Response, Relationship, and Revision: Learning to Teach Writing in Asynchronous Contexts

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Abstract

Graduate students entering teacher preparation programs in English each bring with them an initial understanding of how writing is taught, understandings that frequently mirror the instruction these students received in their own education. Often, these beliefs about writing instruction focus on writing as production, rather than as a recursive process. In this article the authors describe the study of an Online Writing Partnership and examine participants' developing abilities in the teaching of writing as they work with high-school students in writing and revision. Study participants noted a significant sense of separation or disconnect from their high-school partners when communicating exclusively through asynchronous means such as email. This lack of social presence was subsequently blamed for a breakdown in relationships between mentor pairs, and confusion over the role of the study participants in the partnership overall. Findings indicate that in spite of these frustrations, online mentoring opportunities such as the one detailed in this study can provide future teachers with opportunities to reflect on the work necessary to establish effective relationships for writing instruction, and to reexamine the teaching of writing as a recursive process that benefits from dialogic response between teacher and student.

Keywords: online partnership, composition, revision, mentoring, teacher education

> Thank you for helping me out with these papers. i took your comments on the second paper a little harsh haha...but at least in my position you might want to consider sugar coating them a little hehe. sorry if this sounds mean i just figured youd want some feedback for teaching. good luck
>
> -email from Ana-Lucia, high-school student responding to feedback from partner, future teacher Kate (all names are pseudonyms)

The "Sugar Coating Incident"

Kate, a graduate student with a BA degree in English in the fall semester of a one-year English teacher preparation, masters program, was a participant in our study on the use of asynchronous communication technologies (primarily email) to help future teachers learn to teach writing. While initially excited about the opportunity to work with a developing writer, Kate later expressed great discomfort with the lack of immediate responses to comments she made to the drafts of writing by her high-school partner, Ana-Lucia, for the purpose of revision. Ana-Lucia sent drafts to Kate via email over the course of ten weeks (two major writing assignments, narrative and expository; three drafts of each), and, often several days later, Kate returned her feedback on the writing electronically, using Microsoft Word's comment card feature. Throughout the partnership, Kate had felt increasingly frustrated in her relationship with Ana-Lucia. In Kate's view, the "sugar coating" suggestion from Ana-Lucia was the final blow that came not only from the challenge of developing an effective mentoring relationship, but emerged also, in her view, from the technological aspects that prevented an adequate relationship from forming in the first place.

Kate's primary concern, even before the "sugar-coating incident," was that the Online Writing Partnership did not allow her to communicate with her high school partner in ways she felt would be most effective. Email stripped Kate of non-verbal elements of communication, especially her admitted fondness for hand gestures and facial expressions.

But moreover, email was asynchronous, a quality that meant there was no opportunity for

immediate feedback on either end of the partnership. This method of mentoring, for Kate,

broke the flow of communication between partners. Indeed, Kate felt that this interruption

degraded the quality of relationship that could have developed, and as a result she approached

her partner's writing with a self-reported detached, dispassionate manner. In turn, Ana-Lucia

often did not make the changes to her writing that Kate had suggested, and both partners felt

frustrated with their working relationship. That traditional classroom writing instruction is

also asynchronous in the sense that students often don't receive a teacher's feedback on a

paper for a week or more, if ever, did not affect Kate's view. And although online chat

rooms and bulletin boards were available for other kinds of interactions, Kate and her partner

did not choose to use these communication technologies, instead relying entirely on email for

their exchanges.

After the partnership had ended, Kate reflected on her frustration with technology, and

while she did not absolve it from culpability, her reflection raised awareness of her own

proclivities toward relationships with people even outside of the classroom:

> It made me aware of the way I am, as in someone who's responding in a way, in a
>
> teacher/student relationship … like I treat my friends, with people, and they're like,
>
> "You're really harsh, you're being really mean to me." And I'm like, "Well, you're
>
> my friend, and you can deal with it." It shouldn't be the way I function just naturally
>
> without really thinking about it, or [I should] think about it some.

Kate realized she had a tendency to disregard her friends' feelings at times when she

interacted with them and recognized that this "harshness" in her communication style also

flavored her attempts at establishing rapport with her high-school partner. Under "normal"

circumstances to account for this harshness and compensate for it, Kate relied on lively hand

motions, reassuring facial expressions, modulating voice tones, and other "nurturing"

tendencies she felt she possessed but that were unavailable to her in a text-only environment.

This article focuses on the challenges faced by future English teachers in learning to

teach writing, drawing on a larger study of the Online Writing Partnership (Nail, 2008).

Often, the study participants reported a significant level of discomfort with the asynchronous

qualities inherent in email communication, and through these discomforts came opportunities

for professional reflection (Nail & Townsend, 2009). We focus here on the experiences of a

selected group of participants who used asynchronous communication technologies such as

email to help high school students improve their writing. These technologies facilitated the

inclusion of field experiences during initial coursework in theory and methods, and the

experiences working with developing writers revealed the future English teachers' already

held beliefs about writing and writing instruction.

