealed.” I knew that I would have to, in fact, *create* an



interpretation, rather than waiting for “the truth” to emerge. Rather than taking a modernist, positivist approach that implied one Truth existed, I took a more hermeneutic, constructivist approach: my findings would be a conversation between the data represented in my transcripts and my interpretation of that data. It would have to make sense to others but would not be the only possible interpretation, the only possible thesis that could be written based on my data. From this perspective, “all we have or can have is ‘readings’ and readings of readings, without resolution in any fully adequate, finalized, or authoritative interpretation” (Crusius, 1998, p. 150).

### **Finally, an Approach that Might Work**

I reviewed those episodes that still seemed to me “positive” in some way and realized some factors they had in common: sometimes the student found her own solution in spite of my attempted lead; or I held back my opinions to allow the student to explore her own ideas first; or I prompted and encouraged the student to continue; or I simply made space to allow the student to fill it with her own ideas. As a result of these new observations, I created codes for positive action I took while conferencing. I considered my methods positive if they allowed the student to investigate and engage in her own thinking more deeply. As I clarified my ideas around this new focus, I found that the codes stayed relatively consistent--they did not change or seem contradictory as some previous codes had. Upon rereading Martin Nystrand’s *Opening Dialogue: Understanding the Dynamics of Language and Learning in the English Classroom*, I also found that the distinction he made between monologue and dialogue would make a useful tool for interpreting my own data.

If dialogue represented positive pedagogy, authentic discourse, and engaged student learning, then teacher monologue could be seen to have the opposite effect. While focusing on the more “negative” examples from my transcripts, I began to evaluate certain episodes and strategies as less

successful, or monologic, if the student seemed to shut down, become passive or less engaged, or simply accepted my lead; I also found a consistent pattern of interactions that seemed to reveal that, at times, student and teacher did not share the same goal, where I had taken charge of the direction and focus of the conference but had not invited or allowed the student to participate. Whereas at the time of the original conferences, I seemed to feel that this division of power was the appropriate order of things, that our respective roles were clearly and properly established, after this period of reading and reflecting, I came to question the effectiveness of this instructional design. If learners need to actively construct knowledge, then activities that put them in passive mode can be seen to interfere with their learning.

Questioning the effectiveness of the “default mode” of traditional, monologic teaching obviously requires first that we are able to recognize its very existence. I frequently taught by leading and transmitting simply because I did not know any other way. I did not know that I should “leave space” (Palmer, 1998), let alone understand how to do so in this academic, curriculum driven department. I did not know how to set up the instructional environment differently. I had been operating under the assumption that it was my job to fill the space with information. The alternative of creating opportunity for active learning and co-construction of knowledge to take place was not available or encouraged in this environment--indeed, this notion is not generally understood or encouraged in our larger society. I had been unaware that my telling, my filling of space, sent an unanticipated message to students that “I know, while you do not,” and that “there is a right way to perform the task, which I know and you do not.” In “Teaching and Learning Literate Epistemologies,” Johnston *et al* (2001) argue this important notion, revealing the relationship between teachers’ epistemologies and those of their students. The powerful influences and habits of my own traditional education experiences--and those of my adult students--was finally becoming more apparent.

Once I was able to see beyond my dismay of those occasions when I dominated the learning environment, interrupted the students, or took a directive, leading, monological approach to teaching, I saw that students were also able to influence the direction of conferences. I found that there were instances when the students interrupted me, surprised me with the direction they took, or resisted my lead. When I followed their lead we created together a new direction. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia was helpful at this stage for it indicates that we cannot permanently silence the inherent multivoicedness of language (cited in Nystrand, 1997). As much as there is evidence of teacher monologue throughout my data, there are also examples of student resistance and dialogue. This is the direction I finally chose to pursue in coding, analyzing, and interpreting my data.

### *Summary*

This chapter presented a description of the learning environment, the researcher, and the participants involved in this study. It included an explanation of the methods and procedures of data collection and analysis as well as the struggles therein.

Chapter 4 presents results of the study and a discussion of the findings.

## Chapter Four

### Results

In a good conversation participants profit from their own talking . . . from what others contribute, and above all from the interaction--that is to say from the enabling effect of each upon the others. (James Britton, 1970, cited in Nystrand, 1997, p. 17)

This chapter presents two selected excerpts from the writing conferences I had with each of the three participants. These excerpts reveal a dynamic shifting of discourse, ranging from rather teacher-dominated, monologically organized instruction to more reciprocal, dialogically organized interaction. The discourse style varied among the three students, among conferences with the same student, and also during a single conference. This fluid shifting of discourse styles occurred as both conference participants actively engaged in the on-going co-construction and negotiation of each conference. While teachers clearly have significant power stemming from their institutionalized positions of authority, it has also been shown that students play a role in affecting the discourse created in a conference--and, hence, its outcome (Alpert, 1987; Freedman & Sperling, 1985; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Sperling, 1990). In addition, Bakhtin (1981) argued that despite the attempts of either participant to dominate a conversation, monologue ultimately fails to mute the inherent multivoicedness of discourse. Even Amy, the student with whom I attempted some of the most monologic instruction, found ways to resist my dominating discourse, often maintaining her participation and point of view in the face of strong indications that she should follow my lead.

### *Conferencing With Amy*

In the following excerpt, Amy was working on an assignment which required students to read an interview-style newspaper article titled “Ending a Life of Crime” about Tim, a reformed young offender who was abused as a child. Then, as a “during reading” exercise, she was to take notes in columns on the following four topics:

- Events that contributed to Tim’s ‘life of crime’
- Tim’s actions and behaviours
- How Tim felt
- Suggestions Tim makes for helping young offenders

In the excerpt below, I had approached Amy to see how the assignment was coming along. In the preceding 65 turns leading up to this point in the conference, Amy had told me some of her ideas about categorizing the content of the article into the various columns. As we talked about the work she had done so far, I became puzzled by some of her ideas and her choices of categorization. I also realized she was being much more detailed and thorough than the assignment required, a common tendency for this self-professed “perfectionist.” During these turns she had also read aloud several long passages from the article but had not seem concerned about placing the information she had read to me into the appropriate column. I kept trying to keep her focused on which of the four columns to put the information in, whereas she seemed to resist my direction, often discussing her ideas about the content of the story while making seemingly “off-topic” statements about similar real life situations. In several of these cases I tried to steer her toward what seemed to me to be the appropriate column where her ideas might fit. She resisted most of my attempts to direct her. Overall, this felt to me like a difficult discussion in which we were working at cross purposes and, at times, did not seem to understand one another.

**Excerpt #1:** In this part of the conference, we were discussing which ideas to put in the fourth column: “Suggestions Tim makes for helping young offenders.”

*turn speaker utterance*

- 66 **Amy:** Well, one of the suggestions he [Tim] makes is that he (*reading from article*) “doesn’t think any boy is destined to be 14, 15 or 16 and walking around with a gun.”<sup>9</sup>
- 67 **LB:** Right. Is that a “suggestion to help” them though, or is that just his philosophy--his opinion?
- 68 **Amy:** Umm, that’s a child’s anger.
- 69 **LB:** Yeah, but is that a *suggestion* to how to help? When he says, “I don’t believe kids are destined to be 14 and walking around with a gun,” is that a *suggestion* for how to help them, or is that just his opinion? his belief system?
- 70 **Amy:** Um, I guess it’s his belief system . . . .
- 71 **LB:** Yeah, you kinda have to pick through the stuff [in the article].
- 72 **Amy:** (*Suggesting a new topic*) He puts in there that their needs aren’t being met.
- 73 **LB:** Hmkay . .
- 74 **Amy:** Number three [i.e. Column 3: “How Tim felt”], I would put that, um (*prepares to write her new idea in column three*)
- 75 **LB:** Is that maybe coming with part of this one (*pointing to her previous entry in column 3: “Child’s needs come first”*)?
- 76 **Amy:** Parenting . . . children are being neglected. Their needs aren’t being met.
- 77 **LB:** Hm hm. I’m asking if that [new idea] is the same as this (*reads her previous entry*): “Child’s needs come first”? That is [also] about the *child’s needs*.
- 78 **Amy:** I don’t think so, I think that that’s . . .\* um, opening parents’ eyes. I mean, you just can’t have a kid and then they’ll raise themselves.<sup>10</sup>
- 79 **LB:** That’s what this one is [saying]? (*pointing to her previous entry*)
- 80 **Amy:** I think that’s what that says.
- 81 **LB:** OK and then how is this [new] one different?
- 82 **Amy:** Umm, I think that um, parents . . . have to be . . . made totally responsible for their parenting . . . I don’t know. I don’t even want to look at it.
- 83 **LB:** It just sounds very much like this [previous] one. I’m not sure if you need two points, I mean you could write it twice if you wanted, I’m just wondering if you need to.
- 84 **Amy:** In here I wrote, yes, (*reads different entry*) “Parents need to be held responsible. Many parents don’t understand the concept of parenting.”
- 85 **LB:** So, is that part of this [previously written] one? That’s why he suggests a Parents’ Offenders Act, ‘cause “they need to be held responsible”?
- 86 **Amy:** I guess that would cover that alright. Might cover it. Not in my mind, but

<sup>9</sup> Square parentheses clarify the speaker’s words; round parentheses and italics explain the speaker’s actions.

<sup>10</sup> Asterisks are used when the words from the tape are inaudible.

maybe in somebody's mind.  
87 LB: Well then write another one. If you don't feel that covers it then write another one.

During this exchange, we disagreed about the proper placement and wording of some of the ideas from the story, and indeed at times we seemed to be talking about different things. I recall feeling challenged and frustrated during this conference. I felt Amy had spent too much time on the assignment and, consequently, I decided to "help" by steering Amy towards my own interpretation of how the assignment should be completed. Knowing Amy's predilection for being overly thorough, I also tried to discourage her from writing more examples than were necessary and from getting too caught up in minute details. However, this was my own personal agenda and it was not discussed with her. Furthermore, while my desire to "help" her avoid doing too much work was genuine, my methods merely seemed critical of many of Amy's ideas. By twice asking "is that just his opinion?" (turns 67 and 69) I was clearly indicating what I thought of her suggestion. This IRE structure continued when I asked her questions that implied her second suggestion ("children's needs aren't being met" turn 76) was redundant. This monologic, leading style implied that there was a "right" way to complete the assignment and that, as the teacher, I knew the correct answers and she was doing it wrong. As it turns out, I now see her two ideas actually weren't the same: "children's needs aren't being met" can be seen as different from "a child's needs come first."

