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Talk to Text

George Gallagher

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by

George Gallagher

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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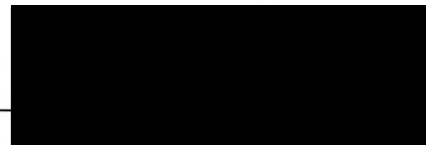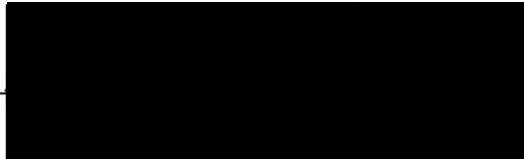In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

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College of Humanities and Social Sciences   Thesis Committee:

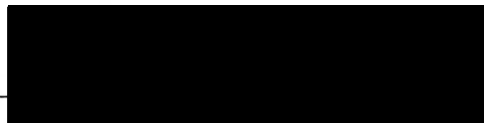English Department ___███████████████████___

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to both examine and embrace the lack of concrete language available regarding what actually happens with students during face-to-face conversations about their writing. The context of "conversations" covers a broad spectrum of participants – teacher and student, student and student, student and tutor, as well as student with self – and domains – cognitive, affective, psychological and creative – that are particularly vexing to capture in words. Attempts by authors to weave together such disparate, dynamic forces breed tension. Such tension is good, and, quite often, purposeful. My research seeks to explore how such constructive tension is created in particular by Donald Murray and Peter Elbow, and how each author uses language to challenge the reader to experience a similar type of tension that one or both participants feels during the "conversations" concerning student texts. Furthermore, by closely reading each author's work through Jacque Derrida's lens of *Differance* – a theory that presumes a perpetual gap between author's word and reader's understanding – I seek to argue how the reader's interpretive tension experientially brings her uniquely inside the uncertain substance of the "conversation" itself.

Furthermore, I seek to reposition *Differance* as a hermeneutic – an essential skill of talk - for the teacher or tutor to effectively use in speaking with students about their work. By embracing the inherent mutability of ideas, texts, and meaning, and talking through such instability with students, I propose a more particular kind of talk that empowers student's metalinguistic skills. Rather than contemplating misunderstandings between participants in "conversations" as stylistic failures, my thesis considers Derrida's theory as a pedagogy that can stimulate awareness in students as to how such instability creates rhetorical possibilities. Such heightened talk promotes enduring metalinguistic and metacognitive consciousness in the student, which endures well beyond the "conversation" itself.

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Talk To Text

In his work *Preparing to Teach Writing: Research, Theory, and Practice,* James

D. Williams asserts that "Conferences with students represent the single most effective

tool available to writing teachers" (149). However, other than to delimit the approximate

time frame of the questions (anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes per student, depending on

need), and provide a checklist of questions to ask (while keeping in mind that students

should do most of the talking), Williams' articulation of the writing conference (149-50)

is remarkably thin. Donald Murray, the Godfather of directed listening and a student-

centered, conversational ethos, describes the fruits of his interpersonal labor in "The

Listening Eye" by concluding that student writers have "taken my conferences away from

me" (16). Peter Elbow extensively categorizes particular types of peer-to-peer

interactions that students can engage to effectively help one another; however, in

articulating the dynamism of the exchange itself, his articulation takes a turn towards the

metaphysical, if not the downright elliptical: "When you share your writing, you need to

give your listeners permission to interrupt and tell you if they cannot comfortably hear

and understand your words – permission to make you *give* your words" (23). These

seminal contributors to the larger conversation *about* conversation – Murray and Elbow

in particular - affirm the practice of the writing conference, but struggle to pin down,

precisely, what it looks like. Why?

Sometimes words fail us. However meticulously sculpted, refined, and varnished, they can wade just so far into immersive experiential waters before they bloat, combust, and dissipate. Yet, at the same time, words are all we have; they escort us from vague uncertain shadows of sentience to clearer lines and shapes of reason. The paradoxical push and pull of language – the suggestive ether that gathers when words both delimit the breadth of our experiences, yet serve to remind us, essentially, that there *is* something to delimit – lives in the language of those willing to articulate meaningful teacher to student interaction. It is something of a walking contradiction in that the *what* – the conference itself - is a universally agreed upon critical component, but the *how* – the efficacy and substance of the interaction - remains difficult to precisely sculpt into words. Most of the seminal scholarship concerning the *how* of the writing conference brings us close, almost adjacent, to the conference itself, but does not quite get us there. Perhaps, to a certain extent, that is the point. Perhaps these authors seek to provoke us, as readers, to challenge through their texts, our sense of what we know, what we *think* we know, and perhaps most importantly, what we *don't* know, to provoke in the reader a tension similar to the one student writers actually experience during the writing conference itself.

Such reasoning begs the question: do composition and rhetoric scholars purposefully seek to confuse us, to obfuscate, to – in essence – *not* make sense? Perhaps the most reasonable response is yes, but with a purpose. In essence, the experiential "sense" of the writing conference is that it should, prescriptively, *not* make sense. Most seminal articulation of the pedagogical dynamics of the teacher-student writing conference speaks in language that alludes, implies, and approximates, but does not

exactly, precisely, describe. Perhaps such linguistic suggestiveness is meant to create an interpretive tension in the reader, one that both cognitively challenges the reader's sense of language, while, at the same time affectively provokes the reader to work within similar tensions that actually transpire between teacher and student in the talk of the writing conference. In short, such authors want you to wrestle with the idea of what a writing conference is, much like both the student writer and teacher will wrestle with the emergent student text during the course of a writing conference. Texts that inhabit the space between understanding and *knowing* best apply to the literary theory of Deconstruction; in particular, the idea of Jacque Derrida's *Differance*. By examining seminal texts of Donald Murray and Peter Elbow through Derrida's lens of *Differance*, and, in particular exploring the "push and pull" of the rhetorical multiplicities of each author's work, I seek first to argue how such interpretive tension is *essential* to both theoretically articulating the cognitive and affective multiplicities at work during the writing conference. I further seek to argue how recognizing the tension of reading such texts can benefit the writing instructor to subsequently *use* that pressure as a hermeneutic to effectively procure more engaged, constructive, and authentic conversations with student writers. Finally, I seek to assert how such types of conversations transacted in different contexts – for Murray, in teacher to student conversations; for Elbow, in peer-to-peer conversations - will ultimately produce a fuller, deeper type of student "text" that connotes the process of how students think about how they write as much as it does craft the product of the words themselves. In other words, I seek to use the tension of *not knowing* – for both the teacher and the student – as embodied particularly in the scholarship of Donald Murray and Peter Elbow, and the dissemination of such tension

through the writing conference as a way for the student writer, in concert with a teacher,

tutor, or peer, to talk her way to a text.

Deconstruction seeks to articulate elements of language and self by examining the

gaps, fault lines, and inconsistencies of words and meaning. Noted and oft-quoted

Jacques Derrida, furthers the sensibility of Deconstructionism through his linguistic

theory of *Differance*. The term actually combines the French words for *defer*, or

postpone, and *difference* (Parker 95), a seemingly slight misspelling, but one designed to

connote Derrida's belief that the closest one comes to authentic communication resides

only in written language. "Communication" through the printed word rests on the

essential relationship between what linguist Ferdinand De Saussure originally termed the

"signified," or critical, intuitive "essence" of a word's meaning, and the "signifier," or the

"sound-image," or word, itself; the effective instrument of the meaning. Derrida's subtle

phonemic shift of his essential term illustrates the concept that meaning -- the cognitive

conceptualization of a term – is never stable in relationship to the word itself, or

equivalent to the linguistic instrument of its delivery. In *How To Interpret Literature:*

Critical Theory for Literature and Cultural Studies, James Parker clarifies Derrida's

shift, explaining, "In Derrida's lingo, the free-floating signifiers guarantee that there is

always an *absence* between the signifier and the signified" (95). Therefore, words, and

perhaps more importantly, their meaning, are inherently unstable, incoherent, and

fragmented. Parker furthers contextualizes Derrida's *Differance* as "the gunk in the

gears, the imperfection – the entropy or inefficiency – that inevitably interferes with any

system" (96).

In one interpretation, Derrida's lens is designed to illustrate breakdowns, flaws, and shortcomings concerning language and meaning, as well as the fundamental inefficacy of communication through the printed word. In another, it is an opportunity for the writer to play – to suggest, approximate, allude, and otherwise invite the reader to more cognitively and affectively interact and engage with the text's possible meanings. In other words, the writer aims to *provoke* the reader. By more closely filtering Murray and Elbow's scholarship through the lens of provocation – in embracing the purposeful complication of their words as an invitation to question what we know, and, perhaps as importantly, to validate what we don't know – we can alight upon *how* not knowing what a writing conference is, exactly, provides the paradoxical architecture as to what a writing conference *ought to be*, in the way of producing different kinds of conversation between teachers, tutors, and students. In applying Derrida's theory to Donald Murray and Peter Elbow aphoristic, axiomatic texts, I seek to transpose *Differance* and reposition it not only as an interpretive theory for reading their texts, but also an essential pedagogy for teacher-student talk.

Derrida's relationship with Writing Studies is not new. The interpretive, destabilizing multiplicities of *Differance,* and in particular, the profound sense of linguistic "play" offer a template of uniquely flexible thought which demands careful reading, sustained critical thought and purposeful articulation. However, the opportunities that *Differance* seems to offer have not necessarily translated in practice or application. In *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness,* Krista Ratcliffe cites Derrida's particular method of deconstruction that "champions writing as a trope that more accurately describes textuality, or how we use language and language uses us"

as a critical influence in devaluing the act of listening itself as a rhetoric (20). In "Inheriting Deconstruction: Rhetoric and Composition's Missed Encounter with Jacques Derrida," Brooke Rollins charts the influence of Derrida's deconstruction on scholarship in composition and rhetoric, particularly between 1985-89, because of deconstruction's "emphasis on rhetoriticity and the power of language" (14). However, much as his short-lived celebration by the "Hermeneutic Mafia" in the Yale School of Literature in the late 1970's, Derrida's deconstruction fell out of favor predominantly because "scholarship attempted to extract a generalizable method from Derrida's writings...composition, in short, used deconstruction as a type of judgment – as a method meant to refute socially oppressive educational practices – and deconstructive pedagogy thus became a version of programmatic politics or ideology critique" (Rollins 15). The indeterminacy residing at Derrida's theoretical core ultimately vexes those who attempt to apply such theory in broad strokes as a kind of pedagogy or teaching method. Perhaps, instead of delimiting Derrida's theory by selectively deploying it within a generalized educational context, or as an undergirding theory to challenge or dismantle ideologies, we ought to contemplate deconstruction and *Differance* as methods in and of themselves. Rollins recognizes this particular pedagogical opportunity in referencing the work of Atkins and Johnson in *Writing and Reading Differently,* who assert that "'Derrida himself has insisted that deconstruction *is* teaching as well as an interventionist strategy'" (Rollins 14); however, Derrida's theories usually take the form of an ideological crusade "figuring deconstruction as a method that could be used to refute oppressive institutional and pedagogical practices" (Rollins 22). Instead of contemplating how to make the theory come alive, perhaps the possibility is that Derrida's theory is *already* alive. In

