RAISING THE CURTAIN:
POSITIONING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN ONLINE LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

by

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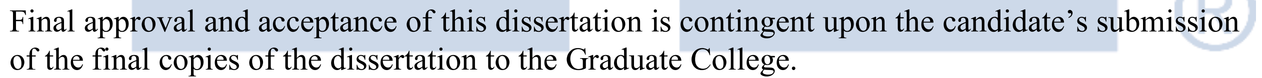

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DEDICATION

To my grandparents, who nurtured my love of learning.

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ABSTRACT

Raising the Curtain:

Positioning and Identity Construction in Online Language Teacher Education

More fully online MA TESOL programs are offered now than ever (England, 2012; Hall & Knox, 2009; Murray, 2013; Murray & Christison, 2017), resulting in an unprecedented number of teachers who have received or are receiving their education online. Such a major shift in the educational context requires a closer look in terms of professional growth, social interaction, professional identity development, and teacher learning. To this end, given the importance of identity development in teacher education programs (e.g., Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Kayi-Aydar, 2015), this qualitative study explored how teacher candidates construct and perform their identities as teachers in fully online educational settings.

Using De Costa and Norton's (2017) multilevel framework for analyzing language teacher identity and viewing identity through a poststructural lens (e.g., Pavlenko, 2003; Morgan, 2004), I explored the positioning processes of three instructors and eight teacher candidates in a fully online MA TESOL program over the course of five months and multiple classes. To adapt to the multimodal digital environment, I combined positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) with social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) and an ethnographic approach (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Beach, Bagley, & Marques da Silva, 2018), which offered new insights into the ways that the context and design of the online course site powerfully shape the positioning processes that occur.

Institutional and instructor positioning via course design were found to strongly influence teacher candidate identity construction and community development. Teacher candidates

reported the need for discursive modeling and personalized content creation by instructors and private, non-evaluated spaces for informal, off-task talk. In addition, distinctions between teacher candidates' positions enacted in course postings and interviews, as well as the ways these positions sedimented over time, highlight the need for future multicontextual exploration of online identity construction. The multimodal positioning analysis developed and applied in this study emerged as a promising way to explore interactions in online settings in more nuanced detail.

Technology is the campfire around which we tell our stories.

–Laurie Anderson

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What we need is a floating zendo, where an old Bodhisattva can wander from place to place and always be sure to find a spot to sleep in among friends.

--Jack Kerouac, Dharma Bums

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We must be undone in order to do ourselves:
we must be part of a larger social fabric of existence in order to create who we are.

--Judith Butler, 2004, pp. 100-101

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The world, in truth, is a wedding.

--Erving Goffman, 1959, p. 23

CHAPTER 1:
Introduction

There has perhaps never been such an exciting time to be an educator as now, when vast information flows among individuals and organizations around the world allow people to be exposed to ideas and cultures far removed from those with which they were raised, and people can easily travel to the other side of the globe within a single day. For educators in the fields of language and culture, these possibilities for nearly immediate interconnectivity are especially revolutionary, as entire industries have been developed based on the demand for language education and intercultural competence and communication. For the first time, collaborative work between students who are living oceans apart is not just a possibility but a common occurrence, disrupting previous notions of education taking place within the confines of a brick-and-mortar classroom and replacing them with an ever-expanding variety of opportunities and potential configurations. Regardless, beneath this dizzying array of possibilities lie an equally disorienting number of questions about the repercussions of such sudden and dramatic change.

As a language teacher educator, I found myself grappling with many of these questions in a very practical way. Prior to beginning this study, I spent more than four years coordinating a series of fully online certificate and professional development programs for teachers of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL), in which teacher candidates often lived and worked continents apart from their instructors and peers. The ability to bring together like minds from around the world to collaborate as groups on lesson planning and curriculum development, to share snippets of their teaching, and to engage in critical discussions via the university's learning management system (LMS) and various websites and apps was exhilarating.

However, a feeling of tension between connection and isolation occupied my thoughts as I worked with the teacher candidates and instructors in the fully online classes. Although I was

confident in the programs' curriculum and content, I was less sure of whether participants in the online classes were experiencing the same sense of community with their classmates that those who attended classes in person had. Likewise, as a teacher and administrator, I struggled with my own online persona, which I could feel was quite unfamiliar and different from face-to-face contexts, regardless of how hard I tried to present myself equally and authentically in each. These uncertainties caused me to question: In a world in which education is shifting more and more toward online contexts, how are language teacher candidates, especially those enrolled in fully online programs, affected by the possibilities and constraints of the online educational setting? How do their learning experiences shape them and their feelings of connection to one another, to the profession, and to their instructors and the institution?

Resulting from these questions and the experiences that prompted them, this study examines the positioning and identity negotiation processes that took place in a fully online MA TESOL program over the course of five months. It seeks to examine how teacher candidates, linked with one another and their instructors solely through their participation in the virtual world, position themselves and others in this fundamentally changed and physically distant setting.

The title of this manuscript takes inspiration from Erving Goffman's (1959) classic work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, an analysis of the ways that identity performance is in constant motion and reconfiguration, couched accessibly in dramaturgical metaphors. Written well before the advent of the Internet and current, more dynamic poststructural views on identity, its metaphors of rehearsal and preparation in the backstage versus the carefully planned performance for specific audiences may in some ways be too rigid, but they continue to be a useful lens for researchers in online contexts. Just as curtains separate the preparation of the

backstage from the performance that ensues when the curtain is raised, the virtual, disembodied nature of online interaction serves as a means by which individuals' identity performances shift between the public stage that appears on the screen and the private world of struggle and rehearsal. It is my hope that the findings of this study will help to raise the curtain, offer insight into the complex processes that shape the performances that take place in online classroom discourse, and build upon the as-yet nascent research in identity development in online educational settings to provide a more nuanced perspective of the complexities in this rapidly expanding area.

Purpose and Significance

Online education in the United States has been on a steady incline since 2002, with more than 3 million post-secondary students enrolled exclusively in online programs and nearly 6.5 million enrolled in at least one online class in 2016 (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). This increase is even more dramatic when coupled with the fact that 1 million fewer students are attending classes on campus in the same time period, a fact that highlights the larger tidal shift from face-to-face to online education, with the greatest changes happening within public institutions (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). Several public universities now fall under the category of "mega-universities" as a result of enormous student enrollment they have achieved via online degree programs (Gardner, 2019). Although undergraduate students make up the majority of today's online students, graduate programs, including the MA TESOL, have also been deeply affected by this trend, with more fully online MA TESOL programs being offered now than ever (England, 2012; Hall & Knox, 2009; Murray, 2013; Murray & Christison, 2017), and their numbers continue to rise. As opportunities for enrolling in online MA TESOL programs grow, so do their graduates, resulting an unprecedented number of teachers who have

received their education partially or fully online. Such rapid growth in online teacher preparation programs calls for careful analysis of the implications inherent in this new form of education.

In a field as globally situated as language teaching, technology provides educational and professional opportunities previously unimaginable, such as pursuing a master's degree from a university in the United States while gaining work experience as a teacher in Thailand, Morocco, or Russia, or teaching students in China while living in California. It allows teacher candidates in online programs the ability to connect with colleagues who are working in diverse contexts and learn from their anecdotes and experiences as they make connections between theory and practice and visualize possibilities for themselves in the future. This flexibility has also led to greater access to education programs than ever before; many online students are non-traditional (i.e., older) students who are more likely to be parents, work full-time jobs, and live in geographically remote areas ("2019 Online Education Trends Report"), factors that make attending classes at brick-and-mortar schools challenging or impossible.

However, these possibilities are interlinked with a new set of limitations. Due to the lack of geographical proximity, traditional forms of education, which take place in shared, face-to-face environments and involve regular synchronous interaction, are transformed in online settings. Although online students may connect with one another via class-based apps, email, or various social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, they may never interact with their instructors or classmates synchronously or face-to-face. The physical space of the school for fully online students, even if hosted by a brick-and-mortar institution, becomes not a tree-lined campus where one may study with peers in libraries and pore over new concepts in busy coffee shops but a network of screens separated by space and time. As a result, the majority of online language teacher education (OLTE) programs today use fully asynchronous

configurations (Murray & Christison, 2017), which rely heavily on written contributions rather than spoken conversation. “Discussions” become posts on a designated board, and responses may be received hours or days after the initial posting, or sometimes not at all. Likewise, without the ability to be in close physical proximity to one another, spontaneous moments of informal interaction between classmates, such as those which may occur in hallways before or after classes or in after-hours events, may not exist. The common experiences associated with being on a college or university campus, such as being able to attend talks or extracurricular meetings, may also be limited in situations in which an online option is not provided.

Due to these changes and a plethora of others, the proliferation of fully online programs is changing the face of communication and idea exchange in the MA TESOL classroom. This confluence of a truly global student body, increased access for nontraditional students, and fundamental changes to how students are able to interact with one another creates a novel learning context that, despite more than two decades of research, remains underexplored (England, 2012; Hall & Knox, 2009; Murray, 2013; Murray & Christison, 2017).

One area in which such dramatic changes in possibilities for interaction may have the most profound effects is that of teacher identity. Teacher identity studies have experienced tremendous popularity in the TESOL field since the “social turn” (Block, 2007) in second language acquisition research began and Norton’s (1995, 2000) work on identity and investment among language learners pushed the field to reconceptualize its understanding of how people teach and learn. Concepts such as beliefs about the teacher’s role(s) (Farrell, 2011); values in relation to language, culture, ethnicity, and life history (Aneja, 2016; Illieva, 2010; Pavlenko, 2003; Tsui, 2007); and the positioning of the teacher vis-à-vis students, administrators, and fellow teachers (Menard-Warwick, 2007; Reeves, 2008) make up a complex tapestry that

informs the ways that teacher candidates understand the material in their classes, as well as the ways they enact their teacher identities when they shift into teaching positions of their own. Indeed, in an introduction to a recent *TESOL Quarterly* Special Issue on language teacher identity, the issue's co-editors summed this sentiment up quite clearly: "*Who* teachers are and *what* they bring with them, individually and collectively, matters in *what* and *how* they teach and thus, to students, families, communities, and institutions" (Varghese, Motha, Park, Reeves, & Trent, 2016, p. 548, emphasis added).

From a poststructural perspective (e.g., Morgan, 2004; Pavlenko, 2003), which currently dominates language teacher identity research (Kayi-Aydar, 2019b; McNamara, 2012; Miller, 2009; Norton, 2013), identities are developed socially and emerge through discursive interactions, which position the self and other(s) within a range of indexical processes, categories, and stances. In contrast to previous notions of identity as stable and unitary, identity is dynamic, multiple, performative, and often conflicting (Buchholtz & Hall, 2005). Through this lens, the discursive context takes on heightened importance. In the dramatically changed discursive context of fully online education, the processes by which identities are negotiated may be changed as well.

To date, however, remarkably little research has examined teacher identity construction in fully online educational contexts (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014), and in contrast to identity research in face-to-face settings, studies that take a poststructural perspective are extremely limited. Likewise, much of the research relevant to teacher identity in online settings does not take place in fully online settings but within online classes that are offered within otherwise face-to-face contexts (e.g., Chen, 2012; Choi et al., 2016; Samburskiy, 2013; Schallert et al., 2016). The discursive differences created by asynchronous, text-based communication as

the primary or perhaps only form of communication between peers or teacher candidates and their instructors necessitates a closer look specifically at fully online educational contexts, which this study has been designed to accomplish. As online MA TESOL programs continue to grow, such research will be essential in ensuring that online teacher candidates receive equal attention not only to the cognitive rigor and achievement of learning outcomes but also to the social interactions and discursive processes that shape their identities as both students and teachers.

Design of the Study

Drawing on data obtained from following students in a fully online MA TESOL program over five months, this study will begin to elucidate the ways that online teacher candidates engage in identity negotiation via the positions they take up or are assigned within the affordances and constraints of their online coursework. Using positioning theory, which situates the enactment of identity in discursive practices in which individuals position themselves and others via "the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46), I will examine how these identities are performed and constructed in participants' online course interaction and interview narratives, as well as how the context in which they are enacted and the ways they are positioned by the institution affect these identities.

Analysis centers on how teacher candidates discursively position themselves and are positioned by others in text-based and multimodal online interactions, coupled with interviews in which teacher candidates reflect on their interactive positioning and express aspects of their offline identities over the course of a semester. In addition, screenshots of the online class setting, interviews with course instructors, and a collection of course documents and communications shared by the instructors help offer a counterpoint to teacher candidate

positioning by allowing me to examine the ways that institutional and instructor positioning processes influence possible positions taken up by teacher candidates in their classes.

In response to the need for research that combines positioning analyses with ethnographic data (Depperman, 2015), this study takes a layered approach to analysis that connects positions taken up in narratives and class interactions with the larger context within which the participants are situated. All interview and class data are supplemented by an approach informed by ethnography (Beach, Bagley, & Marques da Silva, 2018; Hymes, 1996; Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Glesne, 2016) and digital ethnography (Dicks, Mason, Coffey, & Atkinson, 2005; Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis, & Tacchi, 2016), in which data from interviews and class interactions are combined and triangulated with data obtained from program documents, interviews and email correspondence with the program director, and a collection of observation notes, screen shots, and reflective journals gathered and produced during my silent observation of all classes during the entirety of the semester.

Likewise, this research will build upon previous examinations of teacher identity performances in online settings by taking a multifaceted approach that includes data collected over a span of two 7.5-week sessions and across multiple classes. Such in-depth, multi-context studies have been limited in the current literature on teacher identity as a whole (Kanno & Stuart, 2011), and to my knowledge, are nonexistent in the still-scarce literature on teacher identity construction in online contexts. The in-depth nature of this study will provide much-needed insight into the ways that fully online MA TESOL programs help shape future teachers' professional identities and prepare them for their teaching careers.

Finally, to better address the non-linguistic forms of meaning-making inherent in the digital context, I will draw on social semiotics (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988) and

multimodal analysis (Kress, 2009; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2004) to extend positioning theory into a more comprehensive multimodal positioning analysis. In doing so, I view the online class environment as a virtual semiotic landscape (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2011), in which the visual design and considerations for the user experience are understood as components of an agentively created space for interaction that carries messages indexing discourses and ideologies. By incorporating attention to the affordances of the online context, I am able to connect institutional positioning of online instructors and students with the positions they are, in turn, able to take up within the class setting.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were inspired by De Costa and Norton's (2017) adaptation of the Douglas Fir Group's micro, meso, and macro dimensions of language learning to the area of language teacher identity development. Research Question 1 examines the macro level, understood here as the institution, by looking at the institutional positioning processes that are evident in the course design and use of predesigned courses, and which affect the overarching storyline of the online class and positions that both teacher candidates and course instructors are able to take up. Research Question 2 narrows the focus to the instructor (meso) level, which is tightly bound to institutional positioning and therefore acts as a bridge between the institution and the interactive positioning that takes place among teacher candidates. Research Question 3 looks specifically at the interactive positioning that takes place in peer-to-peer interactions in the shared online space, also within the meso level. Finally, Research Question 4 connects these interactive positioning processes to the reflexive positioning at the micro level that teacher candidates express via anecdotes and fragments of narratives, both in their online interactions and in our interviews.

1. How do the affordances and constraints of fully online course contexts shape positions available to both teacher candidates and course instructors?
2. How do online instructors position themselves in relation to the course content and the teacher candidates through participation in the online course environment?
3. How do teacher candidates position one another through participation in the online course environment?
4. How do teacher candidates position themselves through participation in the online course environment?

Organization

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework for this study and a literature review on the topics of teacher identity and positioning, community in language teacher education, and online identity performance and construction. Chapter 3 provides a methodological overview, including data collection and analysis procedures, a description of the study context and participants, and a reflection on my positionality as a researcher and how this influenced my approach to this study.

Chapters 4-6 highlight the study's findings by exploring the positioning of teacher candidates on multiple levels. Although all positions are interconnected within their respective storylines, I attempted to examine each level of positioning in detail by shifting the lens from a focus on the effects of *institutional* and instructor positioning in Chapter 4 to peer-to-peer *interactional* positioning in the online class in Chapter 5 to *reflexive* positioning in Chapter 6; importantly, however, because all positioning is relational, the three types of positioning and they ways they intersect will be discussed throughout. In recognizing that all positions are indexical, Chapter 4 addresses the need for contextualization of the analysis, taking an

ecological, semiotic perspective in understanding the course environment; it examines the visual design of the courses and the shifted instructor positioning that took place as a result of the use of predesigned courses and a strict delineation between face-to-face and online programs. Chapter 5 zooms in to analyze the ways that teacher candidates positioned themselves within the asynchronous, text-based environment of the online course setting. Chapter 6 explores teacher candidates' personal experiences and perspectives to gain insight into the ways their positions and patterns of participation differed from one person to another, highlighting the role of individual identity negotiations that may remain hidden "behind the scenes" in the disembodied world of online education.

In the final chapter, Chapter 7, I return to the research questions as I connect the findings from Chapters 4-6 and provide theoretical and pedagogical implications for current and future teachers, administrators, and instructional designers working in fully online contexts. This chapter will also highlight limitations of this study and offer suggestions for future research.

A note about the implications of the organizational structure of this chapter is in order. The macro-to-micro analysis presented here is not meant to imply unidirectional positioning or causality; positioning processes that take place at any level have the potential to affect those same processes at other levels. Although positions are shaped and constrained by processes found in higher levels, they are not predetermined by them (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Harré et al., 2009). Rather, positioning takes place within a complex web of connections in which the agentic actions of individuals at all levels create ripple effects that may destabilize and disrupt even the most seemingly stable and powerful positioning processes at the highest levels. The same multi-directionality is true of the meaning making inherent in the production and interpretation of semiotic resources. As Hodge and Kress (1988) make clear, normative systems

"only constrain the behavior and beliefs of the non-dominant in so far as they have been effectively imposed an have not been effectively resisted" (p. 7). Due to the scope of this study, the macro-to-micro directionality is more prominent and is discussed in greater detail, but when seen with a wider lens, the opposite may be true as aspects of the macro-level discourses are contested and reconfigured over time. For this reason, it is essential to read the findings presented in this manuscript not as predetermined and unchangeable but as reflecting a range of dynamic processes in play over the five months during which the data for this study were collected.

