

AN EXPLORATION OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN AN  
ONLINE WRITING PARTNERSHIP

By

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To Elizabeth R. Nail, and in memory of William A. Nail, Sr. for their love and support.

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The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of four preservice teachers and one practicing teacher in an Online Writing Partnership with high-school students dual-enrolled in a community college, and to examine what these experiences revealed about preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching, writing instruction, and the use of technology for instructional purposes. The following questions guided this study:

1. What kinds of experiences do prospective English teachers preparing for the teaching profession have in a distance, online partnership with secondary writers?
2. What do these experiences reveal about these prospective teachers' views of teaching and specifically teaching writing?
3. What influences on the partnership or on the participants appear to exist from experience with and attitude toward technology? In what way did these attitudes affect the partnership/participants?
4. What contextual threads appeared most salient to these prospective English teachers in the success (or lack thereof) of this online partnership?

For the study, the researcher conducted extensive interviews (both formal and informal), collected documentary data from both the graduate students and their high-school partners, and kept a detailed research journal. The questions of the study are addressed in the results and presented as individual case studies of the five participants; an across-case analysis addresses the questions again, using the contextual threads identified by the participants for question four of the study as a lens for further examination.

Each of the five graduate students experienced the Online Writing Partnership in ways that reflected their individual experiences, beliefs, and attitudes about online technologies, education in general, and writing instruction in particular. Each individual case was unique; however, there were significant similarities across cases, providing for a view of context from which all participants can draw in creating and interpreting meaning. Looking at the individual cases collectively, those aspects of context deemed salient by the participants of the Online Writing Partnership were: their perception of social presence between partners, their understanding of the relationships between teachers and students, their sense of the role and authority of a teacher, and their preconceived expectations of classrooms processes.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

When I first entered my teacher preparation program, a group of friends and I would meet once a week to drink beer, talk freely, and generally enjoy each other's company. We met at a local Irish pub because the pub served cheap food, and we were invariably hungry and broke. It did not hurt that the pub was close to the university we all attended while we pursued graduate degrees in education; we met on Wednesday evenings after class, and often walked over from campus. Our agenda for these meetings was always what we were reading, what we wanted to read, novels, magazines, anything—it was not uncommon for each of us to have pen and paper in pocket, in case a recommendation was made to further weigh down our bedside tables. The discussions that ensued were sometimes loud, always passionate, and motivated not only by our love for literature, but also by our love for talking about literature.

In the mythology of my progression and development as a teacher, I like to think there was one night when I had a sudden wondering about how I could encourage my own students to pursue the discussion of their own reading with the fervor and need that each in my group felt. In reality, it was likely a wondering that developed over time. But it seemed to me that somehow, there had to be something I could do to help my ninth graders engage in reading and be motivated to do so naturally, similar to my Wednesday night outings.

Eventually, the problem of student-motivated literature discussions was addressed by my implementing an online bulletin-board system as part of my curriculum. After

some time and many small (and not so small) adjustments, my students took my initial idea and ran with it, pursuing discussions of their own design beyond my most optimistic expectations. While gratified at the outcome, I was not satisfied. I found myself wondering about the very success my students had achieved, how they had managed to develop a community of learning outside (and largely independent) of our physical classroom. What was it about this online environment that seemed to encourage learning in ways that complemented and enhanced what my students were doing in class?

When I left teaching to continue my education, this wondering found new ways of expression. My focus shifted from wondering about teaching literature to helping future teachers prepare to teach, and specifically to teach writing. I wanted to know how online, virtual environments could assist in preparing future teachers of English for the classroom. So many educational opportunities were moving to online environments, but rather than replace traditional teacher education, I wondered how online learning might enhance traditional teacher preparation programs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As the Internet has become more and more ubiquitous, it has become difficult to believe that email, the World Wide Web, and various other computer technologies have been around a scant fifteen years. Even public schools, which have historically been behind the curve of early adopters of developing technologies, are increasingly connected to the Internet. The nature of education is beginning to change, as more and more courses and entire degree programs are moving from the brick and mortar schoolrooms to the virtual spaces of distance, online education.

There has been much research conducted regarding the nature of online technologies (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000; Murray, 1997) and the varied applications of

these technologies in education (Bromley & Apple, 1998; Cole, 2000). Additionally, there have been some explorations into the nature of context in online environments (Bolter, 2001; Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Landow, 1992; Turkle, 1995). However, there is a marked dearth of studies that focus on the use of online communication technologies by pre-service teachers as a means of facilitating practicum experiences with the teaching of writing. I believe the Partnership at the heart of this study represents a unique and effective contribution to the development of future teachers and that exploring this particular case can shed light on the learning of future teachers in other practicum experiences. A number of reports have pointed to the division that exists in the minds of teachers between the theory of the university classroom and the practice of the secondary school, and to the difficulty of bridging this divide. The Online Writing Partnership, which paired graduate students in English education with dual-enrolled high-school juniors for the purpose of providing mentoring in writing, represents one such approach to this problem that has experienced success in this area, and study of this particular instance can provide insight into ways to address what has been identified as a common problem for teacher preparation programs.

### **Scope and Significance of the Study**

This study is a case study of five women enrolled in a writing methods course as part of a graduate level teacher education program in English Education. As part of the writing methods course, these women were assigned a high-school student to mentor online in writing, exchanging drafts with feedback via email. Over a span of ten weeks, the graduate students provided feedback to multiple drafts of two separate writing assignments. In researching this particular process, I conducted multiple in-depth interviews with each of the five study participants; these interviews were audio taped and

transcribed verbatim by me. I also collected documentary data from both the graduate students (emails, reflective writings, feedback given to their high-school partners) and the high-school student partners (emails, drafts of writing assignments). As part of and during the data collection process, I kept detailed notes in a research journal.

My findings in this study, although specific to this particular instance, have implications for teacher education. Most significantly, online practicum experiences can provide opportunities not only for authentic use of educational theory but also allow for more and varied occasions of applying theory to practice. Moreover, this application can be guided by the experience of a knowledgeable other, without the myriad concerns (e.g. taking attendance, grading papers) that demand the pre-service teacher's attention in traditional, field-based practicum environments. Additionally, online experiences such as the Online Writing Partnership can provide valuable opportunities for reflection on beliefs about teaching and teaching writing that are often formed prior to entering a teacher preparation program (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999).

### **Questions of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of five graduate students' in an online writing partnership and to explore what beliefs those experiences revealed.

To guide my research, I designed the following questions:

1. What kinds of experiences do prospective English teachers preparing for the teaching profession have in a distance, online partnership with secondary writers?
2. What do these experiences reveal about these prospective teachers' views of teaching and specifically of teaching writing?
3. What influences on the partnership or on the participants appear to exist from experiences with and attitudes toward technology? In what way did these attitudes affect the partnership/participants?

4. What contextual threads appeared most salient to these prospective English teachers in the success (or lack thereof) of this online partnership?

The first question provided a way to examine the online partnership from the perspectives of those participating in the partnership. The second question looked at the experiences of the five study participants through the lens of belief about teaching, writing, and writing instruction. The third question required me to look at prior beliefs about technology and how those beliefs might have impacted the experiences of the graduate students during the partnership. The final question provided the opportunity to explore the nature of online environments and the impact these contexts might have on teacher education.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study looks at an online partnership between pairs of students, one student from a graduate-level, teacher education program and one from a college dual-enrollment, high-school program. This partnership gave future English teachers the opportunity to work with developing writers like the ones they would work with both later in their internships and moreover in their careers as professional educators. In this chapter, I will begin by looking at literature pertaining to learning, followed by literature dealing specifically with teacher learning. Research and theory related to learning is of primary importance for this review of literature for the light it sheds on the movement from novice to expert, both in the practice of writing and in the practice of teaching writing. I will also review literature concerning writing and theory related to the teaching of writing. Next, I examine research on and theory of context in general and online contexts in particular. I conclude this chapter with a summary of literature on the methodology used in this study.

### **Language and Learning**

#### **Language Development**

In this study I employ a social constructivist view of learning. Social constructivism is poststructuralist in its view of learning and development and as such rejects an empirical view of knowledge, wherein what can be known is limited to what can be verified by observation. For the social constructivist, knowledge and meaning do not exist externally outside of the individual. Instead, meaning is constructed by an

individual within the context of a particular culture (Bruner, 1986; Ong, 1982; Smagorinsky, 2001). Rarely do we formulate an understanding of the world in isolation; rather, our knowledge of the world is most frequently “mediated through negotiation with others” (Frank Smith, quoted in Bruner, 1986, p. 261). This mediation is accomplished primarily through our use of tools and signs (Vygotsky, 1978a), with language serving as a central tool.

Language is our primary means of representing the world; it is both a socially constructed tool with which we organize our personal understanding of the world (Holquist, 1990; Ong, 1982; Smagorinsky, 2001) and the tool with which we construct meaning through negotiation with others (Bruner, 1986; Cheyne & Tarulli, 1999; Holquist, 1990). Bruner (1986) notes that language is our primary tool for “referring,” wherein language “uses cues to the context in which utterances are being made and triggers presupposition that situate the referent” (p. 63). In other words, language allows us to interact with others by relying on shared and jointly constructed meaning; language provides the primary medium by which we are able to communicate and, thus, to learn (Lindfors, 1991).

Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of utterance as a unit of speech communication provides significant insight for this study. Most of the communication between the selected participant pairs occurs using variants of written language such as emails, papers, and comments on those papers. Often, teachers and students alike view writing as a product (Dyson & Freedman, 2003; Flower & Hayes, 1994) and do not view this form of language use in the same way they view traditional, oral speech. To be sure, there are significant contextual differences between written and oral speech (see Kress, 2003; Ong,

1982). However, as Bakhtin notes, we do not communicate through the exchange of sentences, but rather through the exchange of utterances (1986). Each piece of writing—with all its contextual elements, including the writer’s speech will, or purpose in speaking, and the reader’s assumptions about that speech will—constitute one utterance, one link in a chain of communication.

Bakhtin’s differentiation between sentence and utterance, where a sentence has no implicit meaning at all, unless as part of a whole utterance, is fundamentally constructivist in nature because through utterances, meaning is created by a convergence of contextual features selected by the speaker as part of his/her speech will. Language *in use* is social. Vygotsky’s view of language, like all higher psychological processes, is also fundamentally social in nature: “When we speak of a process, ‘external’ means ‘social.’ Any higher mental function was external because it was social at some point before becoming an internal, truly mental function...” (Vygotsky, 1981, quoted in Cheyne & Tarulli, 1999, p. 9). For Vygotsky, what makes human learning unique is its presumption of a particular social nature that leads to development in keeping with the expectations of intellectual life within a culture (Vygotsky, 1978a). This social aspect is manifested in the dialogic nature of language, wherein each speech act, or utterance, consists in part of the presumed response of an *other* (Bakhtin, 1986; Holquist, 1990). No matter if an utterance is a single word rejoinder to a command, a complex and artistic written utterance such as a novel, or an informal greeting in the form of an email or instant message, each speech act is a whole utterance whose completeness includes the presumption of response, whether immediate or delayed, in the form of another utterance, or in influencing the other’s actions.

Some learning occurs as part of the natural development of most children, such as language acquisition itself (Lindfors, 1991). This type of learning is in large part outside the scope of this study. However, learning and development are not separate phenomena; learning is a kind of development. At a certain point development and learning converge and learning becomes more deliberate, especially in the context of schooling. The internalization that occurs when the mediation of human action with tools moves from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal is an indicator of psychological growth, of learning (Palincsar, 1998; Smagorinsky, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978a), and is accomplished primarily through the use of language (Vygotsky, 1978a) and the organizational structures that language provides (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Lindfors, 1991, 1999), such as the core concepts that experts in specific disciplines or areas develop to guide their thinking about problems. For example, the expert jazz guitarist knows that when a solo is called for in a song, s/he needs to know only the key in which the song is played. The guitarist understands because of the organization of her/his knowledge of music theory that certain notes and chords are called for, while others are not. By reading a tablature transcription of a solo, the novice guitarist can also play a solo in a jazz piece; she can read the notes on the page but does not necessarily know how they relate to chords or key signature. The same is true for theories in other disciplines, such as education. These organizational structures, these theories, are not rigid and uniform; rather, they are both individually specific and at the same time bound to the process of cultural development (Kress, 2003; Ong, 1982).

Smagorinsky (1995) notes that in any theory of development there is a sense of *telos*, an assumption that development through learning constitutes a move toward a

positive, appropriate end. This is especially true in education, where competency in various areas is a primary goal (Bransford et al., 1999). However, any subjective terms such as “positive” and “appropriate” connote a meaning that can only be culturally determined. Any such theory, then, might be “grounded in unexamined cultural assumptions” (Smagorinsky, 1995, p. 194). Even if those assumptions are examined by a learner, either individually or as part of a community of discourse, it is impossible to escape completely the cultural assumptions that shape the construction of meaning (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). In English education, for example, the debate over “standard” English and the role of dialect in the classroom has led to researchers and teachers alike looking at the cultural assumptions that lead to certain languages being imbued with power, others denied power, and the costs of both to students (see for example, Christensen, 1990; Clayton, 1996; Delpit, 1988, 1998; Egan-Robertson, 1998). The very tools we use to negotiate meaning with others, most notably language, are born of a particular culture. Bakhtin (1986) argues that even the choice of how one will engage in speech (the selection of a particular type of utterance, or *speech genre*) is indicative of a multitude of contextual (and cultural) considerations. The importance to this study of viewing language and its forms as culturally bound are evident when considering the varying levels of competency in writing and other instances of language use, not only between the university students and their high-school partners but also between the university participants themselves and the ways their language competencies affected the relationships among and between partners.

### **Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development**

From an early age, everyone constructs a theory of the world which forms the “basis of all perception and understanding” (Smith, 1997, p. 65) and determines how we

act toward new information (Lindfors, 1991). When we encounter new information, it either conforms to our theory and we assimilate that information, or it does not conform and we are faced with a need to make sense of this new development, to accommodate this new information by restructuring our theory (Lindfors, 1991, 1999; Palincsar, 1998). In a sense, we are required to reconstruct our theory of the world in light of new information that conflicts with our previous understanding. Sometimes, we require help in assimilating new information. This study looks at the ways selected preservice teachers assist high-school students in their writing and also how these preservice teachers assimilate new information about the nature of teaching and the roles teachers play in assisting learning.

For this study, I looked at participants enrolled in a master's level teacher education program. Studies show that students entering these types of programs often have already formed concepts of what teaching is and the role teachers plays in student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Moore, 2003). Often, these beliefs about teaching and teachers do not reflect what research has shown about how students learn and the most effective ways of teaching for student learning. However, the traditional notion of teacher as one who assists in the development of competencies in students is common and mirrors to some degree Vygotsky's (1978a) mentoring relationships. According to Vygotsky (1978a), there is a gap between a learner's *actual developmental level* (what a learner can do independently) and the learner's *potential developmental level* (what a learner can accomplish with the assistance of a more knowledgeable peer, teacher, or other form of tutor). The gap between these levels is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is of importance to this study of online partnerships in particular, as

studies show that communication technologies can assist teachers in bridging the gap between actual and potential development, placing the ZPD within the context of the online environment. Additionally, knowledge of the ZPD and the mentor/teacher's role in it can shed light on the role this partnership plays in bridging the actual and potential development of the university students' competencies in teaching.

Vygotsky's theory of development is helpful in understanding how learners develop understanding with the help of others, but what Vygotsky does not describe in detail is the nature of the work that falls to the tutor when assisting a learner within the ZPD. Bruner et al (Wood & Wood, 1996) suggest the metaphor of scaffolding, wherein tutors seek to build onto what students already are independently capable of doing (actual developmental level) by performing various critical functions such as providing focus and performing demonstrations, to name a few. These activities in turn "scaffold" the gap and help students develop further additional independent processes.

Every learner has his/her own ZPD; while Vygotsky (1978a) primarily used examples from early childhood learning and development, students of all ages continue to learn and continue to require the assistance of others in moving toward their potential development (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Lindfors, 1999; Palincsar, 1998; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998). Moreover, simply moving to independent competence does not mean a learner is capable of being the tutor to someone else. Bruner (1986) notes, in a follow-up study of the tutoring process, that children who are taught a certain skill and then asked to assist another in learning that skill, are not able to gradually relinquish responsibility of completion to the learner they are assisting. Teaching is not so easy, and Bruner's follow-up study suggests the particular importance of scaffolding and the ZPD in relation

to contexts of teaching and learning how to teach. In the next section, I look at literature relating specifically to learning in the field of teacher education.

### **Preservice Teacher Education**

Learning to teach, especially learning to teach in a specific subject area discipline such as English, can often resemble a two-headed beast. Preservice teachers must not only acquire competence in the content area they are to teach, but also must become competent in pedagogical theory as well and then somehow synthesize the two. In addition to the traditional, academic approach to the study of education, preservice teachers must, often simultaneously through practicum experiences, internships, and methods classes, learn how and when to apply the knowledge they have acquired.

Because this study focuses on the experiences of preservice teachers in both an academic setting and practicum setting occurring simultaneously, I will be looking at literature related to preservice teacher education and in particular in the following areas:

knowledge and competency, factors affecting the transfer of knowledge to practice, and the role of field experiences in preservice teacher education.

#### **Knowledge and Competency**

Student teachers learn a certain body of knowledge, “generated through research on teaching” (Bransford et al., 1999), that is required of effective classroom teachers, what educational researchers call “epistemic knowledge” (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Moore, 2003). Studies have shown that when teachers lack this pedagogical knowledge, they also lack the ability to engage students in the content of their teaching (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002) But learning to teach is not merely accumulating knowledge. Participation in educational discourse communities is necessary to allow learning to move from isolated to contextually situated (Graham & Thornley, 2000).

Student teachers need to interact inside the communities they are seeking to join, while at the same time being guided through deliberate, reflective processes regarding their own emerging and transforming beliefs and behaviors (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998).

While knowledge acquisition is the first step toward competency, it is assuredly not the last. It is one thing to memorize facts and otherwise acquire knowledge and another to be able to apply that knowledge in settings different from the one in which it was learned. This ability to apply knowledge in unique settings is referred to as *transfer* and results in a learner's body of knowledge becoming "conditionalized," meaning that knowledge is organized in such a way that it is responsive to situational cues that signal what knowledge is relevant and when it is needed (Bransford, 1999; Moore, 2003). I will discuss issues affecting transfer in more detail later in this section.

Another aspect of interest concerning knowledge and learning, not only to teacher education in general but to this study in particular, is the perceived disconnect between the theoretical base of knowledge that is presented in teacher education coursework and the learning that occurs from experiences in the field. Very often, student teachers identify these as "separate realms," with theory coming from the realm of universities and education researchers and practical knowledge coming from field experiences and from mentor teachers in the field (Graham & Thornley, 2000; Moore, 2003; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Wilson et al., 2002). Field experiences are consistently remembered by teachers not only as the most valuable part of teacher preparation programs but as largely disconnected from coursework (Burant & Kirby, 2002; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998).

Research suggests that when preservice teachers see these two realms as disconnected, and when there is insufficient help bridging this gap between realms,

preservice teachers are likely to fall back on previous conceptions of teachers and teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Moore, 2003; Wilson et al., 2002). What is the cause of this disconnect, however? This same research suggests that the gap that student teachers and practicing teachers see between the academic training and field training is owed in part to the sense that “teaching is doing,” that assisting others in learning is not something that occurs in theory but in actual practice. Studies have also suggested that because student teachers have spent so long in the academic community, exposed to teaching in practice, they feel (perhaps subconsciously) as if a type of apprenticeship has already been served (Borg, 2004; Phelps, 1989). This disconnect between the two realms of teacher education is of particular importance to my study, as the partnership under investigation takes place in some sense “in the field” (albeit in a non-traditional, emerging context), at the same time that it is part of a traditional university methods course.

### **Issues Affecting Knowledge Transfer**

In the present study, preservice teachers were asked to mentor a high-school student in writing via communication technologies. Part of the preservice teachers’ task was to act as a guide, helping to initiate high-school students into the community of writing of which the preservice teachers were already competent members. To do this, they had to view the educative situation, determine the characteristics of that situation and how those characteristics related to their own beliefs about teaching and the role of the teacher in addition to their ongoing acquisition of knowledge about the theories of pedagogy and then apply these beliefs to that situation. In other words, the online practicum was asking the preservice teachers to reflect about what they were learning in the realm of the university setting and apply that knowledge to the mentorship they had

been assigned to do. To provide a theoretical base and to better understand the processes involved with participation in this partnership, I will review the literature related to knowledge transfer and how learners move from novice to expert. I begin by looking at a number of factors that are necessary for knowledge transfer to take place and knowledge to become conditionalized.

Perhaps one of the most common misconceptions of learning is that it consists primarily of knowledge transmitted to the learner either by an instructor or through educational materials. Some learning can occur in this manner, if the listener or reader is alert, receptive, and curious (Lindfors, 1991). However, for learning to affect beliefs and actions, that knowledge must find some way from an abstract, isolated concept in the student's mind to become part of that student's beliefs about the world. Knowledge must be transferred to belief and practice. Korthagen (1999) identifies three factors affecting knowledge transfer that are of particular interest to this study. They are: prior knowledge, felt sense of need by way of an immediate problem or past experience, and the nature of relevant knowledge to a task.

In all forms of learning, prior experience and understanding play hugely significant roles. In teacher education this is especially true, perhaps more so than in other professional programs. By the time a student has reached a teacher preparation program, that student has spent a minimum twelve years observing and experiencing teaching first hand. Research has shown that this experience shapes in very real ways beliefs about good teachers and teaching, beginning as early as second grade and possibly before formal schooling even begins. Students of education bring with them conceptions of teaching that they have been forming for more than a decade. The challenge for

teacher education is the integration of research-generated theory into already existing beliefs that will then be applied to real contexts and students.

Another potential problem, or area of interest, is the fact that all learners need to have some sense of the relevance of what they are learning to some situation that will come up later in their lives. If theory does not relate directly to a concern that a student teacher has, or does not address a problem the student teacher has faced, then there is no immediate relevance sufficient to provide clarity of purpose and motivation for study. There needs to be a reason to learn and those reasons, if transfer is going to occur, cannot come on faith alone.

However, learning in relevant contexts, while helpful in promoting transfer, does not guarantee transfer. When placed in an authentic setting, student teachers often become overwhelmed with the daily routines of teaching (Moore 2003), such as taking attendance, monitoring student behavior, and managing the paper load. Often student teachers and teachers alike do not have the opportunity to reflect on situations that arise and how learned theory might be applied to those situations. Knowledge must not only be learned, it must be relevant to a situation and “conditionalized” to certain circumstances (Bransford et al., 1999) in order to be fluently recalled.

Another factor that greatly affects the transfer of knowledge is the nature of the knowledge itself and the ease with which it can be accessed. Not only is it important what theories teachers learn, it is important how they organize their understanding of that learning. Teachers often rely on immediate solutions to concrete situations that arise in the course of a day. Rarely is there time, in the immediacy of the classroom, to stop and reflect on which theories are relevant to a particular situation (Burant & Kirby, 2002;

Darling-Hammond, 2000; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). Rather, teachers react instinctually to the situation as a whole. If knowledge has not been organized in the preservice teacher's mind in such a way that it can be recalled according to a particular situation's cues, then that knowledge is of little use (Bransford et al., 1999).

### **Expertise and the Organization of Knowledge**

The current study looks at an online partnership designed in part to give experience to preservice teachers seeking to develop expertise in the teaching of writing. Looking at how knowledge is organized in those who have expertise in a field offers insight into the ways these selected participants may have been beginning to organize the theories about teaching taught in university coursework and how they began to apply that knowledge to a mentoring process.

Those who have expertise in a particular field do not have to stop and think about what they know in a given situation. Instead, they are able to recognize features of a situation as being indicative of and requiring certain knowledge (Bransford et al., 1999; Carter, 1990). Additionally, they have fluency in their ability to recall and apply knowledge. This is due in part to an expert's ability to notice things about a particular context that a novice would not and comes not only from the vast amount of content knowledge they possess about their field, but also from the large amounts of time spent in situations that require those particular knowledge sets. For example, all of the selected participants in this study were undergraduate English majors. By and large, the participants have expertise within the field of literature studies, in part because they have read not only a great quantity of literature and related theory, but have developed competencies that allow them to automatically and without conscious reflection apply various theories of literary meaning to their reading, evaluate the quality of books as

either “serious reading” as opposed to “beach reading,” or draw forth any number of evaluative techniques that would not be available to novice readers lacking their specific areas of expertise.

Part of the automaticity of this interaction with text is because, as graduates with an English degree, students do not really look at reading and interpreting a text as a process that they go through. Instead the reading of a text, the recognition of symbolic elements in that text as well as the decoding of letters and words on the pages of the book, is seen as elements of a whole that is *reading*. The act of reading for an English major likely is a gestalt, defined by Korthagen et al (1999) in the context of educational theory as “the dynamic and holistic unity of needs, feelings, values, meanings and behavioral inclinations triggered by an immediate situation” (p. 9).

Teachers, regardless of their level of expertise, view teaching situations as whole experiences, rather than as a collection of contextual elements suggesting the selection of certain theories over others in order for learning to take place (Bransford et al., 1999; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). Teaching is an active profession and teachers are constantly acting within the role of educator; rarely do they have the time (much less the inclination) to stop and reflect on which theory of education is most pertinent to the situation at hand and how that theory might be implemented. Rather, they must react to a situation viewed holistically, recognizing automatically the cues that direct their recall of relevant knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, in order for knowledge to transfer to practice, it must be organized in such a way that knowledge becomes “conditionalized,” or stored in the learner’s mind so that, when conditions are recognized, the cues allow for fluent recall of

applicable knowledge (Bransford et al., 1999; Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995). Korthagen et al (1999) draws on the work of Gestalt psychologists, calling teachers' holistic view of situations "gestalts." In order for new learning to be incorporated into teachers' practice, they must reflect upon their gestalts. This reflection can lead to schema formation. Reflection within the schema level, when teachers begin to make connections between various schematic relationships, can lead to theory formation. When teachers reflect on their held theories of learning and learners, these theories gradually become incorporated into new gestalts. Within teacher education especially, preservice teachers usually benefit from guided assistance through the reflection process. A preservice teacher's initial gestalt can be viewed as his/her actual development level (Vygotsky, 1978a). With assistance from a knowledgeable other in a situated context (Lave & Wenger, 1991), such as a university professor, novice teachers can begin to work toward gestalt transformation and, ultimately, expertise.

### **Theory and Practice in Practicum Experiences**

In the example of a student of English literature, perhaps in part because it is an academic discipline, literature studies facilitate the type of learning that takes place in classrooms; students can be guided through the process of analyzing literature because the mentor, or knowledgeable other, is often with them through the entire process. Literature study is predominantly academic and thus thrives in the academy. Teaching, however, takes place in schools; learning to teach does not always lend itself to having both the preservice teacher and university professor in the same context at all times.

In teaching, authentic experiences are thought to occur largely in schools and it is not as easy to model the act of teaching and then give over a classroom of students for practice. This is where the traditional employment of internships come into play

(Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995). Even though tradition holds that theory is presented in the university classroom and later applied in practice in the internship classroom, often with little continuing, practical connection between the two, it is common for students to fall back on previously held beliefs about the nature of teaching and teachers, which often is at odds with progressive theories of education most frequently proposed in university-based teacher preparation programs.

Virtually all teacher education programs incorporate some form of internship experience (Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995; Wilson et al., 2002), where anywhere between nine weeks and sixteen weeks are spent by the preservice teacher in some form of apprenticeship to a practicing, mentor teacher. Likewise, many programs incorporate shorter, interspersed practicum experiences before the internship to provide preservice teachers with opportunities to “try out” some of the pedagogical theory they have been learning in class. However, merely learning theory and then being given time to practice it are not enough to develop competency in teaching (Graham & Thornley, 2000). All learners have a Zone of Proximal Development; there is a limit to what student teachers are able to do on their own. In this study, the selected participants were all college graduates and had demonstrated an ability to succeed in traditional classroom environments. This traditional, academic competency represents their actual developmental level, in that they do not have to be guided through the process of acquiring information about, in this case in particular, writing. What preservice teachers do need assistance with exists in the realm of their individual, pedagogical potential development level. In other words, there is a similarity between the children in Bruner’s

follow-up study and the participants in the present study: the participants know how to write; they do not know how to teach writing to others.

Preservice teachers require a knowledgeable other who can assist them in moving forward in their competencies related to implementing the theoretical into the practical (Graham & Thornley, 2000; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998). For preservice teachers, the gap between theoretical understanding of pedagogy and the ability to implement effective practice based on that theory is their Zone of Proximal Development. Practicum experiences, as well as internships, can exist within that zone, and require a knowledgeable other, a mentor, to assist in a reflective progression through that zone. In this study, the gap of special interest existed between the participants' competence in writing and their developing abilities in teaching others to write. I turn next to literature about the writing process and approaches to teaching writing.

### **Writing**

Writing is a complex and multifaceted discipline; while writing resembles in many ways spoken language, it is fundamentally different—unlike spoken language, writing evolves through a recursive process. Writing can also have the appearance of paradox, for while writing often seems to be an exercise undertaken individually, writing as a cognitive process always presumes an “other.” All of these—the complexity, the seeming contradictory nature of the “space” where writing occurs—can create difficulties for veteran and novice teachers of writing alike, especially when writing moves from the confines of the classroom to those of online environments. For this study, there are three aspects in the literature about writing that warrant particular attention: the process of writing and the recursive nature of that process, the social nature of the writing act, and

teachers' responses to students' writing. These aspects are to a degree not separable from each other and often overlap and inform the others.

### **Writing as Process**

Writing, like any other complex activity, is a process (Farnan & Dahl, 2003), and many if not all teachers of writing have come to internalize some notion of writing as a process into their teaching (Faigley, 1994). Problems arise for students when process is over-generalized and codified into a series of rigid rules and procedures, which are then used as criteria for evaluation. Often this codification occurs when writing is viewed as product-oriented. For example, Flower and Hayes (1994) explore a common example of a metaphor for thinking about writing, that of discovery. In the discovery view of the writing process is the presumption of a product waiting to be found in some already extant form. This notion of process is contrary to what Kress (2003) calls the "semiotic work" of language and writing; rather than "finding" meaning through composing, meaning is created through the very act of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1994; Kress, 2003; Reither, 1994).

Instead of prescribing a series of linear steps to be followed to reach a predefined end product, a view of writing as a process suggests a number of stages that best represent the recursive work of writing. These stages are broad enough to be generalized, yet still allow for the differences of individual writers as they recursively move through these stages. Emig (1994) notes that most views of the writing process mirror (with occasional adjustments or modifications) the stages set forth by Graham Wallas in his typology of creative thought (cited in Emig, 1994). Wallas' stages begin with preparation, wherein the writer begins to think about the problem of the writing task itself. Whether or not preparation includes actual drafting or takes place fully in the

writer's head does not lessen the importance of this first stage (Vygotsky, 1986).

Preparation is followed by incubation, when the writer thinks about the task at hand. Perl (1994) writes about a "felt sense," wherein the writer focuses inwardly to "non-verbalized perceptions." She calls the process of attending to this felt sense "retrospective structuring" that forms an arch between incubation and the next stage of Emig and Wallas' typology, illumination. The final stage is verification that in the case of writing could include the revision process.

Because these stages seemingly fit within the "usual organizational structure of the school" (Dyson & Freedman, 2003), that is, they appear to be a set of procedures to follow, a common reaction to this and other process typologies is to incorporate them into curricula as "instructions" for writing (Dyson & Freedman, 2003; Faigley, 1994). As Emig (1994) notes, what starts as a useful way to view the writing process often is reduced to a rigid set of criteria for creating and evaluating writing, wherein process is understood as a prescriptive rather than descriptive tool for viewing writing.

Researchers (Dyson & Freedman, 2003; Faigley, 1994; Farnan & Dahl, 2003; 1994) caution against this view of process, arguing that writing does not always follow a straight line of development, but instead will "return to substrands of the overall process, or subroutines" (Perl, 1994). Recursiveness, according to Perl (1994), is a unique feature of the writing process that "implies that there is a forward-moving action that exists by virtue of a backward-moving action." In other words, writing cannot be looked at as occurring in a linear sequence. Even as a writer moves forward in his/her writing, part of that "moving forward" involves re-reading what had previously been written; this interaction of reader and text then informs the writing that follows, and the cycle repeats.

This process in its essence is not an individually-isolated one and in the context of the classroom becomes decidedly social. While we as writers often view the process of writing as solitary, and certainly at times it feels solitary, the mental processes involved in writing keep us from isolation (Bakhtin, 1986; Holquist, 1990). We must interact with others as we write in the Bakhtinian sense; that presumed interaction is how we order our ideas.

### **Writing as a Social Act**

Bleich (1989) notes that all forms of language, by definition, rely on social factors for meaning; language, and therefore writing, can only be understood through the lens of a society. Likewise, language acts (of which writing is one) have multiple aspects, including purpose, expression, participants, and context (Lindfors, 1999). By using a language, we are acknowledging (however subconsciously) the systems of that language (Bakhtin, 1986). Researchers have suggested that rather than focusing on writing in the traditional, decontextualized sense, it is necessary to study and understand the variety of communities in which writing takes place (Faigley, 1994; Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995; Heath, 1983; Ivani, 2004; Reither, 1994).

Faigley (1994) and Reither (1994) state that it is important to study the contexts of writing as necessary components of the composing process. In their view, the contexts of writing are at least partially self-generative. Writing cannot be separated from the “social-rhetorical situations” where writing occurs; moreover, writing not only happens within contexts, it “creates and constitutes its own contexts” through its very use (Reither, 1994). Because of this inextricable link between writing and context, the difference between successful and unsuccessful writers exists in part due to the

unsuccessful writer's lacking sufficient familiarity with the context in which s/he is writing (Berthoff, 1994; Flower & Hayes, 1994; Reither, 1994).

Murray (1994) argues for the social nature of writing by illustrating how, when we read another's writing, we must understand it as it relates to particular contexts. Writing, as an interactive process, places the writer and the reader in each other's roles simultaneously, requiring the writer to understand not just what is being written, but how it is construed within the context of a particular community of discourse (Ivani, 2004). Therefore, merely knowing the facts of the subject is insufficient for writing about that subject— one must not only know how to participate within the discourse community but also actively identify as a member of a “socially meaningful group” (Gee, 1999).

Not everyone sees writing as social. Teachers may see writing as intensely private and be disinclined to engage students in aspects of writing other than the conventional (grammar use, appropriate vocabulary, etc.). Writing, however, is inherently social. Certainly the “projective structuring,” what Perl (1994) defines as adherence to the rules of a particular writing discourse, is an aspect of writing that invites teachers to engage socially with their students. The teacher is the “knowledgeable other” in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (cited in Lindfors, 1999) who helps “initiate” students (Murray, 1989), modeling how they participate within a writing discourse and assisting students as they move toward their own participation. There is also the “retrospective structuring” of writing, defined by Perl as the recursive process unique to each writer. The retrospective structuring by its nature seems private, untouchable, but is just as influenced by the context of the writing as any other aspect of the writing process. For

students, the teacher is inextricably part of this context and the teacher's responses to students' writing inevitably influence the learner's development.

### **Teacher Response to Writing**

#### **Defining Response**

Response is not something that comes only after instruction; rather, response can be an integral thread in the "teaching-learning interaction" (Freedman, Greenleaf, & Sperling, 1987). Researchers contend that response is most often considered within the confines of written remarks by teachers, either in the margins or at the end of a submitted text (Dyson & Freedman, 2003; Freedman et al., 1987). Response is not limited to written comments, however, and can occur in a formal conference or informally between classes, in writing, or through oral interactions with students (C. M. Anson, 1989; Freedman et al., 1987; Onore, 1989; Warnock, 1989). Response can come at any time during the writing process, even in the discussion of what topic a student will write about (Freedman et al., 1987).

Often, the theory of response to writing is different than the practice of response. 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 (Langer & Applebee, 1987). One study of writing teachers' practices 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 this study, ninety-seven percent were "editing" comments (Langer & Applebee, 1987).

Correcting errors can be part of response to be sure, but it is not the entirety of response helpful to student writers. This study has at its center a partnership designed to

foster social engagement between prospective teachers and developing writers. In the partnership, which forms the focus of the current study, emphasis was placed on response to writing that was not primarily corrective. One goal of the partnership was to focus the interaction of two (and sometimes three) people on a writing task, to help improve a piece of writing, not to evaluate it. As such, an expanded view of teacher response is helpful.

Freedman (1987) defines response as “collective problem solving.” Defined in such a way, response to writing can be more accurately viewed as it was intended by the partnership. Flower and Hayes (1994) argue that the best writing stems from the need to solve problems identified by the writer. This view of response includes the teacher in this problem-solving view of writing and clarifies the social aspect of writing. For example, in presenting students with the assignment to write an argument for an issue of importance, teachers present students with a problem that must be solved largely by the student, who must determine an issue that they consider important and write an argument in defense of their view. The teacher, however, is not divorced from the writing process simply because the student determines the specific issue on which to write. Rather, teacher response contributes to the student’s understanding in a number of ways, such as pointing out issues of clarity in the structure of the argument and providing an alternate view of the issue, to name a few. Response becomes part of the writing process; writing then is “jointly accomplished teaching and learning” where “[b]oth the teacher and learner negotiate the parts they play” (Freedman et al., 1987, p. 9). This definition highlights the social nature not only of response, but also the social aspect of writing and more closely represents the stated intent of the writing partnership in this study.

