

# REAFFIRMING THE WRITING CONFERENCE: A TOOL FOR WRITING TEACHERS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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Considerable literature has been written in recent years supporting the concept of teaching writing across the curriculum. Teachers and researchers agree that the idea is consistent with theoretical models of how students learn and how discourse communities function. Much less has been offered, however, about how to teach writing in these non-writing classes. Do we simply appropriate the techniques that have proven successful in writing classes? Are such techniques generalizable across the curriculum? Assuming that so-called content instructors have neither the time nor the commitment to teaching writing that writing instructors do, what works best? If we have to choose, to which techniques should we give priority?

Two recent books in composition studies have underscored the critical role in teaching played by response (Anson 1989; Freedman 1987). In both these works response is defined broadly. As Anson points out, the "ideology of response" has evolved considerably since the days when teacher response consisted of marking themes (4). Whatever ancient practices persist in some composition classrooms, many teachers today view response in a collaborative framework. "It seems clear," argues Freedman, "that for response to be effective, teacher experts must collaborate with

learning writers with the aim of helping the writers become independent. This collaboration must result in a process the writer could not have engaged in without expert guidance and should result in a product the writer could not have produced without such guidance" (9). Simply correcting students' errors could never have such an impact on the writing process or on their texts. What, then, do we mean by response and what form should response of this quality take?

Kenneth Bruffee's use of the term "conversation" as a metaphor for teaching and learning has been applied mostly in the context of collaborative learning among peers. Yet the notion of conversation has much to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between teachers and students engaged in the writing process. Conversation between teacher and student can significantly influence the evolution of a text. Even the teacher-expert advocated by Freedman need not achieve expert status by dictating to students. By using experience and credentials as members of the discourse community students are seeking to join, teachers can exchange ideas with students and offer advice in a conversational rather than lecture format. Such a format seems more appropriate for the level of response teachers and researchers are finding not only desirable but increasingly necessary to teach students what they need to know.

The most obvious vehicle for this model of response as conversation is the writing conference. Clearly, if teacher and student can sit down together for a period of time, they can answer each other's questions and discuss possibilities for changes in the text in an efficient and collaborative way. Such communication could occur in writing but rarely does, partially because, as Bruffee points out, only through conversation do we learn what we need to ask. In Freedman's study both teachers and students preferred writing conferences as a mode of teaching (157), but teachers had difficulty providing sufficient time for conferences. Time constraints aside, the more we demand of ourselves and others as respondents, the more appropriate the conference format becomes as a teaching methodology of choice.

The significance of conversation and the advisability of writing conferences become even more critical in the context of writing across the curriculum where teachers play a major role as representatives of their disciplines. They literally speak to students not simply as arbiters of good style in the tradition of Strunk and White, but

as spokespersons for a field that has conventions of its own. Recently we have become more aware of how knowledge of a field influences a student's ability to write papers (Jolliffe and Brier) and how much discipline-specific conventions determine whether a student paper succeeds (Anson 1988). The ways in which these conventions function, often mysterious to students, may be revealed in the questioning and answering typical of conferences.

By the same token, in a conference setting instructors can more readily determine how much students know. If, as Jolliffe and Brier claim, "successful writers in a discipline know much more than their written products show" (71), the instructor's response must take this knowledge into account. Difficulties mastering content and methodology often manifest themselves as problems in writing (see Odell). As a result, effective response must address the student's thinking as integral to the writing, and conversation offers a suitable context in which to probe a student's thinking.

Focusing response on conversation about a student's ideas as well as about how those ideas are presented solidifies learning as it improves writing. It also gives teachers a better sense of what their students have absorbed. Knowledge gained by instructors in writing conferences can help them become more effective classroom teachers of content as well as more effective teachers of writing. Consequently, instructors can come to see the time spent in writing conferences as central rather than peripheral to their goals as teachers of their disciplines, a common concern in writing across the curriculum programs.

