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Original Publication Information

Chisholm, J. S., Olinger, A. R., & Heron-Hruby, A. "I didn't want to make them feel wrong in any way': Preservice teachers craft digital feedback on sociopolitical perspectives in student texts." 2019. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 19(4).

ThinkIR Citation

Chisholm, James S.; Heron-Hruby, Alison; and Olinger, Andrea R., "'I Didn't Want to Make Them Feel Wrong in Any Way': Preservice Teachers Craft Digital Feedback on Sociopolitical Perspectives in Student Texts" (2019). *Faculty Scholarship*. 428.
<https://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty/428>

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PRESERVICE TEACHERS CRAFT DIGITAL FEEDBACK

“I didn’t want to make them feel wrong in any way”: Preservice teachers craft digital feedback
on sociopolitical perspectives in student texts

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Published in *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* 19(4): 2019.

Note: Please reference this version, as there are production errors in the online version

(<https://www.citejournal.org/volume-19/issue-4-19/english-language-arts/i-didnt-want-to-make-them-feel-wrong-in-any-way-preservice-teachers-craft-digital-feedback-on-sociopolitical-perspectives-in-student-texts/>).

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Abstract

This qualitative multi-case analysis investigates the role of “educational niceness” and “neutrality” (e.g., Baptiste, 2008; Bissonnette, 2016) in preservice English teacher feedback on sociopolitical issues in student writing. As part of the field experiences for several ELA methods courses at two universities, one urban and one rural, the teacher-researchers used Google Docs and other technologies (screencasts, Google Community) to connect preservice teachers (PSTs) with high school writers at a geographical distance so that urban-situated PSTs could mentor rural-situated writers and vice versa. Five methods courses over 2 semesters served as cases, and 12 PSTs from those courses participated in focus groups. Data included audio recordings of 9 focus groups and PSTs’ digital responses to student writing. Using thematic analysis, we explored how PSTs responded to sociopolitical perspectives in students’ writing—both engaging them and staying neutral. Although authentic opportunities for responding to student writers supported PSTs’ critical reflection on teaching writing, analysis of PSTs’ responses indicate that such authentic practice may not be sufficient for preparing PSTs to navigate sociopolitical issues and may, in fact, exacerbate PSTs’ impulse to enact educational niceness.

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“[W]e cannot ignore the current moment and the significance of new teachers entering the field ready to support students as sociopolitical agents in a tumultuous, and in many ways dystopian, context” (Bomer, Land, Rubin, & Van Dike, 2019, p. 13).

Describing her experience giving feedback to an adolescent writer through Google Docs, preservice teacher (PST) Emily¹ said that she wished she knew the race of a student who had analyzed the poem “Rosa Parks” (Giovanni, 2002). The student “was proving that racism ended...which obviously isn’t true. And I didn’t know how to respond...I’m like, is she white and she just doesn’t understand that racism still exists? Or is she some other minority and she’s reading the poem incorrectly?” The main platform used in this connected learning/teaching partnership (Moran, 2018), Google Docs, made Emily’s experience giving feedback more challenging because she couldn’t tailor her feedback to the student. Although Emily was willing to respond to the student’s views on racism, other PSTs whose students wrote about sociopolitical (Nieto, 2003) issues² were less willing to take such risks, preferring to comment on seemingly “neutral” aspects of students’ writing to not be perceived as partisan (e.g., Hess & McAvoy, 2015). In times when teachers’ voices are being silenced by legislators (e.g., Altavena, 2018) and echo-chambers proliferate in public discourse, learning to provide productive digital writing feedback is an especially relevant practice for preservice teachers.

Considerable attention has been devoted to research on the teaching of writing in K-12 teacher education since Morgan and Pytash’s (2014) review of literature, which identified only 7 studies conducted on this topic before 2010. Bomer, Land, Rubin, and Van Dike (2019) found 82

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² A text becomes sociopolitical when an agent of that text (reader, responder, writer) notes attention to or neglect of social injustice within the text. Because a text is not static in the sociopolitical context of school (Nieto, 2003), it always involves agents. Sociopolitical agents are readers, responders, and writers of/to a sociopolitical text. In using this definition, we acknowledge that all texts are potentially sociopolitical. An ideology is a belief system that shapes an agent's sociopolitical participation in a text.

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studies published between 2000-2018, but they identified only one study “as activating a sociopolitical discourse, [and] none specifically discussed how [prospective teachers] might introduce sociopolitical purposes for writing or position their EC-12 students as social agents” (p. 7). In this paper, we build on two emerging bodies of literature: calls for support for PSTs’ development of social justice pedagogical content knowledge (Dyches & Boyd, 2017; Garcia & O’Donnell-Allen, 2015; Minor, 2018) and scholarship on ideologies shaping ELA teachers’ beliefs and practices (Barnes & Chandler, 2019; Laughter, Huddleston, Shipman, & Victory, 2018; Sherry, 2017).

Discourses in the Teaching of Writing

Both theory (Ivanič, 2004) and research (Bomer et al., 2019) suggest that a broad range of discourses on teaching writing exist and are taken up in different ways by different teachers. Ivanič (2004) described six distinct discourses that shape the teaching and researching of writing: skills, creativity, process, genre, social practices, and sociopolitical (p. 225). PSTs must balance concerns for helping high school students master a set of basic rules and structures—Ivanič’s “skills” discourse—with progressive academic orientations to writing as a social, cultural, and ideological activity—Ivanič’s “social practices” and “sociopolitical” discourses. PSTs must also address potential conflicts between what they tend to think teachers *should* do when responding to student writing—correcting student missteps and taking on a seemingly objective, one-size-fits-all approach to student writers—and what they find satisfying when actually responding to student texts in their field experiences—including engaging in dialogue with students about the content of their writing when issuing feedback (Authors, 2018). Sherry (2017), for example, demonstrated how these discourses compete with one another as PST participants engaged in

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default responses (e.g., correcting mechanical issues) on students' writing even when they previously expressed negative feelings about engaging in such an approach.

Sherry and Roggenbuck (2014) called for research that illustrates how PSTs “practice responding to student writing in ways that both challenge their assumptions about their roles as teachers and help them to connect theory to practice” (p. 6). Such learning opportunities can bring into consciousness for PSTs the plethora of factors (e.g., teacher education cohort, cooperating teachers, methods courses) that influence PSTs' conceptions about teaching and the relative levels of influences those factors may have at different points in time (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016; Pardo, 2006).

Such diverse factors can result in what Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985) described as the “two-worlds pitfall” (p. 63). This emerges when PSTs graduate from progressive teacher education programs and then encounter “competing centers of gravity” (Smagorinsky, Rhym, & Moore, 2013, p. 148) and “praxis shock” (Smagorinsky, Gibson, Bickmore, Moore, & Cook, 2004, p. 214)—the realities of contemporary classroom life that may challenge beginning teachers who learned about sociopolitical discourses related to the teaching of writing, but then encountered the skills discourse in their first jobs, such as, through the scrutiny of administrators who perceive skills instruction as necessary for raising student test scores. Aligned with the sociopolitical discourse related to teaching writing, our study seeks to understand how prospective teachers think about and respond to students whose argumentative writing is grounded in potentially polarizing ideological perspectives.

Teaching as Social Justice Practice

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In their framework for Social Justice Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (SJPACK), Dyches and Boyd (2017) argued that “all instructional maneuvers are politically charged and therefore never neutral” (p. 477). Grounded in this belief, the authors extended Shulman’s (1987) influential framework that described the specialized knowledge set of teachers known as Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)—a framework found ubiquitously in teacher education programs and used recently to frame research on the teaching of writing as a core practice for PSTs (Ballock, McQuitty, & McNary, 2018). Dyches and Boyd (2017) noted, however, that Shulman’s framework is relatively silent on supporting teachers to disrupt status-quo structures that result in inequities for students from marginalized populations and prevent teachers’ growth as critical change agents. SJPACK offers a framework within which teacher practices such as responding to student writing can be reconceptualized as a space for enacting social justice:

If teacher educators and other stakeholders with a vested interest in the field do not make explicit that all PCK practices are politically imbued, PSTs will continue to think of their work as neutral and devoid of ideology, an orientation that will likely affirm students belonging to dominant, mainstream groups while only further marginalizing students belonging to nondominant populations. (Dyches & Boyd, 2017, pp. 478-79)

The circulation of power, ideologies, and the influences of lived experiences creates a political context in every instructional interaction, perhaps especially during written interactions in which political stances are encoded in the language choices that privilege some concepts over others, establish power relationships between author and respondent, and expose ideological differences derived from writers’ lived experiences.

