

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY, BUT HOW YOU SAY IT (AND TO WHOM): ACCOMMODATING GENDER IN THE WRITING CONFERENCE

Claire Elizabeth O'Leary
University of Wisconsin–Madison

A central mission of writing centers is to help writers in all disciplines, at all levels of proficiency, learn how to improve their writing skills. The primary tool for achieving this goal is the writing conference, in which a writer receives personal attention from a trained tutor who works with the writer on a specific piece of writing. Conferences, as Kenneth Bruffee suggested in his seminal essay on collaborative learning, have the potential to generate new ideas via conversation—a conversation in this case between a writing tutor and a student (645). In a writing conference, the tutor is challenged to facilitate conversation with a diverse and changing writer population which, in a successful conference, acts as a vehicle for the collaborative creation of new thoughts. Thus, conferencing and conversation are intimately linked, as the productivity of the conference depends on the quality of conversation in which the writing tutor and student engage. A tutor's ability to hold a productive dialogue with the student is the difference between a successful conference, after which the student writer feels ready to tackle revisions with new ideas, and an unsuccessful conference, which may leave both the tutor and the student feeling frustrated by a lack of communication, and, consequently, progress. For the tutor, facilitating productive conversation about an unfamiliar piece of writing requires careful attention to the back-and-forth of the dialogue and the ability to respond and adapt immediately to conversational cues from the student. A tutor's spontaneous conversational responses are influenced by more than the content of the conversation. Although “content” factors, such as the paper topic, the genre of writing, and the current state of the draft play a key role in determining what ideas will emerge in the conference conversation, the flow and development of the conversation are also affected by how the tutor and student enact and respond to each other's social identities.¹

In a writing conference conversation, particularly if it is between strangers, the social identities that could affect conversation often correspond to physically apparent characteristics that identify different persons as belonging to different social groups. Such outwardly visible characteristics lead others to make conclusions, correct or not, about an individual's status “at first glance.” Social group identifiers, which affect both how a conversational partner thinks of him- or herself and how he or she is viewed by other conversation participants, include race, age, and gender. Feminist scholar Evelyn Ashton-Jones identified gender as a feature of conversation participants that can profoundly impact conversational behaviors, proposing that the “ideology of gender” (the social expectations associated with one or the other gender) is reproduced in conversation (7). Thus, in a conference, tutors and tutees may reproduce social gender norms in their conversational interactions. Bringing together discourse analysis studies of gender and language and studies that examine the role of student and teacher or tutor gender on conference conversation, this paper investigates how student gender influences the conference style of undergraduate peer writing tutors (specifically, tutors from the Writing Fellows Program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison). I explore in a small case study how a student and a writing fellow may inter-

act in gender roles in such a way as to affect the tutor's conversational style. In doing so, I address and draw attention to a conversation dynamic—that created between a peer writing tutor and student—that has yet to be thoroughly examined from a linguistic point of view in the literature on conference conversation. I suggest that, in keeping with the role of a tutor as a facilitator of conversation, writing fellows make what I call “conversational accommodations” for student gender behaviors. I propose that the changes in a peer writing tutor's conversational patterns with students of different genders are the manifestations of this accommodation.

Before examining how a peer tutor may accommodate student gender, it is necessary to identify what gender norms are stereotypically associated with each gender, and how this creates gender-based roles for conversation participants. In looking at gender performance in the writing conference context, I have based my definition of stereotypical masculine and feminine roles on the tutoring-style identifiers tabulated in a study by Kathleen Hunzer on students who visited a university writing center and worked with both a male and a female tutor. Students surveyed consistently described their tutors' styles in ways that identified male and female tutors as performing stereotypical gender roles, both in positive and negative ways.² Students described female tutors as demonstrating stereotypically female qualities: they were deferential, nonassertive, sensitive, caring, emotionally involved, and good listeners. Male tutors, in contrast, were seen as frank, self-assertive, objective, analytic, less skilled at listening, and more skilled at focusing on the task at hand (par. 4). Hunzer noted that the identification of tutor conference styles in a way that corresponds to common gender stereotypes suggests that tutors and students interact in gender roles during the writing conference (par. 5). Similarly, in her discourse analyses of conference conversation, Laurel Johnson Black found that students and tutors interacted in gender roles, as males and females in mixed or same-sex dyads (81). Since conversation is the primary mode of interaction in the writing conference, the manifestation of these gender roles is in the conversational behaviors of the participants, in both their listener and speaker roles.