Because of the time and energy consumed by writing conferences, resistance to them occurs even among instructors for whom conferences are a tradition. Instructors who have no such tradition often question the effectiveness of conferences. They assume that well considered comments on papers represent the best feedback they have to offer students and that nothing will be gained by discussion with students unless the students have questions. These instructors do not view the conference as an opportunity for dialogue, and certainly not as a potential learning experience for both participants. The goal of this paper is to convince non-English teachers that both they and their students have much to gain from writing conferences.

Over the last few years, graduate student writing instructors in our Writing Across the University program at the University of Pennsylvania have repeatedly proven to me the value of writing

conferences for teachers across the curriculum. As a writing teacher, I had always required conferences because I believed them to be invaluable experiences for student writers. For years my students had reinforced that bias by gobbling up as much conference time as I could feed them. I had always viewed the inordinate number of hours spent each week in conference, however, from my point of view as an instructor, as a burden. Although I enjoyed getting to know my students in conference, the benefits accrued, I assumed, entirely to them as writers. Never did I pause to consider what else they might be learning or what non-English instructors might gain from writing conferences until I began training teachers from different disciplines. Even then, only after reading numerous testimonials to the importance of one-on-one instruction written by our graduate student instructors, did I insist on the writing conference as a teaching method for new instructors teaching writing across the curriculum.

Each year at the University of Pennsylvania approximately seventy graduate students from across the university take part in our Writing Across the University program. Trained by internal and external consultants experienced at teaching writing and familiar with composition theory, these writing fellows strive to incorporate teaching writing as a primary goal as they teach the content of their disciplines. Whether as teaching assistants they assume responsibility for their own classrooms, or as writing consultants they coach students outside of class, their mission involves integrating writing and thinking. They teach students not just how to write, but how to think through and write a sociology, management, or biomedical engineering paper.

Because these graduate students represent so many different disciplines each semester, they depend primarily on a combination of the experiences of previous writing fellows, which we regularly document, and their own inventiveness to discover teaching methods that produce results in their particular fields and in their specific courses. Although they attend seminars that instruct them in ways of responding to student writing, developing assignments that promote good writing, teaching revision, and using collaborative writing in the classroom, they must apply what they learn to the structures that exist in a given course and fill in the blanks with materials and strategies that are discipline-specific. Although we acquaint them with, for example, informal writing assignments from various courses, they frequently have to adapt

those assignments to their own courses or invent new ones. They frequently find that methods that worked well in History of Art do not succeed in History.

Each semester all writing fellows turn in reports detailing how they implemented the goals of Writing Across the University in their courses. After a number of brief questions about the structure of the course, the writing requirements and their role as writing fellows, we ask them to describe their approach to teaching writing in their disciplines, including references to drafting and rewriting, assignments, evaluation, conferences and formal and informal writing. The substance of these reports varies greatly, but repeatedly, over several semesters, the fellows spontaneously endorse writing conferences:

I continued the process of conferences with the five-page paper, meeting with each of my students after reading a first draft of the paper. The process was time-consuming and brain-frying; but I'm convinced it is the most important service WATU (Writing Across the University) can offer.

Over sixty percent of the reports recently received from instructors mention writing conferences as crucial vehicles for teaching writing across the curriculum. While they are comfortable teaching the regular content of their courses to groups of students, several fellows insist that "the only way to teach writing is one-on-one." A number argue that conferences should be required in all writing across the curriculum courses. Consistently, instructors applaud the success of conferences as a means of integrating writing and learning. They report that the results achieved far exceed the results brought about by even the most exhaustive written comments, the method of response commonly used in courses not affiliated with Writing Across the University.

Unlike ordinary writing teachers, instructors in writing across the curriculum have a two-fold agenda. They seek to help students improve their writing, but they also want to influence students' thinking about the subject matter. Their enthusiasm for writing conferences stems from their discovery that in conferences they can further both goals simultaneously.

