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“It Doesn’t Feel Like a Conversation”: Digital Field Experiences and Preservice Teachers’ Conceptions of Writing Response

Alison Heron-Hruby, James S. Chisholm, and Andrea R. Olinger

Research shows that preservice English teachers (PSETs) lack opportunities to respond to student writing and that they may view student writing through a deficit lens. To address this need, the authors developed the Writing Mentors (WM) program, a digital field placement that gave PSETs experience providing feedback to high school writers. In this analysis, we examine how PSETs’ views of response were shaped by their digital interactions with high school writers. The challenges of interacting asynchronously created opportunities for PSETs to identify limitations in the mode of communication, propose approaches to providing feedback, and reflect on how teacher feedback can nurture or constrain relationships with students. These findings point to the promise of critical reflection on the disruptive potential of digital feedback for supporting PSTs’ response to student writing.

Students learning to write benefit from targeted responses to their drafts as part of the writing process (MacArthur, 2012; Sieben, 2017). However, research shows that preservice English teachers (PSETs) lack opportunities to respond to student writing (e.g., Ballock et al., 2018; Morgan & Pytash, 2014; Simon, 2015) and that, without guidance and practice, they may revert to error-focused feedback and view student writing through a deficit lens (Sherry, 2017). To address this need, we developed the Writing Mentors (WM) program, a digital field placement that gave PSETs at our universities experience providing feedback to high school writers at a geographical distance.

Although research has explored how digital technology can support PSETs’ reflection on and practice of response to student writing (e.g., Barnes & Chandler, 2019; Sherry, 2017), its role in disrupting how PSETs provide feedback on student writing has not been explored. In this study, we examined how PSETs experience the activity of responding to student writing using a digital, asynchronous platform, asking how PSETs’ views of response...
are shaped by their digital interactions with high school writers. Here, we consider how these platforms can both aid and hinder PSETs in enacting principles of effective response, conceptualize tensions PSETs encounter in digital contexts as they learn to respond to student writers, and provide guidance to ELA teacher educators who are designing digital field experiences that involve response to student writing.

**Literature Review**

In the 1980s and 1990s, scholarship by compositionists coalesced around a number of shared principles for effective response (e.g., Anson, 1989; Elbow, 1999; Sommers, 1982; Straub, 2000): (a) transforming responses into a dialogue with the writer, (b) avoiding taking control over the writer’s paper, (c) privileging global issues over local ones, (d) avoiding inundating the writer with comments that exceed the paper’s scope, (e) tailoring responses to the paper’s draft stage and who the student is, and (f) praising the writing. How teachers enact these principles depends on contextual factors, such as the writing assignment and the larger purpose of the course (Straub, 2000), the setting (e.g., synchronous vs. asynchronous), and the feedback medium (e.g., in-person versus video or audio conference, handwritten versus typed comments). For instance, those who provide audio-recorded feedback view it as nurturing teacher-student relationships in a way that written feedback cannot (Mrkich & Sommers, 2016).

The extent to which teachers enact these principles, however, is an open question. Synthesizing research at the college level, Rysdam and Johnson-Shull (2015) identified a “long-standing disconnect between what scholars have historically suggested as best practice, and what teachers seem to continue to do . . . writing instruction seems to be stuck in a rut of negativity and correction” (p. 76). Working with PSETs, Sherry (2017) noticed contradictions between the feedback they preferred to receive as students and the feedback they provided on the writing of middle school students. Sherry suggested that this disconnect is because the preservice teachers were “identifying . . . with visions of what a high school writing teacher should do/be, based on more limited experience with that role” (p. 567). Other studies have identified additional contextual factors that shape students’ visions of their roles; these factors often involve divergences between PSETs’ experiences as students in K–12 and college classrooms, as prospective teachers in their field observations, and as beginning career teachers (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016; Hebard, 2016).

PSETs may therefore have a difficult time internalizing and adapting principles of effective response, especially if they have experienced some of
the challenges of writing instruction in K–12 schools. The amount of time that ELA teachers are typically able to spend on writing instruction is minimal (Graham, 2019). Moreover, a large portion of the writing is “writing without composing” (p. 280), such as filling in blanks and writing short-answer responses. As Graham described, individual studies have found that students are primarily writing for their teachers (and standardized tests) with little peer collaboration or formative assessment.

In light of the mix of competing influences that PSETs are negotiating, Bomer et al. (2019) identified a range of teacher education experiences that might lead to “purposeful disruption of inherited traditions” (p. 12), such as experiences with student writing and interactions with student writers. One example is Barnes and Chandler’s (2019) digital Pen Pal Project. In this project, PSETs gave feedback to sixth graders via Google Docs, commenting on students’ drafts approximately two to three times per week over a semester. The researchers analyzed the types of feedback the PSETs provided and the extent to which it was tailored to students’ individual competencies. Although the researchers noticed that pen pals’ relationships were “strained by the sole use of the online platform” (p. 18) and felt that face-to-face interaction would have been beneficial, they concluded that the digital space created an “effective sheltered place” (p. 19) for PSETs to learn how to give feedback.