However, despite my hinting and pressuring Amy to change her ideas, she frequently resisted my direction. At turn 67, for example, I created a dichotomy, limiting her choice to two possibilities: "Is that a 'suggestion to help' them though, or is that just his philosophy--his opinion?" Amy resisted my choices and answered "that's a child's anger." She had her own ideas and interpretation of the events in the article and would not be forced into answering

my way. Amy continued to ignore several of my questions by refusing to answer and, instead, pursued her own ideas. For example, at turn 75 I asked, “Is that maybe coming with part of this one (*pointing to a previous entry: ‘Child’s needs come first’*)?” to which she replied with an apparent *non sequitur* “Parenting . . . children are being neglected. Their needs aren’t being met.” While my conscious intention was to help Amy complete her assignment in a timely manner--an issue she continually struggled with--it seems clear from this excerpt that my approach did not “help.” At turn 82, Amy’s frustration with the conference finally showed: “I don’t know. I don’t even want to look at it.” However, she continued to engage in the discussion and to resist many of my implied criticisms despite my continued implication that her second idea was redundant (“I’m not sure if you need two points”). At turn 86 she appeared to give in to my pressure to change her ideas--“I guess that would cover that alright. Might cover it”--but in truth she indirectly held her ground when she continued, “Not in my mind, but maybe in somebody’s mind.” Amy’s resistance persisted until I finally acquiesced: “Well then write another one. If you don’t feel that covers it then write another one.” My attempts at directing Amy toward my predetermined ideas were unsuccessful--as Bakhtin (1981) argued, all efforts at monologism inevitably must fail. In this case, my authoritative “official” discourse was continually in conflict with Amy’s innerly persuasive discourse. Here we see Bakhtin’s notion that language is structured by tension, even conflict, as one voice “refracts” another (1981).

Amy’s obvious resistance to my hinting and leading eventually “bought” my acquiescence--an interesting contrast to Sperling (1990), who found that quieter students can “buy” *more* teacher input by being relatively passive during conferences. In this conference with Amy, it finally became so uncomfortably clear that she did not agree with me, or we did not understand each other, that I stopped trying to steer her to see things my way. Her resistance finally forced me to reevaluate my own teaching approach and goals. Clearly the leading and



directing stance I had taken in an attempt to *help* her get the assignment done was ineffective--and perhaps unwanted. At the time, I was unable to step back from my perceived task, my role of teaching and telling, to recall that while Amy's assignments were often painfully thorough, they were generally accurate and on topic. In effect, my past experiences revealed I did not need to worry about her eventually doing the assignment correctly. However, my default mode of leader seemed to have overpowered my particular knowledge of Amy and temporarily impaired my ability to think more creatively and effectively in the particular moment. It took her clear resistance--"Not in my mind, but maybe in somebody's mind"--to finally show me how directive (yet futile and ineffective) my approach was.

In the several exchanges that followed the above excerpt, I attempted to back off from my "helpful" directive comments and gave Amy more room to investigate and explore her own ideas. In the next six turns I left uncharacteristically long silences ranging from 17 to 80 seconds while Amy thought about and wrote out her next addition to the fourth column. During these moments, I had time to do my own thinking about the conference and realized that my presence and attitude were not helpful to her. Rather than "creating space" (Palmer, 1998) to allow the student to construct her own understanding of the material, to orally draft or try-on her ideas, I had been filling it with my own ideas. I had perhaps interfered with her developing thinking, her process of constructing understanding. I decided I should let her work on the assignment more on her own and return later. Ten turns later I suggested, "why don't I leave you to keep going through and find a few more points . . . and then I'll come back and see how that went and we can talk about what the next step is going to be?" Clearly, Amy's resistance had influenced the course of the conference, and I was forced to abandon my monologic stance and consider an alternative approach to "helping." As it turns out, Amy received full marks when she handed in her completed assignment.

From this excerpt a pattern emerges which occurred in other conferences as well: my monologic discourse was sometimes followed by the student's resistance which, at times, forced me to change tracks, abandon my "mission" and listen to the student's ideas; thus, the student helped create a more dialogic exchange of ideas by challenging official discourse. While we did not create a consistently mutual dialogue with a shared agenda, punctuated by authentic questions and uptake, Amy's resistance did encourage me to consider the ineffectiveness of my previous approach and to try a new direction. I realized that critiquing her ideas at such an early stage in her thinking may not have been helpful. Though I was actually trying to assist her to complete the assignment more efficiently, my approach evidently made her feel frustrated or irritated. We were clearly at cross purposes: I wanted her to be faster and less thorough whereas she was deeply considering both the content of the story and the assignment--an ironic reversal of the usual teacher and student concerns!

I believe the absence of an agreed-upon agenda was an important factor that contributed to this conference going so awry. Several authors have focused on the importance of a mutual agenda during conferences and on a shared task context and mutual goal during scaffolded instruction. Palincsar (1998), for example, concluded that it is "essential that we understand the child's definition of the task in order to fine-tune assistance, and that we find ways of incorporating the child's definition of the task into the activity" (p. 371). Likewise, Butler (1998) contended, "[t]hat students do not always interpret tasks the way adults (or teachers) intend is apparent in the literature" (p. 375). At several points in the conference it became clear that Amy perceived the four columns and their suitable contents in a different light than I did, and that she also seemed more interested in discussing her views on the "content" of the article than in categorizing it into the four preconceived columns. On that point, Johnston *et al* (2001) outline the relevance of students sharing personal responses and experiences in the construction of knowledge. These differences

in task definition and conference agenda were key factors in the conflicts we encountered, and Amy's resistance encouraged me to reconsider the relevance of the exercise itself. While she was very interested in the topic of parenting, the particular activity seemed less than useful or relevant to her, and at other times Amy had articulated her interest--or lack thereof--in the topics covered in the course. Several authors have indicated the importance of teachers attuning their questions and assignments to student interests (Nystrand & Christoph, 2001; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). When an instructor fails to attend to a student's concerns, "focusing instead on what the instructor wanted the student to learn" (Butler, 1998, p. 383), the conference is unlikely to achieve the desired results (see, for example, Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Madigan, 1988; Walker & Elias, 1987). These are relevant observations for the conference with Amy.

A final factor that may have contributed to the difficulties we faced during the conference was that Amy had not requested this conference and may not have been ready to discuss her ideas yet. I may have put her on the spot by asking her questions before she had fully thought out her ideas. In general, Amy rarely asked for help and when she did it was only when she was truly stuck or when the assignment was complete and "perfect" in her eyes. Again, my past knowledge of Amy's particular patterns was overshadowed by the power of my teacher default mode which trained me to see teaching as helping students by directing them rather than joining with them, and speaking and leading more than listening and collaborating. On that note, Butler (1998) argued, "establishing a communicational context requires not only coming to a shared task definition but also making effective moment-to-moment judgments about the focus of students' attention" (p. 382). In this case, it took a high level of student resistance to finally open my eyes to our lack of "shared task definition" and to show me that Amy's attention was more focused on articulating the responsibilities parents have. As Harris (1986) observed, "meshing teacher goals with student goals is indeed delicate" (p. 34).

In another conference a few days later, we discussed the final editing of a letter Amy had written to Tim regarding his story. In this excerpt we discussed her corrections regarding run-on sentences and the use of commas. I tried to help Amy by making suggestions about how she could edit a particular sentence. She again resisted my leading and, in this case, found her own solution.

**Excerpt #2:** The sentences we discussed and edited below were originally written in Amy's previous draft as follows: *I am sorry to learn that you were sexually abused, it is a horrendous experience to come to terms with, if one ever is able to totally put it behind ones self.* In this excerpt Amy had successfully corrected the run-on sentence by changing the first comma to a period. We then reviewed the next changes she made (she had changed both the above commas to periods, thereby creating a sentence fragment).

*turn speaker utterance*

- 48 **LB:** Ok, great. And you caught this one [run-on] here, which is good . . . .  
(*Reading the next revised sentence haltingly*) "If one ever is . . able . . to totally . . put behind . . oneself . . this violation." . . . (*Repeats*) "If one . . . ."
- 49 **Amy:** It's one of those sentences you have to think about.
- 50 **LB:** Uh huh. I think the problem with this one is this "if." I think, I think if you change one of the commas up here, instead of this one, I think you might be better off. 'Cause you know how "if" works: if there's "*if* blah blah blah blah," then we have to have the second part, "*then* blah blah blah blah."
- 51 **Amy:** Hm.
- 52 **LB:** Whereas, now we've got "*if* du du du duh" and then you stopped.
- 53 **Amy:** Or could I put "*Does* one ever. . ."
- 54 **LB:** Oh.
- 55 **Amy:** --totally put behind?" I just--<sup>11</sup>
- 56 **LB:** Yeah, yeah, perfect.
- 57 **Amy:** Umm
- 58 **LB:** You're asking like a rhetorical question.
- 59 **Amy:** That's a period, so this would be \*
- 60 **LB:** Sorry (*I had the pencil she needed to make the correction*)  
(*For the next 6 turns we discuss the kind of pencil she's using; then Amy returns to her revisions*)
- 67 **Amy:** Umm, kay take that right out of there . . . . (*erasing and rewriting on her page*). Ummm, you put it behind you. But now I'm changing the meaning of the sentence here . . . Um. (*writing*) "Does . . one ever . . totally . . . ."

<sup>11</sup> Dash means speaker is interrupted.

- 68 **LB:** Put it [behind]?
- 69 **Amy:** Um, “Does one ever totally . . . um . . . (*6 second pause*) forget.”
- 70 **LB:** Hm.
- 71 **Amy:** Does one get over . .
- 72 **LB:** Hmm.  
(*10 seconds while completing her revised sentence*)
- 73 **Amy:** Would that be a question or
- 74 **LB:** Yeah<sup>12</sup>
- 75 **Amy:** just a statement?
- 76 **LB:** No, I think it would be a question, even if it’s a rhetorical question--like you think you know the answer is no . . .
- 77 **Amy:** Any survivors I’ve ever talked to \* you think you’re over it and then something happens and . . .
- 78 **LB:** Right, there it is again. (*Reads her revised sentence aloud*) “Does one ever totally get over the violation.” Question . . . (*hinting for final punctuation*).
- 79 **Amy:** Question mark.
- 80 **LB:** Question mark, good.

In this excerpt, I attempted to direct Amy’s revision by identifying the sentence in need of revision at turns 48 and 50, as well as indicating how Amy should fix it: “I think if you change one of the commas up here, instead of this one, I think you might be better off.” However, there is clearly more than one way to revise an awkward or incomplete sentence. In an attempt at efficiency, I quickly suggested what seemed to me the simplest revision--“change one of the commas up here”--whereas Amy decided to revamp the sentence in a different way: she asked, “Or could I put ‘*Does* one ever . . .’” This alternative revision elicited a surprised “Oh” from me and shifted the monologic style of discourse into more of a dialogue where Amy’s ideas were taken seriously when she actively got involved in revising the sentence. After she suggested this alternative revision, I was able, temporarily, to leave *my* editing suggestion behind and, as Palmer (1998) recommended, “create space” for Amy to think about how *she* wanted to revise the sentence.

As a direct result of Amy’s resistance to my suggested revision, the conference shifted toward more mutually engaged, dialogical discourse. She was

<sup>12</sup> Underlining represents overlapping speech

not distracted from her ideas about revising the sentence even when we had a six-turn side conversation about her pencil. At turn 67 Amy was clearly in “oral draft” mode while she erased, thought aloud, and rewrote her sentence, starting with “Does one ever . . . .” I could not prevent myself from trying to help at turn 68 by suggesting she complete this sentence with “put it [behind].” However, Amy maintained a kind of internal focus as she struggled to express her own ideas and ignored my suggestions. At this point I waited an unusually long six seconds while Amy considered her choices. Finally realizing I should stay quiet to allow her to think, I gave a supportive “hm” for two turns while she revised her ideas, led the conference, and finally arrived at her own sentence: “Does one ever totally get over the violation?”

