TEACHER DOMINANCE IN THE WRITING CONFERENCE

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There is no dearth of material today on the subject of writing conferences. And conferences have avid supporters. "Perhaps the most successful practice in the teaching of composition has been the regular conference to discuss the problems and progress of the individual student," write Squire and Applebee (254). "We are convinced [conferences] represent the most valuable innovation in the enrichment of the high school curriculum in English," writes Janet Emig (228). "We should spend nearly all of our time conferring with individual writers. That seems to be what they need most. . . . The writing process demands it. Discourse theory calls for it. Research on writing supports it. I don't see any way around it," writes Charles Cooper (21).

Murray speaks for many teachers and researchers (Garrison; Carnicelli; Knapp; Duke; Fisher and Murray; Fassler; Claiborn and Dixon) when he writes, "conference teaching is the most effective—and most practical—method of teaching composition" (147).[1] Writing conferences have been widely accepted by teachers at all grade levels, and much of the literature today describes successful sessions and offers suggestions to teachers (Murray; Duke; Graves, *Writing*; Calkins, *The Art* and *Lessons*; Harris; Walker and Elias).

Students consistently praise conferences. About student comments in 92 sections of Freshman English at the University of New Hampshire, Carnicelli writes, "One statistic was easy to compile: not one of the 1800 students found classes as useful as conferences" (105). Statistics from Stanford University's Freshman English program for the years 1980-84 show that Stanford students favor writing classes that include individual tutorials over classes that do not (Walker and Elias 267).

Among the research studies demonstrating the superiority of conferencing is one conducted in 1979 on four campuses of the Los Angeles Community Colleges District (Simmons). Researchers tested the effectiveness of the Garrison method, a one-to-one method of teaching composition, and found that Garrison method students—in both remedial and regular Freshman English classes—showed significantly greater writing gains than control group students did, that Garrison students had better feelings about themselves as writers, that Garrison classes generally retained a higher percentage of students than control group classes, and that teacher morale in Garrison classes was high.

Other studies support these findings. Fritts found that students who had conferences in their freshman composition classes showed significantly better writing achievement than control group students who had no conferences. Looking at course grades (Kates), retention and course grades (Sutton), and retention, course grades and completion of credit hours (Gates), researchers have shown that writing conference/tutorial students perform better than students in "traditional" lecture-discussion courses.[2]

Studies by Applebee, Bereiter, and Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod and Rosen, show that, by allowing students to focus on their own work and writing processes, conferences foster the development of students' meta-awareness of language as a generative system for thinking and for formulating knowledge. Freedman ("College Students" and "Teaching and Learning") found that the dialogue that occurs in conferences allows students to express their own concerns and thereby participate more actively in the evaluation of their work.

This is a lot of good news about writing conferences. And it is thus for good reason that conferences have been widely adopted in schools and colleges across the country.

But the next question is, what are the obstacles to deriving maximum benefit from conferencing? Prominent among the worries of many scholars and practitioners are concerns about the deleterious effect of teacher dominance in the writing conference. Susan Florio-Ruane addressed this issue in a paper presented at the 1986 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Francisco. "Current literature on writing instruction," she said, "focuses on the writing conference, which accompanies a shift in emphasis from product to process and potentially transforms the teacher's role from task master and evaluator to respondent, opening the door to greater peer interaction in literacy learning. However desirable this ideal may be, extant research on classroom communication indicates that teachers dominate instructional talk in both the classroom and also in the writing conference. The limitations of the conference arise perhaps because much of the talk is instructional, that is, geared toward an expert/novice distinction between teacher and student" (1). "Teachers dominate instructional talk. Not only do they speak far more than students, but they generally control topic and access to the floor. Teacher talk is powerful" (5).[3]

David Taylor, in a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Writing Centers Association East Central Conference in 1985, argues that "problems caused by a teacher's inherent authority during writing conferences can be surmounted by bringing a counselor's approaches to structuring and conducting an interview with a client. . . . [T]he creation of an atmosphere of acceptance and trust is more important to the writing conference than specific teaching techniques. . . . [C]haracteristics of effective helpers must be identified, including helper empathy, helper warmth and caring, and helper regard and respect, as well [as] openness and honesty" (1).

Lucy Calkins in *The Art of Teaching Writing* gives a number of valuable suggestions to teachers about how best to conduct conferences and, in so doing, she touches on the problem of teacher dominance and control. As teachers, writes Calkins, we have to be careful, because "there are many ways in which, without meaning to do so, we take over ownership in a writing conference" (120). Speaking of teacher talk, she notes that, as a teacher, "I [can] also take control with my compliments, my evaluations, my assessments" (121).

