

The Teacher-Student Writing Conference and the Desire for Intimacy

Neal Lerner

In the Museum of Composition Practices a variety of techniques fill the display cabinets: Talk-Write, the drill pad, sentence diagramming, tagmemics, programmed instruction (with copies of Joseph Blumenthal's *English 3200*). While some seem quaint anachronisms of earlier, more naïve times, and others remain in use despite the best intentions of the curators, one practice never collects dust: teacher-student conferencing. Advocates for conferencing have spanned each era of practice, from current-traditional rhetoric, through sociocognitive approaches, to postmodern sensibilities and post-postmodern realities. Endorsers range from Charles Sears Baldwin of Columbia, who argued in 1894 for "the value of the office-hour in the teaching of rhetoric" (290); and E. C. Beck of Nebraska State Teachers College, who surveyed the literature in 1939 and concluded that "[p]erhaps it is not too much to say that the conference method has established itself as the most successful method of teaching English composition" (594); to Donald Murray, who told *College English* readers in 1979 that "I average seventy-five conferences a week, thirty weeks a year" ("The Listening Eye" 13). For much of this history, the issue hasn't been so much whether or not to use conferencing, but how to teach with *regular* conferencing.

Regularity, of course, is a relative concept. Conferencing has been championed primarily at those moments when enrollments bulged, and students were from more diverse backgrounds and brought more varied preparation than ever before. These challenges made clear the shortcomings of whole-class instruction, and teachers of composition turned to conferencing as a way to meet students' individual needs.

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This turn, however, was countered by the working conditions for faculty: too many students and too little time. The response, then, was to endorse conferencing in principle but to fall back on whole-class solutions and on familiar strategies for meeting students' individual needs—the drill pad in the early days and the computer-assisted exercise more recently (Lerner). The enterprise of composition—what Stephen North calls “College English Teaching, Inc.” (“On the Business” 118)—needed to generate tuition dollars and full-time equivalents, and extensive conferencing was an expensive bauble, best meted out to those high-standing students with whom faculty *really* wanted to work, and far too extravagant for the great mass of students slouching in the backs of our classrooms.

In what follows, I trace the literature on conferencing during four tension points in higher-education enrollments: the 1890s, the 1930s, the 1950s, and the 1970s. At each of these points, conferencing was offered as the best way to teach writing to a suddenly large and an increasingly diverse student body, but the enrollment crush of each era created conditions that made effective conferencing impossible. Also in each era, conferencing was tied to the idea of writing as a *laboratory subject*, though the usage of the latter term varied given the cultural and political forces of the time. In the 1890s, the classroom was a laboratory for close teacher-student contact; in the 1930s, the laboratory was an out-of-class solution; in the 1950s, the laboratory represented a technocratic threat to the humanities soul of composition and a reminder of the need to deal with underprepared students; and in the 1970s, the laboratory was a peer-centered, teacherless place to counter the authoritarian classroom instructor.

In our present moment, the need for conferencing and the pressures that preclude extensive one-to-one work seem an amalgam of these earlier eras. Reliance on part-time, contingent instructors, unease about students underprepared for higher education, and a renewed push for higher admission standards at historically open-access institutions all threaten the teaching-learning ideal that conferencing represents. We manage our fifteen minutes or so once or twice a semester, wishing we could do more, knowing we are unable.

That our field seems stuck in this cycle is an indication of the need that conferencing attempts to fill. Amid piles (whether physical or electronic) of student writing, we yearn to offer students what George Herbert Locke described in 1905 as “direct, personal, and often intimate intercourse with professors of maturity and human sympathy” (656). The desire for intimacy, for meaningful connection with student writers, is a powerful force, a veritable “Rosebud” that keeps us going despite overwhelming working conditions and precarious professional status. The writing conference, then, is a window into the structural impediments to effective teaching of writing, impediments long established in higher education generally and in composition in particular.

TENSION POINTS IN HIGHER-EDUCATION ENROLLMENT

Enrollment in postsecondary institutions in the United States has increased steadily since the late nineteenth century; however, at four particular points the numbers spiked dramatically as compared to the previous decade. In the 1890s, higher education began to shift away from the province of the elite, those students historian Laurence Veysey describes as “a parade of Anglo-Saxon names and pale, freshly scrubbed faces” (271). This stress would occur again in the 1920s and 1930s, when the children of the immigrant waves of the turn of the twentieth century opted for higher education; again in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when returning WWII veterans took advantage of the GI Bill; and once again in the late 1960s and 1970s, when the open admissions movement made higher education available to largely poor, largely urban students who had been denied the opportunity previously.

Table 1. Higher education enrollments, 1869 to 1999 (U.S. Dept. of Education)

Academic Year	Total Enrollment (in Thousands)	Amount Increase	Percent Increase
1869–70	52	—	—
1879–80	116	64	122
1889–90	157	41	35
1899–1900	238	81	52
1909–10	355	118	50
1919–20	598	243	68
1929–30	1,101	503	84
1939–40	1,494	393	36
1949–50	2,659	1,165	78
1959–60	3,640	981	37
1969–70	8,005	4,365	120
1979–80	11,570	3,565	45
1989–90	13,539	1,969	17
1999–2000	14,791	1,253	9

In terms of numbers, Table 1 shows higher-education enrollment in ten-year intervals from 1869 until 1999, as well as the increase over each of those intervals. The four points at which the percent increase is highest—when our institutions were faced with the greatest rates of increased enrollment and thus the greatest pressures on available resources and methodologies—were 1879, 1929, 1949, and 1969. The change was particularly acute in the earliest and latest periods of those

four, and the literature in higher education, including composition, was at its most combative and desperate-sounding during these times. Students were everywhere, writers seemed to say, and they were very different from anything we had encountered before. We needed to *do* something! Starting in the 1890s many writers saw individual instruction, particularly the writing conference, as just that something, and the cycle of concern, followed by a realization of limits, followed by a return to whole-class methods, would be repeated during subsequent enrollment bulges.

