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Improving Office Hours and Writing Conferences

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Another essential component of teaching that we feel we should work on improving is the conducting of office hours and conferences. Early research (Carcinelli, 1980; Zamel, 1985; and Sokmen, 1988) found that conferences can be even more effective than written feedback for ELLs because there, students can express opinions and needs and clarify instructor comments. Still, as with "best practices" in other arenas, we feel the ideal approach here is to talk about improving our practices holistically rather than merely singling out strategies to use with ELLs.

TIMING & INVITATION

Griffin et al.'s study "Starting the Conversation: An Exploratory Study of Factors That Influence Student Office Hour Use" (2014) suggests that students attend office hours if they find the location and timing convenient and if they find the instructor approachable and their feedback helpful. These are all things we, as instructors, can control. In addition to choosing convenient times for office hours (e.g. by checking in with students before establishing on office hours schedule; choosing an hour on Monday and an hour on Tuesday for those with a MWF conflict; by offering additional "by appointment" office hours), Griffin also suggests that instructors should also be educating students during class time about the benefits of attending office hours. We should be issuing an invitation, so to speak, rather than seeming like we hold office hours out of obligation.

DISCURSIVE PRACTICES & HEIGHTENING CO-PARTICIPATION

In the USC Writing Program, we are in the unique position of engaging with students in regular, mandatory conferences. Young and Miller (2004), drawing from work in sociology and linguistic anthropology, argue that language and context are inextricably linked and that meaning is, thus, negotiated through interactions. In other words, as stated by Mirzaee and Yaqubi (2016), "all cognitive developments are results of 'social interactions.'" What this means for writing instructors holding office hours and conferences is that we must first be aware that the way we interact with students influences how they learn, and, second, be intentional about the kinds of discursive practices we turn to when we meet one-on-one with students. Discursive practices—or recurring episodes of face-to-face interactions—that seek to more equitably distribute power within a conference and to heighten student engagement have the capacity to change students' experiences in office hours from peripheral and passive to fully-engaged and growth-oriented.

It may be helpful to distinguish between conferences/office hours sessions aimed at brainstorming and discussing early essay ideas and conferences that seek to devise a plan for revising a work-in-progress.

EARLY CONFERENCES

When doing an early conference, such as a WP #1 conference, during which students may only bring in invention notes or a working thesis statement, open-ended questioning can serve as an essential tool in guiding the in-person discussion. In analyzing transcripts of conferences, Freedman and Katz (1987) found that when teachers initiated many questions to guide the student, the student supplied the direction and content of the conference.

In an early conference such as this, the instructor should aim to 1) create a comfortable environment for the student to engage with the instructor; 2) understand the approach the student has thus far taken in approaching the writing assignment, 3) guide the student towards a clearer understanding of the paper prompt and the task at hand; 4) compel the kinds of critical thinking that can lead the student to a thoughtful response to the assignment.

Questions about process might include: "Can you tell me a little about your process of thinking for this assignment?" "Where did your early ideas come from?" Students may, then, be emboldened to share that perhaps their ideas derived from a personal experience, which creates an opportunity for the instructor to demonstrate through their interest and engagement with the student's story that the student's voice and experiences are important and valued in the context of office hours and conferences. (Encouraging students who grew up outside the U.S. context to share these stories can be especially helpful in reminding them that activating prior knowledge is a crucial component of critical thinking and that knowledge most certainly does not need to have been derived in U.S. classrooms.)

In following up, instructors might devise questions that encourage students to gauge the extent to which their early ideas can be useful in approaching the upcoming writing task. To achieve these ends, instructors can turn to the six types of Socratic questions below and determine which might be most useful:
- Clarifying concepts
- Probing assumptions
- Probing rationale, reasons and evidence
- Questioning viewpoints and perspectives
- Probing implications and consequences
- Questioning the question

Some examples of useful questions may include: "What has reflecting on this personal experience revealed to you?" "What leads you to believe that what happened in this instance speaks to a larger truth?" "What questions might a reader have about your viewpoint/perspective on this matter?" "Beyond this experience or example, what other

evidence leads you to the conclusion you're drawing?" "What about this early thinking seems most helpful in responding to our writing prompt?"