Calkins suggests questions a teacher should ask the student or ask the student to ask him/herself. "It is easy," she writes, "to list questions in a book and harder to ask them in real classrooms. The questions put the spotlight on the writer, and too often, as teachers we hesitate to give away control" (119).

If a teacher asks questions and has a certain answer in mind, he/she is, in fact, taking over the conference, writes Calkins. "While I do not take pen in hand to rewrite the student's draft because I know better, I can be manipulative and coy. 'I'm wondering if you see a different way to start your piece?' I ask. 'Is there a different sentence down around here which might work better?'. . . . Then, of course, I use my voice to signal the 'right' answer, and pretty soon the student's text has become my own. But it is not my piece of writing. It belongs to somebody else. If we, as teachers, ask questions and make suggestions so that student texts end up matching what we had in mind—what have we accomplished?. . . . The only real lasting result of such conferences is that we teach students to be dependent on our evaluations, on our advice" (120-121). Calkins argues that we want to create independent student writers, writers who can evaluate and criticize—and then revise—their own writing.

Donald Murray, in *A Writer Teaches Writing*, agrees, warning against teaching which encourages the student to "become dependent on the teacher for identifying problems and developing solutions. I believe it is vital for the writer to learn how to read a draft and evaluate it" (148). "The primary goal of a writing conference," says Muriel Harris, in her comprehensive 1986 look at conferences in *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*, is for the teacher "to work him- or herself out of a job, that is, to make the student independent" (28).

Harris addresses specifically the subject of too much teacher talk as an aspect of teacher dominance. She makes clear that poor teachers often talk far more than they should. In describing one type of good conference Harris quotes Graves as saying that teacher "'action in conferences [should be] redefined as intelligent *reaction*.'" Graves "lists symptoms of teachers who act rather than react: they talk more than the writer does, they ignore where the writer is in a draft, they meddle with the writer's topic, they teach skills too early in a conference, they ask questions they know the writer can't answer, and they supply words and phrases for the writer to use." In sympathy with Graves's point of view, Harris writes, "It is dangerously easy for the instructor to wade in and begin revising" (29).

Murray also specifically discourages too much teacher talk. On the subject of how to start a conference, he writes, "The conference opens best when I am pleasant, friendly, and silent. Pleasant and friendly is fairly easy for me; silent isn't so easy" (161). Murray suggests teachers not worry that students will have nothing to say. "If teachers allow students to speak first they will discover that they have a response" (152).

Carnicelli argues similarly. "*The teacher must listen to the student*," he writes, highlighting this sentence by using it as a subheading to a section of text in his article "The Writing Conference: A One-to-One Conversation." "A conference teacher must know when to talk and when to listen," says Carnicelli. "Of all the skills a conference teacher needs, the ability to listen is easily the most neglected, yet it may well be the most important. . . . If the teacher does most or all of the talking, the student may simply sit there, politely confused" (117).

The foregoing body of literature asserts what many good teachers believe intuitively: teacher dominance—often in the form of too much teacher talk—can have ill effects on students: in particular, teacher dominance in writing conferences is undesirable. My research associate and I had in mind the possible detrimental effects of too much teacher talk when we planned our discourse analysis study of writing conferences several years ago.

When we began this study of teacher and student talk in the individual writing conference, seeking to discover what factors were associated with successful writing conferences and what factors with unsuccessful ones, we had a number of assumptions. Prominent among them was our assumption that students—and possibly teachers—would rate highly those conferences in which teachers listened more and talked less, conferences which teachers did not dominate. We held this assumption for a number of reasons—because of our own teaching experiences and those of our colleagues, and because of research we had read about teaching writing.

The writing conference, a one-to-one interaction that occurs away from the classroom, seemed to us an excellent place to study the general phenomenon of teacher dominance. With no other students to distract the attention of the teacher (acting here in his or her capacity as an individual tutor), the focussed, sustained nature of the conference might be expected to intensify any tendency a student has to feel his or her lack of authority, status and expertise compared to the teacher's.

The results of our study surprised us. The hypothesis that conferences judged most successful by students and teachers would be those in which the teachers were the least vocal was not supported by the data. Teacher utterances averaged 67.2 percent of total utterances in the high-rated conferences, and 66.4 percent in the low-rated conferences, not a significant difference. The group of high-rated conferences included the conference with the lowest amount of teacher talk and the one with the highest amount of teacher talk.