WRITING WITH TEACHERS IN THE 1890s

The first pronounced call for teacher-student conferencing as the best way to teach writing came in the 1890s. Educational writers increasingly decried the “mass instruction” that had dominated U.S. schools up to that point, with students all learning the same lessons at the same pace with the same methods of teaching, proceeding grade-to-grade in a “lockstep” march toward mediocrity (Burk). The influx of new students had varied needs, as did American society, and a new professional class demanded more advanced literacy skills (Russell 47). A new generation of teachers embraced the contribution they could make toward educational reform, and the key setting for these efforts was the classroom. The longstanding lecture-memorization-recitation approaches were little more than enforced monotony; instead, the classroom—whether the subject matter was writing or science—needed to be an educational *laboratory* with a focus on frequent practice, individual feedback, and community spirit. The hope was that students would learn best under these conditions, and that the teacher would be far more than the droning pedagogue behind the lectern.

It is not surprising that the term *laboratory* came easily to the minds of educational policy makers and practitioners in an era that historian H. W. Brands labels “the reckless decade,” for it was a time of great experimentation. Nearly a quarter of the country’s population visited the 1893 Columbian Exposition World’s Fair in Chicago and glimpsed the future of technology, particularly the electrification of every household in the country (Brands 45). For many educators experimentation seemed as promising for schooling as it was for Thomas Edison in his New Jersey laboratory. In addition, teachers were working in overcrowded classrooms with students from much more diverse backgrounds and more varied preparation than ever before. The contrast in the college classroom was described in 1912 by Samuel Avery in an address to the National Education Association:

[T]his enormous influx of students has changed the general character of the student body. I think I am safe in saying that in the early days practically all college students came from cultured homes, or from homes animated by a burning aspiration for higher things. The students were a selected group—not always selected by the most

rational means, but nevertheless vastly different in character, training, antecedents, and ideals from the student bodies of today. (784)

The teaching of composition and rhetoric was particularly poised for change in this era. Instructional approaches up to this point consisted largely of, in Albert Kitzhaber's words, "a mass of principles to be committed to memory" (*Rhetoric* 219). However, the recognition of writing as a "laboratory subject" led to recognition of the need for students to practice writing as much as possible. At Harvard, Barrett Wendell devised the method of the "daily theme." At Columbia, Baldwin described in 1894 a system of "frequent themes and, following immediately on each theme, a private conference with each student at an appointed time" (291). If students were to learn to write, they needed frequent practice and meaningful feedback on that writing. They needed, in short, to be writing with teachers.

In *The Dial's* 1894 series on college composition practices nationwide, several writers invoked the concept of the laboratory and referred to one-to-one conferencing. For example, Brander Matthews of Columbia described an approach that sounds remarkably contemporary:

As the best way to teach students to write is to have them write freely and frequently, they are called upon to express themselves on topics in which they are interested, and often of their own choice. [. . .] These essays are criticised by the instructors in *private talks with every individual student*. The general tendency of the instruction is affirmative rather than negative. In other words, instead of telling the student what he must not do, and of dwelling on the faults he should avoid, the aim of the instructors is to show him how to express himself easily and vigorously. (40–41; emphasis added)

In addition, Wendell described writing instructors at Harvard devoting five hours per week solely to writing conferences (47), and George MacLean of the University of Minnesota, after a fairly pedestrian description of the work of his department, claimed that "[i]f one term had to be used, the 'laboratory method' would describe ours" (158). Finally, Fred Newton Scott picked up and ran with the concept of the laboratory, making reference to John Franklin Genung's use of the term to describe practices at Amherst College. Scott pointed out both the possibilities and the limitations of conceiving writing instruction as akin to a laboratory where instructors had the time and space to give individual attention:

As Professor Genung has well said, the teaching of composition is properly *laboratory work*. If that is true, why should it not be placed on the same footing as other laboratory work as regards manning and equipment? I confess that I now and then cast envious eyes upon our laboratory of chemistry, with its ten instructors and its annual expenditure of ten thousand dollars, and try to imagine what might be done in a rhetorical laboratory with an equal force and a fraction of the expenditure. [. . .] The student in composition needs as much personal attention as the student in chemistry. (122)

As we all know, the students and teachers in composition never quite received the resources that Scott called for. By 1902, a survey of college composition practices found that “[t]he colleges themselves proclaim, as one of their greatest needs, more time set apart by the English instructor for personal conference with his students” (Hart 370). By 1912, Edwin Hopkins of Kansas was easily able to answer “no” to his question, “Can good composition teaching be done under present conditions?” An anonymous article in that same volume of *English Journal* asked in its title “Shall ‘Laboratory Work’ in Composition Be Given Up?” That author decried

a willingness on the part of a few teachers and administrators not simply to admit failure in English composition teaching, but to proclaim that the matter is hopeless, and that there is nothing to do but return to the old order and let students teach themselves to write and speak English with merely casual assistance. (48)

Many institutions were finding that the price of intimacy was too great, and many instructors realized that having students write a good deal made pedagogic sense, but responding to that writing in meaningful ways was burdensome, time-consuming, and, simply, impossible. As described by Robert J. Connors, the demand for individual methods—“and the related inability of teachers and administrators to grasp its meaning in a changing college environment—led to the nightmare of overwork that composition courses became” (68).