This example shows that my first conception of “help” fell under the category of “telling” her *my* way of changing the sentence. I attempted to give her a “quick fix” so that we could move on. Clearly, “getting through” an assignment is not the same as *learning*--an activity that often seems to take more time than we feel we have. However, rather than assisting Amy to learn the skills needed to revise independently, my first attempt to help seemed to be focused on fixing *this* sentence in a particular way--my way. In contrast, Murray (1979) has stated that our goal as teachers should be to produce better writers, not better writing. Amy’s resistance encouraged me to change my teaching approach in the moment, to hold my suggestions back and allow the student to find her own way. Eventually, I saw my task as creating an opportunity for Amy to think through her own ideas. My role as teacher changed from dominating leader to supporter and co-creator, though the shift was not smooth, instantaneous, or absolute. By resisting my suggestions, Amy claimed her position as active and engaged co-participant. It is the conflict and tension, Bakhtin tells us, the struggle among competing voices that gives shape to discourse (in Nystrand, 1997, p. 8). In the first excerpt our conflict led to a break in the conference when I decided to exit; our agendas were so divergent--and, for me at least,

unconscious--that no mutual negotiation seemed possible. However, in the second excerpt our agendas were more in line, allowing a shift to shared dialogue.

### ***Conferencing With Dee***

Like Amy, Dee rarely asked for help. She worked independently and generally handed in completed assignments that required little if any revising. In the excerpt below, she did express some frustration with one of the paragraph questions about the poem "The Piano" (given below, with permission from the author). The assignment was from a past English 12 Provincial Exam and was meant to help students prepare for writing that exam. The poem is about a boy who is asked to play the piano at a family gathering of older adult relatives, but once he begins playing he is ignored by his audience until he finishes. The question stated: *The poet makes use of descriptive language when observing the behaviour of adults. In paragraph form quote two examples from the poem and explain how each illustrates this behaviour.* In this conference, we started out dialogically, but when Dee became uncertain, I ended up merely telling her what to do.

#### **The Piano**

1 I sit on the edge  
of the dining room, almost  
in the living room where my parents,  
my grandmother, & the visitors  
sit knee to knee along the chesterfield & in  
the easy chairs. The room is full, & my feet  
do not touch the floor, barely  
reach the rail across the front  
of my seat. 'Of course  
10 you will want Bobby to play,'--words  
that jump out from the clatter  
of teacups & illnesses. The piano  
is huge, unforgettable.

It takes up the whole end wall  
 of the living room, faces me down  
 a short corridor of plump  
 knees, balanced saucers, hitched  
 trousers. 'Well when is  
 Bob going to play?'  
 20 one of them asks. My dad says,  
 'Come on, boy, they'd like you  
 to play for them,' & clears  
 a plate of cake  
 from the piano bench. I walk between  
 the knees & sit down  
 where the cake was, switch on  
 the fluorescent light  
 above the music. Right at the first notes  
 the conversation returns to long tales  
 30 of weddings, relatives bombed out again  
 in England, someone's mongoloid  
 baby, & there I am at the piano,  
 with no one listening or even going to listen  
 unless I hit sour notes, or stumble  
 to a false ending.  
 I finish.  
 Instantly they are back to me. 'What a nice  
 touch he has,' someone interrupts  
 herself to say.  
 40 'It's the hands,' says another,  
 'It's always the hands, you can tell  
 by the hands,' & so I get up  
 & hide my fists  
 in my hands

(Frank Davey)

### Excerpt #3

*turn speaker utterance*

- 1 **LB:** So, why, why do you hate poetry all of a sudden?
- 2 **Dee:** "The Piano."
- 3 **LB:** Well what's so different about "The Piano" from everything else?
- 4 **Dee:** The questions.



5 **LB:** The questions.  
6 **Dee:** Hmm hm. Examples. (2 sec. Then reads from the question) “Uses descriptive language.” I didn’t find anything descriptive--  
7 **LB:** Ahh (*understanding her frustration*).  
8 **Dee:** in this friggin’ poem.  
9 **LB:** (*laughs*)  
10 **Dee:** I didn’t!  
11 **LB:** I agree with you.  
12 **Dee:** How can you say that it’s descriptive? That’s a totally misleading . . .  
13 **LB:** I agree.  
14 **Dee:** adjective.  
15 **LB:** Yup.  
(For 19 turns we discuss the possible way the exam questions are chosen.)

35 **LB:** So, it’s not particularly descriptive. So then you just try and find examples that will work, that will show the behaviour of the adults, even if you don’t feel like they’re particularly, grandly descriptive.  
36 **Dee:** Ok. So, well, the first two examples I used, where was it . . . (*looks at the poem*) Right here, (*reads the line*) “Right at the first notes the conversation returns to long tales of weddings, relatives bombed out again in England, someone’s mongoloid baby--”  
37 (*Both laugh briefly at the use of this politically incorrect adjective.*)  
38 **Dee:** Sorry.  
39 **LB:** I know. It’s bad but we laugh.  
40 **Dee:** So I used that.  
41 **LB:** Ok and what does that show us about the adults? What does that behaviour show?  
42 **Dee:** That, that, what did I say? (*reads her draft*) “It illustrates that they are totally disinterested in listening to him play the piano. They are gathered at his parents’ house to socialize with one another, not to listen to a child play piano.”  
43 **LB:** Hmm hmm.  
44 **Dee:** Basically.  
45 **LB:** Yup. They’ve got adult things to talk about.  
46 **Dee:** \* children are seen but not heard.  
47 **LB:** Hmmm! Hmm hmm. Kay. That sounds good.  
48 **Dee:** The second one now, I was, ah, . . . now I don’t know if this is a good one. Uh, (*reading the quote rapidly*) “in the living room where my parents, my grandmother, and the visitors sit knee to knee along the chesterfield and in the easy chairs. The room is full.” But I don’t . . . (*seems uncertain*)  
49 **LB:** It’s definitely *descriptive*.  
50 **Dee:** but . . .

51 **LB:** but . . .

52 **Dee:** I don't know. It's, it doesn't have, I can't really, um,

53 **LB:** There's no *behaviour* that we can kind of conclude from it, is there?

54 **Dee:** No . . . and there's nothing here either (*points to another part of the poem*).

55 **LB:** What about in here? Around line 10.

56 **Dee:** Oh, the "of course you will want Bobby to play, words that jump out of the clatter of tea cups and illnesses."

57 (*Both laugh at this description.*)

58 **LB:** That's a little descriptive: "tea cups and illnesses."

59 **Dee:** Yeah

60 **LB:** What about that?

61 **Dee:** Like um, now, is that, he, they know he's there? They want to . . . but then I'm . . .

62 **LB:** It's hard to interpret.

63 **Dee:** Yeah  
(3 second pause)

64 **LB:** "Of course you will want Bobby to play. . . . words that jump out from the clatter of te--" I wonder if you could almost see that one the same, with the same interpretation--

65 **Dee:** interpretation as this one (*pointing to her first example*)

66 **LB:** as that, that one. Yeah.

67 **Dee:** That's how I see it.

68 **LB:** I mean, yeah. It doesn't say that they have to be two different examples.

69 **Dee:** So I could include both of those examples.

70 **LB:** Yeah. To say the same thing. The parents are really very disinterested. I mean we get that.

71 **Dee:** Yeah.

72 **LB:** Yeah. And there's more than one example that shows the same thing.

73 **Dee:** Hmm kay.

74 **LB:** Yeah 'cause the "sitting knee to knee"--

75 **Dee:** Yeah

76 **LB:** gives a description but how--

77 **Dee:** it doesn't

78 **LB:** it doesn't reveal anything.

79 **Dee:** No.

80 **LB:** Yeah.

81 **Dee:** Hmm kay. So I can put those two, cause they both relate to

82 **LB:** Hmm hmm

83 **Dee:** one another. (*Moving on*) And how do you "hide your fists in your hands"? (*refers to last line of poem*)

For the first 48 turns the conference was predominantly dialogical: we began with mutual interaction, authentic questions, and building on one another's responses. I used repetition and paraphrasing of the student's comments, as well as pausing and affirmative filler ("hmhmm") to encourage Dee's active participation in the conference. The student's concerns and ideas were in the foreground and I asked questions and made comments based on her statements. There was uptake (Nystrand, 1997) of the student's ideas and concerns while she explained her opinion of the poem--"I didn't find anything descriptive"--and reviewed her first example. However, Dee seemed to get stuck with her second example, introducing it with "The second one now, I was, ah . . . now I don't know if this is a good one." She then read her second example out loud ("the visitors sit knee to knee along the chesterfield and in the easy chairs") and concluded with "But I don't . . ." With her uncertainty, our participation structure changed at this point. I saw she was struggling and seemed stuck, so I decided I should "help." This was a crucial juncture in our conference since the only "help" I could envision or knew how to give came in the form of clues leading towards *my* interpretation of the example she had chosen. I already had a very clear, predetermined idea in my head about what would and would not "work" in this paragraph--a *right* answer--and I began *telling* her how to reach this same conclusion: that her example would not work.

First, I gave a hint at turn 49 saying, "It's definitely *descriptive*" to emphasize that the quote Dee had chosen had one but not both of the elements required by the question ("*descriptive* language when observing the *behaviour* of adults"). However, when she continued to struggle--"I don't know. It's, it doesn't have, I can't really, um"--I quickly told her my personal conclusion: "There's no *behaviour* that we can kind of conclude from it, is there?" I was uncomfortable with her struggle and uncertainty, and I could not conceive of another way to help. Rather than creating space and just a little more time for Dee perhaps to work out her next step for herself, I resorted to *telling*. When Dee

then indicated some difficulty in finding alternative examples, I quickly directed her to the place where she could find a better example, *my* example: “What about in here? Around line 10.” I did not even give her a chance to look for an example of her own. This was clearly my example, not hers and, as a result, she struggled to make sense of it, to make it her own: “Like um, now, is that, he, they know he’s there? They want to, . . . but then I’m. . . .” Again, witnessing this uncharacteristic struggle made me uncomfortable, and after holding back for an only three second pause, I gave her my interpretation of the example: “I wonder if you could almost see that one the same, with the same interpretation.” Dee obediently picked up my suggested interpretation of the example--“Hmm kay. So I can put those two, cause they both relate to . . . one another”--and she was then ready to move on: “And how do you ‘hide your fists in your hands’”?

Rather than focusing on the larger task of teaching general poetry analysis skills, my instruction focused on rescuing the student--and myself--from the discomfort of her struggle. I seemed to feel the student’s uncertainty was undesirable, perhaps a negative reflection on my own teaching. Unfortunately, this transmission style of instructional intervention does not necessarily help the student become better equipped to handle a similar problem in the future. Murray’s (1979) goal was “not to interfere with their learning” (p. 14), and to “teach the student not the paper” (p. 15). This approach involves giving students room to explore their own thinking, to try on new ideas. Likewise, Denyer and Florio-Ruane (1991) found that, rather than helping, we actually interfere with student learning by leading. In this particular episode with Dee, it was the student’s struggle and uncharacteristic uncertainty which helped move a relatively dialogic conference more toward a leading monologue. Dee may or may not have wanted my help, my answers, but her struggle purchased them from me nonetheless as I could not think of any other approach to take. I may have helped Dee get through this particular problem, but I doubt she enhanced her skills so as to be better prepared next time.

In the next excerpt there is again a similar pattern with Dee. She was working on another Provincial Exam question, this time on a poem called "Station" (given below, with permission). The poem is about a father and son saying good-bye at a train station as the teenaged son prepares to leave his father to go live with his mother. The question asked students to explain the symbolism of the train in the poem.