Discourse analyses of conversations between participants of the same and opposite sex in a variety of conversational contexts have shed some light on how gender performance emerges in linguistic behaviors. Critical reviews of language and gender research by Deborah James with Sandra Clarke and Janice Drakich, as well as primary research conducted by Amy Sheldon, suggest, overwhelmingly, that the linguistic behavior of an individual is highly dependent on the characteristics of other participants as well as on the nature of the conversational interaction.³ Though specific linguistic behaviors cannot be associated definitively with one or the other gender, these studies found that some general characteristics of discourse do correlate to gender in various conversational situations. The feminine discourse style, for example, is generally described as “affiliative” because women mitigate statements and use collaborative strategies more often than men; the masculine style, on the other hand, is more adversarial, employing discourse control strategies (Sheldon 87). In addition to being affiliative and collaborative, the discourse among all-female speakers in less formal situations often evolves into the “high-involvement style” characterized by supportive interruptions, rapid flow of speech, and more laughter than typically occurs in all-male or mixed-sex conversations (James and Clarke 259). Within these general gender-specific trends, however, actual participant linguistic behavior varies most strongly based on whether the conversation is informal or formal, task-oriented or not, and if a preconceived status difference exists between participants.

In considering conversation in the writing conference context (typically between a teacher or

adult tutor and a student, often in a classroom or writing center), discourse analysis suggests that writing conference interactions are task-oriented, formal, and involve status difference. In a task-oriented conversation, participants (the tutor and student) are focused on one issue (the student's paper) and together work toward a goal (improving the paper). The institutional aspect of the teacher's or tutor's relationship to the student makes the conversation more formal than informal and creates a status difference between the participants, with the teacher or tutor traditionally accorded higher status than the student because of association with institutionally granted authority. In reviewing studies on gender and interruption, James and Clarke concluded that status differences are important determinants in formal, task-oriented conversations like those in a writing conference: an individual's perception of who holds more power or a participant with a high-dominance personality will affect conversational behaviors more than performance of gender roles (249, 262).

In the studies cited above, formality emerged as one of the primary factors determining the linguistic behaviors of conversation participants. Notably, when the interaction is less formal, conversational roles taken by male and female participants often relate more directly to stereotypical gender roles. In mixed-sex informal conversation, the amount of time women talk is equal to or exceeds the talk time of male peers (James and Drakich 297). In contrast, in this same review of the literature on gender and amount of talk, James and Drakich found that in formal task-oriented situations men and women initiated the same number of vocal acts but men spent more time talking (291). They propose that this difference between informal and formal interactions, particularly those involving only a few participants, exists because women use facilitative speech to fill silences, which occur more frequently in less formally structured interactions. It seems that women often talk more in a mixed-sex group, then, because other conversation participants expect that female participants will fill silences by contributing facilitative comments (299). The types and frequencies of interruptive speech acts also correspond to whether or not a formal structure exists: the frequency of interruptions with dominating intent decreases in more informal interactions; overlap, on the other hand, increases as speakers observe the formal "one speaker at a time" rule less strictly (James and Clarke 241).

Conversation structure and context alone do not determine linguistic behaviors, as both formal and informal conversations are affected by how well the participants know each other. In many writing conferences, the student and tutor don't know each other well or have never met before; such a lack of familiarity has been shown to affect linguistic behaviors. Nervous or highly engaged participants who don't know each other well have more mistiming errors that cause unintentional overlap in both informal and formal situations (James and Clarke 257). The awkwardness of informal conversation among strangers can cause conflict, which may lead to more interruptions made with dominating intent as well as intentional topic-switching, which, according to James and Clarke (248), may minimize the value of the previous speaker's comment. Strangers are also more likely to determine self-other performance expectations based on outwardly visible status characteristics. In the formal situation, this characteristic is the position of authority one participant has relative to the other; in the informal situation, gender is one of the first status characteristics participants use as they negotiate their relationship within the conversation (Ashton-Jones 5).

Looking more specifically at conversational behaviors of participants in writing conferences, discourse analyses of conferences conducted by Terese Thonus and Laurel Johnson Black confirm the power an individual's status has on conversation. Both found that high-status individuals (the

graduate student tutor or teacher) talked more, regardless of the gender of participants (Thonus 242; Black 69). Thus, institutional authority makes male and female teachers or tutors more similar than different—both genders perceive themselves as high-status individuals in comparison to students, and therefore exhibit similar conversational behaviors. According to Black, this similarity stems from the fact that “[c]onferencing so closely resembles teaching, not conversation . . . that the roles of teacher and student seem to dominate while gender roles complicate” (69). Expanding on this logic, it seems that Black is implying that, if the writing conference dialogue more closely approximated conversation between peers (were more informal), gender roles might be more of a dominating factor in determining linguistic behaviors of the participants.