What can we make of this finding? In seeking an answer I decided to take a closer look at the rest of our study results in an effort to understand their implications for the question of teacher dominance and also to go back and take another look at the literature on writing conferences, focussing particularly this time on commentary on amount of teacher talk and on teacher dominance. I wanted to see what our study was telling us about these specific issues and to consider its findings in terms of what other scholars and teachers had to say.

For our discourse analysis study of writing conferences we audiotaped, transcribed, divided into T-units, coded, counted, and analyzed the talk between teachers and students in 17 writing conferences at Stanford University and California State University, Hayward. The coding system which we developed for this purpose is presented in Appendix I.

We had each student and teacher/tutor independently "grade" the success of each conference on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). And then we looked to see what kind of talk was characteristic of conferences rated highly by both teachers and students and what kind of talk was characteristic of conferences given low ratings by both.[4]

We had two specific hypotheses when we began our study. First, we thought that the most highly rated conferences would be those in which students participated most actively—talked most. Part of our reason for wanting to test this hypothesis was that we believed, as noted above, the complementary hypothesis, that the most highly rated conferences would be those in which the teacher participated least actively—talked least. Our second hypothesis was that, in the best conferences, the agenda would be the evaluation of the students' work—tutors/teachers evaluating students' work and students practicing evaluating, that is, learning how to reflect on and critically assess, their own work.

The second of these two hypotheses was supported by the study. Statistical analyses of the data in our coding categories showed that two categories—Criteria and Evaluations—were significantly associated with highly rated conferences. In successful conferences in this study both students and teachers were actively engaged in formulating and articulating a set of principles that define a model of good writing and in evaluating and revising students' papers according to this model. In these conferences tutors were not only evaluating students' papers and discussing Criteria but they were also eliciting Criteria from students and encouraging student self-evaluation. Thus, students were achieving the goal of the sessions, learning to be more independent and self-sufficient as they judged their own work against an articulated ideal. Unsuccessful conferences were characterized by repeated student and tutor Requests for Explanation indicating, perhaps, that students were lost, not understanding what was going on, confused about the content of the paper and about the writing process, and that teachers were also confused.

I was surprised, however, when we looked at the results of our study in reference to our first hypothesis. This hypothesis, that students and teachers would consider most successful those conferences in which students participated most actively (talked more than they did in less successful conferences), was not supported by the data. In fact, it seemed that the amount of student talk compared to teacher talk made no difference. We found that the group of high-rated conferences included both the conference with the highest amount of student talk and the one with the lowest amount of student talk. Furthermore, when we looked at the data in aggregate, we found that student utterances averaged 32.8 percent (SD=9.3) of total utterances in the high-rated conferences and 33.6 percent (SD=5.2) in the low-rated conferences (F[1,8]=0.03,ns).

So I began to look for an explanation. Teachers talked more than students in all the conferences in this study, but students—and teachers—rated some conferences highly, and the highly rated conferences had the same proportion of teacher-student talk as the low-rated ones. The amount of teacher talk clearly did not account for the differences between high- and low-rated conferences. So, what did?

The answer lay in the validation of our second hypothesis—what is crucial is not who talks more but what the agenda is (what they talk about)—and in a factor we did not anticipate: who owns the agenda. As noted above, a successful agenda focuses on Criteria and Evaluations, but what about this second factor, the issue of ownership?

We might ask the following questions of a writing conference. Is the subject of discussion the student's agenda—what is on the student's mind—or is it the teacher's agenda—what the teacher wants to talk about? In this study, if the conference was highly rated, the agenda was likely to be the student's; if it was not, we were likely to see a tutor spotlighting him or herself. Thus, the issue of teacher dominance needs to be discussed in terms of who owns the agenda rather than in terms of who is talking and how much. Teacher talk and teacher dominance are not problems if the teacher is talking about what concerns the student, about what is on the student's mind.

For illustration, let us look at the dialogue in an actual writing conference, one which was highly rated by both student and tutor. In this first instance from our study, that of Tutor C and his student, it is significant that the student initiates discussion of the agenda, naming the topics she wants covered and thus signaling her ownership of the agenda for the conference. It is equally significant that her experienced tutor creates a setting in which she can do so and, if fact, specifically invites her to name the agenda for their discussion.

When we first looked at the results of our study, Tutor C's conference was the biggest surprise. Because we assumed that tutor dominance, in the form of too much teacher talk, would cause problems in the writing conferences (and, consequently, low ratings), we were confused when we saw that both student and tutor in Tutor C's conference rated the session highly. Why? Tutor C thoroughly dominates the talk in this session, at one point talking for almost five minutes, the longest uninterrupted speech in any of the conferences taped for the study.

