

Some Cautions For Writing Teachers Using the Conference Method

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Ionesco's one act play The Lesson is a drama of the tutorial method gone awry. With hallucinatory intensity it depicts an exchange between a middle-aged male language teacher and his young, rather attractive, female student. During the lesson the tutor exhibits his power over her--a power that is conferred on him by his mastery of verbal skills--while the pupil, for her part, undergoes a series of changes. She is successively presented as subservient or helpless; she grows fearful then angry, finally seductive. Though the professor is initially obsequious, he soon begins bullying her with a nonsensical lecture on philology. Finally, he grows frustrated with her lack of comprehension. He brandishes a knife (the stage directions permit it to be an imaginary one), then stabs and kills her--his fortieth victim of the day. The professor's use of a fictitious weapon suggests that in Ionesco's mind the assault is spiritual as much as it is physical--an attack on the soul as well as on the flesh. It is an event with political overtones: the professor is the sort of bully that Naziism produced, and his student is a victim who is all too pliable and cooperative. How disconcerting for us as teachers of writing that Ionesco would find in the familiar student/teacher conference an objective correlative for the very worst abuses of political power.

When this play was conceived, the tutorial method was more familiar to Europeans than it was to us, committed as we were to the lecture or a combination of lecture and discussion. However, in the last ten years we have observed the growing emergence of the student/teacher conference as an important tool in the teaching of composition. With the growth of writing labs and the development of new methods of instruction in writing skills, the emphasis has shifted from the impersonal lecture to the personal conference, from the classroom to the writing lab. The movement that began here with Janet Emig's¹ endorsement of student/teacher conferences, and was given further impetus by Garrison's individualized methods,² places primacy on the tutorial method for teaching rhetoric. A concomitant development has been the stress on writing not as product but as process--a recognition that "writing is revising" as Hemingway expressed it.

As might be expected, however, new solutions also create new problems. And the confluence of these developments--the tutorial method and the revising process--is no exception. If, in many cases, the conference method increased intimacy between teacher and student, in some instances it has also aroused and intensified some dark feelings, those similar to the ones Ionesco was dramatizing--feelings which had been masked or lain dormant in the lecture method.

Granted what transpires in the teacher/student conference will not approach the savagery generated by Ionesco's characters. Even so, in diluted form, the same tensions are often manifest and may be hindering communication. They should not be ignored. Though some of the literature in composition studies does recognize the conflicts that may exist between student and teachers, most tend to concentrate on the student's feelings and overlook the tutor's reactions. In psychoanalytic terms, they focus on transference rather than on counter-transference. Since these terms are often loosely used, let me offer a definition of them. Transference is the projection upon others of unconscious feelings which the individual originally directed toward a parent. As such, they are regressive in nature, having as their point of origin not the current, objective situation, but ones that took place in infancy or childhood. The feelings that may be

aroused in transference include anger, hurt, criticism and resentment. Counter-transference, on the other hand, refers to the reaction of a therapist to a patient (or teacher to student). In counter-transference the therapist unwittingly reacts in kind to the emotional outbursts of his patient, which only serves to heighten the tension. In terms of the writing conference, the teacher mistakenly meets the student's frustration or anger with his/her own.

Before proceeding further, let me relate my own experiences with the conference method and the kinds of problems I encountered. While I had been holding office conferences for many years, I only began relying on them as Garrison advocates in the spring of 1980. Armed with some of the methods of Dawe and Dornan³ at a 4C's conference, I began with great enthusiasm. Soon, however, I became aware of how discomfiting conferences could be for some of my students. I assumed that perhaps in their past discussing matters with a teacher meant academic or disciplinary problems of one sort or another. (An open door college such as mine attracts a wealth of marginal students.) And I was comforted by the fact that most of my students did grow more relaxed in time. But some did not. Despite my efforts to praise the strengths of their papers and to limit my suggestions for improving the paper to one feature of it, a number of students remained anxious. At first I could discern no correlation between their tension and either their grades or the extent of the revisions I was proposing. Some students overreacted to the most modest suggestions; some argued rather than reflect on my comments; some seemed distant; some (usually females) grew flustered and uncomprehending; a few stopped coming.