In the 1913 *Report on the Cost and Labor of English Teaching*, a committee commissioned by the MLA and NCTE and chaired by Hopkins of Kansas took up the cause. After roughly twenty years of teaching writing as “chiefly a matter of laboratory practice and of individual instruction” (3), the result was not a pretty picture:

Of the colleges, some of the very best testify that it is more difficult to retain instructors in English composition than in other subjects. Others report that instructors wear out, suffer from indigestion and nervous exhaustion, lose their efficiency, impair their eyesight, become the prey of shattered nerves, break down and find their way to the hospital or cemetery, because of the “killing” work in English composition. (7)

One particular example of the “killing work” of teaching writing largely through conferencing in this era occurred at Princeton University, and even this elite institution with a relatively homogeneous student population would experience a cycle of justification, use, and ultimate dissatisfaction with conferencing. In 1905, Princeton announced it would use a “preceptorial system” or tutorial method of instruction for almost all classes in the humanities and social sciences. The intent, according to a 1905 editorial in *School Review*, was that “the professors and the students will be brought into more intimate relationship” (Locke 657).

At the time of its announcement, educators and popular writers championed Princeton’s move. An article in *The Nation* titled “The New Standard of College

Teaching” reported that “[t]hose who heard [Princeton] President Woodrow Wilson at the Dartmouth inauguration felt that they were listening to a prophet” (Hyde 107). Praise from the president of Bowdoin College, William De Witt Hyde, for Princeton’s system was a testament to the desire of many educators to overcome the impersonality of mass instruction and transform teacher-student relationships:

From now on the highest mark, or A, must include as an essential feature the costly personal work where teacher meets learner, man meets man, in groups so small that formal barriers are broken down; individuality is recognized; and teachers and learner touch each other through their common contact with the subject taught. (108)

Hyde’s comment that such individual work would be “costly” is a recurring theme in the accounts of Princeton’s system. Princeton Dean Andrew West, writing in *Educational Review* in 1906, told his readers that hiring a preceptor staff was largely guided by budget constraints: “We were able to pay only a moderate salary for this service, valuable as it is, say \$1500 to \$2000. That naturally cut us off from men who were not only good scholars, but had incumbent on them the support of a family” (505). This staff of single, relatively young men was set apart from the professoriate at Princeton, and by 1912 cracks were appearing in the system. A report by the Committee of Eight commissioned by the Princeton faculty to evaluate the preceptorial system found numerous fissures. In short, inadequate financing and the reliance on a young and inexperienced staff were the chief stressors. The report noted that “general personal conditions under which [instructors] work” were leading to great discontent among the labor force:

Doubtful tenure and uncertain dignity of position, insufficient salary, lack of a system of graded and automatic promotion, not to speak of the fact that some at least have had a feeling that there has been an unjust variation of salary throughout their number—these have been factors that have operated, as year has followed year, to arouse disappointment, dissatisfaction, unrest. (17)

No surprise, then, that the teaching in conferences was becoming less than satisfactory. As described by the committee report,

[c]ertain preceptors have surrendered their proper influence, and, yielding to the pressure of lectures and examinations on the one hand, and to student inertia on the other, have accepted the office of driving a given number of students to do a definite, prescribed task—and have in many cases stopped there. [. . .] In still [other conferences], the only method of teaching used is that of the “lecture,” the “quiz,” or the “recitation,” and in no sense does real *conference* take place. (27)

As would be true for subsequent generations of instructors facing similar pressures, what had been a method of meaningful teaching and learning had evolved into small-scale mass instruction. Intimacy and intellectual discovery had instead become a

disgruntled, alienated teaching staff understandably avoiding the hard and time-consuming work of one-to-one or small-group teaching.

Princeton's Committee of Eight reported a massive attrition in the number of assistant professors assigned to "preceptorial duties" seven years after the inception of the system. By 1924, a report by Harvard's "Committee G" on improving undergraduate instruction concluded from Princeton's experience that given financial constraints "it would be better to limit the application of the [preceptorial] method" to "high-stand" students (Perry 543). The story, then, is familiar—the benefit would be to those students who "deserve" meaningful instruction by dint of their achievement prior to coming to higher education. For the rest, the vast majority, meaningful contact with the professoriate through writing conferences was a rarely realized ideal.

The promotion of conferencing as an instructional technique was not abandoned, however. Conferencing as a way to counter the impersonality and ineffectiveness of whole-class solutions—to fill composition teachers' need to have some semblance of effectiveness—would be offered again in the 1930s. At that point, a combination of economic uncertainty and a college-age population bulge forced higher education to confront its limitations and once again to turn to individual methods.

WRITING IN LABORATORIES IN THE 1930S

The patterns established in the 1890s—countering mass education with individual instruction in the hopes of creating more meaningful teacher-student relationships; recognizing writing as a subject best taught through frequent practice and subsequent teacher-student conferencing; threatening these ideals with a lack of funding, a reliance on contingent, overworked staff, and a retreat to less challenging ways of instruction—were well set by the time of the next enrollment bulge in the late 1920s, particularly as required first-year composition had become "universal" across the country (W. Taylor 3). However, unlike those in the previous era, the sites of composition teaching in this era were increasingly large state institutions, and the students, the children of the great immigrant waves of the turn of the twentieth century, were a more diverse and more variably prepared student body than ever before. The picture was frightening, at least for Burges Johnson and Helene Hartley of Syracuse University, who described composition classes in 1936 as "flooded with hordes who come from high schools overcrowded with students lacking the background of cultured homes and the tradition of good English speech" (i). While such students threatened the elite ideals Johnson and Hartley wanted to protect, just as common a reaction was a Progressive Era attitude that saw the writing conference as a way to

meet these new students' individual needs and counter the ineffectiveness of mass instruction. Based on his 1928 survey of composition practices at 225 institutions, Warner Taylor of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, described the essential nature of conferencing:

No aspect of the first-year course is more vital than the fifteen or twenty minutes apart customarily assigned to personal conference with each student twice or more a semester. No phase of the course should be more stimulating to the person taught; none, surely, more challenging to the one who teaches. No course is more personal, more intimate, really, with its constant output of written work, a living record of the one who wrote it. Teachers of Freshmen everywhere have an opportunity for making or marring, entrusted to no other instructors in colleges. And it is in the conference that the opportunity centers. (26)

Note that “frequent” conferencing has now been reduced to “fifteen or twenty minutes [. . .] twice or more a semester” (26), a significant reduction from Wendell’s 1894 description of five hours per week devoted to conferences at Harvard. But even at Harvard, the situation changed a great deal forty years later. By 1932, first-year students at Harvard in English A-1 could expect to meet with their instructors in “bi-monthly individual meetings, one-half-hour in length” (“English A-1” 389). For most institutions, then, conferences sent the message that *something* was being done about supporting students’ learning to write, and in the face of increasing enrollments and challenging working conditions, how could any institution do more?

Taylor also ascribes the possibility for intimacy (and for harm) to first-year composition, just as writers did in the previous era. However, Taylor quickly moves in his report to an indictment of conferencing as currently practiced:

It seems to me that of this opportunity too little is made. There is too great a tendency to let the conduct of the conference drift with its tide, to let it take care of itself. As a matter of fact, no element in the course requires a more informed technique, a more deliberately planned procedure. It takes on the aspects of an art. (26)

In other areas of Taylor’s report we find the challenges to the composition teacher as artist. The institutions he surveyed reported a *maximum* salary range for first-year-English instructors of \$1,908 to \$2,342. Compare those figures with the “moderate salary” of \$1,500 to \$2,000 that West reported for Princeton preceptors in 1906. In over twenty years, little to no progress had been made. Taylor also found that the average teaching load for a first-year-composition instructor was ninety-three students. One hour of weekly conferencing with every student would have resulted in a 105-hour work week (assuming 12 hours of classroom instruction). No surprise, then, that fifteen or twenty minutes a couple of times per semester was as much as was feasible—if not humane. No surprise, as well, that writers such as Os-

car James Campbell of Columbia University would describe in 1939 the plight of composition instructors in fairly melodramatic terms:

[F]or the vast majority of those who begin their careers as section hands in Freshman English there is no future in the profession. They cannot hope for even moderate academic promotion. But, for all that, crowds of young men and women have been lured into the teaching of English by the great numbers of positions annually open at the bottom of the heap, and there they stick, contaminating one another with their discouragement and rebellion. (181–82)

Campbell did note that at Columbia one “realistic way of helping students with their writing” was the use of “tutors or advisers in composition” (184). This tutorial outlet valve—usually called a writing laboratory or clinic—had become a fairly popular instructional plan by this time. Several institutions created writing laboratories for first-year composition or for “sub-freshman” English, and these out-of-class solutions seemed the best way to enact the ideals of conferencing. The setting for this instruction was akin to a science lab—a roomful of students, sometimes as many as thirty-five, voluntarily reporting each week to write in response to a task assigned by the laboratory instructor or, more frequently, by another class. While students wrote, one or two instructors would circulate, conducting one-to-one conferences and occasionally offering minilectures on some issue germane to many of the student writers. This practice laboratory seemed ideal in many ways. Descriptions of the University of Minnesota General College Writing Laboratory, created in 1932, offer a vision of Deweyan Progressivism rarely realized in the seventy years since (see Appel, “English Studies” and “A Writing Laboratory”; M. MacLean). As described by Malcolm MacLean, Dean of the General College, “[i]n a quiet skylight room we provide chairs and slanting tables for ease in writing” (244). A student enrolled in the Writing Laboratory at Minnesota could be found “writing things which he wishes to write in answer to natural demands. [. . .] His instructor in the laboratory merely conspires with [the student] to achieve clear expression and never assigns him a theme” (Appel, “A Writing Laboratory” 71). This conspiratorial relationship between instructor and student in the writing laboratory was clearly unavailable to the classroom instructor, who, thirty years after Wendell had started the practice, was still locked into assigning the daily theme.

Several other institutions created writing laboratories during this period, including the University of Iowa and the University of North Carolina in 1934, the University of Florida in 1935, and Dartmouth College in 1939 (Shouse 84–85). However, the emergence of writing laboratories let composition instructors off the hook in some ways—if they couldn’t find the time to conference with an overwhelming number of diverse students, at least some entity at the institution could. In this era, then, the writing conference was institutionalized via the writing laboratory.

The classroom was kept separate, and writing went on in segregated quarters. The laboratory had shifted from a site for experimenting with teaching methods to a clinic for the underprepared, from experimenting *with* students to experimenting *on* students.

In many cases, the writing laboratory was not necessarily a welcome addition to the pedagogical family. Most institutions' mixed feelings, if not outright hostility, toward the least-prepared students extended easily to the writing laboratories. Obtaining adequate resources for writing laboratories was always a struggle, and staffing was largely relegated to peripheral members of the English department, often the same contingent staff who were teaching first-year composition. It was a double bind of sorts: an English department could claim that it was offering students individual instruction through the use of a writing laboratory or laboratory methods, but such methods were also a reminder of the large numbers of underprepared students challenging an institution's self-image in the 1930s.