What stands out in this session is the tutor's behavior in terms of ownership of the agenda. While Tutor C talks far more than his student, he begins the session by asking her to set the agenda for their discussion of her paper and then he uses her agenda to frame his remarks.

The example below illustrates this point. It also illustrates the other major finding in our study: in the best conferences the agenda is evaluation, by both tutors and students, of student's work. This conference is characterized by a high number of Evaluations and Criteria. In the passage below, note how Tutor C allows the student to have her say, but also reflects her evaluation back to her. At the very beginning, he asks his student to evaluate her paper and say what is good and bad about it. Then, throughout the session, he uses her remarks as a framework for his evaluation. In other words, the tutor here evaluates his student's paper extensively, but he allows the student to set the agenda for his copious commentary.

T: I probably might start by having you tell me a little bit about how this went for you while you were writing it and how you felt about it when it was done.

S: Well, um, I like my ideas . . . I started writing about something more like what we talked about in class and I got off on a bit different subject, as you can tell, which I was a lot more interested in than what we were doing, so I was more excited to write about that, and I had a few ideas on the subject. I had trouble fitting it into categories, so I was a little concerned about the coherence as a whole.

T: What would you say worked out the best for you in writing the paper? What do you remember as being the best thing about it?

S: The ideas, probably.

T: Good. I think you're right. That's exactly what the strength of the paper is. What are you least satisfied with? What would you like to have worked on more?

S: I didn't think my diction, my sentences, were that good, cuz I had time to work on it, but not time to really find . . .

T: To polish it, to the stage of . . . Well, I would agree with your evaluation completely. I would say that absolutely the strength of the paper is your ideas and, in fact, even compared with the other papers in the class, it really stands out for the approach you took to the play, and I was really pleased about that. And I would agree that the weakness in the paper is the level of diction and a little bit of the phrasing, some of these sentences. Let's have a look at it.

S: OK.

Throughout this session, the tutor uses this framework for his evaluation: praise for the ideas and criticism of the diction. After issuing the invitation above, "Let's have a look," the tutor launches into his monologue. His extended evaluation (of 33 utterances, 11 are Evaluations and 6 are Criteria) follows the pattern established by the student's self-evaluation:

T: And I thought that kind of step-by step progress from the starting point of the theme, things not always being what they appear to be, and then moving into, I think, a deeper level, that's what we were talking about the week before last when I was talking about going beyond the obvious level of description and trying to analyze, and I thought you did a good job of that in this paper. My only comment on style in the first paragraph would be that the last three sentences come across so much as statements and assertions that it's a little bit jerky, a little bit one, two, three . . . and it may be just a little bit of connection or a few transitional phrases might make it a little bit smoother.

The tutor follows this pattern for each succeeding paragraph of the student's paper, holding up some aspect of the writing, praising the ideas, discussing them, and then gently criticizing and revising the diction. Although the student in this session is not speaking much, she is, in fact, participating; it is her evaluation that the tutor uses to inform and guide the discussion, giving her an opportunity to observe the evaluation process and to reflect on her work.

This writing conference beautifully illustrates the insight about teacher dominance of instructional talk: essentially, it does not matter how much a teacher talks compared to his or her student, or how many corrections and suggestions he or she makes, as long as the student remains in charge, in control of the topics of discussion (the agenda).[5]

One of the other tutors in our study, Tutor D, follows a plan not unlike Tutor C's. In his high-rated session, he also allows the student to take the lead, to set the agenda, for their discussion. The student in Tutor D's high-rated session reflects on his work, not so much through close examination of the text as through extensive commentaries on the subject matter. Here it is the student—not the tutor—who consistently displays his expertise. In the following example the tutor explicitly defers to the student's expert knowledge.

T: I'm wondering whether you might want to say 'Wage and price controls apply to the oligopolistic elements within our society' and then *parens* 'free motor companies build automobiles, utility companies control electrical prices'—that would give enough to . . .

S: Unfortunately, the utility situation is almost monopolistic, because of AT&T's predominance [laughter]. Apparently, their assets and profits every year are like seven or eight times the next competitor.

T: Is that right?

S: Yeah, it's true.

T: I didn't know that, I didn't know that.