### **Teachers' Responses to Students' Writing**

Response to student writing is a difficult notion for many teachers because it requires the teacher to wear two “hats” simultaneously: that of the helpful guide and also of the authoritative representative of the field of “proper” writing (Anson, 1989). Students likewise find response to writing difficult to grapple with; many students perceive response to a final draft of a paper as more valuable than response during the process of writing itself (Daiker, 1989). As a result, this view often has the effect of removing what is viewed as the real benefit of response, joint discovery and problem solving (Freedman et al., 1987).

Similarly, the way teachers are taught, not only in methods courses, but particularly in college literature courses, influences greatly the way they approach student texts (Anson, 1989; Emig, 1994; Phelps, 1989; Reither, 1994). 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 which typically are one-shot critical essays, graded and evaluated when they are turned in and rarely revisited with the aim of improving writing.

Because such academic experiences can have a profound impact on teachers' approaches to student writing, and because this study deals with participants who are graduate students with undergraduate degrees in English who are prospective English teachers, looking at how students in college literature courses approach texts (both writing and reading) is important. Anson (1989) delineates a progression of “ways of

knowing” that is particularly relevant. They are: the *dualist*, who sees a text in black and white with only one possible reading; the *relativist*, who sees that all readings are correct and therefore none of them are; and the *confident relativist*, who understands that there are multiple ways of approaching a text and multiple possible meanings, delimited by the parameters of what constitutes valid readings (Rosenblatt, 1978). Although this taxonomy represents a progression, Anson acknowledges that not all students move beyond any given level. This is true even of graduate level students in teacher preparation programs and can have a profound effect on their assistance with students’ developing abilities in writing. A teacher reading a student’s paper is reading a text; how they define and approach texts in general will likewise determine their role in the joint production of that text in the classroom.

### **Revision**

A discussion of revision is warranted here, because revision is “a central and important part of writing” (Fitzgerald, 1987), and because the partnership at the center of this study was developed to provide high-school students assistance in the ongoing process of revision and to provide experience to prospective teachers in providing that assistance. For most teachers, the closest they come to affecting the revision of a student’s writing is in providing response to that writing, if they provide any response at all; ultimately the student decides what depth of revision, if any, occurs (Beach, 1976).

Revision is “a sequence of changes in a composition—changes that are initiated by cues and occur continually throughout the writing of a work” (Sommers, 1980). Revision is inextricably linked to 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 (Sommers, 1980). Also like response, revision is often shaped not only by past experiences with writing, but also by the writer's conception of revision (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 a matter of "moving words around" for the sake of clarity of meaning and/or the polishing of writing style (Sommers, 1980). 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 (Fitzgerald, 1987; Perl, 1994; Sommers, 1980). 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 approach their responses to student writing in ways designed to engage students in the process of reflecting on their own writing. The goal of writing instruction, competency in writing in a variety of contexts, 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 context of 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 results. Revision becomes mere proofreading, both in the student's eyes and at times in the eyes of the teacher.

Elements of the classroom context play a large role in revision of students' writing, such as the time allowed for work on assignments, how much time is available in a class overall, the physical conditions of composing (whether on computers or with pen and

paper), and the number of student writers demanding the attention of one teacher, to name just a few. When the mentoring of writing “goes online,” as in the partnership at the center of this study, the contexts change, but are still critical to understanding the processes of writing and the teaching of writing.

### **Importance of Context**

This study examined the experiences of selected participants within a particular online context. No experience occurs within a vacuum (Kress, 2003; Smagorinsky, 2001, 2002) and every experience incorporates aspects of the participant’s past and current understandings (Kress, 2003) both implicitly and explicitly (Dey & Abowd, 1999; Gwizdka, 2000). For Vygotsky (1978b), the most significant moment in intellectual development occurs when speech and practical activity converge. This convergence can be described as speech in context and “produces new relations with the environment,” noting that “every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relation between things” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 218). Dourish (2004) defines context itself as a “relational property,” suggesting a strong connection between thought, intellectual development, and context. That is, context is not merely a set of quantifiable factors such as place and time, but includes the interaction of the individual with and within these factors.

Context is particularly important to issues of language and learning. Discussing the movement of thought to speech, Vygotsky (1986) notes that every thought is a generalization and word meanings are dynamic and dependent on context. Kress (2003) states that no language act (communication) is neutral; neither are any of the modes for representing communication. Rather, communication is dependent largely on the context of its mode of representation. Every time an individual word is uttered, according to

Kress, the speaker fills it with meaning consisting of every experience with the concept that that word signifies; each utterance is therefore unique and dependent on context (Bakhtin, 1986; Kress, 2003; Vygotsky, 1986).

### **Defining Context**

The term “context” is one with which most are familiar but are unable to define precisely. Common approaches to defining context are attempted by listing examples of elements of a particular context or by selecting synonyms such as “conditions,” “factors,” or “environments” (Dey & Abowd, 1999). Neither of these approaches gets a researcher any closer to understanding what exactly context is. Context is understood in general terms as having “relevance to the matter at hand” (Dourish, 2004), that “gives meaning to something else” (Schmidt, Beigl, & Gellersen, 1999). Dey and Abowd (1999) note that this “sense” of context is insufficient and that in order to make the most of context in research settings, a better understanding of its defining characteristics is important. In other words, in order to study context, it is necessary to be able to recognize it, or at least know where to look.

Context as a concept is important when considering the interaction between human and computer (Dey & Abowd, 1999). When studying the effects of context in online communities, it is important to have a definition that identifies important, common features indicative of all contexts. Often contextual features of communication go unnoticed in human to human interaction (Dourish, 2004), becoming noticeable only when the ability to use these contextual features is no longer there (Lindfors, 1999), as can be the case when using online communication technologies.

First, context is unique to a particular situation and resists objective categorization (Dey & Abowd, 1999; Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995; Lindfors, 1999; Schmidt et al.,

1999). Second, context is both internal and external to the individual and is either implicitly or explicitly manifested (Gwizdka, 2000). Third, context is “dynamic” (Dourish, 2004) and is constantly negotiated (Cullen, 1998; Dourish, 2004; Lindfors, 1999) by participants in a particular situation. There are other ways, suggested by Lindfors (1999), to approach context than by attempts at definition.

Many of the past attempts at defining context for the purposes of applying it to human-computer interactions have roots in the theoretical philosophies of positivism (Dourish, 2004), wherein all aspects of context were such that they could be objectively observed in a controlled setting. The assumption was that contextual features were stable, predictable, and generally applicable. According to Dourish, this assumption is only in part true. More important are the aspects of context that are unique to any particular situation and the fact that there are many more aspects of context that are subjective and particular not only to an instance but also to an individual. Rather than looking at context as a set of facts to be determined independently, Dourish positions context as a “relational property” between the user and his/her environment.

Lindfors (1999) acknowledges the difficulty of defining context and suggests that, rather than defining the term, “probing” context in relation to particular events is instead more useful (p. 216). Drawing on the work of Cole (1996), she elucidates two interrelated notions of context. First, there is the notion of “surround”; second is the notion of “weave” (1999).

The surround notion of context includes those aspects of context relevant to the nature of the task in which the individual is participating. In educational settings this surround is typically (but not always) the classroom (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995;

Lindfors, 1999). Lindfors notes that although metaphorically we might look at the surround as being the immediate environment of the individual, the boundaries of this environment are not impenetrable. Indeed, during any experience, the individual brings with him/her all previous knowledge, experiences, and beliefs, which in turn “contextualize utterances and interaction events” (p. 218). Other researchers suggest this notion of surround context when discussing the concept of “community of practice” (Derry & Steinkuehler, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991), which includes “social relationships, physical and temporal contexts, symbolic and material resources (such as tools), and historical change” (Derry & Steinkuehler, 2003).

The weave notion of context referred to by Lindfors suggests the “definition” of context given by Dourish; that context, while having elements of “things,” is primarily a “relational property” (2004) between activities and objects and is actively constructed. In other words, context is created through the “weaving” of all of the various threads (such as those included earlier in communities of practice) available to the individual and from the individuals inhabiting any particular context (Derry & Steinkuehler, 2003; Dourish, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lindfors, 1999).

### **Online Context**

Because the context of special interest to this study was online, further discussion regarding specific possible threads of context in the particular world of cyberspace is warranted. First is the notion of context as it relates to writing and in particular to the notion of writing as a mode of communication. Vygotsky (1986) sees written speech as “lacking situational and expressive supports” and notes that communication in writing must be achieved through the choice and combination of words. This observation does not suggest that writing lacks context but merely that the context for writing is different

from other modes, and for written communication to be successful there is the requirement of what Kress and others (Kress, 2003; Smagorinsky, 2001, 2002) refer to as a translation between modes. Online communication represents what some have called a “revolution,” one which is ongoing and in which the translation from modes of printing to those of electronic forms of writing are negotiated (Bolter, 2001; Ong, 1982).

### **Transparency**

An important thread of context for online experiences is the notion of transparency. Transparency refers to the ability of a particular mode of communication to be invisible to/unnoticed by the user (Bolter, 2001; Ong, 1982). Transparency evolves through time as the relation between mode and medium become “nearly invisible...through the naturalizing effects of long-standing convention” (Kress, 2003). The more transparent the medium the more “natural” it seems to the user and the less likely it would be that the technology of writing would distract from the communicative functions it seeks to facilitate. Considering the aspect of transparency in online methods of communication is of particular importance because online modes of communication have not yet achieved the degree of transparency that other, similar modes of communication have. Writing on a computer screen shares the same sense of transparency as writing with a typewriter or even writing free hand on paper. Where online communication differs is in its potential for more dynamic uses. Online modes of communication are governed by spatial relations as well as temporal (Kress, 2003) and are characterized as being more “flexible and immediate” (Bolter, 2001). This flexibility can lessen transparency and create what some researchers call “hypermediacy” (Bolter, 2001; Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Landow, 1992) which suggests that part of the nature (context) of this emerging mode of communication is the attention drawn to the medium

itself. In other words, part of the context of online communication is that it can be sometimes transparent and sometimes hypermediated (Bolter, 2001).

### **Social presence**

What is not completely “natural” for tasks mediated by computers is interaction between participants who are not physically present. Another salient contextual thread for online contexts, especially when considering the level of satisfaction of an individual with experiences in online contexts, is that of social presence. Each person within an online context experiences a level of social presence, 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 is not limited to online contexts (Delfino & Manca, 2006; Tu, 2000) and can be developed and strengthened in any context where there is personal interaction. Social presence is of particular importance to computer-mediated educational experiences; while there may be high levels of transparency regarding the medium and user task, it is difficult to make the absence of another transparent. Higher levels of social presence positively influences online interaction (Tu & McIsaac, 2002), and social presence is essential for establishing collaborative learning environments (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003).

### **Writing “space”**

As the modes of communication transform, so do the “economies” of those modes (Bolter, 2001; Kress, 2003; Ong, 1982). Each mode of writing, specifically electronic modes, although not exclusively, has its own intricate economy defined by Bolter as a “dynamic relationship among materials, techniques, genres, and cultural attitudes and

uses” (2001). Part of the economy of writing is constituted by the actual/virtual space in which the writing occurs; according to Bolter and others (Bolter, 2001; Kress, 2003; Ong, 1982), that space is in a constant process of “remediation,” (Bolter, 2001; Bolter & Grusin, 1999) wherein one medium gradually reforms and/or replaces an older one.

Kress (2003) uses the metaphor of time to represent the mode of writing as a form of communication, where words are placed temporally in sequence, one after another. For Kress, the emerging “space” of online and electronic modes of writing is visualized through a spatial representation, where words are still temporally sequential, but are also juxtaposed with images and other media to form a multimodal space for communication to occur. Kress’ temporal metaphors for conceptualizing the context in which writing takes place is helpful in understanding the complexity and evolving nature of communication contexts within the realm of “cyberspace,” and especially the challenges presented to preservice English teachers’ notions of educational context and the teaching of writing.

### **Qualitative Research Methods**

Qualitative research methods are forms of inquiry that enable better understandings of the meaning of social phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1978), with the philosophical assumption that meaning is constructed by participants and context. Context is a defining characteristic of meaning, inseparable from a particular phenomenon, and can only be studied holistically (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Any study that looks at particular social phenomena warrants the use of qualitative research methods.

Case studies are “intensive descriptions and analyses of a *singular unit* or *bounded system*” (Merriam, 1998), the aim of which is to illuminate the meaning of a

phenomenon as it is socially constructed. Case studies, and qualitative research in general, emphasize meaning as constructed by participants and their contexts (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). More precisely, case studies emphasize the processes of meaning construction (Merriam, 1998). This study examines the phenomenon of an online writing partnership in order to explore the contexts of a unique case, a singular unit, within a teacher preparation program. In this study, I am particularly interested in the threads of the partnership's context, such as the communications technology used to facilitate writing instruction, and the meaning that is created by the participants as they prepare to become teachers.

Dyson & Genishi (2005) state that case studies do not attempt to present meaning context-free for greater generalization. Rather, case studies, including this one, are interested precisely in context itself. Case studies are particularly well suited when the goal of a study is to explore the "messy complexity" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) of human experience; this complexity requires holistic descriptions that take into account the unique features of a particular phenomenon, in order to accomplish what Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider to be the primary purpose of qualitative research: the greater understanding of complex phenomena by readers of the study.

### **Summary**

In the process of composing this review of literature, the following major ideas have emerged:

1. Meaning is socially constructed and contextually dependent.
2. Language, our primary tool for negotiating meaning, is both individually specific and culturally bound.

3. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development is not limited to viewing early childhood development but can also provide insight into the development of teaching competencies.
4. For students in preservice teacher education programs, there is a perceived disconnect between academic course work and experience in field placements, creating a gap between knowledge *of* practice and knowledge *in* practice.
5. In order for pedagogical knowledge to transfer to practice there must be relevant, prior knowledge, a felt sense of need on the part of the learner, and the availability of a knowledgeable other to assist in application of knowledge to a specific situation.
6. Writing is a recursive, social process that simultaneously takes place within contexts and creates its own contexts.
7. Teachers' approaches to teaching writing often mirror their own education and are often at odds with the notion that writing is a process rather than a product.
8. Teachers of writing often limit their feedback to student writing to issues of grammar and mechanics if they provide feedback at all.
9. Context is a critical factor when examining meaning.
10. Regarding online environments, it is more useful to view context as a "relational property" between users and their environment.
11. Drawing on the work of Michael Cole, Judith Lindfors views context as being twofold: context both surrounds participants in an event, and is woven by those participating in the event.
12. In all writing "spaces," or contexts, transparency is an important thread, particularly in the emerging space of online, electronic writing.
13. Qualitative research methods are appropriate in studies that seek to understand the meaning of a social phenomenon.
14. Case studies emphasize the processes of meaning construction.
15. Case studies are particularly well suited for exploring human experience and holistically presenting the complexity of these experiences.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS

In this study I examined the experiences of four preservice teachers and one practicing teacher in an online writing partnership, to examine the contextual features identified by the participants as salient during the mentoring experiences, and to see how those experiences contribute to a broader understanding of how preservice teachers preparing to enter the field envision their role in the teaching of writing. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research setting and participants in this study. Additionally, I describe the process of selecting the setting and participants, as well as the collection of data sources and my method of analysis. Finally, I discuss the issues of internal validity and the consistency of the study results.

### **Study Design and Rationale**

Finding a site to examine the phenomenon of online writing instruction was a difficult task. I sought out a number of potential sites, including programs in distance learning offered through a major research institution and a public, virtual high school. Neither avenue proved fruitful, with the former operating primarily through traditional means of distributing instruction at a distance (course materials were distributed via postal service), and the later being reluctant to open their program to possible critique.

At a large research institution in the southeast, there had been an online partnership program in place for two years. This partnership was developed for use in a course on language and composition by myself and the professor of that course, and paired high-

school students dual-enrolled in a local community college with master's level graduate students enrolled in the language and composition course. This partnership had two primary purposes: a) to provide feedback to young, developing writers, and b) to provide opportunities for future writing teachers to practice giving feedback and being a mentor to a student in his/her writing. I chose this partnership as the setting for this study because it included the use of communication technologies in teaching, represented a developing method of preparing future English teachers to teach writing, and provided authentic teaching opportunities incorporated in an in-class practicum, all of which are areas of teaching and teacher development that hold great interest to me.

Ultimately, my research interests center around educational technology and teacher preparation, and the best choice for the study that I wanted to conduct existed in the partnership that I had helped to establish. Because of my relationship with the professor of the language and composition course that "hosted" the online partnership, and because of my involvement in designing the partnership itself, I was able to gain the access necessary to examine the phenomenon of online writing partnerships and of online teaching and learning opportunities.

Finally, because at the time of this study the Online Partnership was in its third year of existence, this study design was ideal for my desire to observe the real experiences of participants in a bounded instance, where the core activity (the actual, online partnering of future teachers and secondary students for the purposes of providing tutoring in writing) was established and supported by two years of prior use.

## **Setting and Participants**

### **Description of Setting**

In a grounded approach to research in education, the ideal situation for a researcher is to immerse him/herself in the site of study (Hutchinson, 1997). Because the phenomenon that I wanted to study occurred in a virtual setting, immersion in the traditional sense was problematic. The partnership was on one hand a dialogic relationship between two partners, mediated by technologies that operate in “virtual” spaces but allow the “connection[s] between differences” (Holquist, 1990) that are endemic in all dialog. On the other hand, the experiences within this phenomenon of an online writing partnership dealt directly with the medium itself and the frustrations inherent in negotiating new and developing technologies. The “writing space” (Bolter, 2001; Bolter & Grusin, 1999) of the two partners was virtual, and it was not an area that I could be physically present in.

For contextual purposes, there were two “physical” sites that, along with their corresponding programs, provided the background to this study. One was a teacher preparation program at a major research institution in the southeast United States; the other was a high-school dual-enrollment program at a local community college. It is important to note that neither of these programs were the object of study. Rather, it was the purpose of this study to examine the online partnership that provided the dialogic connection between the two (Bakhtin, 1986).

### **English teacher preparation program**

This study focused on graduate students who volunteered to participate and were enrolled in a course on teaching language and composition. The majority of students enrolled in this course were preparing to become English teachers; however, some

students, including one of this study's participants, were enrolled in other programs. All the graduate students, as a part of the curriculum for this course, were paired with high-school students who were "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 through the use of email, chat rooms, and online bulletin boards. The online partnership continued for approximately ten weeks.

### **High-school dual-enrollment program**

At the time of this study, the community college was celebrating thirty years of hosting an on-campus dual-enrollment program for high-school students. This program differed from most dual-enrollment programs. Rather than attending select college classes while remaining on their home high schools' campuses, these students were completely immersed in the life of the college. While they maintained ties with their "home" high schools, during their junior and/or senior years these students attended classes exclusively on the community college campus. Because not all student progress at the same speed, or in the same subject areas, the community college employs full time faculty who teach high-school requisites to complete the graduation requirements of the dual enrolled students. For this study, I looked exclusively at eleventh-grade students enrolled in a high school-level writing course and who had been paired with graduate students in the language and composition course at the university.

The High School Dual Enrollment program (HSDE) reflects the diversity of the area. Students in this program come from a variety of backgrounds, both ethnic and economical. Busing and free and reduced lunch are provided for students. Tuition is

free, and textbooks and lab fees are provided as part of the State's obligation to public school students. While the HSDE program does have an admissions process and not every applicant is accepted, students enrolled in the program have a diverse range of abilities and skills.

### **Participant Selection**

At the beginning of the semester, after the graduate students had been given a chance to acclimate to their new situation, I came to the language and composition course to introduce the partnership and answer questions about what they could expect during the semester in regards to both the partnership and the technology involved. In the weeks leading up to the beginning of the semester, I had worked on setting up a variety of online technologies in order to facilitate communication between the graduate students and high-school students, and planning out the logistics of such communication. I understood that email would be a vital aspect of communication as the method for exchanging drafts of papers between participants. Because email is asynchronous and does not have the immediacy that I suspected the graduate students would desire in working with developing writers, I established a web page featuring multiple chat rooms where participants could "meet up" and talk about the partnership in synchronous, real-time discussions. Although discussion would be limited to typed communication, I anticipated that the chat-rooms might provide some of the immediacy of communication that would be missing from email-only dialog. The online bulletin boards I set up were also designed to provide a "space" where participants, both graduate and high-school, could discuss issues in a group setting.

During this first visit, I focused on establishing the outlines of the online partnership. Ultimately this partnership had value to the course beyond my research

interests, and my involvement was established regardless of my presence as an investigator. As a part of introducing the partnership and the rationale behind it, I led the students in a brainstorming exercise to develop an idea of how they felt they could benefit from this experience. Many of the students in the class saw the partnership as an opportunity to “practice” giving response to student writers, but many also mentioned the benefit of experiencing interactions with students similar to those the graduate students anticipated teaching in the coming years.

When it came time to pair high-school students with graduate students, I allowed the high-school students to express their preference in the process. The graduate students had written letters of introduction, and I presented these letters to the high-school students to read. Each high-school student used Post-Its notes to indicate their top three choices, and I was able to assign partners chosen among the top two in each instance. After giving the high-school students their graduate partners’ email addresses with instructions to send along their own letter of introduction, the online writing partnership was underway.

After the partnership had progressed for a few weeks, I made a return visit to the graduate class. By this time the writing partners had exchanged one paper; the graduate students provided response and the high-school students had submitted their revised, final version to their English teacher. I delivered these revised papers to the graduate students, and sought to clarify and further troubleshoot any technical problems they had experienced. At this time I informed the graduate students that I was interested in examining their experiences in this partnership, and asked those who were willing to volunteer. I gave every student in the language and composition course a volunteer form

approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A) that included in detail what I wanted to look at and what would be involved for anyone who volunteered to participate.

On the high-school end of the equation, I proceeded in a similar way: the high-school students had been given both a volunteer participation form and parental permission form, approved by my University's Institutional Review Board, allowing them to participate in the study if they chose to do so (see Appendix A). There were a possible six graduate participants available with a willing high-school partner. One graduate student soon became unavailable, and I decided to study all of the remaining five.

Of the five participants in this study, four were enrolled as master's level graduate students in the teacher preparation program. The remaining participant was a classroom teacher enrolled in a specialized Literacy and the Arts graduate program and was taking the language and composition course as part of her program of study. The participants ranged in age from twenty-two to twenty-seven years at the time of the study and had had widely varying experiences involving education outside of their respective programs. All of the participants were Caucasian and female. (See results chapter for more elaborate descriptions of each participant.)

### **Data Collection Methods**

In qualitative studies, facts and values are viewed as inextricably mixed (J. K. Smith, 1983) and require "diverse 'slices of data'" (Merriam, 1998) to provide thick, rich data sets for a thorough understanding of bounded instances. I collected data by conducting a series of interviews with each of the five participants, beginning in September of 2004 and concluding in March of 2005; collecting student and participant

artifacts; and conducting interviews with ancillary participants in the study, primarily the high-school partners. I conducted four semiformal, taped interviews with each participant, as well as numerous informal, non-recorded interviews. I collected reflective writing by the participants, high-school student papers with embedded feedback, and email correspondence between the participants and their partners. I also kept a journal containing my thoughts and experiences throughout the study. Each data source provided insight to the questions that were guiding this study; these sources and the questions they address are represented in Table 3-1.

### **Subject Interviews**

A few weeks after the start of the semester, I conducted the first of four interviews with those graduate students selected to be participants in the study. The interviews were semiformal in design, with a written protocol (see Appendix B) for all participants but that also allowed me to explore topics as they arose. I kept the tone of the sessions informal, at times meeting in coffee houses and book shops, in order to put the participants at ease. I felt this approach would take pressure off both parties and minimize the feeling of being “analyzed” that I feared might limit the participants’ responses.

The first round of interviews served as an introduction not only to the study, but also to the participants themselves. These interviews explored the backgrounds of the participants. I also wanted to gauge attitudes toward the various “realms” of the study, such as the attitudes and beliefs about technology, teaching, and writing instruction.

As the first audio taped interviews were being completed, I began to make and analyze the transcripts in order to shape the questions I would ask in the next interview (Merriam, 1998). I noticed commonalities across the selected participants, and applied those commonalities to follow-up questions and questions relating back to the

Table 3-1. Study questions with corresponding data sources

Study Questions	Primary Data Sources	Secondary Data Sources
What kinds of experiences do prospective English teachers preparing for the teaching profession have in distance, online partnerships with secondary writers?	Interviews with study participants Reflection papers Journal	Journal Email correspondence with high-school partner
What do these experiences reveal about these prospective teachers' views of teaching and specifically teaching writing?	Interviews Reflection papers	Interviews with ancillary participants Journal
What influences on the partnership or on the participants appear to exist from experience with and attitude toward technology? In what way did these attitudes affect the partnership/participants?	Interviews Reflection papers Feedback on student writing	Email correspondence with high-school partner Interviews
What contextual threads appeared most salient to these prospective English teachers in the success (or lack thereof) of this online partnership?	Interviews Reflection papers Journal	Interviews with ancillary participants

experience of the online partnership. For example, early in the process of conducting the first interviews, I noticed that all five participants exhibited surprise at what they perceived as a low-level of writing ability in the high-school students. Therefore in the second interview session I asked the graduate participants what their expectations for student writing had been coming into this online experience, and how those expectations compared to the actual writing.

During each interview, I conducted numerous member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by summarizing the “themes” that had arisen, such as the disappointment with the quality of writing by their partners. I asked if these themes accurately reflected their thoughts on particular issues, or if these summaries were accurate summaries of their answers. Where we differed, I asked them to clarify their answers, and to expand upon those answers when possible.

### **High-school Student Interviews**

The focus of this research was not on the experiences of the high-school partners, but because their perspective could provide valuable insight and triangulation to the data collected through interviews with the five participants, interviews were conducted with all of the online partners of the study’s participants. These high-school students were interviewed once on the campus of the community college at a time and location convenient to the students involved, using a semi-structured interview protocol.

### **Documentary Evidence**

During the online partnership, various documents were created by both groups of student participants. Some of these documents were created separately by each group of students in their respective sites—the graduate students wrote reflection papers as required by the course they were enrolled in, the high-school students wrote the initial drafts of the papers on which they would ultimately receive feedback. Other documents were jointly created in the process of paper feedback and revision. I collected all of these documents for analysis and incorporated them into the picture that developed as I examined the phenomenon of the online writing partnership. These data sources included two separate papers, along with multiple revisions of those papers, written by the high-school students that formed the center of the online partnership, email correspondence

between the partners, and reflective writing done by the five participants in this study as a requirement of the language and composition course.

### Student writing

The essays written by the high-school students served as one medium for establishing a relationship with the graduate student participants. These papers were originally electronic in nature, written on Microsoft's Word computer program and submitted between partners via email. To facilitate the feedback process, early in the semester I provided a workshop in using the "comment card" function included in Microsoft Word. Using comment card, the graduate student participants were able to embed, or place directly into the document, their thoughts, comments, and suggestions for their partner's writing (see Figure 3-1). In establishing the online partnership, both the professor and myself encouraged the graduate students not to act as editors; mechanical and grammatical errors in the writing should be noted when they distracted from the

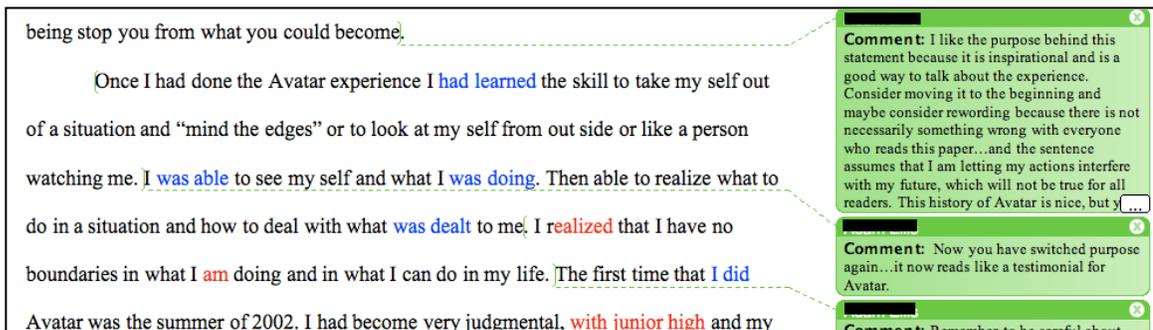


Figure 3-1 Example of Microsoft Word Comment Card function, with 'pop-up' comments to the right, with corresponding place indicators connected to the student text with dotted lines.

clarity and flow of the writing, but should not be the sole focus of the graduate students' attention. Rather, part of their focus should be on engaging their partners in dialog about writing, for the benefit of the papers at hand and for writing in general.

The proposed purpose of these comments was to engage the high-school students in a

dialog about their writing, to provide another “set of eyes” with which to view the writing and to give the high-school students an audience that would in turn provide guidance in their writing. These comments then would show up as highlighted sections on the computer document, and “pop up” when the computer’s cursor was placed on top of that section, revealing the embedded comment of the graduate student. To collect this documentary evidence, I printed from the electronic format a physical copy, including the embedded notations (placed marginally for printing) at their original location in the text (see figure 3.1). These documents provided valuable insight into the process of the partnership itself and the developing relationships between partners, as well as a source of triangulation for the analysis of other data sets.

### **Email correspondence**

Email was intended, as part of the Online Partnership, to be the primary form of communication to transmit the writing of the dual enrollment student to their graduate partner; it was not intended to be the only form. I had participated in the online writing partnership for two years prior to this study, and one of the elements of the previous partnerships that had been negatively critiqued by the future teachers was the lack of real-time interaction between graduate and high-school students. For this study, I had established an online “chat,” which would allow partners to meet online in a synchronous environment, meaning they could “chat” in real time by typing on a computer and having their words sent immediately to each other. Chat rooms have an immediacy that is not present in email, but chats require more coordination between partners (in setting up times to participate in chats) in order to provide this immediacy. It was my intention that the chat rooms would provide the missing social presence that had marked the previous two iterations of the online partnership. In practice, however, email became the near-

exclusive form of contact of any kind, be it sending papers or otherwise. Although I ran a workshop early in the semester to show how to make use of the chat rooms, both graduate and high-school students had difficulties employing the technology involved, coordinating times to “meet” online, and/or finding the motivation to do either.

Email was used for a variety of purposes during the partnership. Microsoft Word documents were created by the high-school students and attached to emails, which were then sent to their partners. Copies of these emails were also sent to me and I received all email correspondence connected to the papers themselves. I also received a copy of the paper on its return from the graduate students, including all imbedded comments, as part of my role in the online writing partnership itself. Additionally, any time there was a problem or issues with the partnership, I was the contact person via email. These emails were also collected for use with this study.

### **Participants’ reflective writing**

As a required culminating assignment for the course, the participants were asked to write a reflection paper describing their experiences in the course and highlighting in particular those elements that were major features of the course’s design. These elements included two practicum experiences in area classrooms as well as the online writing partnership itself. I collected copies of these reflection papers for their insight and for purposes of establishing internal consistency.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

### **TAMS, Computer Software for Qualitative Data**

According to its creator Matthew Weinstein, TAMS Analyzer is “an open source qualitative package for the analysis of textual themes” (Weinstein, 2002). In other words, it is a computer program that assists in the analysis of digital forms of collected data. In

addition, TAMS provides a powerful set of tools that allow for the manipulation of data results and the organization of data into accessible, useful forms.

In certain ways, TAMS Analyzer works like most word processors—there is the ability to enter text and format it according to need. Where TAMS Analyzer differs from conventional word processors is in the types of formatting it allows. TAMS stands for “Text Analysis Mark-up System,” and this program allowed me to embed in the data themselves codes that helped to identify meaningful units within a particular document. Once all the documents had been coded, TAMS Analyzer assisted me in searching through multiple documents for particular information relevant to a specific question; in doing complicated searches for themes appearing in multiple documents across multiple participants; and to collate information into usable and useful groupings.

Using computers to sort qualitative data has implications in qualitative research. Because the computer and software used in data analysis constitute additional levels of mediation (Bolter, 2001) it is important to consider the ways in which computer assisted analysis affects that analysis. Software of any stripe is limited in that any functions included by the programmer are assumed to be the functions that will be needed by the average user; the same is true for qualitative analysis software. If the creator of a particular program does not see the need for a particular function, then this function may not be available with that software and this can color what analysis is done with a given data set (Merriam, 1998). As Ong (1982) has suggested, the nature of the tool affects the nature of the task. To account for the possibility of the software influencing the way in which I analyzed my data, I made sure I was as aware as possible of the limitations of TAMS Analyzer and considered the “by hand” method of everything I did on my

computer, to see if there was anything that was limiting me in my ability to see what my data had to show. When this proved to be the case, or when I found the parameters of the software influencing my approach to the data, I followed the suggestions of Merriam (1998) and worked with my data by hand. An example of this happened early in the analysis process.

As I was first looking at the newly transcribed first interviews, I noticed that devising new codes while using TAMS to read through the documents was cumbersome and broke the natural flow of interacting with the text. I found myself looking for ways of “stretching” the codes I had already created, or forcing bits of data into categories when they should have been given a separate and unique code. It did not take long for me to realize that this process was not going to work, so I printed out all of the interview transcripts, placed them in individual folders according to participant and put pencil to paper. I rid myself of the distraction of the computer interface and I was able to move at a more natural pace. As a result, the initial analysis of the transcript data and most of the collected artifact data was done by hand. Only afterward was the data transferred to TAMS Analyzer, which facilitated further analysis.

### **Analysis of Interviews**

As soon as possible after each interview, I transcribed the audio taped sessions into Microsoft Word documents. As I transcribed, I began to look for patterns in the information contained in the interview protocols, such as similarities in the ways the participants answered questions, or how certain answers reflected particular beliefs, and applied these patterns to the protocols for the next round of interviews in accordance with the grounded-theory approach (Hutchinson, 1997). I continually made notes on these

emerging patterns, which would formulate the eventual “codes” used for analysis after all of the interviews had been conducted (Hutchinson, 1997; Merriam, 1998).

The emergence of patterns in my data was one of the most exciting aspects of this study. Because the online partnership was designed to provide prospective teachers with an opportunity to perform tasks traditionally included within the role of “teacher,” but in a setting that was not a part of the traditional context of that role, I suspected that part of the information gathered through interviews would be about the technology itself. This was the case, and one early example of an emerging pattern was of negative attitudes toward technology, especially when technology was perceived to be “replacing” human interaction:

I do not think that teachers should rely on online feedback when they communicate with students, but that it should be combined with classroom instruction.

In my initial analysis, this comment was coded as a “belief” as it clearly expressed a belief held by the participant about teachers. There were many statements of belief in the interview data and in subsequent analyses I refined the code for this statement to include “belief about teaching,” and finally “belief about teaching and the role of technology integration in instruction.” I coded this particular example as **beliefs>teaching>technology** in TAMS Analyzer (for an example of a coded transcript, see Appendix C).

As all four interview sets were conducted and transcribed, I imported each transcript into the TAMS Analyzer program and began the coding process. Typing new “codes” into TAMS Analyzer is not difficult, but as I discussed earlier, I found that it interfered with the natural flow of reading through and looking at emerging themes in my data, so I decided to print out each protocol and make my first coding “pass” by hand. As

I read through each transcript, I made marginal notations recognizing emerging themes and patterns, assigning codes that fit Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of being both heuristic and "interpretable in the absence of any additional information" (Merriam, 1998).

### **Analysis of documents**

The process of analysis for the documents collected in this study was much like that of the interview analysis. In the instances where I did not have an electronic copy of the particular document, such as the reflection papers written by the participants, I used ReadIris, a commercial Optical Character Recognition (OCR) computer program, to scan the text into my computer, which I then imported into TAMS Analyzer. Once the document was in TAMS, I analyzed the content of that document exactly as I analyzed the content of the transcribed interview protocols.

I analyzed the reflective writing documents after the analysis of most of the interviews, as these documents were not available until after the second (and for two participants, after the third) interviews. Therefore, some of the codes used in the reflection papers were the same as those used in the interview protocols. However, there were some fundamental differences in the reflection papers as data sources and the interview sources. Primary among the differences was that of audience. In the interviews, the participants were speaking directly to me. I was very clear as to the purpose of the interviews and what I was interesting in looking at in the study. The reflection papers also had a different purpose. The professor of the language and composition course assigned the reflection papers as a part of the overall course curriculum, and the purpose in writing was not to provide me, the researcher, with insight into the participants' experiences in the online writing partnership. In fact, much of the

reflection papers' focus was on aspects of the course other than the partnership. For this data set, they had a different audience and purpose. My analysis of these documents had to consider that there could be different levels of candidness in addressing the online partnership. Indeed, there were some instances where the participants' attitudes toward and experiences with the partnership were expressed differently than in the interviews. In these instances, new codes were needed. For the remainder of the documents, such as student papers and emails, I incorporated them into data sets as they came to me. The majority of these secondary sources (see Table 3-1) were used as contextual data and for the purposes of triangulation.

