
INTRODUCTION

THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OFFICES WERE ON THE THIRD FLOOR OF the library, on the end near fraternity row. I climbed slowly up the stairs, planting each foot deliberately on the worn marble treads. At the top, to the left, was the secretary's desk. It was a few minutes before five. I stood quietly in front of her, happy to let seconds pass as I waited for her to notice me. When she finally looked up, I asked her where Dr. B's office was. She gave me the number, glanced at the clock, and began to put the plastic cover on her typewriter. "I don't know if he's still there," she said, shrugging on her coat. I gave her a little smile. I hoped he wasn't—in fact, I was counting on it.

The hallway was dim, still, lined by wooden doors darkened with old varnish. Closed now, they were littered with evidence of the academic world: notes, cartoons, and envelopes with students' papers jutting out were taped or thumb-tacked all over them. I walked slowly, quietly, not wanting to break the stillness. My heart rose into my throat—Dr. B's door was ajar, and he was at his desk. He looked up, his eyebrows raising in surprise, then he stood, opening the door wide for me.

"You said to come and see you," I whispered.

"Yes, yes," he said, "come in."

I was a sophomore, a first-generation college student, struggling in my English major, struggling with the language, the ways of writing, learning, and living at college. Dr. B. was notoriously tough and equally well-liked. I had notebooks full of his words—scribbled verbatim—and I also had a stack of papers with ever-decreasing grades. On the last one, he had written: "F+ —come and see me."

So there I was, though I hadn't planned on actually seeing him. I had thought I might just miss him, but would leave a note saying,

“Sorry I missed you. I’ll try to catch you some other time.” The secretary would have been able to vouch that I had really been there, doing what his end note had demanded. But it was all messed up now. Though I could hide in his class—keep my head down, take notes furiously, laugh when others did, look at my book—now it was just the two of us in a small office.

The sounds of the fraternity boys shouting obscenities and insults and laughing loudly rose up through the window as Dr. B. pulled a chair over near his desk. I handed him my paper silently and sat down. He held the paper out for us both to read while I held my chin in my hands and let my long hair fall forward to shield my face. He began with the first page, and line by line, word by word, he showed me where I’d failed, used the wrong construction, argued the reverse of my point, or made no sense at all. From time to time he nodded his head violently, and his little reading glasses fell from his nose to his chest, clicking as they struck a button on his shirt. I could see this through the veil of my hair, but I wouldn’t look openly at him, wouldn’t let him see me.. I couldn’t breathe. My chest and throat were full, and I stared unblinkingly at the monstrously wrong typewritten pages I’d worked hard on to make neat and inconspicuous—just as I’d worked hard to make myself inconspicuous in his class.

Finally he was silent. I remained still. I knew he wanted me to respond, to talk to him, but I had no words. After a little bit, he sat up straight, sighed deeply, leaned forward again, and said something like: “Look. There are some good ideas here. But they’re not phrased right. See? This paragraph right here for example. This is interesting. But listen to how it could sound.” He began to read, changing it subtly or radically as he read. As I followed along, I saw that the words weren’t all mine, but they sounded right somehow, they sounded like what I read in books and articles and the papers written by my wealthy and better-spoken classmates, sounded like what professors sounded like. My ideas, his words.

Suddenly I was standing, and Dr. B. was looking up in surprise. The conference wasn’t over, but I was thanking him, stuffing my paper into my backpack, telling him how helpful he’d been as I turned and whirled back through the doorway, half walking, half running down the dim hall. I was afraid he’d follow me and ask what was wrong, but I was crying and didn’t want him to know. Besides, I didn’t know exactly what was wrong. I banged the ladies room door open, dropped my pack in a stall, and leaned against the door. I didn’t know if I was

crying because I was so stupid that I'd made a nice man—my teacher—frustrated to the point of sighing and giving me an F+, or whether I was relieved that for the first time, my ideas had been matched to the words that carried weight, and maybe I could start again from this one hybrid paragraph and rebuild myself. In the dark stall, I wept in stupidity and relief.