Given the similar context of our Writing Mentors program, we wondered about the nature of the “strain” of online response. What influence would this digital context play in challenging directive, error-focused approaches and promoting effective practices for response? Johnson (2016) asserted that “for many teachers, teaching writing with new technologies requires a shift in how they conceptualize the teaching of writing” (p. 55). This tension—whether digital tools reinforce traditional approaches to feedback or help PSETs innovate their response pedagogies—gave rise to the present study.

**Context of the Study**

Our universities are approximately 134 miles apart and located in, respectively, an urban and a rural area in the same state; we paired PSETs at one university with high school classes near the other university. The program, as a result, functioned as a digital field placement in which mentors interacted in an asynchronous digital space with mentees from outside their geographic area.

The study involved PSETs in five undergraduate English methods courses taught by the authors. Each course focused on literacy teaching, and two on the teaching of writing. We included multiple sections in the study to
glean a range of feedback experiences. Because we piloted the WM program, we drew participants from our courses. Through readings and discussions, we hoped to convey to the PSETs, whom we identify here as WMs, that they were mentoring student writers.

Rather than engaging in direct teaching, whereby they would be expected to edit or correct students’ papers, WMs prompted student writers to “hear the writing saying something more, or less, or completely different” (Murray, 1985, p. 7) by being an interested and concerned reader, asking for clarification or elaboration, pointing out specific successes, and nudging the writer to consider other perspectives. We counted the WM program toward the PSETs’ required field experience hours and gave them grade credit for timely responses that followed cooperating teachers’ (CTs’) directions.

During the study, we collaborated with three different CTs, teachers we knew from past projects who had expertly mentored several of the PSETs in our methods courses during field experiences and who were engaged in professional development (e.g., seeking national board certification). All CTs had their feedback preferences. The teacher in the urban-situated high school provided WMs with specific areas on which to focus their responses, though he was open to WMs going beyond those areas. The two other teachers, both from the rurally situated high schools, did the same but occasionally had their students supply an “Author’s Agenda” to tell the WM what to look for in the draft (e.g., “please tell me if I have good transitions between paragraphs”). When the teachers provided guidance to WMs, it was always genre-specific; if the student writers, for example, were writing horror stories, the teacher would ask that WMs look for how the writers built suspense.

During the study, WMs employed Google Classroom, a digital platform that affords teachers and students use of Google’s suite of digital apps, including Google Docs and Google Drive. One course also provided response in the form of screencasts.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Twelve WMs participated in this study. Table 1 identifies the PSETs who were WMs (all names are pseudonyms), their university contexts, the course to which each belonged, and the number of mentees with whom they worked. All PSETs served as WMs for their course’s field experience requirement, but only some participated in the study. We aimed to enroll three to four participants from each course, enough to collect a range of input but not so many as to limit speaking opportunities during focus group discussions. Eleven of the 12 participants identified as White women and one as a Black man.
For two courses, more than four WMs agreed to participate in the study. To narrow our participant pool in these courses, we surveyed students about their epistemological beliefs about teaching writing (Newell et al., 2014). Although we did not study how these beliefs affected participants’ thoughts on giving feedback using digital tools, we originally sought to diversify the range of responses in our focus groups by including PSETs who prioritized either structural, ideational, or social practices writing epistemologies. Because our participant pool was not diverse along race or gender, we hoped that epistemology would allow us to diversify it in at least one way. However, while Newell et al. (2014) demonstrated that English teachers can hold distinct epistemological views that shape writing instruction in their classrooms, we found, as others have (e.g., Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016), that PSETs do not rely on one predominant view of learning to guide their