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Part of developing SJPACK as a teacher of writing involves studying ways to respond to and explore sociopolitical issues. Scholars have used the phenomenon (a.k.a. “disease”) of educational niceness (Baptiste, 2008, p. 7; Bissonnette, 2016) to problematize the ways in which teachers may unwittingly reinforce status quo societal structures by avoiding imposing ideas on their students in the interest of “value-neutrality” (Baptiste, 2008, p. 7). By identifying how the commitment to educational niceness undermines even the work of two of the most revered critical theorists in education—Paulo Freire and Myles Horton—Baptiste argues that educational niceness is “not a humanizing practice” and that “[u]ntil educators rid themselves of their yearning to be nice, until they embrace wholeheartedly their obligation to impose, their educational impact—especially in addressing social inequalities—will be severely curtailed” (Baptiste, 2008, p. 26). Knowing when and how to “impose” can represent an ideological and pedagogical challenge for prospective teachers of writing who are charged with reconciling what they’re learning in their teacher education programs with what they’re seeing in their field experiences and with their own experiences of schooling.

Responding to Student Writing as Social Justice Practice

Researchers working in the area of language instruction (as part of a larger curricular program in the teaching of writing) have explored preservice and inservice teachers’ language ideologies about marginalized and stigmatized Englishes (Godley, Carpenter, & Werner, 2007; McBee-Orzulak, 2013; Metz, 2017). In particular, scholars have called for increased attention to the ways in which PSTs can become sociopolitical agents toward the language ideologies that inform methods for teaching about grammar (McBee-Orzulak, 2013). Scholars have also emphasized how teachers’ disciplinary content knowledge of dialects of English (i.e.,

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sociolinguistics) and the approaches available to them for teaching about language (e.g., code-meshing [Young, Barrett, Young-Rivera, & Lovejoy, 2014]) can support a social justice agenda and support learners' sociopolitical agency (Godley & Reaser, 2018), including for white and monolingual students (Metz, 2017). This body of research has produced clear recommendations and guiding principles for teachers working in secondary ELA settings, as well as for English teacher educators (e.g., Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006).

Other scholars have studied how teachers negotiate competing ideologies during discussions of polarizing and challenging topics during classroom discussions (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; O'Donnell-Allen, 2011; Author, 2018). Concepts such as "civil discourse" (O'Donnell-Allen, 2011) and dialogic stance (Boyd & Markarian, 2015; Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013) have been introduced in ELA teacher education to manage political polarization during discussions.

Hess and McAvoy (2015) drew on an extensive study of teachers and students engaging in political discussion to position such discourse as integral to democratic education. Promoting political literacy, Hess and McAvoy argued, requires that students learn to listen, engage with, and respond to political controversies. Recently, ELA researchers have conceptualized Daily Independent Listening as an approach to navigating polarizing perspectives during discussions for PSTs (Laughter et al., 2018). Laughter et al. (2018) provide portraits of three PSTs as they facilitated discussions during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Although the authors don't address the myriad situated obstacles that could prove to be challenging for teachers who broach sociopolitical content with their students, they point out how teachers can support students' learning during classroom discussions around polarizing topics by (a) creating a space for

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students to speak (without needing the teacher's approval for everything that is said), (b) developing explicit listening skills, (c) promoting students' critical reflections about sociopolitical topics, (d) building relationships through critical listening and speaking practices, and (e) not becoming discouraged when this literacy practice isn't immediately successful.

To date, however, ELA teacher education researchers have not focused on prospective teachers' responses to sociopolitical issues in students' writing drafts. In this study, in which PSTs and students never met face to face, we examine how PSTs reflected on the sociopolitical perspectives embedded in students' writing and perceived the digital tools to mediate their feedback. We asked, how did PSTs respond to sociopolitical perspectives in high school students' writing?

Methods

Because our university courses focus on writing as a sociocultural practice, it is important that candidates work with diverse populations. To that end, we emphasize in our teacher education coursework the centrality of culture and cultural knowledge. We draw on Ladson-Billings' (2014) definition of culture as a foundation for this work: "an amalgamation of human activity, production, thought, and belief systems" (p. 75). Cultural knowledge, then, "refers to the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75). Of critical importance to us is our students' understanding that culture is "dynamic, shifting, and ever changing" (Paris, 2012, p. 94). We also seek to support future teachers in developing a contemporary conceptualization of pedagogy that goes beyond being relevant and responsive to their students' cultural practices to "perpetuat[ing] and foster[ing]—to sustain[ing]—linguistic,

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literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

With these goals in mind, we developed the Writing Mentors program, a connected learning/teaching partnership (Moran, 2018). PSTs at a rurally situated university work with high school students in a city about 130 miles away, and PSTs who attend a university in that city work with high school students near the rural university. We designed Writing Mentors to be a digital field experience so that our PSTs could participate outside of K-12 school hours to provide high school writers support, without traveling great distances, which would be difficult for university students with jobs, families, and/or a lack of funds for gas. PSTs are paired with one or more mentees and give them feedback to a variety of English class assignments, including short stories, advertising campaigns, speeches, and argumentative and analytical essays.

The present study stems from a multi-case analysis of 5 undergraduate English methods courses that used the Writing Mentors program for field experience hours (2 methods courses at the rural university and 3 at the urban university). The study began at the start of the spring 2018 semester, with two courses, and continued in the fall 2018 semester, with three courses. From each course, we requested volunteers to participate in focus groups to learn about their experiences responding to high school students’ drafts over digital platforms. We used focus groups instead of individual interviews to capture the shared knowledge that emerges from the discussion of complex processes (Cyr, 2015). The shared cognition of a group interview format aligned well with our orientation towards data analysis, a constructivist thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 14), in which we sought to theorize the social-cultural contexts and structural conditions that shaped the PSTs’ responses to student writing.

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From each list of volunteers, we chose up to 4 participants to keep the number manageable and to give each participant multiple opportunities to speak. Our selections were based on a questionnaire we had the PSTs complete at the start of each course to glean their orientation towards writing. The questionnaire was based on Newell, VanDerHeide, and Olsen's (2014) study of argumentative epistemologies, which they termed *structural*, *ideational*, and *social practice*. Structural epistemology refers to a focus on developing a coherent essay structure as an argument; ideational epistemology focuses on developing original ideas that are explored and justified through argument; and social practice epistemology focuses on developing a projected or imagined context with an authentic audience for the argument (Newell et al., 2014, p. 97). We selected participants with different orientations to include diverse perspectives during the focus groups.

In total, we had 12 participants (3 from the rural university and 9 from the urban university) across 5 different courses. Two of the participants from the rural university participated during both semesters of the study because the university has a very small English education program, and they were in both of the courses involved in the research. The participant demographics are representative of the courses in the study and of the national teaching demographics in the United States, where most of our K-12 teachers are white women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). There was an exception to the demographic trend—one of the 12 participants, CJ, identified as an African American man (see Table 1).

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Table 1

Participant Contextual Information

<u>Name</u>	<u>Course/University</u>	<u>#Mentees/Writing Assignment</u>	<u>Case (Semester)</u>
Madison	English Methods/Urban	3/Argumentative Essay	1 (Spring 2018)
CJ	English Methods/Urban	2/Argumentative Essay	1 (Spring 2018)
Rebecca	English Methods/Urban	2/Argumentative Essay	1 (Spring 2018)
Jennifer	English Methods/Urban	3/Argumentative Essay	1 (Spring 2018)
Yasmine	Teaching Writing/Rural Advanced Studies/Rural	8/Short Story; Speech 4/Cause & Effect Essay	2 (Spring 2018) 5 (Fall 2018)
Marybeth	Teaching Writing/Rural Advanced Studies/Rural	8/Short Story; Speech 4/Cause & Effect Essay	2 (Spring 2018) 5 (Fall 2018)
Kristy	Teaching Writing/Rural	8/Short Story; Speech	2 (Spring 2018)
Camille	Teaching Writing/Urban	1/Argumentative Essay	3 (Fall 2018)
Athena	Adolescent Readers/Urban	4/Rhetorical Analysis	4 (Fall 2018)
Elle	Adolescent Readers/Urban	3/Rhetorical Analysis	4 (Fall 2018)
Emily	Adolescent Readers/Urban	2/Rhetorical Analysis	4 (Fall 2018)
Kenzie	Adolescent Readers/Urban	2/Rhetorical Analysis	4 (Fall 2018)

Note. Argumentative essays were based on high school students' written arguments about the guilt or innocence of the main suspect in the popular podcast *Serial* (Season One) (Spring 2018) or whether mass hysteria like that described in *The Crucible* could happen again (Fall 2018). Short stories were student-generated creative dystopian pieces and speeches were persuasive about a range of topics. Cause and effect essays also included students' generation of advertising campaign slideshows. Rhetorical analyses examined poems such as "Rosa Parks" by Nikki Giovanni and "Burning Oneself Out" by Adrienne Rich.

