Awakening the Writer's Identity through Conferences

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After four years of *teaching* basic writing at a four-year, community-based university, I gave up. I quit teaching. I abandoned my authoritative, traditional blackboard pedagogy and began using writing conferences to redefine myself as a collaborative writer working in a community of writers: basic student writers. The result is revealed in the words of one student writer in last semester's evaluations: "I got to know other writers and did not feel ashamed if I made mistakes that all writers make. Mostly, I enjoyed having Ms. Freeland as my writing friend."

Now each semester I teach less and my students learn more. I cancel ten or more class days to provide time for approximately five fifteen- to twenty-minute conferences. As a result of this one-on-one time, my students are no longer victims of "bleeding drafts" that immobilize them through lack of confidence and dread of writing. Over the last four semesters, I have come to love my job, and my students are generally surprised by their writing potential—and that they don't hate to write.

Since graduate school, I had used conferences with my first-year composition classes. Names such as Janet Emig, Thomas Carnicelli, Peter Elbow, and Donald Murray were headliners in my graduate rhetoric and composition courses, so I knew that writing conferences should be an aspect of my pedagogy for basic writing courses. When I prepared my first syllabus, I obediently scheduled several conferences each semester: the first early as a get-to-know-you effort and a few others sprinkled later throughout the semester to go over my comments on a draft of an essay. Unfortunately, for the majority of their writing assignments, these basic writing students, who were for the most part inexperienced in both study skills and writing, were expected to navigate alone through my generous feedback to their drafts. They would then rewrite based on my written comments, trying desperately to get the paper up to my standards, and return the final effort to me for a grade. Clearly, the concept of the writing conference had been lost on me.

In the few conferences I did schedule, my basic writing students were cordially invited to sit down in cozy proximity to me in my office with a mauled draft on the desk between us. Then I would begin. First, I *told* the student what I thought the strengths of the paper were—often a standard generalization about an interesting topic or a contrived "I like the way you catch the reader's attention." Then came the "But." The remainder of the fifteen-minute conference centered on a detailed "going over" of problems that *I* felt the student needed to work on. The student, eyes shifting back and forth from the draft to me, sat silent, nodding when appropriate.

In the interest of self-evaluation, I even asked students to tell me in their journal writing how they felt about the conference experience. The diligent students responded that they were grateful for the abundant feedback, and, in turn, their revisions mirrored my ideas, and the final product was graded accordingly. A few outspoken students who generally did not do well in my class made comments like "Ms. Freeland made me see what a bad writer I am and how hard I will have to work to pass this course." Even more telling, however, was the attrition in my basic writing classes. Every semester I would lose or fail approximately one-third or more of my basic first-year students. Of course, I attributed this loss to my high standards and rationalized that if these students couldn't take the pressure, they probably didn't belong in college. My formal student evaluations were generally high among those who survived the class, because I was "a good teacher who told us how to make our papers better."

After a few years, however, I realized there was no joy on either side of the desk. I was forcing students to make rote changes in their drafts that had no meaning to them as writers, whereas

sitting for hours writing prescriptive, mostly negative comments on student drafts exhausted me.

I knew I had to rethink my approach to teaching writing and how basic writing students learned to become writers. Those writing process theorists and practitioners I had studied in graduate school came 'round to haunt me—not from textbooks, but from my own unproductive teaching practices. I needed to create in my conferences a climate that allowed students to learn based on their own observations of their writing. Rather than telling them where their writing needed work through copious, hand-written comments, I wanted students to *discover*, through a genuine sense of audience need and writer purpose, what worked and what did not in their writing. Peter Elbow in *Embracing Contraries* (1986) affirms that the writer has the right to ground his behavior on his own experiences, "to embark on his own voyage of change, development, and growth as to what is right for him" (69).

Evaluative, teacher-centered conferences were having a negative effect on my students' perceptions of themselves as writers, resulting in frustration and high attrition in my classes. So I set out to redefine my role from authoritative teacher to collaborative reader and to design writing conferences that affirm the student's identity as "writer," thus placing control of the writing process where it belongs: in the hands of the writer.

To establish a collaborative, reader-writer relationship in writing conferences, I made three basic adjustments in my pedagogy: (1) I changed the way I respond orally to students' work to impart a collaborative rather than an authoritative relationship; (2) I have students write reflectively both before the conference, to set their own agenda, and after, to establish personal writing goals; and 3) I changed the way I assess students' work, moving from traditional grading to portfolio assessment so that writing conferences were about writing, not grades. As a result of these adjustments, I have seen over the last three semesters a marked change in student motivation, as well as lower attrition and higher grades.

Setting up a nonthreatening learning environment in a writing conference requires the use of collaborative language, which shifts the students' self-perception from mere students to the position of writer, and the use of nonevaluative responses to students'

work, which allows the students to make decisions about the needs of their readers and their own purposes for writing.

