First-Year-Composition Writing Conferences as a Pathway for Becoming Graduate Teaching Assistants

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Introduction

Holding WCs as an accompaniment to regular writing-class instructions has gained much traction, with their pedagogical contributions that forefront individualist advancement (Alexander, 2006; Flaherty, 2019; Hawkins, 2019) and the composing *process*. (Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace, 1988; Morse, 1994). WCs also prevail, given the increasing diverse student demographics and differing educational experiences in writing classrooms. Such influx of a heterogenous makeup of students challenges a "whole-class instruction" (Lerner, 2005, p.186), with WCs becoming the recourse for many writing instructors who hope to *individualize* and *intentionalize* feedback on students' writings.

Despite ample studies on WCs regarding instructors' identity roles at WCs, professional identities of FYC GTAs at WCs remain under-explored, as a large body of literature focuses on veteran primary and secondary teachers (e.g., Flaherty, 2019; Graves, 1983; Harris, 1986; McCarthey, 1994), writing instructors at tertiary levels (e.g., Newkirk, 2005) or writing-center tutors (e.g., Park, 2017; Waring, 2005). Relatively few studies concentrate on FYC GTAs (e.g., Connors, 1990; Hairston, 1974; Shvidko, 2018), who embrace multiple identities (e.g., as graduate students, TAs, and researchers). Therefore, FYC GTAs occupy a uniquely carved niche in the academia that deserves more theorizing. Further, previous scholarship on WCs funnels its focus to understanding the identity enactment through a situated lens—grounding writing instructors' identity enactment at an interactional level without considering how institutional mandates or policies could also scalarly inform the ways in which writing instructors conference. To bridge such a schism

between the situated interaction and the institutional constraints and/or affordances, the current research study aims to comprehend the interconnectedness between the college-level WC talk and institutional discourse in the formation of FYC GTAs' *becoming* and *become* identities[1].

Literature Review
The Typology and Nature of Writing Conferences

WCs have been understood to be where writing teachers meet, typically, one-on-one with students to talk through their texts, hoping that writing knowledge can be internalized through verbal scaffolding (Cazden, 2001, pp.77-78). Such *scaffolding* (Newkirk,1995) in WCs operates on an activity system (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997), wherein writing teachers and students dynamically negotiate, reinscribe, or reposition their participating roles. Ulichny and Watson-Gegeo (1989) substantiate the pedagogical idealization of WCs by maintaining that "the writing conference holds the key to the process model because conferences bring teacher and student (or peer and peer) together for a one-to-one discussion of written drafts" (p.311). The routine administration of WCs suggests a shift away from mass instructions (Harris, 1986; Lerner, 2005) to forge a more intimate and affiliative relationship between teachers and students (Lerner, 2005; Shvidko, 2018). Unsurprisingly, WCs have been ardently endorsed by writing instructors and become a mainstay as part of the writing curriculum rather than as an ancillary accompaniment.

Reigstad (1982) in his ethnographical study pigeonholes WCs into three overarching models: (1) teacher-centered, (2) collaborative, and (3) student-centered. Teacher-centered model (TCM) features instructors dominating the bulk of the conference talk and the modeling work. Tutors operating under TCM saliently engage in reading through students' drafts, pointing out surface errors, and issuing directive statements for "specific revisions to be made by students" (Reigstad, 1982, p.16; see also Hawkins, 2019), without necessarily conversing with students for critical reflection and illustration. The conference talk is thus focally restricted to the text itself (e.g., the student's paper), and a modicum of moment when teachers verbally probe students' ideas and thinking frequently leads to teachers responding to questions themselves with few turns given to students,

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[1] *Becoming* is apropos of describing the identity enactment process that is situated and "on the move." It highlights the agency and subjectivity that are dynamically derived and afforded through the mobile process of moving towards and along with identity enactment. On the other hand, *become*, the form of which connotes a completed, finished action in the modern English language, refers to the shackling constellations of power that constrain the subjectivity accorded by the process of *becoming* (Anthias, 2012, p.11). Thus, the rhetoric of *becoming* highlights the agentive subjectivity while the metaphor of *become* underscores the counter-agentive intersubjectivity.

who thusly acquiesce to instructors' feedback (Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). Thus, a TCM WC can be readily morphed into a site of transcription (Hawkins, 2019), of error-finding remediation (Hawkins, 2019; Rose, 1985), or of the establishment of teachers' own expertise (Walker & Elias, 1987).

The collaborative model (CM) allows flexibility for both instructors and students to (re)negotiate their speech roles. Assuming an egalitarian role-playing under CM (Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Sommers, 1982), teachers and students are "conversational equals" (Reigstad, 1982, p.17), partnering in problem-solving and exploring ideas. The establishment of students as active actors, according to Jacobs and Karliner (1977), is co-constructed by instructors, who intentionally situate students as "topic selector[s]" (p.504). The delegation of the role of discussion to students propels them to initiate the turn and sustain the discussion, rendering them to be the knowledge-producer rather than the receiver only. Therefore, antithetical to the TCM focusing on teachers' elicitation, the CM is characterized by instructors mitigating authoritative nature of their directives, or à la Reigstad, "qualify[ing] their directiveness" (1982, p.17), thus contributing to students having the final say in the translation of feedback into uptakes (Calkins, 1986, p.126). The student-centered model (SCM), sharing much affinity with the CM, prompts students to orient the development of their own pieces, rather than being pressured into nodding along with what instructors spoon-feed (Graves, 1983; Sommers, 1982). The movement from one major phase to the next is self-initiated by students themselves who maneuver the conference talk, with an occasional aid from instructors supplying "additional resources of information" (Reigstad, 1982, p.17) and not dismantling students' active role in the conference talk. Reigstad (1982) points out that much akin to the CM, the SCM also leaves the final decision of amendment to students and constructs "consistently conversant-to-conversant" (p.17) relationship between instructors and students.

