Student Writing Conferences: Teaching Outside the Classroom

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Summary
For years, teachers of English Composition have used individual student conferences to build on concepts taught in the classroom and to provide specific feedback on students' writing. This approach to teaching writing has been very effective with composition students, but the concept has elements that would prove helpful to students and teachers outside of composition classes and into other disciplines as well. Individualized attention will benefit students in any area of study where writing assignments figure into course requirements; not just with respect to perfecting grammar and punctuation, but in generating ideas, methods of appropriate research, and the arrangement of information in a piece of writing. Meeting with an expert in the field assists students in gaining a deeper understanding of their subject matter as well as the requirements of the assignment in order to ensure success. Instructors are in a unique position to give meaningful guidance on specific projects to their students, and to ensure that concepts taught in the classroom are being understood. This workshop will introduce the concept of student conferencing along with the many ways in which it proves beneficial for students and also advantageous for instructors.

Keywords
student consultation, writing conferences, composition, assessment

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Student Writing Conferences: Teaching Outside the Classroom
Jill Jones, University of Windsor

SUMMARY
For years, teachers of English Composition have used individual student conferences to build on concepts taught in the classroom and to provide specific feedback on students' writing. This approach to teaching writing has been very effective with composition students, but the concept has elements that would prove helpful to students and teachers outside of composition classes and into other disciplines as well. Individualized attention will benefit students in any area of study where writing assignments figure into course requirements; not just with respect to perfecting grammar and punctuation, but in generating ideas, methods of appropriate research, and the arrangement of information in a piece of writing. Meeting with an expert in the field assists students in gaining a deeper understanding of their subject matter as well as the requirements of the assignment in order to ensure success. Instructors are in a unique position to give meaningful guidance on specific projects to their students, and to ensure that concepts taught in the classroom are being understood. This workshop will introduce the concept of student conferencing along with the many ways in which it proves beneficial for students and also advantageous for instructors.

KEYWORDS: student consultation, writing conferences, composition, assessment

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
By the end of the workshop, participants will be able to:

• identify and discuss the difference between a student conference and a student meeting during office hours;
• recognize the benefits of a student conference for both students and the instructor; and
• plan and carry out successful student conferences.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Bell and Stutts write about their experiences when they imposed mandatory one-to-one conferences between their composition students and a tutor at an on-campus writing centre. They cite the benefits for mandatory conferences as follows: it allowed students an opportunity to learn all the services offered by a writing centre, students were not stigmatized since they had to attend for class credit, and it reinforced the revision step in the writing process, emphasizing drafting and feedback. For success with conferencing, these researchers suggest strong communication to make expectations clear before the conference occurs, as well as establishing an appointment system to ensure the tutor's satisfaction with the process.

Chen conducts a qualitative and naturalistic study to find out how English language teachers and students interact with one another through verbal and nonverbal cues during writing conferences conducted at a university campus. Chen videotapes conferences of four teachers and eight students, and interviews each of the participants before and after the conference. The author concludes that healthy conferences should address the concrete reasons for the meeting but also the emotional and social aspects of interaction. Conferences should be part of a motivational learning environment where students feel relaxed, where they can come to understand more about their assignments and the teacher’s feedback (as a process), and where the student possesses the control over his/her writing and the way it might be revised. Unhealthy conferences occurred when students felt “pressed,” “helpless,” and left feeling as though they did not want to attend conferences in the future. Chen argues that there should be balance within the conference, and she cites four aspects that should be carefully considered:

1. **Balance of Power, Roles and Responsibilities:** the student should have a big role in determining the agenda of the meeting and the direction of the conversation.
2. **Balance of Attention to Verbal and Nonverbal Behaviour:** instructors need to be aware that students are quick to observe and decode nonverbal behaviour, and they need to take notice of the student’s nonverbal cues as a way of reading a student’s level of comfort in this type of learning environment.
3. **Balance of Interaction Parameters:** it is insufficient to consider only one aspect of the meeting as a determination of its success or failure. For instance, some researchers have considered only verbal cues or nonverbal body language but Chen argues that it is through consideration of the relation between structure (of the meeting) and content (of the discussion) that an instructor will realize success or failure.
4. **Balance of Tangible (physical/technical) and Intangible (mental/social):** the instructor must deal equally with the text (and its needed revisions), their (own) attitude (and the effect it can have on the conference itself), and the feelings of their students.

