

Reflection Through Discomfort: What Resistance Reveals When Communication Technologies Mediate Authentic Writing Mentorships

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Abstract

Students entering teacher preparation programs often exhibit a desire to be shown the magic bullet of teaching practice. When they fail to be presented with recipes for success, or when the instruction they receive in methods classes does not match their own understanding of instructional methods and what they believe methods should be, they can feel a heightened level of discomfort. This paper describes the study of an Online Writing Partnership and examines participants' discomfort regarding the use of online communication technologies to facilitate mentor relationships with high school students in writing. Findings indicated that this discomfort can provide opportunities for reflection on and examination of beliefs about writing instruction, as well as on the nature of writing itself as a recursive process. Further, using online communication technologies to facilitate practicum experiences can enrich preservice teachers' understandings of and approaches to the complexities and challenges of teaching writing.

The online setup restricted relationship and thereby restricted accountability and explanation. My student could not possibly understand all of my reasons behind my comments and therefore had limited motivation to make changes to her final drafts. (Kate, discussing her frustration with mentoring in an online context)

Students preparing to become teachers of English and language arts typically have few if any supervised opportunities to work with developing writers at the secondary level. As a result, they have little opportunity to respond to students' writing in progress—through multiple drafts—prior to entering the classroom during student teaching. Perhaps even then, they have little opportunity to work with the developing writing processes of students.

Research has shown that of all aspects of teacher preparation, nearly everything takes a backseat to the experiences gained in classroom placements, especially the internship (Burant & Kirby, 2002; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998). Korthagen and Kessels (1999) noted that before students can transfer knowledge to practice, they often must feel a sense of need for that knowledge within the context of teaching. That sense of need may not be there for preservice teachers in methods classes where they identify their role as more student than teacher. Once they make the transition to the classroom, even while still students, the more immediate influences on student teachers are not the educational professionals associated with the preparation program but rather the classroom teachers with whom the students have been paired (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002).

Prospective teachers can learn from the directing teachers who open their classrooms to them. However, prospective teachers often view these opportunities as disproportionately valuable in comparison to the instruction in theory and pedagogy that takes place in the college classroom. Numerous studies have revealed that field experiences not only provide future teachers with the greatest sense of preparation for classroom teaching, but that a marked disconnect occurs between their understanding of the work done in preparation for teaching and the real-world teaching they will eventually be asked to do (Graham & Thornley, 2000; Moore, 2003; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). Unfortunately, these same studies show that, when immersed in the world of teaching, preservice teachers often revert to earlier and often unproductive notions of teaching— notions they are familiar and comfortable with from having been students for the better part of their lives.

This predicament prompted us, English education professors, to reenvision ways of bridging knowledge and practice before our students entered their intensive, 10-week internships. Future teachers experience an uncomfortable period of conflict during the hybrid period when their role begins to resemble that of teacher, without fully leaving the role of student. This discomfort can come from two separate areas: one, a conflict between what future teachers experienced in their own education and the learning theory taught in their teacher preparation program, and two, possible conflicts between what they know from these programs and what they see in practice with their mentor teachers (Gallego, 2001).

We knew that our ability to help students with these instances of discomfort, to reflect on the needs of teaching in the moment, were frequently limited to after-the-fact sessions removed from the context when applying learned theory is most important. What would happen if we were able to stave off this reversion to the comfortable while at the same time provide guided opportunities to apply new knowledge to practice?

Hence, we created an Online Writing Partnership to help students in a secondary English teacher preparation program make connections between the theory they were studying in a writing methods course and the practice of teaching. This partnership also afforded an opportunity for us to explore how students in a graduate-level writing methods course experienced working with secondary-level student writers using online communication technologies.

We found, among other things, that many of our students became uncomfortable and sometimes agitated in an educational context that conflicted with their expectations of a traditional classroom. This discomfort prompted a further, more intensive study of the partnership to explore the nature of context in writing mentorships that take place in asynchronous, online environments. This article focuses on the role that discomfort and resistance played in the experiences of 5 study participants and how these kinds of

experiences might provide valuable opportunities for reflection and learning in teacher education.