The Larger Study

This article draws on a larger study that focused on five graduate students who

volunteered to participate and were enrolled in a masters-level course on teaching language

and composition (Nail, 2008). The majority of the study participants were preparing to

become English teachers (Kate, Libby, Claire, and Nikki); however, one of the study's

participants, Juliet, was enrolled in another program, and was already teaching pre-

kindergarten students full-time. As one of the assignments in this course, the graduate

students were paired with a high-school student who was "dual enrolled" on the campus of a

local community college for the purpose of mentoring the high-school student in her/his

writing. The Online Writing Partnership was an assignment in the language and composition class, but the vast majority of the work of the partnership took place outside of the physical classroom and was constructed to use email, chat rooms, and online bulletin boards. The partnership lasted for approximately ten weeks.

We collected data for this study by conducting a series of interviews with each of the five participants over a seven-month period (including an assessment of post-course impact), collecting artifacts, and conducting one-time interviews with the high-school partners. We conducted four semiformal, taped interviews with each graduate student participant, and numerous informal, non-recorded interviews. We collected reflective writing by the participants, high-school student papers with embedded feedback (accomplished using the "comment" function of Microsoft Word), and email correspondence between the participants and their partners.

The directions of the partnership assignment clearly indicated that the purpose of the graduate partner was to take a mentoring role with the high school student, helping the student make her or his writing better by revising it through multiple drafts (usually three); the purpose was not to serve as proofreader. However, as the study progressed, it became clear that the stated purpose conflicted with the graduate students' beliefs about the role of the teacher in writing instruction. In examining the data, we were especially curious to see 1) what types of responses the future teachers gave, 2) how much collective emphasis they gave to the various types of responses, 3) how the actual responses compared to the ways the graduate students characterized their responses, and 4) what these characterizations revealed concerning their beliefs about the roles of teacher and students in writing instruction.

To examine the types of comments given by the participants in response to their high-school partners' writing, we collected the various drafts of papers exchanged by the participant pairs and analyzed the comments left marginally using the "comment card" function of Microsoft Word. We did not attempt to assess the responsiveness of the high school partners to those comments, nor did we attend to the quality of their writing, issues outside the purview of the study. The patterns that emerged from the array of comments given by our five participants formed seven categories that reflected our understanding of the future teachers' intended focus: Grammar, Mechanics, Development, Questions, Structure, Praise, Criticism. (For a summary of the types of responses along with brief descriptions of each, see Table 1 below.)

Table 1. Categories of response type with descriptions.

Response Type	Type Description
Grammar	Any response that points out an error in grammar conventions, such as errors in subject/verb agreement, plural endings, or verb tenses.
Mechanics	Any response that points out an error in written conventions, such as misplaced or absent punctuation and spelling.
Development	Any response designed to elicit more information from the writer. These were generally also questions, although not exclusively.
Questions	Any response that was phrased as a question and the answer to which was not already known to the mentor.
Structure	Any response relating to an issue of writing convention and specifying clarity, such as sentence or paragraph structure and organization.
Praise	Any response whose main purpose is to praise and/or encourage the writer, or otherwise express pleasure.
Criticism	Any response the purpose of which is to point out an error that does not otherwise fit into either grammar or mechanics. Often responses in criticism were about style and preference.

We identified categories of teacher response based on the apparent intention of the

comment. For example, when an interrogative form was used, we decided if its purpose was

true inquiry, that is, was it designed to elicit a response that would assist the mentor in

moving beyond her present understanding of the writer's purpose, plan, or ideas. If so, we

placed the comment in the Questions category. Some examples include: "Why is this

important to [your subject]?" "How does it fit into the philosophy?" "How could you

describe this activity?" "What did you feel as you had this realization?" and "Do you think

there is a difference in the way we talk and write?" The Questions category required some

caution, however, as there were some instances where responses were written as

interrogatives, but indicated an error needing correction, a pretender inquiry (Lindfors, 1999).

For example, Kate asked in Ana-Lucia's second paper, "Do you mean 'is'?" in response to

what was clearly a typographical error. Instead, we put these "questions" in the Mechanics

category, which included such typographical errors, errors of punctuation, and others. Many

of the responses fit into multiple categories. For example, the graduate students sometimes

asked questions to provoke the high school students to elaborate in a way that would help

with the development of their paper. Hence, we identified this type of response as both an

instance in the Questions and Development categories.

Teachers' Responses to Students' Writing

Often, the theory of response to writing is different than the practice of response

(Anson, 1989; Dyson & Freedman, 2003; Freedman, et al., 1987; Onore, 1989; Warnock,

1989). While the concept of process-based writing instruction has over the past quarter

century established itself as an underlying principle in American schools, teachers do not

necessarily enact approaches that are in concert with this view of writing instruction

(Whitney et al., 2008). Teachers frequently view responding to writing and editing student

papers as the same thing; for that matter, so do students, if only because that is what they are

used to. One study of writing teachers' practices (Langer & Applebee, 1987) looked at the

frequency of "editing" comments (comments that sought to correct some "rule" of writing)

versus the frequency of "praise" comments, where the comments were intended to encourage

what was seen as "good" writing. Of the thousands of comments given during that study,

ninety-seven percent were "editing" comments. In our study, nearly two thirds of our five

participants' comments also focused on some kind of correction. Indeed, Kate's predominant

use of this type of comment, while congruent with the response patterns of her classmates,

may well have played a role in provoking the dissent between her and Ana-Lucia, who

interpreted the comments as "harsh."