The courses involved in the case studies were as follows:

Case 1: Urban University Spring 2018 — *English Teaching Methods*

Case 2: Rural University Spring 2018 — *Teaching of Writing*

Case 3: Urban University Fall 2018 — *Teaching of Writing*

Case 4: Urban University Fall 2018 — *Teaching Adolescent Readers*

Case 5: Rural University Fall 2018 — *Advanced Studies in English for Teachers*

Studying each course as a case allowed us to examine connections between course objectives, what the PSTs learned about their mentees' social and cultural selves during the field experience, and their experiences giving feedback to these students using digital technology.

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The technology the PSTs used to give feedback consisted of Google platforms—Google Docs, Google Drive, and Google Community—as well as a screencasting tool. Though Google Community is now defunct, at the time of the study two of the three Cooperating Teachers (CTs) used it to set up a central place to post links to their students’ drafts on Google Drive, to communicate with the PSTs about their feedback, and to carve out a space for get-to-know-you conversations between the PSTs and their mentees, during which the PSTs and students provided brief bios and exchanged the occasional meme or greeting.

We chose to extend the study over two university semesters so that we could pause to reflect on the data from the first semester to make any changes the PSTs suggested might be worthwhile in using the digital platforms. Based on PSTs’ comments during the first semester about wanting to know more about the mentees’ interests and writing backgrounds, we created more robust opportunities in the second semester for PSTs and mentees to get to know one another. During the first semester, we discussed the schools’ locations and demographics (see Table 2) with the PSTs during class in the context of the course readings (see Appendix A) and during instructional planning for culturally relevant pedagogy. We also had the PSTs and the students write letters of introduction to each other, shared over email. During the second semester, we encouraged social exchanges between the PSTs and the students about life events, hobbies, and interests using the comments feature in Google Docs, and, for one case, used video introductions instead of emailed letters of introduction. Additionally, we facilitated more frequent contact between the PSTs and the CTs so that the PSTs could ask questions about the students’ needs and instructional context. After these changes, the PSTs did not cease mentioning their desire to know more information about the students; however, during the

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second half of the study, we noted a different type of concern, namely that the PSTs weren't sure how to use what they knew, or purported to know, about the students when responding to their writing. We attended to both kinds of uncertainty when analyzing the data for the present study. We recognize as one limitation of our study the absence of the student writers' perspectives on the experience of participating in the WM program. We did not include the high school writers as participants as part of the design of our study because our focus was on the pre-service teachers' perceptions of the response process.

Table 2

Demographic Information for Race in Three High Schools (HS)

<u>Race</u>	<u>Rural HS 1</u>	<u>Rural HS 2</u>	<u>*Urban HS</u>
	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
White	97.3	95.3	60.0
African American	1.0	2.0	20.7
Hispanic	1.0	1.0	15.3
Asian	0.0	0.3	2.2
Native American or Native Alaskan	0.0	0.1	0.3
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.0	0.0	0.1
Two or More Races	0.7	1.3	1.5

Note. At Rural HS 1, 66% of students were eligible for free lunch. At Rural HS 2, 60% of students were eligible for free lunch. At Urban HS, 68% of students were eligible for free lunch.
*We use "urban" not as a coded term to indicate race and socioeconomic status, but as a geographical indicator.

Researcher Positionalities

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Author 3 has a PhD in Reading Education and an MA in the Teaching of Writing and is a former middle and high school English language arts teacher. A white, middle-class woman, she has worked in teacher education since 2002 and she is presently tenured faculty at [Rural U], a regional university in the Appalachian southeast, where she teaches English education, content area literacy, and freshman writing courses.

Author 3 started the Writing Mentors program four years ago to provide teacher candidates at Rural U an opportunity to work with high school students from a wider range of cultural backgrounds. She invited Author 1, who teaches in a large urban center, to collaborate so that teacher candidates at her university could work with the culturally diverse students in his university's service region, and so the teacher candidates in his program could work with high school students from the rural service region of her university, who are primarily white and from working-class Appalachia.

A former high school English teacher, Author 1 has a PhD in English Education and has worked in teacher education since 2006. Author 1, a white, middle-class man, has worked at Rural University (Author 3's institution) and Urban University (Author 2's institution), and had a sense of the different ways in which the WM program might benefit PSTs in both locations. Author 1 and Author 2 met when Author 2 joined the faculty at the Urban University; they have collaborated in the past and through the interdisciplinary working group Author 2 co-facilitates.

Author 2 has a PhD in English/Writing Studies and works in the English Department at Urban U. She is a white, middle-class woman who teaches undergraduate and graduate composition courses and graduate seminars in writing and literacy studies. Since 2016, she has taught teacher education courses for English and education majors. Author 1 invited her to

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participate in the project in part because adding a third university site would allow each teacher education course to be paired with each of the three CTs' courses.

The teacher education program in secondary English teaching at [Rural U] is part of the English major and is relatively small, compared to the one at Author 2's and Author 1's university: in 2018-2019, there were two graduates; in 2019-2020, there will be three. The program at Rural University is housed in the Department of English, with students taking non-content related pedagogy courses in the College of Education, whereas the same program at Urban University is housed in the Department of Middle and Secondary Education, with students taking content coursework, in addition to the Teaching of Writing course in the Department of English (Author 2's department). Both education programs espouse sociocultural and culturally responsive approaches to teacher preparation, but both also work within a highly regulated state and Standards Board in which policies, paperwork, and compliance can obscure educators' visions of teaching toward culturally sustaining pedagogies.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources for the study included audio files from focus groups and corresponding transcripts, and 12 PSTs' responses to 46 mentees. Semi-structured questions for focus groups elicited participants' approaches to teaching writing as well as the opportunities and challenges they faced as they used Google Docs and other digital tools (see Appendix B for our interview protocols). Over a nine month period, we conducted 9 focus groups with PSTs. Case 1 included 2 focus groups with 4 PSTs. Case 2 included 2 focus groups with 3 PSTs during the first focus group and 2 PSTs during the second focus group. Case 3 included 1 interview with 1 PST. Case

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4 included 2 focus groups with 4 PSTs. Case 5 included 2 focus groups with 2 PSTs. Two PSTs participated in both Case 2 and Case 5, as noted above.

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017) to identify patterns in the ways the PSTs identified or reacted to sociopolitical content in the students' drafts. Thematic analysis has six phases for an interview study (Braun & Clarke, 2006): transcribing the audio; generating initial codes from the transcriptions and audio files; searching for themes by looking for relationships among the codes; collapsing similar themes and eliminating themes with codes that have flimsy connections; defining the remaining themes by naming them in a way that captures the aspect of the data which they represent; and then organizing them by theme and sub-theme.

Our thematic analysis was collaborative so that we could cross-verify the content of the themes (Smagorinsky, 2008). For the larger research project from which the present study stems, we met in person to read one transcript together and generate initial codes. Subsequently, we each read more than one-third of the transcripts until every transcript was coded by two of us. We then combined our coding lists, eliminating redundancy, and constructed the themes together during bi-weekly video conferences.

For the present study, our data sources included the coding book from the original study and the PSTs' digital responses to their mentees' writing. The coding book contained the interview data, organized by codes that captured the following: the ways the PSTs spoke about their overall preferences for providing feedback on student writing, including how they preferred to receive feedback from their own writing teachers; their understanding of how students' cultural knowledge affected how and what they wrote; and their thoughts about using digital

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tools to provide feedback on student writing during their participation in the Writing Mentors program. After identifying any sociopolitical perspectives the PSTs themselves espoused, as well as instances when the PSTs perceived tensions between their perspectives and those their mentees employed in their drafts, we examined the PSTs' digital feedback to their mentees to understand how PSTs responded to sociopolitical perspectives in students' writing.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we combine the findings from our thematic analysis with our discussion of those findings so that we can illustrate the findings' significance in the same rhetorical space. We show that although authentic opportunities for responding to student writers supported PSTs' critical reflection on teaching writing, such authentic practice may not be sufficient in preparing them to navigate sociopolitical issues and may, in fact, exacerbate their impulses to enact educational niceness.