### **Authenticity and Internal Consistency**

“Validity” and “reliability” are terms commonly associated with quantitative research. For all research, however, there is the need for the study to be plausible, to be authentic and internally consistent. There are a number of strategies that can be used to ensure that a researcher has done everything he or she can to safeguard that authenticity and consistency. I used four basic strategies provided by Merriam (1998): triangulation, member checks, peer examination, and examining my own biases as researcher.

The main data source for this study of participants' self-reported experiences was comprised of interviews of the five participants. Triangulation of the participants' perceptions of events and their reflections on experiences within the online partnership was accomplished with the documentary data sets, such as the essays written by their high-school partners (with embedded comments from the graduate students), that reflected actual feedback and participation within a teacher/student relationship. In this way each of my guiding questions was addressed by at least two separate sources of data (see Table 3-1).

Because of the number of conducted interviews and the opportunity to do member checks on patterns and themes as they emerged in conversations, I was able to check the reliability of my analysis by talking to my subjects about what I had observed from their statements, asking if they felt my analysis accurately reflected their experiences and perceptions, and receiving qualifying information when necessary.

I enlisted the aid of fellow doctoral students in order to provide inter-rater reliability. In particular, a doctoral student familiar with this study was given representative transcripts of all interviews of one of the participants in this study, along with the parameters I used in determining codes for analysis. He was instructed to read through the protocols and provide his own analysis of the data using the same criteria and we met to discuss and look at the two separate analyses. Each analysis proved strikingly similar, with over three-quarters of the code sets overlapping and almost a quarter bearing similar if not identical wording.

### **Researcher Bias**

Nearly a decade ago, I completed the very program in which four of the five participants in this study were enrolled. The completion of this program contributes in no small part to my self-identity and is a part of my life that I am proud of, not only in having completed the degree and become a classroom teacher of English, but also in my natural affinity and pride in my alma mater.

Additionally, in the years prior to this study, I participated as a doctoral student on the instructional side of the program and was vested not only in the success of my students at that time, but in the success of the program itself. There were multiple levels to which I was personally invested in the setting of this study. Primarily among these was my work in helping to design and implement the online partnership. In the first year

of the online writing partnership, I helped to establish the logistics of pairing high-school and graduate students for the purpose writing mentorships. At that time, the high-school students involved were from the same program at the same community college as in this study. Later, I was employed by the community college in the high-school dual-enrollment program, and the high-school students in subsequent partnerships were my own.

In order to account for the issue of bias that naturally arises in any researcher, but especially in my case as an alumni of and former graduate assistant in one aspect of the study setting, and as the instructor of the high-school students involved in the partnership, I took steps to address the issue of bias. Primary among these steps was the keeping of a reflection journal, where I recorded my thoughts about myriad elements of the data collection and analysis process. This journal provided a number of benefits. First, it proved an invaluable tool in the constant and recursive nature of the grounded theory approach of this study. Toward researcher bias, it “kept me honest” in the sense that in writing about my feelings concerning various aspects of the study as it progressed, it drew my attention toward those areas that might affect my ability to look honestly at a particular data set and helped me to recognize those areas of my understanding that were influenced by the role of teacher and/or alumni in me, rather than one of an investigator.

Although the focus of the study was on the phenomenon of the Online Writing Partnership itself, and specifically through the experiences of five graduate student participants, I understood that there could be the appearance of a conflict of interest. My focus in this study was never on the high-school students that I taught and were involved in this study, so for the purpose of interviewing the high-school participants, I enlisted the

aid of a fellow doctoral student, who conducted the interviews using the protocols I had designed. As a colleague in both doctoral programs and the high-school dual-enrollment program, this doctoral candidate was familiar with the study proposal and was able to interview the students in a satisfactory manner.

### **Summary**

I conducted qualitative case studies in order to explore research questions regarding the experiences of five master's level graduate students in an Online Writing Partnership. The participants were enrolled in a language and composition course and were paired via online means with a dual enrolled high-school student at a local community college. To explore the research questions I:

- Conducted semiformal and informal interviews with the five participants;
- Collected documentary data from a variety of sources, including emails, reflective writings, and student papers;
- Observed selected participants in internship classrooms;
- Arranged for semiformal interviews with participants' high-school partners;
- Conducted semiformal interviews with persons ancillary to the study but involved in the participants' university programs.

Authenticity of the study was aided by data triangulation and member checks, while the internal consistency of my analysis was enhanced through inter-rater reliability checks and through an awareness of and attention to researcher bias.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of four preservice teachers and one practicing teacher in an Online Writing Partnership, and to see how those experiences contribute to a broader understanding of how preservice teachers preparing to enter the field envision their role in the teaching of writing, as well as to explore the influence/experiences of an online context on their learning. This partnership paired graduate education students with high-school juniors for the purpose of helping to develop the high-school students' writing, while at the same time providing opportunities for those enrolled in a graduate-level language arts methods class to begin to apply theory and pedagogy in an authentic, if virtual, setting.

The assignment of the Online Writing Partnership was for each graduate student to act as a writing mentor to a high-school student. There were few "written-in-stone" requirements of the assignment, other than to help the high-school students improve in her/his writing. At minimum, the graduate students were expected to provide written feedback to drafts of three papers sent to them by their high-school partner and generally to attempt to establish the kind of rapport they felt would be helpful in writing instruction.

The primary focus of this study is to look at the context of an online learning environment and to examine how the participants constructed meaning through the partnership as it related to the teaching of writing. As discussed in Chapter 2, context has two interrelated aspects that are important for looking at any phenomenon and

particularly this one. First is the “surround” context, which in this case includes primarily the participants themselves and the online environment in which they were operating; second is the “weave” context, or the relational property between the individual threads of context that is actively constructed by the individuals involved along with their assorted histories and previous experiences teaching and learning.

### **A Metaphor**

To better illustrate the context of this partnership, imagine that you hold in two hands a piece of cloth. From arms’ length the cloth has the appearance of unity, of a single, whole object with particular attributes. There is a great deal you can tell superficially about a single piece of cloth, such as the color you see, the texture you feel, perhaps even a distinguishing smell. However, on closer inspection you can tell that the cloth, while having the appearance of a single object, is made up of a multitude of interwoven parts. By pulling the cloth toward your eyes you can see a criss-crossing of threads that form the fabric before you. Each of these threads, while part of the whole, has characteristics of its own. Looking at the edge of the fabric, you can even see that those threads could come loose, separating from the whole.

Pulling at one of the threads, you can see more elements that illuminate just how the cloth is constructed. You might note just how many threads there are on average in any given inch, how they are woven together, or that each thread is slightly different in hue, giving the cloth as a whole the impression of a single, particular color. Remove one thread completely from the cloth, and upon very close inspection you notice that even that smaller piece of the fabric is the result of many, smaller fibers twisted together. With the naked eye alone, you can see the complexity of a “simple,” everyday item.

Table 4-1. A comparison summary of data across cases.

	Kate	Libby	Claire	Nikki	Juliet
Experiences during partnership	Approached as a student rather than teacher; no sense of relationship with partner; partnership not a priority; tension with partner	Offered an opportunity to reflect on how to work with high-school writers; learned to view revision as part of teaching philosophy	Qualified to help as someone “trained in writing;” partnership a good opportunity to gain practical experience	Excited to inspire partner as someone “known for their writing”; frustrated by partner’s lack of motivation	Nervous about “catching” grammar as a non-English major; reader approach to partner’s writing; listening stance
Beliefs about teaching writing	Writing as a product-generating process; writing as self-discovery; response as direction for revision/editing	Too much pressure to “get it right”; desire to “be there” as support mechanism	Difficulty envisioning self as expert, teacher; uncomfortable as an authority figure in writing	Teacher as expert, authority; teaching writing is largely inspiration	Elements of teaching writing are same regardless of age/grade; writing as storytelling
Attitudes toward technology	Tech. useful in conjunction with conventional approaches	Very comfortable with comm.. tech. in social/familial contexts;	Love/hate relationship with computers; proud of ability to trouble-shoot	Distance teaching as inevitable; harder to inspire developing writers when not physically present	Can be overwhelming in large quantities; accessibility is important
Contextual threads related to success of partnership	Student-teacher relationship paramount; transparency of technology; immediacy of communication	Ability to communicate clearly; distance as a benefit; immediacy was absent; relationship adequate	Comfort level with theory relating to task; sense of identity within relationships	Writing ability as inspiration; expertise in form/function of writing; personality of teacher	Prior experience in pre-K classroom; accessibility of technology; ability to connect to writing.

In presenting the findings from this study, I use this metaphor of a piece of cloth and the threads that form the whole to provide organization for a very messy human

endeavor, to paraphrase Dyson and Genishi (2005). This metaphor stems largely from Lindfors' (1991) own metaphoric notions of context, discussed in chapter 2, of “surround” and “weave.” Ultimately my interest is in the cloth as a whole, and how online partnerships may contribute to our understanding of how the teaching of writing can be approached through communication technologies that are part of the threads that hold the piece together. But understanding the whole requires examining not only the subsequent parts, but also how those parts fit together; a handful of threads by themselves do not constitute cloth. They must be put together, constructed, and the act of construction is as much a part of the whole as the threads themselves.

The first part of this chapter presents the threads of this metaphoric cloth. Each participant, like threads in woven fabric, had her own unique existence within the partnership at the heart of this study, and so I present first those threads individually as rich, thick descriptions of each of the participants' experiences working with high-school writers through verbatim interviews and other documentary evidence, such as reflective writings and emails. These descriptions constitute the threads of the fabric, which together form the “surround” aspect of context; each individual participant “thread” in this study brought with them a unique set of experiences and beliefs, summarized in Table 4-1, which surrounded them and influenced how they would experience the partnership.

The second part of this chapter presents a view the fabric itself, consisting of those aspects of the cloth held in common by its constituent threads and the ways in which they are woven together and relate to each other to form a picture of this particular experience that was at once individual (each participant engaged in the activity of the

partnership individually) and collective (the assignment was part of a class they participated in together), and occurred in cyberspace.

Both sections one and two address the following research questions:

1. What kinds of experiences do prospective English teachers preparing for the teaching profession have in a distance, online partnership with secondary writers?
2. What do these experiences reveal about these prospective teachers' views of teaching and specifically teaching writing?
3. What influences on the partnership or on the participants appear to exist from experience with and attitude toward technology? In what way did these attitudes affect the partnership/participants?
4. What contextual threads appeared most salient to these prospective English teachers in the success (or lack thereof) of this online partnership?

Part one of this chapter addresses these questions as they relate to each participant in the study. Each thread follows the order of questions given above. Part two addresses the case of the online partnership as a whole, also in the order given above.

### **Kate**

Of all the students enrolled in the class that made up the pool of participants in this study, Kate was one member I had hoped would participate. At the beginning of the semester, I entered the classroom prepared to talk about the partnership, explain how it was intended to work, and answer questions that any of the students might have. Kate, from the outset, had many questions. In my research journal I noted my doubts that she would in fact agree to be a participant in my study, because many of her questions seemed tinged with doubt as to the efficacy of the Online Writing Partnership. The professor of the language and composition methods course and I, along with another doctoral student, established the Online Writing Partnership a few years earlier with the goal of providing both sets of students (graduate-level preservice teachers on one end and

high-school students on the other) an opportunity to receive help with their respective learning. The high-school students would get an additional set of “eyes” to read and respond to their writing as it was developing, and the preservice teachers would experience in a limited way what it was like to work with a student writer while they learned about the teaching of writing.

Kate spoke to me briefly outside of class when my presentation was over. She had more questions, mainly about the nature of my work with students in the high-school dual-enrollment program that formed one end of the partnership. I was glad to talk to her, still hoping that she might be someone willing to explore with me the nature of mentoring writers online. When I finally had a chance to look through the collected release forms I had handed out that night, I was happy to see her name on the list to participate; I thought she would make an especially thoughtful participant

### **Kate’s Experiences in the Partnership**

Kate and I met for our first interview shortly after the partnership began in earnest. Kate sat across from me at a conference table, at ease and personable, as she would for most of the sessions when we met to talk. My initial impressions were of a person who was comfortable with who she was, sure of what she was doing. It came as a surprise when her first comments regarding the partnership were about the intimidation she felt.

I was pretty intimidated by the idea of limiting my critique to language [in the online, virtual context] because to me, um, critiquing writing is, it's kind of ironic, but it's so much more than the words. And you can...critiquing writing has so much...it's the way you deliver the critique and the way it comes across face-to-face and your general relationship with the student and so I was really kinda intimidated by the idea of limiting myself to the words on the page and finding, "how am I going to do this?" ...My frame of mind going into it was "wow, this is going to be really hard, but a good exercise for me in this thing."

During this initial visit, I felt that overall Kate was having a positive experience in the partnership. By the time of our next meeting, her experiences with the partnership had changed. Enough time had passed in the process of the partnership that she had been able to form opinions as to the success of the partnership itself, or to the lack thereof. As she had anticipated, it was difficult for Kate to get past the grammatical and mechanical aspects of her partner's writing:

When my student emailed me her drafts, 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.

Moreover, she was frustrated with the partnership in general, and her partner specifically. Largely this was due to what Kate felt was the lack of opportunity for a relationship to develop. Email was the primary way Kate and her partner were communicating, and even that was limited. For Kate, there needed to be some element of real-time communication, rather than the back and forth of emailed messages punctuated by substantial blocks of time without communicating. I wondered about her apparent dissatisfaction. I asked about her use of the other technologies made available through the partnership, in particular the chat rooms, which allowed for real time conversation. Her response was that she did not use them. In fact, while she acknowledged that the other available technologies would have been useful and would have made for a better experience, she did not feel that her obligations to the assignment of the partnership warranted the use of these other technologies:

... it wasn't set up, it wasn't easy to [use] and there really wasn't any need, like I felt like what I needed to do for the [assignment], my requirement was taken care just by putting the comments and there wasn't really anything to discuss...

By the time of our third interview, these beliefs and frustrations concerning the partnership were pronounced. By her own admission, she had done nothing beyond what

she saw as the minimum required for the assignment, and at the same time had become increasingly frustrated at her felt lack of success in “getting through” to her partner in regard to her partner’s writing. Kate seemed aware of this contradiction to a degree, and acknowledged that there was a disconnect between the amount of emphasis placed in her methods course on the partnership, and the amount of time that she actually spent on the partnership itself. Kate was very blunt in her assessment of how much effort she felt compelled to give in mentoring her student writer:

We had so much to do last semester that this seemed like such a small part of it, yet there was such an emphasis put on it, in the class? Like, respond to your experience. In terms that we actually spent on it, there wasn’t much to respond to. Most of us were like, “I can write a five page essay if you want, on this experience, but I’m writing an essay about thirty minutes of my life.”

There was a point during this interview when I felt my own defensiveness rising. I noted in my research journal that “she’s rather passive aggressive in her critiques. [It’s clear that] she’s using this [interview] as an opportunity to voice her disapproval.” However, Kate always strove for balance and was never critical of the partnership without being reflective. For each problem she identified in the partnership, whether it related to how she viewed her participation in it or how it was structured, she considered the lessons learned at the time, and how those lessons fit into her understanding of what she would need to do as a teacher. For example, in reflecting on all the practicum experiences she had during the semester, Kate framed her discussion in terms of how the writing activities she had observed might have been affected, both negatively and positively, through the inclusion of an online element.

Part of Kate’s frustration with the partnership stemmed from her belief that relationships formed the core of educational practice. Kate simply did not feel she had a relationship with her partner in any real sense:

Throughout the online partnership, I found myself very limited, in that not only did I not have a role in this scenario, I did not have a relationship with the student. Since writing can be so personal, it is imperative that the teacher considers other factors like mood, attitude, personal situation, and the interest level of the student when commenting on student writing.

Relationships were obviously important to Kate, but she did little to try and establish one with her student. In her reflection paper after the partnership was complete, Kate discussed the paucity of communication between her and her partner, admitting that she “wanted to write to her [her partner] more,” but did not do so, stating in her interviews that she did not feel compelled to do more than was required of her, because of the relatively low level of “work product” required by the assignment. Kate seemed to grasp what she needed to do as a writing coach, but she was stymied by her inability to develop what she considered was a needed rapport with her partner. Kate’s perception of her role in the overall writing assignment her partner was working on also impeded her inability to move outside the role of college student and assume the role of writing coach, a role which she felt required more authority than she believed herself to possess during the partnership.

The friction between Kate and her partner escalated throughout the semester, culminating in what I call the “sugar-coating incident.” Kate had stated early on that it was a challenge avoiding the grammatical and mechanical errors exhibited in her partner’s writing, but true to her word and the instructions for the assignment, Kate avoided becoming an “editor” and dealt primarily with what she viewed as improving “the substance” of her partner’s work. Her comments, while largely critical, were directed at the larger structure of the high-school student’s writing, and Kate gave her partner very specific suggestions on ways she could “re-vision” the various places that

Kate felt exhibited “poor writing.” Her comments were polite, but were aimed at areas of her partner’s weakness, and Kate withheld any praise until the very end:

Overall, I like what you are trying to do here. The second persona approach has the potential to be amazing and can really make your paper powerful. However, you need to decide what the purpose of the paper is. Are you trying to recount a history of Avatar, are you doing a commercial for the process and this is a testimonial about the power or is it an instruction manual on how to use a process to improve daily outlooks on life? You may be trying to do too much. You have a great start here with some really huge ideas. With some time and planning, this could convince even the most stubborn critic to give Avatar a try. I can’t wait to see the final draft!!!

Her partner did not respond in a positive way. After the last paper was returned to her partner, Kate received an email from her partner, detailing her views of Kate’s responses:

thank you for helping me out with these papers. i took your comments on the second paper a little harsh haha they were more like revisions [sic] than suggestions i guess. i enjoyed the ideas that you were trying to get across but it took me a while to get past “what i thought was things I was doing wrong in stead [sic] of things i could improve on” i think you have wonderful ideas and i’m really glad that you’ve done something like avatar [a self help program that was the subject of the paper in question] I think that makes people so much more aware. you had really intelligent though through [sic] comments and i enjoyed that, 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 feed back [sic] for teaching. good luck

This email really got under Kate’s skin and she mentioned the “sugar coat” comment specifically both in her interviews at various points, as well as in her final reflective essay for the language methods course. Attached to the bottom of the above email was a copy of the final paper, and in it Kate noted that many of the suggestions she had given her partner were not, in her view, even considered. This was very frustrating for Kate. I asked her about the “sugar-coating” incident, and her answer revealed a clearer picture of Kate’s beliefs about the nature of her response to her partner’s writing.

Moreover, it revealed Kate's expectations of what a student should do with a teacher's feedback to their writing:

At the same time I kind of wonder if I should, if that would be an effective way to get through or... cause I kinda sugar-coated things in the first draft and a lot of them, a lot of the ideas were omitted, and they weren't considered. And because they [the comments she left] were "oh, you're doing all this stuff really great so let's continue..." and so in this one I think I made a concerted attempt to try not to sugar-coat things so that maybe there would be some change? Maybe if I say this, and I say well, "and it's not so good that I'm going to say a lot of good things about it because I really want you to change it."

For Kate, it was important for the student to not only read the responses she gave, but to incorporate them into the revised draft. Her partner, by and large, did not do this, and Kate felt that this was due largely to hard feelings held by her partner in response to what the partner felt were "harsh" critiques. This incident occurred at the very end of the partnership, and there was no further contact between Kate and her partner, although Kate expressed in her reflective writing that she did wish to talk with her more.

### **Beliefs about Teaching and Teaching Writing**

In talking about her beliefs regarding educational philosophy and her role as teacher, two comments stand out as being particularly well articulated and synoptic of her statements throughout the interview process. One was in response to a straightforward inquiry into her philosophy of education as a whole; the other to an inquiry into her beliefs of her particular role within the classroom.

Kate presented a clearly articulated set of beliefs concerning what teaching was and her role within the educational environment. In each of the participants' first interview sessions (approximately one month into the semester), I asked them to describe their teaching philosophy, in their own words, and it was clear from Kate's answer, given

immediately and without hesitation, that for her, teaching was largely centered around relationships:

... for me I see the classroom as an opportunity to be a guide on this journey and on the discovery of um, the voice, it's kind of psychological. And, helping students, well creating an environment that's comfortable for students to express themselves and to read things they identify with so that they can do that. So that they can participate in society, so they can have working relationships with families and friends and to use reading and writing as a method for self-discovery and, and relationships? I guess? And to model, to model good relationships for them, so they can see the way to conduct yourself in a business-like way with certain people and then their relationship with peers, kind of just a microcosm of what they're going to experience with the tools, are the books and writing to, to encourage that. To make you go further and, kind of, guided preparation for life.

This view of the purpose of education dovetailed nicely into her view of the role of a teacher in the classroom. While her answers presumed particular notions of what effective relationships were and appropriate ways of social engagement, her approach was far from dogmatic. Rather, she saw her role

As the "introducer?" [laughs] Can I say [that]? The, as the person who's introducing the students to the ideas, presenting the material, presenting problems and facilitating the discovery but not necessary the core, um, more, more like, I'm learning too. This is something that is interesting to me. I think [the professor] does it a lot. She's just, something that's interesting me and so I want to know if it interests you, and it's a lot of "let's take on this thing together?" And I think that's a probable way to look at it in an English classroom especially because it's so much about world-view. Instead of saying "this is your world-view and this [is] the way you need to look at this," it's "this is the way you could look at a situation" or "how do you look at a situation?" Because it's so subjective, there's not the right and wrong, and it's gotta be, for me, a, um just kind of planting ideas, and wait...and strategies to tackle problems more than necessarily problem-solvers.

Kate viewed the student teacher relationship as one of coordination and cooperation, where the teacher acts as a guide, but also as a participant in the process of discovery rather than an arbiter of collected fact. The notion of the teacher as a participant guide, with student choice and motivation playing an important role, was evidenced in her critique at the end of the semester of an in-class practicum experience in

a local middle school. During this classroom experience, she saw students react negatively to a writing assignment because, in Kate's view, "the teacher...stripped the ability to choose a topic from the student whereby stripping away some of the motivation."

From our first meeting Kate expressed very definite ideas of what writing was, and what her job as a writing mentor/teacher ought to be. So much of her background (she began her undergraduate education as a journalism student with an emphasis on editing) was focused on the "ins and outs" of the structure of writing that she knew it would be difficult for her to focus on other aspects of the writing process. In her view, the fact that the mentoring she was being asked to do was facilitated by communication technologies such as the Internet only made the task more difficult, as she would be limited to the "text" of the writing and would not have physical access to the student doing the writing. Kate believed that this would limit her to seeing only the words of the writer and not the writing partner, and she understood that it was expected that she should not act as an editor. She felt that she had done a fairly good job up to that point of not "nit-pick[ing] over actual language things but over 'what's behind it.'"

Although Kate employed a variety of ways to describe the writing process, each suggested that for her, writing is a process of transcribing one's thoughts, rather than a process that contributes to thinking itself. During one interview, she stated that her "whole goal is to go in, and go in there and show that writing is nothing more than stringing your thoughts together in a creative way," but much of what she said about the writing process in relation to the classroom reflected a view that there was a "right" and a "wrong" way to string these thoughts together. This perspective led to a degree of

friction between Kate and her partner. Yet despite this tendency to view writing as a mechanical activity, there were aspects of Kate's view of writing that placed heavy emphasis on the writer her/himself.

For Kate, writing can be "so personal" in part because she views writing as revelatory of the writer's very identity. Writing was viewed as a process by Kate because she saw it as a self-discovery process. She articulated on a number of occasions that in her mind, writing and self-discovery are intricately related. In explaining the difference between assisting someone with physical learning (the example she used is learning to ride a bike) and learning that "has to do with the mind," Kate said the following:

the point is you wouldn't need to nurture as much because it's [learning to ride a bike] not an activity that's related to the person's like, mind and their... I guess writing somehow's got to like, it's related to the psyche and just the way they're...you can tell different things about a person the way they even, I think, structure sentences in different situations and how we talk to different people.

Kate considered writing, even at a structural level, as a window into the essence of a person, and therefore it came as no surprise that relationships between teachers and students would be the central concept for her of important contextual threads related to the successful teaching of writing.

As a subject of instruction, writing for Kate was an amalgam of "nurturing" and "guidance," yet she viewed her response toward writing in very separate and distinct categories that favor the "guidance" aspect. One type of response, which Kate called "feedback," is no more than empty encouragement, designed to bolster a student's confidence in writing, but with little aim toward improving that writing. Kate felt that "feedback" was the type of response to student writing required of her through the partnership. In her words, the partnership was an opportunity for the graduate students to "give 'em a little feedback, but not a lot of critique." Critique, in Kate's view, was when

the teacher provided a student with an assessment of the success of the writing and reasons for why it was or wasn't "working," along with suggestions for improvement. While not explicitly stated in any of her interviews, it became clear over time that Kate expected her suggestions to be adopted into her partner's writing revisions. When they were not, as in the case of the "sugar-coat incident," Kate felt that the student wasn't listening to her.

### **Technology as a Means to an End**

Not all aspects of the partnership were negative for Kate, and she demonstrated a genuine recognition of the benefits of certain technologies, such as the comment feature of Microsoft Word, where reviewers can embed comments into the word processing document in ways similar to marginal notations that can be written on physical papers. Yet, it would be a stretch to call Kate a technophile.

When Kate complemented the partnership and recognized its value, it was usually in a "backhanded" manner. She would often hail the "efficacy" of using a word processor for the correction of grammatical and mechanical mistakes, and note that reading a student's paper on a computer, away from the student herself, a teacher was permitted more focus. This was due in part because it "dramatically cut back on extraneous conversation unrelated to writing instruction." Yet this acknowledgement of the benefits of online writing instruction belied what she repeatedly mentioned as a shortcoming of the partnership, that there was no venue to allow for a relationship to develop between teacher and student. Without a relationship, without a sense of trust between teacher and student, there could be no conversation about the paper, which was how Kate preferred to think of her approach to mentoring writers. She needed only to

point at the misinterpretation of her remarks on her partner's paper as evidence of her intent not translating in its electronic form.

Technology was not the enemy in Kate's eyes. Quite the contrary, not only had Kate used communication technologies frequently in her own education, she admitted to using them almost exclusively for things like drafting and revising papers. Early in her interviews, she stated:

Um, I'm very comfortable with technology and I really like the idea of having, I mean if it were up to me you'd have computers in every room and do all of our editing on computers with everybody's paper in front of us [laughs] and do peer editing, and there'd be a way for us to, to send it back and forth, and it would reduce paper but, it just doesn't seem possible. But as far as this project, I liked it a lot.

Moreover, Kate had enjoyed taking writing classes in a networked environment.

She described the experience in our first interview session:

I really like the idea of the networked writing environment, and I've had really good experiences writing and receiving feedback. It was in a university setting of course where everybody was able to sit in front a computer and it was all done anonymously. And, you wouldn't, you didn't put your name on your paper you just presented it and then the whole class could make comments and...it's kinda class accountability for who's going to provide good and bad feedback. And it was a good, it was really good for me

However, Kate's comments suggest that despite her experiences and beliefs about technology, that computers and other forms of communication technology had their place, and in the case of integrating technology with education, that place was in the conventional school classroom. What she described as a very positive experience using computers in writing was within a networked environment that was bounded by four walls, in much the same way as any traditional classroom environment.

One aspect of context that is particularly important for technology uses is the notion of transparency, or the level to which the technology goes unnoticed in the normal

use of that technology. For Kate, there was a decided lack of transparency in the partnership on multiple levels. First, Kate was all too aware of the technology confronting her during her participation in the partnership. Largely this was because the contextual threads that establish relationships, admittedly her biggest factor in being a teacher, were absent. She was being asked to do what in her mind was impossible, to mentor someone in writing without actually seeing them.

Technology was never the culprit for Kate per se, but rather technology appeared to lack the inherent contextual features that she felt necessary for a successful mentoring relationship to develop. Immediacy was primary among these. For Kate, the lack of immediacy inherent in email was detrimental to having a conversation about writing with her student. Although she acknowledged the availability of the chat rooms and bulletin boards, she also acknowledged having never attempted to use them. She liked the “post-it” comment function of Word because it mimicked her idea of critique, which was part of her already formed notion of writing responses. Technology use for Kate was almost always discussed with qualifiers such as “complement,” “conjunction,” and “supplement.” Through her statements in interviews and reflective writing, it seemed Kate’s view of the partnership, at least in part because of the technology, was that of an exercise in preparation for the “real thing,” that of teaching writing in a physical classroom.

Relationships form the core of Kate’s teaching philosophy, and technology seemed to depersonalize every aspect of the partnership for her. While she did not hesitate to mention this particular dissatisfaction in the interviews, it was perhaps most effectively

illustrated through a note she included at the very beginning of one of the papers her partner sent.

The comments are by Kate Conwell, not Aaron Ellington...sorry about the name confusion, I have to edit this on his computer...

Microsoft Word has, as part of its comment function, a feature that places the name of the person leaving a comment at the top of the comment box. However, the program automatically inserts the name of the person to whom the software is registered, not necessarily the person using the program at that particular time. In this case, Kate was using the computer of a friend, and the comments that showed up in the margins trumpeted a name that would have been entirely unfamiliar to her partner. Not only was the process of providing online feedback creating what in Kate's view was detrimental distance between writing partners, but now her very identity was confused as a result of the technology used.

### **Partnership as Flawed Success**

Kate had largely negative experiences in the online partnership, by her own admission. This negative assessment stemmed largely from her perception that there was no tangible relationship between her and her high-school partner. For Kate, the need for a relationship seemed paramount, but her notions of relationship had very definite contextual elements that did not overlap with the contextual threads that defined her experience with her partner.

I know only what the student wished me to know from a short introductory paragraph, I have read two writing samples, and exchanged three emails that were no more than three lines each. That is not a relationship! Moreover, since relationships are the key to instruction, especially writing instruction that is so frequently connected to personal issues and worldviews, I would need more than a "book jacket" familiarity with the student to provide worthwhile feedback.

For Kate, technology at the heart of the partnership was helpful with certain aspects of mentoring student writers, such as focusing the partners on the writing and cutting down on time spent discussing extraneous, possibly tangential subjects. On the other hand, the freedom of extemporaneous communication that can lead toward “off-topic” discussion was also responsible for what Kate considered to be the real power of face-to-face instruction, the ability to rely on “so much more than the words” written by either party:

Just because there’s something about the relationship that can’t...well, when you’re teaching writing or critiquing something about the way they’re presenting their thoughts [it] can come across as if you’re actually critiquing their thoughts. And so, it [being face-to-face] creates kind of a buffer, where you can say, “you know this is what I’m not doing...” there’s just something with voice inflection and, maybe that’s just a female thing, but there’s just something about...being able to soften the blow I guess, kind of, when you’re not being, or even like facial expressions, you’re not trying to say it in a way that would be offensive. And not that you wanted to say anything that could be taken offensively to the student anyway but...something where it’s not just, almost what we do physically, it kind of explains what we’re saying often times and so it...it makes more sense to me, but that’s just my learning style, and so I would probably tend to teach that way, too.

Ironically, when giving her own assessment of the partnership after all was said and done, Kate agreed that the experience was a positive one. This was the case because she felt that the partnership had provided her with a problem to solve, a problem that required her to examine the nature of relationship between teacher and student in the teaching of writing. It focused her attention also on the technology of the partnership and made her think of how that technology could be used in the course of teaching writing. In nearly each case, the technology was reported to have limited usefulness, and then only in addition to the traditional face-to-face work done in the classroom.

Context was a big factor for Kate, especially because she felt she could not fully immerse herself in it. Rather, through her own admission, she spent a great deal of time

trying to imagine the context she felt was most appropriate for mentoring a student writer, rather than acting in the context she was in. The context Kate felt was necessary was that of the traditional classroom.

### **Libby**

When I began to seek study participants, I sent those graduate students who were interested a link to an online survey I had set up to get some idea of their knowledge of the technology involved in the Online Writing Partnership. The survey consisted of a series of questions asking about the frequency of use of various computer technologies such as chat rooms, the Internet, and email. Each item included a scale from one to five, with five representing frequent use of and high comfort level with that particular technology. Ultimately this survey was not used as part of the participant selection process; however, the results of the survey showed that nearly all the students used email regularly, but few other items were ranked as “fives” by anyone other than Libby, who averaged five over the entire survey.

As we were getting ready to begin the interview process, I asked Libby about her experiences with computers. She had been “online” since high school and had been around computers for as long as she could remember. As we talked, she mentioned that she was not at all intimidated by computers or technology in general, and I noted in my research journal that her approach to unfamiliar technologies was the same as mine: Libby simply jumped in and figured out what she needed to know about a given technology. As a result, Libby had incorporated email and instant messaging (the sending of messages in real time with one or more persons) into her everyday life in ways far surpassing any of the other study participants. She readily acknowledged that there were some friends with whom she maintained intimate relationships entirely through

online communication technologies. I wondered how Libby's comfort with online technologies might manifest in her experiences during the partnership and was glad she agreed to participate in the study.

### **Experiences in the Partnership**

For our initial interview, Libby and I met in a conference room at the university where she was enrolled as a student in a preservice teacher preparation program. Libby came into the conference room smiling, apparently excited to be there. The Online Writing Partnership had just begun and she was very pleased with what she viewed as a great opportunity for growth, both as a teacher and a user of technology. While sharing her initial thoughts leading up to the partnership, she drew on her experiences as a substitute teacher to explain her general ease with the prospect of working with high-school students in an online environment:

Well, I mean I'm really comfortable with people, at almost any level, but um...and teaching, and substituting, I think, you know, thank god I was already in grad school, but besides that it made me have really thick skin, so...when I heard that we were going to be doing it, I guess always I measure it like that [laughing]. I'm like, this could never be like substituting because, you know, all I could possibly do was learn how to give suggestions for papers, improvement? You know the goal is to help my student, I have a female student, so the goal was to help her, so I mean, there's no fear on my part, all I have to do is learn from the experience. So I didn't really have anxiety, I think I looked at it more like, you know, "I hope I can be supportive enough to my student" [laughing].

Libby was consistently focused on her ability to help her student during the partnership and rarely expressed concern about the technology involved. From her perspective, she told me that this absence of anxiety toward the technical end of the partnership stemmed from Libby's "technological family" and her high comfort level with computers and using communicative technologies.

During the partnership, Libby experienced a few issues with the technology itself, although she was quick to point out that these were, in her view, common problems and at least in part due to conditions beyond anyone's control. One such condition undeniably beyond her control was the weather. During the semester in which this partnership occurred, the area surrounding the university was beset by multiple high-level hurricanes. On a number of occasions classes were cancelled at the university and at all area schools. Much of the county experienced power outages that lasted days and sometimes weeks. While these circumstances were minimal for those nearest the university, such as Libby and the rest of the participants, the inclement weather was a factor that Libby identified as affecting the fluidity of her developing relationship with her partner.

Hurricanes aside, Libby made every effort to take advantage of the communicative technologies provided for all participants in the partnership. She was one of the few study participants to actually use the chat rooms, albeit to no fruition. Libby was frustrated at her and her partner's inability to connect online in such a manner, but the experience didn't sway Libby from her belief that online chatting would be of great use in talking with students about their writing. Some study participants felt that the exclusively online format of the partnership limited what they could do for their partner. For Libby, however, chatting online provided a better way of mentoring:

And I sometimes think that chat is better than a phone conversation for this type of thing, because it allows you to think, you know, on the phone you don't often stop and think for three minutes and then answer whatever the person said, but on chat you can do that. You can say "I need to think a second" and the person does whatever else on the computer and then answers you on the chat.

Libby compared the use of chatting online with that of a phone, which she felt would be impractical for working with students' writing. However, she acknowledged

that a phone call would have made things easier in some ways. Libby and her partner were one of only two partnership pairs to attempt to use the chat rooms to discuss the partner's writing. This attempt failed largely because it was difficult for Libby and her partner to set up a time to be online together. Even when an agreed-upon time to meet online in the chat room was arranged via email, the two partners still failed to connect. The chat room program available to all partnership participants included four virtual "rooms," in order to provide enough "space" for multiple partner groups to chat without interfering with others. Once a time and date was set up for chatting, it was still a matter of showing up at the correct chat "room." The nominal transcripts of Libby and her partner's attempted online meeting show Libby in one chat room and her partner in another, each waiting for the other to show up.

With the difficulty of coordinating all of the factors necessary to have an online chat, coupled with the time constraints that were a big concern for Libby as a graduate student, she and her partner decided to forgo the chat rooms altogether in favor of relying solely on email. Libby explained that her initial excitement of being able to chat in real time with her partner was disrupted by the irony of needing "old-fashioned" communication to facilitate the online variety:

When I found out "oh, we can chat," I was like, "oh that'd be really good." But then we didn't have a means of...like the chat was the one-on-one like, real-time conversation, so we needed a real-time conversation to get to the real-time conversation. You know what I mean? [laughs] So the problem was, we needed to have a phone conversation to solve the scheduling problem. Because we tried to schedule over email, and the lapse of time over email was too great for us to adequately schedule, which is why we never met.