The taxonomy of WCs above, far from being exhaustive, encapsulates the mainstream WC models that writing instructors currently adopt and that WC scholars draw on for cataloguing. With the foregone taxonomized traits of WCs, which operationalize as a paradigm for the potentiality of a re-definition of teacher-student roles, nevertheless, scholarship on WCs has consistently revealed a more complicated and messier picture. For instance, Sperling's (1990) quantitative description of WCs reveals that the lopsided extreme participant role (i.e., TCM or SCM) is rarely the case. Instead, WCs undergo multiple shapes, as both participants jockey for the transmission, appropriation, and completion of information, thereby contributing to a wavering dyadic discursive pattern. This kind of fluctuating dyadic discourse does not merely happen when the teacher works with *different* students; the fluid nature of WCs and engagement can be discerned even when the teacher works with the *same* student at different times (Sperling, 1990, p.307). Therefore, that WCs operates in the same fashion and confers universalistic

learning purchases does not suffice to explain the multilayered, complicated identity negotiation of writing instructors and students at WCs.

Interactional Emergence of Identity Enactment

Identify formation vis-à-vis interactional pattern has been long theorized along the line of *de-essentializiation*. For example, Blommaert (2005) recognizes that identity enactment is "a semiotic process of representation" (p.203) mediated by a host of artifacts, objects, and signs that betray certain information regarding one's identities. One theoretical purchase of treating identity as indicative of semiotic potential is to avoid essentializing identity as prefabricated (Blommaert, 2005, pp.204-207); therefore, socially (pre)ascribed labels become untenable. Structure and enactment of socially conditioned semiotic work (Prior, 2008) become the staple of understanding identities as far from being pre-selected. Other scholars use different conceptual tools to similarly theorize the interactionally constructed and mediated identities. For instance, Gee's (2011) proposal of Discourses (with a capital D)—sharing a similar sensibility of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical presentation of self—posits that social actors speak, write, do, act, value, feel, behave, and believe in relation to other objects, technologies, and social actors to enact socially recognizable identities at specific times and places. Davis and Harré (1990) propose that discursive practices through the lens of *positioning*, defined as the "discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (p.48), permit actors to "negotiate new positions" (p.62; see also in Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Qin 2019). These divergent conceptual tools and frameworks uniformly point to an orientation of understanding identity enactment being a complicated yet organic process through which interaction, negotiation, and positioning characterize the *emergence* as well as *becoming* of one's identities.

Per the connection between the WC talk as well as the identity role enacted therein, WC scholarship has been drawing on sociolinguistics (e.g., Park, 2017) or discourse analysis (e.g., Newkirk, 1995; Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989) to unearth how spontaneous verbal interaction informs interlocutors' roles and the concomitant power dynamics in a conversational exchange or discursive pattern (Jacobs & Karliner, 1977). To exemplify, McCarthey (1994) discovers that children gain internalized intersubjectivity when engaging with the conference dialogue, showcasing varying degrees of "acquiescence and resistance to the norms of the classroom" (p.226). McCarthey's (1994) research demonstrates that young children, no longer empty vessels that respond to teachers' comments and feedback "willy-nilly" (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997, p.52), assert their (inter)subjectivities by weighing teachers' imposed authoritative stance and discourse. They negotiate with the "power" discourse and attempt to re-create their own discursive practice or agency. Thus, a dichotomy of WCs being either

authority-reinforcing or agency-conferring oversimplifies the critical ecological nature of WCs. Instructors and students are differentially cooperative in shifting, negotiating, dismantling, or maintaining their emerging identity roles.

Theoretical Framework of *Becoming* and Purpose of the Study

The theorizing of WCs through talk-in-interaction to grasp a moment-to-moment establishment of identity formation can be limiting in its explanatory power because other scalar dimensions, such as that of the institutional mandates, are overlooked. Conceptual apparatuses focusing excessively on emergent interaction have the tendency to overlook other temporal and/or geographical scales in identity enactment. Therefore, this study attempts to move beyond an emergent constructivism of identity formation and to ground the theorization of identity formation through an ontogenetic-development lens: the identity enactment that travels across multi-scalar chronotopes (e.g., Prior & Shipka, 2003) that demonstrate a complicated *becoming* pathway (Prior & Smith, 2019; Wortham & Reyes, 2015). To further the current epistemological parameter of identity construction at WCs, this research investigates how the WC can be a liminal point that threads across differentially scaled dimensions whereby FYC GTAs *become* GTAs. Thus, through a qualitative case-study design, three research questions comprise the central inquiry:

(1) What are the interactional patterns observed in WCs and what do they reveal about FYC GTAs' discursive identity enactment as GTAs?
(2) How do WCs help morph FYC students' perception of FYC GTAs' identity roles as GTAs?
(3) How do programmatic/departmental/institutional policies (or discourses) inform FYC GTAs' approach to WCs?

Data Collection
Procedure, Setting, and Participants

Approved by the Institutional Review Board at the State University of Illinois (SUI)[2] in Fall 2019, data collection of this research study spanned across from Fall 2019 to Spring 2020 and was executed via participant observation, post-observation interview, and artifact analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Convenience sampling of the FYC GTAs and the students was adopted and produced two WC observations with two FYC GTAs at the SUI:

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[2] The institute's name is a pseudonym to ensure the participants' privacy. The pseudonym itself also suggests the institute type and its location—a large public university that has four-year undergraduate programs and graduate programs in the state of Illinois.