### Table 1. Participant Contextual Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Course Title/University</th>
<th>Course #/Semester</th>
<th># of Mentees/Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>English Methods/Urban</td>
<td>1 (Spring 2018)</td>
<td>4 (Rural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJ</td>
<td>English Methods/Urban</td>
<td>1 (Spring 2018)</td>
<td>2 (Rural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>English Methods/Urban</td>
<td>1 (Spring 2018)</td>
<td>3 (Rural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>English Methods/Urban</td>
<td>1 (Spring 2018)</td>
<td>3 (Rural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yasmine</td>
<td>Teaching Writing/Rural</td>
<td>2 (Spring 2018)</td>
<td>8 (Urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English Methods/Rural</td>
<td>5 (Fall 2018)</td>
<td>4 (Urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marybeth</td>
<td>Teaching Writing/Rural</td>
<td>2 (Spring 2018)</td>
<td>8 (Urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English Methods/Rural</td>
<td>5 (Fall 2018)</td>
<td>4 (Urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristy</td>
<td>Teaching Writing/Rural</td>
<td>2 (Fall 2018)</td>
<td>8 (Urban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>Teaching Writing/Urban</td>
<td>3 (Fall 2018)</td>
<td>1 (Rural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>Adolescent Readers/Urban</td>
<td>4 (Fall 2018)</td>
<td>4 (Rural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elle</td>
<td>Adolescent Readers/Urban</td>
<td>4 (Fall 2018)</td>
<td>3 (Rural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Adolescent Readers/Urban</td>
<td>4 (Fall 2018)</td>
<td>2 (Rural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenzie</td>
<td>Adolescent Readers/Urban</td>
<td>4 (Fall 2018)</td>
<td>2 (Rural)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** PSETs at the regional comprehensive university in the rural area were paired with a greater number of student writers at an urban high school due to the relative class sizes in those two instructional contexts. The number of PSETs at the research university in the urban area more closely aligned to the number of students enrolled in the English class of the participating rural high school, resulting in these PSETs working with fewer high school students when compared to PSETs at the regional comprehensive university.
pedagogy but instead espouse hybrid views. As such, we could not determine if a single epistemological view correlated with any of the PSETs’ teaching behaviors. The surveys, then, served as a participant selection tool rather than an analytic lens.

Data Sources
Over two university semesters, we audio-recorded nine focus groups with 12 WMs, yielding transcripts totaling 128 single-spaced pages. We used focus groups over individual interviews to capture the shared knowledge that emerges from the discussion of complex problems (Cyr, 2015). Semi-structured questions for focus groups with WMs elicited participants’ beliefs about teaching writing both before and while they used Google Docs and other digital tools (see the appendix for our interview protocols).

Data Analysis
Together, we analyzed the focus group transcripts using a five-phase approach to thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Working collectively afforded us cross-verification of the content, an advantage of collaborative analysis (Smagorinsky, 2008). In Phase 1, we created a secure, online repository for all data. In Phase 2, we discussed our process for analyzing the transcripts and identified initial codes that represented what WMs told us about responding to high school writers, such as valuing students’ voices and personal stories and using knowledge of students to craft feedback.

In Phase 3, we applied these basic codes as each of us coded the transcripts individually, adding codes as we examined each transcript. Each of us open-coded six transcripts, which allowed each transcript to be coded by two researchers. We then combined the codes each had developed, along with the data excerpts we used to evidence the codes, into a master document. We created an audit trail with summaries of our codes, analysis of evidentiary excerpts, and analytic memos. Codes unrelated to our research question were categorized but excluded from this analysis. In total, we identified 17 codes for the research question.

During Phase 4, we collapsed similar codes (e.g., “scripting screencast feedback before giving it” with “[audio]recording feedback using digital tools” under the theme “digital contexts affect clarity of feedback”). Following Saldaña (2015), we conceptualized a theme as an “outcome of coding” (p. 14) that identified processes at work in the data. We considered a code for a theme even if the code occurred only once in the data because—in accordance with thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017; Saldaña, 2015)—our goal
was to illustrate the existence rather than the typicality of the phenomenon under study. By collapsing all codes, not just recurrent ones, into themes, we included contrasting data in our Findings to showcase the variety of PSET viewpoints. Table 2 provides a final list of all themes, codes, and example data excerpts.

In Phase 5, we refined our initial themes, discussing relationships between WMs’ general beliefs about feedback on student writing and their perceptions of the digital tools they used to give feedback during the WM program. The resulting themes, which we describe in Findings, represent how WMs’ views of response were shaped by their digital interactions.