contemplating its vitality as a hermeneutic or pedagogical method, *Differance* bequeaths a unique tension: how does one clearly articulate to anyone that all texts are unstable, without disintegrating into a worn, clichéd litany of ubiquitous, bumper sticker cop-outs affirming "everyone is different," and "question everything"? Furthermore, how does one embody and model the instability of such a method – *consistently* – in such a way that it "translates" to a student writer? The answer rests in the writing conference. Derrida's tension of not knowing, of searching for meaning and articulating the variegated possibilities of a text, as well as the requisite skill development associated with rhetorical "play," implicitly lend themselves to talk. It is precisely in both exploring and modeling Derrida's *Differance* –in looking closely at the "gunk in the gears" that gums up fluid ideation by specifically talking *through* that "gunk" – where the composition teacher can at once summon, develop, and authorize student ownership of her own writing. Before examining the texts that contemplate the complicated dynamism of the writing conference, it is important to understand composition and rhetoric's relationship to other fields that delve the cognitive and affective domains of the individual through talk, particularly the precariously experiential type of talk that, through tension, unlocks enduring understandings and developmental autonomy in its participants.

Lev Vygotsky is a significant contributor to the field of developmental psychology, particularly concerning a child's cognitive development, and, in particular, how relationships shape such development. To Vygotsky, cognitive growth is "inherently relational," dependent on frequent interpersonal interaction The growing mind "extends beyond the skin" and flourishes in what he calls the Zone of Proximal

Development, a "socially mediated space" defined by "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers," one formed "through relationships" (Goldstein 648-49). Such a model is a collaborative one, where the child works with an adult teacher or more experienced learner, and engages in establishing "a common ground of knowledge and skills...a common reference point" (649). In "Teacher Self-Identification in Culture from Vygotsky's Developmental Perspective," Elina N. Lempert Shepel characterizes Vygotsky's theory as a "possibility paradigm" of "theoretical thinking" that "observe(s) fundamental relationships within a system...Theoretical thinking is not a panacea, but a cultural means to create a context of development" (427). In one sense, the writing conference is both the literal and metaphorical zone of development, the literal space of talk, as well as the metaphorical context of the development of the child, or student's self- actualization – the ongoing "talk" between learner and adult that broaches the relational distance between the student's literacy and "sense" of her own ideas in relation to the more experienced adult's or model's fully-formed, realized literacy and "sense" of her ideas. The "cultural means" to create context is the uncertainty of *Differance;* the "common reference point" is the student text. The articulation between teacher and student takes forms of disconnect, further explication of meaning, and articulation of the gaps in understanding between both participants; as conversations develop, presumably, the element of the "play" of language, and its multiplicity of interpretive possibilities – become the substance of the discussion between the student writer and teacher. The "development" represents the degree to which the

student writer eventually embraces the recursive complexities of language and meaning, and, as a result, unlocks the potential of her own idiom, to more authoritatively, skillfully and purposefully craft her words.

Those who have broached the subject of the student-teacher writing conference echo Vygotsky's aims of fostering cognitive autonomy through affective talk. In "The Student-Centered Conference and Writing Process," Charles R. Duke states that the teacher should use the conference "to help the student reach the point where he feels comfortable talking about his writing" (45); in *A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition,* Donald Murray articulates a similar objective, when he states "The purpose of the conference should be to allow the student to make a tentative diagnosis of his own writing problem of that week and to prescribe a tentative treatment" (151). Therefore, the thrust, the objective of the cognitive conversation, rooted in a purposeful tension of cognitive dissonance, is to ultimately promote a kind of autonomy whereby the student writer effectively "shrinks" her zone of proximal development concerning her own writing in relationship to the teacher. The teacher, through talk, collaboratively engages, provokes, and cognitively promotes the skill of self-reflection concerning the student's own writing. In other words, the ultimate distance of the zone of proximal development, of the foundational component of social-constructivist thought, is to bring the student writer to the precipice of a self-actualization that writing is really a highly charged, highly engaged, kind of talk. So, what form might this "zone," and these conversations, take?

The idea of the writing conference's objective has its roots in Vygotsky's work; the pedagogy of the writing conference is indebted to Dr. Carl Rodgers, the godfather of

"Client Centered" Psychotherapy, where the fundamental assumption is that the client will lead herself to her cure. The role of the therapist is primarily to engage the client in a non-judgmental, non-evaluative manner. For a "Rogerian" practitioner, it is the *relationship*, specifically the *integrity* of the relationship (i.e., climate of trust), that ultimately helps to steer the patient towards wellness. (www.infed.org/thinkers/et-rogers.htm.) Maxine Hairston and Lisa Ede succinctly articulate critical principles connecting Rogerian therapy and teacher-student writing conferences in their articles "Carl Rogers's Alternative to Traditional Rhetoric," and "Is Rogerian Rhetoric Really Rogerian," respectively, by emphasizing the congruency of the teacher or "therapist" in the conversation, the use of non-evaluative language by the instructor, and the teacher's obligation to listen with acceptance and understanding (Rogers 373, Ede 44). Therefore, the efficacy of the conversation itself is rooted in a relative sense of ease of understanding between both participants. Therefore, the writing conference – theoretically – is a unique intersection of cognitive and affective domains. So, the inherent position that the writing instructor must implicitly embrace is rooted in multiplicity and complexity. She is expected to engage in cognitive development when not exactly a researcher; she is meant to interpersonally "heal" her students although she does not come from a medical background. The writing teacher can theoretically train, read, and embody these ideas, but in practice, does not actually execute the ideas of these disciplines precisely in the original way that they were intended. Instead, the writing teacher – in the space of a writing conference – is a unique hybrid of a character; her training is in language and text, but her charge, her pedagogy, takes its cues from disciplines designed to research, observe, and cure. Even such approximate language and

terms do not, precisely, synthesize what it is that the writing instructor *is,* or *does,* during the teacher-student writing conference. I propose that the very inexactness of the teacher's specific role promotes a unique characterization that the teacher can effectively reposition to maximize the productive tension of such uncertainty: the teacher as interloper. However, the connotation of interloper in the context of a writing conference has a particularly cosmopolitan shade. The teacher does not dissociate from one domain – the cognitive or the affective - at the expense of the other, but, instead, accumulates a resonant weight of thought and experience, both by reading texts and working with students. Such accumulative "weight" will further allow the teacher to use what she needs most expeditiously to successfully help bring the student to become her own kind of interloper of the world, one who accumulates thought, perspective, and deepened literacy by authentically "visiting" ideas, places, and domains of knowledge that she might not otherwise experience. A closer look at how of Donald Murray and Peter Elbow view conversation as the fulcrum to activate the particular cosmopolitan, interloping sensibility – and, in particular the respective *contexts* within which each author envisions such conversations transpiring – will further the idea of conversation's integral place in developing student writer's autonomy. For Murray, the context of conversation is in a uniquely deconstructed talk predicated on directed listening that "makes strange" the roles of teacher and student; for Elbow, the locus of context shifts entirely to students, or peers, whom he likes to classify as "real" readers who constructively promote the writer's development through particular types of talk.

Donald Murray: Subversive, Transformative Silences

In "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader," Donald Murray weaves together the cognitive, affective, and therapeutic strains of the writing conference, while practically channeling Derrida through paradoxical collisions of words and suggestive, metaphorical approximations of his role as instructor during the writing conference. Murray asserts that "In practice, the effective conference teacher does not deal in praise or criticism," but rather an "aggressive act" of listening (145). Here, Murray seems to almost subvert the architecture of commonly held notions as to what a writing instructor actually does; how can a teacher not praise *or* criticize? However, Murray is clearing the overgrown, mossy residue surrounding the conceit of the writing teacher as aesthete, as the end or ultimate arbiter of taste. The subtle, seemingly innocuous linguistic confusion of the writer's role in the conference implicitly shifts the focus *away* from the teacher's reactions and *towards* the words of the student writer herself, a shift that, upon deeper reflection, suggests an inherently transgressive approach towards conventional assumptions concerning student authorship and teacher evaluation. Murray's transgressive approach speaks to a larger cultural paradigm recognized by Krista Ratcliffe in *Rhetorical Listening*, one where speaking and listening have acquired specifically gendered connotations. Ratcliffe refers to the work of Debra Tannen, who articulates such gender distinctions: speaking is masculine and viewed positively; listening is feminine and viewed negatively (Ratcliffe 21). Furthermore, if listening as a type of rhetoric is employed by gender, the implicit connotation is distinctly different: for men, the connotation is competitive ("Do I win?"); for women, the connotation is nurturing ("Have I been helpful? Do you like me?"). Such gender distinctions lead

Ratcliffe to wonder "Why…cannot listening itself be revalued, even reengendered?" (21).

So, not only does Murray's juxtaposition of listening and aggression problematize and make strange the role of the writing teacher, but furthermore calls into question deeply embedded gender stereotypes regarding speaking and listening as it pertains to gender. Additionally, Murray is decentralizing the locus of control in the conference, implicitly demanding a cognitive growth from the student writer by departing from pedagogical certainty, shifting the notion of the teacher as the arbiter of veracity and meaning, and blurring the conception of what a writing teacher is actually supposed to know, say, and do in a conference. Reading Murray through the lens of *Differance* confuses a variety of roles: of male and female, teacher and student, and certainty and uncertainty; however, such close reading further illustrates the conference as a mutual kind of "interloping" for both participants. Murray paradoxically traverses the breadth of the students ideas by "aggressively" listening, thus giving authorial silence to the student writer; as such, in the act of explicating her thoughts to the writing instructor (Murray), the student is metaphorically "visiting" the terrain of her own thoughts in a more autonomous fashion than she is likely used to, one that, through silence, promotes a deepened sense of metacognition.