**Station**

1 We are saying goodbye  
on the platform. In silence  
the huge train waits, crowding the station  
with aftermath and longing  
5 and all we've never said  
to one another. He  
shoulders his black bag and shifts  
from foot to foot, restless to be off, his eyes  
wandering over tinted windows where he'll sit  
10 staring out at the Hudson's platinum dazzle.

I want to tell him he's entering into the light  
of the world, but it feels like a long tunnel  
as he leaves one home, one parent  
for another,  
15 and we both know it won't ever  
be the same again. What is the air at,  
heaping between us, then thinning  
to nothing? Or those slategrey birds that  
croon to themselves in an iron angle, then  
20 take flight, inscribing  
huge loops of effortless grace  
between this station of shade and the shining water?

When our cheeks rest glancing against each other,  
I can feel mine scratchy with beard and stubble, his  
25 not quite smooth as a girl's, harder, a faint fuzz  
starting--those silken beginnings I can see  
when the light is right, his next life  
in bright first touches. What ails our heart? Mine  
aching in vain for the words  
30 to make sense of our life together, his

fluttering in dread  
of my finding the words, feathered syllables  
fidgiting in this throat.

In a sudden rush of bodies  
and announcements out of the air, he says  
he's got to be going. One quick touch  
and he's gone. In a minute  
the train--ghostly faces behind smoked glass--  
groans away on wheels and shackles, a slow glide  
40 I walk beside, waving  
at what I can see no longer. Later,  
on his own in the city, he'll enter the underground  
and cross the river, going home  
to his mother's house: I imagine that white face  
45 carried along in the dark glass, shining  
through shadows that fill the window  
and fall away again  
before we're even able to name them.

(Eamon Grennan)

#### Excerpt #4

*turn speaker utterance*

- 3 **LB:** What have you been . . . thinking about since we spoke an hour ago?  
4 **Dee:** Oh, just going back and forth over this poem.  
5 **LB:** Hm hmm. Are you thinking about the train symbol thing--  
6 **Dee:** Yeah  
7 **LB:** or the other question. Yeah?  
8 **Dee:** Yeah, I've just . . .  
9 **LB:** Ok, what have you been . . . focusing on?  
10 **Dee:** It's this "in silence the huge train waits."  
11 **LB:** Hmkay . . .  
12 **Dee:** So it's like this monumental rift, I feel, between the father and the son?  
13 **LB:** Hm.  
14 **Dee:** I don't \*  
15 **LB:** Waiting. Yeah, tell me more about the rift.  
16 **Dee:** Yeah and then, well, throughout the poem you know that they don't--  
obviously are not--they don't get along.  
17 **LB:** Hm hm  
18 **Dee:** because they don't talk to one another.  
19 **LB:** Hm hm, doesn't seem like they have huge shouting matches, it seems like

- they're--
- 20 **Dee:** no, they just can't--
- 21 **LB:** --isolated from each other or something.
- 22 **Dee:** Yes, yes. They just don't know how to talk to one another, express their feelings, or. . .
- 23 **LB:** Hm hm.
- 24 **Dee:** So, and yet, and yet and when you were here earlier . . . "waits." I'm trying to figure out: "in silence, the huge train waits." Agh! . . . And I can't . . .
- 25 **LB:** So waiting. "Huge train--
- 26 **D/L:** (*said simultaneously*) "waits."
- (3 sec)
- 27 **LB:** Kay, so there's one mention [of the train]. Then is there another mention--
- 28 **Dee:** Yeah.
- 29 **LB:** --that might shed insight on the first one?
- 30 **Dee:** Um, "in a minute the train, ghostly faces behind smoked glass, groans away on wheels and shackles
- 31 **D/L:** (*said simultaneously*) "slow glides"
- 32 **LB:** So the train (*speaking slowly, pondering each word*) "groans away, a slow glide. I walk beside, waving at what I can no longer see." . . . "Groans away a slow glide." . . .
- 33 **Dee:** Why is it so difficult? Why can't I see it.

Up until this point, I had been asking authentic questions about the student's ideas such as "What have you been . . . focusing on" and "tell me more about the rift" as well as using positive filler--"Hm hm" and "Ok"--to encourage Dee to continue talking and exploring her ideas. However, at turn 24 the student's confusion and frustration began to change the dynamic of the conference: "Agh! . . . And I can't . . ." After a mere three second pause I stepped in by changing the focus to another area of the poem in an attempt to bring new insight. However, research on wait time suggests that students may simply need more time to think and that teachers often hurry onwards when more thinking time is actually required (see, for example, Tobin, 1987). At turn 33 Dee again expressed her frustration, "Why is it so difficult? Why can't I see it?" and this reaction seemed to "buy" even more active participation from me. I felt required to say more--to help--so I took charge and tried to focus on the poem itself, hoping it would spark some ideas in Dee.

#### Excerpt #4—continued

*turn speaker utterance*

- 40 **LB:** Kay . . . . so the train waits, then groans away, a slow glide. Now . . . so you've been reading those lines,
- 41 **Dee:** Yep
- 42 **LB:** and trying to think, 'what does it remind me of?' and what, so what did you come up with? You came up with rift?
- 43 **Dee:** Yeah, something that's large and um, what did I (*turns page*) like it's there, it's just there, like in silence.
- 44 **LB:** Hm hm. Kind of almost hovering or--
- 45 **Dee:** yeah
- 46 **LB:** overshadowing them it seems,
- 47 **Dee:** Hm hm.
- 46 **LB:** and this, even go beyond the word "waits."
- 49 **Dee:** Yeah, "crowding the station."
- 50 **LB:** "crowding."
- 51 **Dee:** Yeah.
- 52 **LB:** So it's got some kind of effect on the surroundings. It's not just waiting kind of passively, it's--
- 53 **Dee:** Oh no, it's there.
- 54 **LB:** It's active, hm hm. "crowding the station with
- 55 **D/L:** "aftermath."<sup>13</sup>
- 56 **LB:** That's kind of weird, isn't it?
- 57 **Dee:** Yeah.
- 58 **LB:** What is "aftermath"? . . It's like the destruction after a storm or something.
- 59 **Dee:** Consequences.
- 60 **LB:** Hm hm.
- 61 **Dee:** Yeah.
- 62 **LB:** (*reading*) "and longing, and--
- 63 **D/L:** "all we've never said to one another."
- 64 **LB:** So, it's crowding the station with these emotions.
- 65 **Dee:** Yeah
- (4 sec)
- 66 **Dee:** Yeah
- (5 sec)
- 67 **LB:** "and then it groans--
- 68 **D/L:** "away"
- 69 **LB:** and there's no other mention of the train.
- 70 **Dee:** No. It talks about the station,
- 71 **LB:** the birds,

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<sup>13</sup> The slash between speakers represents simultaneous speech.



72 **Dee:** and, yeah . . .  
(5 sec rereading poem)  
73 **LB:** tinted windows though, tinted windows too though.  
74 **Dee:** Yeah, I see--yeah.  
75 **LB:** "Tinted windows where he'll sit staring . . ."(*reads to self*)  
76 **Dee:** So, to me, the theme must, er something must, should pop out right away.  
77 **LB:** Hmm!  
78 **Dee:** To me, well, for this question to be asked  
79 **LB:** Ahhhhhh  
80 **Dee:** You'd think it should be there,  
81 **LB:** Hmmm  
82 **Dee:** But it's not.

I seemed to feel my only option--indeed my responsibility--was to be more directive and helpful, to lead us through an examination and interpretation of some lines of the poem. I fell into the teacher default mode which is generally to take over, although I did not really have any ideas about what to do to help her find her own symbolic meaning. I seemed to have no other knowledge of how to "help" the student find an answer to the question. I resisted simply telling her what to write but was still clearly leading the discussion by choosing the lines to read aloud and drawing our attention to particular words. However, instead of being helpful, my leading may have actually distracted Dee from finding her own interpretation, may have shifted her from active participation to passive listener. In the several turns following this excerpt, I spoke more, hoping somehow to spark an idea in her. In fact, a dozen turns later Dee came up with another possible symbol, the train representing freedom. As I "helped" brainstorm ideas about freedom, my over-involvement in speaking and interpreting the poem became more clear when Dee commented about my ideas, "Gosh, you're good Laura." Clearly the focus had switched to *my* ideas and our conference had become a demonstration of my poetry analysis skills, rather than helping put the student in the role of actively engaged thinker.

In conferences with Dee, it seemed that her uncertainty tended to shift our dialogic discourse into more teacher-led telling. While abandoning a student to

flounder may not be helpful, my discomfort with Dee's silence or uncertainty prodded me into the role of director. Sperling (1990) indicated that struggles, starts and stops, and pauses are not necessarily signs of a poor conference--yet we generally try to avoid them just the same. Dee's struggles and frustration made me feel responsible for rescuing her. However, the only approach I could think of was to tell her how I would do it. Instead, I could have created more space for her to explore her ideas before leaping to the rescue, or suggested tactics such as brainstorming, free writing, taking a break, or talking herself through her ideas. Although she seemed stuck and frustrated, she did not directly ask me for help and had not even requested the conference. The question I was left with after reviewing these excerpts with Dee was the common teachers' dilemma: when do we continue to support and offer help, and when do we let go of the hope that the student will figure it out and directly tell her? At the very least, I could have asked her if she wanted my suggestions or still needed more time to work through it herself.

### ***Conferencing With Sandy***

Writing conferences with Sandy were different from those with Amy and Dee in several ways. First, Sandy tended to request conferences more frequently, seeking my help sometimes daily while both Amy and Dee rarely requested a conference and would spend weeks revising one assignment alone before coming to me with it. Second, Sandy often had specific questions or problems in mind when we conferenced, asking for clarification about the instructions, or showing me a draft to ensure she was on the right track. On the other hand, Amy and Dee tended to struggle with such issues alone, only presenting a finished product. Despite these differences, one similarity is that the discourse during conferences with all three participants ranged from monologic to dialogic. In the next excerpt, Sandy had requested a meeting with me after working on a second

draft of a paragraph about the poem called “The Piano”--the same poem in the except with Dee. While there were moments of student active engagement, I was predominantly the one in charge of this conference.

**Reminder--the question stated:**

*The poet makes use of descriptive language when observing the behaviour of adults. In paragraph form quote two examples from the poem and explain how each illustrates this behaviour.*

**The second draft of Sandy’s answer to the above question follows:**

*The first descriptive quote in the poem “The Piano” is in the phrase “grandmother & the visitors.” This describes how they sat, “knee to knee along the chesterfield & in the easy chairs.” This phrase you could visualize the grandmothers and the visitors sitting all in a row with their knees up together along the chesterfield. Another descriptive mentioned of the adults actions. This is where the adults continue to talk as Bobby is playing his piano. The adults discuss everything from, “Tales of weddings, relatives bombed out in England, to someone’s mongoloid baby. This was a very rude group of adults, showing no consideration of the young pianist.*

**Excerpt #5**

(Several opening turns were not recorded due to a tape recording malfunction.)

turn speaker utterance

- 1 **LB:** *(I am in the middle of reading aloud her written draft, shown above. Her written words are shown here in quotation marks)* Um ok . . . “. . . the phrase you could visualize the grandmothers and the visitors sitting all in a row with their knees up together along the chesterfield.” Ok . . . so you’re talking about visualizing and the question says descriptive--
- 2 **Sandy:** descriptive
- 3 **LB:** behaviour, observing the [adults] . . . Yeah. Ok . . . Uh . . . Now what? . . . And then it’s asking you “Explain how each illustrates the behaviour.” What, what is the behaviour of the adults? Is it just the way they’re sitting? Is that, is that what’s important, just that they’re sitting, on the chesterfield? Or, is the question really asking “what are they *like*?” . . .
- 4 **Sandy:** Well I say down below what they’re like, but this . . .
- 5 **LB:** hmmm
- 6 **Sandy:** this is the visualize part. I don’t have to do that?
- 7 **LB:** N--you do. I think you have to do both . . . That’s just--keep going, ‘cause

if you said down later what they were like, that's good. Maybe you just need to mention it earlier. Don't, don't make me wait until the very end to find out what they're like?