Table 2. Themes, Codes, and Excerpts for Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Excerpt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant Feedback Depends on Classroom Context</td>
<td>Struggling to time feedback amid schedule clashes</td>
<td>And then it’s like a week before I get a paper back from them, with changes. So it doesn’t feel like a conversation. It feels like I speak to them and it’s just nothing for a while and then all of a sudden . . .” (CJ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dealing with editing privileges constraints</td>
<td>I felt bad, but I think that it was like literally a few hours before it was due or the night before it was due, that’s whenever she let me edit it. So I’m like “sorry, but.” (Jennifer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wanting the cooperating teacher to provide more context for the prompt or assignment</td>
<td>The prompt was very unclear. And I thought if I thought it was unclear they must have also thought it was unclear. (Emily)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Struggling to personalize feedback if you don’t know their name</td>
<td>I don’t think I used a single name in mine. And that makes me a terrible person. (Yasmine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Contexts Affect Clarity of Feedback</td>
<td>Establishing communication channels with students and teachers improves feedback</td>
<td>Because I didn’t for sure know that that was supposed to be an argumentative paper. And I feel like if I would have had some kind of guidelines for what the teacher was actually looking for in those papers, it could have been a lot better. (Jennifer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recording feedback using digital tools</td>
<td>I don’t know if I was being as clear as I could have been . . . I couldn’t judge how he would receive it, like, in person, face-to-face. . . . I wrote down everything I wanted to say, and then eventually I just had to cut some of it out, ‘cause it got too long. (Camille)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing vs. talking: Google Docs vs. screencast vs. in-person feedback</td>
<td>I’m like a fan of the verbal. I liked the screencast actually. ‘Cause I feel like the perk of verbal is that there is not a miscommunication of tone . . . and they can ask me questions about it in class [the night after I put it up]. (Emily)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Excerpt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Digital Interactions Led to Inferences About Writers’ Identities and Motivations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worrying that digital interaction prevents them from giving sound feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes I think they get my points better and it makes more sense when I verbally say it. And they can comprehend (rather than when I’m typing it). I feel like it’s kind of hard to know what I’m trying to say or maybe it sounds kind of like pushy or maybe it sounds like, I don’t know. I don’t know how they’re taking it. (Madison)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not knowing who the mentee is provides less biased feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td>I think it makes it easier not knowing who they are because I felt like it was easier to review their papers than it would be for like a friend. (Kristy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Google Docs provides an authentic context for responding to high school students</td>
<td></td>
<td>It gave me a better feel for how actual high school students actually write, you know. ‘Cause I know how I write and how other college students write ‘cause we review each other’s papers, but I hadn’t seen any other high schoolers’ work at all. So it gave me a better feel for how to work with students and deal with their writing and help them improve. (Yasmine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ copying and pasting their comments into the text</td>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t mean for you to copy and paste my comment as your paper. And then I didn’t know how to respond after that because the more I commented, she just kept copying and pasting all my comments in as her paper. I was like I don’t know if I even should respond at this point before I say something [to the cooperating teacher]. (Emily)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning the utility of their feedback because of students’ lack of response</td>
<td></td>
<td>Like they don’t click resolve. I hate whenever they don’t do that, because I don’t know if my things are even helping them or not. (Jennifer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not having visual and audio information about students</td>
<td></td>
<td>So this class was a little bit harder to get a little more out of them. ‘Cause you only knew their name. (Elle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heightening the importance of back-and-forth communication</td>
<td></td>
<td>So I was able instead of just presenting him a comment and like doing it at separate times, we were able to actually do it together. . . . I was trying really hard to like not give him the answers. (Athena)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Co-constructing Ideas via Online Dialogue Created Effective Mentoring Relationship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting feedback from students through the digital tools</td>
<td></td>
<td>She always opens up with exactly what she’s looking for from me. And that’s super, super helpful when she’s like “Madison, please look for X, Y, and Z.” And then she also comments on how she appreciates my feedback. . . . You’re clear about what you want from me and you’re also telling me that I’m helping you. (Madison)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking advantage of synchronous features</td>
<td></td>
<td>So I was lucky enough to type alongside of two of the students—or at least one of the students—I’ve actually helped work on their paper. And so with that, we were really good with like, “This is what I suggest.” And he was like “Ok, how about this?” And so I was real quick—’cause we were on the same time—real quick to work things out. (Athena)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialoguing with students about writing using Comment improves interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td>Like the Comments function. I feel like it should be a two-way thing. That’s the point of the peer review. You can’t just do a one-sided thing, ’cause it’s like you said. I don’t want to do it that way because I have a reason. So I just think it would help out a lot if they did that. (Yasmine)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

WMs valued feedback that identified specific strengths and weaknesses, addressed global and local issues, and allowed them to develop dialogic relationships to encourage writers and co-construct the feedback they received. WMIs found that the digital tools and the remote context—the fact that they were not in the classroom with the teacher and were interacting with the writers at a distance—constrained their feedback in specific ways: tailoring their feedback to mentor teachers’ objectives, delivering clear feedback, and interpreting students’ lack of communication. However, WMIs also found that the remote nature of the mentorship allowed them to engage in perspective-taking and to resist “teaching by transmitting” by exploring ways to model revision for and co-construct ideas with student writers.

Relevant Feedback Depends on Classroom Context

WMIs felt that their lack of knowledge of what was happening in the classroom impaired their ability to provide specific feedback that adequately addressed writing prompts. Many WMIs expressed a desire for more information from the teacher to help them give better feedback, worrying that their feedback would contradict the teacher’s expectations and lead students to receive a poor grade. Emily was anxious that her lack of knowledge of what the teacher had covered influenced what she could assume in her feedback and, thus, how she could “teach [her mentee] things”:

I also didn’t know how to teach her things. I don’t know if her teacher has even taught her that. Like using transition words between paragraphs... I don’t know what was my jurisdiction to say “Have you all talked about transition words in class?” because the sentences looked like they came from two different essays.