Emma and Grace, along with their two undergraduate students (David with Emma and Alex with Grace[3]).

The two WCs, with each lasting for roughly for 20 minutes, took place in the graduate student offices in the English Department building at the SUI. The researcher videotaped (cf. Waring, 2005) and audio-record the conference talk in these shared spaces, out of a concern of authenticity (see also Waring, 2005). Both the audio-recorder and the video camera were placed in front of the participants. The post-conference semi-structured interviews were held in three unoccupied rooms in the SUI English Department building; the interviews were audio-recorded. The length of the four interviews varied, contingent upon the responses received and the follow-up questions raised for rich, thick descriptions (Merriam, 2002, p.15). See the appendix for the semi-structured interview questions.

Both the WC interactional data and the semi-structured interview responses were transcribed verbatim, and the artifacts alluded at the interviews were collected for analytic triangulation. Full transcripts and a full set of semi-structured interview questions are available upon request.

Data Analysis

This qualitative study, with an explicit attempt to explicate the *becoming* and *become* process that transpires across from the conference interaction to institutional spaces, used an open and closed coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Dyson & Genishi, 2005). After transcribing the data of the conference talk and the interviews, the researcher gave the transcripts multiple reads to color-code possible episodic moments pertinent to the participants' identity roles. With the open-coding, the researcher collapsed some open coding categories and arrived at the four overarching codes that guided the data analysis: topical initiation, topical evaluation, FYC GTAs' *becoming* identity, and FYC GTAs' *become* identity. These codes were further triangulated with the fields notes; the FYC students' written texts; the FYC GTAs' assignment prompts, syllabi, and comments on the students' drafts; the FYC instructor handbook by the SUI FYC. Below is a table of the four main codes that surface across the analysis of all the data.

Coding Categories	Subcategories	Examples
Topical Initiation	-claiming the ownership of the topic	-Emma provided the comments
	-selecting the topical focus	-Alex self-selected
Topical Evaluation	-explicating or clarifying the comment	-Emma and Grace
	-recognizing or affirming the success	-Grace(Emma

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[3] All the participants' names are anonymized.

		through written comments)
	-issuing directives/giving suggestions	-Emma and Grace
FYC GTAs' *Becoming* Identity	-embodying teaching philosophy	-Writing Process
	-evaluating teaching performance	-Clarification
	-forming camaraderie	-Peer Mentor
FYC GTAs' *Become* Identity	-institutionally mediated	-Mandatory conferencing
	-students' perceptions evaluation/perception	-Compared with the other TAs

Table 1. The Four Major Coding Categories

Finding and Discussion
WC Interactional Data

The following discussion of the *topical initiation* and *topical evaluation* draws on excerpted snippets of the interaction between Emma and David and the interaction between Grace and Alex, with each respectively epitomizing Emma's and Grace's conferencing styles. The two codes that emerged out of the conference observation—*topical selection* and *topical evaluation*—evidence how a student-led WC is an elusive concept that should be further theorized and, more importantly, how the *complicated* interactional forms disguised under the SCM showcase a more *layered* identity enactment of FYC GTAs.

Topic Initiator: Who Got to Decide the Conference Topic

Per the topical initiation, despite the fact that their purported allegiance to an SCM WC, Emma and Grace instantiated the SCM WC drastically differently. Such differences occurred through the first code: *topical initiation*. The topical initiation informed by the data pertains less to who initiates the turn of a conference but to the *ownership* of the topic or the direction of the conference—that is, who gets to determine what is to be covered at conferences.

In Emma's WS with David, the topical initiation appeared at least prima facie executed by David, who was afforded with agency to decide on the topic of the conference talk. However, with a closer examination of the transcript as well as the David's draft, one should readily notice that the pre-conference comments left on David's writing by Emma *in actuality* set up the parameter of the possible topical foci and initiations of the conference talk. One interactional consequence is that David and Emma hung onto those textually present comments that primed their attention. That is, although David was encouraged to assume the role of the discussion leader—under the purported student-led approach—the actual ownership of the topic was primed by Emma's pre-conference comments and notes. Thus, even though the conference agenda was never verbally set for the conference,

the presence of Emma's feedback on the David's draft served as a physically textual (or environmentally coupled) token that directed how the successive turns and the topical configuration of the conference talk unfolded. A nominal student-led conference dissolved into an interactional form in which David served the role of raising questions and Emma dominated the ensuing turns to respond to his questions. In a word, Emma "owned" the topical development and focus.

Emma and David-Topical Initiation	Line 001 David: So my first question is *with the end comments*, I think my first question
	Line 002 Emma: Yeah
	Line 003 David: Like so you see, you see more arguments and like my question is how can I move like the arguments into supporting evidence or analysis or?
	Line 004 Emma: Cool. I shall give an example *here* just on, just a moment. Yeah. So like *here*, this is basically more of a slogan type argument.
	Line 005 David: Okay.
	Line 006 Emma: *We need to start working more on teams. And we as black people need to look at the mirror and ask what can I change myself when you stop waiting? When you stop setting* (Emma narrating David's text), which is great like this, like, it's kind of it's already there. But I wish to you to have more specific, um I don't know more specific solution.