In interchanges like this, the student actively formulates what he knows about the subject matter in order to reflect on it; he discusses it on an equal basis with the tutor. But the tutor plays an important role, too. He provides a setting in which the student can flourish. And he stays a little in the background, encouraging the student and voicing his admiration of the student's knowledge and assertiveness. This is a successful collaboration, fostered by an expert teacher as well as a responsive student. Together they work to solve problems in the writing, a process that requires explicit comparisons between what the student knows and how he has expressed it.

Let us look at one more successful tutor and see how her approach is similar to that of Tutors C and D.

As in other high-rated sessions in this study, both Tutor A and her student focus on concerns of the student. The teacher encourages the student to express her concerns and then uses these concerns as a framework to get the student to participate actively in the evaluation of her paper. Tutor A and her student engage in significantly more evaluation and enunciation of Criteria than do their counterparts in the low-rated sessions. Even more important, perhaps, is the fact that Tutor A frequently requests her student to express her ideas about her work, state the criteria for good writing, and evaluate her work against these criteria.

The following exchange demonstrates how Tutor A uses frequent Requests for Criteria and Requests for Evaluation to focus the conversation on the student's work and ideas and to provide a framework for the student's evaluation of her work. (See Appendix II for the coding of this passage.)

T: First of all, let's look at the title and then let's look at the first paragraph. OK. First question is, what should be in a title?

S: Well, that was my joke, because remember we talked about [how] I'm saying 'On Lying to Patients' and then never talked about lying?

T: Yeah.

S: So, that's what I was doing. It's not a real clear title, I guess.

T: Well, now, why? You say it's not a clear title. Why is it not a clear title?

S: I don't say. . . [hesitates] I don't express my opinion in the title.

Here, the student evaluates her title ("It's not a real clear title"), and embedded in this evaluation is the criterion requested by the tutor ("What should be in a title?"), that a title should express an opinion, indicate a position on the paper's topic. Earlier, the student articulated yet another criterion for a good title: a good title should not mention a subject that is not addressed in the paper.

In the above instance, the student volunteers an evaluation without any explicit solicitation by the tutor, who quickly attends to the student's concern with a request for further elaboration. Whether she was following earlier patterns established with this tutor or picking up some non-verbal clues as to the tutor's opinion of the title is not of great importance; what matters is that this student gets an opportunity to help set the agenda, to evaluate her work and to articulate the basis for her evaluation.

In the conferences of Tutors C, D, and A focus is unquestionably on the student, the student's work, and the student's agenda, rather than on the tutor and his or her agenda. In the low-rated conferences in our study the opposite is true. The following example is illustrative. Here Tutor F shuts his student out by taking over the composing process completely, doing the student's thinking and writing for her. The student here is talking a good deal—the problems in this conference do not arise because the student is silent and the teacher is talking a lot—but she has had trouble writing her essay and she is not in control of the agenda in her writing conference. She feels she has little expertise in her subject matter; her tutor feels he has a good deal of expertise on her subject and he literally composes her paper for her, telling her exactly what to write and when.

He tells her, "Write this down." And then he begins composing her paper for her out loud, dictating to her as he goes. The student tries to interrupt him with a vaguely worded question, but he goes right on. In a moment of insight he says, "I shouldn't do this because I'm writing your paper for you. It's my own ideas. And I don't think you understand it even yet."

Below is an example of Tutor F's domination of the composing process and of his student's lack of understanding and participation. The tutor is composing out loud, and his student is struggling to understand and transcribe.

T: [Composing] ". . . In every scene there is some symbol or symbolic gesture."
S: Oh! Just what we wrote on.
T: Write this: "The unity of effect in this story insists or is made, is created . . ."
S: Wait, wait. "The unity of effect is shown in all the scenes by representing a symbol."
T: Good.
S: Oh, God, now I'm lost.

The tutor's evaluation ("Good") is revealing. He knows what he wants to say, but by no stretch of the imagination can the sentence transcribed by the student be called "good," in context or out. No wonder the student is lost: she has participated very little in formulation of ideas and sentences. Instead, she has acted as a vessel for the tutor's ideas and sentences, and an imperfect vessel at that, since what comes out is jumbled and fairly incoherent. Clearly, this student cannot be said to be in control of the agenda for her writing conference.

I began this paper by saying I was surprised by our study's results because I found, contrary to my expectations, that students and teachers did not rate more highly those conferences in which teachers listened more and talked less, conferences which teachers did not dominate. I have discussed in detail above the implications of our study concerning teacher talk, teacher dominance, and the importance of student ownership of the agenda of writing conferences. But what about placing our study's findings in the context of what other scholars and teachers have to say about teacher talk and teacher dominance? There are, I think, several points to consider.