Terms Used

Teacher Candidate

Throughout this manuscript, I refer to the students enrolled in the MA TESOL program as teacher candidates as a means of recognizing their status and aligning my terminology with much of what is published. However, this term is potentially misleading, as it denotes the status of a future teacher, when in fact, many of the participants were current teachers with years of experience. In some places, I have opted to use the term student rather than teacher candidate to emphasize the universality of some of the findings, which are not limited to teacher education settings but are shared in common with all online students, regardless of their area of study.

Online Education/Online Student

In online educational studies, the meaning of the term "online" is one that is regularly debated. A common definition of "online" education is that which takes place 80% or more online (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). However, this study focuses on fully online settings, and as such, it is meant to apply to settings where 100% of coursework is completed online or at

a distance. For that reason, this manuscript frequently uses the term “fully online” to distinguish this learning experience from related online experiences that may take place in partially or primarily face-to-face settings. The MA TESOL program discussed in this study had a curriculum of fully online classes as well as one in-person “internship,” or practicum, which was held off-site and arranged by the teacher candidates at an approved location of their choice. However, teacher candidates were not required or expected to interact with their classmates, instructors, or representatives of the university in any in-person capacity, which made this program entirely held at a distance.

Face-to-Face/In-Person/On-Campus

In the literature, the terms face-to-face, in-person, and on-campus are used interchangeably to denote programs, or students within programs, in which classes are held according to the traditional model of regularly set class times and corresponding physical locations, typically on a college or university campus. The most commonly used term in this study and others is face-to-face (sometimes written as F2F in other studies), although in-person and on-campus are used on occasion as well according to context. The term face-to-face should not be confused with synchronous discussion, which may take place online or in person and may or may not include audio or video components.

CHAPTER 2:
Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Introduction

In the past two decades, teacher identity has emerged as a key topic in educational research, resulting in a rich body of literature that demonstrates the importance of identity work in teaching and teacher education as a whole (e.g., Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Flores & Day, 2006; Kayi-Aydar, 2019b; Lee & Schallert, 2016) and among language teachers in particular (e.g., Clarke, 2008; Martel & Wang, 2015; Miller, 2009; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). Teachers' professional identities have been shown to have implications for a wide range of topics, including retention rates (Freedman & Appleman, 2008), burnout (Acheson, Taylor, & Luna, 2016), motivation (Day & Kington, 2008), ethics (Miller, Morgan, & Medina, 2017) and pedagogical practices (Ajayi, 2011; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Reeves, 2008), and they are closely connected with teachers' sense of agency and engagement in agentic practices (Kayi-Aydar, 2015, 2017; Ruohotie-Lhyty & Moate, 2016).

Indeed, language teacher identity has been the topic of recent special issues of both the *Modern Language Journal* (2017) and *TESOL Quarterly* (2016), as well as a wide range of books (e.g., Alsup, 2008; Barkhuizen, 2017; Cheung, Ben Said, & Park, 2014; Clarke, 2008; Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro, & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2015). The interest in language teacher identity construction has been especially strong in the area of teacher education, with Kanno and Stuart (2011) calling it "the central project novice teachers engage in" (p. 250), thereby placing identity development squarely in the center of research regarding teacher practices.

However, for new teachers, such as those in this study, identity is perhaps most salient as it relates to finding one's place in the larger community of language teachers. The act of

becoming a teacher is a necessarily social and community-based process; teacher candidates simultaneously reflect upon their existing experiences with teaching communities (e.g., Lee & Schallert, 2016) as they envision themselves as future members of these communities. To become a member of this group, they must learn to engage in community practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and discourses (Alsup, 2008). They must, to use Gee's (1996) straightforward explanation, learn "the appropriate costume and instructions on how to talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize" (p. 127). Therefore, as teacher candidates engage in learning in their teacher education programs, they are not simply obtaining knowledge but acting agentively to develop their identities (Clarke, 2008).

Although joining new communities can be a deeply fulfilling and empowering act, this work is rife with tension. Identities are multiple, dynamic, and often in conflict with one another (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), which means that as one aspect of an individuals' identity develops, other aspects are also necessarily shifted and disrupted to make space. As teacher candidates work to become members of new communities, the beliefs, values, and ways of being that they carry with them from their participation in other communities may come into conflict with the norms and expectations held in the communities they join as both students and educators. Power dynamics associated with existing capital (Bourdieu, 1977) in the form of previous teaching experience or socioeconomic status are implicated, and personal histories become entangled in ways of understanding oneself as a student, as a professional, and as an agent for change. The identities that teacher candidates initially envision for themselves may, as a result, change dramatically as they engage with new ideas and discourses through dialog with their instructors, their classmates, and themselves (e.g., Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Golombek & Jordan, 2005; Illieva, 2010).

Within this study, I view such negotiation of identity and community membership as acts of *positioning* (Bamberg, 1997; Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Individuals position themselves and others in relation to "storylines," or narratives that they use to make sense of the world and their place(s) in it. Those in positions of power and knowledge, for example, hold a different set of *rights and duties* (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) than do those who do not hold such power, which shapes expectations of what they are expected or allowed to do (Harré & Dedaic, 2012). As individuals gain access to the capital that allows them to be seen as legitimate members of a community, the positions that they may take up, and the indexed rights and duties of each, are altered. These positions are enacted discursively in moment-to-moment interaction that continually (re)situates the individual within multiple dynamic contexts ranging from the micro (one-on-one) to the macro (ideological) level.

This chapter will begin by situating the current study within a poststructural theoretical framework in which identity is viewed as an ongoing, social process that takes shape discursively via acts of positioning. I will provide an overview of positioning theory and social semiotics, two complementary frameworks which combine to form the theoretical and methodological lens for this study and provide a nuanced approach to understanding identity construction and performance in online settings.

The literature review that follows is separated into three sections. The first section will examine relevant studies of language teacher identity, particularly as it is constructed and performed in relation to positioning and community participation, both of which are areas that are well developed although they each lack sufficient discussion of online teacher education programs. The second section will begin connecting identity research with previous studies of

online educational communities, the context in which this study is situated. The work in this area holds as a primary concern the importance of developing a sense of community and belonging through student socialization and interaction and encompasses studies that have informed online class design and pedagogical practices over the past two decades. Given the importance of community in identity construction, and due to the poststructural view of identity as being discursively constructed, this section will also problematize concepts that have not as yet been meaningfully unpacked (Jaber & Kennedy, 2017) theoretically in terms of identity performance and construction in online educational settings. Because the vast majority of existing research in this area takes a distinctly different, non-poststructural approach to understanding identity and community participation, the third section will work to bridge this divide by highlighting studies that have begun to explore new, more nuanced approaches. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of how the current study addresses major gaps in the literature related to identity work in online educational settings by applying a poststructural lens and positioning theory/social semiotic framework to deconstruct the role of online community participation in teacher candidates' identity development.

Theoretical Framework

Identity and Discourse: A Poststructural Approach

Traditional views of identity have depicted the self as stable, unitary, and shaped by the rigid and unquestionable forces of nature or institutional structure (Gee, 2000). Poststructuralism, however, has emerged as a key theoretical stance stemming from the work of scholars such as Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Althusser (Dillet, MacKenzie, & Porter, 2013), which challenges the notion of a stable and uniform identity and underpins conceptions of identity throughout SLA research and applied linguistics today (Block, 2007; Darvin & Norton, 2015; Kayi-Aydar,

2019b; Kramsch, 2012; McNamara, 2012; Morgan, 2004; Norton, 2000, 2013). Poststructural viewpoints push back against the notion that an individual's identity aligns neatly with supposedly stable social roles, highlighting continual shifts and providing room for the ongoing navigation of an individual's trajectory within and among multiple and changing contexts.

Social and Discursive Processes

Society and social practice are continually in flux, discursively and diachronically constituted, and shaped by power dynamics and ideological processes that are, themselves, in an ongoing state of contestation and change (Dillet, MacKenzie, & Porter, 2013; McNamara, 2012). In contrast to (and in reaction to) earlier, structuralist and synchronic views that depict society as static and systematic (e.g., Saussurean linguistics or semiology), a poststructural perspective pulls back the lens to highlight the tension and reconfiguration that create ongoing change, thereby framing society as a web of ongoing discursive processes that cannot be understood outside of the socio-historical context within which they exist (Bakhtin, 1981; Blommaert, 2005; Fairclough, 1989, 1992; Foucault, 1969, 1980; Howarth, 2013).

Poststructural perspectives emphasize the ongoing struggle for power that shapes discourse and propels the constant shifts and disruptions within both micro and macro levels of society. Bourdieu's (1977) notions of *economic*, *social*, *cultural*, and *symbolic capital* are central in many poststructuralist analyses, as this framework articulates the dissemination of power via a range of disparate yet connected resources, which may be tangible (e.g., wealth and property) or intangible (e.g., social connections and prestige). A person's varying levels and types of capital shape the power and privileges that person may hold in different contexts. For example, an individual with a high level of economic capital, or wealth, may still be denied access to elite communities if they are lacking the appropriate connections or behavioral patterns, which

correspond to their levels of social and cultural capital. Therefore, to gain access to certain communities, one must accumulate and display the correct forms and levels of associated capital, although access is still not guaranteed. Within the field of SLA and education, Darvin and Norton (2015) connect Bourdieu's forms of capital directly to an individual's overall *investment* (Norton, 2000; 2013) in learning: Larger perceived gains in capital, or gains in especially valued forms of capital, are likely to increase investment in learning, and therefore, in taking on new identities; in addition, the capital that individuals bring to a learning environment (e.g., prior education, high semiotic mobility, high-status home language and culture) may act as affordances that enable them to engage in learning processes with greater ease[1]. However, because both identities and the contexts in which they are negotiated are dynamic and continually shifting, so too are individuals' levels of social capital and the associated affordances they provide.

Levels of capital are in constant flux as individuals and societies change over time, and yet, they are closely linked with ideology, a conceptual space in which dominant discourses compete to produce more stable and enduring practices that may privilege or marginalize certain ways of being or doing (Bourdieu, 1977). As Foucault has argued (1980), power circulates throughout society via ongoing discursive negotiation (Mills, 2004), a process that interweaves power with discursive resources so tightly that Foucault combines them into the concept "pouvoir-savoir," translated into English as *power/knowledge*. Power is constituted and upheld via dominant ideologies, which represent accepted forms of knowledge or truth (Foucault, 1969),

[1] See Blommaert (2005) for a discussion of the transfer of capital and semiotic resources to new contexts within a globalized world.

and discourse is entangled in a struggle to (re)shape these ideologies and situate individuals, communities, and their norms and expectations within a complex ideological matrix.

The ongoing power and ideological shifts that take place due to these discursive struggles and negotiations make clear the importance of analyzing discourse within its sociohistorical context for a full understanding of content. Synchronic, "snapshot" methods of discourse analysis, such as conversation analysis, provide a valuable window into interaction structures such as turn-taking or conversational patterns, but they do little to connect *what* is being said to *why* it is being said in the way it is.

To disentangle everyday interactions from the larger sociohistorical context and corresponding ideologies, Gee (1999; 2000) distinguishes between "big D" Discourses and "little d" discourses. "Big D" Discourses are those that are ideologically and sociologically informed; participation in such Discourses via clothing, behavior, values, or ways of being represent alignment or affiliation with larger communities, a concept which will be addressed in greater detail later in this chapter. On the other hand, "little d" discourses are stretches of spoken or written communication that take place in moment-by-moment interaction among individuals or groups and constitute one's negotiation and positioning of self within Discourse.

Although this distinction is perhaps overly simplistic (Bamberg, 2014) in that it does not take into consideration the roles of access and legitimacy (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Norton, 2000), each of which must be granted by others, such attention to macro and micro levels is necessary to clarify the connection between individual discursive choices and the larger ideologies they both constitute and are constituted by. As people engage in interaction with one another, each aspect of their communication is connected with larger historical narratives and therefore imbued with indexed sociological meanings (Fairclough, 1989; Silverstein, 2003, 2006). In other words, each

instance of language in use (discourse) is a reference to and enactment of the larger concepts and categories (Discourses) that make up people's understanding of the world. People are, in this way, *heteroglossic*, or multi-voiced (Bakhtin, 1981), continually incorporating the voices of others in their own communication and connecting even small and seemingly mundane stretches of interaction with the ways they position and reposition themselves and others within multiple orders of indexicality (Silverstein, 2003) and semiotic meaning. In turn, individuals continually engage in acts of resistance to dominant ideologies via these discourses, thereby slowly shifting the larger Discourses over time.

These connections provide the theoretical cornerstones of discourse analysis from a poststructural perspective: As Kramsch (2012) states, "a poststructuralist stance is an epistemic stance" (p. 487)—the focus of inquiry is not simply on *what* is being said but *how* individual interactions are co-constitutive with ideology and power/knowledge and *how* these connections then affect individuals or groups as a result.

Identity Construction and Performance

Seen through this poststructural lens, individuals are also in continual flux as they navigate shifting social and discursive practices and engage in identity work. Just as power circulates and ideologies shift over time, identity construction is also an ongoing, emergent process in which people are constantly changing and in a state of becoming. This process takes place through socially situated, discursive acts, both over an individual's lifespan as well as in moment-to-moment interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) to create a life-long project that Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson (2005) term *identity-in-discourse*. As people attempt to take up positions of legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1977) and enact agency (Ahearn, 2001; Howarth, 2013) in their everyday lives, conflicting beliefs and values within the self and between the self

and others are continually brought into contact and disrupted. Kayi-Aydar (2015) summarizes these opposing forces and their impacts in defining identity as:

> …multiple presentations of self which are (re)constructed across social contexts and demonstrated through actions and emotions. The poststructural identity is multifaceted, dynamic, a site of struggle, and shaped by power relations between the individual and others. (p. 138)

This negotiation in relation with others (Buchholtz & Hall, 2005; Norton, 1995, 2000, 2013) is not only discursive but also embodied, a key point in Judith Butler's (1990, 2004) feminist poststructuralist framing of *identity as performance*, which has greatly influenced current theorization of how identities are enacted discursively (see also Baxter, 2003; Cameron, 1997; Tannen, 1994). Every time individuals interact with one another, they perform their identities via a range of actions (e.g., the content and manner of their speech or their bodily presentation), all of which index qualities, values, and stances that may be recognized by interlocutors through their familiarity with macro-sociological constructs that are shaped and enacted discursively (Eckert, 2008; Silverstein, 2003, 2006). For example, a person's clothing, grooming, and word choice may index gender, social status, education, or affiliation with niche communities or subcultures, among many other possibilities (Gee, 1999, 2000). Within each of these interactions, performed identities may be accepted, contested, and/or reshaped in response to changes in the communicative context and relationship(s) with interlocutors.

Norton (1995, 2000, 2015) has repeatedly advocated for a poststructuralist view of identity negotiation for both language learners and teachers as they navigate multiple layers of capital (Bourdieu, 1977), ideology, power, and cross-cultural orders of indexicality (Blommaert, 2005; Silverstein, 2003) to take on the identities of legitimate users of a language. Her definition

of identity as “the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2013, p. 4) incorporates these multiple layers and situates the act of learning and teaching a language within the larger, sociohistorical and geopolitical context of opportunity and legitimization. In an inherently global profession such as language teaching, and especially at a time when the world continues to undergo dramatic processes of globalization and technologization that topple long-standing boundaries and give birth to new avenues for identification and meaning-making, such a multi-layered approach to identity is needed. This poststructural approach to understanding identity and contextualization of identity practice within larger discourses shapes the ways that identity construction is discussed within this study.

Positioning Theory

This study is guided by positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as both a key theoretical framework and methodological approach. This theory sits nicely with the poststructural views of identity outlined above as it situates the enactment of identity in discursive practices in which individuals position themselves and others via “the stories through which we make sense of our own and others’ lives” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46). It is within these stories, and the positions that the interweaving of these stories allows, that identity is constructed (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Slocum-Bradley, 2009). As a result, positioning theory provides a means for examining how individuals construct and reconstruct their identities discursively with every interaction.

Positioning theory has its origins in a range of scholarly work carried out in the latter half of the 20th century. It draws upon speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) in the recognition that the words individuals use have illocutionary and perlocutionary force, which

allows people to use language not only to communicate information but to take action—to *do* things—in the world. Its roots can also be seen in Goffman's (1981) concept of "footing," which refers to the shifting stances that individuals take in relation to what is being said and done in their interactions with interlocutors; Harré and van Langenhove (1999), however, draw a clear distinction between positioning theory and Goffman's work, emphasizing the shifting nature of positions as opposed to the more rigid notion of roles Goffman employed. The term positioning itself stems from Foucault's (1969) "subject position," which was coined in reference to the ways that individuals are positioned via discourses that determine the power and privileges that they may be allowed or expected to exercise (Depperman, 2015). Initially put forth by Rom Harré in the field of social psychology, positioning theory has changed over the years as it has been re-envisioned (e.g., Bamberg, 1997; Wortham, 2000), expanded (e.g., Slocum-Bradley, 2009), and applied to a multitude of contexts. Indeed, positioning theory has served as both the theoretical and methodological framework for a large number of studies in education and applied linguistics (Kayi-Aydar, 2019a ; Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018), including studies of student self- and other-positioning (Menard-Warwick, 2007; Nguyen & Yang, 2015; Sugimoto, 2016), teachers' positioning of students (Kim & Mitchell Viesca, 2016; Menard-Warwick, 2007; Reeves, 2008; Sugimoto, 2016; Yoon, 2008), and teachers' self-positioning (Barkhuizen, 2010; Colomer, 2015; Glazier, 2009; Haneda & Nespor, 2013; Kayi-Aydar, 2016; Kayi-Aydar, 2018; Trent, 2012; Whitsed & Volet, 2013). A discussion of some key studies in this area is included in the literature review in this chapter.

