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The teacher/student conference has long been associated with process approaches to writing (Emig.1960); (Graves, 1983); (Murray,1968). As with any concept that exists over time, teacher/student conferences run a wide gamut of manifestations and definitions for the practice. Bill Silver, an elementary teacher, offers that "a writing conference is simply a meeting to share ideas about a piece of writing in progress, a potential piece of writing, or the writing process itself," (1983:36). Although perhaps not as specific as others, this definition allows for the broad range of practice that the term "conferencing" encompasses while avoiding gross generality that would render it useless.

Practicioners of conferencing speak of the way that the conference stimulates children as learners and places teachers in the role of advocate or coach (Graves,1983), (Harris,1986). The implication and the hope is that conferencing represents a break from traditional classroom discourse, the features of which have been the object of many studies. For example, the teacher-talk register is already well-documented (Cazden). In addition, the instructional sequence of initiation, reply and evaluation (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1976), (Mehan, 1979) is well-established as a traditional classroom discourse model. These studies show how teachers dominate the language of the classroom by controlling topics and types of response. Other studies indicate this domination by citing the large percentage of time that teachers talk, anywhere from two-thirds to three-quarters of the time spent in the classroom (Flanders,1970); (Delamont,1983); (Stubbs, 1983). In short, the linguistic components of a classroom

provide a thorough picture for the purpose of comparison, a picture that places the teacher as the dominant speaker, turn-taker and turn indicator.

In contrast to this concept of teacher dominance, advocates of teacher-student conferencing speak of its student-centered characteristics. Memering reminds us that students respond to conferences because "they are unlike anything else in their experience at the university" in that they are not teacher-dominated (1973:307). These beliefs are echoed by Duke who offers that "The student-centered writing conference can play an important role ... in establishing a better environment for developing skills in writing." (1975:44) Variations of this theme wiggle their way through the literature (Atwell, 1987); (Calkins, 1986); (Graves, 1983); (Harris, 1986); (Murray, 1982).

Recently, however, there has been a flurry of research on the teacher-student conference which questions the notion that conferencing with students breaks with traditional clasroom patterns. A study of Michaels et al out of Harvard University claims that conferencing remained a teacher-dominated activity and did little to change the underlying structure of classroom interaction (1986). Florio-Ruane, citing the Harvard work and that of Freedman and Sperling (1985) and Jacobs (1983) among others, comes to the similar conclusion that conferencing is limited "precisely because it is instructional talk" (1986:5). Teacher Lucinda Ray, studying her own conferencing practices, revealed that in most cases she was talking for three-quarters of the conference (1987). This research asserts that often conferencing is merely teacher-centered instruction in a different package. Although none of these studies goes so far as to suggest that teacher/student conferencing is worthless or unproductive, they do raise important considerations for those teachers who conference.

As a teacher who has been working with and refining the use of conferencing in a secondary school setting since 1980, the implications of the research outlined above hit home. My own experience with conferencing, one that is based on heretofore undocumented observation, is that this strategy has made a significant change in the

structure of my classroom and in my interaction with my students. Those studies which call conferencing to task have raised many questions for me. Am I misperceiving the effect of the conference? Do I need to be more aware of my role in the conference? Are there compromises that must be made to authoritarianism in order to manage conferencing in a classroom of thirty-three students? In short, how much has conferencing in my classroom changed from the teacher-centered traditional model, if at all, and realistically, how much more change can I expect to enact?

This study does not attempt to answer all of my questions. The primary purpose here is to examine the relationship between teacher-student conferencing and the student-centered classroom. Even Graves, an avowed advocate of conferencing, cautions practitioners to exert discipline upon themselves so that the conference will allow for true conversational interaction (1983) and not replicate the artificial teacher-student dialogue alluded to by Stubbs (1983). In the end, I hope to have a better understanding of what occurs when I conference and to see just where the conference lies on the continuum between teacher-centered and student-centered writing.

Specifically this study focuses on three questions. Are my conferences more teacher-centered than student-centered. If so, is there still potential for making them more student-centered? Finally, given that traditional teacher/student interaction differs markedly from the interaction of conversants (Mehan, 1979) and using both the IRE format and informal conversational structure as opposite points of a continuum, is teacher/student conferencing in my classroom closer to the traditional format, closer to conversational discourse, or more a blurred hybrid showing mutually distinct qualities of both ends of the continuum?