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The poems I'd turned in for the week, now scrawled all over and stained with coffee, lay on my professor's lap. I remember two of them. One was about a bank robbery gone bad, each section of the poem moving further into the mind of one of the robbers. They were all male characters, and their words and thoughts were full of obscenities and sexual slurs. In the other poem, I used the metaphor of a suicidal "jumper" to explore a first sexual experience—mine, as I spoke to a younger sister. The teacher handed me the poems and asked me to read them aloud. He leaned back, eyes shut, listening. When I was done, he rolled his chair over to me, close enough that our legs touched. He looked at me in surprise, laughing a little, and asked me where I'd learned to use obscenity like that. I, too, was astonished, realizing for the first time that my disguise—a privileged coed from a "good" family—was successful, that he couldn't see the "real" me. After the astonishment, I was afraid. I could feel my face burning as I wondered what I should say. That I learned to swear from my mother? That in the summer, when I worked on an island with lobstermen, we talked easily, our speech peppered with obscenity? Finally, I managed to joke, "Jeeze, I wasn't born a nun, you know!" As he laughed and said, "I know, but—" I cut him off, asking an acceptable question in an eager tone: "But does it work?"

We talked in the yellow light of the little office along the same dark hallway I'd fled down a year before. I don't know if he was as aware as I of how close he was sitting to me, of how hard I struggled to find ways to answer his request for "more detail" in my poem, ways that would keep us firmly teacher and student, not friends, not equals, not anything other than what we'd constructed in class. I don't know if *he* struggled as he tried to describe how a man might think in the situations I presented to him. I know I cursed myself silently for giving him these poems, even as I knew that I had no choice. He was my teacher, I had to give him poems, I was going to

be graded by him on my writing, and these were my best. I can't recall exact words now, but the scene remains, almost tactile—our words brushing against each other, the warmth where our legs touched, the coffee-stained pages rough in my hands, the onion skin paper flickering as we breathed.

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I begin with these two memories because they hold great power for me. They have stayed with me for almost two decades, these two relatively brief speech events in a genre of talk which supposedly reduces the tensions of the classroom, lets teachers and students get to know each other, and pushes against those traditional student-teacher power relationships. They embody some of the hidden tensions of conferencing for both students and teachers, and they illustrate some of the problems and frustrations that teachers, myself included, have long voiced about conferencing. Silent students. Writing that is unaffected by conferencing. Resistant students. Open assumptions and hidden fears. For crying out loud, teachers lament, what was going through her head while I was telling her how to fix this paper?! I can't say whether these two examples represent "good" or "bad" conferences; certainly, the first was a turning point in my academic career, and the second a moment when cultural constructions of class, status, and gender stirred the surface of the talk like the backs of hungry fish. They are moments I've returned to when I've asked students to write about their best or worst conferences and I write with them, still not sure into which category to place these conferences.

When I've looked out my door to see three students waiting to conference and my schedule shows twelve after that; when my most difficult student—the one closest to failing, the one who tries and tries and is always on the wrong page, has no draft, can't find the paper—appears late and moments before another student is scheduled, I am reminded of the fear and tensions of my own conferences as a student. Now I'm the one with the chair that rolls and lets me control the geography of the office; I have to ask for more detail; I have to understand resistance, desire, and fear from a perspective I could only guess at—which I didn't—as a student. The problem is, I don't always do these things very well. Like most teachers, I am not merely self-trained at conferencing, but trained by those (in this case,

all white men over my four years as an undergraduate and mostly men, all white, as a graduate student) who held my papers in their hands and talked earnestly to me in words they thought or hoped I would understand. I bring those experiences—most blurred and internalized, a few stark and sharp as the two I've recounted here—with me to my writing conferences. They are now framed in a feminist perspective I didn't have at eighteen or twenty-two or even later. What seemed perfectly natural, woven tapestry-like into the fabric of the first conference, was the fraternity jousting that formed a backdrop for the control Dr. B. had of my paper, my physical space, my words. It also seemed natural at the time of the second conference that I would be writing persona poems in which I adopted the voice of a man, and that the professor would tell me how men thought even in a poem about my own sexual experience.

These are aspects of conferencing that I can interrogate, things I am now sensitive to and conscious of. But the lessons I have learned from my teaching models, from the culture in which I grew up (white, female, working poor, suburban/rural, North American) are less easily noticed. I can reflect on them here while I write: in the real time of conferencing, they are more elusive but no less powerful. If we look back on the two scenes I began with, there is much that is missing; they are sketched and shaded broadly. What were the words Dr. B. used as he dissected my paper? How, finally, did I phrase answers to the questions about my poems, questions which I remember being carefully worded but pressuring? One of the powers of narrative is its movement to which we submit, and thus its ability to escape scrutiny, to avoid being held still and examined. The narratives I've written of my own student conferences are powerful because they are part of a chain, constructed in some ways to evoke similar responses and evoked by stories from my own students and the students of other instructors. They are emotionally "whole" for me, but for analytical purposes, they are incomplete. The narratives we tell each other as teachers who are struggling with our conferences also move along to what appears to be an inevitable conclusion: frustration and often failure. When we turn with delight to a colleague and talk about a wonderful conference, it is often with amazement. But successful or unsuccessful, these are usually stories told on the fly, in a hallway or over a quick cup of coffee, and they remain unreflected upon. Conferencing is something we do, but unexamined, it remains something we do not understand and thus cannot improve.