If research indicates that male and female teachers and graduate student tutors exhibit conversational behaviors that are more similar than different, what in the writing conference would lead to gender-stereotypical descriptions of tutor styles, like those given by Hunzer’s students? If the student, rather than the teacher or tutor, participates in the conversation in a gender-based role, the tutor may respond to the student’s gendered conversational cues and accommodate student gender role performance in order to facilitate a fruitful conversation. The idea of teachers responding differently to male and female student gender performance is supported by Black’s conference conversation analyses. Black found that teachers did adjust their conferencing styles according to student responsiveness and conversational behavior, and that the degree of responsiveness and types of conversational behaviors related directly to student gender. Female students actively facilitated the teacher’s talk and were more likely to deny their own knowledge, thereby taking a subordinate conversational role (65). Both female and male teachers responded similarly to this gender role performance—female students, on average, received more praise, more suggestions, and were given definitions, rules, and explanations of writing conventions (77). Male students, on the other hand, did not take a subordinate role; they were more resistant to advice and suggestions, and more likely to defend their work than to offer revision strategies (70). These student behaviors relate directly to the roles males and females are conditioned to assume in similar conversational situations with peers. In a task-oriented formal interaction among peers, expectations of a high-status individual would be assigned equally to male participants; in contrast, female students in the same situation take the role of what James and Drakich (298) called “facilitators,” participants who voluntarily take a low-status position by encouraging others to speak. The teacher is institutionally empowered and does not share status with the student regardless of the student’s gender. In a conference, then, the female student’s role identifications converge while the male student’s diverge. In the conferences Black analyzed, female students, habituated to accept the low-status position in interactions among peers, interact with the teacher in a similar facilitative, low-status participant role. Male students, on the other hand, are habituated to assume a high-status position; the conversational behaviors Black identified, particularly between a male student and female teacher, show that male students engaged in a power struggle with the teacher over who would take the high-status conversational role. Black’s study confirms, then, that a main determinant of linguistic behavior in formal conversation (like that of a writing conference) is how participants perceive their status relative to one another.

This research identifies writing conferences as formal interactions in which status, not gender, is the primary determinant of conversational behaviors—which led me to ask the question: In a less formal conference, will gender, rather than status, be a larger determinant of linguistic behaviors? Discourse analyses of writing conferences have not fully investigated conferences between a

peer tutor and a student writer in which conversation is, according to Thom Hawkins (66), less restricted because the tutor is more accessible to the student as an equal. In what follows, I attempt to address how, in a peer-peer interaction conducted in a neutral setting (not a writing center or classroom setting, which might add to the peer tutor's status by association with instruction), an undergraduate peer tutor (writing fellow) actively accommodates student gender performance by changing conversational behaviors. In examining the conference conversation of the female writing fellows, my premise is that as these conferences will be more informal than those facilitated by teachers/graduate student tutors, students and fellows will rely more on stereotypical gender roles during the conference, performing these roles in a way that is apparent in their dialogue.⁴ Though limited to a small case study, in addition to identifying possible gender accommodation I also hope to identify the peer tutor-student conversation dynamic itself, little studied from a linguistic point of view, as an intriguing subject for gender and language studies.

My case study consisted of two female undergraduate tutors in conference with one male and one female student each.⁵ These tutors are in the Writing Fellows Program, run through the University of Wisconsin–Madison Writing Center, which trains undergraduate tutors to work with fellow undergraduates. I tape-recorded the four conferences between 9 November and 13 November 2007; after each conference the fellows responded to a questionnaire. After careful review of the methodologies used in the previously cited studies, I chose five aspects of conversation on which to focus my examination of the conference transcripts: time at talk, type of talk, conference tone, participants' statuses, and performance of stereotypical gender roles.⁶ I coded the transcriptions for talk time (participant conversational turns) and the following type of talk subcategories: self-correction, backpedaling, and second-guessing; praising; overlap and interruption; topic-raising; and suggestion. This coding and the fellows' post-conference responses informed my assessments of overall tone as well as each participant's status and gender performance. The results of one fellow with both students are presented first, with the analysis of the second fellow's conferences following.⁷ This highlights not how the writing fellows differed from each other but rather how their individual styles did or did not change in a way that can be correlated to student gender.

The first writing fellow, "Anna," was assigned to a women's studies and literature course and worked with "Rich" and "Jillian." The writing assignment involved close reading of class texts and integration of secondary research. In both post-conference responses, Anna expressed that these students were among the more skilled writers with whom she had met. Both came to the conference with questions to discuss. Anna described the students as "proactive" writers with whom she was able to go beyond discussion of writing "basics." She felt she and the students related in the conference as fellow student writers, describing both conferences as "equal exchanges" of ideas. Based only on Anna's descriptions of the two students in her post-conference responses, one might expect these conferences to be more similar than different. My analysis, however, shows that this is not the case.