Our instructors regularly cite two benefits they derive from conferences which make responding to writing easier and which also promote student learning. First, conferences create a context

in which instructors can discover how much students actually know about their subjects. As one writing fellow described the process:

The most significant thing I learned this semester was the importance of conferences, of *talking* to students about what they were trying to say in *writing*. On the first assignment, one student had handed me a first draft that seemed very confused, trying to say far more than could be tackled in 500 words. I said as much in my comments and received a second draft that seemed to me virtually identical to the first. Talking to the student led me to see that she was not, as I first thought, being defiant, but that she was not making her connections clear in writing. What seemed to her perfectly clear seemed to a reader completely disconnected. I think I helped her see that it is in her interest to get what she means across on paper (even if she thinks her readers are stupid because she has to do it). She helped me see that many students are much more articulate orally than they are on paper and need very detailed comment and reaction if they are to improve the way they put their meaning across.

Instead of having to extrapolate how much students understand the ideas about which they are writing from an often disorganized and highly “writer-based” (Flower) draft, in conference the instructor can question the student. Together they can begin to disentangle problems of fuzzy thinking or misconceptions about the subject matter from problems more specifically related to the writing process. This procedure also helps the instructor to encourage the emergence of ideas previously obscured by poor writing:

There is nothing more valuable in the teaching of writing than one-on-one consultation. . . . The students became excited as well as defensive about their ideas, especially since they had roughed them out on paper and were able to talk intelligently about them. By articulating their thoughts out loud, they gradually saw how they could express them more clearly and effectively. I would correspondingly correct misconceptions that arose from a lack of contact with the text and Classical culture in general. More importantly, however, I would listen to the students and then explain in different words what they had said to see if it made sense. I also would develop their ideas by asking them further ques-

tions and impressing upon them the need to ask themselves the same type of questions. Needless to say, as a grammarian by inclination, I attempted to steer them clear of common colloquial errors in their composition. I found these sessions gratifying, and I think the students were pleased with the attention.

Until students have their ideas under control, their thinking tends to interfere with their writing. Although we may commend the process of writing to learn, that process does not lend itself to producing finished work unless we insist that students follow the writing process through to other stages. Eventually, student writers must learn to control their material, to turn their attention to issues of presentation for an audience and to concentrate on casting their ideas in structures appropriate to the assignment and the discipline. Long before that adjustment occurs, however, instructors can assist students in formulating their ideas, if they can gain access to them. The context created by the writing conference provides that access.

The second benefit follows logically from the first. In addition to suffering from fuzzy thinking, student papers frequently fail to reveal adequately the writer's intention. Too often instructors find themselves wondering about the point of a paper or why the writer chose to write on a given topic. In those situations the process of responding to the paper involves searching the text for clues, hoping that some obscure passage will give up its meaning under scrutiny. Although eventually instructors may satisfy themselves that they have understood what a student was trying to do, misreading frequently occurs. For example, the following paragraph introduces a student paper for a social history course. Can you determine with any confidence the topic of the paper?

The 1820's-1830's were periods of tremendous social disorder and transition. The old castes of mercantile, artisan and agrarian were eroding, and the new factory/capitalist system was not yet fully established. This placed the people of this era between systems—in a world of disarray. The corporate family economy was being phased out and what the future held for most was uncertain. This caused particular anxiety for mothers who were concerned for the futures of their children.

Is this paper about family life in a period of transition in American history? Perhaps, but the next paragraph turns to religion and the

religious revivalism of the period. The third paragraph picks up on the role of women during the period, arguing that they led the revivalist movement, but then focuses on revivalism as a middle class movement. The succeeding paragraph veers off to discuss the Rational Radicals in contrast to the Revivalists. The rest of the paper continues to compare those two movements and the people who participated in them, concluding finally:

Thus the Radicals were grounded in the past. They feared the Revivalists and saw the future system as potentially oppressive to members of the laboring class, namely themselves and their children. They banded together to offer an enlightened critique of the infant yet emerging capitalist economy.