Positioning theory relies on the perspective that "what we choose to do or say depends on who we are and with whom we interact" (Kayi-Aydar, 2019a, p. 22). Individuals can position themselves tacitly or intentionally via *reflexive positioning*, which aligns a person's position in a

storyline with individual beliefs about one's identity, as perceived to be appropriate in that particular context (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Tan & Moghaddam, 1995). They can also position others via *interactive positioning*, either as the result of the individual's relevant personal attributes or events that take place in the course of interaction (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Such positionings reflect "clusters of beliefs about how rights and duties are distributed" (Harré et al., 2009, p. 9) as well as "moral orders" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) within the local interaction and thereby determine what individuals are expected or allowed to do. These potential actions, called *repertoires of acts*, are those deemed acceptable in the specific context according to his or her position (Harré & Dedaic, 2012). Thus, the storyline, the positions held within it, and the illocutionary force (provided by the allowable repertoires of acts and their associated rights and/or duties) of those positions create a "mutually determining triad" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 18) in which the three elements are interlinked and co-constitutive.

In line with the poststructural emphasis on continual change, positioning is an ongoing and recursive process whereby individuals may be positioned and repositioned repeatedly within any given interaction. This process occurs in three orders. *First-order positioning* is that in which people position themselves and others, either tacitly or intentionally; *second-order positioning* refers to the ways that the positions put forth are challenged, revised, or accepted (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, 1991). For example, an individual may assign him or herself a position of authority in the act of first-order positioning, but this authority, and the rights and duties associated with it, must be accepted and confirmed by other participants in the interaction to be upheld. Participants may, within the framework of the interaction, challenge self- and other-positionings put forth by others; in this case, these positions and the rights and duties afforded to

them must be renegotiated. *Third-order positioning* is that which takes place beyond the initial interaction, and it is in essence "talk about talk" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 21); individuals may discuss and renegotiate positions after the initial interaction, or one or more of the initial participants may discuss the interaction with an outsider, thereby potentially re-engaging in first-order positioning of the self or others through perspectives of the initial storyline.

Individuals' attributes outside of discrete interactions, including their ideological alignments, attitudes, and prior exchanges, are implicated in the positions a speaker may take up. In other words, individuals position themselves and others as "known characters in shared story lines" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 49). These story lines, and the positions within them, play out moment-by-moment but are situated in the crux of past, present, and future as individuals make sense of their own positions and the social expectations inherent within them. The "moral orders" a person takes up in relation to positions in an interaction are aligned with the story lines they have established for themselves based on their lived experiences, values, and beliefs; taking oneself to be a certain kind of person influences how someone will participate in first- and second-order positioning during the exchange or in third-order positioning afterward. In addition, people may *pre-position* themselves and others (Harré et al, 2009) by making certain traits, skills, or qualifications clear as a means of establishing characters with understood sets of rights and duties, although these positions may also be contested in discourse.

Positioning is not only influenced by participants' identities within interaction but also serves to develop those identities over time. Momentary shifts in positioning and repositioning at the local levels of individual conversations, given time and repetition, may take the form of long-held positions, or *positional identities* (Anderson, 2009; Kayi-Aydar, 2019a) that give the

individual a sense of self based on historically informed narratives and socially accepted positions. These sedimented or accumulated positions become more stable, eventually shaping the individual's perception of their place in the world as a whole. As Davies and Harré (1990) note:

> Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (p. 46)

Even within these sedimented positions, however, identities remain multiple, conflicting, and in a continual state of change.

Despite its immanentist perspective, which has been criticized due to the need to connect locally constituted interactions to larger cultural constructs (Anderson, 2009), positioning theory does not strip away socio-cultural or historical context, a point which has been further elaborated in more recent articulations of positioning theory (e.g., Harré et al, 2009). Likewise, positioning theory provides an effective means of investigating identity construction within multiple layers of interactions as it "allows for a very natural expansion of scale, from the analysis of the dynamics of person-to-person encounters to the unfolding of interactions between nation states" (Harre et al., 2009). For this reason, Kayi-Aydar (2019a) places positioning theory on a continuum between conversation analysis, which focuses on micro-level interactions, and critical discourse analysis, which emphasizes the role of macro-level discourses and ideologies. Therefore, it provides both an excellent theoretical framework and methodological tool for analyzing discursive enactments of identity at both the micro and macro levels while drawing connections between the two.

Likewise, although positioning theory has traditionally been used in analysis of conversations, Bamberg (1997, 2000) has appropriated the framework as *positioning analysis*, reconceptualizing the emerging "story lines" in interaction as individually and socially constructed narratives in which interlocutors are authors who attribute various forms of agency to themselves and the "characters" in their stories. Taking a Bakhtinian dialogical approach, he extricates positioning from typical conversational settings and applies it to the telling of narratives to an audience toward whom the narrator positions him or herself. This narrative approach has been successfully applied to a variety of contexts, such as interviews (Baynham, 2011) or "small stories" that emerge in mundane interactions (Barkhuizen, 2010; Vásquez, 2011; Watson, 2007).

Limitations of Positioning Theory

Given the poststructural understanding of identity as shaped via discourse within multiple layers of power and ideology, positioning theory emerged as the most appropriate lens for this study. Regardless, its focus on linguistic cues, particularly in conversation, limit its applicability to the multimodal, asynchronous settings in which the majority of online interaction takes place. Perhaps for this reason, it is not widely used in studies of online interactions, although it has been shown to be potentially effective in this context (see Dennen, 2007, 2011 for examples). As online interaction rapidly expands to nearly every part of our lives, whether in the form of email, social media, or online coursework, this is a major limitation of the theory. The current study, which investigates identity development in fully online settings, required a complementary approach to expand the possibilities of positioning theory within the research context.

As discussed above, positioning theory, with its roots in speech act theory (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1979) and linguistic approaches to social psychology, focuses on conversational

phenomena (Davies & Harré, 1990). Conversations typically take place synchronously, whether in face-to-face settings or not, so the majority of work using positioning theory has been conducted in synchronous contexts. Likewise, positioning theory as it is typically conceived delves only minimally into analysis of semiotic meaning making outside of the use of linguistic and paralinguistic cues. As the theory has evolved, it has grown to account for acts of positioning by groups and institutions and the multimodal forms of communication they use (e.g., Harré et al., 2009), but a way of fully analyzing multimodality through a positioning theory lens is still lacking.

These limitations stand in stark contrast to the reality of communication in the online class setting, where the majority of interaction takes place asynchronously and interaction is constrained by the class interface's affordances for communication, which have become powerful forces in shaping the positions that may be taken up by any participant at any given time. As this manuscript will discuss in depth in Chapter 4, the choices made by course designers or instructors about how and when students should interact, what sort of information they should share about themselves and their perspectives, and who the audiences are for such interactions are even more powerful in fully online contexts due to the fractures of place and time. Such constraints on positioning were impossible to ignore as their effects showed up throughout the online course interactions I observed and the interviews I held with participants.

Social Semiotics and Multimodal Analysis

To compensate for this lack, I turned to social semiotic theories (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988) and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2004), which look to language as only one form of meaning making among a range of interconnected multimodal options and emphasize "the absolute interrelation of

discourse and its mode of appearance" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 24). The interpretation of linguistic forms of discourse is inseparable from and dependent upon the semiotic modes in which they are disseminated; the same linguistic elements index different meanings if they are spoken or written, embedded in fictional or factual accounts, presented in conjunction with audiovisual elements, or (re)mixed with elements from various socio-historical contexts, for example (van Leeuwen, 2008). Given the importance of the composition and constraints of the digital context in this study, a social semiotic, multimodal approach allows acts of positioning to be analyzed in relation to the semiotic landscape of the online class (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2011).

As the name implies, social semiotics elevates the importance of semiotic resources, the multitude of ways they can be combined and presented multimodally, and their theoretical and actual semiotic potential for use and interpretation. Communication is *semiotic work*: as authors agentively embed messages within carefully *designed*, *produced*, and *distributed* modes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), individuals who interact with these messages actively interpret each layer according to their own multifaceted, indexical understandings of the world, thereby engaging in an active and continually shifting process of meaning making. Thus, as the receiver of the message actively interprets its meaning, the message itself becomes a dynamic site of potential contestation and reinterpretation. Kress (2009), in his later work on multimodality, explains the tension of this social semiotic work as follows:

> Communication can only be understood if we see it as an always complex interaction embedded in a contradictory, contested, fragmentary social environment: whether between groups or between individuals, coming together from social 'locations' which are always distinct in some respects. In the interaction, the social divergences/differences between those who interact provide the generative dynamic of

communication…Communication depends on the transformative/interpretative engagement by a participant in an interaction with a message made by another—in ways guided by their interest. *Interpretation is the defining criterion of communication: only if there has been interpretation, has there been communication*. (p. 35, emphasis added)

However, this is not to say that individuals have the ability to interpret and use semiotic resources in any way they like. Hodge and Kress (1988) state that "every semiotic act has an ideological content" (p. 40) and connect the interpretations of messages to larger *logonomic systems*, which serve as the outward rules of ideological complexes that are taught and upheld by those in power. These systems prescribe dominant interpretations and semiotic behaviors and thereby enforce *production regimes* (rules constraining production) and *reception regimes* (rules constraining reception) (p. 4). These rules "rest on a set of classifications of people, topics and circumstances which are the result of contestation over long periods, but which ultimately derive from the ruling ideas of the dominant group" (p. 5). These logonomic systems, deeply connected to dominant ideologies and established orders of indexicality (Blommaert, 2005; Silverstein, 2003), are more stable over time and therefore more difficult to challenge successfully.
One example of a logonomic system, the *genre*, may clarify the part that these systems play in communication and meaning making. As a genre becomes more established, its norms also stabilize. Although the norms in the production of genres inevitably shift over time, this only occurs via repeated contestation, particularly by individuals who hold positions of power and therefore the ability to initiate new norms (Hodge & Kress, 1988).

As online classes have proliferated, certain genres have become ubiquitous and now make up the logonomic system of online education, one which is continually contested and changing and yet surprisingly stable overall. For example, LMSs, which are closed communities

that allow access to course materials and features only to select individuals for a limited time frame, have become the standard means of offering online classes despite complaints that they are "walled gardens" that create artificially and needlessly impenetrable barriers between the class setting and the outside world (Kipp, 2018). Similarly, asynchronous, text-based discussion forums, which make up much of the data for this study, have become almost ubiquitous components of online classes due in large part to their ease of facilitation and setup, regardless of the multitude of alternative synchronous and multimodal technologies that have arisen in the decades since their introduction (Lieberman, 2019).

Additionally, the affordances of the technologies themselves are grounded in the values and ideological frameworks of their respective designers. For example, a range of studies have shown how the global proliferation of technologies such as Microsoft Word (Kvale, 2016) and PowerPoint (Djonov & van Leeuwen, 2011, 2013; Zhao, Djonov, & van Leeuwen, 2014), social media (Poulsen & Kvale, 2018; Poulsen, Kvale, & van Leeuwen, 2019), and mobile devices (Adami & Kress, 2010) has shaped not only the way information is presented but also has formed entire genres of communication that foreground values associated with the needs of business and capitalism in Western societies. This embedding of values and ideologies in technologies, combined with the ideologically driven institutional selection of such technologies, creates a scenario in which users may customize interaction and messages solely through a sort of *bricolage,* or process of choosing from a range of predetermined options. These limitations have important implications for positioning and identity construction; as Adami and Kress (2010) state, "the media we use and the affordances they offer—what they facilitate, what they hinder and inhibit—influence how we make meaning and hence how we come to shape our identity" (p. 185).

In this study, I emphasize that the construction and maintenance of online educational spaces are carried out by agentic actors, both individual and institutional, whose socially constructed stances and values have direct effects on how these spaces are designed and how individuals are positioned within them. Thus, the online classes take place within virtual semiotic landscapes, digital terrains marked by "visible inscription made through deliberate human intervention and meaning making" (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2011, p. 2). Much as the infrastructure and appearance of brick-and-mortar schools are based in values and assumptions about education (e.g., the pedagogical reasons for organizing classroom desks into rows vs. small groupings or the elements of neo-Gothic or neo-Classical architecture on American university campuses to evoke a sense of the timeless, sacred, and European elite), so is the structure and appearance of the online class. Therefore, although the online class itself cannot have agency, just as a classroom in a traditional brick-and-mortar school building cannot, it is a space imbued with semiotic meanings that have powerful illocutionary and perlocutionary force in their ability to position individuals, thereby exerting control over the positions these individuals may then take up within that space (O'Toole, 1994; Ravelli & McMurtrie, 2015; Unsworth, 2011). The technologies selected, the ways in which they are configured, the affordances they provide, and the overall design of the course combine to create a dynamic landscape rich with imported ideologies, well before the class even begins. It follows then that throughout this study, the ways that semiotic resources (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) have been configured in the online classes examined are seen as both products of larger ideological forces and as discursive acts themselves.

By combining multimodal analysis with positioning theory, I came to see the online course site as not merely a container for interaction but as an agentively designed, multimodal

form of communication rich with its own indexical meanings and ensuing power dynamics, and I was able to frame the positions that participants took up in relation to one another within the limited positions (and the rights and duties they entail) that were made available to them. I was also able to examine multimodal elements of identity performance and positioning in greater detail. Because all communication in the online setting takes place within a visual screen, details such as the placement of text in relation to other elements; the inclusion or lack of inclusion of elements such as images, video, and audio; and the ways that messages appear more or less prominent all became available areas of investigation. I refer to this approach as *multimodal positioning analysis*; a fuller description of how this was carried out is available in Chapter 3.

Literature Review

Language Teacher Identity: Navigating Positions and Communities

The increased attention to language teacher identity in recent years has taken a wide variety of forms, with research developing and/or building upon a range of diverse theoretical perspectives. This section will begin with a discussion of previous work that uses positioning theory to investigate teacher identity and therefore provide a basis for how this approach has been applied to similar studies, albeit primarily in face-to-face settings, in the past. Then, in efforts to make connections between the identity work being done using poststructural approaches to a more community-based approach commonly seen in studies of identity development in online educational settings, I will provide a brief overview of the literature that links teacher identity construction and performance to community membership and belonging.

Teacher Identity and Positioning

As mentioned above, positioning theory has emerged as a popular choice for examining teacher identity, both as individuals position themselves and others in their personal narratives and as those identities are performed in the classroom and in relation to students and/or fellow educators. Studies using positioning theory have shed light on the subtleties and nuances that come into play in teacher identity construction and the ways that beliefs, personal histories, and emotions are interlinked with individuals' positioning of themselves and others. For example, Kayi-Aydar (2018) examined the way that three Latina pre-service teachers position themselves and others as they develop identities that align them with their Hispanic students while simultaneously distancing themselves from non-Hispanic educators who they feel do not have the same cultural insights into their students' needs. One teacher in the study, Carmen, aligned herself so closely with her Hispanic students that she felt that in helping them, she was in turn, helping herself as well in disrupting processes of alienation that she had experienced as an English learner in US public schools. Positioning such as this highlights the rights and duties (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) that one may assume for him or herself—as a member of the Hispanic community and former English learner, Carmen thereby attributed duties to herself as a teacher that may go beyond what others can meaningfully take up. In this case, she took on the duties of being a helper and encourager, duties she felt were all the more necessary (and positions which were strengthened) due to her own difficulty finding someone to fill those roles in her personal experience.

However, although the linguistic and cultural affinity the teachers shared with their students in this study served as a means of strengthening their resolve and dedication, imposed or *forced positions* (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) based on these affinities may have the opposite effect. Colomer (2015) discusses six high school Spanish teachers who were called

upon to take on the role(s) of ESL teachers, even though they were not specialized in the area and expressed resistance to these positions due to their pre-existing duties related to teaching Spanish. Colomer emphasizes that this positioning in turn relieved monolingual English-speaking teachers of their responsibilities toward English learners while overburdening the Spanish teachers, leading to a situation in which English learning students were not provided with specialized and dedicated attention.

Erickson and Pinnegar (2017) tie positioning to the use of metaphors to understand how four experienced in-service teachers approach their work via the rights and duties their metaphor-based positions entail. The metaphors identified, that of a *gardener*, *traveler*, *butterfly*, and *the Queen of England*, are all connected to an underlying sense of nurturing and caring for students, but the obligations that go along with these diverse metaphors are quite different. One particularly striking contrast is that between the gardener and the Queen of England: The teacher as gardener "works to remove obstacles and distractions, and focuses all of her attention on establishing a rich, stimulating environment that nurtures and supports children" (p. 117). The Queen of England metaphor, on the other hand, connotes a position of power and status in which students are citizens and the teacher is a benevolent but imposing figure.

Such positioning begins to point to the ways that positioning is relational and that positions taken up in one part of the storyline impact all other positions in that same storyline. More to the point, the position that a teacher takes up directly effects the positions that students and others in the class may take up in turn. In Menard-Warwick's (2007) often-cited work on a teacher's positioning of her responsibilities in relation to her students, the power dynamics at play in classroom positioning are quite evident. The instructor, working in an adult education program in which the majority of students were Latina immigrants, made assumptions about her

students' lack of education and previous work experience, which then caused her to position them as being less professionally capable and aware than they actually were, even when they demonstrated otherwise in class activities. Work such as this points to the need for teachers to provide opportunities for students to reflexively position themselves, and then to listen carefully to how these positions are negotiated and taken up rather than forcefully using one's power as instructor to impose positions on others based on assumptions that may not be accurate.