The first aspect I addressed was how Anna's two conferences compared in terms of talk time. In Anna's conference with Jillian, Anna talked more overall, held the floor for extended periods during which the student contributed only back-channel responses (affirmative signs of active listenership), and took more conversational turns than the student. Rich was more of a verbal presence than Jillian was in her conference, and talk time was more equally shared between the fellow and student in his conference. During the first few minutes of his conference, Rich talked Anna through an outline he had brought. After discussing the outline, however, he continued to take

longer turns than Jillian did throughout the conversation. Consequently, Anna took shorter turns in her conference with Rich than she did in Jillian's conference.

When type of talk is analyzed, the two conferences diverge even more, with Jillian and Rich displaying different conversational behavior patterns. In her conference, Jillian had a high incidence of self-correcting statements (indicating an unwillingness to assert her knowledge or a lack of confidence in her abilities). In Rich's conference, neither he nor Anna expressed a lack of confidence; both participants used a minimal amount of self-correction, hedging, and devaluing comments. Though the incidence was low, Anna did exhibit more of these behaviors than Rich; however, these instances were confined to mitigating phrases accompanying suggestions. Interestingly, in Rich's conference praise was used more frequently than in Jillian's conference; Anna praised Rich's revision strategies and Rich praised Anna's abilities and helpfulness.

In terms of interruption, Anna interrupted both students with a fairly high frequency—a pattern that she acknowledged as a flaw in her conferencing style in her post-conference response. In her conference, Jillian attempted interruptions, but not as often as Anna did, and with much less success than Anna. Anna was never unsuccessful in her interruption attempts while Jillian was unsuccessful more often than not. Some of Anna's interruptions of Jillian were disruptive or negated Jillian's previous statements, whereas Jillian attempted only supporting or neutral interruptions. The use of back-channel responses, generally assumed to be supportive and often not recognized as overlap, is particularly noteworthy in Jillian's conference. Jillian used back-channel responses often, to affirm and encourage Anna's conversational contributions; Anna, however, did not use such responses to an equal degree when the student had the floor. In Rich's conference, on the other hand, the use of interruption and overlap (including back-channel responses) was mutual, with Rich actually interrupting Anna more. Although a good portion of Rich's interruptions or longer overlaps were supportive or neutral, many overlaps involved completing Anna's sentences—completing her sentences seems to have been a demonstration of his understanding and a way to indicate that there was no need for Anna to explain further. He did seize the floor several times, occasionally denied Anna's suggestions, and clearly defended his point of view—behaviors the female student never exhibited.

Topic-raising was often done in the form of a suggestion, but despite the convergence of these two categories the use of topic-raising and suggestion was not uniform: the students brought most of the topics to the conversation while the fellow gave frequent suggestions. The fact that topic-raising was the only linguistic behavior that both students performed to a greater degree than the writing fellow likely relates to the fact that the students had brought questions to discuss based on the comments Anna had written on their drafts. Though she raised topics in the form of suggestion in her conference, Jillian still had a very low incidence of suggestion in comparison to Anna. Jillian used interrogative or specific modal suggestions, primarily to propose revision strategies, solicit information on topics related to writing and revision, and affirm the writing fellow's suggestions. In contrast, Anna rarely used interrogative suggestions, and instead made indirect and modal (both vague and specific) suggestions that were almost always accompanied by a mitigating phrase, tone, or sentence structure. Anna's use of indirect and mitigated suggestions in the conference implies that she sought student affirmation for her statements. Although Anna made more suggestions in both conferences (unsurprising given her role as a writing fellow), Rich almost equaled Anna in frequency of suggestion. Rich, like Jillian, took it upon himself to raise topics, but he ensured few silences by continually offering revision strategies. This contributed to Rich's high incidence of

suggestions. He, like Jillian, was much more likely to use interrogative suggestions. As the conference with Rich progressed and the two got into more specific aspects of the draft at hand, Anna began to rely exclusively on specific modal suggestions. At no time did Anna offer an imperative suggestion to Rich, although she did use this type of suggestion with Jillian.

As different as these conferences were, it seems that in both cases the student and fellow interacted to create a positive conversational tone. Anna verbally dominated the conference with Jillian, but this did not seem to cause a disagreeable tone in the interaction, which Anna described as “positive and supportive,” but also serious and intellectually “stimulating.” The high-involvement style described previously as characteristic of all-female talk appeared only occasionally, when the participants moved off topic, although both participants seemed highly engaged throughout the conference. The high-involvement style, which my research indicated as exclusive to female discourse patterns, appeared to be less gender-specific than I expected. The conversation between Rich and Anna actually included more typical elements of the high-involvement all-female style, such as a greater supportive overlap and use of back-channel responses. Rich and Anna did stay on task even during their high-involvement exchanges, and the conversational tone was focused on the paper, with both participants highly engaged.