Despite the initial frustration of not being able to discuss her partner's writing in real time, Libby's attitude toward the partnership stayed positive. Throughout our discussions, both in formal interviews and in informal conversation, Libby felt that she

was learning a great deal from the process. Going into the partnership, her biggest desire was “to be a support” to her student in ways that Libby felt she herself had missed out on in high school and college. Through her comments in the interview, it was clear that the notions of revision and writing multiple drafts was something she had only experienced recently, since beginning the graduate program in teacher education:

I’ve learned through writing so much in college and not having a lot of feedback and never really getting to draft things. You know, you just turn it in and it’s like 50% of your grade, and whatever you get you get. And I think the whole idea that they [the high-school partners] were going to get to use the feedback that we gave them to improve their draft and have another chance without that scary “you’re going to get a grade now and that’s it,” ... I was really excited about being a part of that process because I almost sort of do want students to see, you know, if I would have known about drafting back then, I would have had much less anxiety about writing in general.

To Libby’s thinking, she was in fact able to provide the support she felt would be most beneficial to her partner. Asked if she felt that a relationship had developed between her and her partner, she felt it had. While not the intimate, mentor-like relationship Libby anticipated being able to establish given more time than was available during the partnership, she felt that there was a bond similar to that of a teacher/student relationship but without the anxiety, for either partner, of having to concern themselves with grades. When I asked Libby about the drawbacks she saw in the partnership, she laughed while telling me that her partner “could totally blow off” the suggestions given for a paper. But after considering her initial answer, Libby clarified her belief that the option of her partner to ignore suggestions might not be a drawback at all:

I think as far as drawbacks go in the relationship, um...you know, the students *could* not take it seriously as far as...but I don’t know if that would be really that negative, because maybe they take certain things that they see in my comments or maybe nothing, you know? Or maybe only like one of ten comments would help them. Spur them on to keep writing.

Libby felt that her relationship with her high-school partner was more relaxed than it would have been had the high-school student been dealing with a classroom teacher.

Libby had discussed this point with her fellow graduate students and shared with me her sense that this was generally true with all partnership pairings:

You know, I think overall my impression, I can tell you from the class's comments and things too, is that um, the students, the high-school students felt less intimidated that we were commenting on their papers because they knew that we had nothing to do with their grade.

Not only was it a "relief" for the high-school students, but Libby felt that she was less anxious about providing feedback to a developing student's writing. Because the notion of response to writing drafts was relatively new to Libby, she was grateful for the opportunity to practice "comment[ing] on student's writing separate from grading their writing." Libby felt that during the partnership she had grown most in greatly increased comfort level providing response designed to help improve a student's writing.

### **Beliefs about Teaching and Teaching Writing**

Many of Libby's beliefs about teaching were shaped through what Lortie coined as *the apprenticeship of observation* (Borg, 2004), where her initial approach to education mirrored closely that of her own experiences as a student in secondary school. While Libby was reflective about her stance on education, and part of her desire as an educator stems from her goals to give to her students what she herself felt was lacking in her own education, much of her approach admittedly came from watching her teachers as a student, both in high school and college.

Libby was one of only two participants in this study who had any kind of substantive teaching experience. In addition to working as a substitute teacher for the local county school board, she had worked for a number of years as a teacher of adult

learners of English as a second language (ESOL). Both of these teaching experiences contributed to her beliefs about the practice of teaching, and the ESOL teaching especially contributed to her self-perception as an educator. However, Libby consistently returned to the notion that until she was taught otherwise (a process she viewed as ongoing), her apprenticeship of observation was the foundation of her approach to teaching:

I just, you know, a lot of how you are as a teacher, I think, without classes teaching you how to be a teacher, is how you were taught. Because that's what you know. And then you say, well, I want to be just like that, or I really don't want to be like that. But until you try it, you know, I don't think...I think you're always adding to things.

Libby did not believe that she would remain static in her beliefs about teaching. She viewed continual development as the “job” of a preservice secondary English teacher, “adding to things” as she gained an understanding of theory and pedagogy through course work in the teacher preparation program and in practicum experiences like the Online Writing Partnership. When speaking of her teaching philosophy, Libby expressed great desire to hone her ability to provide support to students in their writing, and to work at taking some of the focus off of grades, both for her students' sake and her own:

I'm pretty sure that the name you could put with my philosophy is “warm demander.” I think? As far as my feeling in the classroom and things like that. Um, I tend to have really high expectations for my students, but not necessarily grade-wise. I'm definitely not grade-focused. Which is sometimes hard because students don't respond to that as well, like they don't know, like they need more concrete so...I've learned how to do the grade thing but...I think yeah, I just have really high expectations so...you know...I expect the students to do the best they possibly can even if they are at different levels. Rather than having the idea that everyone needs to be at this level and...you know what I'm saying? In English it's...you know, it can be really sketchy how you teach a few...I don't know, if you say, well this is the range of papers I have, the worst paper's gonna get an “F” and the best paper's gonna get an “A”...some people think about it like that but I don't

think about it like that. I like to think about it like progress over revision and things like that.

In this statement about her view of herself as a teacher, Libby pointed out that she likens her progression as a developing teacher to that of the revision process in writing. Revision as a metaphor for her development was constant, suggested by Libby because of the relative “newness” of her experience with multiple drafting of papers and also because she viewed revision as “closer to [her] style [of teaching].” In her apprenticeship of observation, her academic writing had not been something she enjoyed largely because of the pressure she felt to “get it right the first time.” In her reflection paper, written after the partnership was over, Libby noted how this pressure affected her personally as a writer, especially during high school:

Much of my fear of writing and halting approach to it has resulted from the way my writing was conceived and subsequently assessed during secondary school. During this critical time, the word “paper” only meant one thing to me: hours of agony.

One of the most significant developments in Libby’s beliefs about teaching was the “discovery” of revision. 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 as critical to the teacher/student relationship as well as being integral to what she viewed as the primary duty of English teachers, the “responsibility to promote critical and independent thinking.” Revision to Libby gave students the opportunity and freedom necessary to view learning as a gradual process and that grading, while important, is not the final step in writing a paper.

On a number of occasions, Libby expressed concerns about grading, both in her ability to assign grades and what she saw as the tendency in classrooms to conflate

*grading with assessment.* One element of the partnership that she appreciated and enjoyed was the ability to work with a student without having to assign grades. As discussed earlier, Libby felt this opportunity to focus on helping the student and not on grading relieved pressure on both ends of the partnership, and helped to clarify in her mind the relationship between revision, growth as writers by her students, and the assigning of grades. In this extended quotation from her reflection paper, Libby discusses her view of revision and grading, and how they impact the role of writing teacher:

Another advantage to the partnership was the fact that I was not responsible for grading the student's work. The concept of assessment and grading are often synonymously addressed in secondary school. But could it be that this perspective is one that ultimately hinders the improvement of writing? Assessing student writing is a difficult task, but then adding a numerical value to a qualitative thing makes teaching writing a bit daunting in my mind. Maybe we could attempt to separate these two tasks by allowing students multiple revisions and feedback on their writing process, rather than on one hastily written piece. Allowing for the time to give feedback encourages a dialogue between the student and teacher, which supports the goal of creating critical thinkers.

In addition to supporting creativity and critical thinking, the process of revision may give a teacher more substantial information upon which to assign a grade. A teacher could look at the improvement from draft one to the final copy of a student's work, rather than being pressed to judge only one copy. Another benefit to this method would be to encourage student progress. Often as a student, I felt as though my writing could not improve because it was not judged on its own merit, but compared to the writing of others in my class. I found this process to be very frustrating as a student. It seemed to alienate me from the teacher, because there was not that connection between us that could be achieved through verbal or extended feedback.

In the above writing, Libby distilled much of what she said repeatedly during the course of our interviews. While her experiences as a student provided a foundation for her view of what a teacher's role was, Libby's notion of revision as a cornerstone of teaching writing was quickly becoming the scaffold on which to build the teacher she wished to become.

### **Technology as a Legitimate if Flawed Alternative**

In addition to being very comfortable with technology, Libby was also very open to the idea of using technology to enhance the educational experiences of her students when she entered the classroom as a full-time teacher of English. Partly this view came from her extensive experiences with and frequent use of communication technologies in her academic and personal life. Moreover, Libby felt that it was important to integrate technology in teaching situations because resources such as computers and the Internet were already a large part of society as a whole:

I would define integration of technology as anyway you can use technology that is available in society now, email, laptops, internet, blah blah, cell phones, anything. I know these kids are on AIM all the time. Using all those things that they already know how to use and probably better than we do [laughs], um, to enhance what's happening in the classroom. Especially with writing.

Libby's emphasis on using technology to enhance the work of the classroom was consistent with her view that technology was not just something to make teachers' work easier. She acknowledged that in some ways technology integration would make more work for teachers. However, making connections between students' lives in school and at home via technology provided ample rationale:

I definitely think it takes more planning, and more energy to have a class that's more dynamic. But I think it really advances how students learn. Because they're already doing all those things anyway. It's like well are we going to include what they [students] are already doing with what they're learning in school, or is it going to keep getting more and more separate. [She imagines students saying] "I'm learning this in school, and I go home and it's a totally different world."

Libby's view of the Online Writing Partnership's technology was through the lens of expanding her notion of writing instruction. She did not see the partnership as something to be emulated or replicated, but as an opportunity to learn more about particular technologies and their possible uses in teaching writing. Libby recognized that

not only could computer technology provide a scaffold for her students' learning, but it could provide a scaffold to her own learning as well. Her comfort level with technology and openness to further learning helped her move past the anxiety she felt in dealing with response to student writing, an area where she acknowledged she had little confidence.

In particular, Libby was impressed with the use of Microsoft Word not only as a means of students preparing drafts of writing, but as a way of providing content-related feedback to that writing. For Libby, the level of ease in reading her partner's paper as a word processing document was equally present when inserting her own typed comments using the comment card function of Word. Paired with her increased confidence in providing helpful feedback to developing writers, this technology was a highlight of the partnership:

I felt like, over the course of making the comments and learning how to do the comments in, within the Microsoft Word program and...I just felt that was a really valuable thing that I learned on my end of it.

Even in those areas of communication technologies where Libby was not active, such as the chat rooms, there was a great deal of reflection on how they might enhance a teacher's ability to reach students. Libby viewed discussion about writing that took place *through* writing was in itself beneficial, in that "you're actually practicing all those skills that you're doing in your paper, in like a microcosm ...". She explained in a later interview what she believed high-school students were doing when they were using text-based, online technologies:

And when you're typing things, it's different than when you're saying things, because you're always editing. You know, especially kids...I didn't really grow up with chat, I'm not that young [laughs], but I know they did, and so they've, probably are, you know, editing all the time when they're chatting, too. Or you know, at least they put addendums onto whatever they said. Whereas when you speak it's not the same rhythm, you know. You don't like, say something and then

get a chance to edit it and then say it again, so when you're typing something for a chat you do.

For all the benefits Libby saw in using technology to aid in teaching writing, she still viewed technology in the context of the conventional classroom. She most often talked about technologies in general, and those specific to the partnership, in terms of how they might enhance teaching during a "normal" class period. But she surprised me during one interview by stating that she saw where some of the technologies made available for the partnership, in particular email and online chat, might have benefits beyond what the classroom provided:

It's [online communication technologies] important to me for communication purposes. I think a lot of breakdown happens because we rely on those 50 minutes. It's like, that is not enough time to deal with all those students. It's not. Even when I was subbing, I didn't even have enough time to say "hi" to those students. I think that I definitely will have a class website. I'll probably have an email that's available for just those students, things like that. I could definitely see [that] available in the fall. It can be a really positive addition to your classroom. If your students say, "she doesn't really get me," I mean, "she doesn't, you know, she's separate from the classroom, she's there to give us homework." That's [email, other online technologies] another way that you can reach them on their level.

Not all aspects of the partnership were positive in Libby's experience. She felt that the personal closeness she had experienced with students she had taught in the past was not there with the partnership, and she speculated that this was likely due to the fact that neither partner had ever seen or heard the other "in real life." Libby viewed the online partnership as an opportunity to learn, one that provided "an intriguing stance from which to make comments on her [partner's] writing." She did not view technology as a replacement for the classroom context, but as a possible extension of that context.

### **Partnership as an Opportunity to Grow, Learn**

As a learning experience, Libby felt she had gained a great deal from the Online Writing Partnership. Foremost was her belief that she was much more adept at providing

“comments” to student’s writing that would ultimately help them to improve, without burdening them with a fear of failure. The benefits of response were a two-way street for Libby:

One [good] thing is getting the copy back of her writing, her final draft, and her comments about how my comments helped her. That really did kind of complete the circle of the first paper for me. Because of the first paper we did that for. Um, because that really helped me see how my comments were helping and how they weren’t, and if it was different than how I thought.

Libby’s comments about the benefit of “assessment” from her partner illustrate the importance of clear communication as a contextual thread that contributed to the success of the partnership in Libby’s eyes. All of the communication between the pair was written. From the typed papers that were the subject of discussion to the discussion itself, there was in Libby’s view more control over what she was doing in her mentoring of her partner:

Having it typed is really nice, first of all, because then there’s no like, “what’s that word?” you know. But also, reading it through, and then being able to insert comments exactly where I wanted to and having the space to do that, made me feel more confident about making comments because I felt like my comments would be directed exactly where I felt they would, I wanted them to be? Like, if I was having a face-to-face writing conference with you, you might not be able to get much more out of it than you would by having that kind of comment on Microsoft Word.

Another thread that contributed to Libby’s mentoring relationship was the “distance” created between the two. At times, the distance between Libby and her partner was palpable, and there were periodic frustrations resulting from failed communication attempts. Yet this distance also provided a sense of safety for Libby, a sense that she and her partner could “take [their] time” and respond to each other more clearly and effectively. Libby made this point while talking about the chat rooms, a

technology that she attempted to use only once, but one that she acknowledged could be beneficial to mentoring developing writers.

Libby was admittedly nervous regarding her own ability to provide useful feedback to a high-school student. Because she had had little experience in her own writing processes with revision, she was unsure how to provide the type of response to writing that her partner would require. In Libby's view, the online context of the partnership provided her with enough distance that she could slow down and reflect not only on what she wanted to say to her partner, but how her partner might respond to what she said.

A relationship with her partner was another thread of the online context that, while not perfect, was present for Libby. She felt that her relationship with her partner was sufficient, and that it allowed for a new perspective on teaching writing:

I found the fresh look at a student's work, without the insight into her thinking, to be an intriguing stance from which to make comments on her writing.

If there was one contextual thread that was problematic for Libby during the partnership, it was the absence of immediacy. On one hand, the time between the partners' communications was helpful for Libby as she struggled with determining the proper balance between critique and encouragement. On the other hand, she missed the "personal connection" that she had previously experienced as a substitute teacher and a teacher of ESOL.

Throughout the partnership, Libby was aware of the context of online communication and was not "put off" by it. Nor did she feel it prevented her from developing a relationship that was ultimately beneficial to both herself and her partner. While there were aspects she felt could have been better, such as the difficulty involved in orchestrating an online chat, these deficiencies were related more to her belief that any

approach to teaching should be under constant revision. That the writing partnership was online created little dissonance in Libby's mind concerning the proper context for responding to students' writing. This was in part because she had no basis of comparison; the context of providing written response to writing was one in which Libby had seldom found herself, either as a student or a teacher.

### **Claire**

Few of the graduate students participating in this study could claim a more circuitous route to teaching than Claire. After taking a degree in creative writing from a small liberal arts college in the northeast, Claire began what would be a short career in retail sales. Sales was not to her liking, and after another brief stint at a regional newspaper, she admitted that her decision to enter graduate school was determined in part because she believed it would afford her an easier time finding employment geared toward her love of "literature and theory."

Teaching was not something Claire had considered prior to entering the teacher education program, although the prospect of teaching was something that appealed to her at the beginning of our interviews. However, she was not sure that teaching would be her life's calling, and in fact it became clear in our later discussions that she was not sure she was making the best use of her time and resources in a preservice teacher education program. Claire was forthcoming in her admission that she had trouble seeing herself in the role of teacher as she understood that role, and toward the end of the interview process was on the verge of withdrawing from her graduate program altogether. Ultimately she would complete her internship and graduate, but the doubts concerning her pursuit of a teaching career would persist throughout our time together.

## Experiences in the Partnership

Claire entered the partnership with an immediate bent toward the practical experience it would afford her going into her internship the following spring. Unlike many of her classmates, Claire had not anticipated going into education and did not have a clear vision of herself in a classroom. As such, there were many teacher “behaviors” that she felt she needed to experience before she entered a classroom, and providing response to student writing was one of them:

It was good to just be able to practice commenting on a student’s work, since without doing this ... I mean in the internship there would be no other place, you know, outlet for that [responding to writing] before going into the field, so....

Because of her background in writing, Claire not only felt comfortable working with student writing, but also she was reasonably sure that she would be able to help her partner become a stronger writer. There was not much about the Online Writing Partnership that worried her, but she was concerned that she might not be able to connect with her partner. In his introductory email to Claire, her partner stated strong interests in sports and cars, something Claire admittedly had little interest in. Additionally, Claire had concerns about using the chat room. Although she had used online chatting technologies since she was in middle school, it was not a skill she had maintained, and one she was not sure how to re-engage in:

I was worried about going to the chat room, and we never did that. Yeah, so that I’ve never done anything like that before, and that might take a little ... it’s just like a normal chat, right? Yeah, I just didn’t know how to get there. I did that on Prodigy [an early bulletin board system featuring chat rooms] when I was like thirteen.

Yet in spite of her discomfort with chat rooms, Claire had been willing to meet, even when it seemed her partner was not:

Kids are busy. Meeting, like in the chat rooms ... I don't know, maybe they weren't really excited about it. I mean I would have done it, but ....

Of all the study participants, Claire seemed to connect the most with her partner.

Claire's impression was that they "emailed back and forth quite a bit," eventually becoming "more like a friendly thing as opposed to like, feeling like he needed to be real proper or something if I was maybe his teacher."

Claire did not express a strong feeling one way or another toward the fact that the writing partnership was online, although she did feel disappointed that she would not get to meet her partner face to face. Otherwise, Claire felt the partnership would be a good opportunity to learn more about certain communication technologies, both for her and her partner.

At the beginning of the partnership, Claire did not feel that her job was to edit her partner's paper and was confident that she would be able to provide the kinds of response that would encourage her partner toward better writing. She did remark, however, that the grammatical and mechanical errors in her partner's writing were plentiful. Claire's initial approach was to ignore the errors, whose presence she attributed to being "first draft mistakes":

I really did think that in the first draft that some of the things [errors] were just a first draft mistake, that would have gotten corrected in the second, that didn't [get corrected].

When Claire realized that these mistakes were not merely errors typical of a first draft, she began to wonder about the cause of them. In her own writing, grammar and spelling had not been problem areas as she noted in her reflective writing at the end of the semester:

I'm pretty sure my fifth-grade story about a monkey and a banana boat in the Rainforest met a lot of the elements of "excellent writing" that we determined in

this class. My story was organized, had good grammar and spelling, was filled with strong verbs and adjectives, and created an intriguing reality for the reader through its strong imagery. I'm also pretty sure that my culminating essay for the International Baccalaureate program followed rules of convention, had a purpose, pushed boundaries and made people think (I was comparing different sects of Judaism not usually compared), showed creative and original thinking, and was clear and organized. My score on the essay was a large determiner of whether or not I received the coveted IB diploma, so I took care to present my writing in the best possible light.

In her discussion of her own writing, Claire acknowledged that her expectations for writing mirrored those she had for herself during her secondary education, and while she did not often voice a clear understanding of what she saw as the role of a teacher, she was surprised to recognize her own reliance on the conventions of writing of which she had previously been unaware. We spoke one afternoon at a local coffee shop, on the very day she had written the reflection paper quoted above, and she noted with some irony her realization:

Because I did just happen to write the essay that's reflecting on our online thing, um, I did just happen to write that today, and was completely shocked at myself, about how kinda stuck I was on conventions, and I didn't think I would be a person that was real worried about that or would grade based on that.

Perhaps as a result of this realization, Claire made a concerted effort to focus more on praise for her partner, who so far had been receptive to her responses to his writing.

What continued to be difficult for Claire, however, was addressing the problems of convention that were not being fixed during the multiple drafts her partner was writing:

The frustration that I had was like still him using "seen" instead of "scene" I think in one place, or vice versa. Or he'd have "scenery" there, but I don't remember what word it was, but I didn't ... because of our conversation with [the professor] I didn't mark those things and I didn't mark the spelling errors and assuming that he would correct them the second time around. And that was what was most frustrating to me, because he, I think he really did take most of my comments, and like I said, to the way he understood [what] I was suggesting I think he did. I wasn't frustrated with that. Like I don't think I made a comment that he just blatantly ignored that would have greatly improved the paper.

Claire's concern at the end of the partnership was how to devise a strategy that would result in these "grammar errors" being fixed, without Claire's falling into the role of editor:

Maybe I would have replied again with less ambiguous...you know, because that's, initially she [Claire's professor] had said, well let them try and figure out how to fix what you're suggesting, but maybe I would have tried again, it was like, "For example, you could do this here," you know? And maybe it would have seemed less...or less difficult for them to change it if they had seen more...I know that that's like pushing them to it, but if they're not, if they're not doing it to begin with, at least showing them what would make it better, even if they copy it, they're kind of learning it. So maybe I would have done that. I don't know.

In the end, Claire felt "fortunate" to have had the opportunity to work with her partner. She felt that he had been receptive to her feedback, and that she had been given the chance to consider how she would work with student writers who struggled in ways that she never did as a secondary student. As the partnership wound down, Claire felt that a real relationship had formed between her and her partner:

I think 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. You know, 'cause if he didn't feel like I had anything important to say, or that he wanted to hear what I had to say, then I would not have expected to see that he had taken any of my suggestions? ... But I would say it was kind of like I was his like, older sister, reading his papers? Because I was very ... I tried to watch out for circling the conventions and saying this is wrong. And I tried to, not false praise, but I tried to say these are really good ideas, but you might want to phrase things like that, which I know he said he liked.

Indeed, Claire's partner wrote on a number of occasions expressions of his appreciation for the help she was providing. In an email to Claire, her partner expressed appreciation not only for the substance of her responses, but also for the quickness:

I also can't thank you enough for returning my papers as quickly as you did, and when there was a problem with the corrections not coming through you sent me another copy right away, it made things so much easier for me.

Regardless of the positive experience Claire had in the Online Writing Partnership, she was not convinced that her internship would be any different as a result. While she had valued the chance to work with her partner, she had been “shocked” that his writing was as “low-level” as it had been. If anything, the experience Claire had in the partnership presaged more struggles on her part to adjust to low levels of student writing, and to the idea of being a teacher of writing.

### **Beliefs about Teaching and Teaching Writing**

Coming into the preservice teacher graduate program, Claire was of two minds. She seemed to understand on one level what teaching was, and what would be required of her in a classroom. In spite of this, Claire had trouble envisioning herself as a teacher. She was quick to point out that this difficulty did not mean that she lacked confidence in her ability to do the work of a teacher, but that she felt at a distinct disadvantage compared to her classmates:

I think that a lot of people who intimidated me too, their parents are teachers? So they've seen lesson plans their whole life. They've seen them at home and they know what it means. And I'm like, whoa ....

It was the “nuts and bolts” aspects of teaching that intimidated Claire as she thought about becoming a teacher, in part because she did not have the “teacher perspective” that she saw in so many of her peers. Claire admitted early in her interviews that she could barely even remember her teachers from high school, and only one of her English teachers stood out even in a vague sense. When I asked Claire to describe to me what she saw as a teacher’s role, she gave an amalgam of what she knew to be stereotypical and what she had been seeing in the graduate program she was enrolled in:

Um, I don't think the teacher is like, I guess what an older era, like, stereotype of a teacher would be. Where they just like, stand up there and teach their information all day long. I mean I definitely don't think it's that way anymore. And I think,

um...the classroom should be more like, less structured, more group stuff. Not all group stuff. I think sometimes, even in this program, that's a huge emphasis, and I'm going, well, it might be getting a little too far the other way, or, a little too much fun all the time. I don't think it should be that way either. I think...I do think the teacher like, can learn stuff from students too, like I don't want to be super-authoritative. I think that's part of the problem I'm having anyways with it, is that I've never seen myself in like, a teacher role before? You know? Or, I've never been someone's boss, or anything like that, so I'm having a little difficulty imagining how I'm going to do in that role. I really, I really don't...even through all the work, I can't give you a concrete answer to a question like that, 'cause I just, I haven't [seen an example of the role recently] ....

Claire implicitly acknowledged that her secondary education experiences should serve as a basis for the type of teacher she saw herself being in the classroom, but was frustrated because these experiences were not providing much help:

I think until I get into the classroom and get up in front of the kids, I won't know what kind of teacher I'm going to be, or what things I think are super important ... 'cause I just don't know, it's been so long since I've been in a classroom ....

When Claire's own school experiences failed to provide her with some sense of what she would be doing as a teacher, she turned to her preservice teacher graduate program. This too was a frustrating experience because Claire felt that it was not providing the type of learning she needed to feel confident in her role as teacher. During her undergraduate work, theory had played a large part in giving her a sense of expertise. Claire felt that to be a teacher she needed the same sense of expertise, and believed that she required the same emphasis on theory that she received as an undergraduate:

I'd like to be getting more theory than we're getting? Like, we don't get any? Like for somebody who doesn't know...I mean we do, we get some, but it's not...it's like then, the practical application of that theory. Which is good, because we need that. But like I kind of, for me, for someone who never saw themselves really doing this, and still doesn't know? I need to know...I think I want to know a little more theory about that kind of stuff before I can really figure it out.

I will be the first to admit, I haven't done some of the readings, so I'm sure there could be more, but it's very...I mean we're just turning in product after product, it's so much...and it's lesson plan, lesson plan, and all these real practical things, like...I'm not writing a paper...now, I did have to write, like I said, the

management and discipline thing, but that was just strategies that had been presented to us, it wasn't, you know, "research this, and find where you really sit with this information." It wasn't anything like. Which has been kind of a disappointment. In going back to school and choosing to go back to school? And I'm trying to, enrich yourself [laughs] and make a commitment to do more schooling, I kind of want some more of that. Instead of just producing all these things non-stop.

In discussing her own education and how those experiences influenced her approach to teaching, Claire suggested that her own learning style had much to say about her future teaching style. A product of an International Baccalaureate program in high school, Claire was accustomed to highly academic, independent work. She received the same type of education in her college undergraduate degree and was unaccustomed to the "hands-on" learning that she saw as the predominant form of learning in her graduate program. Often, discomfort with this type of learning environment manifested in Claire a desire to be "told what to do," after which she was sure she could model her own work:

I mean like, I understand it's ... it's making more sense than it used to, but I don't ... I would rather somebody tell me, this is how ... I would rather somebody had said, "Here's an example of a unit plan on how to teach a book." And I would go, "Oh! Very good. Thank you." You know what I mean?

This desire to be told how to do something appeared in Claire's approach to the Online Writing Partnership as well. When she assessed the partnership as a success, she gave as evidence the fact that her partner had followed her suggestions. It seemed that to Claire, learning occurred when someone more knowledgeable was available to "show" how something was accomplished, either in learning to write or learning to teach.

Claire was much more comfortable in the role of student than she was in the role of teacher. In her words, she knew "how to study," and wasn't worried about the grades she would get in the program. Her sense of expertise in education was not something she felt was improving over time:

It's just such the first period of my life where I've really never felt like I had a great amount of anything to say, because I just don't know what's going on. Like I just showed up here and I'm like, oh! This is what I'm doing. And I'm trying so hard to devote all my attention to it, and think about it seriously, and say, this is what you're going to do, and try and figure it out, and it is so...it is just so difficult.

I just don't feel like the planning thing is ever going to come to me. I don't feel like it's ever going to make sense. And it's...last semester I got through because it was school. And I know how to do school. And I could get the same grades I got in any program. Even math, probably. Just because I know how to study. But I... this is teaching. And I don't think I can't do it. Like, I really don't. I don't care about the grades, I don't care what I get. But if I'm going to be suffering...I don't want to suffer through the next semester. It seems...horrifying to me [laughs].

Claire also struggled in her conception of herself as a writer. In writing, Claire acknowledged her preparation and ability to perform. She was even confident that she would be able to help others with their writing:

Well, I thought, "Hey, I went to school for writing, so I might have some good things to say." Um, I don't know. I thought ... I don't know, I just thought I was going to get a chance to help someone to really be stronger.

Often, Claire suggested that she was able to see herself in *any* role only at the time she was actually in it. This was evidenced in her belief that her teaching style would not reveal itself until she was in front of a classroom and was also apparent in her statements about herself as a writer:

I mean I can't say to anybody that I'm a writer now because I don't have time. I could be like, I wrote this book, years ago, for school, and here it is, but every time I look at it now, because it's probably not what I would write right now if I was writing. I just don't have the time. I don't know when I'll ever have the time.

Claire's perception of herself as a writer affected her approach to the Online Writing Partnership. Because she viewed authority as the product of achievement in writing, and in her view she had not achieved much recently, Claire at times wondered whether she even had the right to respond to her partner's writing:

Yeah, like I could see myself ... or maybe perhaps the way I thought of myself in my head when I was responding to [her partner's] papers is like, if I was a

published author of a book that these kids had read and liked, and they were writing something that they would want to show to me, because they would want to hear what I had to say about what they wrote. But not like ... does that make any sense? That I'm somebody who writes? And partially went to school for writing? [laughs] And so what I have to say about that [the high-school student's writing] makes sense. But not really like their teacher. Not in any way as a teacher.

Ultimately, Claire believed that while she was able to help her partner with his writing during the online partnership, writing to her was really something that “comes out.” Revision was a concept that she understood in theory, but not in practice:

I think that what comes out originally for anybody when they write is, mostly going to be there in the end. And forever and ever I had a huge problem with revision. And even now, my last drafts? Not very different than my first. Unless it's like a research paper and I didn't really put a lot of effort into it in the beginning. And I vastly ... you know, come in contact with more information toward the end. My poems ... every poem I turned in in my freshman, sophomore year I wrote in one sitting. And I just like, turned it in. And I understand now better the process of revision, and how that helps people.

You can play with it. And I see that too, I do see that too. I see the benefits of both of them. But I think the writing that people feel the most connected to is usually something that comes out.

Claire felt very differently about her abilities as a writer and as a teacher of writing. She indicated that she felt the same about how one became either, however. For Claire the student, writing always had come easily; provided she had the time to write, she could envision herself as a writer. As a graduate student who was struggling to devise an image of herself as a teacher, Claire imagined that teaching “just [came] to you” as well. It just was not coming to Claire.

### **Technology and Indifference**

Perhaps because so much that was on Claire's mind during the Online Writing Partnership centered around her doubts about the choice to pursue teaching in the first place, the technologies involved in the partnership were never of primary concern to her. Often my questions regarding her experiences with the technology itself, such as the chat

rooms, were met with a dismissive wave of the hand and a look that told me that computers were the least of Claire's problems. In fact, computers *were* the least of Claire's problems, and not because of the other more pressing concerns she was dealing with. Claire described herself as a self-starter when it came to technology. She was willing to "jump in" and figure out how to use a particular software function, such as the "comment" function in Microsoft Word that played a prominent role in the graduate students' responses to the high-school students' writing. Moreover, experiences with faulty computers had led her to develop abilities with computers she had not expected to hone:

I've been a lot better though, since my computers have all crashed consistently, I now like...can probably fix most things on my own, which I'm incredibly proud of. Because, this sixteen hundred dollar laptop is the last one I can afford and deal with, and I can't afford to lose everything. In college I lost everything twice and nothing was backed-up.

Most of the education that Claire received in computer technologies, including communication technologies like those used in the partnership, came through experiences she had outside formal education. Before entering the preservice teacher graduate program, Claire had worked at a small newspaper. She only managed to land the job because of her willingness to get her "hands dirty":

I didn't get hired originally because she was like, well you don't know how to do Photoshop [a digital photography computer application]. And then they hired someone else who could like, work for a few days, and they were like, oh, that really didn't work, do you think you could learn it? And I'm like, of course. Or Quark, I had never used Quark [a publishing industry standard in word processing and layout, and progenitor of the desktop publishing software industry]. Even though I was in a publishing program [for her undergraduate degree], I somehow got out of there without ever having to take the class on it. And I wrote a feature article the first day there and used it and printed it out.

Claire described herself as someone who would "jump in with no fear" and tackle computer tasks if she saw them as something that would be of value, either in her

academic or professional career. Technology was not something she loved, however.

Early in our interviews, Claire laughed as she related the following anecdote:

A psychic once told me when I was like...my step-mom took me to a psychic once, and [the psychic] said I was going to work with computers, and I thought that was really laughable, because I have such a love-hate relationship with them, because they're always breaking. But I guess I'm ok with them, for someone who can't stand them. Sometimes. [laughs]

Even as someone who "can't stand" computers, Claire saw the partnership as a good opportunity for high-school students to become accustomed to using technology.

Regardless of her personal feelings, Claire acknowledged that she never wrote anything by hand, besides the occasional note to herself:

I definitely don't hand-write anything, I haven't, definitely since high-school. I don't even hand-write poems. Do you know what I mean? Like if I'm writing in a journal and it's a quick thing I'll hand-write it, but I won't make anything like that unless I'm sitting at a computer.

Claire suspected her partner was also someone who used computers to compose, based on the types of mistakes she saw ("I mean, I know I...like he wouldn't have written 'red rock canyon *comma* red rock canyon...'"). At the same time, there was a part of Claire that felt meeting with her partner would have been helpful, that there were simply some aspects of helping her partner with his writing that she wasn't able to fully address:

I'd still kind of think that we need to meet face-to-face. Like I know that maybe that's, that having the kids work with technology is good, and getting them used to emailing or using the Word feature or being more comfortable with the computer, but...and I think that you should make the comments first, before, like on paper for them, and have them look over before you do explain, but I think it's helpful, if they don't...I mean I said in every email, "if you don't understand what I'm saying here, email me back and let me know and I'll be glad to look at another draft or answer a question, so..." but he never did. So, but I think, I think maybe he would have benefited more if I could have explained it a little bit better, or he could have said, "Well how bout this?" and I would have said, "Ok you're getting there, but let's try another one." As opposed to just, he saw it, and then I saw a revision.

And I don't know how many times or ways he, or how he changed it between those.

It could be that Claire viewed the communication technologies featured in the Online Writing Partnership as one more aspect of the teaching profession. Because Claire rarely wrote unless she was in front of a computer, she may have seen these technologies as merely an aspect of the writing process. Either way the technologies involved in the partnership were of secondary concern to Claire, behind her struggle to see herself as a teacher. The Internet was simply the medium the online partnership used to provide what Claire believed was a valuable experience she did not feel she would get otherwise.

### **Partnership as Microcosm of an Existential Crisis**

At the start of the third interview, sitting across from Claire at a local downtown coffee shop, I found myself in a conundrum. Claire had long since stopped talking about the Online Writing Partnership, and was instead talking very honestly to me of the dread she felt toward the approaching internship, along with feeling that she had wasted an incredible amount of money on a graduate degree she did not know that she would finish, much less use. My predicament was clear. I wanted to talk about the partnership, as it was the focus of this study and something in which I was deeply invested and interested. On the other hand, I was not only a teacher and thus someone who could attest to the "fear and trembling" Claire was experiencing, I was also a teacher educator talking to a preservice teacher who was experiencing a singular moment of self-doubt, bordering on despair, not only toward what she had done in her graduate program so far, but what she still faced doing in the internship the following spring. I opted to let Claire talk about

what she needed to talk about. I would worry about how her words informed my study when the time came.

As such, the narrative concerning Claire's experiences in the Online Writing Partnership felt quite different to me from the moment I began writing it. It seemed to me that while the other participants were focused on the partnership during the interviews, Claire was constantly struggling with the more fundamental idea of whether she should teach at all. Yet, her uncertainty was just as revealing as the responses of any of the other study participants. For Claire, someone who had never imagined herself as a teacher, there were just as many important contextual threads to her success in the partnership. They were not as explicitly stated, perhaps because at the moment I was conducting the interviews, she had other things on her mind. But the threads stood out nonetheless.

Primary among the contextual threads of importance to Claire was the notion of comfort. To Claire it was important that she feel comfortable with what she was doing, whether that be writing, fixing a computer that had crashed, or standing in front of a group of seventh graders attempting to teach them about techniques of propaganda. In her discussions with me, she seemed to jump whole-heartedly into those areas where she expressed extreme comfort, and therefore confidence. In my experience nearly all preservice teachers experience discomfort before they actually enter the classroom, usually in the form of nerves—they have never done this before, or their experiences are limited. Claire's discomfort with teaching was on a different plane; she could not even envision herself doing on a full-time basis what she was being asked to do, during the

Online Writing Partnership in particular and in the preservice teacher preparation program in general.