Chen argues for the three Hs of good teaching: a balance between the head (professional knowledge), the hand (teaching skills) and the heart (enthusiasm, empathy and concern).


Lerner writes about the use of student conferences in teaching English composition, arguing the effectiveness of regular conferencing for improved writing skills but also as a way of enhancing human contact in the academic workplace. Lerner gives a thorough history of student conferencing as an effective method of teaching composition, and he lists three goals of student conferences: to improve students’ writing skills, to work against the idea of learning as passively memorizing material, and to create meaningful relationships between students and their instructors.

Madigan provides a brief summary of Donald Murray’s Responsive Teaching method where the instructor provides support to the writer by asking him/her to respond to their own piece of writing. The instructor gains some insight into the student’s thought process when putting the piece of writing together, and once this perspective is understood, the instructor can then prompt further critical thought into the subject matter. Key to this approach is understanding the student’s perspective, and giving the student an opportunity to respond to both his/her own writing and to the teacher’s response to his/her writing. Madigan provides fictional accounts of student conferences and the specific ways he facilitates critical thought and a productive environment where the student’s cognitive process is balanced with his/her emotional energy. Madigan concludes by advocating for Responsive Teaching because it puts the onus on the student to take charge of their own writing.


In the third chapter, “Responding to Student Writing (I): Productive Tension in the Writing Conference,” Tobin begins by giving a real example of a student conference. He shares his own internal, honest monologue and acknowledges the frustration and challenges associated with conducting student conferences. He argues that there is no student-conference template, and explains that “[l]ike writing, the writing conference is a process”. Tobin writes that it is necessary to understand “the dynamic aspects of each writing conference: the student’s relationship to the text, the teacher’s relationship to the text, and the student’s and teacher’s relationship to each other”. There is a level of tension in the conference, and if the level of tension is productive, it will inspire the writing process. Tobin includes two very detailed case studies that demonstrate the student conference (and writing) as a process.

**CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration (mins)</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Presenter introduces him/herself and the workshop.</td>
<td>Establish a warm and friendly atmosphere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>What is a Student Conference and How Does it Differ From Office Hours</td>
<td>The presenter will lecture about the purpose of a student conference, how it differs from consultations during office hours and how it might be used to accomplish different objectives.</td>
<td>This short lecture will lay the groundwork for an understanding the basic concept of student conferencing.</td>
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The concepts presented here draw from the writings of Bain, Lerner, Jones: Student Writing Conferences: Teaching Outside the Classroom

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<th>Examination of a Student Conference</th>
<th>Break participants into groups of three or four and ask them to read one of two fictional case studies (see Appendix A). Give groups five minutes to generate a list of the strategies they see being used by the instructor in the case study. Afterwards, conduct a short group discussion in which each group shares their list with the larger group.</th>
<th>Participants are exposed to the way a student conference might be conducted, and will have the opportunity to identify its key concepts, become aware of successful strategies, while being exposed to the way a student conference might be held. They will be exposed to the two different formats for conducting a conference.</th>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Benefits of Student Conferencing for Students and Instructors</td>
<td>Using a Power Point Presentation, list the benefits of individual student conferences to both students and instructors. Distribute a take-away handout (Appendix B) to participants.</td>
<td>Participants will learn how this teaching technique can help their students meet the expectations of their course. Additionally, participants will learn that conferencing is a worthwhile activity because it assists in identifying where classroom teaching practices have been successful and where they have been lacking.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>How Does This Benefit Me?</td>
<td>On the backside of their handout, ask students to generate a list of the ways student conferencing could be used by their specific department. Prompt participants with questions such as: • How do you see student conferencing be used in your department? • How might it help your students? • How would you adapt what you</td>
<td>This short activity is a free-writing exercise intended to have participants visualize how they might use student conferencing.</td>
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have experienced here today in an effort to give student conferencing a try?