Their reactions bewildered me: studies I had read indicated that the conference method was preferred by students to more conventional methods.⁴ Yet here I was wincing at their indifference, their anxiety, or their outright hostility. But I was puzzled. What were they reacting to? It wasn't until I assigned a personal paper that I got the clue I needed. The assignment was to describe some aspect of their past that had formed them into the kind of individuals they had become. Unexpectedly, a pattern began to emerge: many of the overreacting students had written about difficulties with their fathers. This led me to wonder: were they displacing their anger onto me? Was I being cast as an overcritical parent from their past? It certainly seemed so. But whatever the etiology of such behavior, I had been alerted to how transference might operate during student/teacher conferences. Moreover, I became aware of how readily I responded to student frustration with my own. (Writing teachers, I think, suffer from chronic guilt and helplessness over not being able to do more for students.) Freud himself readily acknowledged that transference does emerge in situations other than therapeutic ones, but little attention has been given to them as a factor in the writing conference.

That transference arises in the student conference should not be surprising since in many respects it approximates the client/doctor relationship of the psychoanalytic situation. In both, intensity and genuineness of feeling are paramount; personal feelings and beliefs are revealed; an unilateral communication is stressed, i.e., the student's attitudes and expression are explored rather than the teacher's. Inasmuch as the teacher tends to reserve his beliefs, he functions as a therapist or parent might, which then allows the student to project his yearnings for parental comfort or to grow angry when it is not forthcoming.

Moreover, a tantalizing link may exist between the teacher of verbal skills and the parent--a link which encourages transference. Psychiatrist Leo Stone⁵ couples transference to that stage of development during which the child craves the omnipotent parent remembered from infancy. In the early stages of development, the child perceives the mother with ambivalence: she is an omnipotent

figure, but one whom he must begin disassociating from in order to develop into an autonomous being. This process of disassociation is intimately connected with the child's progress in learning language. Thus, the acquisition of language is accompanied by painful feelings of separation anxiety. Stone theorizes that the analyst/analysand relationship is a repetitive echo of that primal situation with all its attendant ambivalence. In taking this line, Stone is extending Freud's postulate that the ego begins to form at the time the child is learning to speak. Thus, for both thinkers the development of language and ego are inextricably linked. If this is true, we can see how criticism of an individual's language skills may easily be misinterpreted as an attack on his/her ego. The result of such criticism is apt to be an unreasoning response--what Freud called infantile hostility. An interesting experiment was conducted by Harold Garfinkel,⁶ in which he asked his students to require verbal precision in the idle chatter of their friends. Here are some instructive excerpts:

"Hi, Ray, how is your girl friend feeling?"

"What do you mean how is she feeling, do you mean physical or mental?"

"I mean how is she feeling. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. Just explain a little clearer what you want to know."

"Skip it. Hey, are you sick?"

A second dialogue:

"All these old movies have the same kind of old iron bedstead in them."

"What do you mean? Do you mean all old movies, or some of them, or just the ones you have seen?"

"What's the matter with you? You know what I mean."

"I wish you would be more specific."

"Drop dead."

The above examples suggest that for many, "speech creates the soul," as Otto Rank put it. For these people, words are not simply a form of communication, but a form of magic, not to be questioned or tampered with. To the teacher of writing, such a view is pernicious, if not outright nonsense. (One wonders if Rank ever read a freshman theme!) After all, what we are trying to convey to our students is precisely the opposite: that their language needs to be revised, not worshipped.

At the same time we need to be aware how difficult it is for anyone, students or professional writers alike, to disassociate their words from their egos. At such times, the teacher/student conference, devoted as it is not simply to encouragement but correction, may be perceived as a source of tension, as a threat. In addition, the very inequality of language skills between teacher and student may create anxiety. "To know how to speak is to have power," asserts Richard Schechner⁷ in explaining the professor's dominance over his student in Ionesco's play. (That unequal verbal skills can create social inequality is the basis of Shaw's play *Pygmalion*.) This same phenomenon is also evident in many social situations. Which of us as teachers of writing skills have not considered evasion when asked about our professions? Especially since we know that the truth usually elicits a comment like, "Oh, you teach writing, my worst subject. I guess I'd better watch my language.") So too, a student's perceptions of his/her inferior verbal skills may well produce a similar tension in the writing conference. "Philology leads to calamity," states the maid in Ionesco's play, later amending it to "And philology leads to crime." As indeed it does, for the unseen knife is a verbal knife that can rape and kill.