Identity within the relationships involved in teaching and teaching writing specifically was another important contextual thread for Claire. It mattered to Claire not only how her students viewed her, but also how she viewed herself in the role of teacher. She wondered frequently where her authority in the classroom and as a writer would come from, and struggled to understand if that authority was legitimate. “I’m really by myself in the program,” she told me after the Online Writing Partnership was over. She felt that although she was used to succeeding in school, she was struggling to keep her head above water and dreaded even talking to her classmates about the teacher education program:

Really, I just...it makes me so overwhelmed. And I’m not usually the type of person that’s concerned of whether somebody’s ahead of me or doing something different than me because I’m pretty confident in my work, but...I’m just like...! Like, I can’t listen to what you’ve done, and they’re like, do you want my ideas? Not really. I know that’s the point of being here, but actually, no, please don’t give me your two cents because I will go home and have nightmares about it. I can’t listen to it.

Talking with Claire was as heartbreaking as it was illuminating. Such a confident person in her everyday carriage, she seemed genuinely shaken at times by the “strange” world of education. The Online Writing Partnership did not shake Claire’s confidence more than any other activity in her graduate program. Rather it was merely an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which, for the first time in her academic life, she felt unsure of herself. These feelings were no doubt intensified because the contextual threads that Claire felt most important to her own success, in the partnership and beyond, were frayed to the point of breaking at the close of her first semester leading into her internship.

**Nikki**

From the beginning of Nikki's first interview, I suspected that her sessions would present a bigger challenge than the other participants'. There was nothing unpleasant about Nikki, and I was grateful for her participation and told her so. Additionally, she seemed pleased and even excited to participate, yet her responses to my questions were problematic. First, it was difficult to get her to speak beyond truncated or even single word answers to my questions. More often than not she responded to my questions with short, direct answers, and when she did speak at length, she did not always speak to the topic at hand. Second, there were some clichéd answers that she gave with relative frequency that caught me off guard. I am accustomed to dry wits, but I struggled to determine if the answers she was giving were meant to be jokes or if they reflected her actual beliefs about writing, teaching, and the partnership (for example, during one interview session she paraphrased the old cliché "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." This quote is given in context later in this section.). More so than any other participant, I found myself having to repeat back to Nikki the answers she gave, gently and in a non-confrontational manner, to see if I understood her correctly.

Nikki's eagerness to immerse herself in the world of education was clear from the moment I introduced the Online Writing Partnership. The class in which the partnership was assigned was split into two sections, so I presented the nuts and bolts of the partnership twice; once to each section. At the second section's presentation, the partnership pairs had already been determined and I had introductory essays to hand out to the graduate students both at the section that night and at the section I had spoken to the previous evening. Realizing that the students from the night before would have to wait a week to get their partners' papers unless some kind of arrangement was made the

professor asked if anyone would be willing to take the remaining essays and give them out when the whole graduate program group met the next day for another class. Nikki immediately and eagerly volunteered. She told me during a later interview that she had volunteered because she wanted to read all of the papers, so excited was she about the prospect of working with student writing.

### **Experiences in the Partnership**

Nikki's initial excitement about the partnership wore off slightly when she realized just what kinds of students she would be working with. In her part-time job at a local diner, Nikki worked with a number of area high-school students who were taking college courses as part of accelerated academic programs. Before my presentation of the Online Writing Partnership showed otherwise, she assumed that she would be working with high-school students like these, perhaps even the very ones who were her co-workers. There was noticeable disappointment in her voice when she talked about the realization that she would be working with "regular kids"—students in the High School Dual Enrollment program that were not in college English classes at all. Nikki maintained a positive outlook however, in spite of her initial disappointment:

I was like, I don't care. They're smart in other things. Maybe they can help me on something, you know? So, I was still excited about it. And um, I looked forward to just working with students. It's just something that I really enjoy whether...I guess I don't really care how old they are, I think that students, you know, just have so much potential. And I like being around, just inspiring people.

Another initial disappointment for Nikki early in the partnership was learning that her anticipation of "working with a student's grammar aspect" would go unfulfilled. In her understanding of the assignment, the Online Writing Partnership specifically forbade any work on grammar and mechanics. Nikki wrote in her reflection paper:

I remember one of the things we were specifically told not to work on was grammar, since this could be edited through the many drafts of the paper.

Even though she believed that this was a directive of the assignment (it was not), Nikki smiled when she told me that she held this “rule” as one that she could break, because it ultimately benefited her partner’s writing. The following excerpt illustrates why Nikki felt it necessary to “break” the rules:

N: So, that’s probably the only part where I was like, ok I have to fix this one, you know, ‘cause I have to...if I saw a way for you [her partner] to change a sentence or if I wrote the sentence it would have been completely different and had a better...but I said, ok. So that’s about the only place that I broke it. But it was more for her.

PI: So you went there really thinking you weren’t supposed to touch grammar or be tuned to mechanics at all.

N: Well, yeah. Very little.

PI: Alright, and that was kind of difficult?

N: It wasn’t very difficult, but it was...I would have liked to have gone through...like changed, a lot. I was like, I could publish this if it’s in my voice [laughs].

Once the partnership began in earnest, Nikki showed great enthusiasm for working with her online partner. Along with Libby, Nikki was one of the few participants who used the chat rooms to talk with her partner about the writing assignments. Unlike Libby, Nikki and her partner were able to connect online, although this meeting would end quickly in frustration. (Because there were not enough high-school students for each graduate student to have their own, some graduate students had to share. Ironically, Nikki and Libby shared not only the distinction of being the only ones to attempt to use the chat room, but they also shared the same partner.) Nikki initially had great plans for using the chat room:

I actually wanted to. I *really* wanted to be in the chat room. I thought that would be a lot...like, you know? Just go line by line, but again, that's coming from somebody that likes to write and read, and critique papers, and that kind of stuff. And I don't think that she was even as motivated, and didn't really want to do it, plus the whole computer factor. Maybe she's just not comfortable with technology, I don't really know.

Although she and her partner were more successful than most, Nikki was not able to chat with her partner about anything. The one time they met online did not go smoothly:

Well, we went into the chat room once, and we scheduled a time. And I had...I was in the chat room, the other chat room, and I had a guest, and I was like, ok, look. I'm only in here temporarily, I have something to do at a scheduled time, and it was like nine o'clock I'm waiting, and I'm waiting, and she [her partner] wasn't there, but I was still there, and I had it opened, and I'm talking to my people, and then she [her partner] shows up. And I'm like, hello! And she's like, hi. And then she says that her computer's really slow, and so it was dragging, and I was like, oh, ok. Well I'll be here, you know if you want to meet in another room or something, that's fine. And I told her...I guess it just, she got booted off or something, once or twice...very shady. And then, I emailed her and I was like, you have computers at school, I'm sure, at school, so, if you have the opportunity, if you'd like to meet when you're at school, just let me know and I'll do what I can to arrange a meeting. But she never got back to me. So I kind of felt let down at that.

Nikki herself stated that while she did not have a computer at home, it was never a problem for her to get to one in the university computer labs. When she recognized that her partner was having technical difficulties, yet was not making strides to compensate for these difficulties, Nikki viewed this as largely a lack of motivation in her partner, something Nikki attributed to her partner's inability to write well. Motivation would be a recurring theme with Nikki through the interview process; whenever problems arose Nikki never saw them as faults in the partnership's technological components or in her own responses but rather something inherent in her partner's level of motivation.

Nikki struggled with the belief that her partner was not motivated to work on improving her writing. Nikki had very high estimations of her abilities as a writer,

believing herself to be someone who liked to write and who wrote well. As such, she viewed herself as an inspiration to students, and especially her partner. It came as a disappointment then, when she did not see her partner put forth the effort that Nikki considered necessary. Often, Nikki expressed her disappointment with her partner in personal terms, saying that she was “hurt” and “let down.” From time to time Nikki would test her partner by intentionally leaving errors in a paper to which she was responding. Nikki wrote in her reflection paper of the frustration she felt when these errors were not corrected:

One of the most upsetting things I found on working with the first essay was that I purposely ignored a typo on the first essay expecting the student to see it when they retyped the essay but they didn't. I found it very frustrating to care about someone's writing if they don't *care* about it themselves.

Consequently, Nikki viewed her partner's failure to respond to suggestions as being evidence of a lack of motivation on the high-school student's part. Nikki expressed repeatedly that had the partnership given her more time, and if her partner had gotten to know her better, she could have inspired her partner to want to work harder.

Throughout the partnership, Nikki showed no signs of doubt in her ability to help her partner. Likewise, she was fully confident in her assessment of why her partner “struggled.” Nikki assumed that when she sent back drafts of papers to which she had responded, if her partner did not respond with questions it meant that everything Nikki had suggested was clear. When the revised draft came back, Nikki was equally clear in her mind as to why few if any of the suggestions she made were followed. In the following excerpt, Nikki describes her process of responding to writing, and why in her mind her partner was unresponsive:

Um, well on the first essay I definitely got back to her really fast. I mean I was...I wanted to get it to her, and I'm like, I wanted to see the change, I wanted to see her

get back to me, and like, “what does this mean, I don’t understand what you’re saying here,” but she never did, so I figured that she understood everything. But also I think she was busy too. You know, like in her own right. And I don’t think um, she put as much time into her essay. ... It’s hard to tell somebody who doesn’t like to write that she needs to take the extra time to make it...more affordable. Like you need to spend that extra hour on it. Somebody who likes to write, like me, it’s just...I get it out. You know, I know what I want to say and it didn’t take me very long to say it. You know, I know when I’m typing it that, this, this isn’t like...you know, like I’ve completely gone off subject for the past five paragraphs. Delete, start over. But I think she didn’t realize that. But I gave, I tried to give helpful comments, but I guess they were pretty generic. Just like, show me, don’t tell me. You know? And I had this...after I re-read her whole first essay, I came up with this really dramatic way of how she would do it...she would have to redo the entire essay and it would be a lot better. And I don’t think she just wanted to spend the time to do it. Which is understandable, if you don’t really like to write you’re not going to rewrite a whole essay.

Despite the frustrations and disappointments Nikki felt during the partnership, she never lost her optimism in her ability to help student writers. Rather, she saw the problems with her partner stemming from not having had enough time. Time was a complaint of many of the study participants, as they wished there had been more time to work with their students. However, Nikki felt that the shortness of time affected her partner’s ability to get to know her. Much of what Nikki felt she had to offer was through inspiration; as someone who liked to write and therefore in her mind was a good writer, Nikki felt the partnership did not provide enough time for that inspiration to make a difference:

I think she had somebody to look up to, but I don’t think it [the duration of the partnership] was enough to motivate, I guess. To make her want to be a better writer.

Nikki’s view of the partnership was that of a “good experience for future teaching,” but little else. Though I asked for clarification, she did not explain how the experience had been good for her future teaching, other than to say she felt she had helped make her partner’s essays better. When I asked Nikki if the partnership had revealed anything to

her about her approach to responding to student writing, she took my question to mean had her approach changed, and answered simply: “The partnership I don’t think changed it at all.”

### **Beliefs about Teaching and Teaching Writing**

Whereas Nikki had less to say than the other study participants about the online partnership itself, she was eager to share her views on teaching and learning, especially as it pertained to the teaching of writing. Nikki enjoyed writing and considered herself a highly capable writer; as such she felt great confidence in her ability to be a success as a teacher of writing to secondary school students. In her view, she had achieved expertise in reading and writing by virtue of her academic accomplishments. For Nikki, this expertise was the keystone in the ability to teach.

Reflecting on her early school experiences, Nikki believed that becoming a teacher was inevitable. She remarked in the interviews that she was surprised, looking back on her life, by all the instances where she was “being a teacher.” For Nikki, the conscious desire to teach stemmed from a paper on home schooling she was assigned to write in a college education course. This paper, and the professor who assigned it, had far-reaching influences on Nikki’s views regarding teaching and education:

So, between that paper and then just the things that she said in class, she just let me believe that I was, you know I was really privileged in what I had when I was growing up, with being read to and having the love of reading and being able to write and do all that, but...I wanted to be able to share that, with somebody else. And I figured, teaching was just one of those things...I don’t even know, I write about it so much on my papers now, that, when I was...the first day I started school, my mom says I came home and started teaching. Like I set up my stuffed animals and I would write on the wall and do that kind of stuff. It was just really bizarre to think about that now, but...and then I found myself, like in high school I had ROTC in ninth grade and I did the same thing. I came home and I taught my sister how to do all the ROTC moves. And I didn’t even think of “Hey, I’m being a teacher.” It was just like, “Hey, I learned something cool today, let me show you.”

In Nikki's own education, she was profoundly impacted on a number of occasions when a professor or teacher stated a fact that rang true in her mind. Nikki did like reading, and remembered having been read to as a child. Whether her professor stated a correlation or causation between children being read to and their love of reading later in life, Nikki took it as axiomatic:

And then one teacher at my junior college went ahead and said that, unless you read to your kids they're not going to find a love of reading. And I think I benefited from that. And I think that was a strong thing for me was that, "Hey, I got read to as a kid," you know, so it really made me like it. And I look forward to being able to do that [create a love of reading].

There were examples during our interviews that suggested Nikki saw teaching as primarily the delivery of knowledge from expert to novice. Skill in teaching seemed to stem not from pedagogical competency, but from subject area expertise. In fact, Nikki on one occasion suggested a belief in the adage, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach":

I think most of us have somewhere deep inside like, oh I'd like to be a writer, that'd be really great. Whether or not that will ever actually happen, who knows? I mean that's why we're going into teaching, because things like that don't happen.

Nikki viewed teaching as a type of mentorship that anyone with skill in a particular discipline could do. This was possible, in Nikki's view, because a teacher's job was primarily to inspire students to want to achieve what the teacher had achieved.

Many of Nikki's views about teaching centered around elements of a teacher's personality. Learning, as she understood it, seemed to occur by virtue of the teacher's presence in the classroom. Nikki was excited about the opportunity of learning from her students, although her comments made it clear that *learning* in this sense more accurately meant encouraging students to contribute to a classroom discussion. Learning centered around authority in Nikki's eyes. As the authority figure in the classroom who knew "a

little bit more,” the students would learn from her. Nikki would in turn encourage students’ motivation to learn by creating at least the appearance of her learning from them:

I want to be more like a friend, I guess. That’s how I see it. And I know in one of our classes, they’re like “You don’t want to portray that,” and all that. And I’m like, yeah you do. Because, if you’re that much above the students then they’re not going to want to be there. I mean, as long as they see me as an authority figure, and that I know a little bit more than them on certain things, then I think they’ll understand...I think I have to set the day...the day, like the first day you set the standard. That I’m here to learn about ... as much from you as you are ... to learn from me. And I think that’s one reason why I’m going into teaching, is that I want to know ... I just want to keep learning. And I think that being in school, as a teacher or as a student, you’re always going to learn something. And I just, I really like the atmosphere of being in school and learning from each other and that kind of a thing. ‘Cause I’m sure, I’ve heard my teachers growing up even saying, “oh, really?” A kid will say something ... and whether or not they [the teacher] really didn’t know that, doesn’t matter. But it made you feel like, hey, I taught the teacher something. So, it makes you feel good at the end of the day. Even if it’s not true.

Teaching to Nikki was an endeavor that relied largely on the force of the teacher’s personality, but also on the level of motivation a student possessed. In Nikki’s eyes, this motivation was in proportion to a student’s enjoyment of a subject. Given an increase in her partner’s motivation, or more time for each partner to get to know the other better, and Nikki felt she could have done more to help her partner. But of the three areas of Nikki’s teaching philosophy of time, motivation, and inspiration, only over inspiration did she feel she had direct control.

That Nikki enjoyed writing was beyond doubt; that she believed she was a good writer equally so. Part of this confidence resulted from her belief that expertise came with time and work, and in fact Nikki felt that because of her academic background she was particularly qualified over her peers to teach writing. Early on I asked Nikki about

any anxiety she might have felt going into the partnership and working with a high-school student's writing:

Well, there was kind of ... I wasn't really worried. I think if we all were ... in my own capability to help somebody in their writing since I write so much ... so ... but I feel, almost empowered? More so than anybody else, because I took a grammar class, and I took a writing ... like I made sure that with every reading class I took that I had a writing class to go with it. Because it ... I thought you can't be an English teacher if all you do is read. It's like you can't be an English teacher if all you do is write. You have to have a balance, and I tried to do that in my undergrad. So I feel a little more ... I feel better about it, I think, than a lot of my friends do. I made sure that I had that, that background going in. So I know certain things that they're not so ... sure of.

It was not mere preparation that gave Nikki confidence in her ability to write well.

On a number of occasions, she noted how others looked to her as someone who was a good writer. On one occasion, Nikki noted that she had "a couple of fans [among her peers in the graduate program] that like to hear my stuff being read." On another occasion she pointed to a teacher who had asked her to proofread papers turned in by a journalism class. Each of these was, to Nikki, evidence of others recognizing her expertise in writing.

It was clear that Nikki had great confidence in her writing ability. What was not so clear was *how* she became a good writer, and how she saw herself helping others with their writing. When asked, Nikki seemed to be at a loss to explain just what she would do for her students when they needed help with their writing. Because Nikki seemed frustrated at the end of the partnership, believing that her partner had not responded sufficiently to the responses Nikki had given, I asked her how she might adjust her approach the next time she worked with a student's writing:

Hmm. I think I would want to get to know the student a little bit more before I started. Because that would help. And then they'd...they'd maybe they'd be able to hear my voice, and they wouldn't be like, "Oh this is the same person telling me the same thing again," you know? Because I'm sure she's heard the "show me

don't tell me" five hundred times, I know I have. It makes a difference. When you can put a picture, like when you can picture somebody in your mind telling you "Show me, don't tell me," and then you know what, you're going to get a bad grade [laughing] because you didn't do it. And just, to have somebody that's...a good writer, known for their writing, and inspiring them.

This statement, given by Nikki after the completion of the Online Writing Partnership, suggests that her presence, her specific personality would have turned what Nikki acknowledged to be a clichéd bit of response to writing into a transformative act of writing mentorship.

Writing in Nikki's view was a skill that developed over time. Nikki believed that this was true for any writer, and could be evidenced by looking at earlier examples of writing and comparing them with later examples:

I [am] supposed to cover sonnets in my internship. So it was one of the things I was going to cover, so I wanted to look in my ... 'cause I keep all my writing...so I wanted to go back to when I was in middle school, and find my first sonnet, and show them my first one, and then write one now, so that they'd see a progression, you know. Like it's not an overnight thing. It takes a while to be able to write something well. And so, maybe find you know, Shakespeare's first ones and then find one, his later ones. You know, just so they see, like you have to practice, it's not going to just come. You're not a writer because you feel like writing.

Nikki frequently suggested that writing develops over time, with practice, but was largely silent about what else should take place during that time, or what her role as a teacher would be in the meantime, other than a source of inspiration. She acknowledged that the Online Writing Partnership had shown her how computers could be used in the English classroom, and she was excited about the prospect of having a handful of computers in the classroom she would intern in that spring, believing they would allow her to prepare her students for the state writing assessment. However this idea also centered on repetition over time:

Actually the classroom I'm in has about ten computers. So I'm thinking, most of the classes have less than thirty, but...some kind of learning center thing, where ten

are at computers and the other ten are, like doing some other activity. So I'm actually, I'm going to use that. And it's just a matter of figuring out what the other activities are. They have an FCAT [a state-wide assessment] writing online, where you can write the whole essay and it grades you? Like they would have FCAT. So I'm going to have the students do that. So they can see how they're doing and maybe do it two or three times before the FCAT comes.

After a certain point in the interview process, I became hesitant to ask Nikki to clarify how she envisioned teaching writing. So much of her identity seemed to center around her abilities as a writer, and she began to sound defensive when I would frequently return to questions about her views on writing, questions she felt she had already answered. It was clear, however unsure I was about her understanding of teaching writing, that Nikki did not question her abilities as a writing mentor and appreciated the experience of mentoring a high-school writer in the Online Writing Partnership. In Nikki's view, the partnership did not change her beliefs about how to help developing writers, but it did provide an opportunity to experience what she anticipated she would encounter during her internship the following spring.

### **Technology as Efficient, Inevitable**

During the Online Writing Partnership, technology was never intended to be the primary focus for the graduate students as they worked with high-school student writers. Rather, the partnership was done online largely because it allowed preservice English teachers the opportunity to gain experience responding to high-school students' writing in a way that would normally be unavailable to them until they entered their internships. However, the frustrations that occurred during the partnership were often directly related to the technologies involved, and therefore the attention of the participants was frequently drawn to issues concerning the communication technologies made available to them. Nikki was largely an exception to this rule.

Nikki's experiences with computers were admittedly limited, and in fact she did not own a computer herself. Instead she would make use of the computer labs available at the university whenever the need arose, including those times she needed a computer for the Online Writing Partnership. Unlike her peers and fellow study participants, and perhaps because the labs Nikki was obliged to use were well-maintained and staffed with those able to help her as needed, Nikki rarely commented negatively about technology. Nor did she look at the partnership technologies, such as the chat rooms, as being responsible for any of the "problems" she identified in her experiences with her partner.

Much of Nikki's reflection on the role of technology was in terms of its practical uses. Nikki recounted an anecdote from her undergraduate education:

I was told when I was in community college that by the time I got into the classroom every student would have a computer. I was like, "Thank god, every student can turn in typewritten work!"

Nikki viewed online technology in general much as its role had been envisioned for the partnership, as a medium through which preservice teachers could gain experience. (The partnership's purpose was also to develop the graduate students' ability to teach writing; it is unclear but unlikely that this was part of Nikki's understanding.)

In our discussions during the interviews, I got the impression that Nikki did not spend much time thinking about the technology involved in the partnership one way or the other. I realized this late in the interview process, and noted in my research journal at the time that this was a surprise to me:

I kinda thought she would be the one to rail about the stuff more because she seems to [have] had such a miserable time with [her partner]. [She seems to be] just taking it in stride, nothing unusual for her ... Only one so far that hasn't blamed it [the online technology] and won't talk about it unless I ask.

One possible reason for this indifference toward technology revealed itself in a story Nikki told about a computer class she had taken in college:

A long time ago when I was in junior college one of my computer professors told me, you know, you're not going to be a teacher for very long. Everything's going on the Internet, there's going to be all this online teaching. And he's like, "You better get used to computers if you want a career," and I was like, "Oh, ok." I was like, I can do that. It's like, computer. My best friend.

Computers, and more importantly the Internet, appeared as inevitable to Nikki. Typically in the discussion of her educational experiences, Nikki deferred to the authority of her teachers when they presented information to her. For Nikki, her computer professor was the expert and if he said it, it was true. As a result it seemed that Nikki viewed the online partnership and the technologies involved as a good "exercise" because it confirmed what she had been told to anticipate in the near future as a teacher of English.

### **Partnership as an Opportunity to Inspire, Motivate**

Through all the data it seemed apparent that for Nikki the pivotal contextual thread in the success of any writing mentorship, including the Online Writing Partnership, was an ability to inspire her students as someone who enjoyed writing and "was known for her writing." Through her years of gaining expertise by taking classes in grammar and writing, Nikki felt especially qualified to provide this inspiration. While the Online Writing Partnership presented some frustrations for her, Nikki believed that the partnership had been a positive experience and was "satisfied with how it ended."

Because Nikki's view of learning reflects a "container" metaphor, wherein the teacher has been "filled" with knowledge and in turn will "pour" that knowledge into her students, it was clear that her preparation as a preservice teacher and undergraduate English major was the contextual thread of most importance in her ability to help with her partner's writing. From Nikki's accomplishments in academic work stemmed her

authority, and she believed that this authority would establish, perhaps on its own, the one attribute in her teaching philosophy that was necessary in order to maintain a classroom, as she noted in the following observation from a reflection paper at the end of the semester:

Ms. Lemon [a teacher she had observed during a practicum experience] had a great relationship with her students—they listened to her and respected her—but she didn't really have a management plan (not that she needed one with the aforementioned qualities) ...

In the above quotation and in others, it became clear that another important contextual thread, revealed through Nikki's experiences with the partnership, is the personality of the teacher in the classroom. Repeatedly, Nikki stated her belief that if students saw that their teacher enjoyed writing, then they too would enjoy writing. In her assessment of the partnership, discussed in a previous section, had her partner been able to hear Nikki's voice, picture Nikki giving advice instead of a semi-anonymous college graduate student, that ability to imagine the *person* of Nikki might have made a significant difference in one final, pivotal contextual thread, that of motivation on the part of her partner.

### **Juliet**

The language and composition class to which the Online Writing Partnership was assigned was part of the core curriculum of the graduate level preservice teacher preparation program in secondary English. However, enrollment in the class was not limited to those students preparing to begin a career in education. Other students from different graduate programs (and subsequently different levels of experience) were also enrolled in the class. Juliet was one such student.

When Juliet volunteered to participate in this study, I was at first concerned that she would not “fit.” Juliet was already in the classroom, working at a local private academy teaching five-year-olds in a pre-kindergarten program. I was concerned that because of Juliet’s differences in experience and background, as well as the level of students she was already working with, that her experiences in the partnership would be too different from the other study participants. Ultimately, I decided that since the focus of this study was the context of the Online Writing Partnership itself, and not the class in which it was assigned nor the program that incorporated that class as part of its curriculum, Juliet’s experiences in the partnership would be just as valuable and informative as the other participants’.

Juliet’s perspective would differ on even more levels than I initially thought. Like Claire, Juliet was not an English major in her undergraduate years. Rather, Juliet majored in theater arts with an emphasis on education; she was in the methods class as part of a Literacy and the Arts master’s degree specialization. Juliet would not be in an internship the next semester as she was already a certified, practicing teacher, and while other study participants had some prior experiences in the classroom, Juliet was the only member who would be teaching full-time during her participation in the Online Writing Partnership.

### **Experiences in the Partnership**

Because she was not a full-time student, Juliet and I agreed to meet at a local coffee house chain after she got off work in the afternoon. We would meet at the same location for all our conversations, both of us drinking coffee and usually beginning with Juliet recounting some anecdote from school related to the partnership. Although she taught students a full decade younger than the high-school student she was partnered

with, she seemed always to be able to make connections with what she was doing in her graduate work with the work she did in her pre-kindergarten classroom.

Like the other graduate students, there were some anxieties about the Online Writing Partnership for Juliet. She was concerned about grammar and mechanics from the beginning, but for different reasons than most of her classmates. Because she had not majored in English, and had taken a route to education very different from her classmates, Juliet was concerned that she might not be immediately up to the task of proofreading her partner's paper:

If I was more concerned about anything it was more the mechanics of it. The more because, I mean, I know what should be a capital [laughing] and I know where a period goes, but you know, there are things that I'm sort of foggy on, because come on, how long has it been since freshman English? And most of my...I couldn't tell you the last time I had a class... 'cause I had AP English classes in high school and then, skipped freshman English and went straight into, you know, all these different literature classes.

So I think I was probably overwhelmed with thinking, you know, if we're going to get into participles, if we're going to get into all this stuff, then I'm going to need a good review. But then when we talked about it in class, that it's more, you're not there to correct their writing and edit their writing, you're there to you know, help them to become better writers? That wasn't so overwhelming for me.

Though Juliet was relieved to be free of editing duties, there were other areas of concern going into the partnership, as she revealed in her reflection paper at the end of the semester:

The Online Writing Partnership provided some anxiety for me, as most of my writing instruction has been at the early childhood level. I was unsure I would be able to help an older student to become a better writer.

Additionally, Juliet was concerned about the amount of technology involved. She did not view technology as "a threat" per se, but was concerned about becoming "overwhelmed" by the amount of online technology use expected of her:

... My experience with technology is, you know, I can search the web and I can send email and so, the whole chat room situation was a little overwhelming. But it wasn't hard to understand. Like once we got into the lab and went through that, it was very, very easy. Um, so I think my only sense of being overwhelmed was just in the technology of it, not at all in the partnership.

As far as her actual experiences in the partnership, Juliet conceded that most of her problems with the "technology end" had more to do with the circumstances surrounding the beginning of the semester. Like everyone that semester, Juliet had to contend with an unusually active hurricane season. Additionally, there were outside complications that affected her experience:

Like, for me in the beginning it was a logistical, because we were leaving the apartment and moving into a house, and I was at the public library to use the computer, so for me it [the problems she experienced with the technology] was [a lack of] convenience to have a computer at my house, and for me I wasn't at UF all the time, so I can't just go into the computer lab. And I didn't really have a real updated computer in my classroom, it doesn't even have Internet capability. In fact the first email I sent her I didn't even use comment cards. I printed out her paper at the library, took it back, and then emailed her the info, 'cause I did it my way that I can look at and just...and a lot happened right at the beginning of the internship, like in September, I mean we finally got phone and cable at the end of October. So, for a big chunk of the beginning of the partnership that wasn't available to me, so I just never sent them the thing, you know, "Do you want to set up a time to do the chat room?" I think it would have been helpful, I was sure of the technology, for me it was just something to use, just to be able to use it.

Despite the inconvenience of not having easy access to a computer, Juliet made the best of her situation and believed that she had established a good relationship with her partner. Although her partner's writing was wrought with grammatical errors, and Juliet's comments did address areas of concern regarding structure and organization, Juliet believed that her approach to providing response to her partner's writing was well received, as she explained in her reflection paper:

It was hard not to edit her work at first as there were numerous mechanical errors. I tried suggesting things for her to look at (i.e. "Look at the tenses you use in this sentence") instead of telling her what she was doing wrong. This was well received, and she wrote me an email thanking me for the way I approached this.

She said that method was really helpful to her because she usually shuts down due to criticism. I also asked a lot of questions to help her focus on things she could revise, and we both really enjoyed this process.

Juliet expanded on her approach to working with her partner's paper in the interviews. Because she was relegated to using computers at the public library, Juliet found it easier to first print her partner's draft and read through it a number of times, adding comments in the margins only after she got a sense of the paper as a whole:

I try very hard like when I get [her partner's] papers to just read through them, and once to experience it and then go back through it, sort of adding comments.

Printing the paper out gave Juliet more time to consider the nature of her comments and to think about how they might be received by her partner. Upon reflection, Juliet decided to change her approach to response:

I printed out her last paper and I went through it and wrote you know, "Say more about this, and say then..." I found when I was doing the comments that I had to change all of those to questions instead of saying more, you know, "What could you say about this that might..." you know?

More than any other participant in the Online Writing Partnership, Juliet approached her partner's writing as a reader might, engaging in the text because she was interested in what it had to say instead of scouring the lines for errors. At times, Juliet found that she was interested in areas of the writing that were not as fully developed as others, and asked questions of her partner to "pull out the things that ... seem like the heart of what [her partner was] writing." It was clear from Juliet's interviews that she did not approach her partner's writing as if she were the teacher who would ultimately assign a grade. Instead, she saw her role in the partnership as that of an additional reader, viewing her partner as "writing [a paper] for someone and asking [Juliet] to read it along the way." As a result, Juliet felt more freedom to engage her partner in ways that she might not have as a teacher. Instead of focusing entirely on the structural faults that she

acknowledged were plentiful in her partner's writing, Juliet focused on her role as reader, attempting to draw out of her partner more of the ideas that she found interesting about her partner's paper:

I just found the things I was drawn to in her paper. Well, this last [paper] was about Avatar. Well, ok the first [paper]. About the whole, the camp that she was writing about, this farm camp and ... The things that were interesting to me, like she would talk about the native, you know this camp was based in Native American lore, and you know...she spent a lot of time like, describing...maybe it's just my own personal opinion. I think that, I think she could have really enriched it with the Native American element. She sort of described the cats and the dogs and the goats, but then didn't go anywhere with it, but then when she talked about the Native American, and just sort of skipped over it, I thought that that was more interesting to me ... what are the foundations of this camp, you know, how was this important to it? Those kind of things. And then she talked about meeting this girl or whatev- ... And I think that it could have been...you know, talked about, but then go more into why she was the most wonderful person that you've ever known or, you know. She's sort of, the details...it was like, a lot of like, little details, but the things that were really interesting to me she wasn't really talking about. And then this Avatar thing [the second paper], like...I thought it was very interesting and I praised her for including...and I don't know if this was part of the assignment, but including part of her journal? Like, she had written a journal entry from when she had gone to the experience? And I thought that was wonderful because that really made it very relevant to us, you know, that it was very accessible. But, you know, and she talked about the most wonderful thing she had was the walk for atonement, and then she gave lots of little, other little [details], and I just would have been more interested in her talking about her process [of self-discovery, the topic of the paper].

Not only did Juliet take care to phrase her critiques of her partner's writing as questions to "soften the blow" and avoid causing her partner to "shut down," she also used a questioning stance to engage with her partner in the substance of the writing. Juliet showed genuine interest in what her partner was writing about, and to Juliet's eyes, this approach was well received. Her partner wrote to Juliet at the end of the partnership via email to thank her for the help she received, confirming Juliet's belief:

Thank you for the comments they were very helpful I liked the way you sugar coat things I think that helps me take criticism a little better. I liked your word choice when giving suggestions instead of saying your doing this or do that you would say consider this and look at that. I think that helped me because then I wasn't looking

at your suggestion I was considering my own. Thank you very much for participating I'm really glad that you were my partner you sounded like a really interesting person I wish I could meet you.

Ironically, Juliet worried about the level of gratitude her partner expressed at the end of the partnership:

[My partner] sent me a very kind email saying "I really appreciate this, I respond very well to this, thank you very much," but it made me wonder if maybe I wasn't ... not that my job is to frustrate the student but ... was I being a little bit too slack? Was I being a little too, "Oh, this is good, this is ..." You know, and it wasn't *all* "This is good, this is good," or "I love this," but it was you know, "Well think about this how can you know, how could you do this," um, you know, there are a lot of times where, her tenses were wrong or you know I would say you know look at the tenses you're using in a sentence instead of you know you're switching tenses here you know, whatever, and apparently she was receptive to that. I'm glad about that, but ...

Part of Juliet's concern that she wasn't "tough enough" on her partner stemmed from the fact that she shared a high-school partner with Kate, and the two graduate students had shared stories about their experience with their partner throughout the Online Writing Partnership. Juliet was well aware of the "sugar coating incident" discussed in the previous participant thread. Juliet wondered if the response she gave her partner was received so willingly because it contrasted starkly with the response her partner was getting from Kate. Although she never saw the types of response Kate was providing to their partner, Juliet ultimately concluded that it wasn't that she was less "harsh" than she should be, but rather a difference in personalities that resulted in the difference in response from her partner:

I like Kate very much ... I don't want to speak for her ... But I know that Kate got a lot more, I think, frustrated than I did, even though we were experiencing the same thing.

At the end of the partnership, as we sipped coffee and talked about her experiences aiding a high-school student in her writing, Juliet expressed genuine pleasure at the

opportunity. Juliet confessed that she felt few of the technological elements would be applicable to her classroom of five-year-olds. However the experience of, in her words, “learn[ing] to listen to [her] partner” had a lasting impact on how she viewed student writing in general, and her role in helping students to develop as writers.

### **Beliefs about Teaching and Teaching Writing**

None of the participants in this study was lacking in beliefs about the nature of teaching. Juliet was no different in her belief that her early educational experiences influenced not only how she approaches teaching but also her decision to go into teaching in the first place. The biggest difference in Juliet’s views about teaching stemmed from her experiences in the classroom. She was not only currently teaching as she participated in the Online Writing Partnership, she had been doing so for a number of years. While she would sometimes talk about pedagogy in the same way the other participants would, Juliet brought with her a different perspective that allowed her not only to share what she believed about teaching but also to talk about how those beliefs had evolved over the course of the semester.

Juliet, like her fellow participants, viewed her own experiences in education as influential in the way she approached teaching. While she acknowledged that many who go into teaching do so because they were “impacted by a teacher at some point,” her teaching philosophy was also influenced by the approach to literature that some of her teachers took, toward which Juliet took umbrage:

I got really frustrated when we would do poetry and we would do um, particularly analyzing it and looking at its symbolism. And I got very frustrated when she [her high-school teacher] would tell me that I was wrong. Because I felt the point of poetry was that you read something, what you’re going to read from it? Um, I know, unless you have the poet’s notes of, this is what I meant by this line, I didn’t feel that she could tell somebody that, what they glean from it wasn’t valid. So I, you know, I felt, I’ll take a different approach to ... I really get into some ...

meaning but I think that part of the beauty of literature and by extension drama, playwriting, is that it speaks to people on so many different levels and I just didn't appreciate being told what I thought was wrong and this was what the absolutely only, right. So maybe that's why I don't say "This is wrong, and this is how you should be doing it" but ....

This approach to reading literature not only influenced Juliet's approach to teaching in her own class, but also to the Online Writing Partnership. On a number of occasions Juliet saw striking similarities between what she did in her pre-kindergarten class and how she worked with her high-school partner. Midway through the interview process, she told me of the following breakthrough:

I thought I would have a hard time [with the Online Writing Partnership] because when it comes to issues of mechanics, I don't deal with that, obviously, with five-year-olds. We're just learning to write things, you know, and so I'm not going to tell them, "This isn't right." I'm going to write it however they want me to write it. And so I guess I feel like maybe, why should I do that to hers [her partner's]?

Juliet explained further in her reflection paper:

I came to realize all of my work dictating my Pre-K students' stories really was tied to this partnership. I learned to listen to my partner, to her voice, and to her story. I was there to help her find ways to make it better. I was there to listen.