- How many conferences do you think you would schedule over a semester?
- How would you conduct one: no agenda? or an assigned agenda?

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<th>35</th>
<th>Gaining Practice in Conducting a Student Conference</th>
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<td>Break participants into small groups of three or four. Give each group a student-conference scenario in which they must respond using the skills talked about in the workshop and perhaps incorporating their own personal insights and experience as well. Give each group a different scenario to work on. Invite each group to think about how to best to deal with the situation they are presented with and describe how both the student and the instructor can benefit from the conference. Encourage participants to get creative and suggest different responses depending on the various ways a student might answer the questions. Circulate around the room in an effort to stimulate thought among the participants. Afterwards, lead a group discussion on effective ways to deal with real-life conference situations. Ask each group to read aloud their scenario, explain the strategies they would employ, and offer an explanation of the benefits of the conference. Give all participants the opportunity to respond to each scenario during the large group discussion. Ensure that all major points are addressed and that the benefits of student conferences are clearly identified.</td>
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<th>10</th>
<th>Looking Forward:</th>
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<td>Conclude workshop by asking participants what ways they imagine This final discussion is intended to have</td>
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How to Adapt Student Conferencing

- student conferencing being used in their departments or disciplines. Could student conferences be used for purposes outside writing?
- Give participants an opportunity to ask any outstanding questions.

Total Time: 90 minutes

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES
There are several strategies used in this workshop. A short lecture at the beginning of the session and the short Power Point presentation are intended to give participants a basic understanding of student conferencing. The break-out activity following the lecture does two things: first, it allows students to see what a student conference is like in real life; and secondly, it encourages them to think about the strategies the instructor employed during the conference. The free-writing exercise encourages the participants to think about how student conferencing could be useful in their own teaching practices; since free-writing is an exercise that encourages thinking through writing, it is a successful approach to brainstorm new ideas. The final group activity allows participants to practice what they have learned. The group discussions employed throughout the workshop work toward creating a friendly atmosphere where participants will feel comfortable to ask questions and develop a rapport with the other participants and the instructor.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

In this book, Bain puts together a collective scholarship of the practices shared by successful educators at the post-secondary level of teaching. He tries to record not just what they do, but how they think about their teaching practices. Of particular interest to this project is the fifth chapter, titled “How do they treat students?”; in it, Bain details the way the individualized interaction with students greatly improves a student's success. The best teachers create a rapport with their students through listening to students’ questions and concerns, as well as sharing a little about themselves, successes and failures in their chosen field, and their ambitions and interests. He demonstrates the way these relationships are achieved through individual meetings between students and their instructors.


Hobsen's article details the usefulness of a writing centre on a university campus and its pedagogical philosophy. He argues the main purpose of a writing centre is to provide individualized instruction, demonstrating "an ideal of access to education for all students
by providing support” (170). He notes that students benefit from one-to-one tutoring. I further this notion of idealized individualized writing instruction by offering it through student conferencing with a Graduate Assistant attached to the course the student is enrolled in. It should not be thought of as a service that sits in opposition to tutoring received in a writing centre but perhaps in addition to, or in collaboration with, the writing centre on campus.


This short informational article discusses the importance of nonverbal body language when teaching. Miller cites statistics suggesting that two-thirds of our communication is nonverbal, and he argues that teachers should have a better understanding of nonverbal cues in order to decode what a student is saying to them, as well as to ensure positive messages are being sent out to students. Miller specifically details the impact of strong eye contact, vocal intonation, and body movement and gestures as ways of communicating meaning. Miller mentions the way that space communicates nonverbally, and although teaching assistants do not have much choice in the arrangement of their furniture or location of the office, it is important, and they should be aware of the non-verbal aspects. Although it is written with the classroom in mind, it is relevant to this workshop because the same nonverbal cues resonate during one-on-one meetings.