First, as noted above, many scholars and practitioners tell writing teachers not to talk too much. Harris and Graves criticize teachers "who talk more than the writer does" (Harris 29). Florio-Ruane sees teacher dominance of instructional talk in conferences as a serious limitation of the conferencing method. She writes, "Teachers dominate instructional talk . . . they speak far more than students . . ." (5). Carnicelli says, "If the teacher does most or all of the talking, the student may simply sit there, politely confused" (117). And Murray writes, "The conference opens best when I am pleasant, friendly and silent. Pleasant and friendly is fairly easy for me; silent isn't so easy" (161).

But, to a large extent, this advice misses the point. What matters most is not who talks a lot but (1) what they talk about, what the agenda is. Successful conferences focus on Criteria and Evaluations, on evaluation of student work by both teacher and student—and, at least as important, (2) who owns the agenda. In successful conferences the student, not the teacher, owns the agenda and thus decides, in a fundamental way, what the talk in the conference will be about.

Many scholars and teachers see the importance of listening to the student rather than pushing ahead, ignoring the student, and taking over control of most of the activity in conference. Harris supports Graves when she chastises teachers who "ignore where the writer is in a draft, . . . meddle with the writer's topic, . . . ask questions they know the writer can't answer . . . [and] supply words and phrases for the writer to use" (29). Carnicelli is critical of a teacher who "didn't really listen to the student. . . [who] kept on pushing [an] idea until she ended up virtually forcing it on the student" (129). Ignoring what the student is actually saying, writes Carnicelli, "is one of the easiest mistakes to make in conference teaching—and also one of the most harmful" (118). Murray and Calkins agree. "Too often, as teachers," writes Calkins, in a line that might have been written by Florio-Ruane, "we hesitate to give away control" (*The Art* 119). Calkins cautions teachers to remember that "[I]t is not [your] piece of writing. It belongs to somebody else" (120).

The results of our discourse analysis study of writing conferences support this viewpoint. Teachers who take over in the writing conference, ignoring what students are trying to say and do and telling students what to write and how received low ratings on our study.

Again, however, this is only part of the story. What our study says is that it is not enough just to listen to students. Teachers need to go one step further. In addition to listening to what students say, teachers need to use student comments—to use a student's own agenda—to design curriculum and to create pedagogical strategies suited to that particular student.

Teachers need to teach in terms of student concerns. Only then will they truly be heard. Only then will their students learn. Because it is only then that students are truly listening, interested in the discussion, ready to learn—because it is their agenda, the topics are their topics, the concerns are their concerns, the answers are the answers to questions they themselves are asking at this moment about their own writing.

In our study, Tutor C, who thoroughly dominates his conference in terms of how much he talks compared to his student, is an excellent example of a tutor who listens to his student and uses her agenda to design his curriculum. He asks for the student's agenda at the beginning of the writing conference and then uses her expressed concerns about her paper as well as her praise of it to create his pedagogical strategies for the rest of the session. His approach is highly successful. Tutors D and A in our study are successful with similar approaches, while Tutor F, who ignores his student's concerns and does her composing for her using ideas of his own, received low ratings.

Murray, Graves and Carnicelli recognize the need for teachers to let students set the agenda in a writing conference. Murray writes, "It is often best to read the paper in conference after the student has made the diagnosis on the paper . . . . Then the teacher is reading with the writer's vision of the paper in mind" and can "overlook those twenty or thirty problems that are always present in most drafts, and concentrate on the place where the student is ready to learn . . . . Most of the time the student will identify a key problem . . ." (171). This way "the student participates in the decision about what has to be learned" (152). Graves urges teachers to "elicit information from [students] rather than [issue] directives about errors on their papers" ("Let's Get Rid" 49). In fact, in *A Researcher Learns to Write*, he titles an article on writing at the primary school level "Let Children Show Us How to Help Them Write." Carnicelli agrees with this approach, saying, "Students come to conference with an enormous amount of information about their papers. They know . . . what they were trying to accomplish in the paper" (107). He urges teachers to "try to make the student's response, not their own, the focus of the conference" (109).

Our study results indicate that Murray, Graves and Carnicelli are exactly right as far as they go—in saying we need to let students set the agenda—but that they do not sufficiently emphasize the other half of the process: once the agenda is set, teachers should not hesitate to rely on their own greater knowledge and expertise to address the problems that confront their students. Contrary to Graves's assertion, once the agenda is set, teachers should be active—not just reactive—helpers, all the while keeping their ears open to their students' concerns.