Correcting errors can be part of response to be sure, but it is not necessarily the kind of

response most helpful to student writers. Providing effective response to student writing is a

difficult practice for many teachers because it requires the teacher to wear two "hats"

simultaneously: that of the helpful guide and that also of the authoritative representative of

the field of "proper" writing. Students likewise find response to writing difficult to grapple

with; many students perceive response to a final draft as more valuable than response during

the process of writing itself (Daiker, 1989). As a result, common practice often has the effect

of removing what could be the real benefits of response: joint discovery, problem solving,

and revision (Freedman et al., 1987).

Similarly, the way English teachers are taught, not only in methods courses, but also in college literature and composition courses, influences greatly the way they approach student writing (Anson, 1989; Emig, 1994; Phelps, 1989; Reither, 1994; Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995). Murray (1989), drawing on Rosenblatt's (1978) reader response theory, states that much of what teachers expect from a text reflects "not only their mental and physical characteristics, but their culture, their experiences with the world, and their experiences with the world of texts as well" (p. 73). These expectations result in teachers reading students' texts "from the perspective of their own academic training and experiences with writing papers" (p. 77), experiences that typically are one-shot critical essays, graded and evaluated when they are turned in and rarely revisited with the aim of improving the writing. In contrast, in Ana-Lucia's English class, taught by a graduate of the teacher preparation program that forms the context for the partnership discussed here, students were required to complete multiple drafts of their writing before turning in a paper for a grade. Ana-Lucia's attitudes toward what she viewed as Kate's "harsh" comments may have originated in the very different experiences each had in high school English. In any case, Ana-Lucia's current teacher had been enacting a very different approach to responding to students' papers, an approach that focused on revision.

True revision (not editing) involves "a sequence of changes in a composition—changes that are initiated by cues and occur continually throughout the writing of a work" (Sommers, 1980). It often requires an open mind and a new view—a re-seeing and possibly re-conceptualizing of initial and developing ideas and organization. Revision is inextricably linked to effective writing because it is part of the interaction between writer and text as s/he moves recursively through the writing process; however, like response, revision in classroom

practice is often different from revision as practiced by experienced writers. Also like

response, revision is shaped not only by past experiences with writing, but also by the

writer's conception of revision itself (Beach, 1976). Sommers (1980) and Fitzgerald (1987)

show in their research that student writers often look at their revising efforts as attending to

matters of form. Typically, student writers approach revision of writing as if the core

meaning is already present, and it is simply a matter of "moving words around" for the sake

of clarity of meaning and/or the polishing of writing style. Experienced writers, on the other

hand, view revision much as Perl (1994) envisions the recursive nature of writing itself, as a

process that is ongoing from the moment writing begins. They view the revision process as

the creation of meaning rather than the clarification of that meaning (Beach, 1976; Sommers,

1980).

Teachers, if they are to model the approach to writing found in experienced, successful

writers, must shape their responses to students' writing in ways designed to engage students

in the process of attending to and reflecting on the content and style of their own writing.

The goal of writing instruction, competency in writing for multiple purposes and audiences,

requires students to view revision not as a final step before assessment and grading, but as a

recursive part of the writing itself. Within the classroom, this orientation can be especially

difficult to achieve, as the nature of schooling is regimented and divided, and many (if not

most) tasks are viewed in light of the end product. Revision becomes mere proofreading,

both in the student's eyes and in the eyes of the teacher. Perhaps one explanation for the

tension between Ana-Lucia and Kate was the difference in the expectations each held. Ana-

Lucia's previous experiences with her classroom teacher's content-based, attentive-reader

comments on her writing probably inclined her to expect something similar from her graduate

student partner. Kate, on the other hand, expected on a fairly deep level that her job was to

direct Ana-Lucia to correct her assorted errors of form.

Future Teachers' Beliefs about Writing and Writing Instruction

The way the future teachers interpreted their task in the partnership revealed much

about their beliefs not only about the role of the teacher in writing instruction, but also about

the role of the student. The descriptions of their experiences in the partnership reflected a

strong belief that the role of the writing instructor was to identify errors and suggest changes

for students to make to their writing. Not only was their role (as they defined it) to suggest

changes, it was also in their view the role of the high-school student to incorporate those

changes into their writing.