Methods

This article draws from a larger study of preservice teachers' experiences in an Online Writing Partnership that was conducted in a graduate-level secondary English teacher education program (Nail, 2008). Students participated in coursework during the fall semester, followed by a 10-week internship in the spring semester. Often theory taught in the classroom does not find adequate support in future teachers' field experiences, and preservice teachers rarely see these experiences as extensions of classroom learning but rather as a different kind of learning altogether. We wondered if there was some way to craft a practicum experience that would allow our preservice teachers to experience working with developing writers at the same time they were enrolled in our class.

Our goal was to facilitate the transfer of knowledge students were gaining in our writing methods course to the practice of working with developing writers. We wanted to create an opportunity for them to work with students in a limited capacity, focusing on one aspect of teaching (in this case, responding to student writing) before they experienced the myriad demands of classroom teaching all at once.

By providing a mentoring opportunity in the asynchronous environments of online communication, we hoped our students would be able to direct their focus to the development of one writer and be able to reflect on that process as part of the class and while under our guidance. We created a partnership where interaction between partners was achieved primarily through online communication technologies such as email, chat rooms, and bulletin boards. 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.

This Online Writing Partnership was an assignment for all students enrolled in a graduate level language and composition methods course. Graduate students 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 students in their writing. Of the five participants selected from this class for the study, four were preparing to become English teachers; one was already teaching and was pursuing an advanced degree.

The high school students emailed drafts of papers to their graduate student partners, and in return, the graduate students emailed the drafts back, with responses to the original writing designed to engage the writers in a dialog about the writing. Exchanges of emails with drafts occurred outside of normal class-time hours, at times convenient to the partner pairs. Although, ultimately, they were not much used by the participants nor their partners, we established chat rooms and bulletin boards for use in the Online Writing Partnership to facilitate communication in real time and in other ways besides email. The partnership lasted for approximately 10 weeks.

Participants in this study were selected from a group of volunteers among the members of the writing methods course in which the Partnership was an assignment. To make the study and its resulting data manageable, we narrowed our focus to 5 participants who represented a range of comfort with and experience using online technologies such as email, chat rooms, and online discussion boards, determined by their responses to a brief online survey (see the [appendix](#)).

We collected data for this study by conducting a series of interviews with each of the 5 participants over a 7-month period and by collecting artifacts. We conducted four semiformal, taped interviews with each graduate student participant and numerous informal, nonrecorded interviews. We collected reflective writing by the participants, high school student papers with embedded feedback (accomplished using the “comment” function of Microsoft Word), and email correspondence between the participants and their partners.

Using a constant-comparative method of data analysis, as patterns began to emerge from the data, member checks were performed with the participants to check the validity of our accounts of the data, and fellow researchers were asked to review collected data and the criteria for analyzing that data. Their results were compared with our own for consistency, which was found to be high (over 80%).

The directions for the Online Writing Partnership were explicitly stated. The graduate partners were to take a mentoring role with the high school students, helping the students improve their writing by revising it through multiple drafts (usually three). We stated at the beginning of the activity that the graduate partner was not to serve as proofreader or editor. As the study progressed, however, it became clear that the stated purpose of providing responses helpful to revision conflicted with the graduate students’ beliefs about the role of the teacher in writing instruction. In examining the data, we were especially curious to see (a) how participants identified and responded to the relative social presence between themselves and their partners in the online context (b) what kinds of relationships formed between participants and their partners, and (c) what their experiences revealed concerning their beliefs about the roles of teacher and students in writing instruction.

Findings

Often in educational settings the context centers around the classroom with individuals in close proximity. Early on, we suspected that context would be a critically important factor in this study, and one of the motivating factors of this research was to better understand what context looked like to participants in this emerging, online space. However, trying to identify a site in the way *site* is traditionally understood in qualitative research is complex to the point of being impractical; therefore, we approached context in a different way. Lindfors (1999) suggested probing context as a way of better understanding the environment in which learning takes place. Michael Cole (1996) proposed two facets of context for such an exploration: surround and weave.

Surround context concerns those elements relevant to the task in which participants are engaged, the course and the online spaces we provided them. Exploring the surround context 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.