8 **Sandy:** Right.

9 **LB:** So, let me, let me keep reading.

10 **Sandy:** Ok.

11 **LB:** "Another"--good, so you've got a good transition, now I know that you're going on to your next example, so that's nice and clear for me as a reader. "Another descriptive (*reading haltingly*) . . . mentioned . . . of the . . ." Ok, I know you haven't checked this yet [for grammar],

12 **Sandy:** Right.

13 **LB:** so we won't worry about--

14 **Sandy:** Right. This is that computer, I'm telling you.

(*Here we discuss for 7 turns the issue of whether the computer has skipped words while she typed.*)

21 **LB:** (*Continues reading aloud*) "This is where the adults continue to talk as Bobby is playing his piano. The adults discuss everything . . . the tales of weddings, relatives bombed out." Right. (*Continues reading*) "This is a very rude group of adults showing no consideration for the young pianist." Yeah so this one, this [second] example, is nice and clear. You've told me what your opinion is-- "they continue talking" --then, you give the quote. Then you say, 'this is showing that they're rude, they're not considerate of him.' So that's an example of . . . (*trying to get her to complete my sentence*)

22 **Sandy:** So this part here . . . (*indicates her latter example*)

23 **LB:** works.

24 **Sandy:** works.

25 **LB:** Yeah.

26 **Sandy:** This here needs . . . work (*indicates the former example*)

27 **LB:** Yeah.

28 **Sandy:** OK, so I can, I can . . . This [second] part's ok then, then I'm saying that this is a very rude group because I'm sort of saying that that's . . . I'm explaining that they're talking through his . . . [piano playing]

29 **LB:** Yup.

30 **Sandy:** So this here (*points to her former example*) has nothing to do with it? It's just describing their knees . . . To me it was like a descriptive thing saying they're all just sitting in a row. It was something you could visualize . . . but, you don't want that. You want to . . .

31 **LB:** You know, it's a tricky question, because, now, the more I look at the way the question is worded? It doesn't say . . . like look at the way the question is worded. I need to look at it again, even though I've looked at this so many times. (*Reads question aloud*) "The poet makes use of descriptive

language when observing the behaviour of adults.” . . . . . *behaviour* . . . . .  
.(repeats word for consideration and emphasis; then continues reading  
question) “In paragraph form quote two examples from the poem and  
explain how each illustrates this behaviour.” It’s a little . . . it’s a little  
vague what they’re actually wanting from you, by saying this: “the  
behaviour.” I mean, is that considered a behaviour? Sitting on a chair? I  
mean, it is descriptive, I be-- I, I agree with you.

- 32 **Sandy:** I’m doing half of the question, I’m not finishing it.
- 33 **LB:** Perhaps. But maybe the, another thing to me is, what does, what *does* this  
show about them? “Sitting knee to knee along the chesterfield and in easy  
chairs.” Like, is that really *revealing* what kind of people they are? Like,  
this, this one (*points to Sandy’s second example*) you said shows that  
they’re rude . . . I’m just trying to figure out now maybe this is actually  
kind of a poorly worded question? . . . I mean, or . . . maybe this isn’t  
*behaviour*. Is *sitting* considered a *behaviour*?
- 34 **Sandy:** No, it’s an action.
- 35 **LB:** Maybe . . . yeah, maybe that’s not behaviour. Like this is behaviour:  
interrupting and kinda being rude. That seems like *behaviour*.
- 36 **Sandy:** Right. Right.
- 37 **LB:** So even though this [i.e. her former example] is *descriptive* . . . it’s kind of  
*passive* descriptive? It’s just, “she was sitting in a chair.” That’s not really  
your *behaviour*.
- 38 **Sandy:** Right.
- 39 **LB:** Ok, so maybe the
- 40 **Sandy:** Right
- 41 **LB:** question is ok. We just have to be clear on what constitutes “behaviour.”  
Just sitting isn’t behaviour. But interrupting someone is “behaviour.”
- 42 **Sandy:** Right.
- 43 **LB:** And let’s see what else in the poem we could use, for [an example of]  
behaviour. .

In this session, I was the one who mainly controlled the participation structure and also dominated it. First, I began by reading Sandy’s paragraph aloud and commenting on it as I read. The result of this instructional set-up was that it put me in a more active, leading position and relegated the student to a more passive, listening and responding role. While reading Sandy’s paragraph, I thought that her first example did not completely fulfill both the requirements of the question asked--it was descriptive but did not reveal the *behaviour* of the

adults. I then felt it was my job to indicate this problem, so I unilaterally chose the direction the conference would take. At turn 3, I first reminded her of what the question asked: “it’s asking you ‘Explain how each illustrates the behaviour.’” I then hinted at the problem I saw by inquiring, “What is the behaviour of the adults? Is it just the way they’re sitting? Is that, is that what’s important. . . ?” But rather than allowing her to answer, I gave the correct reply, disguised in the form of a question: “Or is the question really asking, ‘what are they *like*?’” In this turn I used very leading questions in the hope that she would see the same “flaw” that I saw and get the “right” answer. The implication was clear from my voice and word choice that a right answer existed. While my intent was to help her improve her paragraph, asking such “known answer” questions follows the traditional IRE structure of classroom discourse and tends to thwart dialogue and student engagement by controlling the nature of audience participation. I might as well have simply told her what I thought outright, rather than hinting in this manner as this leading discourse style tends to focus students on the task of figuring out what the teacher is so obviously getting at and telling the teacher what she wants to hear. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) argued that authentic questions promote student engagement, which the authors found had a strong positive effect on achievement. Alternatively, recitation is unlikely to encourage students to become “independent thinkers and self-regulated learners” (Florio-Ruane, 1990, p. 380; see also Gutierrez, 1994). Another indication of Sandy’s relatively inactive role in this excerpt is revealed by a word count: from turns 1 through 14, I spoke 184 words (including 35 words where I read her writing) while Sandy spoke only 33 words.<sup>14</sup>

At one point Sandy did temporarily resist the predominantly monologic structure of this conference. At turn 21 I expected her to “fill in the blanks” with the required response when I said, “Then you say, ‘this is showing that they’re rude, they’re not considerate of him.’ So that’s an example of . . . ?” I expected

<sup>14</sup> Note that Walker & Elias (1987) indicated that word count alone is not sufficient to predict the success or failure of a conference. It is, nevertheless, one factor to note when examining participation structure.

her to follow my script by completing the sentence with a conclusion-type statement such as “that’s an example of the *adults’ behaviour*.” However, Sandy resisted her assigned role by ignoring the vaguely worded yet leading question and began instead to express her understanding of where her paragraph worked effectively and where it needed more work.<sup>15</sup> The student’s more engaged participation in the form of “oral drafting” which occurred in turns 22 through 30 allowed Sandy to construct in her own words her understanding and evaluation of her writing: “This [second] part’s ok then, then I’m saying that this is a very rude group . . . ” During these nine turns, Sandy spoke a more active 86 words, compared to my four words (three of which were affirmations of “yeah” and “yup”).

At the time of the conference I was pleased that Sandy did indeed finally seem to “get” my point about the problem with her first example. However, Rogoff (1994) outlined the “secondary” messages, in addition to content, that students also pick up from the teacher-dominated style commonly called the transmission model:

[Students learn] to carry out tasks that are not of personal interest and may not make sense to them, to demonstrate their skills in the format of basal text answers and test questions, and to figure out the criteria by which adults will judge their performance to be better than that of others. (p. 225)

On reflection, it was clearly *my* point and my observation of her paragraph that was the focus of the conference which implied that my thoughts and ideas should take precedence, that I had all the answers and that the student’s job was to figure out what I wanted and to satisfy my standards. Rather than encouraging her increasing independence as a writer, I seemed to be implying I was the only one eligible to discern whether her writing had improved; only I possessed the knowledge. I was unwittingly reinforcing the traditional view of teacher as authoritarian leader and sole possessor of knowledge. Rogoff (1994)

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<sup>15</sup> See Alpert (1987) for further discussion of student resistance.

indicated that while students may indeed “learn” in all three of the models of learning she outlines--the transmission model, the acquisition/discovery model, and the participation model--the answer to the question of *what* is learned is quite different in each case. Thus, even when a student seems to “get it” when we teach, we must still investigate the nature of classroom participation to ensure our teaching goals beyond content are indeed being fulfilled.<sup>16</sup> Gutierrez (1994), for example, argued that recitation classroom scripts “[limit] students’ opportunities for . . . participating in the very discourse they were ultimately expected to produce” (p. 344), and Lave and Wenger (1991) also argued for the importance of access to practice as a means for learning.

Sandy’s participation at turns 22 through 30 was short lived, however, as, once it became obvious that she did indeed have a clear handle on her paragraph and had gotten my point, I changed the agenda by moving on to my next observation, cutting short her oral construction of her new understanding, and effectively ending her active participation in this part of the conference.

30           **Sandy:** . . . but, you don’t want that. You want to . . .

31           **LB:**     You know, it’s a tricky question, because . . .

Nystrand (1997) confirmed that “[t]eachers in recitation often change topics abruptly as soon as they are satisfied with students’ mastery of a particular point . . .” (p. 11). There are several other examples in the transcripts which revealed my tendency to move on to a new topic as soon as the student seemed to “get” the point. This method keeps the teacher in charge of the direction and topic of discourse. In this excerpt, at turn 31, I began a lengthy examination of the phrasing of the question itself--“look at the way the question is worded.” In the monologue that followed, I focused primarily on proving to Sandy that her first example--“the visitors sitting all in a row with their knees up together along the chesterfield”--may have been *descriptive* but was not effective in revealing the adults’ *behaviour*. However, it was clear that Sandy had already understood this

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<sup>16</sup> As I once read in a book on parenting: just because a particular parenting/discipline technique seems to “work” in the short term, does not mean it is necessarily the best choice in the long run.



notion since she had clearly stated so in turn 30: “So this here has nothing to do with it? It’s just describing their knees” Thus, the dozen turns which ensued were not only unnecessary, but also relegated the student to the passive position of listening to something she already understood.