LIST OF APPENDICES
Appendix A: Case Study 1 and Case Study 2
Appendix B: “Why Should I Hold Student Conferences” Handout
Appendix C: Student Conference Scenarios
APPENDIX A: Case Study #1 and Case Study #2

Case Study #1
This case study is fictional example of a typical experience in a writing conference. The student has been asked to bring in a specific piece of writing in order to ensure understanding and compliance with a specific assignment. The assignment is to write a Research Article about a trend: the student must prove a trend, contextualize it, and discuss the causes and effects.

Julia arrives at Tom’s office for her appointment, and seems a little flustered.
“Hi, Julia,” Tom greets her. “Is everything okay?”
“Sorry,” she says. “I am really stressed right now. I’ve got three mid-terms this week, and I had to have a draft of my research article ready for our meeting today.”
“It’s okay,” Tom replies. “I understand you’ve got lots of school work to do right now. I think the whole campus is stressed out. Me included.” They both laugh. “How much of your draft were you able to complete?”
“About half.”
“Okay, and how do you feel about it?” Tom asks.
“What are you writing about?” Tom asks.
“Eating disorders among teenage girls,” she says. “We talk about it a lot in my Women’s Studies course, and I knew a girl in high school who was bulimic.”
“Okay, good,” Tom responds. “You have some background knowledge on the topic. What did you find out about the trend?”
“Well, I was a little overwhelmed by all the information, and I’m not sure how to write all the statistics into an essay. There are stats for all the different types of eating disorders, like anorexia and bulimia, and some girls are both anorexic and bulimic. And each type has different effects, and I’m just getting all confused about how to write it all down.”
“Well, you are fortunate that there has been a lot of research on your topic,” Tom tells her. “Have you thought about narrowing your topic down?”
“How do you mean?” Julia wants to know.
“Well, for instance, maybe you could write about just one type of eating disorder instead of eating disorders in general,” Tom suggests. “Think about which type of eating disorder interests you the most, or perhaps the one that has the most helpful research for our assignment.”
“Oh, that would definitely be bulimia,” Julia says. “There is so much data out there, and the psychological aspects interest me. If I narrow the topic down, it would help me so much. I didn’t realize I could do that.”
“Okay, so you are going to have rework what you have already written, but I don’t think it will be a problem for you,” Tom said. “In fact, it should make things much easier.” Tom begins to read Julia’s rough draft, and pauses to make suggestions or comments as he reads. He uses his pencil to make quick notes in the margins for her.
“I really like your introduction,” he says. “It’s interesting and makes the reader want to continue on. In your next section, you might want to consider defining what bulimia is so that the reader has a clear understanding of what you are talking about.”
“I wondered about that,” Julia said. “But, a friend told me that writing a definition in an essay is lame.”

“Definitions are not lame,” Tom tells her. “In fact, many times they are necessary for clarifying a topic. The way you present your definition could be lame though. For instance, writing something like: “The Oxford English Dictionary defines bulimia as ...” isn’t very interesting to read. But if you slip the defining characteristics of the disorder into your essay in an interesting way, the reader won’t even realize you are defining the disorder. For instance, you might present the information by writing something like: “Many people do not realize that bulimia ...” or asking a question like: “Do you know what bulimia is?” or “What makes bulimia different from other eating disorders?” You have to consider the type of writing you are doing, and then how best to reach your audience.” Julia writes some notes for herself while Tom continues reading.

“Julia, your section on statistics is very thorough but it is a little confusing, like you mentioned,” Tom comments. “I think that by narrowing your topic to bulimia, you’ll have a much easier time with it. How are you planning to contextualize your trend?”

“Yeah, I was going to ask you about that,” Julia replies. “I don’t get what contextualizing means.”

“Contextualizing means comparing your trend to something else in order to further explain it. For instance, if I tell you that X percent of children in Canada are obese, it doesn’t really mean anything unless I compare it to something else. So, maybe I would compare the number of obese children in Canada to children in another developed country like France, or the United States. And, maybe it would interesting to compare boys to girls.”

“Oh, that helps so much,” Julia responds.