Changing the way we think often requires changing the way we speak. I began referring to basic writing students as "writers" both in the classroom and in the conference because anyone who is creating a written document is a writer, no matter the scope of the work or the experience of the creator. When discussing writing strategies or concerns about a student's work, for example, I refer to myself as the "reader" (Clark 1988, 128). As a student writer and I are going over a draft and I hear a portion that is not written clearly, I will say, "As a reader, I get confused here." When examining possible solutions, I will say, "As a writer, it seems you have several choices." Through this collaborative language, the student understands that "good" writing begins with identifying purpose and the reader's needs. A multitude of drafts soaked in my authoritative comments might *inform* students that this is true, but they only truly *learn* by discovering that, as writers, they are capable of making decisions about their own work.

Overwhelming students with "constructive feedback" on drafts, whether verbal or written, provides them with new information but no new skills (Taylor 1993, 24). Therefore, I also changed the way I respond to student writing. Because as a writing teacher I have extensive experience in solving writing problems, I sometimes find myself slipping into the authoritative role of teacher and dominating the conversation. To maintain a collaborative environment, I use Beverly Clark's conferencing strategies of asking open-ended questions, being silent, and mirroring (1988, 124).

Using nonevaluative, open-ended questions in dialoguing with basic writing students about their writing is a strategy that affirms a collaborative relationship in the writing conference. Nonevaluative questions, which neither praise nor criticize, draw out the writer's meaning (Murray 1988, 236). Instead of telling students what they are doing wrong and how they should fix the problem, I begin by assuming that the writer knows the work better than I do (Connors and Glenn 1999, 57). I ask questions such as, "Is this what you want to say?" or "How can you revise this sentence to make it easier to read?" or "As a writer, you have several choices—which do you think conveys your meaning to

your reader?" When my students answer open-ended, nonevaluative questions, they hear in their own language, based on their experience as readers and listeners, what their reader needs or wants from the text.

I try to remain silent while the student writer thinks of a response, even if the silence goes on for an uncomfortable amount of time. I may *think* I know the best answer, but I must give the writer time to work out his or her meaning and purpose. Once the writer has spoken and I have listened, I often summarize, or mirror, what was said in an effort to reassure both of us that we understand the ideas. I might say, for example, "What I'm hearing is that you want the reader to see that having more classroom aides is the most important aspect of successfully mainstreaming disabled students. Okay. Do you think your thesis conveys this message?"

Of course, it is never my intent to frustrate the basic writing student by not providing any suggestions when the writer simply cannot move forward on his or her own. A writing conference is often a balancing act between spontaneity and pedagogy (Black 1998, 25). When a student draws a blank, I offer simple directive suggestions that model my own writing experience ("I would try . . ."), but I always leave the writing decision to the student.

Another crucial element in establishing a collaborative reader-writer relationship with my basic writing students in the writing conference is having them gain ownership of their writing process through reflective writing. The students' reflective writing not only provides me with information that guides our conferences, but also engages the writers in a form of assessment that maximizes learning; the students are forced to identify what they have done and what they can do (Camp and Levine 1991, 200).

I finally realized that if students can't ask the question, they probably are not ready for the answer; so I ask them to bring to the conference a written reflection about their work—its strengths and weaknesses, and questions that they as writers would like to focus on in the conference. This exercise puts the students in control of their own writing processes and sets the agenda for the conference (Walker 1992, 72). I have found, however, that early in the semester basic writing students often don't know enough to ask specific questions about their work, or they will

ask general questions such as, "Is my paper interesting?" and "Does my paper flow?" When a student arrives at the conference with no questions or vague ones, we begin the conference by reading the paper aloud (Clark 1988, 129). Although basic writing students may lack writing experience, they have been *listening* all their lives and are usually capable of identifying unclear statements, choppy syntax, or illogical organization. In other words, students adopt the role of intelligent reader for a few moments while listening to the sound of their own words. As the writer reads, he or she discovers, as a reader, some of the problems with the content and language of the text. It is my job to add vocabulary or "writer talk" to these concerns (e.g., structure, syntax, transition, etc.) and, little by little, the writer learns to read critically and to use this new vocabulary to dialogue about the work.

Even this vague question about "flow" can initiate a productive conference. I first ask the student, "Can you show me where you attempted to use language and/or structure to help the reader 'transition' from one idea to the next?" If the student cannot specify any particular words or strategies, we turn to the handbook or textbook and examine the information on transitions and coherence. After this minilesson, we go back to the student's work and find places where a transition is needed. Our inquiry leads the writer to discover meaning and the audience's need for logical organization. The student leaves with plenty to work on for the next revision.