My analysis indicates that, although both conferences showed characteristics of informal conversation, in one conference the participants took different status roles. This occurred in Anna’s conference with Jillian, in which Jillian seems to have cued Anna to take the high-status role while Jillian assumed a low-status, facilitative role. This is somewhat surprising since Anna described Jillian as “a rock star” in her conference response. At the end of the conference, Jillian did mention, in an off-topic exchange, that she felt comfortable with the material and her writing. This break from her pattern of using hedged comments and interrogative suggestions implies that she devalued her writing in order to facilitate conversation. Both participants contributed to the conversational asymmetry—although Anna acknowledged that she has the habit of interrupting, Jillian allowed these interruptions to be successful and rarely attempted to speak out of turn. In contrast, as indicated by the amount of student participation and high incidence of interruption and overlap, neither Rich nor Anna took the role of the high-status participant in their conference.

This status determination informed my assessment of participant performance of gender as it relates to the previously described stereotypically male and female conversation roles. Jillian seemed to actively perform stereotypical aspects of the female gender by voluntarily taking the low-status conversational role. Anna’s conferencing style accommodated the conversational role that Jillian selected; as a response to Jillian’s gender performance, Anna’s conversation was more self-assertive, dominating, and could be described as more masculine. The conversation between Anna and Jillian resembled the interactions between teachers and female students described by Black (64): the student raised topics but spoke minimally, and the teacher responded to the student’s performance of the stereotypical female gender role by taking a conversationally dominant position. Both students guided the conference by raising topics, but Rich’s control of the conversational flow was more blatant. Although Rich and Anna’s conversation approximated what characterizes the all-female “high-involvement” style, Rich seemed to take a stereotypically masculine role by verbally contributing more and not mitigating or hedging his statements. Black’s study again sheds light on the student’s gender performance. Male students in her study also had a high degree of cooperative overlap with the tutor, but used this overlap to demonstrate knowledge and understanding (70). It is, then, not surprising that in her conference with Rich Anna’s conference

style comes across linguistically as more feminine. Although Anna considered the two students to be of a similar writing caliber, because the students participated conversationally in different ways that correlate with gender performance, the conference between Anna and the male student seemed more like a conversation between two equal-status individuals while the conversation between Anna and the female student was more like a conversation between a tutor and a student.

“Jane’s” conferences with freshmen students “Alexis” and “Benjamin,” working on papers for an introductory philosophy class, present a contrast to the informality of Anna’s conferences. These conferences were more formal and writing fellow-directed than were Anna’s conferences. As with Anna, Jane’s description of the conferences leads one to believe that the conferences were more similar than different, but again this is not the case. However, unlike Anna’s conferences, in which both students came equally prepared, the differences observed between Jane’s conferences could have been due, at least in part, to the fact that Alexis was more prepared for a conference than Benjamin was. Jane also acted as a scribe for her students, which decreased her verbal signs of listenership and added to the impression of a formally structured, turn-by-turn conversation. Furthermore, Jane initiated a set, and therefore more formal, conference structure: she organized both conferences around the “formula” of reverse outlining the students’ drafts and then reviewing this outline to address problems. Much of what I observed in the conferences relates directly to this formal structure, Jane’s intent to follow it, and how the students responded.

The reverse outline structure played a primary role in shaping talk time and turn-taking in Jane’s conferences, particularly in Alexis’s conference. With Alexis, talk time was fairly balanced between the student and the fellow. However, although Alexis held the floor for longer periods than Jane did, the initiation of these long turns was at Jane’s behest. Jane initially suggested a reverse outline, and then steered Alexis through her paper paragraph by paragraph, encouraging Alexis’s participation with consistent, qualified praise. Benjamin, on the other hand, seemed uninterested in talking about his current draft or working on new writing. It is difficult to determine, however, whether this would have been the case if Benjamin had turned in a more complete draft or come to the conference prepared to work on major revisions. As a consequence of this unresponsiveness, Jane talked more than Benjamin, despite using the same strategies that were successful in facilitating Alexis’s participation. At one point, his continued unresponsiveness led her to praise him for an idea she had, in fact, proposed and repeated several times. This seemed to be an attempt to end the conference on a positive note.