To Murray, the act of aggressively listening in the writing conference promotes a type of "retroactive understanding" for the student writer, one where the teacher models, and the student ultimately adopts a kind of "other self which ultimately produces the draft" (143) which is, in essence a "demanding teaching" that is "nothing less than the teaching of critical thinking" (145). In Murray's language, the echoes of Vygotsky resonate; the "other self" encompasses the "distance" the emergent learner broaches,

through talk, the development of a metacognitive sensibility that moves further from reliance on the writing teacher's talk as a type of "truth," and closer to recognizing and ultimately modeling, he proximal *type* of talk, and thinking, the teacher demonstrates, as types of "possibilities." Additionally, when Murray explains *how* his aggressive listening will substantively manifest in student interactions, he turns cryptically Rogerian, indicating "I will always attempt to underteach so that they can overlearn" so that students will "write when I'm not there" (143-44). Furthermore, the promotion of the "other self" is predicated on an often "stupendous act of faith" (147), or the Rogerian conceit of *trust,* rooted solely in previous conferences that the instructor completed with former students who have different needs than the ones she now faces.

Murray's suggestive language brings us tantalizingly close to what the actual shape of a writing conference would look like, but, ultimately, his only apparent concrete suggestions involve having students speak first, and keeping such conferences "short and frequent" (146). Again, even under the guise of a prescriptive suggestion (How does one define short? How does the writing instructor quantify "frequent" in a classroom of disparate learners with a host of particular needs?), Murray is complicating the idea of the teacher-student relationship, and linguistically calling into question the veracity of traditional writing and teaching methodology.

In *Writing and Difference,* Jacque Derrida asserts that "Metaphor is never innocent" (17). In "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference," Donald Murray does not only craft a metaphor to reconstitute and deconstruct the writing instructor's role in the conference, but he goes so far as to touch the third rail of figurative language by constructing the role of the writing teacher through a mixed

metaphor. Murray's metaphor – his "learning, listening eye" which necessitates his ability to "wait" and "fight the tendency to think I know the subject I teach" (18), is manifest through careful awareness of body language and word choice, an effective kind of "slowing down" of the pedagogical process, shrouded in an otherwise humanistic attentiveness, to effectively model for the student the critical thinking process of a writer – through his attentiveness, to empower students with the confidence to develop, craft, and refine their own pieces, in their own way. In his complication of metaphor, a purposeful shift of language, Murray is confusing the metaphor (thus invoking Derrida's sense of play) to articulate the psychological and cognitive threads of his role during the writing conference; in addition, he is paradoxically attempting to clarify by linguistically complicating our traditional notions of basic sensory detail. His mixed metaphor also accentuates a very deconstructionist conceit: that his summative conclusions concerning the writing conference are ones, ultimately, of uncertainty. Through developing his "listening eye," Murray concludes, "I realize I not only teach the writing process, but follow it in my conferences" (17). Here, the simple connotation of the word "follow" augments and clarifies the mixed metaphor of the writing conference; at once the word suggests an adherence, a procedural through-line, but, given Murray's playfully subversive tendencies, we can also infer an implied sense of chase, a just-out-of-reach trailing of the creative process, one that lives with dynamism of the writing conference, and is close to impossible to put into words. The "listening eye" – the mixed metaphor that challenges our traditionally-held notions concerning figurative language, as the virtually ineffable skill that each writer, individually and subjectively, hones when meaningfully engaging the text of their own ideas through conversation – simultaneously

destabilizes the role of the teacher and privileges the role of the student writer's ideas as text.

Furthermore, Murray's title is an allusion to perhaps the first mixed metaphor in the history of written language: the "mind's eye" of Socrates, articulated by Plato in "The Allegory of the Cave," arguably one of, if not the most, subversive texts crafted concerning the allegorical enslavement of man. As Plato transcribes Socrates' position that "bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds…either from coming out of the light or going into the light, which is true of the mind's eye quite as much of the bodily eye" (472) which amplifies the sensory clarity (or lack thereof) when an individual is held prisoner by the "darkness" of institutional dogma, culture, or custom. Murray's extension of and slight repositioning of Plato's metaphor, shifting its context from visual to aural, implicitly castigates the "deafness" of traditional writing instruction, and, in particular, the role of the teacher, in recognizing and cultivating authentic student "voice." Murray's "play" with metaphor and sensory detail – as well as the nature of rhetoric - contiguously illustrates both his tacit disdain for traditionally didactic, top-down writing instruction (which most often takes the form of editing or shaming the student concerning her implicit lack of conventions of usage), as well as his advocacy for using the writing conference – and its process of interaction as a strange, unfamiliar type of *text* – to further challenge our sense of what student writing *should* be, and recognize, paradoxically, what it *can* be.

Furthermore, we can get *close* to the ideas of Murray's conference, but the actual language he chooses is suggestive, idiomatic, and figurative. Negotiating the particulars of "underteaching" teachers and "overlearning" students who effectively write away their

teachers for the substitute of a shadow figure necessitates epistemological shifts of language, convention, and student-teacher hierarchy. In essence, he is proving Derrida's conceptualization of *Differance* by making us, as the reader, metaphorically share the seat of the student he meets with, awkwardly questioning our own abilities to parse particulars while recognizing the spectrum of possibilities within the interpretation of said particulars. We know that Murray's "aggressive listening" promotes such paradoxical assertions as "I hear voices from my students that they never heard from themselves. I find they are authorities on subjects they think ordinary…they follow language to see where it will lead them, and I follow them following their language" (16). We, as readers, are parsing both the literal and metaphorical strains of "hearing" "listening" and "following" at once. We are trying to visualize the multisensory epiphany, the transformational moment in the context of the conversation, where the student actually "hears" her words or "follows" (with Murray "following" as well) the language of her own thoughts, *in addition to* processing an extended metaphor of how conversation fundamentally reconstitutes and changes our perceptions, intuitions, and understandings. But, the truth is simple: we can't. However, for lack of a better phrase, it *feels like* we do. We can visualize and approximate, but, as readers, in this moment, it is not possible to actually, authoritatively *know*. So as Derrida's *Differance* insists on "the gap that separates meaning from ever settling into something stable" (Parker 94), Murray's texts concerning the writing conference's shape and scope rhetorically, metaphorically propound that an essential type of *instability* are the conference's only stability. If we are to engage in meaningful interactions with students, like to like, person to person, interactions that resonate with Rogerian veracity but do not precisely settle on one

particular paradigm within one narrow pedagogical approach – if our best articulation is a linguistically suggestive approximation - we are likely doing it right. Murray is asking the reader to "follow" his language just as he "follows" his students' conversations as they work through their ideas during a writing conference. Murray is next to us – not leading the way – gently escorting us from what we think constitutes sound, interactive pedagogy, away from the dancing shadows on the wall, towards the light of our own, intuitive, complicated, and subjective truth.

As readers, Murray calls us to thoughtfully tune our own "listening eye" towards his paradoxical idiom. He does not instruct us to arrive at one conclusive meaning, but instead, provokes us towards the nuanced interpretive possibilities of his text, and, by extension, the complicated experience of the teacher-student writing conference itself. He calls us to realize that we don't know what we think we know; in effect, Murray leads us to a similar "listening" space – as readers – that his students occupy when they are working through their own thoughts in his presence. In effect, we are interpretive interlopers breaking down and building up our sense of what is through Murray's words in much the same way that the student "follows language" of newer, richer, more emergent thought during conversation. All participants in Murray's text – the reader, the teacher, and the student - engage in a transformative act of *listening*. As *listeners*, we participate in a complicated, interpersonal reframing of boundaries, roles, and expectations. By listening, we change.

Sherry Turkle explores the transformative nature of listening, as well as its crucial connection to empathy, extensively in *Reclaiming Conversation*. Turkle contemplates

the words of Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, concerning the

connection between listening and empathy:

> For Williams, the empathetic relationship does not begin with 'I know
>
> how you feel.' It begins with the realization that you *don't* know how
>
> another feels. In that ignorance, you begin with an offer of conversation:
>
> 'Tell me how you feel.' Empathy, for Williams, is an offer of
>
> accompaniment and commitment. And making the offer changes you.
>
> When you have a growing awareness of how much you don't know about
>
> someone else, you begin to understand how much you don't know about
>
> yourself. You learn… 'A more demanding kind of attention. You learn
>
> patience and a new skill and habit of perspective.' (172)

Interestingly, we can hear the echoes of Murray's "aggressive listening" in

Williams' penultimate sentence. In fact, Murray articulates the conditional shift of the

writing classroom through listening when he states that his faith in the "other self"

summoned through the writing conference creates an "enormous pressure" on the student.

However, the pressure is borne in the transformative space of empathy, a space where

"the teacher insists that the student knows the subject and the writing process that

produced the draft better than the teacher" (145). The uniquely shifted "pressure" in the

paradigm created by writer-as-expert is a positive result of shared accountability and

mutually raised expectations: the teacher has relinquished his presupposed authorial

expertise as teacher; the student has accumulated greater autonomy in "hearing" the

metacognitive call of her "other self."

Lisa Blankenship furthers Turkle's precipice of empathy and change, propounding that empathy is an emerging rhetoric in and of itself. In "Rhetorical Empathy in Lance Black's *8: A Play on (Marriage) Words*," she characterizes Rhetorical empathy as "a recursive process that may involve both cognition (conscious choice) and affect (which may be unconscious but is constructed by culture nonetheless)" (2). Therefore, the tension of *not knowing, but wanting to,* is in and of itself a transformative moment, a potential mode of discourse that can only be borne of tension and discrepancy in understanding. It is an awareness of a conundrum. Murray's contextual "pressure" residing in the teacher-student interaction stems from what each side, paradoxically, does *not* know, but, as an inheritor of the context of the Rogerian sense of authenticity and trust, rhetorically seeks to. Therefore, Derrida's *Differance* becomes a mutually empowering heuristic – a habitually humble pedagogical exercise grounded in the Rogerian context of trust, made manifest in a truthfulness concerning each participant's ability to actually know – or perhaps as importantly, do not know, but *want to* - that changes how students write and teachers read, interestingly, through how they speak to each other.

Listening is a signpost towards empathy. Empathy is arguably the most paradoxical act – to attempt to feel what someone else feels – that one can undertake. Yet, it is crucial to each of us, repeatedly, virtually every day. Empathy resides in Derrida's gap of instability and misunderstanding; if meanings are bones, empathy is the connective tissue holding the skeletal frame together. Yet its very existence is perilously Sisyphean, logically, as an endeavor. Perhaps empathy necessitates a fundamental deconstruction – a humanistic acknowledgment that sometimes, some things just don't

make sense to us. When constructively offered, such empathy – a fundamental willingness to recognize, acknowledge, and verbalize that I do not understand you, but *want to* - alters the landscape of most, if not all, interactions. Murray's work concerning the writing conference and, in particular, the effect on the reader – brings us to the precipice of such experiential, transformative empathy by destabilizing our fundamental sense of "what is" on a variety of levels, in a multiplicity of contexts.