Perhaps she only realized something she actually had been doing for a while, but through her reflection on the Online Writing Partnership, Juliet acknowledged that she had begun to look at her own role as a teacher in a different light. She admitted that at times she felt her job was to "hand down" information to her students. Through the Online Writing Partnership and the other work she was doing that semester, Juliet began to reevaluate her role in the classroom:

... I'm sort of seeing myself as more a facilitator to helping my children to learn, instead of being the person who has the knowledge that I need to give to them. So it's ways in helping them find that. And it was...with the online partnership, with responding to their writing, like I said, I asked a lot of questions. You know, "How could we ..." or "What could you say ..." So I think I've, coming through that but also coming through my first year of working on my masters, but also in my own classroom, I'm looking at myself differently, and that I'm not this font of

knowledge I need to just, give to everyone, but more helping them along the process more.

For Juliet, the ability to dispense information was not her primary role. She noted in her first interview that “just because someone’s an expert in their subject [they are] not a good teacher,” but still the relative distance she felt from grammar instruction gave her pause upon entering the Online Writing Partnership. Her discovery, however, was that while the content of the lesson might change, her position as teacher centered around the same principle, best expressed by Juliet in her reflection paper after the partnership was over: “All students, regardless of age or skill level, want to feel validated.”

Because Juliet was originally a theater major and received a degree in theater education, her experiences with English curricula were considerably limited in comparison to her classmates. In high school Juliet had taken Advanced Placement classes in literature and writing and tested out of the required freshmen and sophomore English classes. As a result, Juliet did not take even the basic college writing and literature courses common to many college students. However, writing was important to Juliet, and while she took relatively few writing courses in college, it was a discipline she pursued on her own. When I asked her about her background in writing, she explained:

Well, like [I took] writing for theater, like, you know...both writing classes, but uh, playwriting. But no, you know I have like my little books *Anyone Can Write* and little excer-, writing exercises that I do like, once every two years because...you buy the journal and you buy the book and you’re going to be a great writer and then, you know...I don’t, a lot of it’s very like, “On Monday Journal about this, on Tuesday journal...” you know. I don’t do, it’s just too limiting, you know.

Despite the “phases” Juliet would go through in her pursuit of writing, she wrote regularly. I asked her about the type of writing she did, and her answer made it clear that while she took writing seriously, she was less inclined to take herself so:

I do a lot of ... I always laugh at myself when I used to say in college, or in high school, and college that I dreamt in the made-for-TV movie form? [laughs] And it just sort of, I don't know if I watched way too many of them when I was growing up or sort of ... so then I've started writing them down and embellished, you know, and adding more to them ...

Writing was something that Juliet did not feel came easy to her. Rather, she considered herself a storyteller:

... Writing for me is very overwhelming and very scary and I tend to ... I'm a storyteller, I guess, being in theater, and I love to talk and I love to tell stories. I'm trying to transition that into my writing and it's very hard for me.

Juliet took her approach to writing as storytelling into the classroom. For her pre-kindergarten students, most of whom were only beginning to write, she inverted the storytelling process. Her students would tell their stories, and she would transcribe them onto paper. Juliet viewed her role as a teacher of writing to be primarily one of modeling the act of writing, and showing the “meaning and purpose behind their words.”

For her pre-kindergarten students, Juliet believed that her job was to encourage them to “explore language openly.” As her participation in the Online Writing Partnership progressed, she realized that this belief also applied to her partner. Noting that there should be a “balance of mechanics,” nonetheless Juliet expressed a determination to help her students through encouragement, and to show her students and her partner that “educators are not consumed with what's wrong with their writing, but how [they] can help them improve.”

### **Technology and Obstacles**

When I asked Juliet about her experience with communication technologies at the beginning of our interviews, she laughed and replied that the experiences in the Online Writing Partnership had given her a chance to “face [her] fears.” I wondered if she meant

technology in general, but Juliet was quick to explain that her fear was not the chat rooms or the bulletin boards, but rather being forced to participate in them:

No, just because I hadn't done it before. And I know that, you know, like, say...I was looking at a web site and there were you know, like bulletin boards or chat rooms, I would certainly...it wouldn't keep me from [looking at the webpage] ... I'm trying to think of like what I would say if I went to a women's health website and there you know, [were] bulletin boards and chat rooms...I've certainly looked at those, but I've never joined in, or created a name and jumped right in ...

At the beginning of the semester, as I was presenting the various technologies that would be available to all participants in the partnership, Juliet initially felt overwhelmed. She suggested that this anxiety came from her preferred learning style with computers. Juliet described herself as one who eschewed manuals, preferring to "just sort of start" when she wanted to perform a task. Juliet was an avid user of a digital camera, and enjoyed doing photo editing on the computer in addition to using the Internet for research and emailing.

While she admitted to never using the chat room made available to her and her partner, Juliet readily acknowledged that she saw how useful it could have been. For her, however, computer use came at a premium. Between hurricane-related power outages and the frustration of not having phone or cable service until well past the partnership's half-way point, Juliet felt lucky to have been able to find ways of improvising her role in the partnership with the computers available to her.

The inconvenience of having to use the computers at the public library did not prevent Juliet from feeling that she gained a great deal from her experiences with Internet-based communication technologies. When prompted to reflect on the biggest influence the technology aspect of the partnership had on her, she answered in terms of how it changed her level of comfort in actually participating in online environments:

I've been thinking about that and it has, insofar as, like for the gender class [a course on gender issues in education taken as part of her master's program], we had a blog, and we were required to submit to it and to respond to it. So just the technology, in and of itself, being familiar with it, having come through it in the fall during the online partnership, wasn't nearly as scary as it would've ... posting online, responding to things online, I felt was easier because of going through what we went through with getting the writings from the student and responding to it.

Likewise, the use of Internet technologies prompted Juliet to consider how she might use technology in her own classroom. Although she felt that much of the Online Writing Partnership was beyond what would be useful for her five-year-olds, the *idea* of computer use as part of the curriculum was something Juliet was looking at through a new lens:

So if anything, it got me to think, "Oh, how can I use the computers with my kids?" I mean I can't really do this, but ... just, as far as just using the technology and realizing that even in early childhood it can be part of the curriculum, it was something I hadn't done in two years, but it was obviously, I started thinking about [it] ....

One of our expected uses of communication technologies going into the partnership was that the graduate students would use them to develop relationships with high-school students that would facilitate response to writing. Juliet felt she had no need to use technology in this way with her own students but did begin to make use of email to establish relationships with the parents of her students.

Although Juliet seemed to have many practical difficulties with computers during the Online Writing Partnership, she expressed great openness toward thinking about how computers could be used in her classroom and was quick to use the online partnership as a starting point to reflect on her own beliefs about teaching. Juliet was aware that many of her peers in the methods class were openly resistant to the use of Internet technologies to work with high-school writing partners. She acknowledged this in an off-handed way that reflected the ongoing transformation of her own self-image as a teacher of writing:

“It’s interesting the things we’re resistant to when we don’t ... we’re not really realizing that we’re resistant to them.”

### **Partnership as a Transformative Experience**

More than anyone else in the partnership, Juliet expressed a belief that her very approach to teaching had been affected by the experience of the Online Writing Partnership. Not only was it an experience that allowed her to work with a student writer in a way she never had before, but also the partnership provided an impetus for her reflection on the very fundamentals of a teacher’s role in the classroom. Juliet stated her belief on a number of occasions that the partnership had been of great value to her, that she had been able to help her partner improve her writing, and that she herself had learned a great deal during the process.

One of the central contextual threads that led to Juliet’s feeling of success in the Online Writing Partnership was the experience of having worked with language learners who were beginning the process of learning to write not only in making letters but also, as Juliet put it, “in telling stories.” Repeatedly Juliet drew connections between the five-year-old pre-kindergarten students she saw everyday and the sixteen-year-old high-school junior she worked with over the course of a semester. Being a listener to her own students allowed Juliet to listen to her writing partner in ways that no other graduate students mentioned. Working with young children as they explored their own storytelling ability was parallel to the experience Juliet had with her partner whom she believed was just as eager to explore her own abilities with writing.

Another thread of importance to Juliet was accessibility to the computers that would allow her access to her partner. Many of the study participants complained about the ways they viewed technology as inhibiting their ability to get to know their partner.

For Juliet, it was nearly as difficult to find a computer to use as it would have been to actually meet with her writing partner. The irony was not lost on Juliet when she laughed at the “prevailing wisdom” that computers “made things easier.” She was quick to point out that this axiom was only true for those who had easy access to computers.

Perhaps the biggest contextual thread for Juliet was her own ability to connect with the writing her partner would send her. She acknowledged that at times her partner didn’t make it easy for her:

[The] last paper especially was very hard to get through because it was so, there were so many grammar issues and it was sort of all over the board, and, I think she has a good voice it’s just sort of getting her to write ....

Yet instead of changing her approach of being an ear to those who had a story to tell, Juliet stated that she just listened. As she listened, she asked questions about the areas of her partner’s writing that she was genuinely interested in. Pointing to her partner’s thankful emailed response, Juliet expressed her belief that listening and connecting personally to the writing in front of her made all the difference.

### **Across Case Analysis of Results**

At the beginning of this chapter, I introduced a metaphor to organize my discussion of the results of this study: a piece of woven cloth. The five participants of this study were represented as the individual threads of that cloth; however, a cloth is more than just a collection of threads. To present a thicker, richer description of the study data, it is necessary to look at the pattern in which the threads of context are woven.

Context, and especially the nature of context in online environments, has been of interest to me from long before my decision to pursue doctoral work. In fact, it was largely my experience with incorporating online, asynchronous discussions in my literature classes at the area high school where I taught that prompted me to continue my

education in the first place. I was fascinated by how some of my students were not interested in having discussions online, yet others would “log on” at all hours of the night eager to see the responses their posts received. I was equally fascinated by how the online discussions were ostensibly part of “the class” but also not *of the class* in both my mind and in my students’ minds. I wanted to know more about this “online space”—I didn’t know it at the time, but I was wondering about the context of online learning environments.

Often in educational settings, the context centers around the classroom, with individuals in close proximity. But what about online contexts? Certainly each individual in an online environment brings with them an individual surround context just as any student and teacher would to a physical classroom. Exploring the individual surround contexts is an important first step, but none of the study participants’ experiences in the Online Writing Partnership happened in isolation; the partnership was a *class* assignment. There is a broader context, a weave context, which requires a view of the experiences of the five participants collectively, to see how the individual threads relate to each other and further, to illuminate the nature of one specific online activity.

In this section, I discuss the five cases collectively in a manner similar to the discussions of the cases individually, with one primary difference. As discussed in chapter two, gaining a more complete understanding of context requires examination from at least two perspectives. The first perspective, the *surround* context, deals with those elements relevant to the task in which participants are engaged. These elements were explored in the discussion of the individual cases and included their unique experiences, beliefs about teaching, and attitudes toward technology. The second

perspective of context is the *weave*, which is concerned with the relational aspects of activities and objects of the individuals involved. The weave context is actively constructed as the phenomenon proceeds, and in so doing all of the individual participants' contextual threads are brought to bear. Herein lies the complicating aspect of question four of this study, "What contextual threads appeared most salient to these prospective English teachers in the success (or lack thereof) of this online partnership?" Because the weave context concerns relations between and among an array of elements, a full discussion of context requires consideration of the four particular contextual threads the five participants themselves identified as significant, as they relate across the three common elements of the partnership that were the subject of investigation for this study: the participants' experiences in an Online Writing Partnership, their beliefs about teaching and teaching writing, and their attitudes toward technology in teaching writing.

Emerging from my analysis of the data, the study participants identified four contextual threads of significance: social presence, relationships between teachers and students, the role and authority of a teacher, and preconceived expectations of learning environments. In the next section I discuss, in turn, each of the first three study questions through the lens of question four:

1. What kinds of experiences do prospective English teachers preparing for the teaching profession have in distance, online partnerships with secondary writers?
2. What do these experiences reveal about these prospective teachers' views of teachers and teaching writing?
3. What influences appear to exist between experience with and attitude toward technology, and in what ways do these attitudes affect the partnership?
4. What contextual threads appeared most salient to these prospective English teachers in the success (or lack thereof) of this online partnership?

Additionally, I have included two discussions outside of the study participants' perspectives that provide insight into the weave context of the Online Writing

Partnership. In the section focusing on experiences in the partnership, I include a brief discussion of the experiences of the graduate students' high-school partners. Also, in the section on beliefs about teaching and teaching writing, I include a discussion of the types of responses to the high-school students' writing given by the graduate students, and the relative emphasis on those types.

### **What Were the Experiences of the Study Participants?**

The experiences of the five study participants varied greatly because of their individual surround contexts. Because each participant came into the partnership with particular expectations, it was possible through the interviews and in reading their reflective writings to determine if those expectations were met and to what degree. To illustrate the level of satisfaction of the five participants I have included a continuum showing their placements relative to each other, from satisfied to dissatisfied, seen in Figure 4-1.

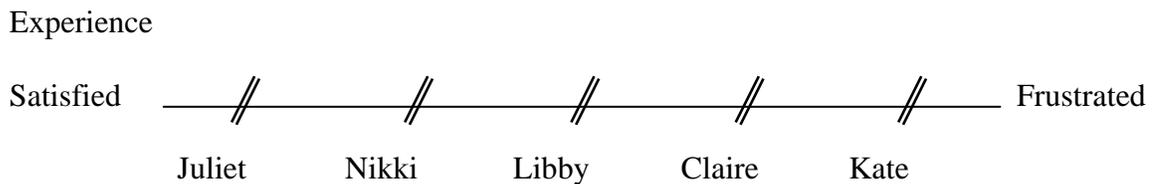


Figure 4-1. Continuum of experiences reflecting participants' overall attitude toward the Online Writing Partnership.

Each of the four context threads identified by the participants contributed significantly in determining the degree to which each participant felt satisfied with the Online Writing Partnership. In the following section I discuss the relation between each of the four threads to the experiences of the five participants across cases, and include a brief discussion of the experiences of the high-school student partners.

### **Experiences and social presence**

Frequently in the interviews with all five participants, I was struck by the difference between how each participant felt and what they actually said. When I looked at responses given me by each graduate student when asked in general about their assessment of the Online Writing Partnership, everyone agreed that it was a positive experience. On closer inspection, however, I was hard-pressed to find positive statements pertaining to specific aspects of the experience.

Libby provided one of the few exceptions to this rule in her belief (although this belief did not manifest itself as practice) that online chatting held an advantage to other forms of communication because it allowed each user more “wait-time” in preparing a response. Each turn in the dialog could be thought out more, without the pressures of an immediate response that Libby felt was expected in face-to-face communication. However, as reported by the participants, most experiences in the partnership were characterized by the ways in which the experience was *limited*. *Social presence*, described in chapter two as the awareness one has for the presence of another during an interaction (Richardson & Swan, 2003), impacted the experiences of the participants largely through its felt absence. As a context thread this absence manifested to the graduate students not only as literal distance between the partner pairs, but also as an inability to connect personally, resulting in confusion and frequent misunderstandings when communicating online.

In the most direct sense, the Online Writing Partnership in the mind of the graduate participants was characterized as the actual distance between the sets of partners. Kate spoke specifically of the limitations she felt because she was only able to communicate with her partner through words. All of the online technologies provided to the

participants for use in the partnership were text-based, and for Kate as well as her classmates, this “one-dimensional” approach to working with students was difficult. Kate explained that because her interactions with her partner were limited to written text, this limitation stunted her ability to communicate altogether:

There was nothing in the email relationship that made us think that it would be necessary to get in the chat room.

There’s only so much you can do in text. ... I felt like my job was half-done because of the relationship, but I don’t think it could have been completed with the chat room. Had I just used it [the chat room] it would have been OK, [but] I don’t think that it would have [been] that effective.

Libby further illustrated how a sense of limited social presence characterized her experiences in the partnership by pointing out the difficulties she had in initiating dialog with her high-school partner. While she generally felt that the technologies provided in the partnership were adequate for maintaining already established relationships, the distance she felt between herself and her partner created problems logistically when trying to set up meetings using only asynchronous modes of communication. Nikki had similar concerns with the lack of proximity to her partner, but for Nikki the feeling of distance from her partner was manifested temporally. She characterized her partner (and to a degree, herself) as lacking motivation because it was “too easy to ignore” an email, thus dramatically increasing the time between contacts. While all the graduate participants tried to be conscientious about the need for prompt responses to their partners’ work, the frustration remained regarding Nikki’s question of “Why don’t we just get these papers?” when they took so long to arrive in her in-box.

Often, a discomfort with the lack of a physically present partner characterized the experience of the partnership not merely because communication was limited to written language—indeed all participants expressed at least basic confidence in their abilities in

writing. Rather, it was the literal separation between partners that colored experience in the Online Writing Partnership. In the minds of the graduate students, so much of communication did not translate to written text. Claire was keenly aware of the problems of attempting to connect with another person devoid of the benefits of body language and other forms of non-verbal communication:

It's really, in computer language, I mean, it's like, it's completely different. You just sometimes can't tell if the person's being serious, funny, sarcastic or also maybe ... I don't know.

Kate expressed similar feelings when asked if she felt there was a relationship with her partner:

I feel there's a relationship, but because it's entirely through written language it's limited. I think there's a relationship where we can misinterpret each other.

Both Kate and Nikki saw the need for a larger context to establish a relationship, not only because communication encompasses more than “just” words and expressions, but also each felt that “the opportunity to see” and hear their partner would allow for greater understanding. Text-only communication weakened the degree of social presence felt between partners because social interaction was viewed as more than just an exchange of words. That the graduate students felt limited in this way characterized the experience of the Online Writing Partnership as a whole.

There was a general acknowledgement from all the study participants that some of the problems of communication they associated with the lack of social presence between partners could have been alleviated through the use of other technologies that were available but largely unused, such as the chat rooms. But as Kate stated early in the interview process, the inclination of the graduate participants was to maintain contact

with their partners in the same way that contact was first made, through email, creating a perpetuating cycle of limited communication and further separation from their partners.

### **Experiences and relationships**

Though directly connect to the issue of social presence, no other contextual thread had more influence on how the graduate participants characterized their experiences in the Online Writing Partnership than that of their sense of the relationships between partners. The various sources of collected data show that all of the graduate participants of this study held complex and often contradictory views about whether they had established a connection with their high-school partners on any level as well as what the nature of that relationship might be. Most frequently the graduate participants described their associations with their online partners as lacking a sense of personal connection. Sometimes this belief was expressed in just so many words, as when Juliet said that she didn't know her partner "as a person," or when Libby reflected on how "the personal connection would have been made more" if there had been a more concerted effort to use all the technologies available through the Online Writing Partnership. Other participants merely hinted at a lack of personal connection with their partner. Kate frequently went back and forth as to whether there was any interrelation at all, but when she finally concluded that there was, she qualified it by saying:

I feel like there's a relationship, but because it's entirely through written language, it's limited. ... If the goal is to only develop good writing, just on the page, then I think the relationship is good; it's standard, it's accomplished what it's supposed to.

Later in that same interview, Kate expressed how she felt she could have improved the rapport with her partner:

I think our relationship would have been supplemented well by a physical, like, like a spatial relationship where we could see one another or at least communicate verbally? But I think we do have one, I just don't know how great it is ....

Nearly all statements made by the graduate participants about the bonds they formed with their high-school partners were qualified in some way, and this in turn characterized their experiences over all, as the perceived quality of the relationship often ran parallel to each participant's satisfaction with the Online Writing Partnership (see Figure 4-1). Neither Juliet nor Libby felt they knew their partners "personally." Claire felt that she did not know her partner "as a student." Yet, there was an equal reluctance to state categorically that there was no relationship at all (although Kate and Nikki did state this on at least one occasion, the specific context of their denials along with the numerous statements to the contrary suggest otherwise).

I remember being rather shocked at the time of the interviews as I realized that the majority of those participating in the study did not feel they had adequate relationships with their partners. The stories the graduate students told me concerning the partnership itself were anecdotes often rich in detail and insight such as the "sugar-coating" incident. I found it surprising that these same graduate students felt little connection to the high-school students they were paired with and were so inclined to characterize their experiences as lacking a full sense of satisfaction as a result. I was curious to see if the same were true on the other side of the equation.

While the high-school students were not the focus of my study, they were an important part of the larger context of the Online Writing Partnership. Therefore, I arranged for brief interviews to be conducted with them to see how the experiences differed among the groups. I wondered if this general sense of disappointment felt by the graduate students carried through to the high-school dual enrollment students. I admit

my surprise when I realized that, yes, the high-school students largely agreed with the graduate students that no substantive bond had developed; they did not share in the disappointment, however.

### **High-school students' experiences in the Online Writing Partnership**

I have discussed previously how there were uneven numbers among the two groups of students involved in the Online Writing Partnership, resulting in some high-school students having more than one graduate student paired with them. As it turned out, although there were five graduate participants in this study, there were only three corresponding high-school student partners.

Claire was the only graduate student in this study to have an exclusive pairing with a high-school student. Sam, like all the high-school students in the partnership, was a high-school junior enrolled in a college dual-enrollment program. I noted Claire's grin as she described her image of him as a "man's man, but in high school," adding that his writing was "not what I would consider to be on-level." Shannon was described by her two partners, Libby and Nikki, as a "fairly out-going girl" who was very much into dance and used dancing as her topic for all the papers she wrote during the partnership. Finally there was Ana-Lucia, whom Juliet described as someone who "likes to shock for the sake of shocking," but who was "trying to find who she is." Kate, Ana-Lucia's other partner, identified personally with what she saw as Ana-Lucia's desire to "get up on a soap-box thing" when writing.

When the high-school students were asked to characterize their experiences overall, the consensus saw the partnership as a "good idea" that would help them improve their writing. Ana-Lucia felt the experience was beneficial because "instead of just getting like the teacher's opinion you get, like, other people's opinion." Ana-Lucia and Shannon

explained that they often used a parent to assist them when a paper was due, and compared those experiences to the partnership. Each of the high-school partners when asked agreed that their expectations coming into the Online Writing Partnership were met.

All of the high-school partners felt that their writing had improved as a result of the Online Writing Partnership. Charlie stated that not only did his specific papers improve, but he also “learned how to improve [his] writing” overall. Ana-Lucia claimed to be “a lot more organized” when writing and felt her partners helped her to “stay on topic.” Shannon was simply thankful for the feedback she received.

The three student writers uniformly acknowledged that they believed the graduate students would benefit the most because they were going to be English teachers (Ana-Lucia was unaware that Juliet’s background in education was different from the others), and therefore had the opportunity to “practice on them.” Ana-Lucia in particular had much to say regarding this opportunity:

I’m sure they graded papers in their class and stuff like that and talked to other kids and stuff, but like, someone who’s actually not experienced, then that’s really good for them. And, like, on the first one, we never sent them back anything about their comments, but this time we’re sending them information about how their comments made us feel and how their comments affected us, so. I think that’s kinda helpful a lot, because, like, I don’t know. Depending on what you say I think it would be “oh you did fine” then that doesn’t really benefit you know...but if you’re like, constructive criticism (laughs), I guess it helps.

Finally, I wanted to know if the high-school students’ views of the relationships that developed were the same as the graduate students’. So often, the graduate students characterized their ties to the high-school students as impersonal, sometimes strained, and often a factor that impacted their experiences in the partnership in frustrating ways.

Failure to connect fully with their partners colored their experiences in the partnership

overall, and I was eager to see if the same dearth of connection existed in the minds of the high-school partners. It did. The three high-school partners were consistent in describing their situations as “working relationships” and little else. Shannon, Libby and Nikki’s partner, elaborated:

I wouldn’t say that there was really much of a relationship except for that criticism [the response] back and forth, and then like, they were really nice and helpful but, I don’t really think there was any [relationship] ....

Charlie was even more to the point, saying “there wasn’t too much of a relationship just, email and, that’s about it.” Even Ana-Lucia, of “sugar-coating incident” fame, spoke only of the experiences she enjoyed about her two partners, at one point calling the experience “groovy” but acknowledging that no bond had developed beyond that of working together. One difference from the graduate students was none of the high-school students expressed dismay over the lack of connectedness they described with their graduate partner, nor did they express any wish for anything different.

### **Experiences and role/authority**

The purpose of the partnership stated at the beginning of their language and composition methods class was to provide opportunities for the graduate students to practice responding to high-school student papers, and in so doing, to help improve those students’ writing while learning something important about the teaching of writing. However, when asked to define their role in this process, the graduate participants were frequently vague and unsure in their responses.

It is likely that confusion over each graduate participant’s role in the partnership stemmed from the conflicting position each found themselves in. On the one hand, each graduate student felt they were being asked to perform duties they saw as “teacher-like.” As a result, the graduate participants saw their role as being in part that of *teacher*. On

the other hand, all graduate students were aware of their simultaneous role as *student*, and admitted viewing the Online Writing Partnership as an assignment. Consequently, there was confusion over the role each graduate student played in the learning dynamic of the partnership, and what authority each had as a result of that role. This confusion over role and authority in turn played a part in characterizing the experience of each graduate student.

Most of the graduate students understood what their “job” was, and Nikki articulated succinctly the consensus view: “We just had to help them be a better writer.” While this was the consensus belief, this answer provided confusion of its own. The graduate students generally understood that response to student writing was not all that was required in the teaching of writing. As discussed previously, their own belief was that *relationships* were the key to successful writing instruction. Yet, many proceeded in the Online Writing Partnership as if providing written response was the only requirement of their assignment. Kate discussed at length how she admittedly gave short shrift to the partnership process (see her individual thread for more discussion of this point). She saw every aspect of her participation as confined to text-only communication, which in turn limited her role in ways that precluded other forms of participation. Kate summed up the experiences of the partnership, as characterized by her confusion over role, by saying what seemed to be on the tongue of each graduate partner at one point or another: “That’s what it seemed like I was supposed to do.”

One facet of the graduate students’ roles that was less confusing was the authority they felt they possessed as writers. Whether in the storyteller role of Juliet or the inspirational talents of Nikki, part of each participant’s identity was comprised of their

view of themselves as writers. Even Claire, who expressed the most doubt about her identity as a writer, drew on her past experiences in writing as evidence of her ability to do what the partnership's assignment asked of her. When the high-school students would overlook some or all of the given suggestions, this lapse conflicted with the graduate students' sense of authority as writers. The consternation they felt in these instances only served to compound their doubt about their role, which in turn further drenched their experiences with frustration.

The graduate students' sense of confusion over their role and authority in the partnership stemmed from their belief that rather than letting them define or discover their role, these roles were assigned to them. Further problems arose when the assigned role of providing response to student writing conflicted with the beliefs the graduate students already held about the role of the teacher in a classroom.

### **Experiences and expectations of the physical classroom**

There was a spectrum of opinions about how favorably the Online Writing Partnership compared to what the graduate students had or expected to experience in the classroom (see Figure 4-1). What was consistent, however, was how expectations of the "conventional classroom" characterized the experiences each graduate participant had in the Online Writing Partnership. Each graduate participant viewed the Online Writing Partnership through the lens of the conventional classrooms they all anticipated working in after their degree program was finished. Even Juliet, who was already teaching full-time during the partnership, reflected on her experiences in relation to how they informed her classroom process, as well as how her classroom informed her experiences in the partnership. Providing for this comparison was in part what the partnership was intended to do. Ostensibly an opportunity to give practice to preservice teachers, there was also

the expectation that the partnership would provide a bridge between the theoretical and academic learning experienced at the university, and the “practical, real-world” learning done in traditional classroom practicum experiences.

Early in her interviews, Libby made explicit her take on how the partnership would benefit her in the long run. As discussed earlier in her individual thread, Libby felt insecure about her ability to provide useful feedback to student writers. Not only did she view the Online Writing Partnership as an opportunity to gain experience and therefore confidence, but also in the end she felt the partnership was successful; her confidence was in her mind dramatically improved, and she laughed in relief that this would “help me in my internship.”

For some participants, the partnership was at least an exciting opportunity to get started working with students in anticipation of the internship the following spring. Nikki especially looked forward in the beginning to helping Shannon with her writing. Claire likewise expressed gratitude that she would get to “try out” giving responses to student writers before she was expected to do so in a more “serious” way during her internship. Despite some serious misgivings in other areas concerning the partnership, each participant expressed different reasons that they were thankful for the experience. However, these experiences were always characterized by thoughts of eventual four-walled classrooms.

Not all of the experiences in the partnership were positive, and this too was due to the expectations held concerning the physical classrooms. Kate had perhaps the least positive experience of the five because the partnership in her mind did not approximate closely enough the idea she had of herself as a teacher in the classroom. Text-only

communication was limiting to Kate because she was aware of all the other ways she could communicate with her students when face-to-face with them. Claire also noted the difficulties of trying to communicate via computers, believing that so much of the communication that goes on in the classroom does not translate to online communication.

Most striking in this study was the way in which the lone classroom teacher, Juliet, viewed the Online Writing Partnership through the lens of the classroom. Everyday Juliet was in an actual classroom as a teacher. I noted early in my research journal that I anticipated she would find the partnership more difficult than the other participants because she had ongoing and possibly contrasting experiences in a classroom. My expectations were proven opposite, however, as she deftly used her experiences in her pre-kindergarten classroom to enhance her experiences with Ana-Lucia in the online environment as well as to reflect on those experiences to improve her current classroom teaching.

All of the four contextual threads identified by the participants played important roles in the characterization of the experiences of the Online Writing Partnership, even if the experiences themselves were not as universal. Some of the contextual threads, such as social presence and the confusion over roles/authority, appeared to the participants as deal-breakers from the start regarding a feeling of success in the partnership. Other threads, such as each participant's expectations of the physical classroom acting as a model for experiencing their online partnerships, were enlightening and even pleasant for the participants. Regardless of how they were characterized, all of the threads played important roles in determining the texture of each participant's experience.

### What do these Experiences Reveal about these Prospective Teachers' Beliefs about Teachers and Teaching Writing?

There are likely no two teachers in the world who hold exactly the same beliefs about teaching and the teaching of writing. Certainly beliefs varied widely among the participants in this study. By examining those beliefs expressed and implied in interviews and in reflective writing, it was possible to place each of the five participants along a continuum starting with the social constructivist model, where meaning is jointly

Beliefs about Teaching and Teaching Writing

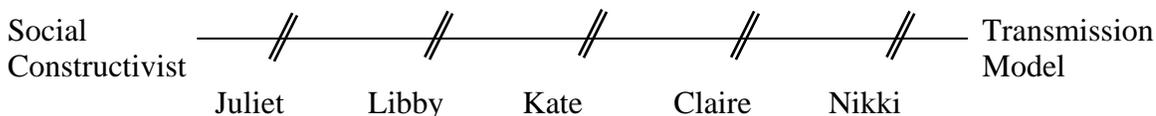


Figure 4-2. Continuum of teaching philosophies reflecting participants' stated and implied beliefs during the Online Writing Partnership.

constructed between teachers and students, and moving to the transmission model of teaching, where information is transferred from teacher to student. This continuum is seen in Figure 4-2.

Each of the four contextual threads identified by the participants played significant roles in revealing their beliefs about teaching and teaching writing during the Online Writing Partnership. In the following section I present an across-case discussion pertaining to question two, "What do these experiences reveal about these prospective teachers' beliefs about teachers and teaching writing?" in order to explore the relations of the four context threads and those beliefs. Finally, to illustrate how beliefs about teaching writing manifested in the emailed responses given to the high-school partners about their writing, I include a brief discussion of those responses and the relative emphasis placed on them.

**Beliefs and social presence**

Although they did not have the specific jargon, social presence during the Online Writing Partnership was the most immediate contextual thread of the entire experience for the study participants. Even before they began exchanging emails with their high-school partners, concerns were expressed about the quality of assistance the graduate students could provide absent actual, spatial presence. The study participants largely understood social presence in terms of immediacy and transparency (and more precisely for each, the lack thereof). Communication with their partners was not immediate, and the technology they were to use was often the only thing the graduate students saw. As a result each study participant felt separated from her high-school partner. This separation between partners impacted the experiences of the Online Writing Partnership overall, and also revealed beliefs about teaching that included a felt need for closeness to their partners.

For the study participants, frustrations expressed over separation from their high-school partner illuminated other beliefs about important contextual threads and provided a way to frame their discussion of what they believed was important in three areas: establishing relationships with students, establishing a clear understanding of the roles teachers and students were expected to play in writing instruction, and beliefs about the context of a physical classroom and the role it would play in their careers as teachers of writing. Without a sense of social presence conducive to the beliefs each participant held regarding student/teacher interaction, connections would either be impossible to create or unsuitable to the objectives of writing instruction. Likewise, the graduate students' beliefs about writing instruction included what they saw as the very nature of teaching: presenting information to students with sufficient clarity to improve writing ability. They

simply did not believe the level of social presence in the Online Writing Partnership allowed them to do so. In their view, physical proximity determined to some degree their ability to present instruction in a clear and effective manner.

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 closeness in 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 the ... the, even the spatial element, it's lacking, just like, knowing what each other looks like, kind of ... because you always skew what you think of a situation based on your physical surrounding and the way, and you, interactions and ... I rely a lot on speech, and combining rhetoric and ... 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 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, the reality based on the experiences of the five participants was that being limited to text-only communication was a fly in the ointment at best when trying to mentor others in writing.

### **Beliefs and relationships**

In reviewing the varied data sources, one of the participants' prevalent and shared beliefs about teaching writing became apparent as the five study participants discussed the relationships they developed with their high-school partners. Each graduate student stated that they had seen evidence of changes made in their high-school partners' writing; it was their belief that these changes indicated the existence of some type of bond between the two and frequently this was the only evidence they would identify. 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" and characterized the difference between her relationship with Ana-Lucia and the one Ana-Lucia had with Kate (Ana-Lucia's other partner) by saying that Ana-Lucia responded to Juliet's suggestions more readily. Libby likewise felt that because her situation with Shannon lacked a "personal aspect" it therefore was "more teacher/student ... than mentorish."

But what contextual factors went into establishing these bonds in the first place? What beliefs did these five participants have regarding the ways in which teachers and students established connections at all? As I have noted in previous sections, the technologies involved in the Online Writing Partnership often received blame when the graduate students became frustrated with the lack-luster collegiality between them and their high-school partner. 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 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 communicative style also flavored her attempts at establishing a rapport with her partner. Under "normal" circumstances to account for this harshness and compensate for it, Kate relied on hand

gestures, facial expressions, and other “nurturing” tendencies she felt she possessed but that were unavailable to her in a text-only environment.

In the minds of the study participants, student/teacher relationships developed naturally and as a matter of course, and particularly when those participants were 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 two 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 with others. The other 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, the belief was that left to their own devices in a physical classroom, relationships would “just happen.” Technology was the *bête noir* frustrating any sense of connectedness between partners; Nikki captured the zeitgeist of the frustration surrounding rapport in the Online Writing Partnership by saying that “if I had the opportunity to see [her partner], that something would definitely develop.”

### **Beliefs and role/authority**

While the graduate students felt their assignment in the Online Writing Partnership, and therefore their role, was vague, this initial confusion did not prevent them from interpreting their role within the partnership and acting on that interpretation. Often the way the participants interpreted their roles was very revealing 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 to be made to students' writing. Regardless whether or not these suggestions were followed, the responses of the graduate participants revealed another aspect of role within the Online Writing Partnership. Not only was their role to suggest changes, it was also in their view the role of the high-school student to incorporate those changes into their writing.

Because they saw themselves as authorities in writing, the study participants experienced frustration when responses were "ignored" by their high-school partner. To the graduate participants, this was contrary to their beliefs about a teacher's role and the authority inherent in that role; in the interviews this conflict was often expressed as confusion. Nikki shook her head in exasperation as she commented about an example in her partner's paper: "I saw a way for [her partner] to change a sentence, or if I wrote the sentence it would have been completely different and had a better . . . ." Sometimes the graduate participants went so far as to view failure to take suggestions as defiance by their high-school partner, as did Kate in her reflective essay when talking about her partner's writing: "If I were grading the final draft, I would mark her off for the places she refused to consider the revisions."

The authority inherent in the graduate students' self-defined roles stemmed from each participant's 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. Libby exhibited this belief in her near total adoption of revision not only as an approach to writing but as an approach to learning, as discussed in her individual thread. Kate, too, 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.

Like Kate, the belief that each study participant understood the nature of writing in their own lives contributed to the authority inherent in their beliefs about the role of *teacher* in writing instruction, and how the beliefs the participants had about writing also influenced their approach to teaching writing. Juliet considered herself a storyteller, and her 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, would allow her position of authority to inspire others to write, emulating her as a writer. For each of the participants, it was the experiences they had had in writing that led to a certain level of confidence in their own abilities as writers, and therefore as figures of authority in writing instruction.

### **Emphasis on types of response given in the Online Writing Partnership**

The purpose of this study was to look at the contextual features that affected the experiences of preservice teachers in an Online Writing Partnership and the beliefs about teaching, writing, and technology those experiences revealed. Since much emphasis was placed on responding to student writing both in the class of which the Online Writing Partnership was an assignment and by the participants in this study, I felt it was important to consider the kinds of responses the graduate students gave to their high-school partners, and to examine the emphasis on the kinds of response given. While the directions of the partnership assignment clearly indicated that the purpose of the graduate partner was not to serve as proofreader, this stated purpose clearly sat in conflict to the graduate students' already held beliefs about the role of *teacher* in writing instruction. I was curious to see what types of responses were given, how much collective emphasis was given to the various types of responses, how the actual responses compared to the ways the graduate students' characterized their responses, and what these characterizations revealed concerning their beliefs about the role of the teacher in writing instruction.