The graduate students' self-defined roles stemmed from the participants' belief that

they had "figured out" what writing was, and this understanding of the nature of writing was

the basis for their approach to the teaching of writing. Kate, for example, believed that her

"duty" to her students was to show them how writing could do for them what it had done for

her. Kate talked early in the interview process about unlocking the power of writing in her

own life:

> When I say something then it makes sense to me and so writing it helps me to make
>
> sense of my reality and so, I majored in it and I found, well, this goes even further:
>
> you can study culture, and people's output is a way of, it's a microcosm of
>
> understanding what's going on in the world …

In a later interview, she expressed how this early realization concerning her own writing

influenced her beliefs about teaching others:

> So I hope that by introducing the idea of like, themselves, in their writing, they're
>
> going to do a lot of writing about themselves, who they are and, a bunch of … all the
>
> poetry we're going to do at the beginning, it's just poetry about yourself. So that you
>
> can, plug your feelings and your thoughts and your actual ideas into … and the
>
> writing becomes a natural outgrowth of it. And it's not … It's the bridge.

Perhaps if Kate had been responding to poetry writing by Ana-Lucia, she would have

responded more in a "bridge" building way. As it was, her reading of Ana-Lucia's narrative

and expository papers focused mostly on correction and not on developing the student's

"feelings," "thoughts," or "ideas."

Like Kate, all five participants held conceptions about the nature of writing in their own

life, and those beliefs influenced in some way each of their approaches to teaching writing,

even if their intentions did not always match their actions. Juliet considered herself a

storyteller, and her pre-kindergarten students assumed the same role (in part because they

were learning to write for the first time). Claire, while dealing with internal struggles over

her right to tell others "what to do" in general, believed that her experiences working for a

newspaper and her degree in publishing made her competent to instruct others in their

writing. Libby's negative experiences as a writer in high school instilled in her the belief that

she needed to countermand those negative influences for her own students. Nikki, confident

beyond all the others in her writing abilities, believed her position of self-perceived authority

would inspire others to write, and they would then emulate her as a writer, developing their

abilities almost magically.

Often the transcripts of their recollections of responding to the students' writing read

very differently from what we found in the comments inserted into the high school students'

papers, demonstrating that what teachers think they are doing is not necessarily what they are

doing (Susskind, 1979). For example, Juliet stated in her interviews that she worked very

hard at phrasing all of her responses as questions, in order to appear "less dogmatic" to her

partner. Upon review of her partner's papers, however, the percentage of Juliet's responses

phrased as questions was only slightly higher than the eighteen percent that represented the

amount of questions among the collective responses given. (For more details of the relative

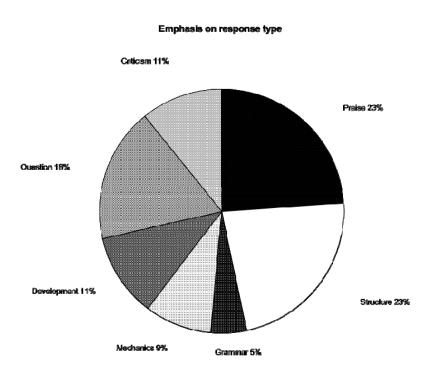emphasis on types of response among all participants, see Figure 1 below.)

Figure 1. Percentage of emphasis on response type

We classified the majority of the responses to student writing, despite the graduate

students' claims to the contrary, as editing suggestions focused mostly on surface features.

The methods professor had recommended three general types of response as being most

effective in prompting writers to revise: honest questions and praise, and tentatively worded

suggestions. Praise accounted for nearly a quarter of all responses, and questions for just

slightly less; however, five of the seven categories identified through our analysis of

participants' response types dealt with aspects of correction: Grammar, Mechanics,

Development, Structure, Criticism. Indeed, nearly two-thirds of all given responses attended

to what the graduate partners viewed as "mistakes" in their high-school partners' writing.

This proportion confirmed, along with the graduate students' repeated expressions of

frustration with the "raw" form of their partners' papers, the belief that the primary role of the

teacher is to identify errors in student writing and/or suggest changes, and the role of the

student is to make those changes. Sadly, these findings reflect deeply persistent views on the

role of teachers' responses to students' writing (Anson, 1989; Dyson & Freedman, 2003;

Freedman, et al., 1987; Onore, 1989; Warnock, 1989).

Revision as a Significant Part of Writing Instruction

Perhaps the most notable aspect of this study, as it pertained to teaching writing, was

the participants' understanding of "revision." Participants reported little if any experience

with revision in their own writing. For them, revision was synonymous with "proofreading"

and "editing," and these alternate terms were as likely as not to be used when referring to the

work the graduate students were doing for their partners. In practice, however, revision is

crucially important for developing writers; it illustrates that writing is a process one actively

engages in (Emig, 1994; Ivani, 2004) and provides a useful opportunity (sometimes the only

opportunity) for teaching intervention. During one of her interviews, Claire described writing

as "transcribing [one's] thoughts," but good writing requires development of thought (Emig,

1977). Still, the study participants viewed grammar as the primary concern teachers would

have with student writing and the area of their partner's writing in which they could be of

most use.