Derrida's *Differance*, in text, rest in the "presence of absence" of understanding. However, the presence of such absence – the act of articulating that one does not understand – demonstrates empathy. However, what is the litmus test for empathy? What does the actively engaged humanistic endeavor to attempt to understand the feelings of another actually, tangibly look like?

Conversations – authentic, engaged interactions that organically transform its participants – cannot be scripted. They evolve, sometimes slowly, often hesitantly, and virtually exclusively to the pace and rhythm of those involved. Murray likens these conversations to a boxing match, identifying himself as a "counterpuncher" who circles his students, "waiting, trying to shut up – it isn't easy – trying not to interfere with their learning" (16). While potentially transformative, conversations are rarely fluid; in fact, if empathetically invested listening were characterized by sounds, they would likely take the form of syncopated rhythms. However, Sherry Turkle accentuates the importance of such rhythms when she stresses "Conversation, like life, has silences and long boring bits. This bears repeating: It is often in the moments when we stumble and hesitate and fall silent that we reveal ourselves to each other" (323). Sometimes, stammering words and speech patterns elucidate; sometimes, silence speaks.

Cheryl Glenn further destabilizes the concept of language and meaning by extending the concept to incorporate the space *between* sound utterances – the movement between silence and speech. In *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence,* Glenn extends the concept of meaning to the presence of silence, when she asserts "Speech often fails us, though, and silence rarely does…it is the only phenomenon that is always at our disposal" (4-5). Therefore, Murray's "aggressive listening," is not only, as Tannen might assert "reengendering" the act of listening as a rhetoric, the paradoxical presence of his silence is in and of itself a kind of speech. Murray's listening implicitly "speaks" to the student writer, furthering the Rogerian sense of trust, implying that her words in the present conversation are, in effect, the "text" both participants are trying to disseminate – Murray listening "aggressively" to the student participant, and the student acclimating herself to the particular "sound" of an attentive audience. Such powerful rhetorical silence cultivates a higher degree of veracity that inspires greater cognitive risk-taking on the part of *both* participants. The interplay between teacher and student, the cadence of a rhetorically rich conversation can include deep, meaningful pauses – what we like to culturally classify as "comfortable silence" – as much as it does speech. Perhaps this particular sound, this alternative rhetoric at work is greatest evidence of Murray's assertion that this particular kind of interaction "is nothing less than the teaching of critical thinking" (146). Silence reveals the sound of thought.

Lad Tobin furthers complicates Murray's reasoning by – not surprisingly – complicating what types of "conversations" the teacher has with her own unconscious thoughts in examining student texts. In his essay "Replacing the Carrot with The Couch," Tobin posits, "I am not suggesting that a writing teacher should play therapist; I

am suggesting that we should play patient" (51). In other words, Tobin extends Murray's metaphor of the "other self" to incorporate how the writing instructor's unconscious manifests itself through the psychological term "countertransference" to shape teacher responses to student texts. Such "countertransference emotions stirred up by the student or text" – associative reactions of past experiences of the writing instructor herself brought about by reading the text – can, to Tobin, serve as a "valuable tool" to help "monitor or police myself so that the unconscious will not get in the way of my objectivity and self-control" (50). Therefore, the teacher must be aware of not only the student's text and ideas, but be so present as to recognize whether her reactions and emotions are a product of the student "texts" of words and talk, or are the association such "texts" summon within the teacher's own subjective palette of prior experiences.

Whereas Murray's concept of teacher-student talk reimagines archetypal roles of teacher and student and the rhetorics of speaking and listening, Tobin's conversations complicate the boundaries of authority in the conversation itself, and blur the lines between the more public or "academic" conversation of the student's text and the "private" conversation concerning the lives of those involved in the discussion. Tobin acknowledges that "to accomplish this requires some letting go and a giving up of ego and control" (51), but can "help people make sense and gain control of their personal as well as private lives" (55). Again, we see recurrent strands of reciprocity and binaries in the language concerning the interactions between the writing instructor and the student; however, the nature of the discourse has shifted between the "personal" (presumably representative of the student's writing or scholarly expressed identity) and the "private" (presumably the intrapersonal, intimate identity that the student reserves and guards

closely, and is loath to express in almost any context). Tobin goes so far as to assert "I *want* to meddle with my students' lives and I *want* them to meddle with *mine*" to accentuate the therapeutic benefits of self-actualization that such highly risky, yet mutually constructive interactions have in encouraging the emerging texts of student ideas, in such a way that they "offer passionate testimony in defense of the personal and psychological – as well as the academic – benefits" of conversation (55). Tobin's teacher-student interactions are as much a catharsis as they are a pedagogical exercise.

While Tobin advocates the benefits of such highly charged interactions, his advocacy does not mean that such conversations are free from displacement, complication, and confrontation; after all, Murray doesn't characterize teacher-student writing conversations using pugilistic parlance because of their civility. To most students, the teacher is a messy amalgam of asymmetrical power and control; regardless of her character, the teacher carries the residual authoritative weight – for better or worse – of each predecessor who has assumed or exercised such power in relationship to said student. Additionally, while Tobin reminds us to strive for "neutrality" when speaking with student writers, teachers cannot help but characterize the student – again, for better or worse – into an associative "type" based on past experiences with other students that trigger countertransference emotions. Tobin is endorsing both participants to "meddle" as interlopers of not only academic, but even personal and psychological territory. However, just how much room does each participant have to "meddle"? To what extent would a student authentically feel empowered to essentially "meddle" with the writing instructor's personal life when her grade – and possibly her very future – hangs in the balance? While not a panacea, the architecture of the Rogerian model of talk, in

particular the binding element of *trust,* must resoundingly come into play to prevent the tension of such highly charged interactions from devolving into fully blown, toxically displaced arguments. In essence, Tobin articulates a pedagogical paradox that furthers Murray's conception of the "other self" through the teacher's "letting go" of attempting to control the – possibly confrontational – misunderstanding between teacher and student created by the phenomena of transference and countertransference. In essence, just as Murray allows the student to cognitively work through her thoughts without interrupting, so too must the writing instructor affectively "let go" of controlling highly charged transference emotions related to authority, grades, and teacher-student power dynamics. *Differance* as a hermeneutic requires a mutually cultivated cognitive and emotional vulnerability of each participant to essentially not know, but authentically *want to*; such conversations further a *productive* tension only when both participants fundamentally *trust* the veracity of the other's intentions, of the spirit with which such interactive interloping unfolds. Murray's conversations (in particular, his silences) cultivate ideas; Tobin's conversations (in particular, his vulnerabilities) cultivate trust. In both instances, such cultivation can take erratic, messy forms that require refinement, reshaping, and even, a willingness to stop and try again, when the Rogerian soil is more fertile.

Tobin articulates the through-line, the actual pedagogical result of Murray's summoning the "other self" of the student writer; it is a self that binds the cognitive and affective domains of the student, and allows such deepened conversation to take place without the teacher, in what Sherry Turkle characterizes as a "private mindspace" where the student writer is now both the architect and site manager on the landscape of her own emergent text of ideas (233). Derrida's *Differance* is manifest in the particular idiomatic

movements the teacher makes in her uniquely particular interactions with each student; because of the experiential nature of the transformative collision of these forces – the ineffability of universally describing what student self-actualization and autonomy *actually look like* in that precise moment of conversation - we do not holistically understand. But that's the point. Murray wants the reader to negotiate his text much in the same way that he would want a student to negotiate a conversation concerning her own text. He wants to provoke the reader towards an experiential collision with destabilized multiplicities of meaning, and leave her in continued conversation with her own thought.

In one sense, it is all well and good to advocate for the humanistic, psychological, and seemingly metaphysical benefits of an authentically engaged teacher-student interaction concerning text. In every way, we ought to aspire to communicate thoughtfully, in how we speak *as well as* how we listen, in what we say *as well as* what we don't say. However, what does that look like? How can a teacher, an instructor of writing parse these metaphors, paradoxes, and images in such a way to fashion them into a pedagogy – to have them function in a classroom, with a student, and produce writing that ultimately (and unfortunately) requires standards, measurements, and grades?

Perhaps one of the most critical skills writing teachers can promote through *Differance* is what Joseph Harris terms a "metatext" in his work *Rewriting: Ho to Do Things with Texts.* For Harris, a metatext is "text about text, writing about writing, moments when a writer calls attention to the terms he is using or the moves he is making (as I am doing now)" (90). The performative, experiential realization of the disparity between word and meaning in one sense does empower the writer, but additionally

obligates the writer to recognize the exigency of clarity; the "metatext" becomes the language to diffuse Murray's "enormous pressure" created through the experiential clarity of the multiplicities of meaning made available through the writing conference, or even the affective collision of transference and countertransference in Tobin's paradigm. The "metatext" is the mechanism that shrugs off the writer's sense of overwhelm concerning these multiplicities, and embraces Derrida's conceit of stylistic "play." Harris alludes to the transformative nature of a multiplicity of "texts" – as printed words, conversations, and combinations of internal monologues and cognitive processes as a simultaneous dialogue happening in this moment – as the "Plural I" of voices communicating to the writer during her process of fashioning a work in "The Plural Text/The Plural Self: Roland Barthes and William Coles". Harris states "a writer's text is always a patchwork of other texts. Writers define their voices not so much as against those of others as *through* them" (162). The emergent writer's text, according to Harris, evolves as writing, reading, or speaking; however, it is both never completely finished, and implicitly collaborative *and* accumulative, taking on the interpretive challenges of others' ideas, digesting them, and ultimately producing writing that reflects their cumulative rhetorical and stylistic weight.

To an extent, Harris linguistically encapsulates the end, the sensibility and skill that the student writer realizes, develops and furthers for the rest of her life. However, what might the process look like to summon this "metatext" within the student writer? Moreover, what is the signpost, the signal to identify the activation of the "metatext" inside the space of a teacher-student conversation? Perhaps the only universally agreed-upon principle concerning the writing conference (other than its importance) is that it

should take place frequently. Given this broad, prescriptive maxim, to what extent can the writing instructor reasonably expect to "frequently" engage in an interaction predicated upon this host of personal, psychological, and interpersonal binaries in such a way as to keep the development of this skill, for lack of a better word, alive? How does the writing conference – the essential "spark" of the other – remain lit in those moments when teachers don't – or can't – talk to students about their writing? Perhaps, in the sense of promoting self-authorship and self-awareness through talk, and, keeping in mind the extraordinary investment in time and pedagogy that such conversations require, we can consider alternative pedagogies that keep the conversational "multiplicities" of student text engaged. To that end, I seek to explore Peter Elbow's work concerning the dynamism of the "writing workshop," an actively engaged classroom where students are committed to furthering one another's ideas predominantly through peer-to-peer, rather that teacher to student interaction.