Table 2. **Selective Transcript of Topical Initiation in Emma's Conference with David**

Table 2 further showcases how Emma's comments played a determining role in the interactional pattern between her and her students. For instance, in Line 001, although it was David who initiated the first turn, David's clear reference to Emma's end comments indicated that David fixated his attention less to what he wanted to discuss with Emma than to what Emma had for him. Such a fixation to Emma's written feedback was also evidenced through Emma's self-referential pointing (Line 004, the use of *here*). The concomitant result is that Emma dominated the ensuing turn (Line 006) and assumed the role of unpacking and elaborating, with David retiring to the role of backchanneling (Line 005). Such an interactional pattern implicates that Emma's conferencing proceedings placed a heavy weight and emphasis on Emma's pre-conference comments. This interactional contour, however, should not be considered equivalent to the traditionally understood TCM (See the literature review). In Emma's case, although she assumed the role of extending and sustaining the turn, she also ensured that

David had certain amount of freedom to decide which of the comments to be discussed. Such interactional patterning thus nuances the role she played as an FYC GTA, who was at once directive and open-ended.

On the other hand, Grace in her WC did not reveal to Alex written comments beforehand on his draft; instead, she left room for Alex to freely self-select the topical focus. However, Grace's seemingly more probing and open-ended approach to commence the conference belies a more complicated, mediated interaction between her and her students.

Grace and Alex-Topic Initiation		
	Line 001 Grace:	So, how are you feeling about your rhetorical analysis so far?
	Line 002 Alex:	I felt like one thing that I need to improve for sure is the rearranging the structure, because like to structure a paragraph, I was writing it because I didn't know we were only supposed to write three pages for the rough draft, so I like wrote all six pages and towards the end I felt like I'm repeating the same thing.
	Line 003 Grace:	Gotcha.
	Line 004 Alex:	Again. Yeah, so I definitely need to rearrange that.
	Line 005 Grace:	What kind of stuff do you feel like it's getting repeated.
	Line 006 Alex:	It's like, at the beginning, I first mentioned like, like I was describing the media. And then during the description, I inserted like the rhetorical analysis there too. But then like later, and also the intended audience part. I also like inserted the rhetorical triangles, and but later when I like, use paragraph to talk about pathos, ethos and yeah, I like kind of repeated some of the two.

Table 3. **Selective Transcript of Topical Initiation in Grace's Conference with Alex**

For instance, in Table 3, as described above, Grace initiated the turn by leveraging a generic, inquiry question (Line 001) and did not direct Alex's attention to any prefabricated comments as Emma did. Such an opening afforded Alex to initiate, *topically*, the focus on the conference and to determine the conference agenda through the unfolding of the interaction. For instance, after Grace's probing of Alex's overall impression of his draft (Line 001), Alex voluntarily oriented the topical focus to his concern about the essay structure because he was uncertain of whether he needed to have a full draft ready at the peer-review and the conference

session (Line 002). He ended up writing a full draft but felt apprehensive about his structure, as he found himself sounding repetitive. However, this self-topical-initiation by Alex was revealed to have been informed by the pre-conference peer-review session, in which Grace's peer-review handout[4] and Alex's peer review partner conditioned Alex's topical initiation. Therefore, Grace might have granted more leeway to students to determine the discussion and topic direction, but similar to Emma's, Grace's pre-conference curricular activity (e.g., peer-review) inadvertently conditioned how Alex could have selected and initiated the topical discussion.

In brief, both Emma and Grace approached the SCM WC differently, and the realization of the topical initiation was laminated with guided directives, prompted by either pre-conference comments or peer-review questions. Such a finding further not only problematizes what it means to lead an SCM WC but also complicates the FYC GTAs' layered roles, who differentially embody the roles of *being* GTAs.

Topical Evaluator: How did the FYC GTAs Evaluate

Relevant to the foregoing analysis concerns the *topical evaluation*, which involves the ways in which participants proffer evaluative commentaries. However, what is singularly revealed through the observation data in the current study is that the embodiment and performance of the topical evaluation are formatively informed by the topical initiation configured at the outset of the WC. The topical-initiation pattern through and with which the FYC GTAs and their students operated organically and naturally informed the contour of the topical evaluation. Thus, the topical evaluation is environmentally coupled with the topical initiation.

Emma and David-Topic Evaluation-Issuing Directives	Line 105 David: And other than that other than that I think like my only thing is I don't think my conclusion
	Line 106 Emma: Okay.
	Line 107 David: Was strong enough. Is there any I wouldn't say like, analysis or anything, is there anything I can add?
	Line 108 Emma: As a conclusion?
	Line 109 David: Right to kind of summarize but at the same time, I don't know how to put it like summarize, but at the same time, like,
	Line 110 Emma: Push forward?

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[4] The peer review sheet that Grace used had one area that asked the students to focus on the structure. The question reads: "*Structure: How is the essay structured? Does the structure make logical sense to you as a reader? Could they improve upon it?"*(Peer Review-Rhetorical Analysis Project, 2020, p.2)

| | Line 111 David: | right, like finish off my argument, if that makes sense, like summarize the paper but then also gave like, and then this is the side I'm on and if that makes sense. |
| | Line 112 Emma: | Yeah, what I wish you to do is definitely summarize your part, which is exactly the main thesis state that again, which I suppose you said in the beginning, but a paraphrase and reverse and say that again, okay. And that will be the first part of the summary of the conclusion, but also try to push a bit forward. |

Table 4. **Selective Transcript of Topical Evaluation in Emma's Conference with David**

For example, as analyzed above, Emma's pre-conference comments on the David's draft primed his reaction and attention at the WC. Thus, Emma assumed the chief role as a turn-sustainer, accountable for issuing more directives, with David primarily engaging in backchanneling. As such, the pre-conference comments and feedback placed the onus of explication on Emma. In Table 4, when David inquired into how to summarize his text without sounding repetitive (Line 109 & 101), Emma took up the role of responding to David's question (Line 112). Emma's turn in Line 112 witnessed more directives (e.g., *what I wish you to*). Therefore, Emma's evaluation could be characterized as forthright.