Without commenting on the merits of the writing, I would assert that our inability as readers to discern the student writer's intention makes a coherent and useful response to this paper impossible. We can arbitrarily decide on the basis of the scanty evidence provided what the paper should be about and respond accordingly, but we risk advising the student to write a paper entirely different from the one the student had in mind. If you add to this the realization that this paper is a draft, and the student may not have understood her own interest, let alone the reader's, until the draft was written, the argument for withholding comment at this stage becomes even stronger.

In this case, as in many others, the student writer never succeeded in synthesizing her ideas until she discussed her paper with her writing consultant in conference. At that time she was able to articulate her intention to present the opposition between the Revivalists and the Rational Radicals as a form of class struggle, each movement representing a different social class. The professor in this course on Jacksonian America had repeatedly emphasized her view that, in analyzing historical events, family dynamics could sometimes serve as a metaphor for events in the culture. Consequently, the student set out to make her case for the class struggle by grounding her argument in references to mothers and children, particularly mothers' aspirations for their children, which reflected on the class issue.

Once the writing consultant understood what the student was trying to do, the mystery was solved. She realized that the student was trying to accomplish two goals at once: to make her



own argument and imitate the type of historical analysis her professor had demonstrated in class. Her failure to communicate clearly a focus for her paper resulted from her effort to use this method of historical interpretation, which she thought she should use, but with which she had had no experience. The consultant's role then became clear, to help the student choose between her two goals. In this case, knowing the professor's intention for the assignment, the consultant felt free to advise the student to eliminate her references to the family in the paper and to concentrate on using her own powers of analysis to argue her point about the class struggle underlying the religious movements of the period. The student felt released from an unwelcome burden, and the consultant recognized this as an appropriate strategy to follow in order to help the student achieve the goals she wanted to accomplish in the paper.<sup>1</sup>

For the sake of the student's understanding of the subject matter as well as for the sake of her writing, the most constructive approach to a paper like this one brings about a dialogue between the writer and a representative reader instead of the one-way communication from reader to writer that often occurs in non-writing courses.<sup>2</sup> The reader, an informed representative of the discipline as well as a writing advisor, needs to ask the writer what the paper is supposed to be about, what point the writer wants to make and how she proposes to influence a reader. The writer, in turn, needs an opportunity to question the reader, to determine whether the ideas the writer undertook to express make sense to a representative reader, and, if not, what type of clarification the reader requires. Full discussion, with both parties on hand to answer questions and point to evidence in the text, avoids both misinterpretations of texts and misreadings of comments. When we discover, as the instructor did in the case cited above, that the student intended to write about a subject quite different from those suggested by her draft, we can skip a close reading of the current version and focus instead on the one yet to be written, the paper the student imagined she was writing and wants to write but never succeeded in putting down on paper.

Drafts in which the writer's intention is never made clear to the reader appear regularly in content area courses as students struggle to own their ideas before they can begin to communicate them effectively to readers. This tension between the thinking process and the writing process inhibits the student writer from attend-

ing to the reader's needs. Although it seems like the right moment to intervene in the writing process if we want to influence the outcome, suggestions made in response to a first draft too frequently miss the writer's point. In order to help students discover their purposes, we must give them an opportunity to consult with an interested reader, preferably a reader familiar with the content of the paper, who can more appropriately direct the student's thinking. Before we reject strategies or propose alternatives, we need to understand not only why the writer chose the options that appear in the text but what other options s/he considered and rejected and what options were never considered. We need to review not only the text, but the decision-making process that led the student to present the text in its current form.