A Description of the Setting and Participants

The setting of the study is an English class in an inner-city high school. The student population is 99% Black with the remaining 1% a mix of Hispanic, Asian and

white. Economically the families range from lower-middle class to a large core living below the poverty level. The current population hovers between 1700 and 1800, down from twice those numbers in the early seventies and thus reflects the recent decline in secondary enrollment nationally. (All figures were obtained from the School District of Philadelphia's Management Information Center). A factor compounding this decline is that the school is designated as a general high school and currently does not figure into the Magnet School Desegration Program of the School District of Philadelphia, except as a source from which students are siphoned.

The classroom of the study is composed of tenth grade students who, either through standardized test scores or teacher recommendation, have been classified as above average in language ability. The class had originally been designated as a star section, indicating top ability, but was downgraded to a rapid section as a number of students were added to fill out the roster to the mandatory thirty-three on roll. The average attendance in the classroom is around twenty-five.

The data in this study has been taken from a video tape of five teacher/student conferences done on the same day in April of 1986. The students conferenced that day were selected randomly by lottery and asked to be ready with a rough draft when they came to class. This use of a lottery to assign a conference day is standard procedure in this classroom and was not done for the purposes of the study. In addition, this class had been videotaped earlier in the year, so the students were somewhat accustomed to the electronic intrusion. The only accomodation for the equipment was to seat the students being conferenced in two adjoining rows to facilitate camera angles. As is always the case in this classroom students were conferenced individually at their seats.

The class was working on a research exercise that had asked them to develop a hunch, pursue research via periodicals and books and write a short (2-3 pages) paper using researched argument and support to prove their hunch. The assignment had been in progress since late February when these conferences, the first of two

scheduled draft conferences, occurred. The taped conferences took place on the first of three days of scheduled conferences, again the schedule being consistent with regular classroom procedure. This day was selected for taping because it was the day that the videotape equipment and my camera person were available. It should also be noted that the original tapes were made as a way to show teachers conferencing under classroom conditions.

Description of the Data Analysis

The analysis of the transcripts hinges upon comparing the discourse of the conferences to known data regarding both the teacher-talk register and aspects of conversation. By examining what has been heretofore researched in both areas and then using that research as the basis of comparison, it is hoped that the establishment of conferences on the traditional classroom interaction/conversational structure continuum may be enacted. The same data are used to assess the teacher-centeredness of the conferences.

Each conferencee was first transcribed in linear fashion, looking much like a printed play script. This linear transcription was then placed into a typed form, but this form was divided into three columns representing the Initiation, Response, Evaluation (IRE) format Mehan (1979) adapted from Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). This change from linear to IRE format represented the first stage of analysis, for decisions were needed to place units of discourse under one of the three categories. Once these new transcripts were complete, each conference was evaluated as to how well it conformed to the model proposed for conversation by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). The transcripts were then assessed for evidence of turn-taking procedures with evidence of nomination, bidding and cueing particularly in mind, as well as identification of who initiated each turn. Another sought category of discourse was the amount of talk and how it related to whom was talking

In addition to this organized assessment (organized in the sense that these categories were decided upon before the tapes were viewed for assessment), a less-preconceived and more serendipitous assessment occurred. The tapes were examined to see what they would yield. In other words, an open eye was left for what might be contained within this discourse that would point toward singularity apart from that which is known or accepted regarding classroom or conversational discourse.

A Report of the Findings

If ethnographic research does, as many have said, make the familar unfamilar, then this section must begin with a description of what may appear obvious but cannot be taken lightly. For starters, the conferences were done with the teacher moving from the normal classroom front to a position of equality either seated next to or squatting beside but never standing over the student's desk. This alone helps to remove teacher-centeredness because it increases the chances for a teacher to be seen as advocate rather than adversary (Graves, 1983). Coupled with this, the teacher and one student are the only participants. This physical lowering of status and equalizing of participant ratio begins the conference at a more student-centered place, encouraging mutually negotiated discussion over question/answer/evaluation.

The most obvious finding is that in my role as teacher I talk a great deal in the conferences. Score one for the teacher-centered side of the continuum. This finding is evident by merely looking at the printed transcripts. In all of the conferences I speak more times and at greater length than any of the students, although the length varies from conference to conference. At times I speak less but still more than the student in the conference.

Another way to confirm the teacher domination of the talk in these conferences is to examine who initiates the discourse units. Using Sacks' et al definition of a turn as "a string of utterances spoken by one person between other person's talk" (1974) and

applying it to Mehan's IRE format, topic initiation can be plotted through a speech event (1979). The latter's findings for nine teacher-fronted lessons were that 81.1% of the IRE sequences were teacher-initiated while 17.9% were student initiated. In the five conferences of this study 76% and 22% were quantified respectively. A remaining 2% were relegated to an "other" category which I will refer to shortly. These percentages equate to the much- documented numbers that claim teachers talk three-quarters of the time, leaving students the remaining quarter (Delamont, 1983); (Flanders, 1970); (Holmes, 1978); (Stubbs, 1983).