Likewise, Yoon (2008) found that the ways that teachers positioned themselves not only affected how they perceived their roles and responsibilities as teachers but also the dynamics that took place in their classes as a result. In this study of three English Language Arts teachers, the teacher who viewed herself first and foremost as a "teacher of children" rather than a teacher of a content area provided a more welcoming and empowering space for her students, which led to greater participation and achievement by the English learners in her class in comparison with those in classes taught by "teachers of content."

In a similar study, Reeves (2008) focused on the positioning of one teacher in particular—Neal, the "hip, irreverent" teacher who believed in a stern approach and felt that teaching came naturally to him. Reeves argued that, in order to maintain his self-positioning, Neal was invested in positioning his English learner students as just like any other student and therefore not in need of the additional assistance that he did not see as being his responsibility, such as linguistic scaffolding, visual cues, or fewer pop culture references. In doing so, one position and its associated rights and duties (that of the teacher) was upheld through the positioning of others and the rights and duties that those positions (those of the students) carry. Similar studies (e.g., Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014) have applied this same relational perspective and positioning theory to teacher education programs, noting how different positions

taken up by teacher educators may have dramatic influences on the ways that new teachers are educated and the content that is emphasized.

In one of the only applications of positioning theory to teacher education in an online educational environment that I am aware of, Dennen (2007) examines how instructors' self-positioning affects class activity levels. One instructor, referred to as "Dr. A," positioned himself as an "expert and disseminator of knowledge" (p. 102), which in turn positioned his students as passive recipients of knowledge; as a result, his relative absence from discussion postings one week caused a noticeable change in student interaction and discourse. Another instructor, referred to as "Dr. C," had very little input in the class interactions, and therefore, although the discussions went on as scheduled, there was almost no reference to the instructor in postings, and the class maintained a lower level of interaction overall. Dennen (2011) continued her application of positioning theory to online settings by showing how, perhaps in contrast to the face-to-face setting, students do not view their class facilitators or instructors as discussion partners but as experts, thereby setting up a traditional instructor position of authority and knowledge. Therefore, instructors who want to position themselves as co-learners or discussion partners must do so explicitly and repeatedly to disrupt the default position.

Finally, it is important to note that positioning is not relegated to the classroom and student-teacher interactions; indeed, institutional positioning of instructors, which takes place when the larger institutional or governmental authorities position instructors and therefore assign or delete their rights and duties, is quite powerful and should not be overlooked. Whitsed & Volet (2013) examined the institutional positioning of foreign English teachers in Japanese universities by bringing to the forefront the discourses of globalization, marketization, and commodification, particularly of English within the larger context of the internationalization of

education. Their study highlighted how these discourses were responsible for large numbers of foreign instructors in universities, who did not feel as if they had a voice in the overall curriculum or other decisions. Such positioning then trickled down to instructors' self-perceptions and positioning of themselves in relation to the universities; as they had been treated as commodities, they in turn viewed the universities as commercial organizations that they could exploit and, conversely, viewed the students as customers who had power over them. Studies such as this make strong use of positioning theory's scalability and expand beyond the immediate interactions to demonstrate how the macro context can have a direct impact on the positions that teachers and students may take up.

Teacher Identity and Community

Due to the social nature of identity negotiation, which entails participation in the practices of a multitude of communities (e.g., Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), approaches that link identity with community membership have been an especially productive area of research. Perhaps the most common community-based research relies upon the influential work on situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Lave & Wenger (1991) conceptualize identities as taking shape as one transitions from being a "newcomer" on the periphery of a community of practice to being an experienced "old-timer" with the knowledge, connections, and social recognition necessary to be considered a central community member. From this perspective, as well as in Wenger's later work (1998), learning and identity construction are inseparable:

> [Learning] is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming—to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person. Even the learning that we do entirely by ourselves eventually contributes to

> making us into a specific kind of person. We accumulate skills and information, not in the abstract as ends in themselves, but in the service of an identity. (p. 215)

The combination of joining communities and engaging in learning has made this framework especially popular in studies of identity development among novice teachers.

Kanno and Stuart (2011) link communities of practice with Varghese et al.'s (2005) *identity-in-practice*, the flip side of *identity-in-discourse* described earlier in this chapter, to illustrate how two teacher candidates, John and Amy, struggled to identify as members of the teaching community due to their lack of previous teaching experience, which then negatively impacted their student teaching experiences. Tsui (2007) draws upon the same overarching framework but homes in on Wenger's social theory of identity formation, in which identity develops as a dual process of identification and negotiation of meanings (Wenger, 1998). In other words, an individual's identity develops through identification with groups with which they are identified in some way, and it is their ongoing participation in the meanings created within those groups that brings their identity into the world. Tsui applies this approach to identity in her narrative inquiry of a Chinese English teacher, Minfang, who detailed the circuitous path of his relationship with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) over the first six years of his teaching experience. Recognition of an individual's competence in the practices of a community is essential for them to form an identity in which they are able to identify with other members of that community and their associated values and practices. Although individuals may slowly become full-fledged members of the community if they are given *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), they may never achieve membership status if they are instead marginalized, as Minfang initially felt before finding strategies to move into the periphery and therefore gain legitimate access to the community.

Another community-based framework, Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities, has guided research that examines how new teachers imagine their future membership in the community of teachers, as individuals' use of imagination and visualization of themselves in possible futures is a powerful force in shaping their work of taking on new identities and the possibilities that they confer (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). This may serve as sources of hope, motivation, and transformation (Kanno & Norton, 2003). As Pavlenko and Norton (2007) state:

> We humans are capable, through our imagination, of perceiving a connection with people beyond our immediate social networks. Our orientation toward such imagined communities might have just as much impact on our current identities and learning as direct involvement in communities of our everyday life. (p. 669)

Non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) in Pavlenko's (2003) study were able to find a third space between native- and non-native speaker status that enabled them to construct new identities for themselves that were not based in deficit views. Through introducing a third, accessible imagined community beyond the native/non-native dichotomy—that of the multilingual/L2 user—Pavlenko noted that students were able to reconceptualize their personal and professional identities as well as their roles as teachers of "a language that belongs to individuals from all national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds" (p. 264). In this way, identities are situated within and continuously informed by the past, present, and future, but a change in one area may affect all others. The interlocking cycle in which the creation of new ideas and ways of being makes space for greater empowerment and agency—and vice versa—can lead to the reinterpretation of the past and the redrawing of the possibilities that the future may hold.

Another common branch of research has instead looked at the communities in which teachers already hold membership, recognizing that teaching communities do not exist in isolation and that the communities to which beginning teachers already belong come into play as they learn how to *do* being a teacher (e.g., Varghese, 2018). In the framework of *figured worlds* (Holland, 1998), teacher identity develops within a vast spectrum of norms related to clothing, speech, duties, and dispositions; these norms are embedded within norms from other figured worlds, and individuals link them together to perform complex, intersectional identities such as *White, middle-class, liberal, female elementary-school teacher* in a moral- and value-bound process that Holland (1998) refers to as "the authoring self" (p. 169). The dynamism of figured worlds, including the ability to visualize and create new figured worlds, may be a valuable source of transformation, agency, and empowerment, as Kasun and Saavedra (2016) found in their efforts to decolonize and indigenize a study abroad component of a teacher preparation program. The study abroad course, held in Mexico, emphasized critical perspectives and indigenous knowledge and made available, through the creation of a new figured world, identities that decentered Western perspectives of education and increased empathy toward English learners, thereby laying the groundwork for participants to engage in further anticolonial, social justice-based approaches to language teaching in the future.

However, both figured worlds and imagined communities may also be inscribed with "regimes of truth": Foucault's notion of normalized societal truths that resist opposition (Carroll, Motha, & Price, 2008, p. 167), and therefore, teachers' attempts to belong to such communities may unwittingly perpetuate ideologies that are oppressive. Typical representations of teachers may not align with teacher candidates' own identities, leading them to co-opt certain discourses or appropriate images that may not truly represent their views. Simultaneously, imagined

communities that are not in alignment with the reality of those communities may frustrate new teachers or set them up for potential failure or additional conflict. As Carroll et al. (2008) state:

> Imagination involves some degree of idealization…As such, imagined communities can become oppressive, or at least, sources of disappointment, disillusionment or alienation when our lived experiences do not correspond to the world and the identities we have imagined for ourselves. (p. 174)

Although identities are continually shifting, they reside within embodied individuals, and these bodies—and the ideologies and *indexical fields* (Eckert, 2008) they represent—play an integral role in how people are perceived and positioned by others and therefore the identities that they believe they may legitimately enact. Alsup's (2008) study of identity discourses in teacher education illustrates how one teacher candidate who identified as a lesbian and embodied "butch" characteristics that indexed her as such (e.g., short hair and androgynous fashion) felt that she would not be accepted within the teaching profession because she didn't fit the image of what she believed parents, administrators, and fellow teachers thought a teacher should be. Recalling the censorship that her own teachers in the LGBTQ+ community had faced, she struggled to find a balance between being an "alternative teaching figure" (p. 67) and censoring herself as a means of self-protection, and she eventually dropped out of the program to pursue a career in another field. Alsup suggests that, because White, heterosexual, predominantly female teachers fit the cultural stereotype of what a teacher should look like, people who fit into these categories may have an easier transition into the identity of a teacher initially.

Motha (2006) echoes this argument and posits that "Whiteness [is] an intrinsic but veiled element of the construct of mainstream English" (p. 497), and as such, it is linked to imperialism and the privileging of Eurocentric values. By following four K-12 ESL teachers for one year,

Motha found that participants struggled with the implications of their racial identities in an environment that upheld racist ideologies regarding language. The teachers in this study, who were White or of Korean descent, recognized the problematic nature of the structure within which they taught but had trouble positioning themselves as antiracist and taking agentic action to contest this institutional framework. Motha points to the need to deconstruct White identity and confront the reality that English language teaching is not a racially neutral act. In doing so, she highlights the White norms that dominate the teaching community and its practices while simultaneously showing that the values of many non-White communities are largely absent in the dominant discourse.

Likewise, Ajayi (2011) demonstrates the role that teachers' racial and ethnic communities play in the ways they enact their professional identities. Through the analysis of questionnaire responses, written perspectives, and interviews with 57 ESL teachers of varying racial and ethnic identities in the Los Angeles area, his study found that Hispanic ESL teachers drew on cultural and linguistic resources as well as shared commonalities in experiences of marginalization to connect with their students and frame their teaching, and that African-American ESL teachers positioned themselves as members of a minority group that had long lacked prestige and access to resources in defining their roles as teachers. White teachers, on the other hand, did not address race in their discussions of themselves as teachers, instead focusing on the potential for education to result in success. In other words, their "views of teacher role identity were couched in the US grand discursive narratives" (p. 671) in which hard work is directly correlated with success, opportunity, and upward mobility.

These possibilities for disillusionment or the perpetuation of oppressive ideologies illustrate the need for teacher educators to bear in mind the role that new teachers' changing

personal and professional communities may play. The struggle inherent in identity negotiation as novice teachers work to integrate multiple and conflicting viewpoints, norms, and ideologies is one that can be a positive or negative experience and can have profound implications for teachers' work overall, as well as their well-being. As Varghese et al. (2016) rightly claim, this necessitates the provision of "safe spaces for teacher candidates to wrestle with issues" (p. 564), communities of mutual trust and respect in which individuals feel able to engage in sometimes difficult discussions and negotiations of meaning and to explore new ideas that may be in conflict with the ideologies and associated norms with which they may feel more at ease. With this in mind, and considering in particular the fully online context in which the present study took place, the next section will examine previous work on how identities and communities have been theorized and constructed in the digital space and consider how such communities make space for discursive struggle and identity negotiation in the educational context.

Identity, Community, and Interaction Online: Divergent Perspectives

In-depth, qualitative research on identity performance in online settings is currently proliferating in the fields of digital anthropology and media and communication studies, which have advanced a number of theories, many of which taking a poststructural perspective, that may be useful in conceptualizing future directions for this work, especially as the technologies used in online educational settings increase in sophistication and affordances. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) work on identity as performative, research that takes place in social networking sites, for example, has illustrated the highly personalized ways that individuals are able to overcome the disembodied nature of the online setting through multimodal acts such as the creation of personal profiles, public "likes" and commentary (Cover, 2012), posted videos and images (Cover, 2015), selfies (Proulx, 2016), and language choice (Luzón, 2018), among many

other possibilities. As Cover (2015) details, the interactivity and multimodality of Web 2.0 has allowed users to “represent corporeality” online in a multitude of ways that may even go beyond the possibilities afforded by face-to-face interaction while allowing users access to perspectives and communities that may otherwise not be possible. Indeed, Howell (2016) explores the liberatory roles that the disembodiment and anonymity of online teaching can offer people who have been historically oppressed due to the bodies they inhabit, namely ciswomen, transgender, and genderqueer teachers, bringing to mind once again the “butch” lesbian in Alsup’s (2008) work who decided not to pursue a teaching career because of the communities and associated values and belief systems her physical appearance indexed.

The newfound possibilities of identity performance in Web 2.0 have fundamentally altered the concept of identity as a whole. Individuals do not simply mirror offline identities in online settings but explore and create a multitude of online identities that may not be fully enacted offline, leading to a merging or blurring of the two areas that calls for a new conceptualization of what it means to perform one’s identities in the digital age. These new avenues for identity performance carry with them a complex set of ethics and rules for media use and communication, as Gershon (2010) illustrates in her work on how US college students choose the channels they use to engage in a highly emotionally charged act: breaking up with their partners. Students enrolled in online classes are, to varying degrees, enmeshed in extensive multimedia networks that have become new and rapidly changing figured worlds, and they bring their knowledge of these worlds, along with their affordances for identity performance and norms for appropriate behavior, with them every time they log into their online class site. Some of these norms, it should be noted, are at odds with the norms of academia (Costa, 2015) and what we understand about classroom interaction (Blanchette, 2009), which may cause additional

tension as students position themselves and find their voices in the specialized genre of the fully online degree program.

Audience Segmentation and Design

Interestingly, many scholars conducting research on social presence in online settings have turned to the clearly pre-Internet (and essentially non-poststructuralist) work of Erving Goffman, particularly his writings on face-work (1972) and presentation of self (1959), to make sense of these new, digital worlds (Aresta, Pedro, Santos & Moreira, 2015; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Jaber & Kennedy, 2017; Robson, 2018). Goffman's (1959) notion of audience segmentation, in which "the individual ensures that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting" (p. 31), has informed theories of boundary management in online identity studies (Gerhart & Sidorova, 2017). As in face-to-face interaction, individuals have a variety of strategies by which they explore their multifaceted identities. Decisions to separate or combine aspects of one's personal and professional lives via multiple social media accounts or platforms allow users to compartmentalize parts of themselves in ways that may be discrete, overlapping, in conflict, or in harmony with one another.

Similar work has drawn on the notions of audience design theory (Bell, 1984, 2002) to focus more specifically on the discursive features used in situations in which the audience(s) for identity performances may not be controlled. The public nature of online discourse entails multiple and shifting audiences that have varied levels of impact on the design of the message: the intended addressees as well as others (i.e., auditors, overhearers, and eavesdroppers) who the speaker is aware may be ancillary audiences. Each potential audience has the ability to shape the way the message is constructed, including the style, level, and type of detail provided (Yoon &

Brown-Schmidt, 2018) and, among multilingual groups, the language chosen in relation to the content (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Birnie-Smith, 2016; Tagg & Seargent, 2014).

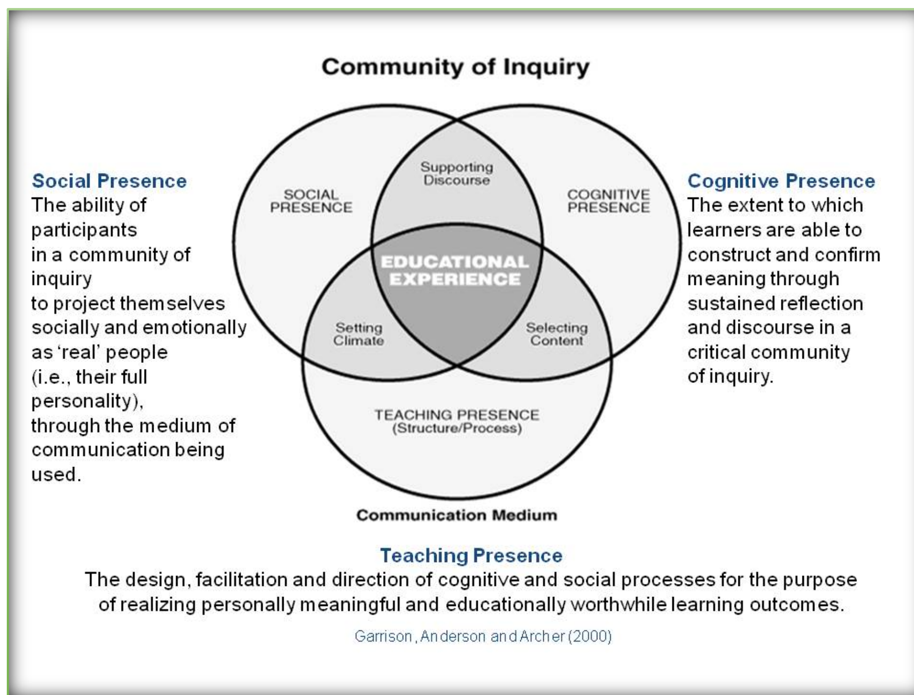
With this multitude of online representations corresponding with one's multiple identities comes highly specialized control over which audience members are privy to which performances (Aresta et al., 2015; Gerhart & Sidorova, 2017) and how those performances are shaped with potential audience members in mind. Indeed, Aresta et al. (2015) put forth the Online Identity Analysis Model, which highlights the ways that online identity performance "can be edited, deleted, arranged and reconfigured according to the character one desires to represent" (p. 82). Such acts are not necessarily intentional falsehoods or deceptions: Given the asynchronous, disembodied, and easily decontextualized nature of information provided about oneself on the Internet, such control is an essential part of impression management and goes hand-in-hand with one's reflexive positioning.