In the play both teacher and student are in the grip of primitive feelings, heightened no doubt, but similar to those that may be aroused in both students and teachers in the writing conference.

While it is evident that negative transference may be evoked wherever authority figures surface, I suspect it arises more intensely with male teachers. This is probably because men are traditionally associated with authority, whereas the female teacher may more readily be identified with nurturance. Since many eighteen-year-olds no doubt are engaged in resisting their father's domination, the male teacher may well become the target of their hostile feelings. George Orwell (who recognized a colonial situation when he saw one, and he saw one in the classroom) may have had something like this in mind when he wrote that no teacher should deceive himself into forgetting that, whatever else his students feel for him, they also resent him.

Whether the transference reaction stems from childhood as the Freudians claim or not,⁸ its appearance poses problems for both the student and teacher, for it hinders communication. All writing teachers who have conferences with their students have seen symptoms that very likely stem from negative transference: the student grows flustered and unable to concentrate to the extent that even simple instructions cannot be absorbed. (Often the student attempts to jot down all of the teacher's comments rather than absorbing and evaluating them.) Or he may overreact to criticism of any sort, however mild. He seems to welcome opportunities for anger and recriminations, citing inconsistencies in the teacher's responses to his writing. ("But you said...") He seems to anticipate criticism and attempts to forestall it even before the instructor has had time to read the paper; or he keeps up a nervous monologue while it is being read. Frustration, when it is expressed, seems extreme, and, on occasion, may be accompanied by tears. The student may engage in paradoxical behavior, like openly acknowledging that he has trouble expressing himself but reacting irritably when the teacher advises revision. I assume these situations are familiar to every writing teacher who conducts individual conferences. The impetus in composition toward Rogerian techniques, with its stress on positive reinforcement, speaks to an underlying anxiety that writing teachers have regarding their dealings with many of their students. However, the most compassionate and helpful teacher will discover that some students confuse him with a judgmental parent or former teacher and react accordingly.

Though the teacher has only limited ability to prevent negative transference, he need not be helpless when it does surface. The teacher can prevent a bad situation from becoming worse in the same manner that an analyst does -- by monitoring his own reactions and by recognizing his own susceptibility to counter-transference. He can acknowledge to himself what Auden in his elegy to Freud calls "the frailty of our conscience and anguish." Our frailty is what I wish to stress: for just as the student may overreact, so too may the teacher. How easy it is for us to respond in kind to the student's hostility, to misassociate this student with figures from our own past.

My own experiences have taught me the responses that signal my own confusion in dealing with a student. Among them is a tendency to overestimate the significance of a single student's dissatisfaction with my teaching methods. Or an urge to defend myself from a student's stated or implied accusation of incompetence, capriciousness, or lack of sensitivity. Occasionally, I find myself justifying my grades or comments with a student long after it is serving

any useful purpose. Or I may be assuming responsibility for a student's disappointing performance or lack of motivation. I tend to assume, often erroneously, that a student will be crushed by a failing grade and that I will have to bear the guilt for this. (In reality some students welcome poor grades as evidence to their parents that they do not really belong in college.) When my remarks to a student no longer seem informational in intent but assume an obsessive and pleading or argumentative tone, then I am probably not responding to the situation at hand but confusing it with a more primal struggle, perhaps with my own over-critical parent. On days when I am fearful of being disliked, defensive, uncertain over my competence (and there are days when I feel all of these), then the conference method is going to create, rather than help surmount, problems.

Although there are strategies for dealing with these situations, what one does at such moments is less important than how one perceives his own feelings. The teacher who senses that he is counter-transferring can save himself considerable grief by his refusal to act on these feelings. He may have devised strategies for dealing with the student -- it certainly is a good idea to have some -- but while tactics are important, more important is the teacher's ability to identify his own feelings before he acts on them. Expunging them is another matter. Unfortunately, I have found no simple remedy for that. (Faith, hope and charity are remedies, but they are not simple.)

Still, there are tactics a teacher might employ to keep a bad situation from growing worse. For example, most students already know what revisions their papers need, so rather than tell them I simply ask what changes they have planned. In cases where there is unresolvable disagreement over a grade, I have found it useful to report to the student that we have both stated our position and that it would be best to acknowledge that no compromise is possible. Stating this aloud relieves me of the burden of either attempting to please the student or forcing him to acknowledge the justice of my grading standards. (He must accept the grade, of course, but, at least, is spared being bullied into admitting that it is deserved.) In such situations where I am unwilling to alter a grade, I still can sympathize with the student's frustration by informing him that I am sorry he is disappointed. (A small touch, but it helps.)