Note, however, that a hasty conclusion to characterize Emma's conferencing approach to be authoritative deserves more discussion. Although the resultant interactional pattern between Emma and David seemed to line up with the typological hallmarks of a TCM WC, David in the semi-structured interview commented that Emma provided space and time for him to raise and discuss questions and gave straightforward suggestions, commenting on her conferencing approach to be helpful. Therefore, the interactional pattern observed in Emma's conferencing with David cannot be oversimplified and reduced to an understanding that Emma had enacted a more authoritative persona.

On the other hand, in Grace's conference, since the topical focus was not set *a priori*, she resorted to positively acknowledging Alex's thoughts and ideas first (Line 009) prior to forwarding her suggestions (Line 011). This was in opposition to issuing directives as Emma did with David in Line 112 in Table 4.

| **Grace and Alex-Topic Evaluation-Giving Suggestions** | Line 006 Alex: | It's like, at the beginning, I first mentioned like, like I was describing the media. And then during the description, I inserted like the rhetorical analysis there too. But then like later, and also the intended audience part. I also like inserted the |

		rhetorical triangles, and but later when I like, use paragraph to talk about pathos, ethos and yeah, I like kind of repeated some of the two
	Line 007 Grace:	Gotcha. You're repeating some of your evidence or some of your analysis, or both? So like, are you repeating your descriptions of the object? are you repeating what you're arguing?
	Line 008 Alex:	More towards? rhetorical analysis.
	Line 009 Grace:	Gotcha. Okay. So I think that's a really great thing to be aware of early on, right. And I will also just hop back a second and say, there's a lot that you're doing here. That's really good, right? I like the way that you're opening in particular, right, talking about what's going on in the world and then transitioning into your experience hearing about Kobe's death is a great way to sort of establish connection, get an emotional response, all of that. So you're doing a lot of really effective things here. And it sounds like your concerns with organization, right. And your concern is that question of repeating towards the end feeling of like just writing something to get a written kind of
	Line 010 Alex:	To like finish six pages.
	Line 011 Grace:	Gotcha. So what I would suggest is, if you feel like there's something you're repeating, feel free to take that out or to combine it together with what you were saying before, right? And the things that you have in here, just dive into it deeper. Right? And then you talk about kind of the history right. So, first thing, who is the author? You've heard of him? you cite him in your in text citations with Sodexo admissions, but yeah, who is he? What is his background? Right? Okay, because that is court understanding. what he's doing, right you're analyzing what he's doing and why it matters.

***Table 5.* Selective Transcript of Topical Evaluation in Grace's Conference with Alex**

For instance, in Table 5, as Alex, continuing his initiated concern regarding the essay structure (See Table 3), was expressing why he felt that he might have overpacked the information and repeated himself towards his conclusion, Grace—rather than skipping to her suggestions immediately—nodded positively to Alex's rhetorical strategies in his writing (Line 009) by praising Alex's smooth transition from the opening description to his analysis. If one compares this opening episode of the conference talk between Grace and Alex with the one between Emma and David (Table 2), it is readily discernible that Emma's positive evaluation of David's text in Line 006 (Table 2) was substantially shorter and much more succinct than Grace's extended positive accolade of Alex in Line 009 (Table 5). In her actual *evaluation* in response to Alex's question about repetition, Grace' infused her suggestions with a series of probing questions (Line 011). Grace's topical evaluation, as informed by how Alex self-initiated the topical focus that was also informed by one of the peer-review questions (see the previous sub-section), witnessed more success-affirmation and probing questions for suggestions, in lieu of directives for suggestions.

However, akin to what was argued regarding Emma's interaction with her students, characterizing Grace's conferencing style to embody student centeredness is simplistic. For instance, even with positivism that Grace couched in her evaluation, she still dominated the role of the evaluative turn (Line 011), reinforcing a common classroom turn-taking sequence: initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) (e.g., Cazden, 2011), in which the evaluation often befalls instructors. Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo (1989) argue that with such sequence, "the teacher control[s] the access to the speaking floor and monitors contributions to the content of the discourse" (p.311). This interactional pattern shown in the interaction complicates how Grace enacted her identity.

An interim summary is in order. First, the two excerpted conference interactions by Emma and Grace with their students point to a less linear and ready-to-codify discursive conference pattern (cf. Reigstad, 1982). For example, although Grace's interaction with Alex indicates a more student-centered inclination, it has been shown that Grace still assumes the role of sustaining the response turn. Second, the conference-in-interaction showcases that not only are the interactional initiation and evaluation developed organically, but the interactional contour is also largely informed by the preparation work preceding the conference (i.e., Emma's pre-conference comments and Grace's distributed peer review questions). Such layered interaction and laminated conference talk strongly demonstrate that both the FYC GTAs and the students conspired to helping each other maintain, disrupt, or negotiate their identities, and so do the other artifacts, such as peer review sheets or textual comments.

Semi-structured Interview Data: FYC GTAs' Identity Roles: Becoming and Become

Guided by the two codes of *becoming* and *become* from the semi-structured interview, the researcher attempts to explicate how the two FYC GTAs envisioned and enacted a more rhizomatic network and interdependence of dynamic, fluid, and embodied identities in a complicated web of interpersonal, institutional, material, or temporal negotiation.