During these final monologic turns (31-43), I spoke 270 words while Sandy said 18--in which she mainly agreed with me. Not surprisingly, Walker and Elias (1987) found that common features of low-rated conferences were the tutor’s tendency to exclude student participation and the focus on “accomplishing the tutor’s agenda, not the student’s” (p. 279). Jacobs and Karliner (1977) also found that “squelches [of student thinking] occur when the instructor is working through his [sic] own ideas about the topic . . . he’s caught up in his own thinking” (p. 500). This accurately describes my behaviour at various points throughout the conference, but particularly at turn 32 when Sandy made the realization, “I’m doing half of the question [i.e. the descriptive part], I’m not finishing it [i.e. the adults’ behaviour part],” and I rushed past with “Perhaps. But maybe the, *another thing to me is*, what does, what does this show about them?” (emphasis added). I was obviously more interested in my own ideas than in Sandy’s. Finally, at the end of my monologic investigation from turns 31 - 42, I once again controlled the direction of our conference by deciding to return to the question being asked: “And let’s see what else in the poem we could use, for behaviour. . . .”

Overall, in this session I was the one who mainly controlled the participation structure of the discourse, dominating the agenda-setting of the conference while Sandy generally responded to my leads. Early on in the conference I found her choice of examples ineffective, and I saw it as my “job” to help her to come to the same realization. This teacher default-mode of leading and pointing out mistakes seems based on the assumption that our role is that of a transmitter of information, an editor, explainer, or corrector, rather than a coach in the activity of encouraging thinking and more independent awareness of

writing and self-sufficiency as composers. However, Nystrand (1997) noted that this default mode is not inevitable, that teachers have the choice to “treat source texts, students’ utterances, and their own statements as either ‘thinking devices’ or a means for transmitting information” (p. 9). We must decide if it is our job to quiz students in objective correctness or to rehearse them in the skills and processes of deeper thinking and reflection. In this vein, we can see that *how* teachers organize classroom instruction directly impacts *what* is learned by students (Gutierrez, 1994; Johnston *et al*, 2001; Nystrand, 1997; Wertsch & Toma, 1990, cited in Nystrand, 1997). In this case, Sandy may have learned once again that I had the knowledge and her role was to figure out what I thought and write the way I wanted her to.

Fortunately, not all my writing conferences with Sandy were so monologic in nature. In the next excerpt, recorded the previous day, Sandy and I talked about her first draft of the same assignment discussed above. In this excerpt, Sandy had requested a conference, indicating she was having difficulty with her paragraph, and we engaged in a generally dialogical conversation about her draft.

#### **Excerpt #6**

*turn speaker utterance*

- 1 **Sandy:** Laura.
- 2 **LB:** Yes.
- 3 **Sandy:** This is *hard*.
- 4 **LB:** Uh-oh. . . Which one?
- 5 **Sandy:** Writing the paragraph. (*laughs*)
- 6 **LB:** OK.
- 7 **Sandy:** Yeah, ok, this--I know it’s scribbly (*shows LB rough draft*).
- 8 **LB:** Ok.
- 9 **Sandy:** Ok . . . this is how, how I, I was going to start . . . ?
- 10 **LB:** Which um, which assignment is this? Just remind me of the poem?
- 11 **Sandy:** This is um . . . where you . . . (*shows LB the question*)
- 12 **LB:** Oh, the, the Provincial Exam practice?
- 13 **Sandy:** Right.

- 14 **LB:** Ok. (*quickly skims parts of the question aloud*) “. . . descriptive language . . . behaviour of the adults . . . two examples . . . explain how each illustrates the behaviour. . .” Right. Ok. So, what did you do first?
- 15 **Sandy:** I first did the way . . . they described the adults sitting knee to knee--
- 16 **LB:** Ok
- 17 **Sandy:** along the chesterfield . . . ?
- 18 **LB:** Ok great.
- 19 **Sandy:** and the easy chairs?
- 20 **LB:** Uhm hm.
- 21 **Sandy:** And then, see I didn't follow instructions and I started writing about how the boy felt.
- 22 **LB:** Ok. How did you, how did you catch yourself in this, in this one? How did you . . . ?
- 23 **Sandy:** I went back and read the instructions (*said quietly, like ashamed*).
- 24 **LB:** Ahhh, mkay. You reminded yourself, and then you realized you had gone off topic a little.
- 25 **Sandy:** Yes I did.
- 26 **LB:** Great--
- 27 **Sandy:** Yes I did.
- 28 **LB:** well that's good. Ok.
- 29 **Sandy:** Kay. So then I went back, ok, the, I went, went to here? (*points to the lines of the poem*) With the chesterfield, and then the other descriptive part was . . .
- 31 **LB:** Uhm hm
- 32 **Sandy:** his attitude, like he just, he, he says how the, the adults are acting (*pointing to the poem around line 33*) he describes . . .
- 33 **LB:** Like they're not gonna listen anyway?
- 34 **Sandy:** yeah
- 35 **LB:** --until he makes a mistake.
- 36 **Sandy:** yeah
- 37 **LB:** That one?
- 38 **Sandy:** Yeah. So, am I, am I . . .
- 39 **LB:** Yeah
- 40 **Sandy:** on the right . . . ?
- 41 **LB:** Yeah
- 42 **Sandy:** oh I am!?
- 43 **LB:** Yup, yup, yup . . . I think the first thing is, you look at the poem and you try to find quotes, examples.
- 44 **Sandy:** Right? (*quietly; seems puzzled* )
- 45 **LB:** What, what did you do first, when you . . . ? You read the question . . . (*inviting her to continue by completing my sentence*)
- 46 **Sandy:** Panicked.

47 **LB:** *(laughs)* Panicked?

48 **Sandy:** Well I, I panicked.

49 **LB:** What, what made you panic? What, what, what--because it seemed more formal? Because it's an exam practice or, what do you think?

50 **Sandy:** Probably.

51 **LB:** Hmm

52 **Sandy:** That word [exam] just totally, panics me. And then I thought, I can't just sit and go pick, pick, pick. I can't just pick. I have to write around it.

53 **LB:** Hmmmmm. Hmm hmm. When you say I can't just--

54 **Sandy:** I panic.

55 **LB:** *pick*, what were you thinking [by the word] "pick"?

56 **Sandy:** Well it wasn't like, like the all the other questions [where] it's just a one line answer almost.

57 **LB:** Hmmmmm.

58 **Sandy:** But this one, I had to write a whole paragraph.

59 **LB:** Hmm hmm. But you've been writing paragraphs all along, haven't you? I don't think there's any questions in this unit that are just one sentence.

60 **Sandy:** Really?

61 **LB:** Yeah.

62 **Sandy:** Really?

63 **LB:** Yeah.

64 **Sandy:** *(laughs)* Well like these would be. . . *(points to multiple choice)*

65 **LB:** Oh, Yeah, yeah--

66 **Sandy:** Ok?

67 **LB:** yeah those are just multiple choice

68 **Sandy:** But yeah, the other ones were just sort of . . . you, '*you* said', 'what do you think'

69 **LB:** 'What do you think?' Right, so it's a personal--

70 **Sandy:** Yeah, see?

71 **LB:** response thing that's easier?

72 **Sandy:** Yeah.

73 **LB:** 'Cause you feel like you can say anything.

74 **Sandy:** Yeah.

75 **LB:** Whereas this feels like there's a right and wrong answer?

76 **Sandy:** Right!

77 **LB:** Is that--?

78 **Sandy:** There is! There's a complete sentence . . . and I have to start and end right . . . I can't use "and"s too often, or "I"s or. . . *(laughs)*

79 **LB:** Hmmmm. . .

80 **Sandy:** And I just. I thought, 'I really have to think about this.'

81 **LB:** So suddenly this is seeming much more formal, and . . .

82 **Sandy:** Yeah, yeah

- 83 **LB:** and you have to worry about everything
- 84 **Sandy:** Yeah, yeah. . . . . ‘Kay . . . so. . . that’s when I thought I better read a bit better. . . . So, so, this much and this much (*refers back to rough draft*) would be considered, enough?

Throughout this excerpt, there is a general sense of mutuality--or dialogue--in the discourse. It was the student who requested the conference and directed it according to her needs: “Ok . . . this is how, how I, I was going to start . . . ?” The student’s ideas and contributions were taken up and influenced the agenda and direction of the conference. We were, in effect, generally co-constructing the discourse. Unlike in the previous excerpt, we seemed to be ‘on the same page,’ sharing a clear, mutually negotiated agenda throughout the conference. Most of my questions were authentic and were meant mainly to seek clarification about the student’s statements and areas of concern. For example, I asked “what did you do first?” and “what made you panic?” and “what were you thinking [by the word] pick?” Such questions sought information from the student which was not already known by the teacher--thus not following the usual IRE discourse pattern. Nystrand (1997) pointed out that in classrooms where talk is more like genuine conversation or discussion than recitation, the teacher “validates particular students’ ideas by incorporating their responses into subsequent questions . . . . In the give-and-take of such talk, students’ responses and not just teacher questions shape the course of talk” (p. 6). This uptake of students’ ideas helps create more dialogic discourse.

In addition to asking these authentic questions, I also used supportive “filler” meant to encourage Sandy to continue talking, such as “ok great” and “yeah.” Such active listening along with the mutually negotiated agenda and direction of the conference contributed to altering the usual conversational rights and duties of both the student and teacher in this instructional episode. Sandy clearly took an active role in directing the conference to suit her needs and get answers to her questions. These actions by both student and teacher

seemed to contribute to the participants co-creating the overall dialogic nature of this part of the conference. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) argued that substantive engagement “depends on what teachers and students do together and how they work in terms of each other; neither can do it alone” (p. 284).

There was, however, one noticeable place in the conference where the mutual dialogue was at risk of turning into a teacher-led monologue. Sandy expressed what seemed to be her main question at turn 38: “So, am I, am I . . . on the right . . . ?” This question represented a crucial moment in the conference. At this point Sandy had brought me up to speed with her draft and outlined her concerns. When she asked her main question at turn 38, she seemed to come to the end of her leadership role. In effect, with my answer the conference had fulfilled its function: she had found out she was on the right track. She was likely ready at this point to continue writing on her own. However, after answering “Yup, yup, yup,” I took over, falling back into my default mode as teacher by more actively directing and leading. Now that her question was answered, I seemed to feel I had to contribute something, as part of my responsibility as teacher. I began by stating some generic instructions concerning the process of writing this sort of paragraph: “I think the first thing is, you look at the poem and you try to find quotes.” With hindsight it is clear that Sandy had already performed these steps, so the advice was redundant.

It was Sandy herself who helped turn the conference back into a genuinely participatory, shared discussion. She resisted the direction I was taking and refused to fulfil her role as obedient student-follower in the discourse. At turn 45, I invited Sandy to follow my script by encouraging her to recite the expected answer to my question, “What, what did you do first, when you . . . ?” I even began her answer for her: “You read the question . . . ?” However, Sandy gave an unexpected but genuine response: “Panicked.” Whether consciously or not, Sandy refused to play along with the traditional, school recitation agenda, and it was her resistance to the expected script that jolted me into the present

moment and helped bring us back to the more authentic, dialogic discourse evident throughout the rest of this excerpt. Sandy's role in contributing to the evolving focus and agenda of the conference is perhaps most apparent at this turn when she introduced her affective response, "panicked." This genuine response derailed my personal teaching agenda--an agenda that could have been described as "review the steps involved in reading a poem and answering a question." We then explored her ideas about the kinds of writing she was being asked to do until turn 84 when it was she who drew the affective portion of the discussion to a close by bringing the focus back to her written draft: "So, so, this much and this much would be considered, enough?" These few turns show the power of students to influence the course of a discussion. As teachers, our control is not absolute, and Bakhtin notes that monologue ultimately fails to mute the multivoicedness or "heteroglossia" inherent in the dialogism of language (cited in Nystrand, 1997, p. 13). Thus, in this instance, my attempted monologic style--reflecting the recitation format so common in classroom IRE exchanges--failed to control the discourse of this conference.