Yet these sequence initiation numbers also throw weight toward the conversational side of the continuum. To begin, the percentages indicated in the conferences are less for teachers and more for students than those produced by Mehan. This alone indicates movement towards the more equal distribution of perceived power in a conversational format. Looking at the conferences individually, a range of student initiation becomes evident, much like the amount of talk. This range fluctuates from a teacher-initiated sequence low of 66% up to a high of 100%. But clearly in some conferences there is opportunity for students to take and hold the floor and thus reduce the teacher-centeredness of the discourse.

The "other" category referred to earlier is the product of a combination of written and oral discourse. In two cases the seequence was initiated by a note written to the teacher by the student. The teacher then initiated the oral portion of the sequence by commenting on the content of the note. In essence, the student selected the topic by writing the note and the teacher, in turn, elected to pursue the suggested topic before going on to other aspects of the written draft. It was the written suggestion that then sparked the oral interaction.

So far, the discourse of the five conferences hovers between teacher-talk and conversation, between teacher- and student- centeredness. Again, returning to the theme of the obvious, an examination of bidding and cueing - singular acts in

classroom discourse (Mehan, 1979); (Sinclair & Coulthardd, 1975) - shows that they are virtually non-existent in the conferences. Once the teacher makes the initial decision to work with a student (and this is determined more by the assigning lottery than any whim of the teacher), then the two enter into an exchange that requires no bidding nor cueing. In addition, nomination follows the rules of conversation. Either one speaker nominates the other or self-nomination occurs (Sacks et al). For instance, in Example 1 the student initiates the conference.

Example 1

S2: Ready?   T: (nods)

Example 2 shows how a student completes one sequence and then self-nominates into another topic.

Example 2

T: So you need to
    get your reason
    first.
    Bring in the
    warning signals
    but then quote,
    either quote the
    article or docu-
    ment the article.
    One way or the
    other.   S4: OK.

S4: If I wanted to
     bring this up.
     I could just
     write "The
     suicidal rate ..."
     But not at the
     first sentence.   T: Now, again, your
                               first sentence
                               of a paragraph
                               should be just
                               that there are
                               warning signals.

The examples point out a natural flow or shift between speakers. the lack of a need for bidding and cueing and the ability to self-nominate as well as other-nominate lend a

sense of more equalized exchange to the conference and increase the opportunity to reduce teacher-centeredness.

These examples point toward an interesting finding of this study. At least as far as these five conferences are concerned, the IRE formal is rarely adhered to, the transcripts taking on the look of a conversational dyad instead. The IRE, however, is not totally abandoned (see Example 3).

Example 3

T: Now remember
    when we talked
    about introduc
    tions?
    Where should the
    proposition go?   S1: (student points) At   T: Yeah, OK. At the
                                  the end.   end of the intro-
                                                                   duction.

This is a classic IRE seequence. However, as Examples 1 and 2 display, the evaluation component is often missing with the discourse flowing as either the teacher takes a lengthy turn or the teacher and student interact. Example 4 introduces the latter.

Example 4

S4: So but, the
     article that I
     got this out was
     called "All Teen
     Suicides Can Be
     Prevented."   T: OK, but that's
                                  what their
                                  purpose is.

T: That's not your
    purpose.   S4: OK.

T: You see what I'm
    saying.   S4: Umhmm.

The topic initiation and response responsibilities are shared between the student and teacher in this exchange. The component of one participant evaluating the response of the other is ignored. Instead each participant comments and responds in much the

same way conversants do. The more these responsibilities are shared, the more student-centered the conference becomes.

In coding within the IRE formal the word OK , with its multiplicity of uses, presented some sticky situations, as seen in Example 5.

Example 5

T: In other words,
     we want to know
     that you didn't
     make that up.   S4: OK.

T: OK.
     That, that, well
     four thousand,
     five thousand
     sounds good; I'll
     just make that up.

The OK used by the student is an Acknowledgement. However the OK used by the teacher is a Marker framing his initiation (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). The student response is accompanied by a falling intonation indicating closure. The teacher response is a neutral intonation, neither really falling nor rising, and thus points toward continuation. There is nothing evaluative in its use or intonation. This distinction is important because it reduces the number of occurrences of the IRE format and thus heightens the relationship of these conferences to a less teacher-controlled experience.