Other WMIs had a variety of questions about the curriculum and instruction being provided. Kenzie was curious about how mentees were taught to approach rhetorical analysis; Emily wondered how mentees were taught to construct paragraphs and if mentees were taught that a certain number of pieces of evidence were necessary to make a good argument. In their interviews, WMIs suggested various ways to rectify this information deficit. Rebecca suggested that they “watch [the teacher] teach ‘this is what the paper is going to be’” and Elle suggested that they see the teacher’s PowerPoint, while Madison and Jennifer expressed a wish for a rubric.
WMs also desired feedback on their responses in connection with the contexts in which they worked. Rebecca suggested that the teacher (or the authors) offer “feedback on how we did with giving feedback.” Yasmine wished that mentees would use the commenting feature to “comment on our comments . . . cause I don’t know how clear I was in my thing and they might not get it. ‘What does that word even mean.’ That would’ve been so nice.” Athena actually reached out to her mentees to find out if her feedback was useful because she felt “unconfident” in her comments. At the end of one paper, she reported that she had written,

“Really quick. I want to ask a couple of questions about my comments. Did you find them helpful? Do they stress you out?” Stuff like that. And usually they comment “thank you” or something. Like really helpful.

Overall, WMs felt that their lack of presence in the classroom impaired their ability to provide feedback tailored to the CTs’ objectives. WMs believed that their feedback could be more useful to mentees if they received assurance from their instructors or CTs that they were responding effectively or from their mentees that their suggestions were useful. Feedback on their feedback, WMs asserted, would have supported their ability to contextualize relevant responses to student writers.

**Digital Contexts Affect Clarity of Feedback**

WMs recognized that each technology had different affordances for delivering feedback clearly. Two WMs felt that screencasting tools did a better job of conveying tone than written comments. As Elle remarked, “I feel like the perk of verbal [screencasts] is that there is not a miscommunication of tone.” However, two WMs felt that recording feedback via video or audio impaired their ability to respond clearly. When Camille had the opportunity to create a screencast for her mentee, she decided to write down what she would say in advance:

I don’t know if I was being as clear as I could have been. I was, I couldn’t really . . . judge how he would receive it, like, in person, face-to-face. So it was kind of, I really, I wrote down everything I wanted to say, and then I eventually I just had to cut some of it out ‘cause it got too long.

Although the Google Docs commenting feature was the more common method of providing feedback, WMs remarked on how written feedback prevented them from being as clear as they could have been through in-person or phone/video conferences. Jennifer suggested phone conferencing because “it’s so hard to type what you want to say sometimes.” Madison expressed a
hope that synchronous discussions would allow her mentees to understand her feedback “the first time around.” In the first focus group, she said,

I also feel like I would give better feedback if I was reading it with them, there with them or over the phone and I could go line by line with them. Just, really knock it out. [I]f we were able to articulate our thoughts to them and they could even take notes on what we’re saying, the first time around, in a way that they understand it.

At the second focus group at the end of the semester, Madison had not changed her mind, commenting, “sometimes I think they get my points better and it makes more sense when I verbally say it. And they can comprehend (rather than when I’m typing it).”

CJ agreed that talking on the phone with mentees would help them understand the feedback more efficiently:

I feel like a lot of times when you read comments on your paper, you either don’t understand or you think you understand and so you make all these changes and then they send it back to me and I read it and I’m like, “Well, you made some changes but like you still made the same mistake.”

The slippage between CJ as “you” and the mentees as “you” shows he empathizes with their position—a move we describe in more detail in the next section. Rebecca even suggested that the decontextualized nature of the WM program forced her to empathize and make sure her comments were comprehensible:

[When you’re grading papers as a teacher, the kids are always going to be right in front of you. . . . You can tell they don’t get it or not. So once I explain something, read it back. Is a 15-year-old actually going to know what this means?]

WMs’ experiences struggling to decipher feedback prompted their perspective taking from their mentees’ positions, and thus to prefer in-person or voice/video conferences. In CJ’s and Rebecca’s cases, the impulse toward corrective feedback facilitated the humanization of the students as writers and readers.

Digital Interactions Led to Inferences about Writers’ Identities and Motivations

Despite WMs’ frustrations with communication, the digital tools did allow WMs to better know their mentees. Across all courses, WMs spoke of the pleasure they took in the digital back-and-forth socializing with their
mentees. They appreciated students who offered comments they found humorous or clever or those who took the time to thank them for feedback, as well as students who were respectful, produced timely drafts, and stayed in touch. They also enjoyed getting to know the mentees through their writing. When asked what she had learned about teaching writing during the WM program, Emily commented, “Actually knowing about their personal life makes a huge difference.” Rebecca pointed out that one of her mentees, who was writing an argument paper using evidence from the podcast *Serial* (Koenig, 2014), displayed a meticulous attention to detail in examining the evidence: “You can see their personality so much through their papers. He would take the timestamps of the cell towers calls and try to connect them—I bet you love math and science, I bet that’s how you think.”