Writing a book like this is not simply one of those “school things,” as my father would say. Instead it is driven by my desire to understand and come to grips with the fear and frustration of my conferences as a student and my continuing frustration with conferencing as a teacher. I sat silently in my classes and conferences, aware that if I opened my mouth I would reveal something “wrong” about myself. I listened intently for clues to the language I needed in order to respond “intelligently;” I tentatively used language picked up in the classroom on a hit-or-miss basis in my papers and waited for the written comments to teach me things I had no language to even ask about. My class and gender, so different from those who simultaneously “conversed” with me and evaluated me on my ability to “converse” with them, became a part of me I needed to deny or exercise control over. I remember clearly making the decision to say to a professor, “Really?” instead of the more “colorful” and, to me, natural “Get outta heayah!”

In the chapters that follow, I will address many of the problems that teachers and students experience in conferencing. In many ways, it is artificial to separate out one problem from another, for conferences, like the people who construct them, are complex. Any problems or frustrations or confusions we experience in conferencing have multiple sources and solutions. But in order to look for solutions, I’ve needed to isolate and clarify problems. In chapter one, I examine one of the fundamental problems with conferencing—the conflicting paradigms which fill our literature and from which we may draw our visions of conferencing. Are conferences conversations? Are they teaching? If we can see conferencing as something separate from teaching, as a genre of speech itself, we may be able to raise new and productive questions. How do we define this speech genre, and what are the implications of that definition for our practice? What are our purposes in conferencing? And how do our beliefs about the roles of students and teachers affect the ways in which we shape conferences? I consider how changing the focus from the written texts we usually talk about to the spoken text that is the conference can lead us to new ways of thinking about this important part of our practice. In chapter two, I examine the ways in which the asymmetry of conferencing—the differing power status of teacher and student—can lead to frustrating situations. While the first chapter deals with this asymmetry in theory, the second chapter deals with it in practice. What happens when we don’t realize our own power?

When does direction become directive? When do we choose to use our power and why? In chapter three, I look at how gender complicates conferencing. Of course, what we are coming to know more clearly is how “gendered” language is also language that reflects power relations. Simply because we have supposedly replaced the confines of the classroom with the linguistically less constrained parameters of the conference, gender does not disappear for either teacher or student, and our conference talk is marked by the social and linguistic evidence of gender roles in many ways. Chapter four explores the difficulties of cross cultural communication. How does racial difference between parties—with all the social differences that usually entails in this country—affect conferencing? How do we or need we shift conferencing practice for students from other countries or home cultures? As classrooms become more diverse in both culture and ability, teachers are turning to conferences to help individual students. What issues do they need to consider as the relationship becomes one-to-one? In chapter five, I look at the affective dimension of conferencing. It is easy to forget sometimes that we chose our field because of how we felt about our own teachers, how we were moved or inspired by what we read or heard, how we were attracted to a certain approach to understanding the world around us. We get caught up in what students should or need to “know” and forget that knowing and feeling aren’t so easily separated. Participants in conferences come in with feelings, but those feelings aren’t usually acknowledged as valid topics for discussion. Finally, in chapter six, I explore a vision of conferencing that is informed by critical reflection, critical pedagogy, and what I know about language at this point in my life. To construct this chapter, I returned mentally to the faculty lounge where new teachers and experienced teachers sit and talk, where new approaches and possible solutions can rise from the ashes of “crash and burn” conferences through an alchemy of lore, practice, research, and hope.

Throughout this book, I work within a framework informed by tenets of critical pedagogy and sociolinguistics, particularly critical discourse analysis. I draw heavily on my own experience and research on the language of conferencing, assuming, as most critical discourse analysts do, that the structures of society—our relationships to one another—are revealed in our language interactions or, just as importantly, our lack of interaction. Both critical pedagogy and critical discourse analysis are interested in laying bare power structures that