Vygotsky (1978) described his famous theory of learning as a zone bordered by two

levels of development. One level represented that which a student could accomplish on

her/his own (actual development level); the other represented what the student was capable of

achieving with the help of a knowledgeable other (potential development level). The

participants in this study understood the concept of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal

Development (ZPD), and in fact would refer to it by name occasionally during their

interviews. There was a general understanding that their future responsibilities as teachers of

writing (the knowledgeable other) would be to help students move across the zone separating

actual writing ability from potential writing development. Yet one persistent anxiety for

participants in this study was exactly how to accomplish this move from actual to potential

with their high-school partner. Bruner and others (Bruner, 1985, 1986; Samaras & Gismondi,

1998) have advocated scaffolding as a bridge between Vygotsky's levels of development, an

approach in which teachers/tutors assist students' learning by first determining what a student

knows, and building gradually from there. This idea of scaffolding, too, was a concept the

study participants were familiar with and referred to frequently. What was missing from their

discussions of student learning, however, was the ability to see these theories in light of

actual practice. Instead, the study participants undertook their work with student writing in

reverse, approaching the partnership from the perspective of what their high-school partners

could not do.

Kate was the most vociferous in her frustration over the level of grammar mistakes

evident in her partner's writing. In her reflection paper, she wrote of her first experience with

Ana-Lucia's writing: "I found myself at a loss and unable to provide constructive feedback

because the errors that filled her paper required a back-to-the-basics approach to writing."

Confronted by so many corrections, it's no wonder that Ana-Lucia would desire a little

"sugar coating." While they were not prohibited from addressing grammatical concerns in

their partners' writing, we did ask that they not correct errors for their high school partners.

In response, they complained early and often about the propensity for error in the drafts they

were receiving. Kate acknowledged in her interviews that students needed to hear about

more than just mistakes in writing, yet followed this admission by questioning how she could

respond at all when poor grammar prevented the meaning from being communicated.

However, when we looked at Kate's feedback on the first paper she received from Ana-

Lucia, there were many examples where Kate had responded to the content of the writing and

not solely to the grammatical and mechanical errors. In fact, the grammar had not got in the

way of content after all.

Claire too described her "main revision suggestions" to her partner as primarily

warning against run-on sentences, and how her partner Charlie might break up long sentences

into smaller sentences. Yet in spite of such clear concern about the grammatical and

mechanical insufficiencies in their partners' writing, and the certainty that these should be

addressed first, participants reported uncertainty about what else to do. In one telling

comment, Nikki stated at the end of her interviews that even after a semester of instruction:

… nobody's ever said, oh, this is what you look for when you grade a paper. So that

kinda scares me...when I go into a classroom, because I don't know exactly how to

grade a paper just yet, and here I am going to have to assign them and I don't know

what to look for.

That Nikki felt grading was a process of "looking for" things (errors) suggests what could be

an underlying sense of need shared by many future teachers despite many discussions about

assessment and practice grading exercises in the writing methods course. Here was yet

another discomfort associated with student writing, this time radiating from the feeling that

there was something more to teaching writing than identifying what their partner was unable

to do.

Korthagen and Kessels (1999) write that for teachers to be able to transfer knowledge

of theory to practice, there must first exist a felt sense of need for that particular knowledge in

a particular context. The discomfort the participants felt responding to student writing came

not from the technological aspect of the Online Writing Partnership, nor even from the

instructions to look beyond correcting errors in their student's drafts though both these

aspects were often frustrating. The central discomfort these future teachers reported arose

from feeling that there was something more to writing instruction, and they were not sure

what it was. And indeed that something "more" is quite challenging. An effective teacher of

writing must help students notice the difficulties they are having in writing so that they

themselves can make the changes that will lead to substantive content and style related

improvement. At the same time, an effective teacher must help students maintain a sense of

agency and motivation so that they will internalize the guidance they are given. This kind of

instructional guidance is a delicate dance between convincing authority and respect for

fledgling efforts, and it remains a challenge for experienced teachers.

In his study of teachers' own educational experiences, Anson (1989) noted that the way

in which teachers were taught to view texts often reflected the way they viewed their own

students' papers. Attitudes toward writing clearly shape teachers' approaches to writing

instruction (Stockinger, 2007). From their statements about writing and specifically about

writing assigned as part of their undergraduate coursework, "writing" for the future teachers

in this study was a product intended to show what students had learned, not a learning

process in itself. If, as Claire stated explicitly, the participants viewed writing as merely a

transcript of one's thoughts, to comment on the thoughts of another might have seemed like a

presumption these future teachers were unwilling to make. In any case, that revision offered

them an opportunity to help their partners deepen their thinking and stretch their sense of

purpose and audience did not much attract their attention.

One exception was Libby, and for her, the most significant development in her beliefs

about teaching was the "discovery" of revision during the methods class. Revision as a

concept was new to Libby, and its introduction late in her academic career sparked a

revolution in her view of teaching. For Libby, revision came to be more than just a part of

the writing process. Instead, she saw this facet of composition as critical to the

teacher/student relationship as well as integral to what she viewed as the primary duty of

English teachers, the "responsibility to promote critical and independent thinking." To

Libby, revision gave students the opportunity and freedom necessary to view learning as a

gradual process, and most important was the idea of providing feedback *in process* on

whatever tasks students were undertaking. Libby was the only participant in our study open

to the idea that writing was recursive and not a prescribed series of steps. Yet, from her remarks about how profoundly the "new" notion of revision presented in her methods class affected her outlook on nearly every aspect of teaching, we concluded that Libby did not view revision as a usual step in her writing process. Moreover, she stated in her interviews and in her reflective writing that academic writing elicited bad memories because of what she called the "one and you're done" approach to writing assignments. This experience with academic writing is not uncommon among college undergraduates (Thompson, 1994).