If the instructor feels a 15-minute conference focused entirely on listening to a student and asking open-ended questions may not result in an action-oriented task, they can shorten the question-asking time and devote part of the session to discussing the essay outline/thesis statement in more detail. (See section below for a more thorough discussion of a revision conference.) Alternately, the instructor can suggest that contemplating broader questions like these in more depth may allow the student to arrive at a better working thesis statement or revision of an outline. The instructor might welcome the student to follow up via email to discuss a new thesis statement or outline draft.

ESSAY CONFERENCES: "REVISION TALK"

Young and Miller (2014) identify "revision talk" as a particular discursive practice that instructors use when conducting writing conferences. In a longitudinal observational study, they analyzed this practice on two fronts: the overall sequencing of the acts in the practice and the boundaries of the practice.

The authors identify eight acts in the revision talk discursive practice, which follow here:
1. Attend (e.g. display attention to the paper)
2. Identify (e.g. identify a problem in the paper)
3. Explain (e.g. explain a need for revision)
4. Write (e.g. write down notes or a revision of a sentence)
5. Direct Write (e.g. issue a directive to a participant to produce a verbal or written revision)
6. Candidate revision (e.g. produce a verbal or written revision of the text)
7. Evaluate (e.g. evaluate a revision)
8. Shift topics

Young and Miller noted that in early conferences, the students' participation tended to be more peripheral. Even when instructors utilize the helpful method of "turn-taking management," students often relinquished their turn by saying "yeah" and yielding their time back to the instructor. Instructors tend to dominate discussion in an early conference, and the authors suggest that this is understandable in that a) the conference or office hour set-up may be entirely new for the student and b) it is, in fact, the instructor's duty to model these acts for the student in an early conference.

As conferences evolve over the term, however, instructors utilizing revision talk as a discursive practice must bring about changes in the participation framework so as to yield fuller participation from students and to allow for mutual co-construction of the roles during the conferences. One way the instructor can do this is by reshaping *how* they take their turn. Koshik (2002) calls attention to a turn structure called a "designedly incomplete utterance" (or DIU) that can be particularly powerful in eliciting student participation during a conference. The DIU,

being incomplete by design, puts the student in the position to complete the thought or revision and can thus facilitate enhanced student participation by either encouraging the student to produce the revision themselves or allowing both the student and instructor to co-create a candidate revision together.

In effectively utilizing turn management, it's also important to pay attention to how the non-verbal behavior of the student and instructor is coordinated with their verbal behavior (Young and Miller, 2014). For example, an instructor nudging a paper towards a student often anticipates the instructor's subsequent request that the student produce a candidate revision. Or, an instructor nodding while a student is talking may be an indication of the instructor's engagement and serve to encourage the student to take an "extended turn."

Mirzaee and Yaqubi further found in their 2016 study that a teacher's silence can play a key role in the management of turns in writing conferences. Silence can, the authors argue, provide the parties with various opportunities for accomplishing intersubjectivity and better enable students to negotiate meaning (which might make it more likely that the student will actually revise the work when they get home). Mirzaee and Yaqubi noted instances, for example, where the instructor used silence to rethink the information provided during writing conferences, and the learner exploited that silence to revise the essay draft.

Instructors aiming to better utilize writing conferences as a pedagogical tool by turning to some of the tools described above can start to gauge the effectiveness of their strategies by asking themselves: Is the quantity of student participation increasing with each conference? Is the student beginning to show mastery of the interactional architecture of the practice of revision talk? Are the writing conferences leading the student to engage in more thoughtful and meaningful revision work at home?

References for Office Hours/Conferences Section:

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