In situations where the student overreacts to criticism of his paper, I have found it best not to talk but to listen. Often such students are willing to accept the grade or the criticism if their protests are acknowledged. (One can only wonder over how many have been dealing with unreceptive parents!) Here it may be useful to use Rogers' technique of summarizing what the student has said before offering a comment on the content. Most important, I try to avoid engaging in controversy, which only indicates that I am matching the student's insecurities with my own.

It is also useful to remember that while no one can control another's feelings, the writing teacher can to some degree influence his student's behavior. A student who is disturbed by a grade can be helped by a teacher who is willing to discuss in class what he considers appropriate behavior in appealing a grade--a perfectly appropriate topic for class that is studying strategies in persuasion. Early in the quarter I indicate to students that I am most receptive to complaints when the student has already discharged his anger, when he indicates that he has reflected on my comments, and when he can provide reasons for me to reconsider the grade.

Previously in this paper, we have been considering problems that arise as a result of negative transference. Freud, however, reminds us that transference

may be positive as well--though "positive" here should not be equated with desirable. Positive transference arises when the student has a friendly attitude toward the instructor, but one that is still based on a confusion between the teacher and a beneficent parent. The teacher is viewed in idealized terms --as someone who can perform magic--perhaps, as an ideal mate or lover. We need to distinguish this feeling from the affectionate one that may develop between two people in ordinary intercourse--one that indeed may enhance the learning process. Positive transference is different: it is manipulative. In its single-minded hunger, it may subvert the learning process entirely. Students acting on this feeling are apt to make inordinate demands on your time; or they may exhibit amorous impulses or coquettish behavior. Some idealize the teacher in a manner which makes instruction difficult: for example, they may spurn help from anyone but the instructor or fail to develop a faculty for self-criticism. They may attempt to manipulate you into correcting or even writing sections of their papers. One's own instincts are the best guide in identifying such students: simply put, they are the ones one wishes to flee from. Or towards. The latter may be the greater danger. The chief difficulty in dealing with these students may lie in resisting the flattery that accompanies this sort of transference, in resisting the plea that the teacher re-write their papers, and in avoiding the tendency to inflate their grades. Strategies are simpler than they are in the case of negative transference, since these students are less apt to make scenes. The student may simply need reminding that you have only an allotted amount of time for each student. Or you may need to explain once again that it is their job not yours to devise an introduction or conclusion for their papers. Or to supply them with topics. (These students must be distinguished from those who really do not know how to do these things. In either case, an effective strategy is to offer the student a possible introduction, for example, provided the student agrees not to use it.) In positive transference, it is important that the teacher speedily recognize the fact that s/he is being manipulated. Dealing with the student usually only involves a polite refusal to be manipulated.

In the foregoing discussion, I have indicated that teachers, like analysts, must be sensitive to their reactions to students if they are to employ the conference approach effectively. Failure to do so may quickly produce in both teachers and students the kinds of tensions observable in Ionesco's play--alternations of infantile rage with feelings of helplessness. The result is not likely to be murder, but it may well be frustration for one and burn-out for the other.

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NOTES

¹See Janet Emig, The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders, NCTE Research Report no. 13.

²Roger Garrison, "One-to-One Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition," New Directions for Community Colleges, Spring, 1984.

³An explanation of their methods may be derived from their text, Charles W. Dawe, and Edward A. Dornan, One To One (Little, Brown and Co., 1981).

⁴Testing the Effectiveness of the One-to-One Method of Teaching Composition: Improvement of Learning in English Project, Jo An McGuire Simmons, Project director (Los Angeles City College, April, 1979), pp. 25-28.

⁵Leo Stone, The Psychoanalytic Situation: An Examination of its Development and Essential Nature (International Universities Press, 1961).

⁶Harold Garfinkel, as reported in Paul Goodman's Speaking and Language: Defence of Poetry (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 57.

⁷Richard Schechner, "The Bald Soprano and The Lesson: An Inquiry into Play Structure," in Ionesco: A Collection of Critical Essays (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 29.

⁸The link between transference and regression is explored, for example, by Karl Menninger, Theory of Psychoanalytic Technique (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 43-98.