In the absence of clarification from students, instructors, particularly inexperienced instructors, tend to make up the student's side of the learning/writing experience. In conversation with students, however, instructors can make it their business to acquire information about the process a draft text represents and advise students accordingly to rethink as a prelude to rewriting. In the conference setting, they can effectively rethink decisions with students, focusing on the process rather than the product and playing the role of master writer/teacher rather than just informed reader. In this context the process of the writing conference becomes part of the intellectual process we teach students to undergo in the course of producing a paper. Eventually we expect that students will internalize the conversation of the conference and carry on the same dialogue with themselves, but initially we teach them the process by accompanying them through it.

Our writing across the curriculum instructors frequently cite other advantages to writing conferences which stem from the relative flexibility of the conference situation. These aspects of conferences, familiar to writing instructors, often take non-writing teachers by surprise and reveal new ways of increasing their effectiveness as teachers of their content areas. Instead of structuring the conferences as a confrontation between writer and critic, the student defending the text and the teacher defending the comments, some instructors prefer inviting students to discuss their drafts in lieu of written comments. Even when instructors have returned papers with comments, they find that conferences create opportunities for students to retake control of their ideas by determining what issues they want to discuss and which ignore. Instead

of teaching students just to follow the instructions often implicit in written comments, conferences help students take responsibility for their writing and thinking and often open up new territory for both student and teacher. In the difficult process of motivating students, conferences can also play a crucial role. As one instructor insisted:

Evaluation of writing should always be written, if only in outline form for quick reference or reminder to the student of conversations, but personal interaction is a *must* in teaching writing. Formal writing by its very nature posits an audience, and an interested reader is the best encouragement for good work.

Many of our writing across the curriculum instructors shy away from offering students prescriptions for good writing. Particularly when students are writing for audiences in different disciplines, we try to help them bring their ideas to fruition without suggesting that a paper written in a specific form or style will necessarily constitute a good paper in any context. Since conventions vary from field to field, we avoid suggesting that a well received paper in one field will automatically work in another discipline. In spite of the fact that we de-emphasize universal principles of writing in favor of teaching writing as part of the process of learning a discipline, students do learn a good deal about writing. We have found in our program that teaching students the process of drafting and revising in their content area courses, combined with appropriate reader feedback and in conjunction with writing conferences works well for many students. At the end of one semester, 62% of our student sample described their writing as improved. In addition, 90% of the students rated the helpfulness of their contact with their writing instructors three or above on a five-point scale, where five represented the most favorable evaluation, and 30% gave the highest rating possible.

In our efforts to teach the writing process across the curriculum, the writing conference emerges as a critical vehicle for communicating with students. In addition, we find that the collaboration which occurs between teacher and student in the conference setting serves not only to instruct students in writing but to further their thinking. Conversation as a mode of inquiry and instruction enables both speakers to teach and learn from each other. In the process of responding, teachers learn about students' intentions,

about their thinking and writing processes, about what they know and need to learn. Regardless of how much students value or learn from writing conferences, instructors clearly benefit as well.

This approach to teaching writing integrated with thinking and in conjunction with the conventions of different disciplines has in large part been defined by the aims of our writing across the curriculum program. Our goal in this endeavor is not simply a better student text but empowered student writers and learners. As Cynthia Onore argues on the subject of response, "Without empowerment there can be no significant purpose for responding to writing." In order to encourage empowerment, instructors must be willing to sit down with students and hear what they have to say. "Only within a context where an inquiring learner comes together with an inquiring teacher, where both persons negotiate, exchange meanings, and share and modify intentions, can empowerment occur" (247). The writing conference provides such a context for teachers and students engaged in dialogue. As they strive to become effective teachers of their subjects, our instructors consistently rely on writing conferences to enable them to accomplish their goals, and with good reason.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>My thanks to Michele Sinex, the writing consultant in this case, for allowing me to use this interaction as an example and also for reading a draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup>Using the work of Michael Oakeshott and Lev Vygotsky as documentation, Bruffee defines thought as internalized conversation (638-41). From a teacher's point of view, then, I would argue for the importance of sustaining a conversation with students which they can use as a model for their internal conversations.

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