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Online Teacher-Student Group Conferences

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JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

Online Teacher-Student Group Conferences

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Teacher-student group conferences (TSGCs) blend the benefits of one-to-one teacher-student writing conferences with those of peer response. TSGCs socialize student writers into discussions of academic writing, giving them an expert model (the teacher) and an opportunity to practice providing feedback to several peers (Ching, 2014; Yeh, 2019). Both Ching and Yeh considered how TSGCs function in face-to-face settings, describing sessions conducted either in a classroom or during office hours in which small groups of students met with their instructor and shared drafts of their writing for group discussion and response. In this teaching tip, we describe how the procedure can be done in an online context over video-conferencing platforms like Zoom, which offer affordances such as screen sharing and text chat as well as audio discussion.

Context

This activity was designed for adolescent or adult students (first- or second-language learners) in academic writing courses.

Learning Outcomes or Goals

- Students will learn how to provide oral and written commentary on draft texts.
- Students will observe how other students approach the writing assignment in their texts.

Format

This activity was developed for use in online synchronous or hybrid classes, but it could also be used in face-to-face classes in which students have access to internet and individual computers outside of class.

Teacher Preparation

Form groups at the beginning of the term, set due dates for students to submit drafts, and read student drafts before conferences.

Estimated Time

Allot 10–15 minutes per writer, with total conference length depending on group size. When possible, use class meeting time for easier scheduling.

Procedure

1. Prior to the first conference, do the following during class time:
 - a. Introduce students to the concept of the group conference and its benefits. These benefits include receiving feedback from both the instructor and multiple classmates, asking questions about feedback, trying out ideas for revising, and learning how to give better feedback through the process.
 - b. Place students in groups of three to four based on schedule, compatibility, or potential contributions to the process. Make

- sure students know when to sign on and have the meeting link (and password, if needed). See Victoria Lee's (n.d.) [example instructions](#).
- c. Establish a procedure for preparing for the conferences that includes the following:
 - i. Due dates by which writers need to share their drafts with the teacher and their group members.
 - ii. Method for sharing drafts with each other (e.g., Google Docs, Word files, or Word online).
 - iii. Processes for providing each other with comments (e.g., directly on the writer's draft, at the end of the draft, or on a feedback form).
 - iv. Expectations for what students should focus their comments on. You may want to provide students with a list of questions or guidelines to set the scope. See [example guide questions from Michelle Kunkel \(n.d.-a\)](#).
 - d. If you create a video to model the conference procedure, assign students to watch it in preparation. See a [model video created by the authors \(Gilliland, 2020\) for a university-level English for Academic Purposes class](#).
 - e. Let students know when in the conference you will give your comments as the teacher (e.g., at the beginning before the students comment, after all students have commented, or in response to student comments).
2. Follow the conference procedure:
 - a. When all members of a group have signed on to the conference, check if students want to have the conference video recorded (for postconference review) and enable the live transcription.
 - b. Begin with one writer's text. You can either ask for a volunteer or nominate a writer.

- i. Ask the writer to state their goals, questions, and concerns about their paper before inviting others to share their comments.
 - ii. Display the writer's text on the shared screen. This can be done either by the teacher or by each writer in turn.
 - c. Remain consistent throughout the conference to ensure all writers get equal access to feedback:
 - i. Comments may be given orally or in the text chat. You may choose to call on students in turn, allow them to speak up spontaneously, or ask them to use the hand-raising function.
 - ii. Decide whether the writer should remain silent while all comments are delivered or respond to each comment.
 - iii. As reviewers are talking, the writer may wish to write down suggestions or ideas for revision.
 - d. Monitor the time and wrap up the discussion of each paper as appropriate. One option for wrapping up is to ask the writer to explain their next steps/plans for revision.
3. If the conference was recorded, if a live transcript was created, or if chat transcripts were saved, upload the files where students can access them. Decide whether these files should only be accessible to students in the conference group or to everyone in the class.
4. Have students do some kind of follow-up activity, such as one of the following:
 - a. Fill out a form on which they summarize the main feedback they received from their peers and teacher, and plan for whether and how they would follow those suggestions. See an [example feedback form created by Michelle Kunkel \(n.d.-b\)](#).
 - b. Keep a feedback log after each conference and write a final reflection paper summarizing what they learned from the

feedback they received throughout the semester. See an [example feedback log created by Mitsuko Suzuki \(n.d.\)](#).

Caveats and Alternatives

- Scaffold students' participation in conference talk through the following activities:
 - Consider recording a video modeling the feedback process, using the same platform that you will use for the actual conferences so that students can see how it will work.
 - Students could work in small groups in breakout rooms to practice the commenting process in Google Docs (e.g., typing comments at the end of the writer's text in response to guiding questions vs. using the comments button; replying to comments).
 - Some students may not know what they can say about a peer's text. They might appreciate a "cheat sheet" of sentence starters or recommendations about things to comment on.
 - Let students know that praise is also helpful. Some students may think that they do not have anything to criticize, but they can say good things about peers' papers.
 - Encourage students to address each other directly during the conference instead of talking to the teacher (e.g., "I thought you should . . ." vs. "I think she should . . .") as a way of increasing interaction/collaboration.
- Establish a comfortable conference environment:
 - Students (especially second-language writers) may be uncomfortable with the expectation that they give constructive feedback to classmates, particularly within earshot of the teacher and their peers (Ruecker, 2014). They may also be uncomfortable contradicting the teacher's feedback or providing an alternative perspective.
 - Staying with the same group members throughout the term can help students feel more relaxed with time.

- Follow up with students after the conferences:
 - Hold a reflection meeting to discuss the conferences. In the meeting, ask students to identify what kinds of comments were helpful, which may encourage them to give more constructive feedback in the next round. Encourage students to talk about the kinds of feedback that they found most/least useful and why.
 - If there are particular things you want to know (e.g., how much time students spent writing their drafts and giving feedback, how confident they felt while leaving comments and why, or how useful they thought a particular conference was), collect feedback from students after each conference. Change the questions depending on what you want to know in subsequent conferences.
 - Use some type of rubric/grading criteria to hold students accountable for submitting drafts and leaving comments on time. See an [example participation rubric from Michelle Kunkel \(n.d.-c\)](#).

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