Consistent with the turn-by-turn formal conversation structure followed in both conferences, the participants overlapped and interrupted each other minimally. The most significant aspect of interruption in Jane’s conference with Alexis was that Alexis was unsuccessful in all of her interruption attempts. Jane did not cede the floor to Alexis, and Alexis chose to avoid extensive overlap, an indication that Alexis perceived formality in the interaction. Overlap from back-channel responses showed an interesting trend—Alexis used back-channel responses supportively during Jane’s turns, but Jane rarely verbalized during Alexis’s turns. However, this may have been because Jane was writing while Alexis talked. In Jane’s conference with Benjamin, the interruptions that occurred were often disruptive: both Jane and Benjamin interrupted in order to seize the floor, although Jane was more successful. Jane also had a low frequency of back-channel responses in comparison to the student during Benjamin’s conference, but Benjamin used fewer back-channel responses during Jane’s turns than Alexis did. Furthermore, although the research previously cited identifies back-channel responses as supportive signs of active listenership, Benjamin’s vocal

inflections made it seem that he used these responses to push Jane toward finishing thoughts by indicating that he understood and no longer wanted to talk about a particular topic.

In both conferences, Jane did the majority of topic-raising: Alexis accepted these topics while Benjamin did not. As in Anna's conferences, topic-raising and suggestion were linked, and Jane's involvement as the primary topic-raiser contributed to her domination of suggestion use. When Jane proposed doing a reverse outline to both students, she presented it as a suggestion, and, in moving through the paper, Jane raised the "topic" of each paragraph. Of the four conferences analyzed, imperative suggestions were used with the highest frequency by Jane with Benjamin. This is not surprising given the tense tone Benjamin created by consistently denying Jane's suggestions. Although Jane suggested reverse outlining four times, Benjamin refused to go beyond the second paragraph.

The linguistic behaviors used most frequently in Jane's conferences coincide with those used in conversations with a formal tone. Despite Jane's attempts to add some levity, the turn-by-turn structure necessitated by the initial decision to organize the conference around reverse outlining restricted progression toward informality. Overall, Jane's conference with Alexis had a cooperative and supportive tone, but no real rapport was created and formality was maintained. Benjamin's conference was also formal; however, the tone seemed to be more conflictive. Both participants recognized that there was not a lot to build on, and although Jane was willing to help Benjamin move beyond this, Benjamin continually denied his ability to do so. There was a struggle for control of the conversation as Jane attempted to get Benjamin to do a reverse outline—he essentially refused to do this and, rather than taking the other options that Jane gave for continuing, made conversational plays to end the conference.

Talk time and type of talk were less useful in making an informed status assessment in Jane's conferences than they were in Anna's, so I relied on speaker intent and verbal inflections. In Jane's conference with Alexis, although turn duration indicated that Alexis was linguistically dominant, the conversation trajectory was determined primarily by Jane. Jane was the participant who kept things moving, and her leadership showed that she had the dominant role. The conversational asymmetry that favored Alexis's participation was created by Jane, and, although Jane left Alexis the opportunity to participate in a high-status position, Alexis continually deferred to Jane by following and affirming Jane's suggestions. Similarly, in Jane's conversation with Benjamin, an attempt to base status assessment on type of talk alone does not adequately represent the intent behind each participant's conversational moves. If we look only at the analysis of discourse, Jane emerges as the high-status participant and the substantial control that Benjamin asserted over this conversation is masked. Benjamin denied his knowledge of the subject, but not his status in the conversation: by denying Jane her set formula and ending the conference on his terms, he effectively controlled the conversation. Benjamin seemed uncomfortable with his draft, which may have made him feel incapable of claiming expert status in regard to the subject matter. He had no grounds upon which to defend his work, and would have had to defer to Jane's knowledge of the writing process—thereby assuming a low-status conversational role. Instead, he chose not to talk at all.

In these formal (and, with Benjamin, conflicted) conferences, what can be said about student performance of gender? Alexis assumed a low-status role even though Jane worked to get her to take a more active part. Alexis did the conversational work stereotypically expected of female conversation participants—she followed Jane's cues on when she should speak, actively encouraged

Jane to speak by attempting supportive overlap, and agreed with Jane's suggestions and criticisms. Alexis, by ceding the control of the conversation to Jane, did not force Jane to act in a gendered way. Benjamin, while reluctant to take the low-status role, was unable to take a high-status role. This is similar to what Black observed in the behavior of male students with a teacher: male students resisted the teacher's suggestions but did not offer their own, or accept a female teacher's, revision strategies (73). Benjamin's unresponsiveness moved Jane to fill silences, be facilitative, and actively encourage his participation. Jane ended up doing the conversational work for both of them, exhibiting stereotypical female behaviors less present in Jane's dialogue with Alexis.