Given these mixed feelings, classroom solutions still prevailed. Fewer than half of the 125 colleges responding to a 1942 NCTE survey required conferences in first-year composition (Grey, Hughes, Lorch, and Parks 585). As described in 1939 by W. Alan Grove of Miami University, "[t]he value of conferences cannot be overestimated, but to attempt personal ones would be absurd" (232). One reaction to these workplace realities was a call for English instructors either to suck it up or to look for another line of work. In a chapter on "The Conference Hour" in his 1930 text for prospective teachers, Thomas Blaisdell made clear one's choices:

Time for adequate conference is not easily found. [. . .] [T]he English teacher, as conditions now are, must expect to have far less leisure than teachers of other subjects have. He must realize that the teaching of English is a day's work and day's play combined; there is time for nothing else. Almost every English teacher who really does his work, no matter where he teaches, at some time becomes the butt of his colleagues' jokes because he gives so much more time to his work than they give to theirs. It is one of the burdens of the English teacher; he must bear it for the privilege of teaching a subject more interesting in itself than is any other subject in the curriculum; and if he does not believe this to be true, he should at once cease teaching English and pass to another field of instruction or go into business. (250)

This sort of tough-love solution extended easily to students by the time of the next enrollment wave in the late 1940s. By that point, returning World War II veterans, new groups of immigrants, and a firm belief in the promise of higher education created new-but-old challenges for many colleges and universities. The responses had a similar, if harsher, tone. The goal was not necessarily to create meaningful relationships with students, but instead to deal with difference in the pattern established during the previous two enrollment tension points.

WRITING AGAINST STUDENTS IN THE 1950s

Between 1930 and 1950, the number of students seeking higher education more than doubled, and these students possessed even more diverse preparation and expectations than ever before. Gilbert Bond of Simmons College noted with no small degree of resignation this challenge for English departments: “Since the remedial-English student will be with us for some time to come, we may just as well accept him” (466). As had been true in the two previous eras, tutoring and teacher-student conferencing were offered as viable ways of educating this student population. A 1944 study commissioned by the National Association of State Universities recommended “[r]emedial clinics, tutorial aids, and ‘similar accessory tools’” (21) for “post-war educational problems” (“Report of the Special Committee” 19). Yet the composition industry seemed fragmented by these challenges. On the one hand, more fully developed approaches to teaching writing began to emerge as developments in the fields of educational psychology, communications, and linguistics influenced classroom practices. On the other hand, a backlash against the “laboratory” approach as “coddling” underprepared students and a frustration with the lack of success of remedial methods resulted in calls for tougher admission standards. The desire for intimacy had been replaced by a disdain for students underprepared for higher education. If students were not succeeding, the thinking went, it was largely their fault, and they were best kept out.

Two authors writing in the early 1950s in *College English*, Barriss Mills and Charles Glicksberg, represent these trends. Mills of Purdue took a common tack of this period in viewing composition as part of the larger communications movement, particularly advances in semantic theory and literary criticism. For Mills, “[t]he common denominator in all of these developments is the concept of process” (20), and he concluded his analysis by noting that “learning to communicate effectively is very much an individual affair; mass methods simply will not work” (25). To offer individual methods, institutions would need to take a familiar approach: “Some sort of laboratory approach seems to be the best method [because it can] make possible more or less continuous co-operation between student and teacher during all steps in the writing process” (25). Mills did, however, acknowledge the structural impediments to full implementation of conferencing or the composition classroom as laboratory:

This kind of teaching will require more knowledge and imagination and ingenuity on the part of English teachers than has been expected of them in the past—perhaps more than we have any right to expect of people who are already overworked and poorly paid—but it is the only way we can begin to make sense of our teaching of communication skills, create some basis for interest and motivation in our students,

and begin to show results that will dispel the present widespread feeling that our efforts have miserably failed. (26)

Writing nearly sixty years after Scott's similar call and caution in the pages of *The Dial*, Mills gets no closer to overcoming the structural difficulties that blocked Scott's proposal. However, the rejection of the *scientific* lens through which writing conferencing might be viewed, unlike its valorization in earlier eras, also played a powerful role in the laboratory method's demise.

For Charles Glicksberg of Brooklyn College, composition was a humanistic enterprise not at all understood by a scientific community emboldened by the recent production of the atomic bomb. In Glicksberg's view these scientists saw required composition as "a dreadful waste of academic time, utterly unjustified from any sound educational point of view" (90). Glicksberg offered a fairly extreme picture of this attack in his call to arms for English instructors to adapt more humanistic methods:

The scientific Huns are on the march, and their objective is not only the elimination of English composition from the curriculum. If they had their way, they would sack the buildings in which the liberal arts are taught, raze them to the ground, and pour salt on the foundation. The new scientific barbarians, now that they have produced the atomic bomb, are determined to capture the citadel of education, adapt it to their own special ends, and establish a dictatorship of the physicists and technocrats. (91)

The chilling, soulless world of the scientist needed to be countered by the humanistic methods of the English teacher and, specifically, through the understanding of students as individuals. For Glicksberg, then, "[t]he composition class is a forum, a confessional, a psychiatric clinic" (96). An essential method in this environment, "the most beneficial educational therapy" (97), was one-to-one conferences. For in these conferences "[t]he instructor seeks to establish rapport with each student, to know his interests and idiosyncrasies, his ambitions and ideals, as much of his past as bears on this present life, his hopes and plans for the future" (97). This expressive ideal would allow students to discover meaning in what they wrote or, in Glicksberg's words, offer "an adventure in self-exploration, a voyage on strange seas of the imagination, and a reconnaissance flight over unknown territory" (98).

