

## CENTERING THE WRITING CLASSROOM: A PRACTICE OF THE DIALECTIC

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Notions of the writing conference have deep roots; we have discussed “the conversation of mankind (Bruffee), the “Burkean Parlor” approach in the writing center (Lunsford), and the move away from the writing center as a “fix-it shop” (North). Additionally, recent scholarship explores the fruitfulness of writing conversations (Reardon in 2019, and Corbett in 2015) within the writing classroom. These conversations, along with others like them, not only indicate an ongoing interest in merging writing center (WC) theory with writing instruction (WI) practice, but also an interest in a systematic examination of how WC theory influences WI pedagogy. In fact, Jackie McKinney (*Strategies for Writing Center Research*) sends a clear call for continued research in the field to consider the ways empirical research projects can “complement the existing work” (xvii) being done in and through the WC. Although her work focuses on writing centers, McKinney's call prompts me to consider the several questions in the context of the writing classroom: How might the knowledge we gain from writing center scholarship provide productive pedagogical implications for writing instruction? If commonalities exist between WC and WI, what does that mean for writing instruction? Through these questions, I reflect on the ways my WI has been influenced by my WC experiences and offer thoughts for how we might “center” writing instruction.

The idea for this research project began in the WC at my current institution after conferencing with a student several times during a semester. During the second consultation, the student said it was more “fun” to sit and talk through her paper instead of listening to me find problems and correct them (which is what she had at first expected). For this student, the WC consultation was no longer a “fix-it” appointment—it empowered her as a writer. A few semesters later, during a semi-structured interview in which a WI student (one of my research subjects in an IRB-approved formal study) strongly asserted that the single most influential teaching practice that contributed toward increasing his confidence in his ability as a writer was the one-on-one writing conference. This was a strong connection to the conversation I had had with my client in my institution's WC.

For context, it is helpful to describe the assignment sequence for my institution's second semester of first-year writing. It is a sixteen-week semester term divided into two eight-week segments. During the first eight-weeks, students engage with a digital archive and learn to think and write from points of inquiry. The first four weeks is spent focusing on close readings of the archive, culminating with a composed summary of the archive. In the second four weeks, students continue engaging with the same archive from their first composition, but in this module, they compose an analysis and evaluation of the archive. The last eight-week segment of the semester is spent focusing on a student's own research question and research argument, which may or may not be connected to their archive from the first eight-week segment. The connecting, underpinning skills are 1) writing from a point of inquiry, 2) developing digital literacy, and 3) deepen thinking to productively impact writerly development.

For the formal study, I collected data from an anonymous survey, a semi-structured interview, student work with my feedback, and a teacher-reflection journal. The instrument for the semi-structured interview contained questions that allowed me to follow up on responses to the survey questions. One particular question was designed as an open-ended question that allowed the interviewee to freely state any specific strategy from class instruction that strengthened writer growth. When I listened to the semi-structured interviews, I took particular note of one student's response when he said that the writing conference was the most beneficial pedagogical strategy. Note the following interview segment transcript:

*Interviewer:* As far as all the different interactions I had you guys do in the class, are there one or two that stick out most in your mind that helped you be successful in the classwork?

*Student:* A hundred percent, going to seeing you in your office hours. [*Interviewer:* Oh, really?] A hundred percent . . . yeah, I like that cuz . . . I'm not very good at Comp, I don't feel like . . . and working with you really helped me . . . cuz when I work with other students . . . sometimes they just

don't try . . . or you don't know 'em . . . and [Interviewer: Yeah]. it's just annoying, you know, uh, like, your projects or whatever, some people slack . . . it's always annoying, [Interviewer: Right] but working with you, like, I actually *have* (student's emphasis) to engage . . . *have* (student's emphasis) to show up prepared . . . and I think that helps tremendously [Interviewer: Yeah] . . . it's more personal. . . so I really like that [Interviewer: True, yep . . . more personal, ok] . . . that was my favorite part [laughter] I always looked forward to going [more laughter] get help with my paper [laughter].

In this excerpt, this student states that the one out-of-class activity (the writing conference in my office) was the most beneficial thing for him. Not only does this student unhesitatingly state his opinion, he barely lets me finish the question before responding. He further qualifies his statement by claiming that the office conversations helped “A hundred percent.” He states he does not really believe that peer review (an in-class activity) was of particular help to him, but that he enjoyed the personal connection with me, the instructor, during the conference. He also mentions that he had to be prepared and more engaged with the writing during the conference. This is a particularly salient point because, in my research, I was trying to ascertain which in-class lesson activities were most beneficial, not whether a writing conference—an out-of-class activity—was beneficial. Because the student explicitly stated that the single-most beneficial teaching strategy for him was the writing conference, I returned to analyzing more of his data to ascertain what evidence there might be supporting his claim.

First, looking at the students' work, there was an increase of sentence complexity from his first composition to his fourth composition. One example is his opening sentence for each composition:

[From first written composition] This aviation archive is one that has a certain layout to help the viewer become more educated on specific information from aviation history.

[From fourth written composition] On February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009 there was an accident that would completely change the ATP, otherwise known as [sic] Airline Transport Pilot certificate, [sic] requirements.