FYC GTAs' *Becoming* Identity
Writing Conference as an Authentical Nexus of Embodying Core Teaching Philosophies

Emma and Grace viewed FYC WCs as a *bona fide* locale where they could experiment with teaching pedagogies and frame their teaching philosophies, especially when their philosophical beliefs were still at the embryonic stage in their early teaching career. A heavy weight of a teacher-centered, wholesale instruction in regular class meetings was carried out, leading to Emma and Grace having had to put on a façade of appearing professionally erudite, capable, and accommodating, without align the individualistic and student-centered tenet with the actual practice. On the other hand, WCs afforded the two FYC GTAs a *space* and *time* to perform their pedagogical practices that dovetailed more closely with their teaching ideals, something that cannot be fully afforded in a regular classroom instruction.

For instance, in Excerpt 1, Grace mentioned that in regular classrooms, she aimed to avoid appearing unprofessional. However, the nature of one-on-one interaction with students afforded her and her students the space to engage more frequently. Emma also echoed a similar sentiment regarding teaching in classrooms versus at WCs. According to Emma, the former witnessed an amalgamation of students of varying levels and needs, causing her sometimes to move along the curriculum and gloss over some students' needs, whereas the latter contributed to more individualistic teaching styles.

> Emma: I would say because it is individualized, I get to point out specifically in their writings, where it can be improved, and where those methods I taught during class can be applied to their, to their like writings. Both me and my cohorts feel like individual conferences are much more effective than classes, because the classes like some students know much more than others, but you have to keep it a standard pace.
>
> Grace: I think that writing conferences because it's one on one, I think and because I'm trying to make it a student led situation. I think I am less concerned or less focused on being, like, I still want to be professional but being like, hyper professional, and I feel like writing conferences are a place for me to interact with my students a little bit more directly. So I think in some ways, some of my writing or some of my teaching

philosophy, at least theoretically, works a little bit better in writing conferences than it does in a classroom.

> *(Excerpt 1*. Emma's and Grace's Reflections on Conferencing in Relation to Their Teaching Philosophies*)*

FYC GTAs' *Become* Identity
FYC Students' Assembled Perceptions of their FYC GTAs

The FYC students' perceptions of their instructors' roles also obtain in terms of the enactment of FYC GTA identity. Specifically, the WCs afford the students to perceive the FYC GTAs' roles as *historically multilayered*. For instance, due to his "fresh-off-the-boat" experiences from high school, David subscribed to this sentiment that the FYC WC at SUI would mirror what he had undergone in high school, which was mostly teacher-centered and one-directional.

> David: So when we had the conference, I was expecting it to be like [Emma] on one side and me on the other side. So when I walked in, and she was sitting next to me, I was like, Oh, that's a little weird, because that's not what I was used to. But it did feel a lot more comfortable. And like I said, it was easier for her to point out what she didn't like or not more so like, what she didn't like, but what was standing out to her as a problem in my paper, and it helped me identify the problem a lot faster. It was better for my writing and understanding and like and the like, how do I put it? That relationship between the student and professor, I guess you could say was, it's better because it's not like she's just like I said back in high school. It's not like she's saying this is what's wrong, fix it. She's showing me and also asking me questions about what's going through your mind. So that really did help a lot.
>
> *(Excerpt 2.* David's Narration of his Conferencing Experiences*)*

Other complexities emerged. For instance, Alex, despite appreciating the WC moment, not only linked the WC to a regular office hour visit, but also argued that attending the WC is more formal than visiting the instructor during the office hours, since students are expected to prepare a battery of questions for discussion.

> Alex: I would say writing conference is more formal. And it's like kind of a requirement you need to go to, but the office hour is just like optional, if you need help, like anytime you could just go to the office hour.
>
> *(Excerpt 3*. Alex's Comparison of the FYC Conference with Office Hours)

The FYC students' previous conferencing experiences—positive or negative or neutral—pivotally serve as am anchoring role of how the FYC students formulate their concurrent perceptions of their FYC GTAs. This therefore makes the two FYC GTAs' identity enactment a *become* process that harkens back to students' prior conferencing experiences.

The FYC students' concurrent experiences with the other GTAs from other classes at the SUI also helped inform how they perceived their FYC GTAs, not only dynamically shaping the interaction with the FYC GTAs but also resultantly

changing how the FYC GTAs themselves viewed the conferencing experience and their own identity roles. For instance, David elaborately described how the FYC WC provides an avenue where not only could he interact more closely with the instructor, but the in-person, one-on-one interaction therein also allows the instructor to see the teaching efficacy without having to wait until the end-of-semester course evaluation.

> David: I feel like those individual conferences really give you that one on one time to voice your confusion and get the best get the most and best help from the TA. Not only would it help the student I feel like it could also help the teacher, the TA or the professor because it's letting them know like, your teaching is good, but sometimes I get confused when you start to do this or sometimes you start to lose me when you start to do this. And I think that works better than when we have the post reflections. The form like the evaluation form. And I sometimes you don't really get the best feedback from an evaluation form as it would from like face to face talking, and hearing what student like what confuses students most about your class, and that also helps the TA, Professor, make their class better and more understandable and enjoyable for students.
> (*Excerpt 4*. David's Reflection on his Other TAs)

Institutionally Mediated Identity

Institutionally-mediated constraints on and affordances of the conferencing practice also evidence the *become* process. First, the FYC program at the SUI dictates that all the FYC instructors schedule at least one class-wide writing conference during the semester. This mandate, in fact, fits perfectly into one of the student learning outcomes[5] created by the FYC program at SUI, the description of which is visually present on both Emma's and Grace's syllabi and pertains to viewing writing as a recursive process rather than a singular bounded event. Most importantly, the FYC students have an opportunity to engage in dialogues with their GTAs, the wherewithal of which could spur revision, complemented by the peer review done in class. Therefore, the mandatory writing conference enabled Emma and Grace to not only flesh out that particular learning goal but also develop more affiliations with and closer understandings of their students.