From my analysis of these four conferences, I conclude that the writing fellows in this study did make accommodations for the roles performed by the students that altered conference style in a way that correlated to student gender. The data of this case study suggests that gender plays a greater role in determining conversational style in more informal conferences, between peers, than in more formal conferences, such as those between a student and a tutor or teacher, which scholars have researched more fully. This indicates that the informal style allowed for a greater degree of accommodation, by the writing fellow, of a student's performance of gender. Furthermore, within peer-mediated conferences, gender affected conference style more when the writing fellow followed a looser structure, again because a less set structure allowed greater accommodation of student gender performance.

In the more informal conferences, mediated by Anna, gender more clearly affected the writing fellow's style. Anna's female student, Jillian, established herself as a low-status participant and exhibited several stereotypically female conversational traits that related directly to what Hunzer (par. 4) identifies as commonly held gender stereotypes that can define conversational roles. Jillian deferred to Anna's knowledge, agreed with her suggestions, rarely interrupted, and was an active listener. Although Jillian did raise topics, she did so in a nonassertive way. Anna took Jillian's cues and assumed the high-status role by talking more, asking fewer questions, and soliciting agreement. With Rich, on the other hand, Anna did not receive any cues to take a high-status conversational role, nor did she give any to Rich. Rich seemed to perform traits typical of both the male and female gender. In stereotypically male fashion, he was assertive, directive, task-oriented, and likely to interrupt. He also exhibited typically female traits, however, in his verbal signs of active listenership, his eagerness to support and affirm Anna's comments, and his suggestions of revision strategies. In Rich's conference the typically all-female high-involvement style was most prevalent. Anna accommodated this mixed-gender performance by taking a more feminine role than she did with Jillian and allowing Rich to be successful in his interruptions.

Jane's style was less changed by the gender performance of her students, which I relate to the formal structure of her conferences. In her conference, Alexis, behaving much as Jillian did with Anna, assumed a low-status conversation role and performed a female gender role: she was deferent and amenably followed Jane's structure. Benjamin did not choose a clear conversational role, but did exhibit masculine discourse tendencies that elicited some alterations in Jane's conference style—she used more imperatives, talked more, and discussed content in her attempts to get Benjamin to participate in the conference. It is difficult to know whether these changes in Jane's conference style were primarily because Jane accommodated Benjamin's gender performance or because she had to make accommodations for the fact that Benjamin was in an earlier stage of the drafting process.

The results of my qualitative analysis suggest that gender performance by students signifi-

cantly affects a writing fellow's conferencing style, particularly if the conference is less formally structured. Given the small scope of this study, however, it is impossible to make definitive conclusions about the nature of peer tutors' responses to student performance of gender. Several variables could cause similar stylistic accommodations by fellows to different students, including: the tutor's preferred conference structure, student age and writing ability, quality of the student draft, student willingness to conference, personality types, and whether a student sees the writing fellow as institutionally empowered. I propose, however, that accommodation of any and all of these factors would be complicated by gender.

The trends identified in these results indicate the need for further research. An investigation into whether male and female writing fellow conferencing styles, like those of graduate student tutors and teachers, are more similar than different would prove illuminating. Discourse studies on a larger scale could determine if both male and female peer tutors accommodate gender by altering conferencing style, and how accommodation of student gender may differ for male and female peer tutors. It would be equally interesting to investigate whether students working with writing fellows, like the students working with tutors in Hunzer's writing center, identify male and female writing fellows' conferencing styles in a gender-segregated way according to gender stereotypes.

My investigation and the prospect of further studies are not only interesting for studying gender and language in the context of a university but might have practical value for peer tutors. Raising awareness of how gender may be performed by students and tutors during a writing conference may lead to an examination of what tutoring techniques can be used to effectively accommodate gender sameness or difference without actively encouraging gendered conversational behaviors that reinforce gender norms. Furthermore, self-discourse analysis is potentially a valuable tool for helping peer tutors, in all disciplines, identify which linguistic behaviors are frequently used to accommodate student gender performance, and how this may alter the conference experience for students of different genders. Particularly for peer writing tutor programs in which the tutors are predominantly female, as is the case with the Writing Fellows Program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, it is crucial that tutors be especially aware of enacting stereotypically female behaviors in response to student gender performance. The overall perception may be that femininity in some way lends itself to successful tutoring while maleness does not, a perception that may discourage male students from participating in such peer tutoring programs.