While Glicksberg offered conferencing as way to "establish rapport" with students, composition as an emerging discipline was working at cross purposes at this point. Writers such as Mills acknowledged the necessity for frequent student practice and for instruction to be akin to the laboratory, with frequent conferences. Yet writers such as Glicksberg saw the composition class as the ideal forum for reclaiming humanistic principles from the encroachment of scientists, a frequent theme in this era, and the mistrust of an approach labeled *laboratory* was one result. Composition was shaping its disciplinary identity, and that image was not going to be a scien-

tific one. These feelings were perhaps best summed up by John Gerber, NCTE President, in his lead article in the February 1956 *College English*:

[O]ur eagerness to appear scientific, especially in teaching the verbal skills, has become almost pathological. We have opened Reading Clinics, Writing Laboratories, and Speech Clinics. When we get into these antiseptic areas we call ourselves *clinicians*, and the students become *cases*. We keep fever charts of their attempts with the comma, and plot their reading rate improvement on graph paper. (249–50)

For Gerber and others, the linkage with science was a potential loss of the basis in humanities—and the study of literature—that motivated many English faculty to pursue their profession in the first place:

In this indiscriminate use of the terminology and techniques of science we can destroy ourselves professionally. For if we come to believe that charts and graphs and coefficients are all that are necessary for the teaching of English we give evidence of the most abysmal ignorance of what human expression is and what its potentialities are. What is more, we deny the essential integrity of the student, who is ever and always a person and never a statistic, an abstraction, a hypothetical average, or a case study. (250)

That composition classes would provide for “the essential integrity of the student” is debatable, but for Gerber and others, the concept of *laboratory* was a threat to the values they held dear as English teachers. It was the scientific study of texts rather than the exploration of writers’ deeper “truths.” It was schooling ruled by *educationists*, not humanists.

Gerber, while showing concern for students’ “integrity,” expressed particular wrath for those *coddling* writing laboratories: “In college, attempts to individualize training [. . .] almost always boil down to special care for the mentally lame, halt, and blind. If there are reading clinics and writing laboratories for the *best* students in our colleges I have not heard of them” (251). A. M. Tibbetts supported this cranky view in 1965 as he looked back on composition teaching in the 1950s:

For the experimentally minded, it was the best of times. There were clinics, reading labs, writing labs, and speaking labs. A student could get his lisp removed at the speech clinic in the morning, and in the afternoon he might learn to read the *Reader’s Digest* faster and faster. [. . .] The Remedial students were the lucky ones; they got most of the attention. It was not a good time to be bright. (91)

By the early 1960s, many four-year institutions even experienced a hiatus from the demands of educating underprepared students. According to Kitzhaber, the quality of students was rising, remedial students were largely being shunted off to two-year colleges, and, as a result, “the writing clinics and laboratories are being abandoned, since students are seldom so poorly prepared as to require special remedial services of this sort” (“Freshman English” 477). One would think that the composition teacher

now had much more time to devote to individual conferencing for those students who remained. However, whole-class methods dominated. If students needed individual attention, the application of Skinnerian behavioral psychology in the form of worksheets and programmed instruction books would meet those needs (Lerner). As Kitzhaber noted in his 1962 study of composition practices nationwide, “[composition] is seldom a course that most teachers—even most graduate students—look forward to teaching, but instead one that they merely endure and too often do not give their best efforts to” (*Themes* 15).

The limits of mass instruction and the inadequacies of composition would become clear again a short time later as the open admissions era ushered in a new generation of college students. The familiar cries would sound, and teacher-student conferencing would once again be offered as a smart solution. The difference, however, was a radically reduced role for the classroom teacher.

WRITING WITHOUT TEACHERS IN THE 1970s

By the 1970s, classrooms were once again becoming increasingly filled with frustrated and underprepared students, and prevailing methods of writing instruction were largely inadequate. In a 1973 *College English* article Lester Fisher and Donald Murray described the students they were facing.

[T]he majority of the students were remedial, and they knew it. They were sent to us by their advisers. They feared writing—they were scientists and agricultural majors, whites and blacks, athletes and wounded veterans; they were the bored, the angry, the apprehensive. (170)

In many ways, the attitudes of the 1970s most closely matched the attitudes of the 1890s. At long last, the focus was on students’ needs, and an emphasis on student-centered learning followed larger efforts to respond to the unrest over the general political, cultural, and educational state of affairs. However, unlike that earlier era’s faith in the power of teaching, mistrust of authority led compositionists to offer a radically reduced role for the teacher. Students could “write without teachers,” Peter Elbow told us in 1973; meaningful student-teacher relationships could be established by removing the instructor altogether. In a writing conference, students were to discover their subjects and to explore their experiences, and instructors were largely to keep quiet (see also Garrison).

Donald Murray first offered the profession his use of conferencing in his 1968 book, *A Writer Teaches Writing*. In a 1969 article in *College Composition and Communication*, “Finding Your Own Voice: Teaching Composition in an Age of Dissent,” the voice to be found in Murray’s title is largely a quiet one for the instructor, a nonauthoritative position that could counter hostility toward the bureaucratic insti-

tution of higher education. For Murray at the University of New Hampshire

[t]he emphasis in the writing course is on conferences which are held at the student's initiative. Teaching is done individually or around a table. The writing lab dramatizes the intellectual act of writing. Everything is designed to help the individual student find his own way to satisfy the essential discipline of the course. (121)

Murray's role in the composition classroom was to demonstrate a set of skills and sensibilities that the student would eventually learn for herself: "[U]ltimately the student must be able to diagnose and treat his own problems when he has escaped the protective custody of his writing teacher" (122). Four years later, Murray, writing with Lester Fisher in *College English*, again offered such a relationship: "[W]riting isn't taught in class. It is learned by a student who writes, then shows what he has done to an experienced, responsive reader" (169).