How did PSTs Respond to Sociopolitical Perspectives in Students' Writing?

Throughout all five cases in the Writing Mentors program, PSTs reported encountering sociopolitical perspectives in high school writers' drafts. They responded in ways that we describe as "neutral"—i.e., the PSTs refrained from commenting on the writers' views and thus did not align themselves with or against those views—and "engaged"—i.e., in their feedback on student writing, the PSTs explicitly aligned themselves with or against the PSTs' sociopolitical views. As we analyze PSTs' responses, we problematize their perceptions and choices and discuss the ways in which educational niceness seemed to influence their response practices.

PSTs' neutral responses to high school students' sociopolitical stances. Several PSTs avoided engaging with writers' sociopolitical content. They articulated that they stayed neutral

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by withholding information about their own political opinions and by privileging structural form in their responses.

“I didn’t want to...push my own ideas on them.” In response to an interviewer’s question about whether the high school students’ cultural or political views affected how they approached their mentees’ writing, Yasmine responded no, saying that she deliberately failed to “factor in” the students’ opinions, giving feedback solely on “substance” and “structure” in order to not make them “feel wrong in any way”:

My students’ opinions didn’t really factor in. I just kind of gave them feedback based on the substance of their work, because I knew that I didn’t want to let my own opinions get in the way of providing them with good feedback, so I didn’t want to, like, push my own ideas on them and make it seem like, as if, I didn’t want to make them feel wrong in any way. So my feedback was all tailored to like the structure of their argument based on like what they decided to do, and their decisions with the writing process.

Because Yasmine found value in using her feedback to encourage and motivate high school writers, she perceived that any expression of her own different opinion might be seen by students as “push[ing] [her] own ideas on them”—imposing (Baptiste, 2008)—and thus might “make them feel wrong.” And “feeling wrong,” we infer, could discourage young writers or make them feel that they have little to contribute.

Yasmine and her classmate, Kristy, also voiced their understandings that the digital and, for them, asynchronous nature of the Writing Mentors program, which constrained how much personal information could be shared, could actually be an affordance. Yasmine commented,

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I think it's also kind of good to not know a whole lot too though because it's like you gauge your understanding based on your own perspective as like, well, from an unbiased kind of "I don't know you at all" kind of thing. These are things that can be improved and that goes across the board for everybody.

The interviewer validated that idea ("That's a good point"), and Kristy added, "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." Both participants saw lack of information as useful to mentee and mentor.

Kristy's thinking was that if one is close to the writer (e.g., a friend to the writer), then the feedback (perhaps if critical) could potentially damage the relationship. As a result, the fact that the mentor doesn't know the writer relieves the mentor from this anxiety. Additionally, this preference to avoid critical encounters in mentoring high school writers suggests that PSTs' "preference for niceness" (Bissonnette, 2016, p. 10) may actually shape the feedback they provide.

For Yasmine, not knowing her mentee allowed her to be "unbiased" and provide feedback that is "across the board for everybody." Additional examples of Yasmine's neutral feedback lie in how she responded to drafts of speeches; students were tasked with persuading an audience and using the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos to do so. Of the speeches she responded to, which covered topics such as the opioid epidemic, drug abuse, and animal cruelty, a student's speech on the humanity of illegal immigrants and the inhumanity of Donald Trump's rhetoric was perhaps the most potentially polarizing. In her comments, Yasmine, who espoused ideational and social practice argumentative epistemologies in her survey responses,

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focused on Alex's use of rhetorical appeals. For instance, after the story of Alex's parents' border-crossing, she applauds the writer's "powerful story," which "makes the topic more personal" (Figure 1).

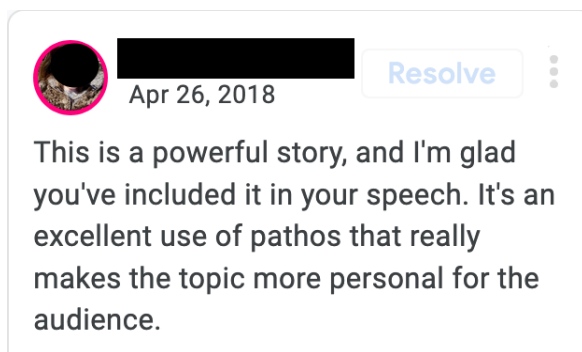


Figure 1. Yasmine's comment on Alex's speech.

At the end of the draft, Yasmine's overall comment praises Alex's topic and use of rhetorical devices and makes a suggestion about structure (Figure 2):

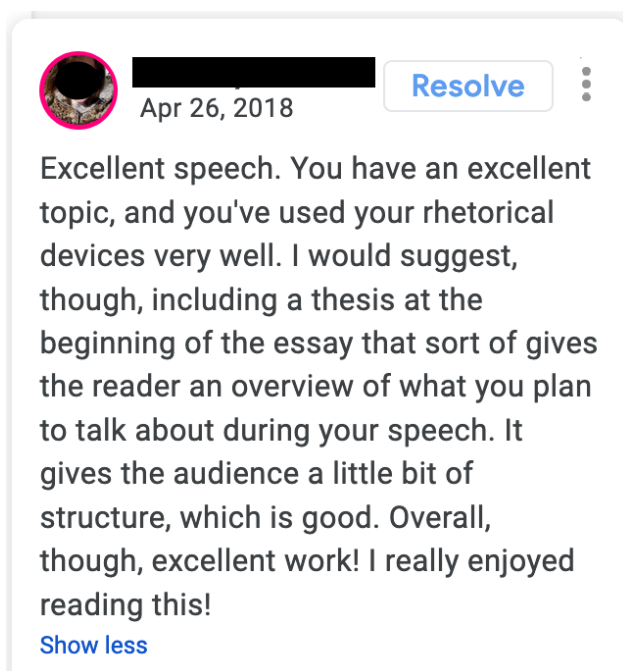


Figure 2. Yasmine's final comment on Alex's speech.

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These comments, in their encouraging tone and concrete suggestions, are representative of her comments on other speeches, which ask students to add evidence or statistics to support particular assertions, add citations for particular pieces of evidence, add personal stories for pathos, and add missing structural elements (thesis, conclusion). We do not know what Yasmine's views on these ideas are; even if she agreed with them, she did not find it relevant to engage in a dialogue in the same way as other mentors did. Notably, Yasmine valued a more conversational approach to written feedback. In the focus group, she described that whereas in the spring 2018 semester, she tended to write primarily long end-comments, in the fall 2018 semester, "it's more of like an open communication, I can write shorter things, ask more questions, and the students respond." Yet for Yasmine, this "open communication" does not extend to sociopolitical issues because, we infer, it might risk shutting that communication down. However, as Dyches and Boyd (2017) contend, value-neutral orientations in response to student writing about sociopolitical content will only affirm dominant perspectives and marginalize nondominant ones.

Refraining from pushing one's ideas on student writers was not the only way in which PSTs perceived they responded neutrally. In some instances, PSTs realized their own sociopolitical perspectives only after reflecting on their responses in focus groups.

"They were just brought up to just trust the police." PSTs described specific instances in which they perceived culture to be influencing the students' work and the perspectives students took in their writing, even if such influences remained absent in PSTs' feedback. When asked, "What do you think it means to use cultural knowledge as a writer?", Jennifer described how one

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of her mentees positioned authority and the law when invited by her classroom teacher to argue for or against Adnan Syed's guilt in Season One of the popular podcast *Serial*, which was the focal text for a unit on argumentation. Specifically, tenth-grade students were asked to respond to the following prompts:

Is Adnan guilty? What evidence do you have to prove this is true? Provide at least three. How reliable is the evidence? What makes it reliable or unreliable? Choose one of your pieces of evidence, explain how that piece of evidence could be used by those on the opposite side of the case.

Jennifer said,

Just like the way the student wrote about it, it was kind of like, they were just brought up to just trust the police and trust the government and the courts and just trust all that. Like you don't question it. That is official and that is that. Because some of the points that the student made were like, well that's what the courts say so that's what is true. And I feel like that just kind of reminded me of maybe that's their home culture. Is you don't maybe like question authority or you don't question, you know, like those types of things.