Peer writing tutors have long been recognized as effective in teaching revision to students, because, as Hawkins has described (67), the unrestricted conversation allows for experimentation—talking through the revision process with someone who has had success in the system but will not judge the student against others. A peer tutor is in a unique situation in a conference with a student in that the tutor not only tailors the conference to the student's needs but is also capable, as a peer, of guiding the student toward becoming a more active participant in the discourse of his or her discipline. The reciprocity of the student-peer tutor relationship can operate either to maintain the gender status quo or to cause a shift in perceptions: on the one hand it can contribute to reinforcement of gender norms, but on the other hand it might allow for a peer tutor who chooses not to accommodate a student's gender performance to have an effect on how that student uses gender as a self-identifier in future conversations, in the academic context and beyond. We, as peer tutors and educators, have the ability to end propagation of gender stereotypes by recognizing and actively changing gender-related conversational behaviors. The possibility that gendered behaviors could be identified and addressed within the context of a peer-mediated writing conference opens

yet another avenue for discouraging institutionally accepted and reproduced gender behaviors that can contribute to perpetuating gender bias at the institutional level.

My heartfelt thanks go to Emily Hall, my wonderful faculty mentor, for spending so much time revising this piece with me, and to Susan Thomas, my faculty reviewer, who has extended my *YSW* experience beyond this work.

Notes

¹I define “social identity” as a how an individual locates him- or herself within a particular context. This identity represents the confluence of many factors that either raise or lower one’s social status in different situations and when interacting with different individuals.

²One variable that Hunzer does not address in her study is whether or not the students visiting the writing center at her university met with tutors who were undergraduates, graduates, or both. Since the students are all undergraduates, the status relationship might be different if undergraduate tutors were seen as peers while graduates were seen as authorities. Status determination plays a large role in how gender affects speaking style, as will be discussed.

³These three papers are compiled in *Gender and Conversational Interaction* (1993), edited by Deborah Tannen. James and Drakich examined literature on gender and talk time (281–312); James and Clarke reviewed studies on gender and interruption (231–80); Sheldon analyzed gender effects on preschooler conversation (83–109).

⁴For practical purposes, I have assumed that sex correlates to gender in selecting my subjects for analysis. However, in determining whether the conferences were affected by gender, I have attempted to avoid assuming sex-gender correlation by making assessments based on gender performance. The relativity of gender and expected performance is alluded to in many studies of gender and language—see James and Clarke; Black; and James and Drakich. Black briefly mentions this in her discussion of teachers and students interacting during writing conferences, saying that they are “socializing in gender roles as well as in institutional roles” and that students generally “perform submissiveness” but may attempt to “perform dominance” in a way that challenges teacher-performed dominance (81).

⁵The number of conferences taped for transcription had to be small due to time constraints. I elected to examine two female fellows’ conferences to address how tutor style changes with the gender of the student, not how tutors of different sexes may have gendered styles—I believe the pertinent factor affecting the tutor’s speech is not self-gender identification but the tutor’s accommodation of the student’s self-gender identification. It should be noted that the fellows had previously commented on the students’ drafts and that this was the second time during the semester that the students had met with the fellows about an assignment.

⁶More detailed information on how these five categories were examined and transcripts of the four conferences and copies of the questionnaire responses are available on request.

⁷Given the small size of this case study, I believe it would be inappropriate to attempt to homogenize the interactions by using a coding system that would classify certain behaviors as necessarily dominant and remove aspects of the fellows’ individual conversational styles. I have also chosen to present my results as relative comparisons, as this highlights the differences and similarities in participant conversational behavior.

Works Cited

- Ashton-Jones, Evelyn. “Collaboration, Conversation, and the Politics of Gender.” *Feminist Principles and Women’s Experience in American Composition and Rhetoric*. Ed. L. W. Phelps and J. Emig. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995. 5–26.
- Black, Laurel Johnson. *Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference*. Logan: Utah State UP, 1998.
- Bruffee, Kenneth. “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” *College English* 46.7 (1984): 635–52.
- Hawkins, Thom. “Intimacy and Audience: The Relationship between Revision and the Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring.” *College English* 42.1 (1980): 64–68.
- Hunzer, Kathleen M. “Gender Expectations and Relationships in the Writing Center.” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 22.2 (1997): 6–11. 30 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.writinglabnewsletter.org/archives/v22/22-2.htm>>.
- James, Deborah, and Sandra Clarke. “Women, Men and Interruptions: A Critical Review.” *Gender and Conversational Interaction*. Ed. Deborah Tannen. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. 231–80.
- James, Deborah, and Janice Drakich. “Understanding Gender Differences in Amount of Talk: A Critical Review of Research.” *Gender and Conversational Interaction*. Ed. Deborah Tannen. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. 281–312.

- Sheldon, Amy. "Pickle Fights: Gendered Talk in Preschool Disputes." *Gender and Conversational Interaction*. Ed. Deborah Tannen. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. 83–109.
- Thonus, Terese. "Dominance in Academic Writing Tutorials: Gender, Language Proficiency, and the Offering of Suggestions." *Discourse & Society* 10.2 (1999): 225–48.