By the time Murray reflected on his twelve years of teaching writing by conferencing in 1979's "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference," his teaching role is even less active and much more a mirror for students to see *their* intent, *their* needs, *their* problems. Murray ends that essay with the kind of powerful anecdote that has always made his writing so engaging and personable, as he describes his student Andrea:

Andrea bustles in, late, confused, appearing disorganized. Her hair is totally undecided; she wears a dress skirt, lumberjack boots, a fur coat, a military cap. She carries no handbag, but a canvas bag bulging with paper as well as a lawyer's briefcase which probably holds cheese and bread.

Out comes the clipboard when I pass her paper back to her. She tells me exactly what she attempted to do, precisely where she succeeded and how, then informs me what she intends to do next. She will not work on this draft; she is bored with it. She will go back to an earlier piece, the one I liked and she didn't like. Now she knows what to do with it. She starts to pack up and leave.

I smile and feel silly; I ought to do something. She's paying her own way through school. I have to say something.

"I'm sorry you had to come all the way over here this late."

Andrea looks up surprised. "Why?"

"I haven't taught you anything."

"The hell you haven't. I'm learning in this course, really learning."

I start to ask Andrea what she's learning but she's out the door and gone. I laugh, pack up my papers, and walk home. (18)

Many of us relate easily to this anecdote: the eager but unpolished student, the sincere and well-meaning instructor, the moments of connection and realization, the teaching and learning that may or may not have occurred. It captures the intimacy of the writing conference in its detail, but also portrays Murray's guilt over having earned that intimacy by largely keeping his mouth shut. In this scenario, the student comes to us fully developed, and the instructor is little more than a mirror

or a Rogerian sounding board, an animate version of ELIZA, the computer “therapist”: “You tell me you’re feeling blocked. Tell me more.” Who needed teachers, anyway?

Conferring and the idea of writing in a laboratory were also renewed by a separate but related strand at the time: the creation of writing centers staffed largely by peer tutors. Following the work of Kenneth Bruffee at Brooklyn College, the move to peer tutors was a corollary to the idea of “writing without teachers.” After all, it was peers who held the power to reach one another, particularly when it came to writing instruction. In a 1976 description of Bruffee’s work, Ronnie Dugger noted that at Bruffee’s writing center, “any of Brooklyn College’s 35,000 students could drop in for help anonymously without fear of being graded or judged” (30).

Thus, conferencing had at least two homes at this point: the classroom, where still-beleaguered composition faculty could offer their fifteen minutes once or twice per semester; and the writing center, where peer tutors could offer insight and sympathy to their fellow students. That’s not to say that students naturally flocked to writing centers and that every institution across the land rushed to offer these solutions. By 1984, Stephen North would feel the need to reclaim “The Idea of the Writing Center” in a *College English* article with that title. Still prevalent was the idea that *individual instruction* meant individual students filling in individual blanks on individual grammar worksheets (at least for those students who could afford to buy new sets and not rely on used, previously filled-out ones). Such a tendency fueled a 1976 Conference on College Composition and Communication investigation into “Learning Skills Centers.” One warning from that report offers an example of how the move away from mass instruction and toward meeting the needs of individual students could always be corrupted:

In the worst sense, “individualized instruction” can mean segregating students by standardized tests—which may or may not be realistically diagnostic; issuing to students sets of routine exercises—written, taped, filmed, or occasionally computerized—which the students are required to complete on their own; and measuring success by the scores students achieve on another standardized test. [. . .] The term “individualized instruction” may become a semantic dodge, worthy of investigation by the Committee on Public Doublespeak of NCTE. (Committee on Learning Skills Centers 1–2)

The responses to the enrollment bulge of the late 1960s have given us a belief in conferences as a way of making the teacher-student relationship not necessarily more meaningful or more intimate but more equal. A corollary to this belief is that equality can only be achieved in peer-led conferencing, and that the instructor’s role in individualizing the teaching of writing primarily means offering whole-class lectures and then handing out individual grammar worksheets. It is a safe bet to say

that just about every contemporary institution has some combination of these beliefs operating at any given time, often in contradiction, often in adjacent classrooms.

THE OUTLOOK FOR TEACHER-STUDENT CONFERENCING

The goals for conferencing—whether stated or not—have always been ambitious. On one level, the purpose was simply to teach writing more effectively. On another, it was to work against a dominant norm that saw learning as passive memorization or dutiful recitation. On yet another level, conferencing was a way to create meaningful relationships with an increasingly diverse student body or at least one that was increasingly different from the teaching class. Ultimately, it seems all of these goals remain unfulfilled, given the preponderance of lecture in writing classrooms, the reliance on (now computerized) grammar worksheets, and the dependence on part-time, contingent labor. It has always been a case of too many students, too little time, too much writing, too few dollars.

The writing conferencing also often seems naïve in its ideals, in its purity as a teaching moment. Instead, we know that student and teacher each brings ideologies, assumptions, and expectations to the writing conference that can potentially clash and make the work grind to a halt. In my copy of Donald Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing*, a previous owner had underlined the following passage:

Pupils should be *convinced* by classroom demonstration and through individual conference that criticism and revision are necessary—and constructive—parts of the process. The student writers should also know they have the primary responsibility to teach themselves to write and that they are capable, through re-evaluation and revision of their papers, of solving their own writing problems. (132–33; emphasis added)

In the margins, that owner wrote, “But how do you convince them?”

How, indeed?