The broader context—a weave context—encompasses the relational aspects of activities and objects and the individuals involved, actively constructed as the phenomenon proceeds, including the participants’ unique experiences, beliefs about teaching, and attitudes toward technology. The weave context required a view of the experiences of the 5 participants collectively, to see how the individual threads related to each other and illuminated the nature of this particular online activity.

Discomfort at the Lack of Social Presence

The responses given by the graduate students when asked to give their assessment of the Online Writing Partnership suggested a consensus positive experience. Closer inspection, however, revealed few positive statements pertaining to specific aspects of the experience. As reported by the participants, most experiences in the partnership were characterized by the ways in which the experience was limited. Social presence, the awareness one has for the presence of another during an interaction (Richardson & Swan, 2003), impacted the experiences of the participants largely through its absence. As an element of context, this absence manifested to the graduate students not only as literal distance between the partner pairs, but also as an inability to connect interpersonally, 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 (all participants have been given pseudonyms) spoke specifically of the limitations she felt because she was able to communicate with her partner only through words. All of the online technologies provided to the participants for use in the partnership were text based. 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'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. Although 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, new to each other, created problems logistically when trying to set up meetings using only asynchronous modes of communication. This point was clarified by Nikki, who noted that, as opposed to a phone call or seeing a student in person, email communications were simply "too easy to ignore" and, thus, dramatically increased the time between contacts.

Although all of 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 inbox.

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 writing abilities. Rather, the literal separation in time and space between partners colored experiences 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 nonverbal 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 had developed 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.

Each participant saw the need for a different context to establish a relationship, not only because communication encompasses more than only words and expressions, but also because they each felt that "the opportunity to see" and hear their partners 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 an exchange of words. The graduate students' feelings of limitations in this way characterized the experience of the Online Writing Partnership as a whole.

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 was that aspects of face-to-face communication existed 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, they were rarely about quantitative, measurable distance but of a more qualified distance that reflected the experience of feeling separated from each other.

Difficulties felt as a result of weak social presence with the high school students they were to mentor 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 that "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 belief that merely having a face to put to an email 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 when the distance between partners provided benefits to the graduate students. 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 discussing writing thoughtfully. Juliet suggested 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 perceived lack of social presence had unfavorable effects on the experiences of the partnership for the 5 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, they made the point clearly 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.

Although 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 possibly on the side of the high school students, as Nikki suggested, but also a lack of motivation on the part of the graduate students themselves. They 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.

Formation of Relationships Between Partners

Closely connected to the issue of social presence, the graduate participants' characterization of their experiences in the Online Writing Partnership was that of their sense of the relationships between partners. The various data sources 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 the nature of that relationship. Most frequently, the graduate participants described their associations with their online partners as lacking a sense of personal connection.

Sometimes this belief was expressed explicitly, 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 partnership. Other participants merely hinted at a lack of personal connection with their partners. 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.

However the technology might have affected the graduate participants' abilities to connect with their high school partners, these relationships were undeniably viewed as impersonal at best and sometimes strained. Much was said about the rapport between partners, or lack thereof, in the interviews. Virtually all mentions of relationship by the 5 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. For Libby, the technology provided one benefit to her 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, nonverbal forms of communication, the ability 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.

Although 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. Indeed, the belief among the 5 study participants was that technologies such as email, chat rooms, and others of the Online Writing Partnership could not provide these circumstances.

Participants' Roles and Sense of Authority Within the Writing Process

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 roles in this process, the graduate participants were frequently vague and unsure in their responses.

Confusion over each graduate participant's role in the partnership likely stemmed from the conflicting position each found themselves in. On the one hand, graduate students each felt they were being asked to perform duties in the Online Writing Partnership that they perceived as "teacher like." As a result, the graduate participants saw their role as being, in part, that of teacher. On the other hand, they were aware of their simultaneous roles as students, and admittedly viewed the Online Writing Partnership as an assignment. Consequently, they were confused over the role they played in the learning dynamic of the partnership and what authority each had as a result of that role.

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." Although 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. 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. 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."

Studies have shown that students entering a teacher education program do so with 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.