Claire was the most experienced of the five participants as a writer, having worked as a professional journalist. Yet she described her approach to writing primarily as sitting down at a computer or typewriter and composing in a single sitting. Claire acknowledged that some people might benefit from the ability to "play around" with their writing, but she was also convinced that the writing most writers connected with "just came out." Indeed, most of the participants (Juliet was the exception) to some degree believed their own writing did not require revision. Nikki explained her view of revision as something "like an actress watching her own movies, or a chef eating their food. I don't think it happens very often." In her reflection paper Nikki even called the revision process "retyping."

Their antipathy toward revision reflected deeply held beliefs that revision was not something that skilled writers did. Instead revision was a classroom activity, a step in the writing procedure, especially for those (such as high-school students) still developing their writing abilities. The pervasive belief was that the teacher was there to illuminate errors in a student's writing, and through revision (aka editing) the student would correct those errors. For the graduate students, revision did not resemble the recursive process described by research on the process of writing (Emig, 1977; Perl, 1994). Rather, revision was teacher-

assisted proofreading followed by re-writing. Judging from the results of this study, that

belief appears to be substantially resistant to change.

Online Relationships with Students

Although they did not have the specific jargon, "social presence" during the Online

Writing Partnership was the most pressing issue of the entire experience for the study

participants. Defined as one's awareness of another in a mediated environment and the

quality of relationship that manifests as a result of that awareness (Delfino & Manca, 2006;

Leh, 2001; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Tu, 2000), social presence was a factor for the study

participants even before they began exchanging emails with their high-school partners. At

our orientation sessions for the Online Writing Partnership, many of the graduate students in

the course expressed concerns about the quality of assistance they could provide absent

actual, spatial presence. Communication with their partners was asynchronous, not

immediate, and the technology they were to use was often the only thing the graduate

students saw. As a result each study participant reported a sense of separation or

disconnection from her high-school partner.

Without a sense of social presence congruent with the beliefs each participant held

about student/teacher interactions, they worried that connections with students would either

be impossible to create or unsuitable to the objectives of writing instruction. Likewise, the

graduate students' beliefs about teaching writing reflected what they saw as the very nature of

teaching: using their personal influence/authority to present information to students clearly

and effectively. They simply did not believe the level of social presence in the Online Writing

Partnership allowed them to do so.

Kate most adamantly expressed belief in the importance of social presence to writing

instruction. Here she explains this belief, shared by the others, of how physical proximity

allowed a teacher to go beyond the "mechanical" skill of writing instruction:

> … In terms of writing apart from mechanics, just writing for audience and all these
>
> other aspects that kind of go beyond, you know, mechanics, it's, it's lacking … even
>
> the spatial element ... just ... knowing what each other looks like … I rely a lot on
>
> speech, and combining rhetoric … I think you can read a speech or you can hear a
>
> speech and they have totally different effects just because the words on the page don't
>
> always do what um, when you hear what the speech actually does.

Situations that lacked close, physical proximity only made teaching more difficult in the

minds of the study participants. While Libby expressed a belief that "talking about writing

using writing" seemed like it would benefit writing instruction, all five participants expressed

frustration with being limited to text-only, asynchronous communication when trying to

mentor secondary students in writing. (Interestingly, they apparently felt no such constraint

in their self-reported, regular interactions with friends via online social networking sites such

as Facebook.)

Even so, each graduate student stated that she had seen evidence of changes made in

her high-school partners' writing; indeed, each believed that these changes indicated the

existence of some type of bond between the two. Claire stated plainly that "there had to have

been some relationship between us or he would not have … I wouldn't have seen any of the

suggestions I made in the final draft." Juliet acknowledged that she "didn't know who [her

partner] was as a writer," yet wrote in her reflective paper "it was rewarding to see my

questions answered in her revisions." Libby likewise felt that because her situation with her high-school student lacked a "personal aspect," it therefore was "more teacher/student … than mentorish."

In the imaginations of the study participants, student/teacher relationships developed naturally and as a matter of course, especially when uninhibited by the limitations of text-only communication technologies. From observations that sarcasm did not translate well in email, to frustrations resulting from a lack of "emotional feelings" toward the high-school partners, the study participants' comments revealed several beliefs about student/teacher interaction in writing instruction. One was that using online communication technologies during the partnership made the graduate participants more conscious of the complexities of communication, and especially of communicating to connect in a personal way with others. Another, somewhat paradoxical belief was that being conscious of and attending to the various complexities of communication only made the process of establishing bonds more difficult. In the case of teaching writing, our participants believed that left to their own devices in a physical classroom, effective working relationships would "just happen." Technology became the focus for their frustration, and Nikki captured the general sense, saying that, "if I had the opportunity to see [my partner], something would definitely develop."