Jennifer's reflection identifies a deference to authority that she doesn't seem to share with her mentee. She noted, "I never really thought about that being like a cultural influence. But I definitely think that that could be if that's like how that student was raised."

Interestingly, Jennifer's actual response to her mentees privileges argumentative structure over addressing any sociopolitical content in high school writers' drafts. In fact, across the three students with whom Jennifer worked (two of whom argued that Adnan was guilty and one of whom argued that Adnan was innocent), her approach to feedback was consistent. Jennifer

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implored authors to draw on evidence to support the claims they were making and to explain how that evidence was functioning. She also pointed out sentence-level issues related to comma use, capitalization, and diction, in alignment with the structural argumentative epistemology she espoused in her survey (although she also espoused ideational and social practice epistemologies), and reminiscent of the participants in Sherry's (2017) study who engaged in such "default" practices despite claiming to hate receiving them as student writers. Finally, Jennifer suggested revisions and reorganizations to support coherence. Here is an example of Jennifer's summative response to Ashley's essay (Figure 3):

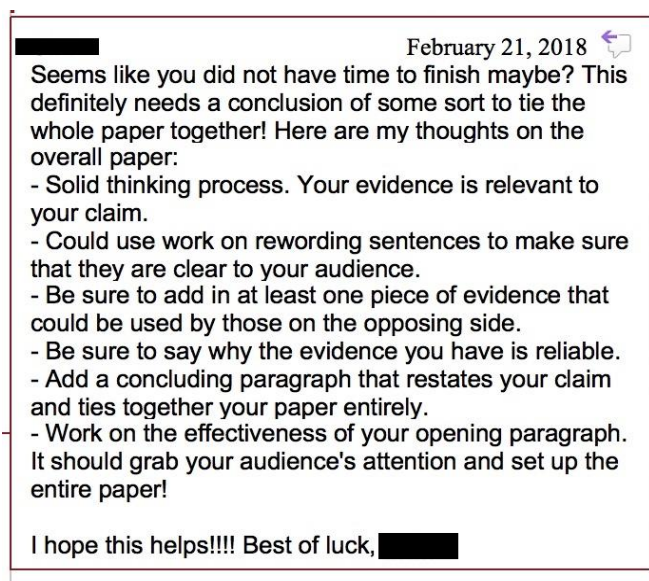


Figure 3. Jennifer's final comment on Ashley's *Serial* essay.

Given Jennifer's lack of engagement with the sociopolitical content and her corresponding emphasis on structure and language, her comments about writers' deference toward authority are noteworthy. The contrast may indicate the value of critical reflection for bringing sociopolitical issues into Jennifer's consciousness. Her epiphany occurred during the focus group ("I never really thought about that being like a cultural influence. But I definitely

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think that that could be if that's like how that student was raised.”), which highlights the value of speaking as a tool for mediation, deepening teachers’ thinking about practice. This contrast may also indicate Jennifer’s commitment to educational niceness as she performs the role of English teacher by adhering closely to the prompt and focusing on traditional structural issues taken up for decades by teachers of writing, thereby maintaining status quo practices.

In the next section, we show how one PST rationalized neutral responses to a high school student’s sociopolitical content by valuing all opinions and privileging a focus first on structural feedback before addressing the content of the writing itself via interlinear and summative written feedback and recorded screencast commentary.

“I was going to tell him that he needed to use a lot of sources.” When asked about how students’ cultural or political views affected how PSTs gave feedback, Camille immediately thought of her and her classmates’ response to “the Brett Kavanaugh situation.” The high school juniors whom her class was paired with had written essays in response to the following prompt, a capstone to their reading of Arthur Miller’s (1952) *The Crucible* and an assessment of their ability to write arguments:

Could mass hysteria like that which overcame Salem in the 1600’s transpire again? After reading *The Crucible* and informational texts about events like the Red Scare and perhaps Japanese Internment, write an argument in which you explain whether mass hysteria could run rampant among the population. Support your discussion with evidence from the texts.

Students generally answered affirmatively, and, as additional evidence of contemporary mass hysteria, some of them wrote about the sexual assault allegations facing Brett Kavanaugh and the

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Senate Judiciary Committee hearings at which he and Christine Blasey Ford testified. The hearings occurred as students were reading the play, and the CT told us that the class discussed the parallels.

Camille’s mentee, Brandon, wrote in his “Dear Reader” letter that he was not able to finish his first draft due to weather and illness; he had shared a page-long introduction and then the first two sentences of the first body paragraph. His thesis asserted that mass hysteria could happen and is happening; as evidence he listed Brett Kavanaugh, Muslim Americans after 9-11, and Japanese Americans after the Pearl Harbor bombing.

Working in Google Docs, Camille added three interlinear comments (using the “Suggesting” feature) and an end comment. For instance, after the last sentence of the introduction, Camille wrote the following (Figure 4):

Your position on the topic is clear, but I suggest combining these two sentences. Are you saying that mass hysteria is already occurring in society today? Make that clear in your thesis. Also imagine as if the reader had no idea what the question for the prompt is- you wouldn’t include “so yes” in this case bc they wouldn’t know what you are responding to.

Figure 4. Camille’s comment on the last two sentences of Brandon’s introduction draft.

This comment addresses the form of his thesis statement: combining two sentences into one to clarify their relationship and avoiding conversational language that is more writer-directed than reader-directed. Her overall comment at the end of the paper similarly focuses on structure and genre issues (e.g., connection between his points and *The Crucible*) (Figure 5):

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Hi [REDACTED]!!

No worries on the length! It's a good start so far & you'll get there. I do have some suggestions on structure that I know will make your writing flow better and help you to plan out the rest of your paper.

Your introduction has a good general structure- hook, some background info, and a thesis. The background info on *The Crucible* is good, but you definitely need to state the book title and author somewhere in there to state what you are summarizing (if I hadn't seen your prompt, I wouldn't know what you were talking about.)

I would also suggest making the background info a little more concise and shorten it, as well as briefly introduce the historical events that you will use to back up your argument. Remember that you can use the plot of *The Crucible* in the body paragraphs to tie your points back to your thesis. Overall good start!! I hope I didn't overwhelm you!! :)

Figure 5. Camille's overall comment on Brandon's first draft.

Combined, Camille's comments are positive and encouraging (e.g., "It's a good start so far & you'll get there"; "Overall good start!!"), confident ("I do have some suggestions on structure that I know will make your writing flow better..."), and sensitive to his response ("I hope I didn't overwhelm you!! :)"). They address issues of structure (e.g., placement and wording of thesis statement), genre (e.g., making sure to respond more explicitly to the prompt in the first sentence, avoiding conversational language, mentioning the title and author of the text studied), or elaboration (e.g., shortening the plot summary, elaborating on the historical events, developing connections to *The Crucible* in the body paragraphs).

Brandon never expanded the essay beyond the introduction and the opening of the first body paragraph, but he did respond to some of Camille's interlinear comments, including developing his thesis. Asked by her instructor to try out screencasting as a medium for feedback

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on mentees' second drafts, Camille produced a 3.5-minute screencast that responded to his revisions. (See Figure 6.)

[Insert Figure 6 Here: Subtitled Audio Recording of Camille's Screencast]

Figure 6. Camille's screencast on Brandon's second draft.

In the screencast, which, from the background noise, Camille seemed to have recorded in a public place, Camille spoke in a pleasant tone that could be described as neutral, dispassionate, and even—neither enthusiastic nor concerned. She again provided feedback on structure (e.g., reiterating that a thesis goes only at the end of the introduction—although she acknowledged “there’s a lot of debate on that” [0:25]; stressing the importance of a topic sentence that relates back to the thesis [2:30]) and genre (e.g., encouraging Brandon to cite *The Crucible* when he summarizes the plot in the introduction [1:13]). She also made a personal connection to Brandon, saying that having a paragraph that doesn’t clearly relate to one’s thesis “has happened to me before, it happens to everybody” [3:04].

Crucially, however, Camille never expressed skepticism about any of his points; she merely asserted the need for his body paragraphs to clearly relate to his thesis. She advised, “Make sure you are relating it [information in the intro provided about Kavanaugh, 9-11, and Pearl Harbor] back to *The Crucible* and making it clear that your argument depends on your three points about Brett Kavanaugh and 9-11 and Pearl Harbor. Um, as well as *The Crucible*” [0:51].