Barriers to effective conferencing are not simply a matter of persuading reluctant students. Based on her study of teacher-student conferencing, Laurel Johnson Black reminds us that

[e]ven in liberal classrooms, where difference may not be ignored or repressed but is “celebrated” in thematic units on diversity, conferences still function to find ways to subordinate the personal experience and language of students to a dominant world view—the teacher’s. (150)

As a result, Black tells her readers that “[w]e have to examine what it is we want from conferencing and we have to explore the possibility that it often doesn’t accomplish those things—it just doesn’t work” (167). Black, however, doesn’t call for teachers to

abandon conferencing, but instead to think critically about our teaching and learning goals, about conferencing discourse and the powerful messages that our words convey, about how classroom practice might be transformed in ways that would meet the goals we set for our one-to-one work. I would like to agree with Black that what we need is more critical understanding of how conferences position writers and teachers, but even such an understanding accomplishes little when one is teaching a 5/5 load at a community college or as a “freeway flyer” at three different institutions.

The question is, one hundred years after conferencing was first embraced, where are we now in the reform-realize-reject cycle that has followed each enrollment bulge? Higher-education enrollments are projected to increase by about 15 percent from 1999 to 2009 (U.S. Dept. of Education). That percentage increase is the second lowest of any decade since 1879, certainly not an indication that we are in for a renewed crush. However, a more important indicator to look at is the sectors that have experienced rapid growth, namely the community college system. From 1976 to 1994, community college enrollment increased 42 percent, compared to 19 percent for four-year public colleges (Andrews and Fonseca), and in two-year colleges 62 percent of the English courses are taught by part-time faculty (Laurence 214). Time needed for conferencing, then, is certainly in short supply in those classrooms in which students need that much more one-to-one instruction.

In our current cycle, the idea of writing as a *laboratory subject* seems an amalgam of the previous eras’ struggles over the term. Frequent writing practice, feedback, and revision—the essentials of the laboratory method—are commonplace in our classrooms, yet frequency has always been a function of the time we have to offer feedback. Some seek technological solutions to this dilemma, such as sociology professor Ed Brent at the University of Missouri, who has designed a computer program to offer feedback. Brent told reporters, “I don’t think we want to replace humans, [. . .] But we want to do the fun stuff, the challenging stuff. And the computer can do the tedious but necessary stuff” (“Now Grading”). The code words here for “we do not want to deal with student error” are longstanding in our field and frame in many ways the dilemma for contemporary writing centers. If it’s not a computer program that will deal with the “tedious but necessary stuff,” it’s long been seen as the writing center’s role to dry clean students’ texts. The legacy of the 1930s, the creation of a separate entity called a writing laboratory or clinic is still with us today when writing centers are positioned as, in Elizabeth H. Boquet’s words, “a *space*, a ‘laundry’ where work is dropped off and picked up, where students are brushed off and cleaned up” (464), where the “tedious but necessary stuff” is done largely out of sight of classroom instructors. While we yearn to see error in a larger developmental progression, it remains a constant reminder that students are flawed, are somehow not worthy of the intimacy we have to offer.

An additional disturbing trend of our era is the call for higher *standards*, an echo of the 1950s grumbling about the permissiveness of previous eras and the mollicodding of underprepared students. At the University of Minnesota, the General College faces being stripped of its standing as a separate college and will be folded as a department into a new College of Education and Human Development. In its quest to be “one of the top three publicly funded research institutions in the world” (D. Taylor), the University of Minnesota has decided that students coming to the open-enrollment General College are not up to snuff. General College Dean David Taylor sees the move to close the General College as an unfortunate attempt “to recast the notion of the ‘land-grant university’ to fit with contemporary politics and to limit access in order to foster an illusion of excellence and exclusivity” (par. 3). Seventy years after the General College was created as an extension of Progressive Era ideals, it is succumbing to contemporary notions that some students are far more suited to quality education than others. Just as Princeton’s experiment in the preceptorial system became an idea best reserved for “high-stand” students (Perry 43), access to public institutions is becoming similarly restricted.

The case of the General College is an example of the power of teaching writing via one-to-one conferencing—not simply as an instructional technique, but instead as a lens into the struggles that higher education has continually faced over equity versus access. Amid heavy courseloads, tentative job security, and numbing committee work, we eke out our fifteen minutes of conferencing a semester, apologizing to students that it is all we can do. We hope that some students visit the writing center, getting more informed feedback than they’d get from a quick opinion offered by a roommate or younger sister. And we hope that our inability to offer more extensive contact doesn’t push students into seeing writing assignments as little more than rote exercises in giving the teacher what she or he wants, a function easily fulfilled by the wide range of online papers for sale.

At the start of this essay, I attributed the persistence of teacher-student conferencing to the way it fills our need to forge connections with our students, the kind of promise for teaching and learning that drew us to the profession in the first place. Perhaps this need can be filled in other ways. After all, composition has long been a leader in the kind of experimentation that embodied the original intent of writing as a laboratory subject in the 1890s and is captured by Geoffrey Sirc in his revisiting of the idea of “composition as a happening.” However, if the need for student contact cannot be filled, perhaps it will simply go away, and a new wave of machine response and evaluation will offer an automated solution for writing instructors to pursue “the fun stuff, the challenging stuff” as envisioned by Professor Brent. For me, at least, it’s difficult to imagine that those activities will involve students at all.

Back in the Museum of Composition Practices, teacher-student conferencing has a permanent installation, but not as artifact. Instead, it is performance art, with both the potential for the happening envisioned by Sirc and the reproduction of dominant literacy practices described by Black. The writing conferencing is a window into our hopes and dreams as teachers, into our successes and failures, into the limits of writing instruction and its endless possibilities.¹

NOTE

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