Ironically, these same experiences informed their understanding of the role of student. Although their expectation for the role of the teacher was largely determined by what the participants observed in their own secondary English/language arts classrooms (Anson, 1989), their movement through the schooling process determined also how they understood the role of the student. This understanding of the role of the student and the way 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. In the view of the graduate students, the students were largely responsible to read the comments 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 perspectives. They saw their roles as mentors through the lens of the teachers who had taught them; their partners they saw through the lens of the students they themselves had been.

When in either role expectations were not met, they felt anxiety and frustration, and the study participants often blamed 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.

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. Clearly, 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 teachers 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.

One less confusing facet of the graduate students' roles was the authority they felt they possessed as writers. Participants' identities were each comprised in part by their views of themselves as writers. Even when expressing doubt about these identities, the participants drew on past experiences in writing as evidence of an ability to complete the partnership's assignment. The participants felt confident in the suggestions they gave to help improve the high school students' writing. When the high school students would overlook some or all of the given suggestions, the lapses 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 roles, which in turn, further drenched their experiences with frustration.

Not only were they unsure of and uncomfortable with their roles within the Online Writing Partnership, all the participants pointed to ways in which the technologies actually 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 accordingly. Kate was quoted as saying she did not 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 seemed with her partner. 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 had understood 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.

Kate's perception 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 her own experiences in high school, when she emailed papers to her older brother for advice. Nikki, on the other hand, felt the process lacked the person of the mentor, which she felt was her greatest asset in writing instruction and alluded to her sense of anonymity, which she believed was caused by the technologies of the partnership. Although each participant had different reactions to their perceived roles and each defined their roles in slightly different ways, all 5 graduate participants' views of role were mediated in large part by the technology provided.

Discomfort and Resistance

With the exception of Juliet (who was already teaching full time), the participants in the Online Writing Partnership were each anticipating their eventual entry into the classroom as full-time English teachers. Study participants, including Juliet, were enrolled in the

class to develop their abilities to teach writing, and naturally they looked at the Online Writing Partnership through the lens of their individual expectations concerning the physical classroom. Their 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, previous experiences in classrooms.

During the interviews, the participants offered their take on technology integration in the classroom and drew on their experiences in the Online Writing Partnership. Indeed, they applied 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 5 study participants often claimed to benefit "just from thinking about how to use" the technologies of email, chat rooms, and online bulletin boards emphasized during the Online Writing Partnership. Juliet, currently teaching, reported that her experience of working online with her high school partner had provided new ideas for her teaching in a physical context.

The participants' greatest discomfort about technology revealed through their 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 beliefs that technologies such as email 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 submitting work in an online fashion such as email might be more productive. However, she pointed out in a reflective essay, "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—a view of technology integration that English educators and researchers alike have struggled to shift (Miller & Fox, 2006; Scott & Mouza, 2007; Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, & Whitin, 2006). 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 yet still could not envision a teaching scenario absent the actual presence of the teacher for inspiration.

Although the spectrum of attitudes and beliefs concerning technology and its role in the teaching of writing was 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.

It would be easy to look at the Online Writing Partnership as a general failure, considering the preponderance of negative assessments given by the 5 study participants. This view would, however, ignore the importance of what those negative assessments reveal. In no way was this partnership perfect, and in fact, in the intervening years since the original study was conducted we have continued to revise and reinvent the Online Writing Partnership. However, upon review of the data, it seems that what was really at work in the participants’ negative assessment of the partnership was not a fundamental failure of purpose, but rather a discomfort resulting from conflicts between what the graduate students believed they already knew about teaching writing and the conflicting experiences working in authentic writing mentorships.

Kate made this discomfort visible 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 offense. Kate did not like the care she had to give to avoid this tone when communicating through writing with her partner. This particular discomfort opened the door to challenging Kate to examine the work of getting to know her students as she had gotten to know her friends and also to recognize how much of the work of a writing teacher comes in the form of written comments on students’ papers.

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 there is often more going on in teaching that is not immediately visible without critical reflection. In this study, the participants communicated 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 shortcomings suggested by the study participants.