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In her interview, Camille discussed her choice to not address the quality of Brandon's analogy between *The Crucible* and Kavanaugh's hearings. Responding to the question about whether students' cultural or political views shaped how she approached her feedback, Camille said that she "never really got to the point where I felt like I needed to talk about it" [her mentee's cultural or political views] 'cause my student actually only did an intro." She explained the prompt and said that whereas her classmates were "kind of upset" by the Kavanaugh examples, "I stepped back and I was like, 'Okay, let's just get the, get the paper written first, and then we can discuss.' Because I wanted to see how he was going to use those examples first." She elaborated,

I was going to tell him that he needed to use a lot of sources and really back up his statements, 'cause those are very, like, controversial. And, I mean, like, he has to really make sure, like, those things go with his argument...so I was going to [address it], but I didn't get a chance to.

We characterized Camille's response as one that responds neutrally by not aligning herself for or against the sociopolitical content; in fact, her response to him does not mention it. She explained that she did not address it because Brandon's body paragraph developing the Kavanaugh example was not yet written. But had he written it, we would characterize her stance as still neutral, because she would tell him "that he needed to use a lot of sources" since his statements were "controversial."

Later on in the interview, Camille clarified her own sociopolitical perspective, contrasting herself with her classmates: "I don't think they were doing a very good job with being open to it, because it is opinion, and, like, I don't think, I don't believe any of, politics, I

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think it's all opinion, honestly. So, um, I was going to let him get his opinions out, and then, um, tell him how he, or advise him how to get evidence in there." Camille's own relativistic view—that political issues are "all opinion" and thus equally valid—underlies her practice of neutrality.

Her classmates, on the other hand, "discouraged [their mentees] strongly" from using the Kavanaugh example. According to Camille, "They said, 'Let's not- 'cause it doesn't quite fit.' They were really discouraging [their mentees] from using ones [examples] that were not quite as straightforward. 'Cause they weren't having- [the mentees] weren't using all that they could to make sure that the answers were clear." Interestingly, Camille's understanding of how her classmates responded to their mentees' use of the analogy involved them taking a "strong" stance against using the example not because it was wrong but because its role as evidence of contemporary mass hysteria was "not quite as straightforward" as other examples. Here, educational niceness informs her vision of how classmates who are "kind of upset" respond to this sociopolitical perspective. This niceness happens when teachers avoid imposing ideas on their students in the interest of "value-neutrality" (Baptiste, 2008, p. 7), in this case in reference to their PST peers, indicating that PSTs might avoid politicizing their own or other teachers' approaches to responding to student writers. As such, niceness and neutrality extend beyond teacher-to-student exchanges to maintenance of the professional community as an apolitical operation.

When asked how she would respond if she were in charge of a classroom and Brandon were in her class, Camille said that she valued students' abilities to make a good argument even if she disagreed: "I mean, if you can express your idea and you can give me, like, a good solid argument for it, I can't tell you that, 'Oh, sorry. Don't agree, so you're gonna fail the paper.'"

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However, Camille also described the need for students to understand what she called “appropriateness”: “I would definitely, like, have a one-on-one conversation with the student and see what they are actually trying to argue- and explain how important it is to know when you can and can't discuss, like, controversial things. It's just best to stay away from it- when you need- when you're depending on, like, a scholarship or a college application.”

Camille's neutral feedback on structure and genre hide the complexity of her thinking about why she responded the way she did. Factors that inform her practice include her sense of relativism—that all opinions are equal, as long as they are supported by evidence—and her desire to support students who are writing arguments with which she does not agree. However, “appropriateness” also shapes her responses, and so she would advise students against using such examples for higher-stakes genres and audiences, perhaps an example of the praxis shock (Smagorinsky, Gibson, Bickmore, Moore, & Cook, 2004, p. 214) that results from the conflict new teachers feel when they attempt to reconcile their university coursework in sociocultural aspects of literacy with the standardized, high-accountability context of public secondary education.

The PSTs in this section evidenced a range of levels of awareness of their preferences for neutrality. Whereas Yasmine stayed neutral to avoid imposition, and Jennifer stayed neutral because she seemed to not have been aware—until the focus group conversation—that she had a choice, Camille stayed neutral both because the draft was unfinished and because she wanted to value all opinions. Although we hope this article might encourage future PSTs and teacher educators to explore ways to engage with sociopolitical perspectives in student writing, we also want to approach these particular PSTs with empathy, aware of the systemic as well as individual

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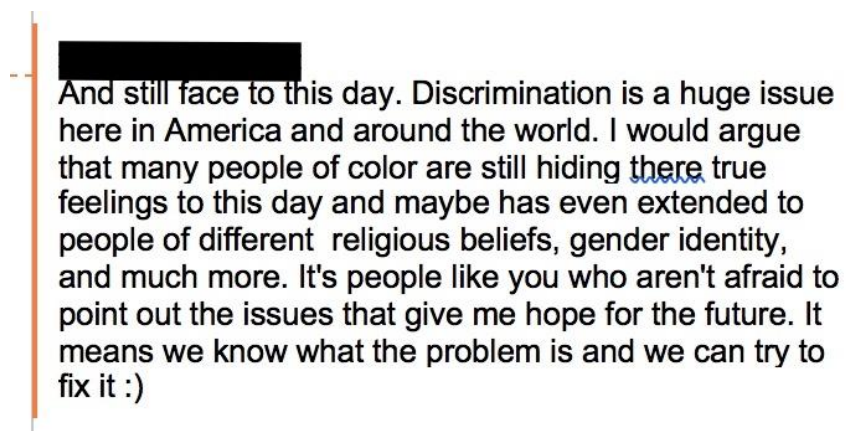
forces that inform their practices. First, PSTs are working within an educational system in which educational niceness is deeply embedded—such as in the audit culture of teacher education programs and in the “haphazard implementation” of culturally responsive pedagogies in teacher education programs (Bissonnette, 2016, p. 18). Moreover, the impetus to fight niceness clashes with a longstanding principle of response that teachers be “facilitative,” not “directive,” that they “help students realize their own purposes” rather than “projecting [their] agenda on student writing and being directive” (Straub, 2000, p. 23). Finally, as Straub (2000) acknowledges, each response situation is unique: “You cannot just employ principles of response in some general, ready-made form. You have got to particularize them...shape them to the circumstances of the class...tailor them to individual students...match them to your classroom persona and your overall teaching style” (p. 51). Given those factors—along with the general response principles of “limit[ing] the scope of your comments”; “limit[ing] the number of comments you present”; and “focus[ing] your comments according to the stage of drafting and the relative maturity of the text” (Straub, 2000, pp. 23-24)—these PSTs made a call to avoid engagement with sociopolitical content. Ultimately, our goal is not to criticize them, but rather to understand the complex sociocultural contexts that inform their learning and response practices.

PSTs’ engaged responses to high school students’ sociopolitical perspectives. Rather than remaining neutral, several PSTs responded to sociopolitical content in their mentees’ writing by taking an explicit stance on their mentees’ views. Perhaps not surprisingly—in keeping with the legacy of “educational niceness”—no PSTs explicitly disagreed with writers’ views when they commented on drafts.

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Athena and Emily provide useful examples. Some of their mentees analyzed Nikki Giovanni's (2002) poem "Rosa Parks," and both PSTs seemed concerned that these students were thinking about racism as solely a phenomenon of the past. In responding to these views, Athena and Emily managed to assert a counterargument while aligning themselves with them. Through these strategies, they managed to avoid appearing to impose their views on their mentees.

"It's people like you who aren't afraid..." The penultimate paragraph of mentee Hannah's essay explored the subjunctive mood of Giovanni's description of Pullman porters, who, according to the narrator, "smiled as if they were happy." Hannah then used language in the simple past tense to describe how racism forced African Americans into particular social positions at a specific historical moment. Athena highlighted this point and responded with a comment bubble (Figure 7):



And still face to this day. Discrimination is a huge issue here in America and around the world. I would argue that many people of color are still hiding their true feelings to this day and maybe has even extended to people of different religious beliefs, gender identity, and much more. It's people like you who aren't afraid to point out the issues that give me hope for the future. It means we know what the problem is and we can try to fix it :)

Figure 7. Athena's response to Hannah's analysis of "Rosa Parks."