Peter Elbow: Living *Differance*

For Elbow, understanding the environment of the classroom – of, in his terms, the essential relationship between the student and teacher in the writing classroom, or virtually any classroom, establishes the foundation of his student-centered conversation paradigm. Elbow's primary position regarding feedback and interaction – about *conversations* concerning text – is that conversations should almost exclusively take place between peers, other "real" readers not saturated in the esoteric language of the classroom. In essence, the "real" reader is anyone *except* a teacher. In fact, Elbow

devotes an entire chapter of his work *Writing With Power* to writing for teachers. He describes teachers as the "trickiest audiences of all," that "illustrate the paradox that audiences sometimes help you and sometimes get in your way" (216). The essential paradox or "unnatural act" of writing for a teacher boils down to "communication...to explain what you understand to someone who doesn't understand it"; however, with a teacher your "task is usually to explain what you are still engaged in trying to understand to someone who understands it better" (219). Elbow characterizes the interaction as a kind of "wrong-way communication" that promotes an epidemic of "pervasive weakness that infects student writing" in a form of "a faint aura of questioning that lurks behind assertions...between the lines he is saying 'will you buy that?'" (219). The most problematic dynamic is that the writer is, to Elbow, crafting texts produced under the guise of changing or affecting "some (ill-defined) hypothetical reader" (221), who in reality is actually the teacher "expert." Therefore, the novice student tentatively engages in a hesitant kind of writing where they must "simultaneously pretend and not pretend" they are writing for an expert, but, instead, the vaguely defined shadow of some hypothetical audience, when, in reality, they are *actually* summarily judged by an unforgiving teacher expert (221-2). Arguably, the greatest barrier to Elbow for a student *is* a teacher (which would also explain why Elbow's canon includes an entire book – *Writing Without Teachers* – devoted to the topic).

Elbow's early positions concerning the role of teachers in the classroom both clarify and complicate his perspective concerning teacher-student interaction even further. In one of his early works, "Peter Elbow Responds" Elbow believes that the teacher must decide to be "either an ally or a gatekeeper" (504) depending on whether the

teacher is "trying more for Piagetian 'accommodation' or for 'assimilation'" (504). He advocates that teachers "can show students how to be supportive allies to each other…to get students to take each other seriously – which means to invest some authority in each other (and themselves!)" (505). In just a few short phrases, Elbow linguistically accentuates the urgency of the teacher's decision; there is no middle ground in the dynamic of the teacher's classroom, it is either the current-traditional sensibility, the Aristotelian filling of a jar, or Vygotsky's social-constructivist, developmental pivoting back and forth, between self, other, and the world; the teacher is faced in the classroom with an ultimatum which demands a heavy opportunity cost. In a sense, the role between teacher and student, the absolutism of Elbow's connotation and syntax concerning the choice that the teacher must make in how she interacts with her students, in either context, implies that the teacher *herself* is Derrida's "gunk in the gears" concerning the efficacy of student growth and achievement.

In a sense, for Elbow, the writing classroom, specifically the relationship that the teacher assumes with her students, is a contextually manifested embodiment of *Differance* that plays out each and every day. However, although Elbow appears to characterize the teacher as antagonist in this existential drama, in reality, he does not completely castigate the teacher in what he perceives as the paradoxical, inorganic relationship with the emerging student writer. In fact, it is his sympathies towards the writing teacher which reveal paradox within a paradox: a withholding of information that is grounded in a peculiar strand of empathy:

> They (teachers) know that their students cannot handle or benefit from a
> mirror that shows so devastatingly every weakness and mistake.

Therefore since teachers cannot communicate to students what it actually feels like to read these words, and since there is no one else who reads these words, the student *never* gets the experience of learning what actually happens to a real reader reading his words. (225)

Most curious is perhaps Elbow's characterization of a "real" reader (later in the same work, he ups the ante of the word when describing writing that has "real voice" instead of "voice") as someone who is an authentically intended audience, one who is the recipient, directly or indirectly of the text, one whom the writer specifically and purposefully envisioned prior to crafting the words on the page, someone who "really takes your words seriously as messages genuinely intended for him" (225). Therefore, the transaction between writing teacher and student is based on a paradigm of obfuscation: the teacher will not saturate the student with exhaustive corrections, and perhaps overstate the merits of the work; in exchange, the student will apprehensively posit a text purporting to know something, but in reality is really fashioning a stylistically misappropriated text timidly purporting credibility, in content or craft, that she believes will please the teacher's implicit dictum of "correctness." Elbow – like Derrida – acknowledges that to an extent the student writer can engage in an element of "play" in writing, but Elbow's sense of "play" is not in metalinguistic suggestiveness, but a murky negotiation of rhetorical role-playing, of knowing exactly who the ever-elusive shadow figure of an audience is, one that confuses the optimal environment, the healthy kind of pressure implied of a "real" reader who makes "minute by minute decisions about whether to keep on reading or put it down" (226). Most often, the well-intentioned writing teacher misguidedly attempts to assume both roles, and, as a result, ineffectively

plays the part of neither. In many ways, Elbow's classroom is Derrida's *Differance* – in its most unstable, negative permutation - come to life.

The inauthentic transaction between teacher and student – the living *Differance* of "play" gone wrong – underscores, to what extent writing conferences between teachers and students matter. In essence, they don't. Rather, Elbow's paradigm is one rooted in a progressive loop of peer feedback, one designed with particular boundaries and roles for its participants to effectively draw out that sense of what a "real" reader is, or could be. Elbow's paradigm of talk virtually eliminates the teacher altogether, and predicates the feedback loop in the context of "real" peer readers. To Elbow, the interaction the writer has with readers who are not experts, ones who can and do have the authority to simply stop reading, promotes an elevated accountability that will cultivate the best possible student text, by keeping students directly engaged with one another as they are indirectly engaged with their own inner discourse of the emerging text. Critical to his interactive paradigm is the production of text itself; to Elbow "writing is more important than sharing your writing with readers; and sharing your writing with readers is more important than getting feedback from them" (238). Elbow's writing conversations are filtered through student text – virtually any text at any particular stage of an idea's development – in an effort to engage conversation so as to produce the most fully realized piece of student writing possible. Elbow succinctly emphasizes such architecture of his paradigm by quipping "Writing is what's most important" (238). Unlike Murray's teacher-student conversations, Elbow's peer-to-peer conversations explicitly delineate the roles of each participant. However, like Murray, the actual substance of the conversations, the dialogue between the performers of the creatively emergent idiom of

text, remain largely improvised. Such improvisational interaction is predicated deeply on Elbow's earlier assertions of veracity and authenticity; the notion of a "real audience" determining how the writer "gives" her words to the reader. Therefore, such determinations are based on activities that require and necessitate an experiential intuition, a "feel" for the writer's "truthful" language that necessitates talk. Such talk revolving around the problematic "reality" of language implicitly necessitates the kind of talk to negotiate *Differance,* particularly where there is, in Elbow's idiom, a discrepancy between what the writer writes, and what the reader hears.

What is unique about the first element of Elbow's conversational loop – the notion of simply verbalizing or "sharing" ones words – without response – comes first. Elbow states "Reading your words out loud is a vivid outward act that amplifies your sensation for responsibility of your words" (22-3). Elbow likens the act of reading out loud to swearing an oath, a kind of declaration where the writer cannot hide or avoid or "withhold some piece of self" (23) that might otherwise be available on paper, or in print. Additionally, there is an unmistakable element of vulnerability present when students read their own words; for many students, in the presence of a teacher or large group, reading aloud is swearing a punitive oath of "correctness" that promotes a defensively worded commentary of the words – a timidly metalinguistic apology – rather than the actual reading of the words themselves. As such, the implied tension of this seemingly simple act necessitates that the student feels comfortable with her audience; such comfort is likely best provided by a small audience (presumably of one) under low stakes (where a grade is not attached).

Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Kramer extensively contemplate the benefits of such an approach, particularly in its applicability to a peer-to-peer, or tutor-to-student writer dynamic, in *Talk about Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writer Center Tutors*. While not peers, trained writing center tutors provide the kinds of pedagogical expertise in talk that promote greater efficacy in student texts, while, at the same time, offer lower-stakes support and feedback that a traditional classroom teacher may not be able to provide. The student writer can receive the benefits of professional feedback without the residue of how such feedback stems from her particular relationship with the teacher, or what implications offering such feedback, if not followed "correctly," will have on her grade. Mackiewicz and Kramer cite Block's 2010 dissertation summary concerning the scholarly discussion of reading student texts aloud; in particular, how " 'reading methods affect client control and engagement, audience awareness'" and, in particular, how many writing center researchers prefer students read their own writing to "'reify their sense of agency and control'" (146). However, they additionally cite other writing center researchers such as Gillespe, who "feel that student writers can benefit more from tutors reading their papers aloud…because they hear their words and punctuation the way their audience would understand them" (147). Additionally, Franklin and other researchers believe that "'Reading aloud actually promotes mind-wandering'" and suggest that "writing center tutors should read aloud" promoting "a good pedagogical choice" (146-7). Moreover, according to the writing conference data compiled by Mackiewicz and Thompson, such read aloud strategies were predominantly executed in proofreading and editing conferences, as opposed to brainstorming and idea generation conferences (147). In their conclusions concerning the deployment of read

aloud strategies, Mackiewicz and Thompson determine that "This strategy gets its efficacy from the extra boost of attention it delivers to a certain line of reading or text via the aural mode," and, can produce benefits as a scaffolding strategy for student writers when the experienced tutor "uses this strategy selectively, with discretion" (162).

The work of Elbow, Mackiewicz, and Thompson unmistakably characterize the dynamism of the student writer's printed word, of her thought, brought to life. Interestingly, we can relate their work to Derrida's fear of the delimiters of speech, as well as the further delimiters of writing, in a revealing passage from *Writing and Difference*, where he laments:

> Speaking frightens me because, by never saying enough, I also say too much. And the necessity of becoming breath or speech restricts meaning – and our responsibility for it – writing restricts and constrains speech further still. (9)

Derrida acknowledges the tensions and multiplicities in the spoken word, and particularly how only the printed word *further* delimits speech, meaning, and by extension – identity. Elbow has articulated a valuable paradigm in arguably the most basic pedagogical act of simply reading words. The particulars of *who* reads the text means a great deal to Elbow – we see the sacred connotation he provides concerning the student writer reading her own words – but, perhaps more importantly, the idea of experientially vocalizing the words *themselves* is the critical component in the read aloud model. Derrida's fear (containing echoes of Glenn's silence as a rhetoric) of "restricting meaning through speech," the interpretive moment where *someone* – whether the reader,

peer reviewer, or tutor, hears words and sentences in such a way that don't necessarily jibe with the original *intention* of the words – a profoundly experiential opportunity of *Differance* is made manifest. Everyone fears mistakes. No one likes to hear their own words said back in such a way that do not mirror the majestic sculpture of thought perched in the writer's mind. But such fear, and the realization of such misunderstandings, communicated in a low-stakes environment where the "breath" is not rigorously evaluated for a grade, furthers student thought. The absence of the hazardous permutations of teacher-student tensions, to Elbow, promotes a "real" space where the authenticity of the student text is the *exclusive* context of the conversation. Whether the participants are peer-to-peer or tutor-to-tutee, the *absence* of the teacher promotes an authentic conversation about student text that allows the most positive outcomes of *Differance* to fulminate. Sharing provides the "boost" that furthers Harris' contention of the "Plural I," literally engaging another reader, even if the reader is the writer herself, to work *through* the text aurally, sharpening the acuity of the student voice as she reads her own words. The experiential accountability, the transformational shift that occurs when the writer hears her words *as heard by* Elbow's "real" read aloud reader, be it a peer, tutor, or herself, provokes change.