But before the student writer walks out of the conference, I ask him or her to jot down either on the draft or a separate piece of paper what we learned in the conference and goals for revision. Those notes will become a reflective journal or letter that assesses the revised work. The postconference reflective journal encourages the students to narrate, analyze, and evaluate their own writing and thus connect this assessment to their own learning (Yancey 1998, 146). Student writers become responsible for reading their own work critically, reflecting on its strengths and weaknesses, and discussing possible revision strategies while fortifying their writing vocabulary. This reflective journal serves to expedite my response or the responses of other readers such as peer groups and can also be used to set the agenda for a subsequent conference.

Reflective writing not only gives the basic writing students ownership of their work in the one-on-one writing conference, but its benefits also spill over into peer groups in the classroom. After several conferences with me, I find that students begin to emulate this writing conference model in their peer groups. By the middle of the semester, as I listen to groups interact, it is with great satisfaction that I hear writers talking about writing. As Roger Garrison (1999) states so well, "The primary job of a teacher is to do himself out of a job as quickly and efficiently as he can" (358). Reflective writing teaches student writers to evaluate their own work, which makes my job as facilitator much less stressful. I agree with Elbow (1986) that we haven't taught the student how to do something unless she can determine on her own whether she has done it (167).

As writing conferences became the primary tool in my writing pedagogy, assigning a grade to drafts or to each individual project seemed to undermine the students' ownership of the writing process and the collaborative relationship I was striving to advance. I was compelled to rethink my mode of assessment and move away from traditional grading practices to portfolio assessment. Portfolio assessment allows students to use their expanding knowledge of writing to revise all of their writing throughout the semester. The student writer chooses selections from a revised body of work—the result of many writing conferences and much revision—to present for final evaluation and a course grade. By deferring grades until the end of the term, I am able to foster a "writing environment" in my conferences, maintaining my role as reader/collaborator (Sommers 1991, 156). Yes, ultimately, the writing must be evaluated, but the final grade represents a body of work written over the course of a semester rather than a compilation of individual, terminal grades that each assignment earned, including those written early in the semester when the writer had little experience or knowledge.

Students' responses to portfolio assessment are mixed at the beginning of the semester, although usually a few had experienced this kind of assessment in high school and are immediately comfortable with the concept. A carefully presented introduction to the concept and process of portfolio assessment in the early days of the course usually allays the fears of those who are initially uncomfortable with the idea of not receiving grades on each assignment. I have found, however, that once we begin the conferencing, reflective writing, and revision pattern, the question of grades rarely comes up. The course becomes about writing and writers, and the notion of grades seems unnatural.

Undeniably, due to lack of maturity or confidence, some basic writers need the accountability that grades provide; therefore, I do midsemester writing conferences for which the students must prepare a portfolio of their work so far. At this point, I tell students who either want to know or are in danger of failing what grade they are earning. But because students are allowed multiple revisions, those who are revising to meet the criteria for the assignment know where they stand based on our discussion in conferences and carefully worded "clues" written on drafts. I will write, for example, "Your work on adding transitions to create coherence is effective. As a reader, I'm still anticipating more support for your final point on parents' reactions to the new 'zero tolerance' policy." Or, "I'm satisfied that this project meets all the criteria for the assignment. If you are satisfied, why don't you put it aside for final polishing later and work on your informative project." In other words, I continue to encourage the student to revise but not to the point of frustration. Even though it can be argued that "real writers" are never satisfied with a product, I think basic writers can become overwhelmed and discouraged if they are asked to rewrite indefinitely on a project, sometimes feeling pressure to work on several projects at the same time.

So what happens when the day of reckoning comes and the course grade must become the subject of our conference? The student and I negotiate the grade for the course during an exit conference. At this terminal point in the semester, the student's writing for the course is finished, and she presents a body of written work that demonstrates her accomplishments in the class. The reflective writing for this final portfolio consists of a cover letter and a self-evaluation sheet, which lists the criteria for the course. The student writer measures his work against the criteria for the course, which has been a continual source of discussion throughout the semester, and, in the cover letter, explains why, based on evidence in the portfolio, he has earned a particular

grade. Before the conference, I review both the portfolio contents and the cover letter and write a brief assessment of the student's work based on the criteria sheet. At the conference, we negotiate the grade. Since the grade is based on hard evidence, portfolio grade disagreements are rare. I have encountered only two out of ninety-one basic writing students with whom I could not amicably reach a consensus. When that happens, I assign a grade that I feel reflects the standards of the course and the university.

As each semester passes, I am more convinced by the positive atmosphere of my classroom and the success of my basic student writers that the writing conference is pedagogy at its best because it is pedagogy at its least. Writing conferences are now the foundation of all my 100- and 200-level writing classes. All writers, regardless of experience, need to talk through their ideas and concerns to identify their purpose and direction. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1960), Alice asks the Cheshire Cat, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" The Cat replies, "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." Writing conferences work this way. In a writer-rich collaborative environment, I no longer have to *teach* writing; I merely participate as an experienced fellow traveler as my students, through "writer talk," written reflection, and self-evaluation, find their way—not only as writers, but also as intelligent readers and thinkers.

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