When asked during the focus group about instances in which high school students' cultural or political views in their writing or in PSTs' correspondence with them affected how PSTs

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approached their feedback, Athena thought of Hannah's analysis of "Rosa Parks" and summarized it as follows: "her argument is for pointing out how this poem is inspiring people to fight back against the discrimination against Black people. Especially during the time period the poem is in or talking about." Athena added,

And so I was careful to, I obviously agreed with everything she said. She was talking about how back then people had to hide their true emotions about stuff going on and the Civil Rights and all that. To not get hurt or whatever. I was really careful. I liked everything that she said. I made sure to compliment on it. But I was also kind of like hinted at today. That you could argue that some of that stuff is happening today. I kind of like inspired her. I complimented her, like, you know "I really like what you had to say. I'm glad that you're pointing this out and realizing this because this is the first step to trying to fix the problem is realizing that there is a problem." Her paper was excellent. Other than [that] I made sure to comment on the topic of the paper.

Athena commented that she was "really careful" in writing this comment and adding her view that racism is still a problem. She was careful by framing it as a "[hint] at today," by complimenting and trying to inspire her mentee (she wrote, "It's people like you who aren't afraid to point out the issues that give me hope for the future"), and, we can infer, by indicating her positive or hopeful stance with a smiley face. These linguistic and semiotic strategies show her desire to engage in discussions about racism alongside her fear that even making that point could seem like an imposition. Arguably, her hesitance to add even a short aside that shows her own sociopolitical views shows the deep legacy of educational niceness, a phenomenon that may be pervasive in American culture, reflected recently, for example, in news editors' debates over

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whether the press can call an elected official's discourse *racist* even when it implicates people of color as being outsiders in their own country or otherwise lesser than white people (e.g., Jensen, 2019). It may be, then, that PSTs need to consider wider political contexts, outside of schooling, to reflect on the conditions that affect how or if they address race with students.

“You and I both know it hasn’t been entirely trounced yet...” A reluctance to assert a sociopolitical view that one’s mentee has not expressed also appears in feedback from Emily, one of Athena’s classmates. Both of Emily’s mentees, Mary and Faith, analyzed the “Rosa Parks” poem. In Mary’s analysis of “Rosa Parks,” Mary’s thesis statement included the sentiment that racism “has been trounced.” Emily highlighted a word in the thesis statement and wrote the following comment bubble (Figure 8):

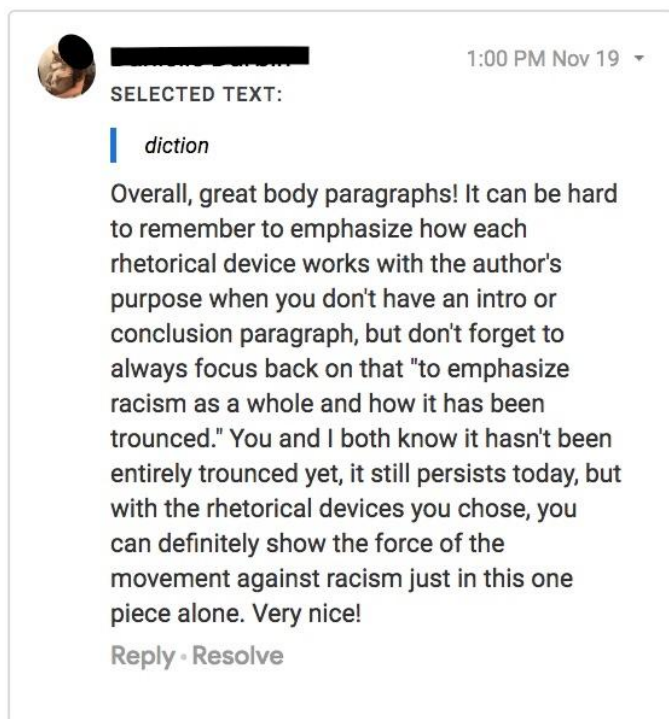


Figure 8. Emily’s response to Mary.

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Emily used a variety of strategies to avoid making Mary feel criticized. Although she could have explicitly corrected Mary, pointing out that racism has not been trounced, Emily chose to align herself with Mary and assume that Mary agreed with her: “You and I both know it hasn’t been entirely trounced yet, it still persists today...” The adverbial hedge “entirely” allows Emily to only slightly correct Mary’s belief, and the construction “You and I both know” frames Mary as someone who possesses the correct belief while aligning Emily with Mary more personally and forcefully than a construction like “We both know” or a vague “We know,” which could be referencing society more generally, not Mary or Emily. Finally, like Athena, Emily sandwiched the potentially threatening act between compliments (“great body paragraphs”; “very nice”; validation of the rhetorical devices that Mary chose). Together, these linguistic strategies allow Emily to take an explicit stance on Mary’s sociopolitical content but do so without seeming to impose her views or lower Mary’s confidence in herself as a thinker and writer.

Another comment bubble shows how Emily integrates her own views into her feedback on Mary’s analysis. Responding to Mary’s point about Giovanni’s use of anaphora (the repetition of “This is for” throughout the poem), Emily wrote the following comment (Figure 9):



12:43 PM Nov 19

Resolve



I like that you selected anaphora as one of your rhetorical devices. Saying "This is for..." over and over again is very much a way of reminding the reader of all the little people who get overlooked, all the other African Americans who are being represented by a small sample such as the Pullman Porters. Great first paragraph!

[Show less](#)

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Figure 9. Emily's comment on Mary's selection of anaphora in "Rosa Parks."

In applauding Mary's selection of anaphora ("very much a way of reminding the reader of all the little people who get overlooked, all the other African Americans who are being represented by a small sample such as the Pullman Porters"), Emily both engages with the poem's content and, through the present tense ("get overlooked," "are being represented"), reinforces her point that racism persists today.

"I just said it was interesting that she read the poem that way..." Interestingly, it was not Mary but her other mentee, Faith, whom Emily brought up in the focus group after Athena summarized Hannah's analysis of "Rosa Parks" and her "carefulness" in her own feedback. Responding to the question of whether they could identify any of their students' cultural or political views in their writing and how that informed how they responded to them, Emily said that Faith used the poem to show "that racism ended": "Like we got it. Like, cool, nip it in the bud, which obviously isn't true." Emily said she wished she knew Faith's race because that would shape how she responded to her. Because we could not locate Faith's analysis of this poem or Emily's comments to her, one of the researchers emailed Emily with a copy of the transcript and asked her to clarify whether her focus group comments referenced Faith or Mary when she talked about a mentee who tried to prove that racism had ended. Emily speculated that Faith had deleted the essay and Emily's comments from the Google Doc, and she described how she remembered responding to Faith's analysis:

She attempted to write an analysis of how the poem shows that racism is dead and done, so I told her that she might try looking at the poem from the perspective of Rosa

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Parks or an activist who wants to show how racism is still alive. Try to see how it successfully pushes that agenda. I just said that it's interesting that she read the poem that way because i think most people would view it very differently and that if she wants it to be really clear that she isn't just misinterpreting the poem, she'll have to be really specific with her evidence. She never responded. (personal communication, May 3, 2019)

Although we don't have Emily's actual response to Faith, we can infer from her account that she, too, did not explicitly correct Faith. Instead, it sounds like she hedged her critique with a suggestion to consider a new lens—what would happen if Faith tried looking at the poem from a different perspective?—and with a comment that upholds the possible validity of Faith's position: asking Faith to provide better evidence. The latter suggestion, asking for stronger evidence of a controversial claim, is a strategy we analyzed above, also used by PSTs who responded neutrally to writers' sociopolitical content.

Overall, these two PSTs showed a desire to engage with their mentees over the idea that racism is a thing of the past, whether the mentee explicitly asserted this (Mary, Faith) or not (Hannah). Analysis of the PSTs' responses shows that PSTs sought to do this in the least threatening way possible, such as by attributing to both themselves and the writers the view that racism persists and by finding ways to compliment the writer. These linguistic strategies allowed PSTs to assert their own sociopolitical views—views that, we would add, should not be controversial—in a way that could not be seen as imposing.