All of the contextual features involved in building rapport with students are important, but a beginning teacher has so much to deal with on any given day that these features do not often get conscious attention, if they receive attention at all. 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, future teachers can 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 provoked 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. Participants pointed to elements of social presence they felt were inherent in being face-to-face with students, such as gesturing and other nonverbal elements, for developing effective teacher/student relationships.

Because these elements were not available in an online experience limited to text communication, the study participants assumed 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 to the satisfaction of those involved.

Although 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 professors, 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.

Because all of the participants in this study were graduate students, each had already successfully completed a bachelor's degree in English or another similar discipline. As a result, they likely experienced more assignments drawing on their ability to write than those entering teaching in other disciplines. Certainly, no other group of future teachers traditionally enters a program with texts as a central focus of study. Many researchers have observed that the way English teachers are taught, particularly in college literature courses, profoundly shapes the way they approach student texts (Anson, 1989; Emig, 1994; Phelps, 1989; Reither, 1994).

Murray (1989), drawing on Rosenblatt's (1978) reader response theory, wrote that teachers' expectations of student texts reflect "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 approaching students' texts in much the same way their own texts were approached, typically as one-shot critical essays—graded, evaluated, and rarely revisited with the aim of improving writing. By asking our participants to approach their partners' writing in a way that dramatically broke from their expectations of working with student writing, it is no wonder they were uncomfortable with the task.

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 her high school partner.

Perhaps the greatest value of the Online Writing Partnership was the 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. As a result, 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.

Conclusion

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 valuable experiences be avoided merely because they have the potential to cause anxiety and frustration. Often the pressure to integrate technology into preparing teachers for the classroom fails to prepare teacher educators for the results this study has shown—that the Online Writing Partnership was anything but perfect and most technology-infused experiences cannot guarantee a panacea of learning for preservice teachers.

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 could be added to these types of online teaching experiences. Technology was only a part of the experience of these study participants, however, and other considerations 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.

We approached the partnership as a way of solving a problem we had identified, a lack of authentic opportunities for future teachers of English to work with developing writers. The partnership, of course, had limitations, as did our study. Primary among them was the participant sample which, though largely representative of the class from which it was drawn, consisted entirely of women of European descent. Research has explored how gender and ethnicity, for both teachers and students, alter the perceptions of and the approaches to technology (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006; Volman, van Eck, Heemskerk, & Kuiper, 2005). Looking at the experiences of men and of women and men of diverse backgrounds in these kinds of experiences would be valuable.

Another limitation was that as researchers we were also the instructors of the course and, as a result, had a certain bias in favor of the experience. Also, we did not delve into the

perceptions of the high school partners with regard to the partnership. Future research could include both gathering high school students' perspectives and exploring the impact of adding opportunities for face-to-face interaction between partners.

It is good that preservice teachers feel a certain level of discomfort about beginning to work with students in authentic experiences. Discomfort can prompt people to seek the source of that feeling and to explore ways of lessening it. However, merely feeling discomfort is not enough. The Online Writing Partnership provided the future English teachers in this particular case 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 a process.

In online experiences such as the one at the center of this study, preservice teachers' views of instruction can be challenged and possibly adjusted so that that instruction can be approached as a process of learning for their students and themselves. Under the watchful eye of the university or college professor, the knowledgeable other, preservice teachers can begin to confront their discomfort and approach instruction as an opportunity to assist students with learning, even as they, themselves, learn.

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**Appendix
Comfort with Technology Survey**

The original survey is available at the following address:

<http://thoughtandword.com/survey/index.php?sid=1>

The following items concern your comfort level with various forms on online technology. For each item, use the following scale: 1 = not at all comfortable, 2 = somewhat uncomfortable, 3 = comfortable, 4 = very comfortable, and 5 = extremely comfortable.

1. Creating a chat room.
2. Joining a chat room.
3. Sending and receiving email.
4. Forwarding email.
5. Attaching files to email.
6. Searching for information on the Internet.

For the following, select "yes" if the statement is true, "no" if the statement is false.

1. I rely on email to keep in touch with others.
2. I rely on email to keep informed with work/school/events.
3. I am generally very comfortable with Internet technologies.
4. I can generally find the information I seek using Internet search engines.
5. I can create basic websites.

Please respond in a couple of sentences to the following:

My experiences with technology have generally been...

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