For the remaining turns in the latter portion of this conference there were several more examples of my uptake of the student's somewhat unexpected ideas. By continuing to surprise or puzzle me, Sandy resisted the usual discourse structure and helped ensure that my teacher default mode was kept at bay. In fact, the traditional teacher and student roles were frequently reversed as Sandy broke the usual rules of classroom discourse by interrupting me several times (at turns 26, 53, 69, and 77). The usual IRE pattern was also challenged when Sandy made several statements which I followed with genuine questions to clarify my own understanding of her ideas (for example, "What made you panic?" and "what were you thinking [by the word] 'pick'?"). It was clearly her ideas that put me into the role of "not-knower" and brought me into the present moment where I had to think genuinely about what this individual right in front of me meant to say. I was forced to wake up and to think on my feet, to be present rather than

relying on a canned, preset lecture or script to fit this particular occasion. Indeed, there is a pattern throughout my transcripts where this student's surprising or puzzling ideas often had the effect of bringing me more fully and authentically into the present moment, forcing me to react to the particular situation and thus to co-create a more genuine dialogue. From a Bakhtinian perspective, these examples show the "centrifugal" force of unofficial discourse to challenge attempts at monologue.

Overall, this excerpt reveals mainly dialogic discourse briefly interrupted by an attempted shift to teacher-led lecture at turn 43, an attempt that was resisted, subverted by the student herself. Though it was the student's unexpected comments which affected the discourse participation of the latter half of the conference, the teacher is not a helpless, passive participant, dragged along by the student's reactions. It is not a case of who gets to lead now, one or the other? Indeed, Nystrand (1997) proposed that rather than falling into the polemic pitting of teacher versus student as the appropriate leader in classroom talk, it is instead "*the relationship between them*" which takes precedence (p. 6, italics in original; see also Sperling, 1990; and Tobin, 1993). Dialogic discourse requires the "consent" and participation of both the teacher and the student who work together to co-create the give-and-take of dialogue--sometimes smoothly and sometimes in conflict. What Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) termed "substantially engaging instruction" is created through a process of negotiation between teachers and students. Importantly, these authors argued that such substantive engagement led to strong positive effects on student achievement.

Finally, in comparing the first excerpt with Amy to this excerpt with Sandy, I must conclude that surprise alone may not be enough to encourage the teacher to take up a student's contribution to a conference and join in authentic conversation. Obviously, the co-construction and mutual negotiation of conference dialogue cannot happen without the participation and agreement of *both* participants. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that perhaps I had actively



participated in the discussion about Sandy feeling “panicked” because I had already seen she was on the right track. Thus, I felt we could afford to explore her somewhat “off topic,” though still interesting reply. However, in the first conference with Amy, I was not certain she was going in the right direction, so I continued ignoring her seemingly off-topic responses and tried to dominate the conference in an attempt to guide Amy toward my agenda.

### ***Summary***

This chapter presented excerpts from writing conferences with the three participants. Each excerpt revealed a dynamic shifting or negotiating of roles and participation during the conference. If the student and teacher did not share an agenda, this could lead to teacher attempted monologue--as in the first excerpt with Amy. On the contrary, if both participants shared a similar task definition, it was more likely that dialogue could ensue--as in the second excerpt with Amy. In several cases, a crucial turning point can be seen, a juncture between monologue and dialogue. As was shown most clearly with Dee, a dialogue could become more monologic if a student seemed stuck, in effect buying more teacher intervention--whether desired or not. In these cases, the teacher default mode and transmission approach to teaching can be seen as a fall back position for the teacher in pedagogical doubt. Alternately, monologic discourse was seen to become more dialogic by a student’s refusal to play the expected role, by resisting--whether consciously or not--the recitation or IRE structure. Student resistance and surprise could both jolt me from the automatic default mode of script teaching--seen most clearly with Sandy. Ultimately, the co-construction of authentic, dialogic discourse required the active engagement of both participants.

Chapter 5 presents conclusions and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion

#### *Overview of Findings*

This study examined the discourse that transpired during writing conferences with three adult participants over a two to eight week period. The discourse was found to shift between monologic, teacher-directed instruction and more dialogic collaboration. This dynamic was linked to factors such as the clarity of the conference agenda, my perception of the student's comprehension and achievement of the task, the type of questions asked by either conversant, and either of the participants interrupting or resisting the other. While I played an often directive role in choosing the assignment, setting the conference agenda, and influencing the discourse style of the conferences, the students also participated in the direction, content, agenda, and discourse style of the conferences. Furthermore, the design of the task itself was also relevant. The difficulty for students of "your task performed by me" appeared with all three participants: Sandy had repeated issues with understanding and following directions for assignments she did not help to create; Amy frequently struggled with her motivation as she found the assignments did not suit her interests; and Dee's difficulties seemed related to the particular questions she was asked to answer rather than her academic ability. Overall, the contributions of both the conference participants and the assignment itself created an interactive context in which discourse dynamically fluctuated, molded by the conversants, their individual personal backgrounds and their histories together, and the task.

The study revealed that my stated goals of increased student independence, achievement, and active conference participation were sometimes

at odds with the conferencing methods and discourse I used. A directive, monologic teaching style along with differential task definitions or conference agendas tended to discourage or postpone student active engagement by creating passive listening or even frustrated conflict. Alternatively, a dialogic co-construction in which students requested a conference and helped direct the agenda seemed to engage the student participants more actively and appeared to contribute to their ability to spontaneously begin oral drafting and to direct their future revisions. My conceptions of what it meant to teach and how students learn were shown to be based on traditional notions, long challenged by scholars, but commonly exhibited in classrooms.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Undertaking this research has helped me to make several important observations which are the basis of changes I have already begun to implement in my teaching, given below. I have recognized the benefits of dialogic, engaged discourse during conferencing as well as the related need for a clearly understood and mutually negotiated agenda and task. This research has also indicated direction for future changes I plan to explore. These current and future directions in my practice are summarized below.

- In the past I viewed each written assignment as an opportunity to “help” students work on their grammar, not realizing that I was contributing to the notion that grammar is more important than content. I now find it easier to focus on content first, grammar last. I also ignore grammar errors in warm-up assignments and personal responses, checking for content only.
- In order to help direct and focus conference discussions, I have begun to add questions to the assignment booklets about the student’s *purpose* and *audience* for a piece of writing, as well as their *likes* and *concerns* about their

writing. I would still like to develop a more effective general procedure for beginning conferences in order to encourage a clear articulation of the conference agenda. For example, it would be helpful if both participants knew that the first questions asked in *any* conference would be something like “What is the purpose of this conference? What kind of feedback are you looking for at this point?” The student should come prepared, ready to answer these questions (see Murray, 1979). This might help reduce unspoken or conflicting agendas.

- I have begun giving students choices about whether to continue revising a piece of writing or not. In the past I helped students revise until I was satisfied with the writing, rather than including them in the decision to continue with revisions. The lack of due dates contributed to this sometimes endless revision. I now often give them a choice when I sense they want to move on, when they stop suggesting ideas, or if they seem to have no motivation to continue. Then I usually ask how they feel about continuing to revise and I suggest I could tell them what mark they would get if they made no more changes, allowing them to decide what they want to do. In this way I am less in charge of trying to force them to continue revising. On the other hand, this may seem like using grading as a weapon, and it is still based on my perception of students’ willingness to revise. I will investigate this method further. Alternatively, I have also considered implementing a clear procedure, such as inviting only one “content” revision and one “editing” conference. I will continue to investigate and adjust my approach regarding when to end revisions, and I will invite students to participate in this discussion.
- I altered the “Learning Log” assignment students complete after each major piece of writing in order to more specifically explore their learning needs, and improve their ability to set goals and self assess (see Manuputty, 2000).

- I have begun to alter assignments so students are more frequently able to choose topics of interest and direct their learning more towards their individual goals and needs. I believe the more the assignments involve student choice, the more likely they will be to answer questions about their *purpose, audience, likes, and concerns* like writers with a genuine purpose, rather than like students performing a task chosen by the teacher. However, I realize that, currently, each assignment's format, length, and procedures are still dictated in the assignment handouts; this implies the form of a piece of writing takes precedence over what students want to say and how they may want to say it. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) argued against "writing instruction in which content, substance, and writer purpose are subjugated to form and procedure" (p. 267; see also Applebee & Langer, 1983; Britton et al. 1975). Thus, I would like to investigate alternative assignments where students sometimes choose both the content and format of their writing. I am also considering alternative assessment practices such as portfolios, and reducing the number of assignments in each course in order to increase the number of drafts of significant pieces of student-directed writing.
- It might also be useful to inform students about the concept of dialogic discourse and the co-construction of knowledge when they are first introduced to conferencing at the beginning of the course. If I outlined the responsibilities we both have to construct understanding through mutual conversation, this may help remind both of us of our roles and duties while conferencing.

### ***Future Research***

My goal in undertaking this research was to explore the discourse and patterns of participation in my writing conferences with adult students. To help verify the suspected benefits of dialogical approaches to conferencing, it would

be useful to study more closely the impact and results of these methods. This investigation could include exploring students' reactions to conferencing. Post-conference interviews with students or a questionnaire might help to determine students' reactions to conferences (see Newkirk, 1995, for creating "backstage" areas to discuss conferences). Finally, it might be helpful to compare conferences in which students have chosen the content and form of their own writing to conferences in which those elements are dictated by the instructor. This comparison might reveal how both teacher and student collaborate differently under different task conditions. I suspect that dialogic discourse might be more prevalent in discussing those assignments that students have chosen. This is an area I am particularly interested in pursuing.

### ***How My Goals Have Changed***

When I first began my master's degree, my goal as a teacher was focussed on finding ways to help students produce better writing--which really meant they should be able to write their assignments more correctly in the form and style envisioned by me. Over the course of this research, my goals have shifted from finding "techniques" that would help students "fix" their writing, to learning ways to contribute to conference dialogue and to participate more effectively in the mutual construction of knowledge and improved literacy.

Through the process of revisiting my transcripts I realized I was leading discussions much more than I had thought I was, and I was even interrupting students when they were talking about their writing--in order, I thought, to keep the conference on track. *My* track. I partly excused this behaviour in the name of efficiency: because my time spent with each student is limited, especially on a busy day, it seemed more practical to lead in order to "get the job done." But what job was getting done? I finally had to ask whether my attempts at efficiency were actually sacrificing student learning. I realized I had an underlying belief that students learned more by listening than talking. It was only through the

clear evidence of my transcripts that I saw glimpses of student engagement when they began talking--engagement that was frequently truncated by my interruptions.

Reading related research and engaging in this study have shown me that learning requires the consent and the active participation of both instructor and learner, and that conference discourse mediates that participation and learning. An alternative to directive, transmission teaching seems to be to share the responsibility for what happens in a writing conference. However, many teachers operate under the premise that we are responsible for students' learning and the only way they can learn is for us to "give" or transmit our knowledge to them. In *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, Mary Rose O'Reilley (1998) indicated that Parker Palmer's idea that "[t]o teach is to create a space" is revolutionary since most of us think in terms of *filling* a space--filling class time, filling students' notebooks, filling their heads. She stated

Most of us believe, at some level, that what happens in the classroom is caused by the teacher. In reality, we cause or control very little . . . The idea of filling students, well-intentioned and nurturing as it may be, rests on the conviction that we know what they need, that their hunger is like our own . . . We know so little about what's really going on. (p. 2)

O'Reilley, along with many sociocultural theorists, proposed that we reevaluate just how much of what goes on is actually due solely to us.