Toward a dialogic mentor-mentee stance. While these findings point to a number of important affordances made available to PSTs in the WM program (e.g., opportunities to work with secondary writers outside of their regional purview, to try out new technologies to facilitate

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their response to writing, and to reflect on how their feedback was taken up or not taken up by their mentees), we recognize important shortcomings as well. One theme in our findings that deserves additional attention is the implication for PSTs' ability to respond to sociopolitical perspectives when they have limited information about their mentees (e.g., Emily's not knowing Faith's race or Jennifer's not knowing how her mentees were raised to be deferential toward authority figures). As another example, Yasmine all but abandoned her previous claim that not having specific information about a writer afforded her an unbiased perspective on the writing; by the end of the semester, Yasmine's perspective began to shift toward cultivating relationships with students:

I think it's [i.e., whether her relationships have improved since she first started participating in the WM program over a year ago] a little bit ambiguous because you don't know anything about the student. You don't know anything about their culture. You don't know where they came from. You don't know who they are or what they look like or anything. And I think that makes it somewhat more difficult to provide them good feedback 'cause it's like you don't have that interaction.

Despite our attempts to improve community building and promote the development of productive working relationships between mentors and mentees, PSTs working with students outside of their sociocultural contexts seemed even more cautious of disrupting educational niceness, resulting in their clear reluctance to address sociopolitical issues they disagreed with.

Yet, we also recognized that the capacity for dialogue in Google Docs facilitated how some PSTs were able to learn about high school writers in ways that provided pathways for supportive feedback. In one Google Doc with another mentee, Hasan, Athena engaged in regular

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back-and-forth communication, conversing not just about hobbies but about Hasan's work, and often at mutually agreed-on times so that they were chatting synchronously, in different-colored fonts. A deeper relationship emerged that allowed Athena to craft feedback intimately tied to Hasan's strengths, weaknesses, and goals. For instance, in one comment, Athena wrote,

Now that I know you can do this, I'm going to push you just a little bit more. The comments that I wrote for this draft are very straight forward, but as time goes on I'm going to be more of guide. That is my overall goal here while I work with you. I guide you through your paper and have you think about this more deeply so that you have a better understanding of what you're doing.

The prompt Hasan was responding to, a diction analysis, did not elicit the writer's sociopolitical perspectives. However, had he been writing about "Rosa Parks," or writing another text with explicitly sociopolitical content, the close relationship he developed with Athena would, we think, serve as an important foundation for a constructive conversation about sociopolitical issues. However, only a few PSTs and mentees seemed to take advantage of Google Doc's synchronous or conversation-like features and co-construct a more dialogic relationship together.

In sum, the Writing Mentors program provided PSTs with valuable experience responding to authentic student writing, but it did not prepare PSTs to navigate sociopolitical issues in students' writing. PSTs drew on numerous rhetorical and semiotic strategies to remain either neutral or engaged without imposing, in some cases recognizing their own sociopolitical stance after reflecting on their students' sociopolitical content. PSTs who espoused both perspectives—neutral and engaged—expressed a diverse range of argumentative epistemologies in their pre-semester surveys, and there was no correlation to their stances on engaging

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sociopolitical content. When the capacity and opportunity to share information between PSTs and mentees was improved in the second semester of the study, a corresponding engagement with students' sociopolitical content did not follow.

Conclusion

Teaching writing in troubled times requires PSTs to imagine themselves as sociopolitical agents who, through critical reflection, facilitate their future students' reasoning and perspective-taking. We would argue that the Writing Mentors program succeeded in presenting PSTs with the myriad difficult decisions that teachers of writing make on a daily basis. Below, based on what we've learned from this study, we explore ways in which the use of digital technologies in writing teacher preparation could be strengthened to support PSTs' responses to sociopolitical content in student writing and PSTs' own perspectives as sociopolitical agents.

PSTs "can benefit from being aware" of their students' and their own sociopolitical perspectives, especially on how social, economic, and political forces "privilege one discourse at the expense of others" (Ivanič, 2004, pp. 241-42). Indeed, scholars have identified several approaches for helping preservice teachers navigate the contradictions in their practices and develop more coherent and socioculturally informed approaches. For example, Hebard (2016) found that teacher preparation coursework that asks PSTs to discuss conflicts and tensions that exist between their own histories as students and writers, what they experience in their clinical placements, and what they study in their teacher preparation and content-area coursework helps them to integrate their knowledge about writing pedagogy to effect a multifaceted and coherent instructional approach. PSTs in Hebard's study who did not have the opportunity to discuss such conflicts and tensions instead used a fragmented approach to teaching writing in their field

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experiences; that is, they used teaching methods that were grounded in a variety of writing experiences outside of their methods coursework, such as their own backgrounds as writers or what they observed during their field placements, but did not integrate these experiences into the sociocultural approaches to teaching writing that they learned in their language arts methods course.

English teacher educators can promote the interrogation of sociopolitical content in a number of productive ways. PSTs could be shown, for example, two student essays that mobilize polarizing sociopolitical perspectives. Teacher educators might then have PSTs draft a range of responses. For the essay that students disagree with, responses could involve the following:

- (1) Get out all of your feelings (e.g., some cathartic writing, like “That Kavanaugh analogy is such a dumb and sexist example!” “Did you spend any time on this essay?!”);
- (2) Debate the arguments and indicate your position (e.g., “You say Kavanaugh was the victim of mass hysteria, just like John Proctor. But how can that be if Kavanaugh is now a supreme court judge?”);
- (3) Logically engage the arguments more neutrally (e.g., “We know that John Proctor was not a witch, but he confessed to save his life, then retracted his statement and was put to death. What similarities and differences are there between this character’s story and Kavanaugh’s life?”);
- (4) Discuss only structure (e.g., “Make sure to back up that point with evidence!”).

Then, English teacher educators could invite PSTs to discuss the pros and cons of each approach, as well as explore whether PSTs could blend any of them.

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It's important to remember that if the ideal response to student writing is dialogic, involving a conversation between reader and writer (e.g., Straub, 2000), readers might want to share their views with writers. If a culture of fairness (rather than division) permeates the classroom, in which divergent perspectives are recognized and addressed reasonably without belittling or ostracizing the person who holds that perspective (Hess & McAvoy, 2015), then these conversations can be rich sites in which sociopolitical issues can be explored. Both teachers and students can become more empathetic toward different perspectives during such dialogue. And PSTs can consider critical reflection questions, such as “Why would this student write this particular argument? What cultural influences might be at work in framing this student’s sociopolitical perspective?”

We also derive from this study implications for future research on how PSTs learn to teach writing. To access the deep logic of educational niceness and the complexities of learning to become a sociopolitical agent as a teacher of writing, researchers could conduct text-based interviews (Prior, 2004) with PSTs to analyze, specifically, the choices they make when responding to specific students. For example, in this study, we could have sat with each Writing Mentor and looked at their responses, discussing why they wrote what they did.

Intentionally prompting PSTs’ critical reflection can yield promising results for teacher education and research. Digital technologies afford opportunities for PSTs to connect with students from sociocultural backgrounds different than their own. In so doing, opportunities arise in which sociopolitical perspectives can be examined and interrogated—these are real dilemmas for many ELA teachers today. A community of learners that teacher education classrooms create can be an ideal space in which such complex views can be examined.

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As noted in the Methods, we did not collect data from students, but permission to analyze student work and interview students could provide insight into how PSTs and writers build relationships together. Furthermore, high school students' perspectives could potentially offer an additional, important point of critical reflection for PSTs as they seek to understand the effect of their feedback on student writers.

Future research in the area of ELA teaching of writing must address how PSTs learn to engage with sociopolitical issues and learn to see the teaching of writing as an opportunity to “position their EC-12 students as social agents” (Bomer et al., 2019, p. 7). We see this study as a step in that direction. En route to realizing Bomer et al.’s goal, we suggest that disrupting educational niceness and exploring differences bridged and impeded by digital technologies ought to be at the forefront of our minds.

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Appendix A

PSTs' Course Readings by Case

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Appendix B

Writing Mentors Program Interview Protocol Interview #1 (Spring 2018 and Fall 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 relationship. How have you been able to establish a relationship with your mentees in your dialogue journals?
5. Another factor that shapes how students write is culture. How would you define culture?
6. How would you define "cultural knowledge" then, as far as the types of cultural knowledge a person might have?
7. What do you think it means to use cultural knowledge as a writer?
8. Describe for me a time, if any, when a student writer in the Writing Mentors program demonstrated cultural knowledge in their writing.
9. Tell me about what you know about the student writers you've interacted with in the Writing Mentors program.
10. Tell me what you would still like to know about them.
11. How do you envision a more successful or satisfying experience as a Writing Mentor than you've had so far?

Writing Mentors Program Interview Protocol 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?

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Writing Mentors Program Interview Protocol 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?
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?