Of the five graduate participants in this study, only three discussed specifically the manner in which they responded to their student partner. For reasons unknown, Nikki never talked or wrote about the kinds of responses she gave to her partner, only that she occasionally "fixed" grammatical errors. Libby only ever spoke in general terms, often speaking theoretically about how the Online Writing Partnership would inform her classroom teaching the following year. In looking at their actual responses, both Libby and Nikki were on par with their fellow study participants as to type and emphasis of response. Kate, Juliet, and Claire, however, seemed eager to talk specifically about both

their approach to providing response to student writing and the specific types of responses they placed on the drafts sent to them. What I found interesting in my review of these data was that often the transcripts of their recollections read very differently from the document data sources of actual student papers. For example, as discussed in her individual thread, 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 Ana-Lucia’s papers, however, I noted that the percentage of Juliet’s responses phrased as questions was only slightly higher than the twenty-three 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 4-3).

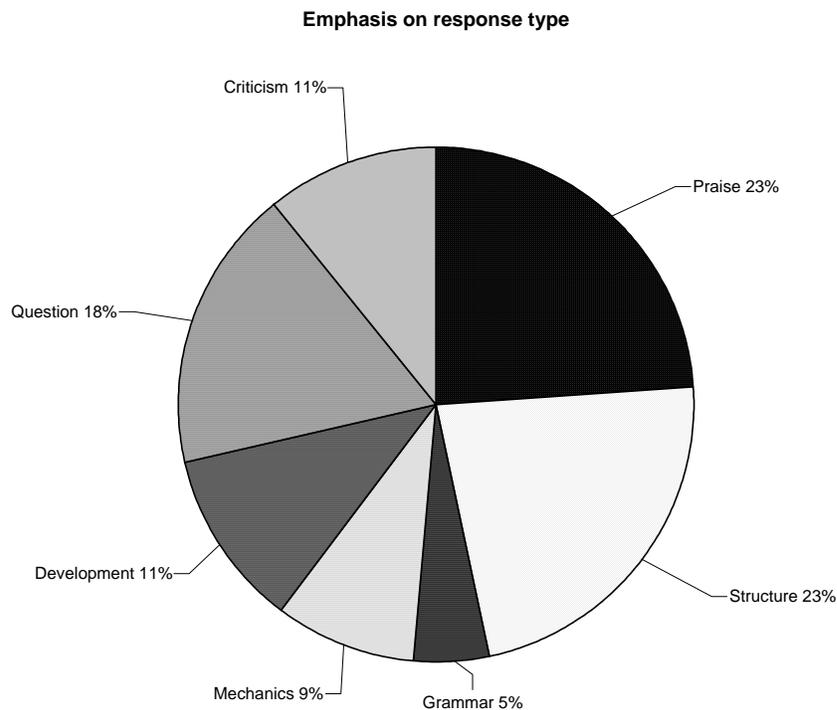


Figure 4-3. Percentage of emphasis on response type

To examine the types of responses given by the participants, I first collected the various drafts of papers exchanged by the participant pairs and read through the comments left marginally using the “comment card” function of Microsoft Word (see Appendix C). Determining categories of response was relatively straightforward. As I read through the responses and noted their placement in context of the high-school students’ writing, I thought carefully about the purpose of each response. Because the graduate participants frequently mentioned the use of questions in responding to their partner’s writing, and also because their professor had suggested an approach to giving response that included asking questions, *questions* was one category of response. Some examples from the *question* category 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?” I was careful with the *questions* category, however, as there were some instances where responses were written as questions, but indicated an error needing correction. For example, Juliet asked in Ana-Lucia’s second paper, “Do you mean ‘is’?” in response to what was clearly a typographical error. Instead, I included 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, most questions were asked in a way that was designed to elicit more information. This type of response was therefore identified as both asking a question and eliciting further information designed to help with the development of the paper. (For a summary of the types of responses along with brief descriptions of each, see Table 4-2.)

The majority of the responses to student writing, despite the graduate students' claims to the contrary, were classified as editorial responses. While praise accounted for nearly a quarter of all responses, and questions for just slightly less, five of the seven categories identified through my analysis of response types dealt with issues of correction. Nearly two-thirds of all given responses dealt with what the graduate partners viewed as "mistakes" in their high-school partners' writing. This proportion confirmed, along with the description of 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 changes accordingly.

### **Beliefs and classroom writing instruction**

Table 4-2. 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 parts of speech, 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.
Structure	Any response relating to an issue of writing convention and specifying clarity, such as sentence 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 <i>criticism</i> were about style and preference.

One of the most surprising aspects of the entire study of the Online Writing Partnership was the revelation of the belief that revision in writing was not only rare in the writing processes of the five study participants, but their beliefs about the process of writing largely did not include the notion of revision. In their interviews and writings, the study participants painted a picture of revision as an activity done in class as the last step before submitting a final draft.

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, I 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. This experience with academic writing, as discussed in chapter two, is not uncommon among college undergraduates.

Claire was the most experienced of the five participants as a writer. 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.” Most of the participants to some degree believed their own writing was something that did not require revision. Nikki viewed revision “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 calls the revision process “retyping.”

These beliefs about revision revealed the participants' views about how they envisioned writing instruction in the classroom. 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 the student's writing, and through revision the student corrected those errors—otherwise known as editing. For the graduate students, revision did not resemble the recursive process described by the literature in chapter two. Rather, revision was teacher-assisted proofreading followed by re-writing.

There were some instances when response was given to the high-school students that did not focus merely on error correction. Frequently the participants would reflect on how very difficult it was to communicate to their partner how verb tense could change the meaning of a passage, or how writing in the second person could be a powerful technique but was difficult to maintain. I do not contend that in my analysis of the data there is no evidence of belief that a teacher, working with a student writer, can assist them in ways other than pointing out “mistakes.” However, it was clear that revision as illustrated in chapter two was dissimilar to what the study participants believed revision to be, nor did this concept of revision reflect the graduate students' beliefs about the role of revision in the classroom.

### **What Influences did Participant Attitudes toward Technology have on the Experiences of the Online Writing Partnership?**

Originally the technological aspects of mentoring student writers in an online environment were what prompted me to undergo this study. It was not long, however,

when I discovered that technology was but one thread of many contributing to the complex and fascinating experiences of the participants in the Online Writing Partnership. But technology holds a particularly important place in this study, and attitudes toward technology and the role it played in the partnership did have a great impact on the experiences of the five study participants. Through an analysis of the statements and writing of the five graduate students, it was possible to place them on a continuum illustrating their relative comfort level toward technology in general, and the Attitudes Toward Technology

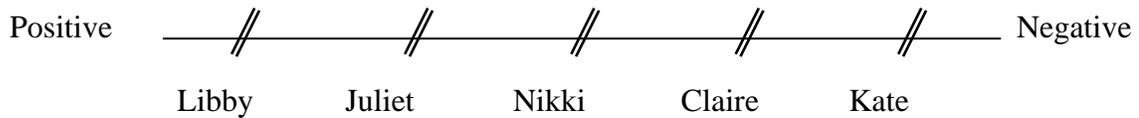


Figure 4-4. Continuum reflecting participants' overall attitude toward technology as revealed through Online Writing Partnership.

online communication technologies featured in the partnership specifically. This continuum can be found in Figure 4-4.

Each of the four context threads identified by the participants impacted the attitudes they had toward technology, especially as technology was used for writing instruction in the online partnership. In the following section I examine each context thread in an across case discussion pertaining to question three, “What influences did participant attitudes toward technology have on the experiences of the Online Writing Partnership?”

### **Attitudes toward technology and social presence**

Examining the nature of social presence in terms of the technology of the online partnership was enlightening in what it revealed about the participants' views of the nature of social presence in a relationship. For most of the participants the biggest fault of the online communication technologies such as email were those aspects of face-to-

face communication that could not be translated to text-based communication. In the minds of the graduate students text-based communication technologies were insufficient when communicating for the purpose of writing instruction. As a result, when complaints arose concerning the felt “distance” between the graduate students and their high-school partners, these complaints were rarely about quantitative, measurable distance but of a more qualified distance that reflected the experience of being separated from each other.

Difficulties felt as a result of weak social presence with the high-school student they were to mentor in writing appeared mostly through the frustrations of having to translate communicative functions such as hand gestures and facial expressions into text-based equivalents. Kate spoke of eliciting laughter and watching as her classmates “imitate[d]” her propensity to “speak with [her] hands” in equal measure to her words. Juliet was the one participant who seemed least bothered by this distance, saying of the partnership “it is what it is,” yet stating that she was limited to “knowing” her partner only through the words written in their papers. Nikki was adamant in her beliefs that the mere visage of partners would have improved the experience of the partnership on both ends. Repeatedly the graduate participants gave examples of how distance, both actual and perceived, revealed beliefs that technology within the Online Writing Partnership created obstacles to effective communication.

There were some instances where the distance between partners provided benefits to the graduate students. As discussed in her individual thread, Libby felt that using chat rooms to discuss papers had an inherent benefit in decreasing the rate of communication and forcing the participants to move at a pace more conducive to thoughtfully discussing

writing. Juliet also implied that the distance in both time and space between her and her partner allowed her to review areas of grammatical uncertainty, areas for which Juliet felt she might need a “refresher course.”

Overall, the thread of perceived social presence (or lack thereof) had unfavorable effects on the experiences of the partnership for the five study participants, and they saw the technologies of the partnership as responsible. There were few wholesale attacks on the insufficiencies of text-only communications. However, the point was made clear on a number of occasions that because of the limitations created by text-only relationships, misunderstandings between partners were common and created an atmosphere of frustration. While the participants understood that distance was only one aspect that contributed to the feeling that their partners were not present during interactions, there was a tendency to lay the bulk of responsibility for this felt separation at the feet of the technologies used in the Online Writing Partnership. This frustration led to a perceived decrease in motivation not only on the side of the high-school students, as Nikki pointed out, but also a lack of motivation on the part of the graduate students themselves, who at times “gave in” to the sense of limitations imposed by the technology and did little more than insert perfunctory comments into the drafts of papers sent their way.

### **Attitudes toward technology and relationships**

However the technology might have actually affected the graduate participants’ ability to connect with their high-school partners, it was undeniable that these relationships were viewed as impersonal at best, and sometimes strained. Much was said about the rapport between partners, or lack thereof, in the interviews. While only Nikki said in her interview sessions that she felt there was no connection at all with her partner, virtually all mentions of “relationship” by the five study participants were qualified with

limitations and acknowledgements that these relationships were not what they would have been had the technology allowed the ease of communication that the participants assumed occurred naturally in face-to-face communication.

Frequently the graduate participants discussed their relationships in terms of how they were influenced by the technology of the Online Writing Partnership. Libby for example looked at text-based communication as mirroring the editorial aspect of writing. In other words, the conversations Libby and her partner had were constructed in the same manner as the papers that were the subject of those conversations. For Libby, this was a benefit to the relationship, for although it increased the length in time between interactions, it provided for her and her partner an opportunity to avoid misunderstandings. In Libby's mind, the technologies eliminated to a degree the need to ask for clarification:

But in a chat, you can do the same thing [seek clarification], but you can avoid some of that by editing what you type in the first place. Does that make sense? So, making your comments more specific in the first place is a benefit of chatting ...

For Kate, the opposite was true. Because she felt so strongly about her need for other, non-verbal forms of communication, being able to avoid miscommunication in typed conversation was beside the point. The fact remained that the technology of the partnership was largely viewed by the participants as responsible for the types of bonds they formed, whether they were beneficial or not. The technologies made available for the Online Writing Partnership were viewed, in terms of the relationships between partners, not for what they provided but for what they lacked. While connections were established between partners, even if they proved adequate for writing instruction as was the case with Juliet and Libby, these connections were not the relationships the participants expected would develop in ideal circumstances. The belief among the five

study participants was that technologies such as email, chat rooms, and others of the Online Writing Partnership could not provide these circumstances.

### **Attitudes toward technology and role/authority**

As discussed earlier, part of the dissatisfaction of the participants in their overall experiences was the feeling that their role in the Online Writing Partnership was vague and not completely under their control. In one of the clearest examples of how context threads were interwoven in the experience of the Online Writing Partnership, all the participants pointed to ways in which the technologies shaped their roles. Kate was most upfront with this admission, stating that because of the way she perceived the partnership was set up, she established her role in the partnership accordingly. In her individual thread Kate was quoted as saying she didn't see her role in the partnership extending beyond the insertion of minimal comments in her partner's paper and returning that paper via email. Yet Kate was also the most disappointed of all the study participants with how superficial the relationship she had with her partner seemed. Later in that interview session she clarified how the technology influenced her perceived role:

I think it would have been beneficial with the chat room if we'd [been] critiquing a little different, instead of email form, like either or. If I had had the paper in front of me and she'd had it there, and we could do the voice thing, that would help, or even type...if it was a conversation then through the paper, step by step, now you see what you're doing here. Then I would, then that would have been a good thing. But, the fact that I did all the comments and then just emailed them to her and she read them, there wasn't...that was the conversation. You know? And it happened in a lump as opposed to back and forth. Which is what I think the bulletin board or the chat room would be good for. So I can see them working well, but not, I mean together but, a little differently. Like, email less. If email was only meant to like, email the copy in the beginning, then that's fine. But then when it, when I'm giving all the feedback for you now...

Kate felt that the assignment of the partnership required little more than her participation through email. As a result, she was less motivated to move beyond email, even though she saw the potential benefits of doing so.

The example above was indicative of what the study participants saw as the influence of technology in determining what role they would play in the partnership. Libby compared the way the partnership was set up, and thus the way she approached her role in the partnership, as similar to the experiences she herself had had in high school, when she emailed papers to her older brother for advice; Nikki felt the process lacked the person of the mentor, which she felt was her greatest asset in writing instruction and alluded to her felt sense of anonymity which she believed was caused by the technologies of the partnership. Although each participant had different reactions to their perceived role, and each defined their roles in slightly different ways, all five of the graduate participants' views of *role* revealed the belief that technology provided a partial definition of those roles in the Online Writing Partnership.

### **Attitudes toward technology and expectations of the classroom**

With the exception of Juliet, each of the participants in the Online Writing Partnership was anticipating their eventual entry into the classroom as full-time English teachers. Juliet was already in the classroom, but her situation was similar to the others. Each study participant was enrolled in the class to prepare them for classroom teaching, and it was natural that they would look at the Online Writing Partnership through the lens of their individual expectations concerning the physical classroom. This was never more evident than when looking at how expectations of the physical classroom revealed the participants' views and attitudes concerning technology.

The Online Writing Partnership represented the unfamiliar to the graduate students. A typical reaction therefore was to look for some area of familiarity with which to approach an understanding of their experiences working online with student writers. Invariably this reference point was the rather generic “physical classroom,” which encompassed a mental manifestation of not only what the graduate students were learning in their educational degree programs, but also their cumulative experiences in classrooms as observers, sometimes as teachers, and as students themselves.

During the interviews, the participants would give me their “take” on technology integration in the classroom and would draw on their experiences in the Online Writing Partnership. Afterward they would apply certain elements from the partnership to a more conventional understanding of how teaching and learning happen within the “four walls” of an English/Language Arts classroom. Typically, these applications dealt with ways of making instruction either easier or more efficient. Kate described her ideal classroom in a discussion early in the partnership experience, even including some elements of online communication. However she stressed her belief that the value of technology in the classroom was as a way of “reduc[ing] paper.” Libby saw computers as being an aid in the administration of her classroom:

I think anything, like there would be a way for students and teachers to communicate or even keep in touch with things like, business-type stuff that takes up a lot of class time some times.

Libby further speculated that the online communicative functions she was experiencing in the partnership could assist in avoiding some of the pitfalls of attendance and assignment due dates she saw as a part of teaching:

Or if the student’s sick you can say, well you can email your paper to me, it’s still due Friday, or whatever.

Even if specific examples of translation from online environments to physical classrooms were not forthcoming, the five study participants often claimed to benefit “just from thinking about how to use” the technologies of email and online bulletin boards emphasized during the Online Writing Partnership. This was especially true for Juliet, who did not believe much of the actual experience of using email and chat rooms for writing instruction would translate to her five-year-old students. Still, she acknowledged the value of the brainstorming that resulted from her experience of working online with her high-school partner in providing new ideas for her teaching.

The graduate participants considered their new perspectives on the use of communication technologies for instruction as ways of “cleaning up” the experiences in the classroom. For example, nearly every participant in this study expressed their appreciation for not having to read handwritten papers. Libby expressed a unique perspective on this point, stating that not only was it nice to have papers typed “nice and neat,” but that in the case of word processing, it might even improve the effectiveness of her teaching. She felt able to insert comments exactly where they belonged using the comment-card function of Microsoft Word.

While there were many aspects of technology that were viewed in light of how it could make teaching writing more convenient (albeit in light of methods of in-class instruction), no single technological aspect of the Online Writing Partnership was more universally beloved by the five graduate students than that of the comment function of Microsoft Word. Each and every time I examined the data I collected, I was struck by how devoted each participant was to this rather minor (at least in my mind) function of Microsoft’s flagship word processing application. Some were not aware of the function

before beginning the partnership, and Juliet was so taken aback by it that she admitted talking to friends about being able to add “little virtual Post-Its” to documents. The comment function alternated between a pleasant convenience for Kate and Claire, to empowering for Libby and Nikki, to humorously “life-altering” for Juliet.

The strongest belief about technology revealed through the participants’ expectations of the physical classroom was that technological approaches to teaching writing should not replace “traditional” writing instruction. Rather, on a frequent and consistent basis, each of the participants expressed their belief that technologies such as email and even Microsoft Word’s comment function should at best only enhance the experience of in-class writing development.

Kate, who was highly critical of the effect she believed the technology had on her relationship with her partner, noted that she saw the online technologies working “well in conjunction with an actual working relationship,” even that it might be more productive to submit work in an online fashion such as email. However, she was mindful to point out in her reflective essay that:

I do not think that teachers should rely on online feedback when they communicate with students, but that it should be combined with classroom instruction.

Technological additions to writing instruction were fine, as long as the foundation for teaching was firmly based on “traditional” classroom methods. Libby expressed similar ideas, believing that the communication technologies of the Online Writing Partnership could “enhance what’s happening in the classroom,” but these technologies could not replace classroom approaches to teaching writing. Nikki admitted that she saw computer-based instruction as inevitable in the future, but so much of her idea of teaching

centered around her own physical persona that the idea that a student could be helped without the actual presence of the teacher for inspiration was anathema to her beliefs.

Although the spectrum of attitudes and beliefs concerning technology and its role in the teaching of writing were varied, the interwoven thread of an expected physical classroom suggested a uniform belief that at best, online communication technologies could serve as an enhancement to writing instruction. Although at times defensive toward what they saw as too-fast modernization of the writing process, most of the participants believed that there was a place for computers in the writing classroom, if not the online technologies that frustrated so many of them during the experience of the Online Writing Partnership.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of the study data, organized by the four guiding questions of this study:

1. What kinds of experiences do prospective English teachers preparing for the teaching profession have in distance, online partnerships with secondary writers?
2. What do these experiences reveal about these prospective teachers' views of teachers and teaching writing?
3. What influences appear to exist between experience with and attitude toward technology, and in what way did these attitudes affect the partnership?
4. What contextual threads appear most salient to these prospective English teachers in the success (or lack thereof) of this online partnership?

In the first section of this chapter, analysis focused on the data as they informed the individual cases of the graduate students' participation in the Online Writing Partnership. For a more detailed summary of these cases, see Table 4-1. The following is a summary of the major points emerging from the discussion of the study data:

1. The overall experiences of the five study participants, viewed across the individual cases, revealed that:

The participants in this study reported a sense that the relationships with their partners were inhibited by a perceived lack of social presence in the online context;

Although the degree varied among individuals, the participants viewed limitations of text-only communication as negatively influencing their satisfaction of the experience of the Online Writing Partnership as a means of helping them prepare to be teachers of writing;

Graduate participants' beliefs regarding student/teacher interaction largely revolved around the notion that teacher and student must be physically present in order for writing instruction to take place fully and effectively;

A persistent belief held by the graduate participants was that relationships in a physical classroom happened with little effort put forth by either teacher or student; and that consequently,

The distance created by the felt lack of social presence was responsible for the inadequate instructional relationships experienced by the graduate students.

2. Through participation in the Online Writing Partnership, the graduate student participants revealed beliefs

That student/teacher relationships, as it pertained to writing instruction, were ones in which the teacher served as editor and the students made corrections to their writing based on the errors identified by the teacher;

That writing instruction was best accomplished through face-to-face interaction;

That authority in writing instruction derived from the graduate students' experiences writing, both academically and professionally;

That revision as understood by the graduate students was not what theory and best practices show revision to be, but rather is closer to the concept of editing and proofreading.

3. In their experiences with the Online Writing Partnership, the five graduate student participants attitudes toward technology manifested as

Frustration toward the perceived lack of personal connection between partners as a result of the physical and emotional distance imposed by the communication technologies used;

Decreased motivation toward participation in the partnership beyond the minimum requirements of the methods course due to vaguely defined roles and a perceived lack of authority in those roles;

Inclinations toward using technology in the classroom in ways that assisted with managerial-type routines but that did not threaten the participants' previously held conceptions of what writing instruction in a classroom should be.

4. While the individual experiences of the five study participants varied greatly, four significant contextual threads impacted the participants' experiences: perceived social presence, understanding of relationships between teachers and students, the sense of role and authority of a teacher, and preconceived expectations of classrooms processes.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of four preservice teachers and one practicing teacher in an Online Writing Partnership with high-school students dual-enrolled in a community college, and to examine what these experiences revealed about preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching, writing instruction, and the use of technology for instructional purposes. To this aim, I conducted extensive interviews (both formal and informal), collected documentary data from both the graduate students and their high-school partners, and kept a detailed research journal. In this chapter I summarize the results of the study, discuss the limitations of those results, and provide implications for practice in both secondary and post-secondary education. Finally, I propose a series of questions for future research.

### **Summary of the Results**

Each of the five graduate students experienced the Online Writing Partnership in ways that reflected their individual experiences, beliefs, and attitudes not only about online technologies, but also about education in general and writing instruction in particular. However, as unique as the individual cases were, there were significant similarities across cases, providing for this online environment a view of *surround context*, described by Lindfors (1999) as a collective “pool[ing] of resources” (p. 218) from which all participants can draw in creating and interpreting meaning. Looking at the individual cases collectively, those aspects of context deemed salient by the participants of the Online Writing Partnership were: their perception of social presence

between partners, their understanding of the relationships between teachers and students, their sense of the role and authority of a teacher, and their preconceived expectations of classrooms processes.

An examination of the verbatim transcripts of interviews with participants revealed that participation in the Online Writing Partnership was a valuable experience in preparing them to teach, albeit to varying degrees. The participants felt that social presence, or the emotional connection felt between the graduate participant and their high-school partner, was not at a level high enough to be satisfying. While some felt this gap was an unfortunate but unavoidable side effect of the nature of the Online Writing Partnership, for others such as Kate, the lack of social presence was the lynchpin to an overall feeling of dissatisfaction with the experience of mentoring a developing writer online.

The manner in which communication took place between partners was entirely text-based, and was comprised of emails (with drafts of papers attached) between partners. The five graduate student participants perceived this medium of communication as limiting and thus negatively influencing of their ability to assist their high-school partner's writing development; although some participants, particularly Libby, saw benefits to communicating with their partner via text, to varying degrees each participant's frustration with text-only communication led to decreased motivation to participate fully in the assignment.

As the experiences of each participant were viewed across cases, a weave context was revealed, comprised of the salient contextual features common to the five graduate students (Derry & Steinkuehler, 2003; Dourish, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lindfors,

1999). One contextual thread woven among the study participants was the impact their beliefs about the nature of teaching had on the partnership experience. One such belief was that the graduate students' perceptions of student/teacher relationships were universally positive, and these relationships were necessary in order for effective writing instruction to take place. But the five graduate participants reported virtually no understanding of the work involved in developing relationships with students, instead implying that connections between teachers and students developed merely through physical proximity to each other. There was no physical classroom to confine the participants in the Online Writing Partnership, and because each participant's frame of reference for teaching included a teacher physically present with students, it was difficult for the participants to feel that any relationship had been established at all. As a result, most of the participants felt the relationships that did develop were less successful for writing instruction; some, such as Nikki, felt the relationship they had with their partner was so weak that instruction was not possible at all.

The study data for the five graduate participants coincided with prior research suggesting the single biggest influence on preservice teachers' beliefs about education and writing instruction come from their own experiences as students (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Phelps, 1989). When asked to describe their experiences with writing in school, each participant recounted memories that, while individual, were of a theme; that writing was primarily done in one sitting, and the teacher's job in writing instruction was to pass on knowledge of grammar rules, identifying in students' papers instances when those rules had been broken. Revision as understood by the study participants reflected little of the recursive *process* of composition identified by previous

research on writing (Emig, 1994; Perl, 1994). Rather, for the study participants, revision resembled what would more accurately be identified as *proofreading* or editorial work.

While the graduate students readily admitted almost exclusive use of computer technologies in the preparation of their own writing, the results of this study suggest that their prior attitudes toward technology had less to do with their attitudes toward the technology of the Online Writing Partnership than did the recognized differences between mentoring writing in an online environment and how each participant envisioned writing instruction would take place in their future, physical classroom. Rather, the communication technologies used by the Online Writing Partnership served to bring those differences to the fore, and as a result often became the “scapegoats” for the frustrations most participants reported having. The views of technology in general, and the online technologies of the partnership in particular, traversed a wide spectrum. Some participants felt that technology was an impersonal substitute for “traditional” student/teacher interaction, while others saw technology’s role in the English classroom as being appropriate for non-instructional tasks, such as keeping attendance and grades, and communicating with students regarding homework or missed assignments. For all of the graduate participants, regardless of their reported feelings about technology and its integration in the classroom, online communication technologies served to decrease the sense of social presence, resulting in some degree of frustration, as well as decreased motivation toward participation by some graduate participants.

### **Limitations of Results**

In this study I examined the context of a particular event within a larger teacher preparation program. While it is possible to recognize, through the experiences of the participants in this study, similarities to other experiences, what Stake (quoted in

Merriam, 1998) describes as the process of naturalistic generalization, the findings of this study are not ones that can be generalized to other teacher preparation programs.

Specifically, the Online Writing Partnership was a component of a program that in many ways is unique, and necessarily any conclusions drawn from this study apply only to this particular instance. However, I believe that certain implications can be drawn from this study that apply to teacher education as well as the teaching of writing in secondary schools, and I will discuss these implications in the following section.

The participants in this study had widely varying experiences and provided five unique perspectives on the partnership. However, all of the participants in this study shared certain characteristics that limited the scope of this study. They were all women, were of approximately the same age, and all shared similar ethnic backgrounds (Caucasian/European). While this group of participants represented the majority of those enrolled in this particular teacher education program, and particularly the methods course that provided the “pool” from which study participants were drawn, it was not wholly representative of other races and genders enrolled in teacher education as a whole.

Another limitation of this study was the connection between me and the online experience that was at the heart of my investigation. As the co-creator of the Online Writing Partnership, and as the one who introduced the partnership to the classes that would participate, there was a large degree of association between the partnership and me. Although I played no such role, in some ways I was viewed as an instructor in the class. This point is evident when looking at the decidedly more blunt tone of the documentary sources of data, especially the reflection papers turned in to the course instructor. These papers were written for a different audience than the one the

participants had in their interview sessions. To a participant, the graduate students reported to me having had a positive experience in the Online Writing Partnership. However, the attitude toward the partnership was markedly different in the written reflections. Teaching has been described as one of the “caring professions,” and I suspect that the study participants chose to soften their words when offering criticisms to me. The words written in the reflection pieces were not being offered directly to me, and were more blunt and more critical.

The time available for exploring a phenomenon is often a limitation with case studies. There is simply never enough time, and researchers can always think of one more data source to pursue, if only there were more hours in the day. While I believe that for the purposes of this study the data I collected are sufficient, I also believe that there is much more to be said about the context of online educational environments. I will return to this point in the section on implications for future research.

### **Discussion of Results**

When I first decided to return to school and continue my education, it was largely because of experiences I had using technology in my ninth-grade classrooms. I was fascinated with the impact online discussion forums made as a part of literature study with my ninth-grade honors students. To these students, the online forums were something *other* than class work, and although they were required to participate, posting their comments about the books they were reading spurred them to inhabit this online space in ways they never inhabited our classroom. The forums belonged to my students; they ran the show online. They were learning, but they were learning on their own terms. It was, in a sense, magical, a source of endless wondering for me. I wanted to know why,

and to a large degree I entered my doctoral program to pursue my curiosity surrounding technology integration in English classes.

A few years later, an opportunity arose to work with future teachers as they mentored student writers using online technologies. This was exactly what I had come back to school to do! I anticipated that the excitement I felt toward my ninth graders' experiences would be reflected in the reactions of the preservice teachers to this "cutting edge" approach, and how *cool* it would be for them, to respond to genuine student writing as part of their learning process. I expected the technological experience to excite the future teachers, sparking an internal motivation to participate beyond the levels of even my original ninth-grade classes.

The Online Writing Partnership, a coordinated effort between a university methods course on the teaching of language and composition in a teacher education program and a community college-based high-school dual-enrollment program, was exactly what I hoped it would be, and little of what I expected. It did in fact provide an excellent learning opportunity for future teachers, offering challenges in ways perhaps not possible in other practicum situations. But just as interestingly, the Online Writing Partnership, and subsequently this study of that event, did not unfold as I anticipated. The participants in this study, all seemingly dedicated to the teaching profession and eager to learn about themselves in learning about their chosen careers, were often frustrated rather than intrigued by their experiences working with student writing in a strictly text-based environment, and viewed the Online Writing Partnership with skepticism as to its effectiveness in providing support to developing writers. Moreover, the study

participants reported a decreased sense of motivation toward the Partnership as a result of this frustration.

The Online Writing Partnership presented to the study participants a different perspective on teaching writing, a perspective that was in contrast to many of the preconceived ideas already held by these future teachers. Because of the starkness of this contrast, there was also a high level of discomfort among participants. The unfamiliar processes of using online technologies to help developing writers became the grain of sand trapped in the oyster's shell of these preservice teachers' assumptions about teaching. At first, the technologies and their perceived limitations were an irritant and the primary focus of the participants' attention. Over time, through the process of discussing these experiences in interviews and in writing reflections, the study participants began to see how it was possible for this irritant to become wrapped in the theory given them in their writing methods course, smoothing out the rough edges where their expectations met experience. I, too, saw the pearl forming, even though it was not manifested as I had anticipated. I recognized the value of online practicum experiences in providing future teachers with opportunities to narrow their focus to one aspect of teaching, in this case writing, to implement the theory given to them in university coursework during that focused experience, and most importantly to provide experiences that prompt discussion about theory, examinations of previously held beliefs about teaching, and begin the development of important concepts for teaching, including: what it means to be a teacher, how to establish effective relationships with students, understanding writing as a process, and how to teach writing.

### **What It Means to Be a Teacher**

One of the first frustrations felt by the study participants, once the partnership had begun, centered on what their role in the partnership would be. This confusion over role stemmed in part from preconceived notions of what their role would be as teachers when they eventually entered the classroom. However, during the Online Writing Partnership, they were not teachers, and this also contributed to their frustration; in the dichotomy of their notion of the classroom, there were only the roles of teacher and student. Both the course instructor and I encouraged the participants to steer away from functioning solely as “error-finder/corrector” and instead explore ways in which to participate with their high-school partners in the thinking opportunities that writing provided. This emphasis further confounded the participants’ anticipated role in the Partnership.

Factors concerning role created difficulties for some of the participants. Kate stated early and often that her frustration with the Online Writing Partnership stemmed from confusion over her role. On one hand, she was charged by the assignment of the Online Writing Partnership to mentor a developing writer; on the other hand, she was being asked to avoid doing so in the way she assumed was appropriate, by attending to grammar. Nikki also knew that her role was not to proofread her partner’s writing, and this conflicting approach to her understanding of the teacher’s role ultimately led to her admitting (in a conspiratorial whisper) that she regularly broke this rule for the benefit of her partner.

I wondered about the frustrations experienced by the study participants, and what it revealed about their understanding of what it means to be a teacher. The participants seemed genuinely perplexed as to where they “fit” in the Online Writing Partnership. They understood that their high-school partner had a teacher responsible for grading, and

that they were participating in a supporting role. And in spite of the friction between what they would like to have done with grammar and what they were encouraged to do instead, the participants in this study were able to provide the type of support envisioned by the partnership. While more than a quarter of the responses given to their partners focused on some form of corrective instruction, responses that pointed out errors in grammar or mechanics, over half of the responses were not focused on technical aspects of writing but instead were attempts to ask questions of the writer, to draw the student into a discussion of the thought processes involved in the students' composing process. Even while Kate insisted that she could be of little use to her student as the partnership was set up, she was able to give her partner, Ana-Lucia, encouragement and at the same time ask questions to spur Ana-Lucia's development: "You have done a good job expressing your excitement about the event. What are some other things about it that make you remember it?" Likewise, Claire admitted to seeing little hope for getting Charlie, her partner, up to speed with grammar in his writing, yet she found a way to encourage Charlie's use of descriptive language.

So then, what was the difference? The participants were confused about role, yet largely fulfilled the role envisioned for them. What this indicated to me was not that there was misplaced frustration; their complaints did not seem to stem from a desire to be turned loose on the grammar mistakes of their partners. Rather, by being asked to take a markedly different approach to responding to student writing than they anticipated, the participants in this study discovered a feeling of discomfort arising from an inherent contrast between their initial beliefs about the role of teacher and the role of writing

instructor that emerged from the theory of the methods class in combination with the experiences of working with a student writer.

Studies have shown that students entering a teacher education program do so with very definite conceptions of the “job” of the teacher, a role that they hope to fill (Burant & Kirby, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2000). Moreover, these roles are often formed not by theories of learning and pedagogy, but by what future teachers have seen while they were students. Further, in the case of this study’s participants, much of what served as models for their own understanding of teaching came from classrooms where revision, as a component of writing process, did not occur often—if it occurred at all. Libby described the writing in her own academic experiences as a “one and done” approach, where a paper was submitted, and only a grade was returned. Libby’s experiences with writing are not unique; rather, as Applebee et al. (Applebee, Auten, & Lehr, 1981) have shown, this aspect of the teacher role in writing instruction is common. Because the participants had no experience with multiple drafts as part of classroom writing instruction, they saw their role, and the role of teacher generally, as one to address all problem areas of writing at once, after submission of a paper occurred.

The study participants’ concept of the role of teacher also arose from their understanding of the student’s role. While their expectation for the role of the teacher was largely determined by what the participants observed in their own schooling, their own movement through the schooling process determined how they understood the role of the student. This understanding of the role of the student, and how that impacted their understanding of the role of the teacher, was another source of friction within the Online Writing Partnership. For the study participants, the role of their high-school partners was

clearly defined when it came to writing instruction. It was largely the students' responsibility to read the comments left by their graduate partner, and make changes accordingly. When the high-school students failed to do so, there was a good deal of reported tension. During their participation in the Online Writing Partnership, the graduate students had to view each role, teacher and student, from their own single perspective. They saw their role as mentor through the lens of the teachers who had taught them; their partners they saw through the lenses of the students they themselves had been. When, in either role, expectations were not met, it caused anxiety and frustration, often leading the participant to blame the Partnership in general and the technology used during the Partnership in particular. For example, Claire noted that when she pointed out an error to Charlie, her partner, he corrected it. However, her assumption was that he would look for other areas where he had made a similar mistake and correct those, too. Claire described herself as the type of student who would have taken her teacher's suggestion and looked for other areas that would have benefited; she seemed disappointed that Charlie was not this kind of student. When I examined Charlie's writing with Claire's comments inserted, I noted an area that reflected what she was talking about. Her comment did note that the specific error she was pointing out was one that Charlie made frequently. In the final draft of the same paper, I noted that Charlie had corrected the error, but only in that particular instance. Claire was generous enough to conclude that Charlie was not the same kind of student that she was. Nikki was not as kind with her partner. In describing her own experiences in school, Nikki exhibited very high regard for the authority of her teachers and professors. She reported that as a student, she knew her teachers were there to "give [her] what [she] needed to

know,” and Nikki characterized herself as motivated by this understanding to do what they asked of her. For Nikki, the fact that her partner Shannon did not make all the suggested corrections was not an indication of Shannon’s ownership of the writing, but an indication that Shannon lacked motivation to perform as Nikki felt students should perform.