> Grace: I have a lot of conversations with my students about the idea that like you can always improve because writing is not like a yes or no kind of thing, you know? Um, and so it's, I make sure that in there, they do peer review and they also get feedback from me and then have my individual conferences. So no one walks out of their rough draft stage with like, "No idea of places that they could improve." And I have a lot of conversations

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[5] The FYC Program at the SUI lists one of the following student learning outcomes in the Instructor Handbook 2019-2020: "Demonstrate knowledge of writing as a process, including consideration of peer and/or instructor feedback, in one or more pieces of writing from initial draft to final revision" (FYC Instructor Handbook, 2019, p.11).

about the idea that you can, you can revise based on the feedback that I slashed your peer reviewers give you, you can also revise based on what you want to do.
(*Excerpt 5*. Grace's Perspective of the Individual Writing Conference)

However, the mandatory WC instituted by the SUI FYC program also exerts certain constraints on the FYC GTAs' pedagogical practice and thus identity enactment. One constraint rests on the maximum number of class-wide conferences that FYC GTAs could hold. In particular, the SUI FYC program decrees that instructors only cancel two weeks of class meetings for WCs[6]. This enforced policy impacts the FYC GTAs' identity performance. For one, the number of the WC that could be slotted into the curriculum compels the FYC GTAs to plan strategically *how* and *where* those two conferences can be inserted. For another, the maximal *two* conferences allowed also diminish FYC GTAs' capacity to fully leverage the dialogic power afforded in the one-on-one conference.

Another potential constraint rests on the number of students enrolled in class. In particular, the number of the students present in class might inform the feedback-giving, the conferencing configuration, or even the curriculum holistically. To illustrate, Grace would be teaching two FYC classes in her second year, and she had been apprehensive about the accommodation.

Grace: I have had multiple times this semester when it's occurred to me that next semester, I'll be teaching two classes and how will I fit in double the number of students and still be able to like, balance everything. And if I schedule them on different weeks, I have my conferences scheduled when I do for specific reasons. So like, how does that impact things?
(*Excerpt 6*. Grace's Opinion of Some Departmental Constraints)

On the other hand, the SUI FYC program supports the FYC GTAs in various ways for them to orchestrate their WCs, thus shaping their *becoming* process as novice writing instructors. First, since a WC is required by the SUI FYC program to take place in public spaces, both GTAs held their WCs in the shared TA offices, the open space of which allowed for observation of how the more experienced GTAs operationalized WCs. Another affordance by the SUI FYC program is that of a peer mentor group, which all the novice FYC GTAs are required to partake of. The peer mentor group is a year-long informal meeting led by the assistant directors (ADs) of the FYC program whose purpose is to furnish

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[6] The SUI FYC Program states the following the requirement in the Instructor Handbook 2019-2020 regarding the conference proceedings: "*One to two rounds of class-wide conferences during the semester* in which you dismiss class and instead meet with each student over a two- to three-day period. Our program requires that you meet at least once – but not more than twice with the accompanying class cancellations" (FYC Instructor Handbook, 2019, p.31).
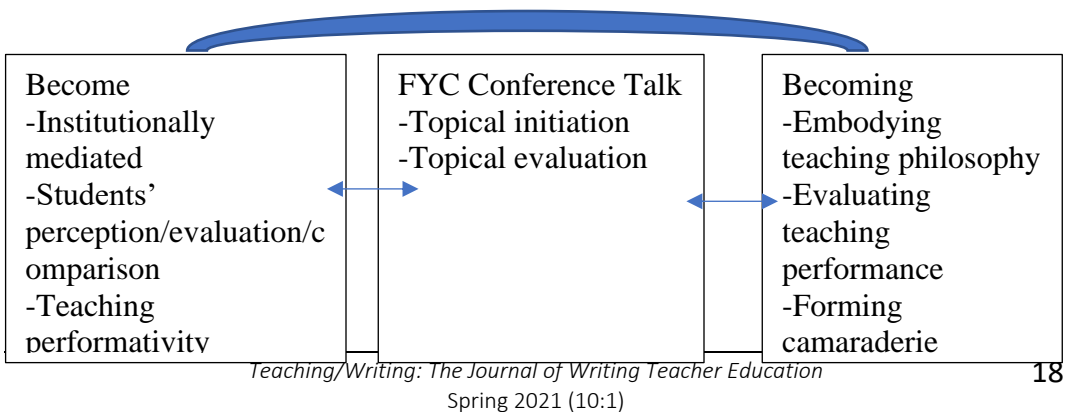
the first-year FYC GTAs with camaraderieship and additional pedagogical supports.

> Emma: But I do feel like my cohorts are helping me when I'm especially having questions. When I was doing rhetorical analysis, I was quite depressed because half of the students didn't know what a rhetorical analysis mean, because it's a new is a new kind of way to analyze. And I did ask my cohorts about that. And they kind of some of the senior cohorts gave me very specific instructions to say, you need to give them these examples for them to understand what it means and you can have these examples for them.
>
> (*Excerpt 7*. Emma's Opinion of Some Departmental Affordances)

Conclusion

This study reports an ontogenetic understanding of how FYC GTAs' identity formation at the WCs is latched on and entangled with a complex chained web of history, culture, discourse, geographies, times, and mediated semiotic resources that mutually and constitutively undergirds and epitomizes the laminated, assembled trajectory (e.g., Prior & Hengst, 2010; Prior & Smith, 2019; Roozen & Erickson, 2017). FYC WCs in and of themselves disrupt "the imagined unity of the site by opening up interdiscursive links to other times, places, people, and practices" (Prior & Smith, 2019, p.4); in other words, WCs should not be conceived as a neatly pigeonholed demarcation; rather, they, as a liminal point, interpellate and intermingle with and across divergent chronotopes, ideologies, scales, and discourses.