However, when mentees did not respond to the WMs’ feedback or were late or remiss in posting drafts, some WMs were conscious of how disconnected they were from their mentees’ sense-making. CJ expressed frustration when he’d spent considerable time responding to his mentee’s writing but was forced to wait an extended amount of time before hearing back (if at all): “And then it’s like a week before I get a paper back from them, with changes. So it doesn’t feel like a conversation. It feels like I speak to them and it’s just nothing for a while and then all of a sudden . . .” Rebecca’s response to witnessing her mentee’s use of Google Docs’ “resolve” function on her comments, without providing any explanations, provoked a number of questions:

Okay, is it my fault? Did I not give clear enough advice? Was it my error? Did he have a bad week? Like are you okay? Do you need help? Are you frustrated? Like talk to me. So it’s kind of weird when you can’t talk face to face, because you have no idea why the changes have or have not been made.

For CJ and Rebecca, understanding why their students did not respond or resolved comments without clarifying how the comments were addressed resulted in imagining reasons for students’ (lack of) responses rather than dialoguing with them.

In addition, without specific information about a mentee’s writing interests and habits, some WMs reverted to negative assumptions about high school students to explain mentees’ lack of presence, namely that they are typically unmotivated or uninterested. Madison espoused a deficit stance on adolescents’ attitudes toward writing, in general, as she accounted for her mentees’ perceived lack of effort and delayed response: “[A] lot of these kids probably hate it [writing] . . . so that probably has a lot to do with the
communication factor and the effort factor.” Yasmine’s extrapolation to all high school students served as another instance in which PSETs’ inferences based on ambiguous communications with youth may have underscored deficit views of youth: “But you’ll have that [not responding to feedback]. They’re high schoolers.” Although the digital tools mediated relationship-building between mentors and mentees, ambiguous digital communicative practices also prevented relationships from developing or prompted mentors to rationalize high school writers’ behaviors that they didn’t understand with deficit explanations or assumptions.

Co-constructing Ideas via Online Dialogue Created Effective Mentoring Relationships

A number of WMs leveraged features of Google Docs to facilitate dialogue with their mentees. Yasmine discontinued her earlier approach to providing feedback—writing summative, paragraph-length responses at the end of a mentee’s paper—when she recognized how the Comments function in Google Docs could be used to engage in an extended dialogue about writing: “But now that it’s more of like an open communication, I can write shorter things, ask more questions, and the students respond. And I think that’s shaped how I provided feedback this semester.” Athena found that such dialogue was easier when she and her mentee were working synchronously in the Google Doc itself:

[I]nstead of just presenting him a comment and like doing it at separate times, we were able to actually do it together. ’Cause there was just one thing that wasn’t clicking with him and I was like “Let’s go back to your example essay. And let’s tear this apart a little bit.” I was trying really hard to like not give him the answers. And then like in the end, it was just “Here’s what I would do. Now you can do the second one.”

Such a digital interaction allowed Athena to provide instruction and support “just in time” for her mentee to use it. Importantly, Athena also recognized how she needed to prevent the impulse to teach by transmitting, opting instead to model a discourse move she wanted her mentee to take up in subsequent paragraphs.

Elle, too, co-constructed ideas with her mentee. She described creating what was essentially an interactive lesson:

They were looking for supporting evidence for things and they’re like “I don’t know what to pull. I don’t know what’s really significant.” And I was like, “give me a list. So the next time you have a chance to put anything on here, give me like 4 examples, like 4 quotes, just pull ’em.” And afterwards, I’d be like “why did you pick this. Write me like 2 sentences why you did it.”
Yasmine’s, Athena’s, and Elle’s comments reflect the affordances of digital technology in creating contexts for dialogic interactions to take place. Yasmine’s questions using the comments feature reflected open communication to promote students’ thinking. Athena resisted editing the document and instead navigated the tricky terrain of providing a mentor text from which students could draw to develop their own writing. Elle used the digital platform to ask her mentee to make the first move in co-constructing ideas by collecting a list of quotations that could be used to provide evidence for the developing argument. These invitations to active co-construction allowed these particular WMs to refrain from giving their mentees answers and, instead, provide guidance when and how their mentees needed it.

**Discussion**

Our study examined how PSETs’ views of writing response are shaped by their digital interactions with high school writers. One important finding was that WMs craved face-to-face interaction with their mentees and a fuller understanding of the teacher’s expectations that they felt could be achieved only by visiting the classroom and/or talking on the phone or in person. Their desire for real-time interactions as conditions of effective response may be due to what Evans (2003) calls the transmission model of communication, in which “stable, fixed meanings . . . [are seen to] be neatly transmitted from person to person” (p. 393). Scholars have long asserted that meaning is co-constructed and dynamic, and decades-old research has illustrated that no mode of communication enables “cleaner” transmission than any other; face-to-face communication between teacher and student does not necessarily remove confusion from written comments (e.g., Sperling & Freedman, 1987), even though a belief in the transparency of one’s meaning is difficult for teachers to shed (Evans, 2003).

