

## **Roleplaying During Grading Conferences: Using Fictional Scenarios to Increase Student Writing Self-Efficacy**

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### **Author Biography**

Dr. Laura Davis is an Associate Professor of English and Interdisciplinary Studies at Kennesaw State University where she has taught since 2002. Her research and teaching interests include Gender and Women's Studies, online pedagogy, and literatures of the U.S. South and India. Currently, she also serves as the Assistant Chair of the Interdisciplinary Studies Department. One of her favorite responsibilities in this role is getting to mentor new teachers in both face-to-face and online classrooms.

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### **Goal of Activity**

As a composition teacher, I used to spend hours writing marginal comments telling students how to revise. However, I have come to believe that this traditional approach places students in a passive role regarding editing, and I want students to become more active writers and revisers. The activity described below was constructed with the goal of helping students gain skillful self-efficacy over their own writing and revision, gradually moving the responsibility for improvement from the professor wholly to them.

### **Structure of the Activity**

On the first day of class I tell my freshmen that, instead of handing in four essays, they will attend four individual twenty-minute grading conferences with me and engage in a fictional role play to help them assess their own work and create a path for revision. They know they will receive rubrics ahead of time and that these conferences are intentionally scaffolded so that each one builds on the former. By the final conference they will be doing almost all their own revision and grading.

#### ***Conference one: podcast me***

Students write a profile of someone, and when they come to my office I read the essay aloud to them. They must pretend they are podcast producers listening to a podcast that needs editing before it airs. As producers, on their copies they highlight anything that sounds confusing or underdeveloped as I read and note anything that sounds powerful or intriguing. When I finish, we mark the essay and rubric together. To indicate that this is a team exercise, the rubric is always visible on the desk between us, turned towards the students to encourage them to write on it. These conversations with my “producers” give me the opportunity to cover rhetorical purpose, organization, development, and language; by the end of the role-play, students are happily highlighting ways to make their “podcast” stronger through revision.

#### ***Conference two: consumer reporters***

Students arrive for conference two carrying evaluative essays. Again, I read them aloud, but the role-play scenario is different; this essay requires them to evaluate a product. They must pretend they are part of a consumer satisfaction group, listening to the essay as if it they are hearing about the product for the first time. What was the product? For whom was it designed? What were its strengths? We use these questions to begin marking the paper and rubric together to determine how well they completed the task of writing a thorough evaluative essay. I score the rubric according to the strengths and weaknesses these “consumers” point out, incorporating their suggestions and mine.

#### ***Conference three: convince me***

For conference three, students write proposals addressing a community problem. This time they pretend to be on a city council listening to the proposal as I read it, and as councilpersons they mark where they hear

a strong argument and where the argument is weak. Since this is the third conference, I up the ante by also asking them alone to score themselves on one or two areas on the rubric. As before, the role-playing leads to conversation about whether the student (as councilperson) was persuaded by the proposal and how the petitioner could improve the proposal the next time it comes before the council.

### **Conference four: curveball**

The final essay is a rhetorical analysis. The students know I will already be in character when the conference begins and that they have to figure out how to play along. When students arrive, they find me sitting in the visitor seat with the black swivel chair behind my desk empty. There are no other chairs in the room. After what is often an awkward pause, I stand up and shake hands, saying, “Hello, Professor \_\_\_\_\_,” (using that student’s last name). “My name is [my actual first name], and I’m a student in your class. I want to read you my paper and see if you would grade it and explain how I should revise.” Students’ faces are usually a study in confusion at first, as it’s a powerful taboo to take the professor’s seat. And yet, once they do, they suddenly take on a level of utter focus. As I read “my” paper to them (really theirs), they immediately pick up their copy and start highlighting and writing on it and the rubric.

When I finish reading aloud, I say, “I just don’t know where to begin revising this” to get the conversation started, and inevitably they, as “my professor,” begin assisting me earnestly in strengthening “my” writing. Some of them get so involved in helping me they seem to forget it is their paper they are working so skillfully to improve. At the end of the conference, they give me a completed temporary score on all areas of the rubric just as I used to do for them.

### **Student feedback**

At the end of the term, I ask students to write on their evaluations what they believe most improved their writing. Typically, over 90% of students choose the role-plays. They frequently comment that the conferences honed their skills as writers and revisers and grew their confidence, and they discuss a newfound self-efficacy regarding the writing they do in other classes.

These comments have convinced me that the twenty minutes I spend conferencing is far more effective than the equal time I used to spend marking each paper in isolation. Students learn through these role-plays how to listen carefully to their own words, how to improve the messages they are trying to deliver, and that they are capable of taking confident ownership over their own writing and revision. Similar conferences could be adapted for essays assigned in almost any discipline. Professors could do these conferences outside of class (as I did), using the time they formerly spent grading, or some class lessons could be moved online so that certain class days were used instead for conferences.