Elbow articulates potential permutations of what such "sharing" conversations look like, articulating the substantial risks and rewards of the exchange:

> Reading your words out loud is scary, and many people invariably mumble or read too softly or too fast. We shrink from such blatant showing of our wares. But that is just what helps you most. Therefore when you share your writing, you need to give your listeners permission to interrupt and tell you if they

cannot comfortably hear and understand your words – permission to make you

give your words (23).

Elbow's first sentence constructs what Derrida's "fear of breath," could actually look like when students are given authorship to speak their "own" words. In the context of Elbow's sharing, "own" connotes not just the phonemic jars that encapsulate meaning, but the rhythm and cadence of the words – the life of the ideas behind their placement and order. To a degree, Elbow's act of sharing becomes a place where rhetorics collide: the listener embodies Cheryl Glenn's silence and Ratcliffe's listening to attentively validate the authenticity of the writer's words. The synthesis of such focused attentiveness, particularly in the experiential moment when the listener's "sense" of the writer's words is made strange, brings Sherry Turkle's belief in the *necessity* of empathy, and the practice of Lisa Blankenship's rhetoric of empathy, to life. The experiential pause, the "gunk in the gears" that stifles a fluent aural transcription of a text fundamentally emanates from a highly engaged "listening" space where the reader – student, tutor, or peer – *wants to* understand. In Elbow's model, the writer engaging in the collision of rhetorics in this otherwise simple act summons Harris' "metatext," in recognition of the place where the words, for lack of a better phrase, do not sound quite right. Such misunderstandings facilitate a heightened, or, in Mackiewicz and Thompson's words, "boosted" metalinguistic revision, manifest aurally, whose residue will presumably sharpen future decisions the writer makes in fashioning text (working *through* the text of her words verbalized imprecisely) for a future performance with a "real" audience (which could include the writer herself, alone, simply reading the words out loud). Elbow's articulation of a seemingly simple, innocuous act engages a panoply

of complex rhetorical modalities that both implicitly raise the stakes of student's ideas and promote greater engagement in, to borrow Hemingway's parlance, "getting the words right."

Elbow's template echoes Brooke Rollins' earlier assertions concerning Derrida's vital role in the writing classroom, in particular how G. Douglas Atkins and Michael L. Johnson assert that "Derrida himself has insisted repeatedly that deconstruction *is* teaching as well as an interventionist strategy. Its practical value inheres in its capacity to effect change – in institutions, in disciplines, in individuals (10-11)" (15). In Elbow's experiential moment of sharing, the writer is de-familiarizing herself with her own words, by producing them in a different context. The permission the peer group has to interrupt harkens back to Elbow's initial idea that the listener needs to "comfortably hear and understand" the writer's words; therefore, aural *and* expressive clarity are equally important. Both function interchangeably; if a listener was unable to fully digest a comment, she most likely would ask for it to be repeated; if the listener could not actually hear the comment, she most certainly would ask the speaker to repeat it as well. In both instances, the listener as rhetor, as the essential delimiter, functions as a critical signpost concerning Derrida's *Differance*. In not "comfortably" articulating the words, the speaker – writer or peer reader - has "made strange" or deconstructed the text. A student would not mispronounce her words because she cannot read them; rather, she is surprised by what she wrote, it seems foreign, or as Elbow indicates "scary." Additionally, the audience -- whether requesting clarification in the rhetoric of Blankenship's empathy, or listening silently, "speaking" in Glenn's rhetoric, asserting that "silence is function –with a purpose" (159) - become the residual articulation where the writer's text is literally,

experientially, moving *through* the other texts of rhetoric, cognition, and empathy. The "text" – the printed words on the page, the rhetorics enacted in sharing, and the continued, deepened "other" metalinguistic conversation of the student writer – transform in the tension of the conversational space of sharing.

Elbow articulates the benefits of sharing upon the writer and audience by affirming "You are listening and learning by ear" (23), an assertion that steers precariously close to Murray's "learning, listening" eye, both in terms of the language, but more importantly, in the slight linguistic confusion of the metaphor of a "learning ear." The essential skill of development is the same in both contexts; however, the method and participants vary slightly. Through Elbow's sharing, both the speaker and audience reap residual benefits from the multiple repetitions of student writers sharing their words; just as the repetition of many songs would empower the listener to denote stylistic shifts in cadence, pitch, and tone, so too can the audience derive such benefits from the procession of students sharing their words. So, in one sense, the "center" of the modeling has shifted to a more diffuse, variegated group; the responsibility of modeling the kinds of rhetorical and metacognitive thought that the teacher would predominantly model during Murray's conferences is now spread amongst a classroom of engaged student learners. However, the likely benefits – the stylistic palette that the student writer has to draw from to further artfully craft her own ideas through the tension of *Differance* that sharing offers – expand exponentially. In other words, Derrida's deconstruction evolves as the sharing conversations evolve; they move from "scary" stultified, hesitant readings to more thoughtfully engaged, rhetorically evolved interactions in a multiplicity of ways – between the student text, the reader, and the listening audience – to the more

enlightened connotation of deconstruction's "play" between word and meaning. As such, Elbow's assertion that the listening audience has "permission to make you *give* your words" takes on a deepened, richer context of cognitive, affective, and linguistic development for the student writer. To a certain extent, such an assertion is a paradox, as uttering the words, empirically, constitutes the end of the act. However, Elbow's syntactical emphasis on the word "give" itself, his directing us to a stylistic shift in the word's connotation, clearly implies that there is more to the rote definition of "giving." The audience, inclusive of the writer herself hearing her words verbalized for the first time, is the arbiter of veracity. Through listening and questioning, the audience allows the writer to most authentically "give" her words in the way she intended. By questioning the paradoxical language of Elbow's phrasing, the reader is brought to the same experiential precipice as the sharing participants he writes about in his text. We are attentively peeling away Elbow's multiplicities, as readers, just as we (and Elbow) want students to peel away the multiplicities of one another's texts. Therefore, rather than viewing Derrida's work, and its requisite application to the act of speaking during the writing process as "too abstract to guide pedagogical practice" (Rollins 13), we ought to recognize its tension as a perilously precise instrument to bring *all* participants in the classroom to the experiential moment of Derrida's abstraction: of simultaneously realizing the delimiters of speech and writing. However, such realization is both created by and further parsed through "talk" – the talk between the writer with her "real" audience, as well as the heightened cognitive and intrapersonal "talk" the writer has with her own ideas, specifically in examining the fault lines of clarity, meaning, and understanding. Elbow seems acutely aware of the experiential benefits of such talk when

he again syntactically "shifts" the meaning of the word "through" in *Sharing and Responding,* with Pat Belanoff, he posits "Writers define their own voices not so much against those of others as *through* them" (Elbow, Belanoff). The connotation of Elbow's "through" is not one suggesting an adversarial confrontation, but instead, an acutely heightened pedagogy that produces a multiplicity of benefits.

Of course, such expressions – of word, of voice, of style, and even meaning - may never be fully realized; but that's the point. In "Lacan, Transference, and Writing Instruction," Robert Burke illustrates symmetry between Elbow and Murray, even though the apparent centers of their interactive paradigms differ. He states that "both Elbow and Murray encourage acceptance that the text (and the writer's intention) is being formed, is plural, chaotic, and even contradictory. As teacher, they see this as all right. Plurality and chaos are acceptable; in fact, they're just part of the process" (687). Joseph Harris furthers the idea of the emergent voice of the writer as an ever-evolving, shifting of multiplicities as he articulates in "The Plural Text The Plural Self" when, in recounting the work of Roland Barthes and William Coles, he affirms "Writing is not simply a tool we use to express the self we already have; it is the means by which we form a self to express…What they (Barthes and Coles) thus value in any kind of writing is complexity, indeterminacy, the opening up of as many kinds and levels of meaning as possible" (161). The "making strange" of sharing one's words – specifically through conversation - provides the unique platform Harris articulates; it is an improvisational theater, paradoxically, even when the actor holds the script. The self – and the interaction, the summoning, the exchange between speaker and audience, between writer and reader, to most authentically bring the reader to "give" her words to the audience through sharing,

align Derrida's sense of "play" and Harris' skill of the "metatext" in Elbow's idiom to suggest that uncertainty represents possible rhetorical pathways more than it does a collaborative march towards one predetermined interpretive result.

Elbow's loop of peer feedback provides an overarching structure of seemingly clearly defined activities that, on closer inspection, belie many shades of nuance. His work is rooted in the engagement of choice. Elbow's feedback is tailored to what the student feels she needs, and what in particular she wants. Therefore, the student selects from a variety of possibilities and requests the peer reviewer to give particular kinds of feedback based on where the student writer sees herself "at" concerning the status of her writing. The feedback is fluid and flexible; it is dependent on the lens through which the author of the piece views the relative merits, weaknesses, and tensions of its creation at that particular moment in that particular iteration. In turn, the reader focuses on specifics – mining the piece in particular portions, moving away from vague generalities, and offering specific suggestions about parts of text where the criterion set forth by the writer seem to particularly wax or wane. In other words, the interaction is predicated on choice and specificity – choice by the student writer in determining *what* she needs, and specificity of the peer reader to articulate *where* those needs are most apparent.