Taylor and Florio-Ruane miss this important point when they argue that the "teacher's inherent authority during writing conferences" causes "problems" (Taylor 1), and that "the limitations of the conference arise perhaps because much of the talk is instructional, that is, geared toward an expert/novice distinction between teacher and student" (Florio-Ruane 1). In our study we did not find the expert/novice distinction or the teacher's inherent authority to be a problem. In fact, we found it to be appropriate for much of the talk in a conference to be instructional, for the teacher to bring his or her own expertise to bear—as long as the teacher is doing so in an area the student has indicated is part of his or her agenda. Witness again the success of Tutors C, D and A who listen to student concerns and devise instructional strategies around them and the problems of Tutor F who fails to listen and to follow his student's agenda.

Taylor minimizes the critical importance of the teacher's expertise in composition and pedagogy when he suggests that a writing instructor can surmount "problems caused by a teacher's inherent authority during writing conferences" by adopting a counselor's approach and by creating an atmosphere of warmth, acceptance and trust; Taylor asserts that warmth, acceptance and trust are "more important to the writing conference than specific teaching techniques" (1). Warmth and acceptance matter, of course. But successful teachers are not just sympathetic listeners. And their specific teaching techniques do matter: a successful teacher addresses a student's concerns while at the same time providing direction for the conference and delivering instruction appropriate to the moment.

In conclusion, this re-examination of our study gives us new insights on the existing scholarship. First, this study suggests that teacher dominance, if defined as a lot of teacher talk compared to student talk, is not, by itself, a problem in writing conferences.[6] Second, the amount of teacher talk—great or small—becomes a problem under only one condition: when the student is not allowed to be in control. Third, student control is defined in terms of ownership of the agenda. In successful conferences the student owns the agenda and gets to decide on the major topics of discussion. Fourth, this study suggests that teachers need to do more than listen to a student's concerns. They need to use the student's agenda to guide and inform them as they bring their own expertise to bear in the delivery of instruction. Finally, the present study not only debunks the myth of talkative teachers as harmful per se and defines respective roles of teachers and students in the dialogue of successful conferences, it provides empirical evidence to support these claims.

The message to all of us who teach is this: we should listen to our students, and then use what they have to say about what concerns them together with our expertise to create appropriate pedagogical strategies for our writing conferences.

NOTES

[1] Knapp, for example, writes that he spends no more time on evaluation using fifteen-minute conferences than he used to spend at home grading papers.

[2] In a 1976 study, Budz and Grabar found that classroom students outperformed tutorial students; other scholars, however, dispute their findings. Budz and Grabar's research design and reporting of statistical results are, according to Freedman and Nold, ". . . so flawed as to make [their] conclusions invalid" (428). On a separate self-report evaluation instrument Budz and Grabar found that tutorial students ". . . were unanimously favorable in their evaluation of [their] individualized instruction" (655). Tomlinson, in

comparing tutorial and classroom groups, also found that attitudes towards writing instruction were more favorable among tutorial students.

[3] Florio-Ruane clearly sees teacher dominance of instructional talk in the writing conference as undesirable; she suggests that an answer to the problem can be found in research on the learning of oral language at home. She supports Bruner when he argues that successful language learning occurs in the home when the mother of the young child sees her "role as supporting the child in achieving an intended outcome, entering only to assist, reciprocate, or 'scaffold' the interaction" (12).

[4] The rating form we used in this study asked participants to consider the work done in the conference, that is, talk about organization, mechanics, style, and content. After we received all the "graded" tapes, we divided them into three groups. There were five tapes which both student and teacher rated 5 (excellent); seven tapes which only one participant rated 5; and five others, that is, tapes of sessions which both teacher and student felt were unsatisfactory in some way. The mean rating in this last group was 3.2 for students and 2.8 for teachers. In this study we analyzed only the five tapes in group one and five in group three. We did not use the seven tapes in group two because they did not represent a consensus of opinion on the part of the teacher and the student about the quality of a particular conference. Except for this disagreement between the two participants in their ratings of conferences, the seven conferences we eliminated were similar to the ten we chose to study. The procedures and materials used in all 17 conferences were the same, the objective of improving the student's own paper was the same, and the topics of student writing were similar. In three instances, a conference we eliminated involved the same teacher as a conference we chose to study, and, in one instance, a conference we eliminated involved the same student as one we chose. Three of the students in the ten conferences we chose to study were foreign students and three of the students in the seven conferences we eliminated were also foreign students.