Social Presence and Community

Despite this broad and exciting range of research into how people can express themselves in online settings and how the online-offline nexus of our modern lives is in itself a key factor in identity development, work related to online education largely skips over such nuanced views of identity in favor of a focus on community formation and group cohesion. Studies of community in online educational settings are well-represented in the literature, with a variety of means of measuring students' perceptions of community inspiring ongoing investigation (e.g., Bergstresser, 2014; Ni & Aust, 2008; Rovai, 2002) and a plethora of studies emphasizing the importance of community development for learning and identity construction (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014; Jaber & Kennedy, 2017; Pittaway & Moss, 2014).

Most notable among the frameworks for understanding community in online educational settings is the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison et al., 2000), a three-pronged framework that has been integral in the conceptualization and design of online courses for nearly two decades[2] and had been cited more than 2,800 times as of August 2015 ("The Community of Inquiry," n.p.).

Figure 1: The Community of Inquiry Model



From Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000

Within the CoI model, social, cognitive, and teaching presence intersect and work together to create a positive educational experience overall, as seen in Figure 1 above.

[2] An in-depth collection of work published on the CoI framework since its inception can be found at https://coi.athabascau.ca/.

Although the CoI framework includes three presences, for the sake of this study, social presence is the most salient feature, as this is the area in which students have the most opportunity to perform their identities and engage in interaction with their peers. As Garrison et al. (2000) state, it is the area in which students "project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (p. 89). Students present themselves as "real" in three key ways: "*emotional expression*—emoticons, autobiographical narratives; *open communication*—risk-free expression, acknowledging others, being encouraging; *group cohesion*—encouraging collaboration, helping, and supporting" (p. 102, emphasis added). Social presence has long been a hotly debated term (e.g., Annand, 2011; Garrison, 2012; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010; Kim et al., 2016; Swan & Shih, 2005; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2017), perhaps due in part to its supposed student-centeredness that in fact omits the students themselves. Students are not only social actors within the classroom setting, but also individuals in their own right with their own personal lives, beliefs, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and identity shifts that go hand-in-hand with the learning process. Such aspects cannot easily be seen in the disembodied world of the online class, and without active attention to these aspects, it is unclear what is meant by presenting oneself as a "real person" (Garrison et al., 2000).

In the rare instance in which the term identity is used in the context of CoI, a static and homogenous perspective is often used, as seen in Garrison et al's (2010) retrospective:

> There is evidence to suggest that the first priority for most students in a formal educational contexts is shared social identity (i.e., the purpose of the course), and not personal identity (i.e., interpersonal relationships). As a result, it is argued that the three dimensions of social presence may be defined in terms of the participants identifying

with the community, communicating purposefully in a trusting environment, and developing interpersonal relationships. (p. 7)

No references are provided for the claim that "a shared social identity" is prioritized by students, nor is there elaboration about the sharp bifurcation between social and personal identity (a dichotomy also found in Rogers & Lea, 2005), which according to a poststructural or postmodern viewpoint, depicts an overly simplistic view of identity. By separating out and elevating a "shared social identity" that exists only in relation to the course, the lives, perspectives, and experiences of students are flattened at best, or worse, erased altogether (Phirangee & Malec, 2017). A result of this flattening of students' lives is a lack of attention to their identity construction, emotional states, and investment in the class and their learning, all of which are based in complex socio-historical factors and subject to ongoing shifts over time (Norton, 2013; Zembylas, 2003, 2005).

Given the research that demonstrates that African Americans, males, and individuals with lower academic achievement typically have higher rates of dropout or failure in online courses (Salvo, Shelton, & Welch, 2019; Xu & Jaggars, 2013), this lack of attention to students' individual identities is extremely problematic. It upholds the perspective that the disembodied nature of online education helps to equalize and therefore mitigate many of the problems rooted in racial, gender, and socioeconomic differences that are well-documented in face-to-face educational settings, despite a growing body of research that illustrates the ways these issues are replicated or even exacerbated in the online setting (Anderson & Simpson, 2007). For example, instructors are 94% more likely to respond to discussion forum posts written by students with names that identify them as White males (Baker, Dee, Evans, & John, 2018), and students are more likely to engage in voluntary chat with classmates who share their race and ethnicity

(Helsper, 2014; see also Rovai & Gallien, 2005). Findings such as these bring into question the ways that aspects of online students' personal identities may hinder or fully obstruct their access into the communities they wish to enter and result in negative educational experiences overall. As Xu and Jaggars (2013) state, "students are not homogenous in their adaptability to the online format and may therefore have substantially different outcomes for online learning"; furthermore, "the continued expansion of online learning could strengthen, rather than ameliorate, educational inequity" (p. 23).

Unfortunately, a monolithic view of both students and instructors pervades the literature on the extremely influential CoI model, which is almost exclusively quantitative and reliant on anonymous survey data, and this extends into the majority of research into fully online educational settings. Large-scale quantitative measures may provide invaluable data on overall trends, including the differences in online achievement noted in the previous paragraph, but they offer few deeper insights into the nuances of meaning that emerge through closer analyses. As with all educational research, understanding the complexities of interaction in a setting as rich with emotion, difference, and personal transformation as the typical class requires multiple methodologies to view the issues from as many angles as possible.

Accordingly, Jaber and Kennedy (2017) argue that the concept of *social presence* needs to be unpacked to be useful to understanding identity and promoting meaningful interaction. Whereas individuals' offline identities[3] are negotiated moment-by-moment through immediate contact with others in unrehearsed, impromptu situations, our online identities may be more

[3] It is important to note here that the concepts of offline and online identities are becoming of less importance as the lines between online and offline worlds rapidly blur and disintegrate in technologically advanced societies such as the US. In this discussion, a distinction is made to emphasize the necessary differences brought about by the affordances and limitations of each context and the ways that we as embodied individuals are able to present ourselves within them.

carefully curated and rehearsed. The ability to select only the most flattering images of ourselves, carefully control our word choice and publicly seen interactions, and select the modalities by which we choose to express ourselves provides a level of control not possible in face-to-face interaction. Again drawing on Goffman (1959), Jaber and Kennedy distinguish between the "front," which is the posted content in the shared online space, and the "backstage," which is the area where the performance is constructed for various audiences, where decisions are made about how, when, where, and with whom one's online actions will take place. Although the backstage of offline interactions may take place behind closed doors alone or with other members of one's close community, the backstage of online interactions is more often a solitary act with particular focus on the individual performance. Due to its more individualized nature, this fundamental change to the concept of the backstage has led to the possibility of greater privacy and control of what the audience sees, as well as the alternate possibility of raising of the curtain to erase the boundary between front and backstage for selected audiences.

Illuminating the Backstage

The hidden dimensions of identity that take place in offline, backstage settings need to be more fully investigated in order to have a complete picture of identity construction in online education. Robson (2018) argues that, in the online setting, the concepts of identity *performance* and identity *construction* should be disentangled to account for distinctions in more active or passive forms of engagement, and this distinction was used to guide this study. In instances in which identity is performed via asynchronous posting of content, passive forms of engagement (cognitive and affective engagement but little or no interaction) and disengagement look similar to the observer. Without indexical meaning brought about through facial expression, body language, or other elements of one's "costume" in immediate interaction, the performance of

one's identity exists as a blank space in which *lack* of communication, rather than the communication itself, becomes representative of much deeper and more complex inner negotiations. For example, in a study that looked at online interactions among pre-service teachers in online communities in which no instructor was present, Lu and Curwood (2015) found that participants performed their identities by being either being actively supportive and sociable toward one another or by refraining from posting and instead "lurking" silently for a variety of reasons that were not evident to their peers in the online community due to their invisibility. However, little is known about how positioning oneself as a "lurker" in an online community affects identity construction over time.

Jaber and Kennedy (2017) point to the use of embodied communication in our offline lives, which takes place in synchronous settings and includes a communicative immediacy that allows for face-work processes to take place and builds trust[4]. Although *immediacy*, or a feeling of presence, is a common term in discussions of online communities (e.g., Ni & Aust, 2008), Jaber and Kennedy view it as being linked to the need for embodiment and potential risk:

> Calls for immediacy in online communication are calls for communication practices that provide less guarded communication that builds trust by leaking unintended information. This is important because online learning environments reduce opportunities for less controllable behaviours and provide an ever-present backstage area offline to rehearse communication. The lack of fixity experienced by learners, juggling multiple professional and personal roles while experiencing transformation of self in the course of learning, can

[4] Media naturalness theory, for example, notes that, because our brains are designed for face-to-face communication, communication that does not include the elements common in this form lead to "increased communication ambiguity, increased cognitive effort, and reduced excitement associated with knowledge communication interactions" (Kock, 2011, p. 2).

> produce insecurity and cause learners to retreat to the backstage to protect conflicting identities. However, the safe space of the backstage needs to be abandoned if online students are to experience social presence—or meaningful social interaction. (2017, p. 227)

In other words, computer-mediated communication that closely mimics offline communication allows participants to draw from a larger range of semiotic meanings gleaned from body language, linguistic and paralinguistic cues, and the potential for a less-rehearsed and therefore more vulnerable version of ourselves to be observed. Although this may be more intimidating for learners who prefer the solitude of the asynchronous online environment, it is important for building the trust needed to create the "safe spaces" that Varghese et al. (2016) argue for in language teacher education programs.

Online Teacher Identity in Educational Settings

So far, this literature review has explored two areas that have similar aims and yet very little overlap in terms of theory or terminology: that of a discursive and poststructural view of teacher identity on the one hand, and that of social interaction and community development in online classes on the other. These two areas represent two simultaneous forces in teacher education today. Teacher educators are becoming increasingly aware of and sensitive to the importance of identity construction in teacher education programs, and a chorus of voices have begun calling for explicit attention to the ways that teacher candidates negotiate their new identities via coursework, student teaching, and interaction with their peers, mentors, and professors. The second force, that of online teacher education, is a rapidly growing area that extends educational opportunities to many who otherwise may not have them and therefore expands educators' reach, but also brings drastic changes to the ways that teacher candidates

interact with the course content, their professors, and their peers. Despite the power and size of these two forces, very little literature directly addresses teacher identity construction in fully online settings. This section will examine literature in related areas to paint a picture of current research with implications for online identity studies and then briefly discuss the extremely scarce research into identity construction in fully online teacher education contexts.

Online teacher education in general is a growing area in the research, with the most commonly published articles appearing to fall into three main categories: (1) overviews of the differences the online context entails (e.g., Hall & Knox, 2009; Shin & Kang, 2017); (2) discussions of new pedagogies and methodologies for teaching online (e.g., Armstong & Manson, 2010; Burr & Otoya-Knapp, 2014; Nunan, 2002; Parsons & Hjalmarson, 2017); and (3) success stories of teachers educated fully online (e.g., Weschke, Barclay, & Vandersall, 2011). However, study specific to identity research in online teacher education settings is much more limited. Perhaps due to the slow integration of online classes into mainstream education, the majority of published studies in the area of online language teacher education (OLTE) that do discuss identity focus on online coursework (Assaf, 2003; Celik, 2013; Cho, 2016; Choi et al., 2016; Schallert et al., 2016) or collaborations (Chen, 2012; Samburskiy, 2013) that are held within face-to-face programs.

Although these studies are a useful jumping-off point for understanding the different ways that teacher candidates perform their identities within online contexts, they do not accurately represent the distinctions between the student experience in partially and fully online programs, making their findings less applicable to a fully online context. Students in fully online settings often complete all their coursework without ever stepping foot on their college campus, meeting their classmates or instructor in person, or engaging in synchronous, unevaluated

discussion about the topics they are learning in their classes. Likewise, without the physical boundaries and multisensory input of a material learning environment or the clear delineations of time and responsibility provided by daily class schedules, students are *emplaced* (Fors, Backstrom, & Pink, 2013; Pink, 2011) within a wholly intangible learning environment that competes for spatio-temporal resources within their personal home environment. Because online students are typically older than those engaged in traditional face-to-face study and are more likely to have full-time jobs and parenting responsibilities (Johnson, 2019), their home environments may already be quite full of demands on their time and physical space (Thompson, Miller, & Franz, 2014). This creates a potentially tense situation in which teacher candidates must negotiate their new identities in the unmoored digital world while their already crowded world(s) of identities as employees, parents, and so forth has its own demands, with the added reinforcement of structure and tangibility. How does a burgeoning teacher identity find its way toward the light in this situation? This question has yet to be addressed at any length (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014).

In one of the few studies of teacher identity carried out in a fully online context, Moss and Pittaway (2013) noted that, seemingly due to these important distinctions faced by online students, they had observed a difference in how the teacher candidates in their program referred to themselves:

> Students did not seem to be constructing a traditional view of themselves as students and pre-service teachers. They did not call themselves students or teachers; rather, they identified more closely with their pre-existing identities as teacher aides, classroom volunteers, and so on. (p. 1007)

In the same study, a mid-career woman referred to as Kerri struggled to identify as a student although she had been studying at a university for several years. She felt as if she was a “fraud” rather than a “real” student due to the isolation she experienced in her solitary study, which was exacerbated by the fact that she began her education when the program was structured as distance education (i.e., mailed materials and an independent study structure) rather than online (in which there is more of a sense of a class with fellow classmates, etc.). Even after feeling comfortable positioning herself as a student, however, she still struggled to see herself as a teacher, preferring to think of herself as “an aide who’s also studying to be a teacher” (p. 1013).

The importance of pre-existing positions outside of the classroom context is evident in another investigation of identity performance in online discussion boards, one of the only studies of student identity in fully online MA TESOL programs. Delahunty (2012) found that certain identities (those of experienced teachers) were privileged, resulting in a disalignment among students. Those students who did not have a teaching background, the minority in the group, created “negative identities” centered on their lack of experience, a situation that may be harmful to students’ self-esteem and confidence levels.

The connection between identity and belonging to a community, and the complexities involved in this relationship, highlight a potentially problematic result of the confluence of “negative identities” and the emphasis on group cohesion in online educational settings. In discussions, the presumably more complex and potentially divisive topics related to morality and ethics served as a point of unwavering alignment among participants; by demonstrating vociferously that they had the same values as experienced teachers, those without this experience were able to position themselves as belonging to the group. Such overt alignments with perceived group values may appear to create a sense of community, but as discussed earlier,

attempts to align oneself with an imagined community may result in negative emotions and a sense of conflict if one's values, perspectives, and lived experiences are at odds with community norms (Carroll, Motha, & Price, 2008). As Delahunty et al. (2014) state:

> If an individual perceives they are not recognized or valued by the community, particularly given the challenges presented by learning online, then the flow-on effects of incongruent identities to interaction, community, learning and motivation could well be at stake. (p. 256)

As students are situated within their lived experiences, a feeling of "incongruence" (Hughes, 2007), or a lack of alignment between the identities that they hold outside of the classroom context and the ones that they feel they should perform within the classroom context to achieve a sense of belonging, is a little-discussed but important element within the overall classroom dynamic. Issues of motivation and feelings of isolation among online students are widely discussed, but both need to be linked to learners' identities and the ways these identities interact with others' in the online context in congruent or incongruent ways for a deeper understanding of the reasons behind these perennial issues.

In another study of discussion board postings in online teacher education, Piro and Anderson (2018) found that:

> Participants equated their own success in the online discussion with confirming belief structures. Conversely, when pre-conceived notions were challenged during the online discussions, the participants had a tendency to become less engaged and were less likely to follow through with additional follow-up or probing questions…there was a hesitation to further engage in discussion when peer opinions differed from participants' views, or to challenge those peers' positions. (p. 181)

Likewise, in a study by Davis (2016), pre-service teachers engaged in online professional identity construction via social media reported feeling compelled to create sanitized online personae due to the public and permanent nature of online writing. Such permanence may inhibit discussion when individuals feel as though their words (and identities) may be challenged in their absence, thereby limiting their ability to control the ways they may be repositioned.

Identities are in constant flux, with conflict and the potential for deep-seated tension, and an essential component of MA TESOL programs is the challenge of reevaluating oneself in relation to multiple levels of socio-economic and geo-political realities, often through public debate and discussion. When students disengage from discussion of challenging topics or view successful contributions as those that uphold the beliefs of their instructor or classmates, regardless of their personal viewpoints, this silence can lead to unresolved conflict. The nature of the fully online class setting, with its capacity for careful rehearsal of identity performances and emphasis on open, relatively permanent contributions that may be seen and evaluated by anyone with access to the class site, is one in which trust-building communication and the discursive negotiation of conflict may be hindered. What impact this altered communication structure has on identity construction is yet to be discussed at length in the literature.

Conclusion

To move forward and contribute to the literature meaningfully, a connection between identity studies and online community and interaction studies must be made, as previously argued by Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones (2014). If educators truly intend to provide fully online education not merely as a convenience or cost-saving measure but as an equal form of educating our future teachers and leaders, researchers must apply the same rigor and nuance in their studies of online students' identities that they do for those enrolled in face-to-face classes.

The depth of insight provided by years of identity work has produced, and continues to produce, changes to pedagogy and curriculum in teacher education programs as well as ever-more complex constructs in the research. A closer and more consistent look at identity construction in fully online teacher education can do the same, thereby deepening and strengthening the learning experience for the growing numbers of teachers who enroll in these programs every year.