Yet commitments to transmission models of communication are not in themselves antithetical to sociocultural approaches to teaching writing. WMs sought back-and-forth contact with their mentees, enjoyed serendipitous moments of synchronous online conversation about writing, and were pleased to learn about adolescents’ lives through their writing. Overall, WMs perceived getting to know their mentees and their contexts as vital components of providing relevant, supportive, and actionable feedback to student writers. They felt, therefore, that typing into comment boxes merely scratched the surface of how they could best support student writers. Furthermore, the comment features challenged some WMs to reevaluate their
beliefs that teaching writing is an act of transmission: because they could not easily lecture in the comment boxes, some WMs reexamined what feedback, beyond direct instruction for improvement, might be helpful to students, thereby disrupting their conceptions about response to writing.

Most significantly, the digital mode of response unsettled PSETs’ thinking in ways that both challenged and aligned with principles for effective feedback. For instance, responding to minimal or absent work from mentees led PSETs to fall back on deficit narratives about adolescents. Yet PSETs’ thinking was disrupted to align with principles of effective feedback when they had to figure out alternative ways to communicate their ideas effectively. For Yasmine, this meant an overhaul of the placement and length of her response to mentees. For Athena, this meant abandoning directive methods (e.g., corrective feedback) with her mentee in favor of modeling. And for Elle, the digital mode of response facilitated her deconstruction of practice. Both PSETs’ struggles and successes illuminated the importance of tension in being and becoming a real writing mentor. As such, our findings reinforce previous recommendations that teacher educators prompt PSETs to address the competing factors that influence their conceptions of how to teach (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016; Hebard, 2016), as well as add to the English language arts field’s burgeoning understanding of the role of digital tools in these conceptions (e.g., Johnson, 2016).

**Implications**

This study supports calls for increasing English teacher educators’ emphasis on the teaching of writing in methods courses, particularly on the tensions that arise as PSETs confront possibly conflicting paradigms about effective response to student writers. Drawing on the data reported here, we suggest that teacher educators provide PSETs with opportunities to use digital tools to respond to student writers and to reflect on those experiences. Additionally, we would argue that such teacher education experiences should be essential components of teacher preparation as we navigate education during a pandemic.

The opportunities to engage with writers in the WM program disrupted some PSETs’ thinking in productive ways. As Bomer et al. (2019) assert, “activities in teacher education that require [preservice teachers] to respond to student writing, in addition to increasing [their] confidence and ability to provide feedback, can be occasions for asking broader questions about the sociopolitical layers of language, literacy, and evaluation” (p. 10). We agree that such practice can lead to confidence and the capacity to pose critical
questions about writing and teaching writing. We add to this perspective the importance of PSETs’ grappling with student writers who don’t “receive” PSETs’ intended meanings. Such miscommunications allowed PSETs to ask questions about what they might have been doing wrong, point to the perceived limitations of the mode of communication, propose more effective approaches to providing feedback, and resort to deficit explanations for students’ responses to their feedback. All of these occasions—perhaps especially the most problematic ones—invite PSETs to enter the professional dialogue around the complex practice of responding to student writing.

With their classmates, PSETs could examine the extent to which their and their peers’ feedback aligned with principles for effective response, given that digital response to writing creates a particular context that may depend on some principles over others or require a revised or new set of principles altogether. Instead of seeking an “ideal” mode of response to student writing (a mode that, per Sperling and Freedman [1987], does not in fact exist), teacher educators can also work with PSETs to analyze how response to writing is shaped by relationships (or lack thereof) with writers, cooperating teachers, and teacher educators; PSETs’ ideologies about youth; and PSETs’ working theories of effective communication. Conversations that focalize conflicts across contexts can help to integrate PSETs’ knowledge about the teaching of writing (Hebard, 2016).

Recent developments underscore the importance of doing so: As schools moved courses online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars with expertise in digital pedagogy took to social media to call for a focus on humanity and compassion in digital schooling, including moving to pass/fail grading to offset student precarity (Stommel, 2020) and rejecting video surveillance of student learning (Watters, 2020), for the sake of valuing student agency over the efficiency and flexibility that digital platforms offered. The teaching of writing online in our study disrupted PSETs’ expectations for what it meant to teach efficiently—they could not always get students to revise in the ways they suggested. Critical reflection on online writing platforms could help PSETs understand how English education contributes to ethical pedagogies, like those Watters (2020) and Stommel (2020) advocate, when the focus turns from efficiency to relationships.