Thus, the final sample for the study included ten students enrolled in writing courses at either Stanford University or California State University, Hayward, and eight instructors who were teaching those courses. This sample contained teachers and students with very different characteristics so that we were able to see if our hypotheses about successful writing conferences held true even when the characteristics of the students and teachers varied.

[5] In this example the teacher agrees with the student's analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of her paper. While gratifying, this is perhaps not surprising, because in the classroom three times each week this teacher is engaging these students both individually and in small groups in a process much like the one we see here: identification and analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the writing in individual student papers. Thus, there is a model, both in the classroom and in earlier writing conferences, for the kind of interaction between teacher and student that we see here. Of course, at times the student sets an agenda not entirely appropriate or not complete and, in these cases, the tutor is responsible in conference to nudge the student gently back on track, making suggestions or corrections but always saying

only as much as necessary and then waiting, providing an opportunity for the student to take the lead as soon as he or she is willing and able.

[6] This study did not happen to include any conferences in which students did most of the talking. While one would expect such conferences to be relatively rare, it would be interesting to see the results of a study similar to this which did include them, to see if the conclusions of the present study would hold—as we would anticipate—under these conditions.

Appendix I: The Coding Categories

1. Preliminaries: Conversation not directly related to the task at hand. Social conversation, conventions ("Hi, how are you?"), business ("Did you hand in the essay we looked at last week?").
2. Markers: Usually, but not always, encouragers. These utterances are likely to be very short, shorter than the utterances in the other eight categories. Often they are only a word or two ("Well"; "um"; "uh-huh"; "good"; "OK"; "right") used by the student or the teacher to signal understanding, agreement, or sympathy. A marker may (1) focus one's attention, (2) encourage the hearer to continue in the vein in which he/she is going, (3) indicate that the speaker is listening to and/or accepting what the other person is saying.
3. Explanations: Giving or requesting new information about the writing task (process) and/or the content of the paper that the student and teacher are examining during the writing conference.
4. Digressions: Conversation which is off the subject; comments which are not directly related to the task at hand, that is, to the composing process or to the content of the paper (and which do not fit into category one).
5. Procedures: Focusing attention on the mechanics and logistics of the task at hand, announcing the plan, the procedure. ("Let's begin by looking at paragraph one"; "What, exactly, did the assignment ask you to do?"; "Please read your paper to me.")
6. Criteria: Articulating a general theoretical model of good writing; setting up a framework of general principles against which the teacher can invite the student to participate in evaluating his or her own prose; making explicit what is required or expected for success in writing in the abstract, e.g., in a model title, thesis, sentence, paragraph. (Question; "What should be in a title?" Answer: "A title is supposed to arouse your interest and indicate where the paper is going.")
7. Evaluations: Judging the degree of success of this piece of writing. ("This is nicely done"; "Why is this not a clear title?")
8. Revision: Rewriting; revising (during the conference) the text the student has written.
9. Test Questions: Unlike the other categories, this is a "teacher only" category. In these instances, the teacher has something in mind, usually a word or phrase to be used in composing or revising, and wants the student to guess what he/she is thinking. There is only one "right answer." This is a simple question and answer situation, narrow in scope. It is not an effort by teacher and student to build a model against

which they can later evaluate the paper at hand. Example:

T: OK, what do they call the thing the ball comes in?
S: A can.
T: It's a can, but what's a general word for it?
[Note: The student has an answer, but it isn't the answer the teacher is looking for.]
S: What's a general word for everything?
T: For anything they put into something else; what's a general word for this?
S: Packaging?
T: Right, packaging, great.

Appendix II: Sample of a Coded Transcript, Tutor A

pro.	T:	First of all, let's look at the title.
pro.	T:	And then let's look at the first paragraph.
mark.	T:	OK.
req. crit.	T:	First question is, what should be in a title?
crit.	S:	Well, that was my joke, because remember we talked about [how] I'm saying "On Lying to Patients" and then I never talked about lying?
mark.	T:	Yeah.
ev.	S:	So that's what I was doing.
ev.	S:	It's not a real clear title, I guess.
req. ev.	T:	Well, now, why?
mark.	T:	You say it's not a clear title.
req. ev.	T:	Why is it not a clear title?
ev.	S:	I don't say...[hesitates] I don't express my opinion in the title.

Key:	T:	Tutor
	S:	Student
	crit.:	Criteria
	ev.:	Evaluation
	mark..:	Marker
	pro.:	Procedure
	req.:	Request (e.g. request criteria, request evaluation)

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