This study attempts to bridge this divide by examining the social setting of the online class with a poststructural lens through which identity is understood as dynamic, multiple, performative, and spatio-temporally situated within individuals' lives. Positioning theory, as put forth and elaborated upon by Harré and others (e.g., Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré et al,, 2009; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) will be used as an analytical tool to connect teacher candidates' socio-emotional processes and individual narratives to the communities and larger social contexts within which they are positioned. It will be combined with social semiotic theories of multimodal analysis (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), which allow for a more nuanced analysis of non-linguistic forms of meaning-making and direct additional attention to the ways that the context itself is an agentively designed, semiotically rich landscape that shapes the positions that may be taken up, both by instructors and students, within it. Likewise, it will be informed by not only classroom interaction data but also a series of in-depth interviews that probe for the role(s) of community and peer interaction in identity construction and performance in efforts to deepen the data pools for analyses of both positioning and community development in online spaces.

It is my hope that this work will help to fill the multiple gaps in the literature that currently exist: those that examine identity construction in fully online educational spaces, those

that apply positioning theory to online communication, and those that take into consideration the entire semiotic landscape of the online course context while engaging in discourse analysis.

CHAPTER 3:

Methodology

In this chapter, I detail the research methodology used in carrying out the study, beginning with a brief overview of and rationale for the research design and methodology used, followed by the research questions and a description of the research context and recruitment of participants. Then, I explain all aspects of data collection and analysis in greater detail, including a description of the research participants and the ethical considerations I have kept in mind throughout the completion and write-up of this study.

Research Design and Rationale

This research has been conceptualized and designed to address several gaps in the current literature related to language teacher identity construction, which were discussed in greater length in Chapter 2 of this manuscript. In brief, those gaps include: (a) poststructuralist research into identity development in online educational settings similar to that being carried out in face-to-face settings; (b) identity development in fully online educational settings, as opposed to online coursework embedded in otherwise traditional, face-to-face educational contexts; and (c) online identity performance and construction across multiple contexts as it occurs through positioning processes.

As outlined in Chapter 2, identity construction is a discursive, social act (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Norton, 2013), and my central goal in conducting this study is to examine how the fundamentally altered discursive space in fully online teacher education programs impacts the ways that teacher candidates construct their identities. To do so, I am combining poststructural perspectives on identity performance and construction with research on community and

interaction in online educational settings as a means of deepening understanding of individual learning and identity development. To date, although the need for such a bridging of perspectives has been highlighted (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014), this has not yet occurred in studies of fully online classes to my knowledge. Therefore, I designed this study with close attention to identity construction as an ongoing process that takes place via interaction with others and that shapes and is shaped by discourse.

Likewise, although studies of identity performances in online classes have been carried out in the past, they have taken place in primarily face-to-face degree programs (Choi et al., 2016; Schallert et al., 2016), which allow for in-person interaction between students, their peers, and professors outside of the online setting. In contrast, this study focuses on the complexities of identity development in fully online settings, where such face-to-face interaction and its effects are not feasible, at least for the participants in this study. Reliance wholly on virtual communication, whether synchronous or asynchronous, text- or image-based, has been shown to create very different power dynamics and contribute to lower feelings of trust and community (Bergstresser, 2014; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Vesely, Bloom, & Sherlock, 2007). Although these effects have been well-documented, the connection between these effects and identity development among language teachers has not yet been adequately addressed in the literature. As the world becomes more mobile and connected across large geographic expanses, fully online contexts are likely to make up a larger proportion of overall coursework and educational opportunities, thereby making research in this area of high importance for future educational practice and policy (Parker & Lenhart, 2011; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). This holds clear implications for online language teacher education programs, which have been proliferating

rapidly over the past two decades but have yet to be studied in depth (England, 2012; Hall & Knox, 2009; Murray, 2013).

Finally, this study expands upon findings from the limited previous research on teacher identity construction in online educational settings, which have focused primarily on analysis of discussion board postings in a single class (Delahunty, 2012; Irwin & Hramiak, 2010; Lu & Curwood, 2015). Although such snapshots of identity performance in highly specific situations at specific times provide initial insights into the ways individuals may negotiate their identities as they attempt to enter the community of the online class, they tell little about identity construction as a process that takes place across numerous contexts and within multiple scales. Therefore, this research takes a longer-term approach to provide additional insights into how changes may take place over time by examining data collected over a span of two 7.5-week sessions and across multiple classes, cross-referencing interview and observation data for additional points of triangulation. Such in-depth, multi-context studies are limited in the current literature on teacher identity as a whole (Kanno & Stuart, 2011), and to my knowledge, are nonexistent in the still-scarce literature on teacher identity construction in online contexts.

Due to the need to work on multiple scales and with data from multiple situations, a systematic approach to data analysis is necessary (Kayi-Aydar, 2019a; Slocum-Bradley, 2009). Therefore, positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) guided both the initial design and subsequent execution of this study, serving as both a theoretical framework and an analytical tool. Positioning theory situates the enactment of identity in discursive practices in which individuals position themselves and others via "the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46); by linking the moment-to-moment interactions in which individuals participate in their everyday

communication to the larger "story lines" within which they understand their *rights* and *duties* (Davies & Harré, 1990), positioning theory provides a scalar lens that allows researchers to zoom between the micro, meso, and macro levels of positioning (Anderson, 2009) and identity construction. In addition, I bolster positioning theory with social semiotic theory (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988) and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, 2009; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2004) to take into consideration the multimodal semiotic landscape of the online course that shapes and constrains possible positions by interactants within it; a key goal in doing so is to draw attention to the role that design and technological affordances play in positioning students or teachers within a larger ideological framework.

In recognizing that identities are constructed and performed within multiple layers of ideology, power, and contextual factors that shape the positions, and therefore the identities, that individuals may take on, I engage in correspondingly multilayered data collection informed by ethnographic approaches (Beach, Bagley, & Marques da Silva, 2018; Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Glesne, 2016) that enable me to gain a broader perspective of participants' experiences. As such, I entered this research with several research questions (listed below), but I worked to maintain an open mind to allow the data to guide the research as it unfolded. Accordingly, I expanded my data collection beyond classroom observations and interviews: Data such as field texts, reflective journals, and screenshots from my observation of the classes are combined with program data and documents to inform my analysis and triangulate my findings. As Depperman (2015) argues:

> Ethnographic research should complement a conversation analytic approach to positioning in order to accurately discern how local action connects with wider contexts of local structure…because such knowledge is needed to grasp more subtle and indirect ramifications of the positions accomplished *in situ.* (p. 383; italics original)

Immersing myself in the research context for months, engaging in ongoing interactions with participants, and casting a broad net in my data collection provided me with both a broad and deep understanding of the context I was studying. This allowed me to make connections among multiple layers as I attempted to connect the discrete moment-to-moment interactions with the larger story lines within which they were embedded and interlinked. Further details are provided in the Data Collection and Data Analysis sections below.

Research Questions

To address this multifaceted investigation into teacher identity performance and negotiation, this study is guided by four research questions. Question 1 situates this study's analysis of positioning within the larger context of the online course design and structure and its relation to discourses about online education as a whole. In recognizing that the fundamentally different discursive context provided in fully online settings inevitably shapes the interactions in which individuals may engage, it draws attention to the online context as not simply a container in which the course takes place but an active part of the positioning process. This question considers how the semiotic landscape of the class curriculum and interface, which indexes instructor expectations and roles and student obligations, positions teacher candidates and instructors alike. Question 2 narrows the scope to classroom interactions and addresses the fact that all positioning is relational, so teacher candidates' positions in the classroom context are linked with the positions of their instructors; it addresses the ways those positions occupy spaces of power, authority, and control thereby shape the positions that are available to teacher candidates (e.g., Reeves, 2008). Question 3 focuses on the interactive positioning processes that occur between peers in the online setting as they interact with one another in the text-based, asynchronous online environment. Finally, Question 4 examines the role of individual

experiences and perspectives in developing patterns of participation and positional identities. A secondary goal of Questions 3 and 4 is to answer whether and how the positions taken up in online classroom discourse are trustworthy indicators of the positioning and identity development processes that take place behind the scenes. As noted in Chapter 2, fully online students' personal and emotional lives take place within a space which is more obscured than in face-to-face contexts due to the disembodiment and geographical and temporal distances characteristic of fully online settings, making such inquiries important for future studies into online identity development.

1. How do the affordances and constraints of fully online course contexts shape positions available to both teacher candidates and course instructors?
2. How do online instructors position themselves in relation to the course content and the teacher candidates through participation in the online course environment?
3. How do teacher candidates position one another through participation in the online course environment?
4. How do teacher candidates position themselves through participation in the online course environment?

The first question is addressed through making use of positioning theory's inherent scalability; the moment-to-moment interactions that take place in course interactions are nested within the larger scale of institutional positioning. In recognizing that the online course is itself a semiotic landscape comprised of indexed meanings, I address this question through a close analysis of the online course design and affordances, as well as the discourses surrounding online course construction to link its semiotic messages to the larger discourses and ideologies they represent. The remainder of the questions are addressed through a positioning analysis of all

interactions among participants, both instructors and teacher candidates, posted on a series of four separate online courses over the span of a semester and collected via interviews. These interactions are primarily in the form of discussion board postings due to the structure of the classes and the prominence of the discussion board forums in class interaction.

Research Context

The study was conducted at a public Research I university in the Southwest United States that began offering a fully online MA TESOL degree in Fall 2017. To maintain anonymity, I use the pseudonym Southwestern University (SU) to refer to the university. Because my home university did not offer a fully online MA program, I conducted a nationwide search for an appropriate location that would fit the needs of this study. Due to the dramatic increases in online classes at public universities (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018), I prioritized public institutions with a well-established language teacher education curriculum. In addition, because I was only interested in programs that were taken fully online, with no on-campus requirements, I narrowed the options to universities that had online programs that were separate from their face-to-face programs. This allowed me to ensure that any formal engagement the participants had with the material, their instructors, and their classmates took place online, rather than participating in some programmatic and course elements in face-to-face settings. After locating an institution that met my specifications, I obtained appropriate permissions from my home university and the department that housed the MA TESOL program at SU and registered for SU affiliate status for the Spring 2019 semester. This allowed me to be enrolled in online courses with course instructor permission.

Program Structure

At the time of the data collection, SU's MA TESOL program consisted of ten classes of three credit hours each, for a total of 30 minimum credit hours. Courses were arranged into six 7.5-week sessions, with Fall, Spring, and Summer semesters each consisting of two sessions referred to as Session A and Session B. This study took place over two sessions during the Spring 2019 semester. Students were able to complete the program as full-time or part-time students; most students were enrolled in one or two classes each session, for a total of two to four classes over the course of the study. Unlike many academic programs, the one observed did not follow a cohort model which required students to enroll at the beginning of a semester or academic school year. Instead, students were eligible to enroll in the middle of the semester (i.e., for Session B) rather than waiting for the following semester. This means that students may have had multiple classes with the same fellow classmates, but their overall learning trajectory may have varied significantly. Likewise, previous teaching experience was not required for admission, resulting in widely different professional teaching experiences for the teacher candidates. Applicants were required to have a bachelor's or master's degree from an accredited institution and at least a 3.0 cumulative GPA in the last 60 hours of their study.

The program closely followed nationwide trends in its course and unit requirements for completion (Stapleton & Shao, 2018). It had 12 hours of required core courses in Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition Theory, Approaches to Research, and Methods of Teaching English as a Second Language, none of which had prerequisites and therefore could be taken at any time. All students were also required to participate in a three-credit-hour internship program, which the student set up at an institution that was convenient to them in terms of geographic proximity and access. An internship coordinator guided students to help them find appropriate internship locations and oversaw the fulfillment of all internship requirements, which were

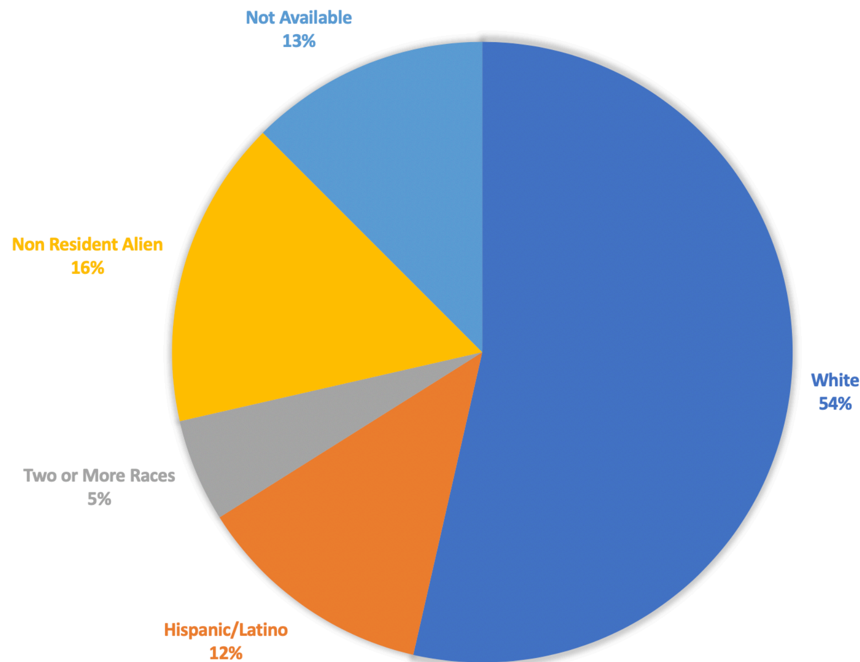
established at the federal level. Students were required to complete a minimum of 150 internship hours in addition to reflection journals and weekly discussions, and this was most commonly completed during the first session of the last semester of the teacher candidate's program, although this could have been completed earlier if desired. Because many students worked as teachers during their time in the program, they were able to carry out this internship at their places of work provided they complete all necessary documentation. During the final session, all students were also required to complete a capstone course in which they were required to identify a problem or question relevant to their current or potential future teaching context, conduct literature-based research on the topic, and develop a lesson plan or activity informed by their research. The capstone course was conducted by a professor chosen by the department and was carried out in a format similar to an independent study. The remaining 12 hours consisted of electives taken from a range of courses determined by the program to be related to the objectives of the MA TESOL program, typically in areas such as language, psychology, and education.

As mentioned above, SU's fully online MA TESOL program began in Fall 2017, and a small number of the first cohort graduated from the program just before this study began, in December 2018. According to documents provided by the program director, there were 47 students enrolled in the program in various stages of completion at the time of the study. Notably, the majority of these students were not from the area in which the brick-and-mortar university was located, in contrast with previous reports in which this was found to be the norm (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). Rather, students were completing the program from 21 different states and five different countries, including Japan, China, Canada, and the Czech Republic. After a slow start in which very little marketing and recruiting took place, the

program's size ballooned quickly, and the program director predicted further growth in the future.

Despite the broad geographical diversity represented, the race and gender of the teacher candidates enrolled in the program skewed strongly toward White females, echoing the predominance of White females in the teaching profession and teacher education programs throughout the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). A total of 77% identified as female, and 54% identified as White. A breakdown of the racial categories reported by enrolled teacher candidates is provided in Figure 2 below. An accurate representation of the racial makeup is obscured by the fact that data was not available for 12.5% of the student population and that the institution provided the non-racial category of "Non Resident Alien," which made up 16% of the student population. This conflation of race with U.S. residency and nationality is due to racial categories being tracked only among students who were citizens of or who resided in the U.S. Nevertheless, the placement of this category within students' reporting of race proves problematic; it simultaneously elevates the importance of nationality above racial identity and removes the possibility of those outside the U.S. to identify themselves racially.

Figure 2: Enrolled Teacher Candidates' Reported Racial Categories



Online Course Development and Staffing

The courses and requirements for the online program were closely modeled on the older, face-to-face MA TESOL program, and all core requirements and objectives were exactly the same as that which was expected of face-to-face students. Because elective courses were taken from a variety of external departments, these offerings varied and were based on availability. Courses offered within the home department of English were developed by faculty members and then reviewed by online teaching specialists to ensure they followed sound online pedagogical practices. Although courses incorporated various forms of multimodal interaction, due to the need for flexibility of scheduling and logistical issues caused by students completing the course from different time zones, course interaction was designed to be almost entirely asynchronous. After review and approval, the faculty members responsible for creating the courses taught the initial offering of the classes, making adjustments as necessary for future iterations of the course. From the second offering of the class on, faculty associates, rather than regular faculty, typically

taught the courses. Faculty associates were instructors who had been identified as being qualified to teach the classes to which they were assigned due to expertise in the area, but they were not tenured or tenure-track faculty members within the institution; a more detailed description of the faculty associates involved in this study is available below. Faculty associates were given access to the fully developed online courses, and although they did not have the ability to alter objectives or a significant amount of content, they were encouraged to personalize their courses and "bring in their own voice" (Program Director, personal communication) to make them their own. In the semester prior to the time in which this study was conducted, the university switched from using Blackboard to Canvas as its learning management system (LMS), a transition that caused some initial confusion among both teachers and students but seemed to have stabilized by the time this study was conducted.

Student Support

Students enrolled in the online program had access to a number of different support systems designed to keep students on track and foster a sense of connection with the university. As SU had an extensive range of fully online degree programs, there were several support options at the university level. Success coaches, who served dual roles as a liaison between online students and SU and as an academic coach who provided tips and strategies for successful learning, were available to all online students. SU also maintained a Facebook page for its online programs, which provided a means of informal communication between SU and students about a variety of initiatives and accomplishments. At the time of the study, the Facebook page had little activity beyond what was posted by SU, although a closed group specifically for SU students to connect with peers had well over 3,000 members. In addition, all online students had access to university resources such as the library, career services staff, study abroad programming,

disability resources, and online tutoring. Students enrolled in the MA TESOL program in particular also had access to two internal advisors who worked with all students in the English department, both online and face-to-face, to ensure that they followed procedures accurately and made continual progress toward completion of the degree.