Although we do not wish to advocate the overreliance on digital tools for teaching—our research does not indicate that online response platforms, such as Google Docs, can replace face-to-face writing instruction—we found that PSETs’ experiences with digital response prompted their theory building, so that co-constructing ideas, developing relationships, and dialoguing
with writers came to characterize what they valued in responding to student writing.

As the world looks toward schooling scenarios that include both face-to-face and online learning environments, English teachers and teacher educators should seek to align digital response-to-writing practices—and the theories that undergird them—with the blended/hybrid teaching and learning contexts that have been popularized out of necessity. With public health experts forecasting the need for continued social distancing to contain the spread of COVID-19, the critical examination of online instructional interactions in English language arts teaching and learning contexts are likely to become even more necessary moving forward. With this uncertain future in mind, we argue that critical reflection on the disruptive and generative potential of digital feedback should be an important part of English teacher education in the years to come.

Appendix

Interview # 1 (Spring 2018)

1. Tell me about what a successful writer does. You can give me an example, if you’d like, of a successful writer and what s/he does when they write.
2. Tell me about what a successful teen writer does. You can give me an example, if you’d like, of a successful teen writer and what s/he does when they write.
3. Describe for me a time when your upbringing influenced you as a writer.
4. We know there are many factors that shape how students write. One of those factors is culture. How would you define culture?
5. How would you define “cultural knowledge,” then, as far as the types of cultural knowledge a person might have?
6. What do you think it means to use cultural knowledge as a writer?
7. Describe for me a time, if any, when a student writer in the Writing Mentors program demonstrated cultural knowledge in their writing.
8. Tell me about what you know about the student writers you’ve interacted with in the Writing Mentors program.
9. Tell me what you would like to know about them.
10. How do you envision a more successful or satisfying experience as a Writing Mentor than you’ve had so far?
Interview # 2 (Spring 2018)
1. Tell me about a teacher or teachers you know who give effective feedback on student writing. It can be a teacher or professor you’ve had, or a cooperating teacher from your time in the schools. What made the feedback successful?
2. In our last interview, we talked about how you were managing to form relationships with the students. Do you think your relationship with your student or students has changed, improved, or stayed the same since the last interview, in March?
3. How do you envision successful feedback on student writing in your future classroom? You may name a specific grade level and writing assignments, if you’d like.
4. Tell me about a time you’ve felt success in providing feedback as a Writing Mentor this semester. Use specific examples from working with the students online.
5. Tell me about a challenging time you’ve had in providing online feedback through the Writing Mentors program. Use specific examples from working with the students online.
6. Tell me about some instances in which this semester’s writing mentors program was a success in helping you learn to teach writing.
7. Tell me about some instances in which this semester’s writing mentors program was a challenge or was problematic in our attempt to help you learn to teach writing.
8. How can we improve the Writing Mentors program for the fall semester?

Interview # 1 (Fall 2018)
1. Describe for me a time, if any, when a student writer in the Writing Mentors program demonstrated cultural knowledge in their writing.
2. Tell me about what you know about the student writers you’ve interacted with in the Writing Mentors program.
3. What have you noticed about your students’ writing abilities so far? What did they do well? What do they need help with?
4. Compare your approach to feedback this fall to this past spring. Are you doing things differently this time? How so?
5. If you answered YES to question 5: Why do you think your approach is different?
6. What, if anything, have you learned about interacting with high school students about their writing from your most recent round of feedback?
7. What are your best skills so far as a teacher of writing? That is, what skills have you acquired so far that you will take into your student teaching and why you have your own classroom?
8. What would you still like to learn about giving effective feedback to student writers?
9. Please look over the epistemological survey you took this in the spring. Do you see any prompt on the survey where your response might be different now than it was in the spring? This would be for prompts where your view on teaching writing has changed since spring.

10. If your view has changed on any of the prompts, please tell me which ones and how your view has changed.

**Interview #2 (Fall 2018)**

1. Were there any instances in which the high school students cultural or political views in their writing or in your correspondence with them affected how you approached your feedback on their writing?

2. What were your impressions of how the students used your feedback to improve their writing?

3. What are your thoughts on how the type of prompt the teacher gave the students may have affected the students’ quality of writing?

4. Did the type of prompt affect the types of feedback you gave? How so?

5. Did the type of prompt affect the enjoyment you took in providing feedback?

6. What are some instances in which you felt you gave excellent feedback? Tell me about those.

7. What are some instances in which you felt you gave ineffective feedback? Tell me about those.

8. How would you describe the high school students as writers? What were their needs, preferences, and strengths?

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1. We use the terms *urban* and *rural* to denote, respectively, densely and sparsely populated; the rural area in our study is primarily White and the urban area is more racially diverse.

2. See Chisholm et al. (2019) for an analysis of PSETs’ readings of high school students’ racial and cultural identities, especially as these identities were interpreted by PSETs in connection to the sociopolitical content of students’ writing.

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