limit or suppress access to knowledge, to public speech, to various social, political, and personal domains; that support the institutionalization of “prestige” and the value system that accompanies it; that help isolate large groups of people who are unable for a number of reasons to participate fully as informed citizens. This theoretical position is always, however, linked to my own experiences as a female, as a child growing up among the working poor, as a student who struggled to fit in socially and academically, as a graduate student who searched for years before realizing what she loved to do, as a teacher of writing and literature and language, and as a writer who writes from institutional compulsion, disciplinary excitement and dialogue, and personal need. Our past is always with us, and these positions and experiences are simultaneously devalued and powerful. I don’t hesitate to draw on them in this book, and I don’t hesitate to ask questions I can’t answer and perhaps can’t even properly articulate or frame. For me, this is the beginning of a dialogue on an important issue. I have in the past been afraid to ask some of my questions about conferencing and teaching, as I know my colleagues have been. If it’s true that much of what goes on in our classrooms is hidden except for the occasional required observation by a peer or administrator and what we choose to share with colleagues, then practically *all* of what goes on in conferences is also hidden, private. Most of what we have learned or “know” about conferencing has gone unquestioned, unexamined, for it is presented as such a simple part of teaching practice that the least able of us should be able to do well. In order to accept that commonly held belief, we must deny our own experiences or fit them, willy-nilly, into the paradigms we’ve been given. If we do so, however, we will never learn.

In many places throughout the book, I refer to and draw on research I’ve conducted on my own conferencing and the conferences of my colleagues. As I explain in more detail in chapter one, I became interested in conferencing after analyzing six of my own conferences: three with female, all white and traditional-aged first-year students, and three with males, again all traditional-aged first-year students, one of whom was African-American. This initial research led me to a larger study of fourteen conferences between first-year students and their teachers, ranging from graduate assistants to a full professor. Four male teachers and three female teachers conference with six male and eight female students (see Appendix A). All but one participant was white. Not all students responded to my request

for demographic data, but of those who did, all indicated they were middle- to upper-class with the exception of a white female, who indicated that she was working class: her father, she said, “worked hard with his hands” to support them. The conferences were audiotaped and transcribed, coded for particular features and a frequency count of features by teacher/student role and gender was done. Certainly, it was a small study of a homogeneous group. But like most teacher research, it grew from an immediate context—I discovered a problem I wanted to explore and possibly resolve. The students represent the demographics where I was teaching, and they and their teachers were willing to help. I use this research as a jumping-off point to raise questions about conferencing, and illustrate with excerpts from the transcripts some of the difficulties teachers and students face in constructing successful, meaningful conferences.

The title of the book reflects the tensions of writing conferences and my concern with the structure that undergirds them. We desire for so much to happen in conferences with our students, maybe more than we will admit to ourselves. And we often find ourselves caught, unable to balance teaching and talking, either unable to leave the platform and step out on the tightwire or rushing because our lives depend upon it to the safety of the opposite end of the wire. I thought at length about incorporating into the title of this book a reference to one student’s—Dana’s—off-hand, vaguely negative summary of Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River” as a “story of a man who went on a fishing trip.” This was partly because I am drawn to images that resonate for me, and this one became a controlling image as I wrote. I think, as a teacher, I’ve always felt that conferencing with my students about their writing helped bring me closer to them somehow. But as I listened to the tape of Dana and Eric’s conference, I laughed along with Eric as he rephrased Dana’s comment to “a long story about fishing.” It was a moment when I realized how great a distance I had come from being a student myself, how imbedded in professorial power and knowledge I was. I felt ashamed that I could laugh at the “ignorance” of a student, embarrassed that I accepted the professor’s rephrasing, which poked fun at the student for the very problem she had come to speak with him about: how to “be insightful.” Yet listening to myself laugh, feeling this awkward moment, I realized I could create a new role, a new place for me to stand as I thought through all these conferences. After all, wasn’t I after the same thing as Dana—to be insightful

about my own teaching, my own conferencing? I suspect that the readers of this book are themselves all fishing in the waters of teaching and learning, of language and power and change, and that we are open and excited by the possibilities, by playing an active role in an on-going story where what we really catch and what we create are open to discussion. And where the analogy breaks down, there is more complexity and even excitement, for students are our partners in this practice. We can fish alone, but we cannot confer alone.

If the composition community has embraced a pedagogical technique that it has not fully explored, it has done so on the basis of the most humane assumptions: it allows teachers and students to enter each other's worlds, it affords teachers the opportunity to provide individualized help to students, and it extends collaboration beyond the classroom, beyond the peer-writing group. And yet, every time I have asked students to write about either their best or worst conferencing experiences, the great majority of them choose to write about their worst. Some admit that they can't think of a best, only a "least worst." Writing along with the students, I, too, find that I have many "worst" conferences to write about, but have only a scanty cupboard of "bests" as both teacher and student. What occurs between the best of intentions that we began with and the often ineffective or even negative outcomes that students and teachers report? I hope, in the rest of this book, to come a little closer to answering that question and to offer some suggestions to create more "bests" for all participants in conferences.