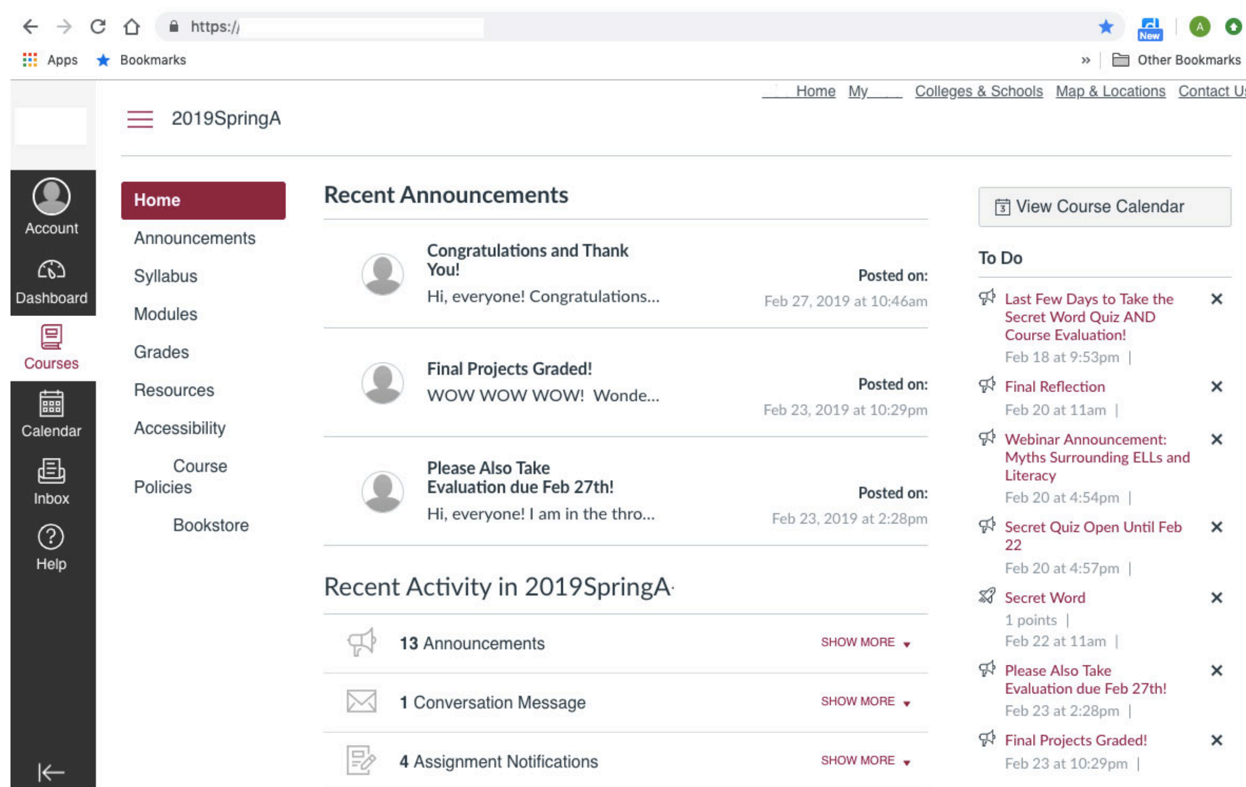
Online Courses Observed

During the semester in which this study took place, a total of nine core courses were offered through the home department of English. Of these, eight were online courses and one was an internship that students were required to complete face-to-face at an approved institution of their choosing. Although I contacted all eight online instructors to request their participation, only four consented to my accessing and observing their classes; therefore, all observation data in this study comes from those classes. Two were held during Spring A (Methods of TESOL and English as an International Language), and the other two were held during Spring B (Approaches to Research and Language Testing and Assessment). Each course had one instructor and approximately 20 total participants according to the classlist that was available in the learning management system (LMS), Canvas.

The courses all had a very similar overall look, with a clean, white background, minimal imagery, and standard three-column grid design with navigational bars along the top and left side of the page and the title of the course and university logo listed at the upper left. Courses varied slightly in the placement and inclusion of modules or tabs (e.g., Discussions as a separate tab or as nested link within the Modules tab) but had a similar overall navigation structure and design. All text was black, grey, or dark red and presented in a clear sans-serif font of varying sizes surrounded by ample white space. The homepage for each course consisted of a series of links to announcements, to-do lists, and notifications of recent course activity, all of which included date

and time stamps. Links to a Help page and technical support were available in the navigational bars of all classes. A screenshot of the course homepage can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Online Course Homepage[5]



In each case, syllabi were provided both within the course site as an embedded HTML page and as a separate PDF file. Syllabi shared a similar structure, including a course overview, learning objectives, grading frameworks, and policies; however, there was significant variation in terms of the visual design and detail provided about course assignments and the general course schedule. All classes required that students purchase one or more textbooks, and additional

[5] This image has been edited to remove reference to the name of the university and other identifying information.

readings and materials were made available on the course site via links to external resources, PDFs, or other uploaded materials such as recorded lectures with audio and PowerPoint slides. Three instructors held virtual office hours via Zoom or Skype, and one held office hours only by appointment via the chat function within the LMS; all instructors listed their availability and contact information clearly on the course syllabus.

Although the courses had a very similar overall design and navigational structure, the course elements themselves varied from class to class. The Methods of TESOL course, for example, included a section for Voice Thread, a third-party platform that allowed participants to record audio or video of themselves and share it to a communal board where they were then able to receive feedback in audio, video, or text form. A synchronous chat section was available in the Language Testing and Assessment course, although it went mostly unused throughout the session. Forms of instruction varied as well. The instructors of Approaches to Research and Language Testing and Assessment posted regular recorded audio lectures in which they explained key course concepts while showing a PowerPoint presentation, whereas the instructors of Methods of TESOL and English as an International Language conducted their instruction fully via text in multiple forms (e.g., responses to discussion posts, course announcements and reminders, group and individual emails).

None of the courses observed required group or partner work or encouraged participants to work with one another outside of mandatory responses to peer postings. Other than two Voice Thread assignments in the Methods of TESOL class, there were no options for students to interact via video, although students could post photos or videos to the discussion boards if they chose to do so. All courses were clearly centered on the text-based discussion boards, and these were the heart of the class interaction in each case. Class participants were required to post

regularly in these discussion boards, anywhere from approximately once every two weeks to twice per week. In each class, the first discussion board posting was an introduction to the class, and the subsequent discussions were in response to a prompt about the topic(s) being covered in that module or section. Of these, the Approaches to Research class, which required students to discuss and analyze academic research articles that exhibited the form of research under discussion, included a 300-word minimum for posts. The Language Testing and Assessment course, on the other hand, stipulated that posts should be between 100 and 200 words. The other two courses, Methods of TESOL and English as an International Language, did not state a minimum or maximum word count for most discussion posts. All courses required that participants respond to at least one of their classmates. Due to the emphasis on the discussion board postings and responses, these boards comprised the majority of all peer-to-peer interaction in each course observed. Anecdotal evidence from interviews with students indicated that this pattern was similar in the majority of their other classes in the program, with the exception of one course that students reported had no discussions or peer-to-peer interaction required.

Research Participants

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Because I was not affiliated with the university at which this study was conducted, I obtained preliminary departmental permission for the study, after which representatives from my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) spoke with the IRB at SU to share information about the study and determine procedures for appropriate compliance. I relied on convenience sampling (Merriam, 1998), which depended on the participation and consent of individual course instructors to gain access to their classes and students in the program. Upon receiving approval to carry out my study at SU, I contacted the four instructors assigned to teach in the online program

during Spring 2019 Session A via an email message that explained the study and requested consent to observe and collect data from their classes, recruit their students for my study, and conduct an hour-long interview with them during the session. In February of that semester, I contacted the four instructors for Session B to request the same consent. During the Session A, two instructors agreed to participate fully in the study; during Session B, one instructor agreed to participate fully, while another consented to my observation and data collection within the class but not to an interview. I obtained signed and dated consent forms that outlined the levels of consent for each instructor. I also obtained consent from the program director to participate in an hour-long interview about the overall program history, structure, and goals.

Due to requirements from my home university's IRB, I was not allowed to recruit student participants directly. Therefore, I sent a recruiting letter and video to the participating course instructors from Session A, and they shared it with their students via email and/or announcements within the online course site. Participants, whether instructor or student, were compensated in the form of Amazon gift cards as an incentive for their participation in the study. Although instructor participants were given one gift card only, student participants were given additional gift cards for continuing to participate in the study during the second session. My goal was to recruit between five and 10 participants, as I felt this would provide a wide variety of perspectives and also help insure against the effects of participant attrition, especially since the diachronic nature of my analysis made it preferable to retain the same participants over an extended period of time. Because I was able to recruit and maintain my target number of participants (n=8) during the first session (Session A), I did not continue recruiting during the second session (Session B). All participants from Session A continued with the study during Session B.

All participants signed and dated a specialized consent form outlining the major goals of the study and the requirements of their participation. This consent form had previously been reviewed and approved by my home university's IRB.

Participant Backgrounds

The data from this study come from my observation of and interactions with 13 total participants: four instructors, eight teacher candidates, and the MA TESOL program director. This section will provide background information on the three instructors who consented to an interview and the eight teacher candidates. Because my interview with the program director was purely for obtaining information about the MA TESOL program and its home department of English, that information is not included here. All names for research participants in this section and hereafter are pseudonyms.

Instructors

All three instructors had specialization in the topics they were assigned to teach, but their levels of experience and comfort with online teaching varied. Although two instructors were regular faculty within the English department, they were not tenured or tenure-track professors within the MA TESOL program; as described above, online courses in this program were initially developed and piloted by tenured or tenure-track faculty or others who were deemed specialists, and then the courses were assigned to "faculty associates" to teach.

Jeff

Jeff, the instructor for the Language Testing and Assessment class, was a regular instructor for the university's English department but typically taught face-to-face classes in First-Year Composition and Introduction to Academic Writing. Prior to teaching this course, he

had only taught one other class online, a course in Second Language Acquisition Theory held in Summer 2018 for the MA TESOL program. However, his dissertation research focused on language testing, so he was considered an expert in the content area by the department, and unlike the other instructors in this study, he played an integral role in the initial design of the course. Jeff was White, born in Europe, and had taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in South America before obtaining an MA in TESOL and a PhD in Rhetoric, Composition, and Linguistics at SU.

Emily

Emily, who was also White, was the instructor for English as an International Language. She began in the TESOL field while working in the Writing Center at SU when she was an undergrad, and after graduation, she taught EFL in East Asia prior to obtaining master's degrees in TESOL and Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing from a nearby university. She then returned to SU for her PhD in Writing, Rhetorics, and Literacies, where she gained an interest in World Englishes. After receiving her doctorate, she took a position as a Writing Program Administrator with a Hispanic-Serving Institution elsewhere in the state, and she was working in this position while also teaching online part-time with SU. She had previous online teaching experience and had also taken classes on online teaching, which she felt had prepared her for her online teaching experience, but she said that teaching online was not her preference. Unlike Jeff, she was not responsible for any aspect of designing the online class at SU and was given the full curriculum to follow. In this case, the course was originally designed by the MA TESOL program director and was based closely on the face-to-face course that had been offered previously, which Emily recalled having taken as a graduate student several years earlier.

Leo

Like Jeff, Leo was a regular faculty member in the SU English department, and he also typically taught First-Year Composition and Intro to Academic Writing courses. A Latino and native of South America, he held master's degrees in French and TESOL and a PhD in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. He specialized in second language acquisition and had previously taught Portuguese and Spanish, as well as a similar class about language teaching in K-12 settings several years before. However, this was his first time teaching online, and his only other prior experience with online education was an online class he had taken the summer before this study took place. He did not enjoy his experience as a student in the online course and hoped to take the course again if it were offered in a face-to-face setting. He said he was offered the online teaching position suddenly and did not feel as if he was prepared to take on the course, but he wanted to learn how to be a strong teacher in multiple contexts, so he agreed. Like Emily, he was not responsible for any design of the course or curriculum, as it was previously designed and assigned to him. Although he was working to learn more about teaching online during the study and looked forward to continuing to learn, he expressed concerns about the effectiveness of the online setting and was very open about his lack of confidence in his online teaching ability.

Teacher Candidates

The eight teacher candidate participants varied widely in their previous educational and teaching experiences, with some having years of teaching experience and others having none. Likewise, with the exception of Fiona, who had a bachelor's degree in English with a minor in TESOL and a TEFL certificate, and Violet, who also had a TEFL certificate, none of the participants had previous coursework in teaching EFL or ESL. Also with the exception of Fiona, participants reported having taken a rather circuitous route to the MA TESOL program, with

large gaps of time between beginning and completing their education, often due to personal challenges. The biographical information of the eight participants in this study supports research that shows that fully online students are typically older, more likely to work full time, and more likely to be parents (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; Johnson, 2019).

Of the eight participants, seven identified as White women and one as a Latino man. This distribution is roughly in line with the overall demographics of teacher candidates enrolled in the program (see Figure 2 above). However, my own positionality as a White woman, which was evident in my recruiting video, may have inadvertently skewed participation to include a slightly disproportionate number of White women in relation to the class as a whole (Lee & Simon-Maeda, 2006). Due to the precarious nature of online educational research and the need for participation over multiple classes and sessions, all those who expressed interest in the study were accepted. The limitations produced by the predominance of perspectives of White women in this study are addressed in Chapter 7.

Table 1. Teacher Candidate Education, Teaching Experience, and Language Background

Name	Race and Gender	Previous Education	Teaching Experience	Language Backgrounds
Guillermo	Latino male	BS, Chemistry DC: Doctor of Chiropractic	Two years, high school science One year EFL in China Part-time ESL tutoring Online EFL teaching for Chinese students Full-time teaching in language college ESL support in academic boarding school	Native Spanish Fluent English Basic Mandarin Basic Portuguese
Violet	White female	BA, Spanish TEFL Certificate	Two years EFL in Thailand Online EFL teaching for Chinese students	Native English Advanced Spanish Basic Thai

			Part-time teaching in language college	
Christina	White female	BA, Cultural Anthropology	Teaching assistant at Montessori pre-school	Native English Basic Italian
Fiona	White female	BA, English, minor in TESOL and Journalism TEFL Certificate	Tutoring international students Online EFL teaching for Chinese students One year EFL in China Substitute teaching Test prep tutoring	Native English Basic Arabic Basic Japanese (listening) Basic Korean (listening)
Danielle	White female	BA, Liberal Studies	Volunteer ESL teaching and tutoring at nonprofit	Native English Advanced Spanish
Eleanor	White female	BA, Spanish and French	Paraeducator working with parents at a preschool program Spanish tutoring Volunteer language partner	Native English Advanced Spanish Advanced French
Chloe	White female	Certificate, Accounting AS, Nursing BA, Liberal Arts BA, Elementary Education (in progress)	None	Native English
Lydia	White female	BA, Social Sciences	Teaching assistant for English as an Academic Language class	Native English Advanced Spanish Basic Danish

Guillermo

Guillermo came to the US with his family from Mexico when he was three years old and had vague memories of being in an ESL class as a child, although at the time of the study, he felt more comfortable in English than in Spanish. He had lived in Southern California since that time. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in Chemistry, he worked as a high school science teacher and a pharmaceutical lab technician before returning to school to earn a Doctor of Chiropractic and then working for a short period of time as a chiropractor. Despite his background in science and chiropractic, he felt that he was "somehow magnetically attracted to" and "geared toward" the TESOL field and contrasted his Mexican-American identity with his

personal experiences of being asked to help out others with their English. He had a varied language teaching background, having taught EFL full time in China for a year, followed by part-time work as an ESL tutor and as a teacher in Chinese online EFL program. At the beginning of the study, he worked in a language college for adults, where he had taught a variety of courses, including Conversation, American Culture, and Business English, for two years. Midway through the semester, he took on a different job at a boarding school, where he provided academic support in a variety of subjects for English learners. He planned to look for a job teaching ESL in a community college setting after graduating, although he was also open to the idea of working abroad or finding a position teaching online. Because he was interested in research and learning more, he initially considered continuing into a doctoral program but had since decided against it, feeling that it was not right for him.

Violet

Violet was a native of Southern California who owned a business with her father before enrolling in college ten years after graduating from high school. She earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish and studied abroad in Spain, where she earned extra money by tutoring locals in English. After graduation, she returned to the US and got a TEFL certificate while volunteering as an ESL teacher's assistant at a local college and working part-time with a language college in California. After seeing some of her classmates from her Spanish program moving abroad to teach English, she decided to do so as well and took a position teaching preschool and elementary EFL in "a rural, rice paddy village" in Thailand. There, she fell in love with teaching and Thailand, and she had planned to continue living in Thailand indefinitely. However, she also wanted to pursue a master's degree to expand her career options, so she opted for a fully online program that would allow her to take classes while living and working in Thailand.

Unfortunately, a personal tragedy forced her to leave Thailand and move back to Southern California with her family, where she was living at the time of this study. This tragedy resulted in her suffering from severe depression, and she credited her coursework with giving her purpose during that time. Although she said she previously preferred not to take online courses, she expressed her gratitude for being able to complete her degree fully online, as she said she otherwise would not have been able to continue her study. She graduated at the end of the data collection period and took a job with a nonprofit organization teaching writing for a prison in New Mexico. However, she was still exploring her options and was interested in potentially working with international students in a university setting and eventually returning to school to pursue a PhD in Second Language Acquisition or Applied Linguistics.