Teachers certainly have a role to play in shaping and participating in the learning in some way. The question is how and when? Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) indicated that teachers

[M]ust carefully attune their questions and assignments to student interests . . . . [Teachers must] be alert to the possibilities for instruction in the interests and questions their students bring to class, and they must be quick and flexible as they capitalize and follow up on these interests and questions. (p. 284)

This seems like a tall order considering the reality of common teaching methods as found in many classrooms by researchers such as Applebee (1986) and Nystrand (1997). Pre-canned lectures and test-question style, IRE classroom discourse contradict the approaches suggested by Nystrand and Gamoran, O'Reilley, Miller, and Palmer, but Allington (2002) observes that we still have few interventions available to help teachers develop the expertise needed to create such classrooms.

### ***A Factor Contributing to Change***

The move from monologic to dialogic teaching can be difficult, even for those with this goal in mind (Denyer & Florio-Ruane, 1995). Unexpectedly, my personal reading at this time in the area of mindfulness or presentness contributed to my own attempts to become more “quick and flexible” in my efforts to capitalize on what transpires in writing conferences. This Buddhist notion indicates the importance of being awake, aware, and accepting of one’s inner state in the present moment. The main goal of mindfulness is to overcome the “auto-pilot” default mode in which we often tend to operate, both in private life and while teaching (Miller, 1981, 1994). In order to be open to hearing and authentically responding to others, to shift from monologue to dialogue, this philosophy indicates we must first become more in tune with ourselves, our present feelings, and our intuition. In the classroom, we must notice and be aware of our responses, feelings, thoughts, and reactions, in an attempt to become more centered, grounded, authentic, and connected to our teaching goals, as well as to our hearts and compassion (Miller, 1981). Palmer (1998) also argued for the significance of such personal awareness while teaching:

[A]s important as methods may be, the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching--and living--becomes. (p. 5)



According to this perspective, the more centered, present, and comfortable we are, the better we can cope with interruptions; thus, there is openness and fluidity in the classroom rather than always pushing in some predetermined direction. In keeping with the Buddhist perspective, Miller (1981) argued that “tremendous energy is exerted to maintain our view of how things should be rather than relating openly to the situation as it arises” (p. viii). An exertion of energy was certainly evident in the first conference with Amy in which I attempted to maintain control of how I thought things should be. Wasting energy is not the only outcome of such an episode: we also lose an opportunity to engage in dialogue that could expand learning and validate students’ experiences. Being responsive to the needs of individual students, asking authentic questions, and taking up their ideas, all require being “present” with them, genuinely trying to hear them and creating a connection rather than experiencing a separateness, a mindlessness, an absence.

The concept and practice of mindfulness helped create the bridge I felt I needed to help me move from the default mode of familiar, teacher-centred pedagogy--with mere intellectual awareness of constructivist learning theories--to action and practical implementation of those approaches. A change in praxis was possible, in part, because the practice of mindfulness is antithetical to default mode mindlessness. This Buddhist notion struck me as quite helpful--or even essential--during conferencing. To facilitate the “balancing act” required to negotiate a conference sensitively, teachers must find a way to remain present or mindful of the particular student, paper, and conference, as well as their larger teaching goals. If a conference is merely a teacher-lecture to an audience of one, then the potential for active student participation and learning is limited or even denied. In contrast, the practice of mindfulness, when employed during a conversation with others, encourages us to hear and respond to the other, rather than merely waiting for an opening to assert our own preplanned remarks (Palmer, 1998). This attitude fits nicely with dialogic, constructivist notions of

learning and teaching as it allows us to be more flexible, less rigid and automatic in our approach to others and to teaching. It can help us to become more open to whatever happens in a teaching exchange while still having purpose. By becoming aware of my own teacher default mode and mindful of my habits, assumptions, and tendencies while conferencing, I can work toward *sharing* the writing conference with the student participant, negotiating the conflict-ridden dialogue, and joining in the collaborative construction of knowledge.

### ***Conclusion***

What began as an inquiry into how better to assist my adult students with their composition skills and products, became a process of investigating and adjusting my conceptions of what teaching and learning are, and beyond that, included an inquiry into my underlying epistemological assumptions and biases. The steps involved in this research helped me to uncover some of my own core beliefs about knowledge and learning, significant in that it is from these underground roots that the stems and leaves of my day to day teaching strategies and attitudes spring. It seems that investigating the nature of these deeply buried roots--one's unconsciously held beliefs and epistemology--can help to uncover and, ideally, alter for the better one's teaching practice.

As a result of this research, I have had to think about and clarify what my goals as an English teacher are. I have come to recognize that many of my habitual actions indicated my main goal as a writing teacher to be the production of error-free prose, yet when not confronted with an actual draft of student writing, I may have said that what I wanted was for students to become more independent and confident in developing and expressing their own ideas *and* in being able to find the areas in their own writing that were in need of revision.

At least, that's what I think I might have said. I'm not sure I really had a clear, consciously articulated "mandate" as a teacher before embarking on this research. It is difficult to admit that I could have taught English for close to ten

years without a clear understanding of my goals in teaching. In a pinch I could have drummed up a worthy sounding statement about teaching a love of literature and encouraging improvement in comprehension and written expression. I would have scrambled to quote a Learning Outcome or two from the Provincial IRP document. However, I suspect this lack of clarity about my purposes and goals in teaching (and the disconnect between some of my goals and my methods) may not be so uncommon, but is rather the secret of many teachers--though our public persona in staff rooms and meetings often exudes confidence in our ability to perform our “duties.”

It seems surprising that, despite participating in a very progressive teacher-training program and some informative graduate level courses, I still found myself frequently operating under many of the the same traditional principles with which I was taught. These recent courses have perhaps been too brief to overcome a deeply entrenched default mode--my teacher identity--and their inability to foster significant pedagogical change provides strong evidence of the normative power of conventional educational experiences and their tendency to promote unconscious reproduction of classroom traditions. I have actually learned well from my own education, though perhaps not the lessons that were intended. Undertaking this research has made me much more aware that, despite my good intentions and keen desire to help students, I was operating under a quite positivist epistemology: the assumption that I could simply tell students what they needed to know, thereby transmitting my knowledge to them. I am beginning to see now that an instructional conversation is a complex interaction mediated by the contributions of both participants and their social context.

I finally saw from the proof of my transcripts how my directiveness seemed to interfere with the engagement, learning, and thinking of these three students. My instructional approach--both the assignments given and manner of discussing those assignments--often reinforced the dynamic in which the

instructor is the only “knower,” the holder of the answers. As teachers, our actions in the classroom can be seen to stem from deep within our unconsciously held “map” of reality, our inherited epistemology and our learned school identities. Likewise, schools tend to reflect general cultural attitudes, and Western teaching practices and expectations seem to encourage teachers to lead and direct. The teacher- or authority-centred paradigm matched my own experiences both in school and at home, and I saw it mirrored in society at large. However, adopting an alternative approach that challenges the conventional transmission style entails more than learning a new technique or method of conducting conferences. In order to adopt and consistently utilize dialogical instructional methods, I see that I must radically alter my beliefs about teaching and learning in general, as well as in the specific context of writing conferences. However, a new perspective cannot simply be put on like a hat, but must be slowly digested, grappled with in a dialogic nature, before it can be understood, accepted, and then perhaps integrated as a deeply held belief. Reading related research and extensive reviewing of my transcripts have enabled me to begin to reconsider my teaching and conferencing methods and their underlying assumptions about both teaching and learning, and, further, about the nature of truth and knowledge. In addition, the practice of mindfulness has contributed to my ability to begin to implement dialogical, constructivist approaches. Overall, the experience of engaging in this research has been a significant step toward what I see as positive change in my practice.

Perhaps the most important part of this change involved turning toward the view that students construct their knowledge by engaging in discussion as peers. This perspective requires an acceptance that learners have something valuable to say--if we ask them, and if we allow them to answer--and that saying it is part of the learning. Finally, contemporary scholars are challenging traditional views of both authority and meaning making. Thus, we are also challenged to question our role as teachers--a role which “for centuries

vested us with the authority and wisdom to find fault . . . [and] is now finally weakening under the scrutiny of its appropriateness in helping writers grow, and not wither, from its manifestation in our response” (Anson, 1989, p. 7). I am struggling to pull away from my traditional transmission roots, to alter my teacher identity, and, while the dialogical perspective provides promise for new direction, I have not yet found a completely comfortable “identity” that I can easily settle into.

Perhaps this lack of comfort is desirable: it means I am still thinking, struggling, open to learning, and open to change.

## Appendix A

Simon Fraser University

### **Informed Consent by Subjects to Participate in a Research Project**

This research involves tape recording conversations between the researcher (Laura Barker) and participating students. These conversations are simply the regular teaching/learning interactions that would normally occur during the school day. The researcher will then analyze these conversations in an attempt to better understand the most appropriate teaching language to help students in their composition. The potential value of the experiment is that the researcher will clarify how instructional conversations about students' writing can be more powerful and effective.

Participants' identities will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms, and they will be encouraged to review and respond to the transcriptions of our tape recorded interactions and any part of the final paper which pertains to them or their writing. With students' permission, samples of their writing will also be used as a source of data. The audiotaped data, transcriptions and writing samples will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. These materials will be destroyed after the completion of the study.

The decision of whether to participate or to withdraw participation will not affect participants' standing at Invergarry Learning Centre. Furthermore, participants may withdraw their participation at any time during the research without penalty. Participants may also register any complaint they may have about the experiment with the researcher (Laura Barker) or with Dr. Phil Winne at the Faculty of Education of Simon Fraser University.

I have read the procedures and I agree to participate in this research by allowing my conversations about my English assignments to be tape recorded and analyzed. I further agree that samples of my written assignments may be used as a source of data. I understand this research will take place at Invergarry Learning Centre between April and June, 2001. I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion, by contacting Laura Barker at Invergarry Learning Centre (584-5424) in the autumn or winter of 2001.

Your Name (please print legibly): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Once signed, a copy of this consent form and a subject feedback form should be provided to the subject.

## Appendix B

# SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF VICE-PRESIDENT, RESEARCH



BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA  
CANADA V5A 1S6  
Telephone: (604) 291-4370  
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April 26, 2001

Ms. Laura Barker  
Faculty of Education  
Simon Fraser University

Dear Ms. Barker:

**Re: Teacher-Student Talk: Conversations About Writing  
In an Adult Learning Centre**

I am pleased to inform you that the above referenced Request for Ethical Approval of Research has been approved on behalf of the University Research Ethics Review Committee. This approval is in effect for twenty-four months from the above date. Any changes in the procedures affecting interaction with human subjects should be reported to the University Research Ethics Review Committee. Significant changes will require the submission of a revised Request for Ethical Approval of Research. This approval is in effect only while you are a registered SFU student.

Best wishes for success in this research.

Sincerely,

Dr. James R.P. Ogloff, Chair  
University Research Ethics Review Committee

c: K. Toohey, Supervisor

/bjr

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