The frustrations that arose from the asynchronous communication technologies provided by the Online Writing Partnership evoked a general belief among study participants that social presence, a sense of emotional connection and a feeling that the people in communicative situations are real (Richardson & Swan, 2003), was lacking in the online environments in which they were participating. As a result, the assumption by the study

participants was that effective relationships were unachievable to the degree necessary for

effective writing instruction to occur. Yet, merely "being there" is no guarantee that social

presence will be established, or that relationships will develop. While distance between

partners, both actual and emotional, was most palpable to the participants of this study

because of the text-only communication between partners, that same sense of distance can

also affect people in face-to-face educational settings. When talking about their own

experiences with writing papers for college classes, the study participants recalled that they

would turn in one draft, receive little or no feedback from their professor, and be given only a

grade in response. Indeed, there was arguably less social presence in their college classrooms

than in the Online Writing Partnership, especially for students in large classes with a

professor whose primary mode of instruction was lecture (Thompson, 1994). Indeed, in many

of their memories of undergraduate composition instruction, our participants made little

mention of rapport between student and professor.

Learning to Teach Writing: Implications for Practice

One major benefit that online mentoring experiences offers is an opportunity for future

teachers to remember and reflect on their own experiences as students. From their high

school memories, our participants could recall favorite teachers, but they also remembered

getting little substantive response to their writing, no opportunities for revision using a

teacher's feedback, and usually only a final grade in evaluation. Yet, each study participant

was readily able to call forth examples of positive experiences with teachers, teachers who

not only instructed them but inspired them to pursue teaching themselves. (The exception was

Claire, who had difficulty even remembering the names of former teachers, and by her own

admission found herself preparing to teach "by accident.") By participating in the Online

Writing Partnership, and especially by participating in the study of that experience, these

future teachers had a chance to discuss what they felt was missing for developing effective

mentoring relationships, and in turn to explore what was required for this development to

take place. Helping future teachers consider the nuances involved in the way words are used,

their tone, and their choice as well as an array of other factors that influence the relationships

between teachers and students (e.g., students' and teachers' sense of purpose in the tasks

assigned, students' experiences with teachers' evaluations of their work) may be one of the

most pressing challenges in preparing people for effective teaching in any subject and in any

context.

The desire for a closer relationship with their partners was genuine on the part of our

study participants; however, it also served as an excuse for why each felt frustrated by the

experience, and perhaps for Kate, was an excuse for why she did not feel obligated to

participate fully. In any case, Kate was particularly adamant about the need for a more

personal relationship in which she understood her partner beyond what her partner could

reveal in writing. Certainly, Kate was correct about the importance of developing an

effective working relationship. Trustworthy relationships are important supports to writing

instruction because while the mechanisms of writing are social (Emig, 1977; Zenkov &

Harmon, 2009; Ong, 1982; Reither, 1994), there can be a large degree of personal revelation

in writing (Dyson & Freedman, 2003; D. Murray, 1994; P. Y. Murray, 1989). The trust

established through a nurtured relationship can help a student be more receptive to what

otherwise might be considered "criticisms" of intimate thought. Likewise, for a teacher to

understand who a student is as a unique individual can be invaluable for understanding what

will help that student to develop his/her thinking and writing. Providing future teachers with

opportunities such as online mentoring of developing writers, perhaps even because of the

discomfort initially felt as a result of teaching in unfamiliar ways, may help pre-service

teachers to develop communicative competencies that avoid assumptions of mysterious,

spontaneously generated social presence, regardless of context.

Future teachers can gain from a certain level of discomfort in preparing to be teachers

(Nail & Townsend, 2009). Discomfort can prompt us to seek the source of that feeling, and

to explore ways of lessening it; however, merely feeling discomfort is not enough. What the

Online Writing Partnership provided the future teachers in this particular case was an

opportunity to feel uncomfortable with their approach to student writing during a period

when they were not responsible for grading it, before their internships, and in contexts that

were supportive of approaching writing as a recursive, individual process. In online

experiences such as the one at the center of this study, prospective teachers' views of writing

can be challenged, and possibly modified, so that writing can be approached as a process of

learning for themselves and their students, rather than a march to discover a presumed,

predetermined "product," as is often the case among teachers of writing (Flower & Hayes,

1994). Under the watchful eye of the university or college professor, pre-service teachers can

gradually become more comfortable approaching writing instruction as an opportunity to

assist students in exploring and developing their thinking, rather than being, in Juliet's words,

"consumed with what's wrong with [students'] writing."