Elbow distinguishes between two types of feedback – Criterion-Based Feedback which tells the writer how her text "measures up" (240) to four "broad fundamental questions" of the clarity of content, quality of organization, effectiveness of language, and control of usage (240). Reader-Based Feedback tells the writer what her work "does to particular reader" by asking three "broad fundamental questions" of what was happening to the reader "moment by moment" in the reading, how the reader would

summarize the text, and to create images for the writing and "transaction it creates with you" (240). For Elbow, a critical advantage of Criterion-Based Feedback is that it provides opportunities for the student writer to work on "conscious understanding of the criteria used in judging writing" (244). A critical value of Reader-Based Feedback, which Elbow characterizes on the whole as "more useful", is that it provides you with "the experience of what it felt like for readers as they were reading your words" (245). The writer does not necessarily have to follow the suggestions of the reader; rather, it is in the experience of "taking a ride inside the reader's skin" (246) which leads to "more listening and learning" rather than "theoretical questions of how good they (the words) are...and a statement as to how your words didn't measure up (246-7).

In the totality of Elbow's perspective concerning conversation, he clearly favors approximation over cognition, of an empathetic "sense" rather than an evaluative measure, to most effectively promote the best possible student writing. Elbow's diction – "experience of what it felt like" and taking a "ride inside the reader's skin" – connote the value of conversation which echo Vygotsky's assertion that the "mind extends beyond the skin," as well as both Blankenship's rhetoric of empathy, and, in particular, Sherry Turkle's contemplation of the relationship between the development of affective empathy and cognitive cognition. Turkle cites the research of Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman in describing his working relationship with Amos Tversky, partners so close they could "finish each other's sentences and complete the joke that the other had wanted to tell, but somehow...kept surprising each other" (246). Even in the close proximity of a working relationship grounded in a remarkably close understanding of the actual articulation patterns of the other, there still was still spontaneity, difference, and surprise.

Turkle characterizes Kahneman's reflection by asserting that "Conversation led to intellectual communion" (246). Moreover, although both participants had a profound conversational intimacy, the instrument of conversation itself still promoted the spontaneity of *Differance,* which functioned as a critical component to help their work move forward. The point is not to understand, but to recognize that, even when one assumes she does, simply put, she doesn't. Through a conversation grounded in empathetic listening, "You don't get more information. You get "different information" that allows you "to go deeper" (Turkle 246) in ways that, without conversation, would leave both participants – in this case, Nobel Prize-Winning linguistic researchers - with a static understanding of topic, text, and self. Therefore, in Elbow's model, the exigency of talk – presumably from participants not nearly as acquainted with one another as Kahneman and Tversky – is paramount perhaps as much to *further* difference between its participants as much as it is to *close* distance between such participants. What we can learn from Turkle's anecdote concerning Khanemen and Tversky is that, while they knew each other's conversational patterns intimately, they were communicating within the conventions of specifically focused conversational paradigms. So, while what they said may have surprised one another, the guiding principles of how they communicated their information, the nature of their research objectives, implicitly delimited the types of interactions they had. Elbow's architecture of talk, in particular his distinction between criterion and reader-based feedback, provides the participants of the classroom community with such flexible structure, a critical distinction that elevates the accountability of all participants. Talk is not just talk; it has a function and purpose. In "Authors, text, and talk: The internalization of dialogue from social interaction during

writing," Sarah J. McCarthey illustrates the necessity of such structure, indicating, "The underlying social rules signal the demands of academic tasks affecting students' perceptions and performance on literacy tasks" (202). Therefore, the structure of the particular type of conversation students choose to have promote a unique proximal zone of development: students improvise within broadly structured activities, and articulate through the particular lens of choice expressed by the student writer, but are free to respond in ways that are unscripted, attentive, and most likely, rooted in the author's implied sense of a "problem" associated with the text.

Perhaps critical to recognizing Elbow's collaborative model, one of choice and creative role-playing between teacher and student, is a guiding principle that Lad Tobin characterizes in his essay "Self-Disclosure" as "embracing contraries" (202). In Tobin's take on Elbow's talk, not only is misunderstanding between peers important, but it fundamentally shapes the decisions student writers make in furthering the work of their text. Elbow and Pat Belanoff expand on the notion of contraries when explaining the guiding principles supporting their particular peer feedback paradigm in *Sharing and Responding*. They assert, "The reader is always right; the writer is always right" in that the reader "gets to decide what's true about her reaction" to the student text; the writers "get to decide what to do about the feedback you get" related to the process. In fact, Elbow and Belanoff suggest that the writer may decide on "making no changes…at all". In the second paradox, they illustrate that "The writer must be in charge; the writer must sit back quietly too," in that the writer decides what particular type of feedback the reader provides, based on what she thinks is most critical or urgent at this particular stage of her work; once the writer has provided the scope of feedback she is seeking, then she must

"sit back quietly" to embrace the peer responder's reading as directed by the writer at the outset. Elbow and Belanoff go to great lengths to assert the *lack* of speaking that the writer should do once she has provided the reviewer with the requisite guidelines concerning feedback:

> ...if you are talking a lot you are probably preventing them from giving the good feedback that they can give. For example, don't argue if they misunderstand what you wrote. Their misunderstanding is valuable. You need to understand their misunderstanding better in order to figure out whether you need to make any changes. (Elbow, Belanoff)

Interestingly, we see Cheryl Glenn's rhetoric of silence manifest as a critical pedagogical instrument in Elbow's model, propounded by the idea that it is directed not specifically towards a particular kind of cognition, but more of an empathetic attentiveness suggestive of Blankenship and Turkle's transformational rhetoric of empathy. Krista Ratcliffe specifically repositions deconstruction as a theory supportive of such empathetic listening in "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a 'Code for Cross-Cultural Conduct'" when she proposes, "poststructuralist theory in the wake of Derrida finds itself suspicious of speaking and, by association, of listening, even though Derrida pays tribute to listening as a means of substituting the ethical for the ideal" (200). Again, we see the intersection of theory and pedagogy, the idea that deconstruction is in and of itself a hermeneutic, with an aspiration towards empathy. Elbow and Belanoff structure their interactive paradigm – harkening back to Vygotsky – as a "possibility paradigm" rooted in in either speaking through or *listening through* misunderstandings to "ideally" produce the most authentic student text possible.

As the listener in Elbow and Belanoff's paradigm, the writer's silence "takes on an expressive power" which "denotes alertness and sensitivity…it signifies attentiveness, particularly when it allows new voices to be heard" (Glenn 18).   In short, the *Differance* is the catalyst for the actual improvement of student writing; the silence of the writer – as opposed to the verbalization of ideas, intention, or meaning – is of principal importance to effectively negotiate Elbow's conversational paradigm. As silence is the fulcrum that activates the dynamism of Elbow's paradox – the activity of crucial meaning, depth, and substance – the silence "speaks."   Just as linguistically, an understanding predicated upon misunderstanding articulates the nature of the writing conversation, the most transformative moment of the conversation itself prompted by the focused, attentive *absence* of speech.   Or, as Glenn asserts, "silence is absence with a function" (157).

Through her silence, the writer is at once processing the feedback of the peer reviewer, but perhaps more importantly, engaging in the metalinguistic, stylistic dialogue of her own ideas. The student writer is, according to McCarthey, engaging in philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's "'internally persuasive discourse'" during the structured peer interaction, struggling between "two forms of assimilation. The internally persuasive word is 'half-ours and half-someone else's (p.345), yet it is not static and isolated, but rather is part of a creative process that can be applied to new situations" (202). So, even when silent, the introspective conversation of the writer continues, as a newer, emergent type of rhetoric. Cheryl Glenn furthers Elbow's paradox by considering the benefits of the writer's "silent conversation" when quoting James Moffett, who feels that "'They must talk through to silence and through stillness find original thought'(240)" (156). Silence, therefore, is a kind of pedagogy, one that necessitates a through-line

virtually *dependent* upon a misunderstanding, misreading, or otherwise disrupted communication between the intention of the author and the difficulty of the reader. The paradox of a silence imbued with the lower-stakes of feedback for feedback's sake, but with the elevated accountability of an attentive pursuit of authentic "truth" of the writer's ideas as disseminated through talk in Elbow and Belanoff's model, breeds creativity.

Sherry Turkle refers to the synergy of location and transformative, intrapersonal decision –making, a kind of intersection between participants where an implicit confidentiality protects the sensitivity of its participants, such as a mailbox, or the list of books a borrower at the library takes out, as a "mindspace," a private, non-judgmental location to "let your ideas jell… to change your mind about important matters" (303). Turkle illustrates the transformative power of "mindspace" in early 20th Century America through the politicization of anti-noise campaigns, ones which did not specifically halt the rise of urban sprawl, but "inspired a new generation of urban planners and architects to build differently, situating schools and hospitals in quieter zones…using parks and gardens as buffers against traffic" (329-30). The need for contemplative quiet is as fundamental as the need for communication. Moreover, just as the infrastructure of pedagogy is predicated upon understanding, and articulation of said understanding, Turkle's concept of "mindspace" underscores Derrida's *Difference* as a hermeneutic which privileges the *necessity* of silence and misunderstanding as not simply an educational, but uniquely human, need. The cognitive space between the reader's misappropriation of the writer's text, and the writer's ultimate intention to more authentically communicate – at least – a particular shade of meaning can only happen by the writer *silently and attentively* recognizing the full source of the reader's dissonance.

Furthermore, such gaps in understanding necessitate multiple conversations: the writer listens to the reader's disconnect; the writer internalizes the locus of the disconnect, then furthers a metatextual conversation with herself that, upon conclusion of her listening, will resolve, or at least narrow, said gaps. These conversations straddle a variety of domains, weaving between cognition and emotion, taking emergent forms of rhetorical academic positioning and private, creative space. Joseph Harris refers to the simultaneous dialogue happening in this moment – the "Plural I" of voices between the writer's own internal monologue and reader's appropriation of the text – using remarkably similar language as he states "a writer's text is always a patchwork of other texts. Writers define their voices not so much as against those of others as *through* them" (162). Here, Harris likely not by coincidence, uses the *exact* verbiage of Elbow regarding the student writer's sense of her own text. In *Rewriting,* Harris further intertwines Elbow's interdependence of feedback with the writer's ultimate, paradoxical act of producing a singular text:

> I've argued throughout this book that the goal of academic writing is to form your own position on a subject in response to what others have said about it. The paradox is, though, that to achieve this sort of intellectual independence you almost always require the help of others…this material work of writing, of the making of texts, almost always involves the help of others (95).

