

# Comp Quickreads

CSULA Department of English

October 26, 2009

## Revisiting Conferencing

### Types of Conferencing

Most teachers of writing are familiar with the traditional writing conference. Other kinds of conferencing discussed at the Composition Conversation include:

**Small group conferencing**—the teacher meets with small groups of students who share similar writing issues.

**Journaling or Student-Initiated Questions**—students keep a journal about their writing and/or ask specific questions to which the instructor responds. Instead of a journal, instructors also use the essay draft to exchange questions and responses.

**Computer-Mediated Strategies**—Email, Blackboard chats and other computer-mediated strategies were discussed as was the use of audio recordings, but for the most part these strategies were merely digital or internet-enabled versions of existing practices.

### Conferencing Strategies

1. Set reasonable **goals**. Avoid trying to discuss everything.
2. Have students bring **two copies** of their essay; while you read one copy, they can take notes on the other.
3. Expect students to **set the agenda** of the conference.
4. Have students **do something** in the conference, such as revising a sentence, or reformulating a thesis.
5. Ask students to **prepare** a set of questions, or give them a list of questions that they must answer before the conference.

The most recent “Composition Conversation” focused on conferencing. Participants discussed not so much the advantages of conferencing but the realities of it. The benefits of writing conferences have been known for years, and most teachers of writing have been trained to incorporate them in their course design. The problem most instructors encounter, however, is the difficulty of maintaining a conferencing model given increasingly larger composition classes.

Out of the conversation emerged a list of common conferencing practices used by the participants themselves or known to be used by other instructors. Participants noted that class size and workload tempered the use of conferences and if used how they were implemented. Some instructors, for example, conducted conferences only with those writers with the most serious problems. Others began with writers with the most serious problems and saw other students only if time permitted. Some had cancelled classes and set up conference times, but all acknowledged that these “conference days” were difficult at best and grueling at worst for instructors with 60-80 writing students.

Generally, the timing of conferences fell into common patterns. In developmental classes instructors wanted to set up conferences both early and late in the term. Early conferences established rapport and enabled the instructor to make clear his or her expectations. Late conferences allowed for more focused work on specific writing issues, especially at the level of sentences and paragraphs. In ENGL 101 and ENGL 102, the use of conferences has been made difficult by class sizes greater than 25. The result is most ENGL 101 and ENGL 102 instructors either use

only one conference per quarter usually around the middle of the term, or none at all. Some instructors make conferences optional, a practice which certainly cuts down on the numbers.

Given the realities of class sizes and workload, participants also discussed alternative strategies to conferencing. One participant suggested the use of audio. Students record themselves reading their papers and the instructor records his or her comments in response. This practice, made increasingly easy through the use of digital sound files, recreates the personal and human aspect of conferencing, which is arguably one of its most important benefits.

Another strategy involves placing students with similar writing issues in small groups. These group conferences save time by allowing the instructor to work with more than one student on similar problems. A related strategy is to combine conferencing with peer review groups. The instructor meets with two or three students alternating between setting tasks for some students while working directly with others. These “multi-tasking” sessions, while efficient, were generally conceded to be very taxing on the instructor.

Finally, participants discussed the importance of having a focused conference. All agreed that conferences are most successful when focused on a few key issues and when students set the agenda. Some instructors have students write down their goal(s) for a conference, what it is that they want to accomplish. Others have students write specific questions on their draft to which the instructor replies either on the draft or in conference.

The next Composition Conversation will be on Tuesday, November 3 on the topic of “Peer Review and Scoring Guides.”