With the addition of the descriptive clause to provide clarification of “ATP,” as well as the use of an introductory clause, the student's writing is more sophisticated by the end of the semester. Further, throughout the fourth composition, there is strong evidence of the student's maturing literacy skills. He employs transition words to move smoothly between

paragraphs, which were used minimally in his first written composition, giving the overall composition a disconnected tone.

Second, the student was able to integrate outside source material in his fourth composition more completely than in the first composition. The first contained source references that were vague because the student never made an explicit citation for any of the information he retrieved from his source. There were explanatory sentences where the student talked around the information rather than making a direct reference. Below is an excerpt from the first composition:

On the aircraft tab there are many articles of airplanes that include pictures and ethical information about the planes; from my background of being a pilot for many years I think the author of the archive does a great job describing them and conserving the history of the aircraft.

Rather than engaging with his source information, he seems to mention it from a distance because his reference is vague without attribution. In contrast, composition four indicates a different level of engagement:

This power reduction greatly diminished the speed of the plane, in fact it got so slow the stick shaker was activated. (Collins)

The way the student engages with source information is more sophisticated in composition four than composition one. He summarizes the information and closes the sentence with a parenthetical citation, which indicates his awareness of source paraphrasing and attribution. In this composition, the student's skill has matured enough to cite not only direct quotes, but also to cite paraphrases.

Third, the student became a more confident writer. In my reflective teacher-journal, I noted he introduced himself at the beginning of the course as a “junior majoring in aviation . . . and . . . uh . . . I've waited to take Comp because I can't write.” His statement during the interview that he was not “very good at comp” reinforces what he said to introduce himself to the class and reveals his lack of self-efficacy. Interestingly, though, since he had “to engage and show up prepared” to the writing conferences in my office, the student spent extra time in the writing process. In my journal, I also note the specific things I wanted to bring up in our writing conferences, such as explaining how he might incorporate outside sources to support his own assertions and/or interpretations. We talked through his thinking and his writing, and I had him read some of his sentences aloud so that he could hear the disconnect between sentences and paragraphs, as

well as learn to self-correct LOC's. Also, he always had specific questions about his draft that he wanted to discuss, which increased his level of engagement with writing as he learned to embrace the process of drafting and revising, and suggests that his confidence as a writer increased.

The student's improvement came after our writing conferences, which further supports his claim that coming to my office was of great benefit to him. I also interpret the statement that he "always looked forward to going" as evidence of his increased sense of confidence as a writer. He never missed a conference appointment, and he even made additional visits outside of the writing conference. My conclusion is that the student's growth as a writer was positively impacted by the writing conference.

I admit, however, that this data does not provide enough evidence for generalizable knowledge regarding writing conferences. Nonetheless, the findings do indicate there is a connection between one-on-one writing conferences and these two writers' growth. While I can speak confidently about these writers, there is room to further examine the impact of one-on-one writing conferences upon student writers as a whole. I also must be mindful of instructors' potential resistance to writing conferences as pedagogy. Conversations with colleagues are, at times, characterized by a concern for adequate time spent in conferencing. The tension is caused, as Neal Lerner points out, by the rising number of students enrolled in writing courses, which limits the amount of time anyone can devote to writing conferences. He explains how "institutions were finding that the price of intimacy was too great" (191), and so the writing conference, as an integral step in the writing process, has been pushed aside. This mirrors conversations I have had with my colleagues, and yet data from my two students indicate the need for us to find the time.

A final point to consider comes from Laurel Black in her work *Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference*. Black explains and complicates how "conferences help demystify the process of evaluation for students as the teacher reads through and responds in a variety of ways to the draft while the student listens and watches" (14). Through her identification of three specific types of writing conferences (teacher-centered, student-centered, and text-focused), she provides valuable information for the evolution of writing conferences. I deem this "valuable" because the three approaches help us interrogate the power structure that is difficult to ignore—to grapple with tensions between what we want and what occurs. Through the process of interrogating these three approaches to writing conferences, instructors might

work to create conference spaces that are opportunities for student's growth as writers: spaces where we "produce better writers" as the beginning point of instruction and future research. As for my writing student, the writing conference is what gave him the ability to confidently and profoundly write about the things he cared about (in this case, aviation certification procedures and requirements).

To deepen my exploration of the emerging phenomena from my research, I merged WC theory with composition theory and considered the ways theory informs practice. It is important that I continue to explore what my students are saying about what helps them to become effective writers. In fact, when Elizabeth Boquet and Neal Lerner ("Reconsiderations After 'The Idea of a Writing Center'"") investigate the progress of writing center research, they also suggest a potential turn for our approach when we consider Stephen North's "Idea" that we make better writers, and that the conference is not "an endpoint, [but] rather . . . an origin" (171). Perhaps by blurring the boundaries between WC consultations and WI writing conferences—since both are locations of writing instruction—and by interrogating what is already happening, we can answer McKinney's call in *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers* to "question the [writing center] grand narrative" (79) and productively explore the ways students are becoming better writers. In my pedagogical practices, I am continually interested to see what will happen when I approach the data with a listening ear to what students are saying, so that my goal of strengthening student writers is the beginning and not the end of my instructional goals. For me, this is what it means to embrace a pedagogy that "centers" writing instruction.

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