Even so, as much as they felt the need to argue otherwise, the participants in the Online

Writing Partnership did not fail at their task of mentoring student writers. Claire, for

example, shook her head when considering where her partner stood at the end of the

partnership in relation to where he was in the beginning, suggesting that she was unsure how

much progress Charlie had made; however, in her reflection paper she acknowledged that she

had seen improvement in his writing, and not just in the fewer number of errors she noted in

Charlie's final draft. The high-school students themselves reported universally that they

believed their writing had benefited from the work they did with the graduate students, even

Ana-Lucia. While it took time for the study participants to recognize it, the Online Writing

Partnership provided an opportunity to respond to student writing while attending to the

developmental process of that writing, an approach that was markedly different than the

assumptions in the minds of the participants at the beginning of the semester. What the

Online Writing Partnership provided for these future teachers was an extended experience

working with individual students, an experience that focused these pre-service teachers'

attentions on the student as an individual writer, with a distinct writing process and distinct

needs for her or his writing development. Unfortunately, many future teachers do not get

these opportunities even in their internship experience (Burant & Kirby, 2002; Darling-

Hammond et al., 2002). Once they have begun full-time teaching, the chances of applying

the theory learned in methods courses are significantly lower (Boreen & Niday, 2000;

Bransford et al., 1999; Graham & Thornley, 2000).

The goal of teacher education should not be to agitate future teachers intentionally with

the hopes of prompting a reassessment of the preconceived ideas many of them bring to the

profession; however, research has suggested that the best field experiences for future teachers

are those with a level of uncertainty that encourages reflective thinking (Kaplan et al, 2007).

In much the same way that revision requires a new view, a re-seeing, the ability to help others

learn to write better may depend in large part on an ability to reflect anew on one's ideas

about writing and teaching. Nikki described the Online Writing Partnership as "a nice

contrast," and perhaps the greatest value of the partnership was this contrast between the

future teachers' expectations of working with imagined student writers and the reality of

working with specific high-school students in an online context. But simply agitating pre-

service teachers is unlikely to provide the necessary experiences that facilitate the application

of theory learned in teacher education programs to the practice of their eventual daily

teaching. In her final interview, Kate reported that what made the partnership worthwhile to

her was the process of interviewing itself, that while her frustration level was high, talking

about her frustrations not only alleviated these feelings but helped her to acknowledge her

own beliefs related to the teaching of writing. Most obvious to Kate was her experience in

the "sugar-coating" incident, where her partner "took [her] to task" about Kate's caustic

comments. This response led Kate to genuine insight regarding the way she related to others,

and while she was far from convinced that online mentoring was the way to go, she saw value

in it as a chance for critical reflection.

Preparing teachers of writing to enter the classroom and help their students improve

their writing presents one of the toughest challenges to teacher educators. Because writing

does not progress in the same way for any two writers, effective instruction must take heed of

the differences inherent in individual processes. Carefully crafted responses from teachers,

the kind of responses that are perhaps the biggest intellectual challenge in teaching writing,

support the unique nature of each student's writing development. In this study, in taking a

looking-for-errors view of writing instruction, our participants showed they had very definite

ideas about teaching writing. Their surety was undermined, however, by their propensity to

become frustrated by the difficulties they faced in online mentoring and often to lay the

blame for these frustrations at the feet of the technology that surely contributed to, but was

not the locus of their discomfort. Perhaps one of the primary benefits of learning to teach

writing partially in online spaces is the opportunity for this discomfort to arise and to provide

the sense of need Korthagen and Kessels (1999) notes is often required for future teachers to

transfer the theory we give them in teacher preparation courses to the practice they implement

in their own classrooms. Online or not, early field experiences helping individual students

develop their writing abilities do offer future teachers the chance to reassess their

preconceived ideas about teaching and writing and gain new insight.

Changes to the Partnership and Future Research

In reflecting on the findings from our study, we have made a number of changes to

the Online Writing Partnership, and we continue to collect and analyze data from

participants' work there as well as to survey participants' perspectives on the process. Noting

especially the need for an increased sense of social presence in the online mentoring

relationships, we have most recently made opportunities for the graduate students to meet

their high-school student partners in person at the beginning of the semester and to work with

them face-to-face in classroom writing workshops during the semester. We have increased

the opportunities for collaborative interactions by using an online course management system

(Moodle) that includes forums and wikis as well as by instituting "feedback quizzes" that

allow the high school students to make comments about the usefulness of the future teachers'

responses to their drafts. We've expanded the number of partners our future teachers mentor

to give them a greater sense of range in what secondary students' capacities can be in writing.

We've also put more emphasis on a final synthesis of reflective thinking over the course of

the partnership, requiring our future teachers to keep logs of all their interactions with their

high school partners and to analyze those interactions for patterns of feedback and response.

Research is ongoing into the nature and role of the Online Writing Partnership in developing secondary students' writing and in preparing effective teachers of writing. We are especially intrigued by the blended environment—using both face-to-face interactions and online spaces— for enhancing teaching and learning opportunities. In both contexts and in various iterations of the partnership, we continue to explore issues of relationship, response, and revision in writing instruction. What factors enhance participants' sense of relationship in the partnership? What are significant revision strategies for developing writers? What kinds of feedback are most helpful to that process? Perhaps most important, what conditions will contribute most substantially to our future teachers' understanding and practice of effective writing pedagogy and in what ways can we best help high school students make their writing better—more articulate, more persuasive, more engaging?

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