In another type of comparison, the conferences align with the fourteen components of a conversational model with the possible exception of Component #10 "Number of parties can change" (Sacks et al, 1974: 11). There was no evidence of additional students entering into conversation during these conferences, although I have noted this occurring in other experiences with conferencing. The thirteen other components, however, were displayed in the video tapes. Of particular note and already mentioned is the conference adherence to turn-allocation techniques. This component serves as

distinct separation between the mainly teacher-nominated class routine and the mutually nominating text of conversation.

Finally, two trends seemed evident. First, the teacher talk was pierced regularly by comprehension checks, usually either OK or all right voiced as a question. This trend fed the second which was a consistent display of back channeling - both oral and non-verbal - by the students. In this instance, the conferences resembled a common situation where one person might be telling another how to get to such-and-such a place; the speaker periodically ascertains that the listener is following and the listener, for her part, provides affirmation. If this is the case, and further study would be warranted, the conferences would lean away from the norm of teacher-fronted classrooms and toward speech events that show more equality among participants.

A Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study are both pertinent and immediate. As the teacher involved in the study, I am its first benefactor. However, all teachers who conference can claim both the caution and optimism of this study as their own. The caution is that, like the studies that fueled this research, it is evident that teacher/student conferencing can be a teacher-centered activity if left unchecked. The amount of time that teachers talk, the length and number of turns taken, as well as the number of turns initiated all suggest that a teacher who wishes to decentralize via conferencing must do so in a manner that reflects the principles behind the act. To rephrase, a conferencing teacher must be one who maintains an awareness of what gets said, how often, and by whom, and further, must be willing to interact with students outside a traditional IRE format. Periodic audio and video tape recordings would serve to place a teacher in touch with conferences as they actually occurred and not as they are remembered, thus enabling the reflective process.

The study's optimism lies in the conference's potential to be less teacher-centered and its tendency to emulate the nature of conversation. By taking the teacher to the student, focusing on the student's work, and eliminating the need for cueing and bidding, the conference gives the sensitive teacher a chance to close the gap between the disparate power levels of the teacher/student relationship. They may never be equal (What dyads are?), but the conferencing lets the two participants slide nearer. Keeping this in mind gives the teacher a target to shoot for, a goal to reach. Knowing that the conditions favor a sharing of power will help to realize that collaboration.

It is optimistic that the conferences tend toward some aspect of conversational participation. This condition also indicates a willingness of both parties to meet on some plane. By showing increased student involvement via topic intiation, verbal back channeling, and self-nomination, the conferences approach a model of more equal participation than is evident in most classrooms. Falling somewhere between conversation and pedagogy, the confernces seem to be a separate speech event within the classroom.

The fact that the transcripts show little of the classroom IRE format supports the idea that conferences are of a separate description from the traditional front-of-the room lesson. When teachers take it upon themselves to conference, they are entering a situation different from the usual classroom give-and-take and should thus exploit the inherent positives. By downplaying their roles as information givers and topic initiators, teachers can use the conference not only to help students become more effective writers but also to bridge the teacher/student power gap.

This study and the ones that precede it have merely touched the surface of teacher/student conferencing and its relationship to the writing classroom. More work needs to be done just ascertaining the content of conferences. What is said when teacher and student talk?

Using this study as a springboard, there are several directions indicated. Most important of these is determining the characteristics of a conference. Will other studies find the tendency toward conversation found in this study? If, as found here, the IRE format is by-and-large inapplicable, then what is or are the formats? Given these findings, what is the most effective way to implement what is known?

Always intriguing are the studies not done. In other words, as the data were being assessed, what avenues beckoned but were left unexplored. For example, of the five conferences, transcripts of 3 and 4 were the most student-centered. Quite simply, why? Was it these students? What made them more willing to talk than the other three? Or was it merely placement - in the middle, away from initial nervousness of the teacher and the press of time at the end? The questions give way to more questions?

Teacher conferencing needs to be studied. It is often not as advertised - a student-centered heuristic for developing writing. This study shows both the strong backbone and vulnerable underbelly of conferencing. If not reflected upon, conferencing can become a teacher-dominated strategy. The students can be discouraged from talking and the old power structures can remain in place. But this study also reveals that a teacher who recognizes the conversational aspects of conferencing can bring teacher and student closer in terms of power. The effects this new alignment can have upon learning are intriguing and open for investigation. What we need are teachers who are more willing to conference and, doing so, are then willing to reflect upon those conferences. In this way educators will continue to add to the rich description of the teacher/student conference.

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