“Good. So how could you contextualize your trend?” Tom asks.

“I could compare bulimic rates to anorexic rates? Or, find out the percentage of teen girls who are bulimic in the United States or England, right?”

“Yes, you’ve got the idea,” Tom tells her. “Listen, I think my next appointment has arrived but I feel like you’ve got a good handle on things. In general terms, your writing is pretty good; you’ve got a nice natural style of writing. There are a few spelling errors and a couple of spots where the phrasing is a little awkward; I’ve circled these problems as I’ve read. I suspect these types of errors were made because you were in a rush. So, before you hand in your assignment try to leave yourself enough time to proof read it thoroughly.”

“Okay, I’ll try,” Julia tells him. “Thanks for all the help. See you tomorrow in class.”

“See you then, Julia, and good luck on your mid-terms.”
APPENDIX A: Case Study #1 and Case Study #2 (con’t)

Case Study #2
This case study is a fictional example of a scheduled student conference with no specific agenda. It’s up to the student to direct the meeting, although many times the student is unsure how to do this. The GA/TA must find a way to initiate course-related conversation in an effort to stimulate the student.

Sue Ann arrives for her scheduled conference with Tom; she seems a little hesitant and shy.

“Hi, Sue Ann,” Tom says. “Welcome to my very small corner of the world.”

“Hi,” says Sue Ann.

“I want to begin by asking you if there has been anything in the course material that you would like clarification on,” Tom asks. “Do you understand all the concepts we have discussed in class?”

“Yeah, I get everything,” she replies.

“Okay, good. What are going to write about for your Editorial?” he asks.

“Ummm ... I’m not sure,” Sue Ann responds. “I wanted to write something about global warming but I don’t really know how to start.”

“Wow, global warming is a huge topic,” Tom says. “Is there one aspect of global warming that interests you, or a cause of global warming that you might be able to make an argument about?”

“Well, I grew up in Ottawa, and my friends and I, we all use public transportation. When I moved to Windsor, I was shocked to see so many students driving cars to school. Why doesn’t anyone use the bus here?” She giggles.

“Well, that’s a great question to ask your fellow students,” Tom says. “And, there is lots of room to make an argument about it.”

“Oh, I like that idea, and it’ll be easy because I feel so strongly about it.”

“How can you make your appeals?” Tom asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Remember in class, I mentioned the best ways to make an argument is to make a logical appeal, an emotional appeal, or an appeal to authority. How can you appeal to your audience?”

“Oh, yeah. Ummmmm ... I guess I could appeal to logic with statistics,” Sue Ann says.

“Yes, great idea,” Tom replies. “Statistics about what?”

“About the number of people who use public transportation?” she says, unsure.

“Yes, those numbers could be useful to demonstrate the lack of people using public transportation in Windsor, or the way greater numbers of people use public transportation in other large cities in Canada,” Tom says. “How could statistics be used to make a logical argument supporting the use of public transportation?”

“Oh, like the reduction in exhaust fumes?”

“Yes,” Tom says. “At the end of a logical appeal, the reader should feel like agreeing with you only makes sense. So, statistics about use and the benefits of riding the bus could be very helpful. There could be other benefits to riding the bus, too.”

“I always do my homework on the bus,” Sue Ann says. “Like reading. But sometimes it’s fun to chat with a friend, especially on the ride home. It can be a de-stressor.”
“Those are great arguments,” Tom says. “And ideas that almost every student in university can relate to.”

“But how can I appeal to emotion?” Sue Ann asks. “I don’t want to make people feel sad about riding the bus.”

“Well, an appeal to emotion does not have to incite sadness,” Tom explains. “It can also enrage a reader, or make a reader feel guilty. So, researching the ill effects of driving a vehicle on the environment might leave a reader feeling guilty.”

“Oh, it might make them angry enough to stop driving their car to school,” Sue Ann says.

“Yes, you’ve got it,” Tom says.

“You know what would be cool? If I could find a famous person who takes the bus on a regular basis. That would be cool. If students saw that someone who didn’t have to use public transportation was using it because they want to … that would really help me.”