Become	FYC Conference Talk	Becoming
-Institutionally mediated	-Topical initiation	-Embodying teaching philosophy
-Students' perception/evaluation/comparison	-Topical evaluation	-Evaluating teaching performance
-Teaching performativity		-Forming camaraderie

> Identity roles are laminated across different assemblages and laminations.

Figure 1. **The Four Major Coding Categories**

Analysis of the interactionally-, interpersonal-, and institutionally-scaled actants paints a complicated picture of a rhizomatic configuration and network wherein the FYC GTAs' badges of identity are not predetermined *a priori* and ritualistically but rather unfold through multiple interdiscursive (re)scaling of locality and extra-locality (as shown in Figure 1). In a word, the FYC GTAs *rehearse* and *are rehearsed* to become as FYC GTAs, as maintained by Blommaert (2005) that "'identity' becomes a matter of details" (p.232) that are semiotically and discursively mobilized and coalesced across space and time.

Limitations & Implication

One noticeable limitation of the current study is that the conference observations were made in different times of Emma's and Grace's professional development. Emma was observed in her first semester in the graduate program at SUI while Grace in her second semester. Besides, Grace was more acculturated to the WC scholarship due to her graduate concentration in Writing Studies and had taken several graduate seminars that surveyed the field of Writing Studies. On the other hand, Emma was in the literature track, and during the time of data collection, she did not take any other Writing-Studies-related seminars, except for participating in the peer-mentor group and the monthly FYC staff meetings. Therefore, given the different points of the observation, with the concomitant showcase of differing levels of competence in conferencing, any qualitative comparisons and contrasts should be further examined.

Some limitations notwithstanding, qualitative approaches to understanding the process of how the two FYC GTAs interactionally enact their identities vis-à-vis conference engagement and institutional discourses still proffer paramount implications for FYC curricular designs and point to some directions or re-orientation for future studies on WCs. To begin with, underlying pedagogical values of WCs can be enormous. Despite this view having been broadly broached, FYC GTAs should seriously entertain fruitful learning benefits that WCs can potentially bring forth not only to students but also to themselves for embodying their teaching philosophies, exercising their pedagogical ideals, and refining their writing pedagogical practices; the one-on-one nature of an FYC writing conference

furnishes FYC GTAs with "a type of formative assessment" (Hawkins, 2016, p.8) to see the instructional discrepancies and to practice alternative pedagogical praxis.

That being said, however, also noteworthy and important for FYC GTAs to bear in mind is that the implementation of WCs in FYCs is not invariably foolproof, especially when a student's agenda is incongruent with the instructor's, as shown in the interactional data presented in the finding section. This implicates that the currently understood student-initiated WC is fraught with definitional and practicing issues and that a student-led WC must be theoretically reconceptualized and pedagogically re-operationalized. How could writing instructors use limited amount of time to maximize the WC? What are some preparations that figure a successful WC? Cultivating a repertoire of conferencing schemes and styles (Bean, 2011; Hawkins, 2016) and exposing students to the working of WCs seem to be sensible strategies for intended results to materialize.

The analysis of the moment-to-moment interaction in the conference talk could supply FYC GTAs with a critical lens into interactional resources employed during the conference talk (Shvidko, 2018), one chief benefit of which helps FYC GTAs grow sensitivity to which specific types of commentaries *could be* aptly administered to students. It also furthers the discussion of the role played by instructors' written comments during drafting stages, such as whether comments should be left and what those comments can be. Curriculum-wise, the interview findings of this study forefront a pressing need for FYC programs to create a space in which WCs could be better strategically, if not optimally, orchestrated into FYC classes. More reflection on institutional discourses is needed when it comes to helping FYC GTAs recognize one-on-one WCs as an "instructional opportunity full of promise" (Hawkins, 2016, p.8; see also Anderson, 2000).

To conclude, analyzing WCs and anchoring them to situated interactions and institutional discourses undoubtedly help FYC GTAs view WCs *in* and *of* themselves as a site where FYC GTAs *become as* FYC GTAs, and thereby pedagogical potentials therein can *become* unbounded.

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Appendix: Post-Conference Questions (for both FYC GTAs and students)

For FYC GTAs

- Could you share with me your teaching philosophies in first-year-composition classes?
- Could you talk a little about your experiences as a student with writing conferences? Are writing conferences an institutional practice that you find familiar or unfamiliar with in your previous educational development?
- Could you talk a little about your experiences as an instructor with writing conferences? What were some formative experiences that helped fashion your general approach/philosophy to writing conferences? What are your goals for the writing conferences? If you have done some already, how do you think they are working?
- Did you plan ahead how you were going to interact with this student or which part of their texts you would be discussing? If so, how plan did you have and how did you select the specific issues in the text?
- How well do you think that your conferencing with students aligns with your teaching philosophies and students' learning goals?
- Can you describe some of the writing or literacy practices that you are currently engaged in for the development of your conferencing strategies?
- Can you describe how the program you are teaching in informs the way you approach the writing conference?
- Could you tell me what you think of your role is at writing conferences?

For FYC students

- Have you done writing conferences with instructors before? If so, how did this conference seem similar to or different from those other conferences?
- Could you describe, particularly, what happened in this moment of the exchange on the videotape [or transcript]?
- When conferencing with your writing instructor, what were your thoughts and feelings, and specifically, what role do you think you played in the conference?
- How did the writing conference affect your revision of the text? How did the writing conference affect your perception of the class and the instructor?