The through line of a single text is an amalgam of the voices enlisted, implicitly, by the author in its creation. However, the amalgam is not a purely defensive, reactive response to the conversation between these voices, but rather a type of metalinguistic

absorption, a deepened footprint of ideas that demonstrates the residual weight of thoughtfulness, of *presence,* in her text. The unorthodoxy of silently negotiating a conversation predicated on a misunderstanding of the writer's ideas is a microcosm for the larger paradox of a solitary author crafting one work, silently, in an ongoing dialogue with other voices – of what she has read, what she has heard, and what she hears – uniquely – in her own development. The paradox of Elbow's paradigm that values the act of silence so abstrusely mirrors the larger paradox of the writer brokering the notion of a "conversation" – an aural interaction - through the printed word. Moreover, the writer's experiential act of recognizing this patchwork, the messy configuration of chaotic pluralities of interpretive silences and verbalized misunderstandings, can, in and of itself, affect change. Such silences, to Glenn, "transform the interactional goal of rhetoric, which has traditionally been one of persuasion to one of understanding" (156) into an expository discipline, a hermeneutic which takes the shape of "a rhetorical art of empowered action" (156). The interaction between student reader and student writer – in particular, at the intersection of experiential misunderstanding and heedful presence – cultivates a space where the most authentically crafted text can seed, grow, and blossom.

The Flexible Shape of Enduring Conversation

So, in navigating the terrain of paradox, misunderstandings, and subjectivities in the writing conference, what could someone reasonably take away as a pedagogical map? What, then, *is* the function of the interaction? How exactly does *not* communicating

clearly show the necessity to communicate at all? If we cannot articulate what a writing conference is, what is the point of attempting to write about it at all?

A cartographer does not stop after charting one route; the necessities of those that may follow, and the situations, circumstances, and capabilities of said travelers obligate the construction of additional options. Therefore, contemplating what a writing conference *could actually* look like, rests on digesting several important principles.

First, *the writing conference should be flexibly structured.*

In their research concerning tutoring center writing conferences, Mackiewicz and Thompson delve the concept of "motivational scaffolding" strategies to promote student writers "to encourage students to think for themselves about their writing and to continue their efforts after the conference" (166). As such, the following strategies were tallied and observed to achieve such autonomy: Showing Concern, Praising, Reinforcing Ownership and control, Being optimistic or using humor, and Showing empathy or sympathy (173). However, analysis of the data from actual conversations revealed that the skill of Reinforcing Ownership and control was startlingly low, leading the authors to conclude that "Given the importance that the writing center scholarship places on fostering students' ownership and control of their writing…the infrequency with which most of the tutors used this strategy somewhat surprised us (174)". In addition, the authors examined tutors engaging in "cognitive scaffolding strategies" – actual types of talk – during each conference, to broker the subsequent motivation of the student writer. The strategies took several broad forms: Pumping, Reading aloud, Responding as a reader or listener, Referring to a previous topic, Forcing a choice, and Prompting, hinting,

and demonstrating (147). In their data analysis, Pumping – a strategy that involves requiring a student to provide a specific answer to a particular question - were "used...more often than all the other cognitive strategies combined" (162). So, in examining the shape and structure of specific writing interactions, the data reveals that not only are tutors structuring their conferences away from the ultimate aim – autonomy – but they are additionally engaging students within the concrete context of interaction, the "safe" types of question and answer that produce results, but lack transformational change.

My purpose in examining such data is not to indict writing tutors; rather, it is to support them. It is to emphasize that speaking to writers about their writing is *extraordinarily difficult*. Whether the participants in a conversation are strangers coming together for one session in a writing center, or a familiar teacher and student working through a paper at the end of the semester, the panoply of rhetorics required to empathetically listen, thoughtfully comment, and, perhaps most importantly, intuitively promote self-actualization can feel daunting. The prospect of navigating such conversations is so daunting in fact, that most settle for "safe" interactions that satisfy a lazy pedagogy of *some type* of conversation between teacher and student, or tutor and tutee, instead of the *best* type of conversation. Such motivations and interactions are pervasive in secondary schools as well, and rot the core of teacher-student interaction, as well as subsequently produced student texts. As Elbow surmised, teachers and students play a game, a cheat where veracity is purported in the rote restatement of rubrics and grades within the smothering ether of "correctness" when we are afraid to admit that we don't, authoritatively, know. *Differance* can change that.

Whether within a specific, grade-based rubric, or in the layered choice of a classroom of accountable student talk, criteria are necessary. But they are not the end. Rather, it is in broaching the interpretive discrepancies of both how the teacher and student recognize, identify, and internalize such criteria, and, in turn, produce them in "texts" – of ideas, multiple conversations in all of their requisite permutations, and skillfully crafted words – that changes the classroom. The teacher does not operate in an interpretive ubiquity, but rather, selects from a thoughtfully crafted menu – of motivational strategies, criterion, questions, and, perhaps as importantly, attentive silences – to best help each student in the context of each conversation. Mackiewicz and Thompson recognized that more experienced tutors engaged more cognitively challenging scaffolds than less experienced tutors (163-4); so, too will the less seasoned teacher begin with a palette of options that are likely more concrete, and less well-developed as the more seasoned teacher. Much the same, the peer reader and reviewer in Elbow's model will likely fumble, stammer, and hesitantly posit at first; however, through the experiential resonance of conversation, she will develop perspectives, ideas, and approaches that will acquire the authoritative weight of metalinguistic certainty, and thus manifest in sharper, clearer observations and language. By "embracing contraries," to work *through* uncertainty in conversation, to live with the complicated tension of emergent ideas, and, in Tobin's patois, to develop the muscle of thoughtfully "reading" one's self in those moments of tension and uncertainty, the teacher will create a flexible structure of deepening accountable talk through the course of her experiences. Tobin's self-awareness is particularly relevant for teachers, as they, uniquely, must "accept" the tension their authority consciously or unconsciously provokes in conversations with

students and "let go" of the implications of such transference emotions stirred by the student as a result of such associations. The teacher must also "let go" of controlling such conversations, but allow them to emerge, organically, as an opportunity for the student to both recognize the teacher's "metatext" and ultimately attempt to develop a "metatext" of her own. While the burden of transference is significantly less for writing center tutors, and virtually nonexistent for peer-to-peer reviewers, there is still an obligation of veracity and empathy – to recognize that the objective is not necessarily to know, but, *to earnestly want to know*. Through experience, both good and bad, each contributor adds options to the respective "menu" of objectives, choices, and skills, and pedagogically and experientially seasons such choices more meticulously – selecting ones that will stimulate, challenge, and – productively – perplex both participants.

Second: The writing conference must earnestly acknowledge the instability of language, and the possibilities of such instability.

Mackiewicz and Thompson contemplate the presence of "Formulaic vs. Non-Formulaic" language in writing conferences, particularly in motivational scaffolding of student writers. In their conclusions, they determined that "people use the same words and syntactic patterns over and over again" which is of critical importance to tutors because "strategies that are formulaic in syntactic form and their semantic content will likely be limited in their function" (176-77). In other words, repeatedly referring to specific skills in a rote manner, assuming "core" principles of "accountability" through semantically repeated language takes on the law of diminishing returns for the student, as well as the teacher. The answer is, much in Cheryl Glenn's parlance, to destabilize language, with a purpose. Again, the objective is not to assert that language in fact *does*

not have meaning, but, through the repeated strains of attentive "talk," imbue teacher or tutor-to- student, as well as peer-to-peer interaction with the urgency of language that, somehow, destabilizes while it transforms. Therefore, talk, and in particular the engaged, interpretive talk circling multiplicities of meaning, is the *only* way to develop such rich, nuanced recognition of text. The end of the talk is not the collaborative consensus of agreement, but the recognition of the multiplicities of meaning. Talk as an interpretive staircase, as an ascension for the student writer to realize that writers inherently, stylistically create layered texts – that the meaning, in fact is that there is no meaning – becomes precisely the platform where, in Derrida's own words "speech takes on different meaning" (218) to the student writer.

Third: the teacher must internalize and model Harris' "Metatext" in all permutations of the classroom, not just in writing conferences.

Most Language Arts Teachers, in fact, most *teachers,* love language, because they verbalize it, every day, in front of lots of people. Most people don't get to do that. In fact, most people are *terrified* to do it. But such love is most authentically communicated in action, not in explanation. In other words, students recognize it when they see it, hear it, and most importantly, *sense it* from a teacher. Therefore, the willingness to not know – to question, challenge, and relentlessly pursue the evolving, transformational nature of language, of ideas, and by extension, the larger "conversation" we have as a society – is not only an opportunity for a teacher to help her students; I argue that it is a *necessity.* The goal of the writing conference is the goal of teaching is the goal, essentially, of life: to empower those less experienced with the kinds of experiences that ultimately render you obsolete. To foster such autonomy, such self-actualization, is difficult, challenging,

humbling, and, paradoxically, virtually impossible to put into words. Just as Elbow and Harris posit that authorship of any text must go *through* others, so too must the conference, and the classroom, resonate as a kind of "through space" for students, a transformative place inclusive of the panoply of linguistic, pedagogical, and philosophical contributors, one where the student recognizes the residue of the interpretive uncertainties of other texts as possible metalinguistic "moves" that he or she can now authorize in her own writing. Moreover, the types of "moves" the student writer feels empowered to make can work in the sense that they simply are offerings; the writer is no longer constrained by the pressure to "hit marks" or "score points;" rather, those offerings are the transformation of the student "text," the creative ideation and extension of an engaged mind at work in the messy chaos of creativity. The writing instructor's most important work is not to tell the student writer how to enact the stylistic devices waiting inside, but rather, to bring her to the precipice of her own aesthetic – through the prism of the writing conference. While didactic secrets are not shared, experiential uncertainties, and the teacher's own "metatext" that contemplates the chaos of the idea – should be a primary goal of a conference. The writing instructor should not be Walt Whitman's "learn'd astronomer" who provides "the proofs, the figures, ranged in columns" of the evening sky, but instead challenges the student to "glide out" into the "mystical moist night-air" to look up "in perfect silence at the stars" (2, 6-8). Furthermore, the teacher should *avoid* instilling an overtly concrete, and potentially hazardous sense of "correctness" that can cause more long-term harm in student texts than it does good, except for the classroom teacher to maintain a façade of semblance and order, which in reality is a safe shortcut to thinking. In *Being Perfect,* Anna Quindlen

articulates the danger of allowing someone a preconceived notion of "correctness" that lives within rigid constraints for too long:

> Someday, sometime, you will be sitting somewhere. A berm overlooking a pond in Vermont. The lip of the Grand Canyon at sunset. A seat on the subway. And something bad will have happened: You will have lost someone you loved, or failed at something at which you badly wanted to succeed.

> And sitting there, you will fall into the center of yourself. You will look for some core to sustain you. And if you have been perfect all your life and have managed to meet all the expectations of your family, your friends, your community, your society, chances are excellent that there will be a black hole where that core ought to be (47-8).

Misunderstanding is misperceived as a kind of failure; rather, it is an invitation to talk. Believing in an interpretive system designed to extract one meaning undermines the creative prowess of the human spirit; *living* a philosophy and pedagogy that meaningfully embraces uncertainty, humbly contemplates complexity, and creatively models textuality, liberates such creative prowess.

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