Kate rather bluntly noted in her reflection paper after the Partnership concluded that she “would mark her [partner] off for the places she refused to consider the revisions” were she the teacher, revealing that, while participating in the role of mentor during the Online Writing Partnership, she was imagining herself in the role of teacher. Thinking about how one would approach being the teacher in a situation, while not actually occupying that role is one of the benefits of experiences such as the Online Writing Partnership. By providing an opportunity to focus exclusively on one aspect of the teacher’s job, in this case helping developing writers through revision, online experiences can provide future teachers with the opportunity to see themselves in the role of teacher in a limited, specific teaching situation. However, merely seeing themselves as the teacher is not enough; because the Online Writing Partnership was a component of a methods course, Kate could be guided by the instructor to examine *why* she would mark her students in such a way, to question the theory informing that approach, and to consider other theories for fulfilling the role of teacher effectively.

### **Developing Working Relationships with Students**

When I was in the seventh grade, I remember studying the development of the scientific method and how it evolved out of a process of observing the world and then asking questions. What I remember more than even the scientific method, however, was the example used as an illustration of fallacious reasoning centuries ago. A common

assumption was that a wet rag left in the corner of the room would eventually give rise to what the textbook called “spontaneous generation” of mice. Somehow, merely from throwing a wet rag into a corner, you could magically produce a family of mice. I remember wondering how anyone could think there was nothing more to explain the advent of a mouse infestation.

I was reminded of the anecdote of spontaneous generation when reviewing the data of this study, however, when I realized three things. First, the participants in this study clearly saw effective student/teacher relationships as being essential to successful teaching. Also, the participants did not feel that effective relationships with their high-school partners had developed, and the cause for this failure was laid at the feet of the technologies used in the Online Writing Partnership. Kate was most adamant in her assertion that being limited to text-only communication simply would not permit the establishment of sufficiently close relationships needed for writing instruction. Libby acknowledged that she did maintain relationships over email and through instant messaging, but that these were relationships that had originated through face-to-face contact. The felt need of face-to-face contact in developing relationships was my third realization, for although the study participants were able to respond to student writing in the Online Writing Partnership, none of them felt the relationships that had developed as a result of this work even approached the level of rapport that they would have achieved had they been permitted to meet with their partners in person.

For some in this study, merely being physically present was all that was required for effective relationships to spontaneously generate. There was a range of comments to this effect: Nikki stated that merely being able to “put a face” to the comments she was

giving would inspire her partner more; Kate was insistent about her need for the variety of non-verbal forms of communication in order for two people to understand each other. But it was Libby's comment about needing to use the telephone to set up an online chat that was most revealing regarding the participants' beliefs about relationship development in an online context.

Libby was one of only two participants who attempted to use the online chat rooms to communicate with her partner, albeit with very limited success. When discussing those attempts with me, she laughed at the redundancy she felt in needing to use the phone to set up the chat appointment; trying to coordinate through email lacked the immediacy that she felt was necessary to negotiate a time when both she and her partner could chat.

When I had devised the online mentoring assignment, I believed I was providing options that would compensate for what text-only communications would lack. I was aware that email lacked the synchronicity of time in communication, that connecting with partners via email could span days and that sometimes a more immediate form of communication would be necessary. Therefore, I set up chat rooms to provide a venue for more immediate conversations. What I did not anticipate was that the participants would be so confounded by the notion of using these technologies to alleviate their discomfort regarding asynchronous communication. It was not that the study participants did not know how to use chat rooms—they had all done so before. Rather, they had never used chat rooms in an educational context, and were unsure of how to negotiate such an experience.

Kate inadvertently drew my attention to one benefit of the Online Writing Partnership by repeatedly stating that she was forced to think about what she said to her partner, and consider how her words might be taken. She saw this self-monitoring as a detriment to the overall process of building rapport, that she would have to spend so much time wondering if her statements were being taken the wrong way. In Kate's view, having to be overly cautious toward the possible meanings of her statements created a sense of artificiality, because in her own life she did not have to consider how her friends would react to the things she said. Indeed, in this same conversation she admitted to being caustic sometimes around her friends but because they knew her they did not take her remarks with offense. Kate did not like the care she had to give to avoid this tone when communicating through writing with her partner. The partnership opened the door to challenging Kate to examine the work of getting to know her students as she had gotten to know her friends.

Kate's complaint about the text-only approach illustrates a value of experiences like the Online Writing Partnership. So much about preservice teachers' views about teaching are formed by what they see in their own education, but like the assumption that tossing wet rags in the corner of a room would cause mice to generate, there is often more going on that is not immediately visible without critical reflection. In this study, the participants experienced having to communicate with their partners without the familiar, comfortable aspects of communication they were used to. The Online Writing Partnership did not provide a way to compensate for facial expressions, intonation, or body language, a few of the suggested "shortcomings" given by the study participants. All of the contextual features involved in building rapport with students are important,

but as with the “spontaneously generated” mice, a beginning teacher has so much to deal with that the only concern very well could be that there are mice present, and not how they got there. Experiences such as the Online Writing Partnership can create in preservice teachers a sense of discomfort regarding the establishment of working relationships with students. With focused, critical discussion as part of a methods course incorporating limited online instructional experiences, these opportunities can allow future teachers to begin examining what teacher behaviors contribute to developing effective relationships with students in the first place, particularly when working with student writing.

The frustrations that arose through the limited means of communication 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. Libby’s need to phone her partner to set up a chat meeting, Kate’s need for non-verbal cues, and Nikki’s belief that associating a face with responses to writing were examples of the participants’ understanding of elements that contribute to social presence. Because these elements were not available in an online experience limited to text communication, 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 contextual features online communication

(such as email) seemed to lack, these same elements can also be lacking 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. This was the extent of the face-to-face writing instruction so often used as a basis for understanding student/teacher relationships, which in turn led to the discomfort each felt in the “inadequate” relationships with their high-school partners; yet there was arguably less social presence in these college classrooms than in the Online Writing Partnership.

What online mentoring experiences can offer, in addition to a narrow focus on one particular aspect of teaching, is an opportunity to discuss those elements of teaching not immediately evident from future teachers’ observations of their own experiences as students. In the example above, there is little evidence of rapport between student and professor. 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.”) Certainly there was more going on regarding relationship development than the participants realized at the time. By participating in the Online Writing Partnership, and especially by participating in the study of that experience, these future teachers were given an opportunity to discuss what they felt was missing with regard to developing effective student relationships, and in turn explore what was required for this development to take place. Kate’s comment that she did not like having to attend to her own communication tendencies becomes more enlightening in

this respect, because it reveals that there is more required than just being present in order to develop the trust and mutual respect necessary for effective writing instruction. Few friendships can survive when one party delivers caustic remarks without the benefit of context. There is the need for consideration of the way words are used, the tone used with those words, and other factors that determine how and to what extent relationships between teachers and students develop.

The felt need for effective relationships was genuine on the part of the study participants; however, it also served as an excuse for why each felt frustrated by the experience, and for some was an excuse for why they did not feel obligated to participate fully. Kate was particularly adamant about the need for a closer, more personal relationship in which she understood her partner beyond what her partner revealed in writing. Certainly, Kate is correct in this. Relationships are important aspects of writing instruction because while the mechanisms of writing are social (Emig, 1977; 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 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 person can be invaluable for understanding the needs of students in developing their writing (Daiker, 1989). Providing future teachers with opportunities such as online mentoring of developing writers, perhaps even because of the discomfort initially felt as a result of communicating in unfamiliar ways, may help preservice teachers to develop communicative competencies that avoid assumptions of spontaneously generated social presence, regardless of context.

### **Understanding Writing as a Process**

In planning for the project, the professor of the methods class and I had determined to emphasize the importance of revision when working with student writers, to encourage the preservice teachers to move away from focusing on the grammatical and mechanical mistakes in student writing and begin to help in the process of writing *development* by asking questions and seeking to engage their partners in discussions about the writing. By directing their participation in this way, we were asking them to look at writing in a very different way than they were accustomed to.

Perl and Wilson (1994) describe the writing process as recursive, that moving forward in writing development happens as a result of looking back at the work that has gone on before. This process involves the writer engaging herself or himself in the text, and changing, developing, altering the writing of that text as the need arises and their thoughts develop. Yet this view of writing was virtually unknown to the study participants before entering their teacher education program. Kate viewed revision as a procedure developing writers needed because they lacked a familiarity with the rules associated with good writing. Claire said that while she understood writers sometimes felt the need to “move things around,” that for the most part the writing that came out through the initial drafting process was the writing with which the author felt the most connection. Nikki presented an intriguing view of revision, likening it to “an actress watching her own movies, or a chef eating their food,” and stated that she did not believe it happened very often.

The exception to these beliefs came from Libby, who was, from the beginning, fascinated with the idea of revision. It was Libby who first mentioned the phrase “one and you’re done” when referring to writing assigned in her coursework, and she felt

genuinely “cheated” that revision was something she “seldom experienced as a student,” and had only begun to see revision as more than correcting errors in grammar and mechanics. And still, Libby’s nearly euphoric embrace of revision illustrated the view of some preservice teachers that, at least until their enrollment in a teacher education program, writing was largely viewed as a product, not a process, and that mastery in writing stemmed largely from mastery of the rules of grammar and punctuation.

In this study, 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 an important step 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 the process of writing requires as much *development* of thought as it is a simple record of one’s thoughts (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.

At times during the Online Writing Partnership the study participants saw themselves as Tantalus, and grammar mistakes in their partners’ writing were the fruit just out of their reach. While they were not prohibited altogether from addressing grammatical concerns in their partners’ writing, these future teachers interpreted their instructions as such, and 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. Yet when I looked at the first paper Kate received from her partner, Ana-Lucia, I noted that there were many examples (in fact, nearly half of the comments) where Kate had responded to the content of the writing and not the grammatical and mechanical errors. In fact, the grammar had not got in the way of content after all.

The study participants' views of writing was one area of the Online Writing Partnership where the technology used was not blamed as often for the frustrations they felt. Instead, the frustrations experienced, as a result of the student writings they were to comment on, stemmed from their views of writing itself. 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. 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. Because one assumption the participants had about their partners was that as high school juniors they would have a reasonable background in grammar, then the writing produced should reflect that knowledge by containing fewer errors than were actually present. If, as Claire stated, the participants viewed writing as merely a transcript of one's thoughts, to comment on the thoughts of another might indeed seem like a presumption these future teachers may have been unwilling to make.

Writing is a complicated affair, having the capacity to be both intensely personal and boldly public all at once. It is conceivable that the private nature of some writing, along with the vulnerability often felt by developing writers unsure of their ability, could contribute to the reluctance of preservice teachers to address anything other than the grammar and mechanics of student writing. Yet the Online Writing Partnership provided opportunities, and in fact required these future teachers, to engage their partners in writing in ways other than how to fix grammar errors and punctuate more appropriately.

Ironically, the fact that for many in this study there was a decreased sense of social presence may have aided the study participants in providing more substantive response to student writing, beyond just offering suggestions for increasing the technical precision of writing. Nikki saw her partner as being less motivated to respond to feedback because “emails are just there,” and were easy to ignore because they seem separate from the person sending them. Nikki admitted that she, too, was more inclined to ignore the work of the partnership, and at times had to force herself to respond to her partner, despite initially being the most excited of the five participants to work with a student writer. To Nikki, her partner seemed more likely to ignore emails relating to writing because there was no face to put with the response she was getting. The comments and feedback that Nikki was composing could have come from anywhere, as far as Shannon was concerned, and therefore Nikki saw no inherent motivation for Shannon to do anything with this feedback. Instead of commenting on grammatical errors, Nikki would comment in a conversational manner, asking questions about the subject Shannon was writing about (always dancing), and when an error presented itself to Nikki, she would simply fix it. This correcting of her student’s writing, however, was considered by Nikki to be

something extra, something that she understood to be forbidden by the assignment of the partnership, but in her mind ultimately beneficial to her partner. In the meantime, she would “talk” to her partner through the embedded comments she inserted using Microsoft Word’s comment card feature.

Kate, too, reported that the anonymity of the partnership process, coupled with her sense that there was no way to establish a relationship with her partner even if she wanted to, limited her sense of need to participate in the Online Writing Partnership beyond the minimum amount of work required for credit in the course. More importantly, Kate felt that her frustration added to her tendency to speak brusquely, and she did so with her partner without consideration for how her brusque comments would be received. With her guard down and her frustrations high, Kate seemed more inclined, because of a decreased sense of social presence, to speak freely. Kate went so far as to suggest this phenomenon as a benefit of online writing mentorship, writing in her semester’s end reflection that the process could “dramatically cut back on extraneous conversation unrelated to writing instruction.”

It is good that preservice teachers feel a certain level of discomfort about how to view writing with respect to their student’s work. 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 it, and in contexts that were supportive of approaching writing as process. In online experiences such as the one at the center of this study, preservice teachers’ view of writing can be

challenged, and possibly adjusted so that writing can be approached as a process of learning for themselves and their students, rather than a march to discover a presumed “product,” as is often the case among teachers of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1994). Under the watchful eye of the university or college professor, the knowledgeable other, preservice teachers can gradually become more comfortable approaching writing instruction as an opportunity to assist students in exploring and developing thinking, rather than being, in Juliet’s words, “consumed with what’s wrong with [students’] writing.”

### **How Teachers Teach Writing**

Vygotsky (1978a) 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 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 where 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 the discussions of student learning was the ability to see these theories in light of actual practice. Instead, the study participants approached their work with student writing in reverse of ZPD and scaffolding, 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." Claire described her "main revision suggestions" to her partner as primarily warning against run-on sentences, and how 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, there was still a high degree of uncertainty as to how they were to approach the teaching of writing.

In perhaps the most telling comment of all concerning the approach to teaching writing, 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 on the part of many of the study participants. Here was yet another discomfort associated with student writing, this time radiating from a felt sense that while at present they were only comfortable identifying areas of grammar that were in need of correction, 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. For the participants there was a constant need to focus on grammar, something these future teachers were perfectly capable of doing on their own. Yet there was also a felt sense of need for something more, a need to attend to more than just grammar when working with student writing, as evidenced by Nikki's statement above. 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. The discomfort these future teachers felt arose from feeling that there was something more to writing instruction, but they did not know what that "more" was.

However, 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. While it took time for the study participants to recognize it, the Online Writing Partnership provided an opportunity to see the development of 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, regarding how writing was taught.

What the Online Writing Partnership provided for these future teachers was an extended experience working with individual students, an experience that can focus preservice 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 (Bransford et al., 1999; Graham & Thornley, 2000).

So many of the study participants' experiences in the Online Writing Partnership centered on frustration, discomfort, and uncertainty. Yet despite these feelings, there was a general sense of appreciation for the opportunities the partnership provided. When asked what they felt they learned from their experience mentoring student writers online, the answers among study participants leaned toward the practical experience of commenting on student papers. Libby in particular felt that her comfort level had increased greatly because of her work with Shannon. But it was Nikki who described the Online Writing Partnership in a way that reflected what I saw as the greatest value to these future teachers: "it was a different...it was a nice contrast."

Perhaps the greatest value of the Online Writing Partnership was the "nice contrast" between the future teachers' expectations of working with student writers and the reality of working with specific high-school students in an online context. But simply agitating preservice teachers is unlikely to provide the necessary experiences that facilitate the

transfer of theory learned in teacher education programs and 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 was high, talking about these 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.

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, neither should possibly valuable experiences be avoided merely because they have the potential to cause anxiety and frustration. My own bias going into this study of an online mentoring partnership may have assumed a panacea of learning for preservice teachers; the results of this study have shown that the Online Writing Partnership was anything but perfect. What, then, is the compromise position for experiences designed to help preservice teachers apply theory and pedagogy as they learn, in authentic experiences? The participants in this study were reasonable in their assessments that the Online Writing Partnership lacked many of the elements facilitating social presence that may have allowed for closer mentor/student relationships to develop. As technological innovations continue, and as access to computers and the Internet continues to become more available to schools, some options for increased social presence can be taken into account. Technology was only a part of the experience of

these study participants, however, and there are other considerations that must be made for task-specific practicum experiences such as the Online Writing Partnership to have as much impact as possible on the preparation of teachers to teach writing, or any other subject area.

In this study, the felt need for effective relationships was genuine on the part of the graduate students; however, it also served as an excuse for why each felt the experience was frustrating to them, and for some was an excuse for why they did not feel obligated to participate fully. Kate was adamant about the need for a closer, more personal relationship with her partner; she felt strongly the need to understand Ana-Lucia beyond just what was revealed in her writing. No doubt, Kate is correct in this. Relationships are important aspects of writing instruction because no matter how social the mechanisms for writing, there can be a large degree of personal revelation in writing. The trust established through nurtured relationships can help a student be more receptive to what otherwise might be considered “criticisms” of one’s thinking. Likewise, for a teacher to understand who a student is as a person can be invaluable for understanding the needs of a student in developing her/his writing.

The weak bonds between partners in this study were blamed largely on the imposed limitations of the technologies provided for use. It was hard to tell, however, just how much of the blame was deserved because the chat rooms and bulletin boards provided to enhance the experiences in the partnership went virtually ignored. Relationships in educational contexts do not bloom from mere exposure, yet this was an assumption of many of the study participants. One way to combat this assumption among preservice teachers would be to provide opportunities for critical reflection on

what constitutes social presence, in the classes where task-specific practicum experiences are a component.

Discussions about the nature of social presence and how effective teacher/student relationships develop can assist preservice teachers to develop a greater understanding of the nature of such presence and how it can be optimized regardless of the context of the teaching situation. For online experiences, the technology itself can be adjusted and enhanced to facilitate both teachers' and students' comfort with educational experiences online. As access to online technologies becomes more common, video conferencing instead of text-only chat rooms could afford a greater sense of connection between partners. Until that day, however, text-based communication technologies such as email, chat rooms, and discussion forums can be used to establish and maintain relationships between mentoring pairs. These technologies cannot be helpful, and ultimately successful, if they are not used; they should be required, not optional. Prior to the commencement of these online experiences, discussions should take place in the methods classroom on how to use text-based technologies to establish relationships, the types of relationships that best provide for effective writing instruction, and what is required of each party within a relationship. These discussions will likely not assuage all fear regarding an experience like the Online Writing Partnership; however, students will become more at ease in unfamiliar environments if a knowledgeable other is there to guide them to better understandings of relationships and how they develop, even in more traditional educational environments.

Because of limited time and resources, university instructors are not able to be with preservice teachers at all times during field experiences. How then, as

knowledgeable others, are they to provide the guidance necessary for competencies to develop? Korthagen and Kessels (1999) identify three factors affecting the transfer of theory to practice: prior knowledge, a felt sense of need, and the relevance of knowledge to particular situations. Two of these factors are naturally served through field experiences in classrooms. Preservice teachers enter field experiences with a certain degree of prior knowledge, both of a particular subject area and (to a lesser degree) of pedagogy. Working with students in actual classrooms provides a felt sense of need for the application of that pedagogy, in the service of helping students develop competencies, for example, in language arts. But with limited teaching experience, and without someone to guide them, there is no guarantee these novice teachers will see the relevance of theoretical knowledge to situations as they arise during an internship. Directing teachers have traditionally served as the experienced other, guiding the novice in application of theory as the need arises, or in reflection after the fact. However, as some researchers have noted (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Graham & Thornley, 2000; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998), classroom teachers can be factors contributing to beginning teachers' reversion to previously held notions of teaching.

Online mentoring should not be viewed as replacements for traditional classroom field experiences. Indeed, there is no replacement for this critical aspect of teacher preparation. However, online experiences add to the variety of experiences preservice teachers can have, and offer aspects of learning that can facilitate the transfer of theory to practice in ways that other experiences cannot. Online practicum experiences can take place concurrently with methods coursework at the college or university, while offering

opportunities to experience writing instruction in ways that are safe, limited in scope, and guided by others more knowledgeable in the theory of writing process and pedagogy.

These experiences can provide a way to demonstrate not only how to scaffold a student's learning in writing, but to scaffold a student teacher in the teaching of writing under careful supervision, something they might not otherwise receive.

### **Implications for Future Research**

In the span of three short years, from the time the data of this study were collected to the writing of this chapter, technology in communication has advanced considerably. As such, communication itself has changed (Ong, 1982). It is necessary for research into this change, and how these changes may affect the teaching of writing, to continue as well. For instance, when I was collecting the data for this study in 2005, most of the Internet connections made by my study participants were through dial-up modems. Now, dial-up modems are vanishing faster than record players. This is a change in more than hardware, however. Because of faster Internet connections and data transfer, new wrinkles can be added to the research agendas of those interested in preparing teachers of writing. Now, chatting with others using the Internet is not limited to text; chatting can be (and more and more often is) done via voice, and increasingly, via video. Yet I wonder if video conferencing would ease the frustrations of future teachers trying to establish relationships with students, or if new frustrations would arise? How would video conferencing influence issues of social presence in assisting developing writers? Kate mentioned in her interviews that she wanted to be able to draw arrows on Ana-Lucia's papers as they talked together, but was unable to do so because of the limits of the Online Writing Partnership's reliance on text-only technologies. I, too, tend to emphasize my writing instruction by drawing lines and arrows on student texts. Is there a

way technology can provide the means for doing so in an online context? Would whiteboards, technologies that track the handwriting of users and transfer that writing to computers, be suitable for use in online partnerships?

Likewise, there is still much to know about the efficacy of online writing mentorship and its use in preparing preservice teachers for the classroom. The focus of this study was to examine the online experiences of future teachers of writing, but it only began to look at how these experiences transferred to practice, if indeed they did at all. I suspect that much of the insight gained from participating in the Online Writing Partnership was not available to the study participants until after the semester in which the experience took place. In my own first year of teaching I was more concerned with survival than with remembering and applying to my practice the theory I had learned at university. Did the experiences of the Online Writing Partnership impact the study participants' approaches to teaching writing, particularly during subsequent, full-time teaching? If so, how?

Often, a concern about technology is that it will replace the need for human interaction. There is some evidence of this today, although I think the fears of the most staunchly techno-phobic are unwarranted. Technology, ultimately, helps us to do things we would do anyway, perhaps only in a different way. Technology gives us assistance, provides us with faster, more efficient approaches, but in terms of education, I cannot see any technology replacing what is fundamental to the teaching profession: caring individuals who, in spite of all the barriers placed in front of them, want nothing more than to help students develop the competencies they will need to be well-rounded, contributing members of society. This study has whet my appetite, yet I am still curious

to explore how technology and its integration into education might impact teaching and learning, and how technology can assist those who dedicate their lives to doing both.

## APPENDIX A CONSENT FORMS

### **Informed Consent**

**Protocol Title:** An investigation of prospective teachers' experiences in online environments.

**Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.**

### **Purpose of the research study:**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences prospective English teachers have in writing partnerships that are conducted via online media.

### **What you will be asked to do in the study:**

You will be asked to participate in three interviews based on your experiences in the online writing partnership you are participating in. The first two interviews will ask you to reflect on the experience in regards to the technology involved and the process of providing feedback to student writers. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in a follow-up interview to be conducted in the spring, the purpose of which is to see how/if the experiences in the partnership have influenced your ideas about teaching and learning.

In addition to the interviews, you will be asked to allow your feedback given to students to be analyzed, as well as the transcripts of any participation in discussion boards, email, and/or chat rooms.

### **Time required:**

1/2 hour (for each interview, approximately)

### **Risks and Benefits:**

I do not anticipate any risks associated with participation in this study, nor do I anticipate any direct benefit.

**Compensation:**

You will not be compensated for your participation.

**Confidentiality:**

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this number will be kept in a locked file in my faculty supervisor's office, along with

APPROVED BY  
University of Florida  
Institutional Review Board (IRB 03)  
Protocol # 2004-00767  
File Name Through 10/20/05

School of Teaching and Learning  
 2304 Norman Hall  
 University of Florida  
 Gainesville, FL 32611

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am a graduate student in the School of Teaching and Learning at the University of Florida, conducting research on prospective teachers' experiences with online writing partnerships under the supervision of Dr. Jane Townsend. The purpose of this study is to explore the process of providing feedback to student writing through online media such as email, bulletin boards, and chat rooms. The results of the study may help teachers better understand the nature of student-teacher relationships and how those relationships aid in the development of writing skills. These results may not directly help your child today, but may benefit future students. With your permission, I would like to ask your child to volunteer for this research.

Your child, as part of his or her English class at Santa Fe's High School Dual Enrollment program, will be participating in an online partnership with graduate students at the University of Florida who are preparing for a career teaching English. I would like the opportunity to gain your child's insight into the process of this partnership from the student's perspective.

With your permission, your child will be interviewed once the partnership has reached its halfway point. These interviews will be taped so that transcriptions can be made. At the end of the study, the tape will be erased. Although the student's name will be used for matching purposes (to their university partners), their identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. We will replace their names with code numbers. Participation or non-participation in this study will not affect the children's grades in any way whatsoever.

You and your child have the right to withdraw consent for your child's participation at any time without consequence. There are no known risks or immediate benefits to the participants. No

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compensation is offered for participation. Results of this study will be available in the Spring upon request. If you have any questions about this research protocol, please contact me by phone at 395-5340 or by email at [allan@thoughandword.com](mailto:allan@thoughandword.com). You may also contact my faculty supervisor, Dr. Townsend, at 392-9191 ext. 231 or by email at [jst@coe.ufl.edu](mailto:jst@coe.ufl.edu). Questions or concerns about your child's rights as a research participant may be directed to the UFIRB office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611, (352) 392-0433.

Allan Nail

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily give my consent for my child, \_\_\_\_\_, to participate in Allan Nail's study of prospective teacher's experiences in online writing partnerships. I have received a copy of this description.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent / Guardian Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
2nd Parent / Witness Date

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### Assent Script for Minor Participants

Protocol Title: An investigation of prospective teachers' experiences in online environments.

**My name is Allan Nail, and I am a graduate student in the College of Education at the University of Florida. I am asking for your voluntary participation in a research study that I am conducting. Please listen carefully to the following information.**

I am conducting a study of prospective teachers of English and their experiences in online environments. My research is primarily focused on the graduate level college students with whom you are partnered in the Santa Fe/UF College of Education Online Writing Partnership. Because my interests center around the relationships that develop within this Partnership, I feel it is valuable to have your perspectives on the experience as well.

I am asking that you participate in a short interview, which will be audio taped. You will be asked questions about your experiences in the online partnership; you should feel free to answer them as honestly as you wish. After the interview, I will transcribe (type) your answers. After transcribing the interview, the tapes will be erased and you will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your identity. The interview should last between 30 and 45 minutes.

There are no anticipated risks involved in this study. Whether you participate or not, your grade will not be affected in any way. There are also no anticipated immediate benefits, nor will you be compensated for your time.

Do you have any questions?

Do you agree to participate in this study?

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APPENDIX B  
SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Questions for interview (Part 2)

What are your thoughts on the process of this partnership?

How have your attitudes toward technology been affected by this experience?

In what ways have you witnessed any relationship develop between you and your partner?

How has this relationship helped you to provide helpful feedback for their writing?

What progress have you noticed in the writing of your partner?

What elements of the partnership and/or your relationship with your partner do you attribute to this progress?

How, if at all, have you used the bulletin boards in this partnership? (What have been your experiences with this aspect of the partnership? With the technology?)

What have your experiences been in using the chat rooms? How have these experiences affected your attitudes toward technology/the partnership?

What problems have you experienced in using any aspect of the technology involved in this partnership (email, chat rooms, bulletin boards)?

What insights have you gained from your experience in this partnership, in regard to providing feedback, developing relationships with students, etc.?

Sample Interview Protocol with Individual Participant Notes

get copy of papers (last?)

Questions for interview (Part 2)

What are your thoughts on the process of this partnership?

How have your attitudes toward technology been affected by this experience?

In what ways have you witnessed any relationship develop between you and your partner?

How has this relationship helped you to provide helpful feedback for their writing?

What progress have you noticed in the writing of your partner?

What elements of the partnership and/or your relationship with your partner do you attribute to this progress?

study hard

How, if at all, have you used the bulletin boards in this partnership? (What have been your experiences with this aspect of the partnership? With the technology?)

What have your experiences been in using the chat rooms? How have these experiences affected your attitudes toward technology/the partnership?

no computer at home  
sense of immediacy

What problems have you experienced in using any aspect of the technology involved in this partnership (email, chat rooms, bulletin boards)?

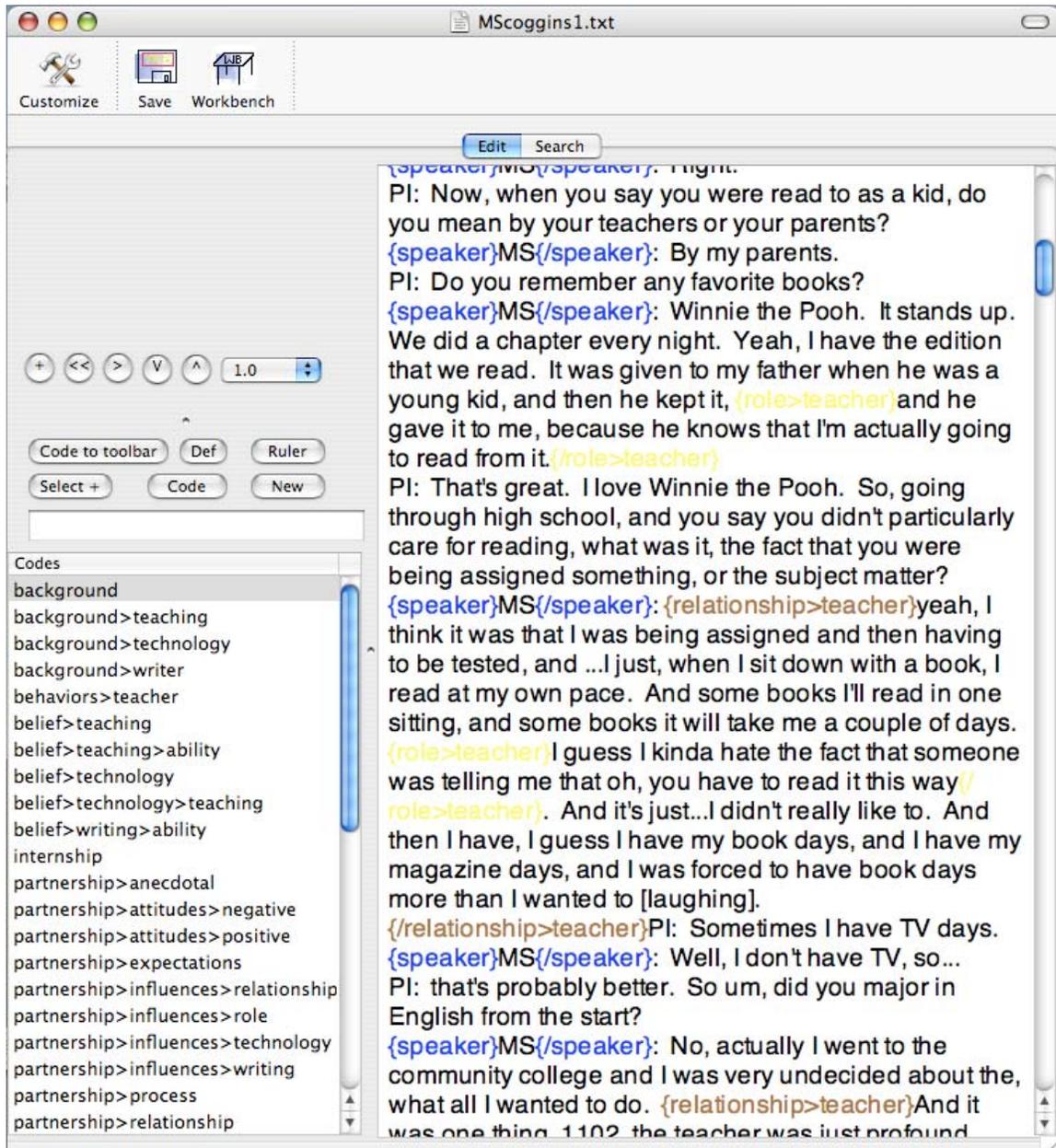
What insights have you gained from your experience in this partnership, in regard to providing feedback, developing relationships with students, etc.? writing instruction in general?

How do you feel you've benefited from this aspect?  
Has it helped you benefit?  
- overall?  
- not expect to writing?  
- get to know the student more

greatest benefit?  
what would you do differently?  
on the technology?

thinking back to the expectations you had - were they met? how, or why not?  
could help her in this?

APPENDIX C  
 SAMPLE CODED INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT



APPENDIX D  
SAMPLE NOTES FROM RESEARCH JOURNAL

Notes on -- interviews:

In the interviews, there is a high frequency of comments made that reflect the subject's views on writing, both **as an act** and **as a subject to be taught**. I tended to separate these into **perceptions about** and **attitudes toward**, although I'm struggling to be sure that there is a significant difference between the two. I suppose these two would represent what she thinks writing is and how she feels about it.

From reading through the interview data of all the participants, not only --, I find that one of the more obvious topics involved the subject's **understanding of what a teacher is supposed to do**, and **what a student is supposed to do**. I have found myself looking at the data and attempting to code along those lines. This is where Goffman's frame analysis would come in. There are also **understandings about the nature of relationships between teachers and students**, and **what factors are involved with creating those relationships** and **what obstacles prevent that relationship from forming**. These are all from Monique primarily, although as I code I think of the other interviews and realize that these are formulating my codes as well.

In terms of the relationship, for -- it is primarily a mentor-type relationship where desirable behavior is modeled by the teacher and the student reflects that behavior back in the classroom or in their writing. -- talks a lot about inspiration and motivation, with success coming in writing primarily through a motivation to do so. This was reflected in **experiences with student-teacher relationships** for the most part, with nominal **experiences with teacher-student relationships**, where the former of each pair is the subject. I suspect, because of the perceived differences between the experiences of the subjects, that this aspect will differ the most in terms of attitudes. This will be tricky for me.

The partnership was the "excuse" for talking to the subject, and it did not come up as frequently, but the peripheral discussion informed on a number of the questions I had about their experiences in the partnership. I again tended to go with **perceptions about** and **attitudes toward the partnership**, and will probably refine these codes to include positive experiences and negative experiences with. Another aspect of the coding will be the **influence of the partnership on writing instruction and on developing relationships with students**. Because I went into this project thinking that relationships would be of paramount importance, while it was not in the strictest sense, the partnership did open the door to a discussion on how relationships are developed and the aforementioned factors involved.

Sample Journal Notes:

The trouble with doing this case study is that the nature of case reporting is to describe the phenomenon with rich and thick detail, in order to present to the reader an opportunity to experience vicariously the phenomenon itself. In my case, this is not so easy to do. It is not a matter of having never been to the site of the phenomenon; rather, there is no site to visit. Even if, for example, we assumed that each participant created an individual site when they sat down at the computer and began to participate in the phenomenon of the online writing partnership, that would present very real, practical problems, as there would then be ten different sites, each meeting at different times and in different places. Aside from the difficulty in obtaining access to all these sites (it is in theory possible); the error in the assumption that these ten “sites” comprise the field of study is just that: an error. In a classroom study, the classroom provides physical boundaries that do nicely to limit the study. Other boundaries are inherent in the structure of the school, such as the time allotted for a class. Certainly this is not the entirety of context, as context from outside the classroom affects profoundly the ways in which students experience the classroom phenomena. This study lacks even that inherent structure for a site of study.

APPENDIX E  
SAMPLE OF INTER-RATER CODED TRANSCRIPT

(Grayscale; Original was color-coded)

PI: I think it's so interesting that so many people, because I was a camp counselor too, but I know you weren't a camp counselor but [

JC: ] it was the same thing [

PI:

it was a similar type thing...so many people who go into education have experience before...um, you mention writing a couple of times in talking about what, uh, what prompted you to go into this line of work, would you say that it was the writing aspect of it that pushed you more, or was it the literature aspect or was it combination of both?

MOTIVATION?

PERSONAL  
SATIS

JC: I really think it was the writing. Uh, not that, I don't really do a lot of creative writing anymore. I started off in ... as long as I can remember I would go with my dad to his office and I would sit at his computer, at his secretaries computer where he worked all day and I would...rhyme, and I called it poetry, and I would just write about whatever was on my mind, and this is started in like fourth or fifth grade where I would just come out with "Look mom, I wrote 50 poems for you today!" and it was just a matter, that was my natural output and, it progressed as I grew up and became, you know was encouraged by teachers to do so. Writing in high school was similar, it was a lot of soap-box kind of, I identified with Roxcy a lot in that thing, this, a lot of, "this is the way it is" and um, then college turned it to more academic and... in a way it's kinda frustrating cause I feel like academic completely squelched my ability to write creatively, but I enjoy it more than anything else. I can write academically and have complete satisfaction with it now {laughs} so it's, it's a good thing.

ENCOURAGED  
BY TEACHERS

UNIV

PERSONAL  
SATIS

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Allan Nail was born in Jacksonville, Florida, but moved to Atlanta, Georgia, with his parents as a toddler when they left to pursue their own education. After living seven years in rural South Georgia, Allan graduated from Zionsville Community High School in Zionsville, Indiana, and returned to his native state to attend the University of Florida. After completing a master's in education, Allan taught at North Marion High School in Citra, Florida, and at Keystone Heights High School in Keystone Heights, Florida, before returning to university for his Ph.D. He continues to teach writing and literature as an associate professor at Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville, Florida. Allan is married to Cheryl Glantz Nail; he is the son of Dan Nail and Diane Parsons, and brother of Erin Berryman.