“You’re talking about making an appeal to authority, and yes it could have a very important place in your argument,” Tom says. “In fact, I saw a news report the other day about Katie Holmes and her daughter taking the subway in New York City. You should see if you can find it.”

“Oh, thanks that’s a great place to start,” Sue Ann said. “And thanks for all your help. I’ll see you tomorrow in class.”

“You’re welcome. See you then.”
APPENDIX B: Why should I hold student conferences?

Students benefit from attending conferences with their instructors because they can
1. get clarification on concepts taught in the classroom.
2. receive feedback on their specific assignments.
3. improve their writing.
4. brainstorm (with a professional) for topic ideas, or to further develop the ideas they have generated on their own.
5. clarify and understand grades received for completed assignments.
6. develop a rapport with their instructor.

Instructors benefit from individual meetings with students because they
1. develop a rapport with their students, and to get a sense for student interests or areas of expertise (which may assist in developing class discussions and activities as well).
2. ensure the concepts taught in class are understood by students.
3. get the chance to model the crucial aspects of peer review.
4. can assist with specific writing problems.
5. are offered the opportunity to assist students in reaching their individualized potential and encourage critical thought into specific assignments.
6. endorse the writing process, where revision is a critical step in successful writing; additional feedback builds on in-class workshops.
APPENDIX C: Student Conferences Scenario

**Case Scenario 1**
Tim arrives a few minutes late, and seems distracted. After initial small talk, you ask Tim if there is something specific he would like to talk about. Tim responds by telling you that he doesn’t have any questions, and that if he was to be honest, he has not started any of the writing assignments yet.

How should you respond to Tim?

What can you learn about this student?

How might Tim benefit from his conference?
APPENDIX C: Student Conferences Scenario (con’t)

Case Scenario 2
Peggy arrives to your office, and is clearly uncomfortable. When asked what is wrong, she confesses that she does not understand one of the writing assignments. She tells you she is stressed out about school in general, she’s never been away from home before, she feels stupid because she doesn’t understand how to do the assignment and she’s completely embarrassed about her skills as a writer. And she doesn’t even know what citation is. Peggy looks to be on the verge of tears.

How should you respond to Peggy?

What can the Instructor learn about this student?

How might Peggy benefit from this conference?
APPENDIX C: Student Conferences Scenario (con’t)

Case Scenario 3
Margie arrives to your office, and immediately starts talking. She is very excited about her writing assignment because she has thought of a great topic. She tells you that she has written a draft and wants your opinion. As you begin to read, Margie continues to talk, and it is difficult to concentrate. However, it is simple to see that there are many problems with the piece of writing she has brought in: her topic is not entirely appropriate, her use of language is a little awkward, and her reasoning is not fully thought out.

How should you respond to Margie?

How might this student benefit from her conference?

What can the instructor learn?
APPENDIX C: Student Conferences Scenario (con’t)

Case Scenario 4

Margot arrives for her conference late, and seems a little standoffish. She doesn't appear to have any interest in having a conference and your suspicions are confirmed when she begins to speak. She tells you that she doesn't really like the class and is only taking it because she needs this credit on her transcript for graduate school applications. She tells you that she finds the writing assignments tedious. Margot goes on to complain about her classmates, she finds them immature and narrow-minded. She confesses that not one person in her group had anything nice to say about her writing at the last workshop. When you ask her if she brought any of her writing to share today, she says she does.

How should you proceed with this conference?

How might Margot benefit from her conference?

What can you learn about his student?
APPENDIX C: Student Conferences Scenario (con’t)

Case Scenario 5

Mark arrives for his scheduled conference on time and seems happy to have the opportunity to meet with you. He has been asked to bring a draft of his most recent writing assignment in order that you may read it and offer some feedback. Mark tells you that he did not bring it; he has excuses, trying to explain why he forgot it this morning, but you suspect that he has not completed the assignment.

How should you proceed with this conference?

How can Mark benefit from this conference?

What can you learn from this student?