Christina

Christina lived in the Midwest and had a bachelor's degree in Cultural Anthropology. After becoming a mother shortly before her 16th birthday, she transitioned to taking online classes to finish high school, which enabled her to graduate a year ahead of her peers in traditional high school. She felt very positive about her online high school experience and the flexibility it offered her at a time that the traditional high school structure would have been too constraining. After graduating, she took a year off from school to parent her son, but when she returned to school, she had a "mental crisis" that required her to take another extended break from schooling. When she returned to school at the age of 23, she felt as though the intervening years had "really lit a fire under [her]," and she reported that she dedicated herself wholeheartedly to her studies. During her college years, she felt equally comfortable taking online and face-to-face classes and took a combination of the two, then had no qualms about signing up for a fully online master's program directly after receiving her bachelor's degree. She

felt that a turning point in her life was a summer that she studied abroad in Italy although she did not speak Italian; this experience gave her insight into the lives of people who do not speak the dominant language and made her very interested in the lives of English learners in the US. She began the MA TESOL program because she felt that it would be a good complement to her degree in Cultural Anthropology, and she planned to look for employment in a governmental or nonprofit organization involved in advocacy work for immigrants after she completed her degree. Although she stated that she would like to include teaching as a component of her work, she felt her main focus was with advocacy and immigration or refugee resettlement assistance. In addition to taking classes, she worked as a teaching assistant at a Montessori preschool during the semester in which this study was conducted.

Fiona

Fiona had just moved from her hometown in the American Southeast to a small city in the Southwest when this study began, and she was planning to move again shortly after the time data collection concluded. She received her bachelor's degree in English with double minors in TESOL and Journalism from a small university in the Southeast, where she tutored international students, primarily from Japan and Saudi Arabia. There, she became especially close with Middle Eastern students, and she studied abroad in Dubai and Sharjah, both within the United Arab Emirates, one summer to begin learning Arabic. Fiona said that this experience kickstarted her wanderlust and made her want to continue traveling around the world. She felt that, after a childhood in which she did not travel much, she had a new world opened to her and she couldn't imagine "staying in one place anymore." In addition to her interest in Middle Eastern cultures and the Arabic language, Fiona studied Japanese and said she was "obsessed" with Japanese and Korean films, particularly Korean dramas. As a result, she had some knowledge of Arabic,

Japanese, and Korean, and was interested in developing her fluency in all three languages. After graduation, Fiona earned a TEFL certificate and worked for one year as an online teacher for a Chinese EFL company followed by another year teaching full-time at an English school in China, which she had completed the fall prior to the beginning of this study. During the study, Fiona worked as a substitute teacher and test preparation tutor, positions which regularly took a significant amount of her time and left her feeling drained and disoriented. Fiona planned to look for work teaching EFL in the Middle East after completing her degree and hoped to move there with her partner.

Danielle

Danielle grew up in the northern US and began attending a major university after graduating from high school; however, she soon felt that she was "in over [her] head," and after her family began experiencing financial problems, she left school to get a job working in communications for a state legislature during a campaign cycle. Although she had initially planned to return to school after the campaign ended, she instead chose to move to a major northeastern city. She got a job working in human resources, met her husband, and moved to a Western state for a few years, where they had two children. Eventually, they moved back to the northeast, and once Danielle felt her children were old enough for her to take the time away from them to study, she enrolled as an undergraduate in SU's online program and earned a bachelor's degree in Liberal Studies, primarily because it was the fastest route to complete her degree. Troubled by political rhetoric toward immigrants, she began volunteer teaching English with a nonprofit organization and "loved it." She felt that it would be a good career option for her because she could "make it work in [her] lifestyle as a parent," so she chose to continue her studies by enrolling in the MA TESOL program. She had had a positive experience completing

her bachelor's degree online with SU, and because there were not many options near her home to complete a similar degree, she opted to continue with the online program at SU. She felt that it was important that her children saw her studying and completing her degree, saying she wanted them to know that "I haven't done things in the traditional path and that's okay." She was particularly interested in working in adult education, particularly with female immigrants, and hoped to get a job teaching ESL with an advocacy focus at a local nonprofit after graduating.

Eleanor

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in Spanish and French, Eleanor chose not to pursue a teaching certificate and instead worked as a paraprofessional at a preschool program, where she taught parenting skills classes. She stopped working to raise her three children, but once they were in school, she decided to look into teaching ESL on the recommendation of a friend. While she was preparing for the program, she began volunteering as a language partner with emergent bi/multilingual families, something which helped her begin thinking about teaching English despite not having formal experience in the field. Living in a major city in Northern California, she had several options for a master's program, but she chose to enroll in an online program due to her responsibilities as a parent. She stated, "I already have a job, you know? I'm a stay-at-home mom, and my time is really valuable." She regularly connected what she was doing as a student with lessons for her children about empathy and acceptance, prompting them to consider what their lives may be like if they lived in a different culture and were surrounded by a language they could not understand. She discovered an interest in peace education via her readings for one of her courses, and she was interested in setting up an internship with the International Rescue Committee, a major organization for resettling refugees, as part of her degree requirements. However, she expressed a lack of confidence in her ability to

"actually go out of my house or leave the coffee shop and interact with people and be responsible for people's learning," referring to the idea as "terrifying."

Chloe

Chloe grew up in a rural town in the Midwest, an area that she characterized as "not very diverse." After completing a certificate in accounting and finding the work boring, she joined the Navy and was stationed on a small island in the Indian Ocean for two and a half years, where she was in regular contact with military personnel from around the world, an experience which piqued her interest in traveling and learning more about other cultures. She returned to the eastern US after completing her military service, where she received an Associate's degree in science, hoping to become a pediatric nurse. However, the Veterans Affairs (VA) office did not approve her funding to continue her education in nursing due to a medical condition. Following a divorce, she moved back to her parents' home in the Midwest, where she obtained an Associate's degree in Teaching and a Bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts. During the study, she was enrolled in her second semester of the MA TESOL program and was also taking 12 credit hours of classes toward a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education at a local branch of a university that offered evening classes. She did not have any teaching experience prior to beginning her education, but she felt strongly that she wanted to teach young children, preferably abroad. When the study began, Chloe was not working; however, two months into the semester, she began a job at a daycare, where she primarily worked with children ages two and under. She regularly emphasized her love of travel and goal to visit every country, a goal she was working toward while studying, with plans to visit 13 countries within six months. At the end of the study, Chloe expressed interest in getting a doctorate in Education, and she had begun applying to several fully online doctoral programs. However, because she said her ultimate goal was to work with

young children abroad, she thought her doctorate would probably be "a huge waste of money" but was something she had always wanted to do.

Lydia

Lydia claimed she "didn't have a lot of direction" or "a great calling to do any one certain thing" in relation to her education, and as a result, she tried out multiple subjects to see what may be best for her during her time as an undergraduate. After two years at a community college and then completing her coursework at a university, she was able to cobble together her various courses to earn a bachelor's degree in Social Sciences. During her coursework, she found linguistics to be interesting and noticed that she was good in Spanish, but she was not sure how to turn those interests into a career. She worked for one semester as a teaching assistant for an English for Academic Purposes class, a position she received by applying for a scholarship that included a tuition waiver. However, her lack of preparation caused stress, leading her to consider aspects of her teaching a "constant struggle." Regardless, after working in various retail positions for several years, she decided an MA TESOL degree may work well with her strengths, especially because of opportunities to work with adults instead of children. She was interested in possibly teaching ESL in an adult education program or with a program for parents of children in K-12 after graduation, and because she lived in an area in which there were not many professional opportunities, she was open to moving to locations within the Pacific Northwest. She chose an online program due to financial difficulties that prevented her from enrolling in a face-to-face program, and she was working nearly full time during the entirety of this study.

Data Collection

The corpus of data collected for this study includes: (a) text-based data gleaned from discussion posts and responses, course announcements and documents, and other

communications; (b) multimodal data such as student- and instructor-created videos, uploaded photos, and screenshots of the course site; (c) more than 28 hours of interview data with the program director, course instructors, and teacher candidates, which I transcribed orthographically in full; (d) materials that surround and situate the online course site, such as SU's websites and social media posts meant for current or future students; and (e) documents in which online education is discussed and the online format, online students, and online teachers are positioned in relation to larger discourses. In addition, a series of reflexive, descriptive, and reflective journals and memos were written throughout the data collection and analysis processes, which are considered to be data sources as well. This section will detail the various forms of data collected and the rationale behind the large-scale, ethnographic approach to data collection taken.

Ethnographic Approach

As I began conceptualizing this research project, I was particularly influenced by the growing attention to positioning and identity work in relation to multiple scales of meaning and influence. In particular, I looked to De Costa and Norton's (2017) adaptation of the Douglas Fir Group's micro, meso, and macro dimensions of language learning to the area of language teacher identity development. In this scalar perspective, interaction and semiotic resources make up the micro level; investment, agency, and power are constructed within the meso level of institutions and communities; and both micro and meso levels are embedded within the larger macro level of ideological systems and values. Recognizing the importance of these scales in relation to identity development, I drew upon ethnographic approaches to data collection and analysis (Beach, Bagley, & Marques da Silva, 2018; Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Glesne, 2016; Hymes, 1996) not only to provide me with a wide range of materials with which I could triangulate my data but also to guide my own learning process and reflexive positioning as a researcher in a field that has

to date not yet been explored from the perspective I take in this study. I was also informed by work in digital ethnography (Dicks, Mason, Coffey, & Atkinson, 2005; Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis, & Tacchi, 2016), particularly in terms of how to collect and analyze data and de-center the digital environment to ensure focused attention to the ways that people use resources, digital or otherwise, as they engage in virtual coursework and online identity construction.

With this ethnographic approach, I viewed my role as a researcher as broadly as possible, immersing myself in a range of documents that expressed the macro-level discourses about online education prior to beginning the data collection within the MA TESOL program itself. I collected both scholarly and popular articles about perspectives on online education, pulling equally from news sites, websites directed toward university faculty and administrators, and academic articles to provide a broad range of perspectives that would begin to sketch in the discourses circulating at the macro levels. I took notes of the patterns I found in these documents, particularly those in which online students and teachers were positioned in certain ways (e.g., busy, non-traditional student, independent learner/worker) as well as those that positioned online education as a whole (e.g., convenient, cost-saving, accessible, less prestigious). I continued this document collection throughout the data collection period and refined and bolstered my notes on a regular basis as the collection grew.

I also engaged in a thorough review of multiple documents and websites associated with the MA TESOL programs at SU, both those held online and face-to-face. I examined websites and social media pages aimed at both current and prospective students and completed a request for more information about online programs at SU so I could view materials that the participants in this study would have received and considered in their initial decision to enroll in the program. To gather more information and the perspective of someone involved in the administration of the

program, I conducted an hour-long interview with the program director. In this interview, my questions focused on: (a) the history and structure of the MA TESOL program, with particular emphasis on the newly formed fully online degree; (b) the curriculum and online course design process; (c) student demographics and enrollment projections; and (d) support for students. I followed up with the program director in a series of emails as I had additional questions.

In addition to the reflexive and descriptive journals, I also kept a series of memos and reflective notes in which I explored the data in relation to the literature, various theories, and the connections I was making between what I was seeing in the everyday interactions and the meso and macro levels in which they were embedded. I set aside dedicated time at least once a week to review everything I had collected that week, including the notes I had taken, as a way to think more deeply about the patterns I was seeing and the positions that participants were taking up repeatedly. I compiled these notes into a reflection journal, where I allowed myself to write openly and honestly about my findings in ways that made sense to me. The format varied, from sections of bulleted lists of points I needed to keep in mind to visual representations of data to long narratives in which I used metaphors, anecdotes, and personal experiences to make sense of the large and growing collection of data I was accumulating. I allowed my own emotional responses to emerge in the reflection journal, then revisited these responses at several points to gain a deeper insight into how these personal reactions may have been influencing my interpretation of the data. It was in this reflection journal that my participant profiles were initially sketched out, many of the questions for my second and third interviews initially took shape, and the role of macro-level ideologies in class discourse was first explored in earnest. I maintained this journal throughout the data collection process and during the months following when I was analyzing my findings.

Course Observations

During the timespan in which the online classes were active, I took on the mindset, as much as possible, of being a student in the classes I was observing. The form of access I was given meant that I had identical access as the students in the class did, and I also received all class-wide emails or alerts. I followed along with the class to the largest extent possible, watching posted lectures, reading discussion posts and other course interactions, and keeping track of the course schedule as outlined in the syllabus. I checked each class four to five times per week during the entirety of the semester, each time adding to my journal of descriptive field notes with details about what I was seeing. After the timeline for responding to a discussion post or other online assignment had passed, I saved all initial postings and responses made by all study participants. The majority of postings were text-based discussion board postings, which I copied into Microsoft Word and formatted before importing them into NVivo, a software program for qualitative data analysis that provides features for working with multimodal data. I saved non-text-based posts, such as videos, photos, and PowerPoint presentations and imported them into NVivo as-is.

Table 2. Courses Observed

Name	Session	Courses Observed	Instructor
Guillermo	A	Methods of TESOL	Leo
	B	Approaches to Research	Dr. Z
Violet	A	Methods of TESOL	Leo
	B	Approaches to Research	Dr. Z
Christina	A	Methods of TESOL	Leo
	A	English as an International Language	Emily
	B	Approaches to Research	Dr. Z
Fiona	A	English as an International Language	Emily
	B	Approaches to Research	Dr. Z
Danielle	A	Methods of TESOL	Leo
	B	Approaches to Research	Dr. Z

	B	Language Testing and Assessment	Jeff
Eleanor	A B	Methods of TESOL Approaches to Research	Leo Dr. Z
Chloe	A A B	Methods of TESOL English as an International Language Language Testing and Assessment	Leo Emily Jeff
Lydia	A B	English as an International Language Language Testing and Assessment	Emily Jeff

However, I chose not to fully take on the role of participant observer: I did not complete assignments or contribute to class discussions myself. Instead, I was a silent but active observer, with the only evidence of my presence in the class being the inclusion of my name on the shared class roster. Although I believe my near-invisibility in the classes reduced any observer's effect, I also acknowledge that all enrolled students in the classes were at least peripherally aware of my presence due to my recruiting emails sent at the beginning of the semester; likewise, those who were active participants in the study were very aware that I was collecting and recording their interactions throughout, as they were not only informed of these actions in the initial consent process but were also asked to comment on their interactions during our sequence of interviews that took place over the course of the semester.

Interview Data

In addition to the large amount of data obtained via an ethnographic approach to classroom observation and data collection, I also engaged in a series of interviews with instructors and teacher candidates, resulting in more than 28 hours of interview data. The interviews with instructors were designed to answer Research Question 2, and the interviews with teacher candidates were designed to answer Research Question 4. However, this data was also used to triangulate findings for the observation data that informed Research Questions 1 and 4. Each interview was held online via Skype, FaceTime, or Google Hangouts and was audio-

recorded. I took notes during and after each interview with my initial thoughts and reactions. The interviews were later transcribed orthographically with the assistance of Otter transcription software; after the initial transcription, I went through each interview while replaying the audio to correct any errors. Afterward, I saved all transcripts in Microsoft Word and uploaded them into NVivo for analysis, and I saved the audio recordings in a protected file for reference and closer analysis as needed.

Course Instructors

As mentioned above, I held hour-long interviews with three of the four instructors of the classes I observed. Because these interviews were designed to help address Research Question 2, which was related to instructor positioning, the questions focused on obtaining the instructor perspective on the course from a variety of angles: content, overall course design, and relationships with students, each of which were found to be pivotal in positioning processes. I was especially interested in learning more about how much input the instructors had in the design and presentation of the courses, how comfortable they felt in teaching the content in the online setting, and how they viewed their roles as instructors and their positions in relation to the teacher candidates. I focused on these areas for a number of reasons. Because the online course setting, and especially the ways that interactive spaces are set up and evaluated, has a powerful impact on how students are able to engage with one another and what positions they are able to take up, learning more about the instructors' reasoning behind these decisions, and where and when they had the option to make adjustments, was essential. As I had already spoken with the program director about the process for course design, this also gave me additional insight into the instructors' perspectives on teaching a course that had been, in two of the three cases, developed by another faculty member. In addition, because positioning is relational, I wanted to know more

about how the instructors perceived the teacher candidates and what expectations they had of them during the class. In each case, these interviews were held during the first half of the course but not at the immediate beginning of the class, which allowed the instructors to begin to get a feel for their courses but also inform my class observations throughout the latter half of the course period. The guiding questions for these interviews can be found in Appendix A.

Teacher Candidates

I held a series of three semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2013) with each of the eight teacher candidates who participated in this study. The interviews were designed to move gradually from larger-scale influences on their lives (e.g., their work and educational history, reasons for beginning the MA TESOL, and current demands on their time outside of the course) to their experiences and positions in the classes, envisioned selves as future teachers, perspectives on being a student in a fully digital space, and plans for their future or current positions as teachers. The first interviews were the most uniform, as I began the study with a set list of questions to ask in order to gather comparable information and gain a broader perspective on students' lives. The guiding questions for the first round of interviews can be found in Appendix B. However, due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews and my conviction that it is necessary to "let the interview breathe and speak for itself" (Seidman, 2013, p. 120), these interviews were peppered with follow-up questions and moments of more natural conversation in which I entered into brief discussions with the participants. My goal was to create a space "in which the interviewer and interviewee are viewed as equal partners in co-constructing meaning" (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 72), so I allowed the interviews to flow naturally, even when they at times appeared to go off topic, and encouraged interviewees to ask me questions as well.

In the second round of interviews, I began to customize the guiding questions significantly, asking for clarification about previous points or observations I had made within the class setting. Because the second round of interviews took place shortly after the end of Session A, many of our discussions revolved around their challenges and accomplishments from the previous session, as well as their positions in relation to the classes, their instructors, and their peers, and what they hoped to accomplish during Session B. In collecting this data, I was able to engage in a first round of member checking my interpretations and also elicit narratives and perspectives that helped me to better understand their reflexive positioning. Importantly, it was during this interview that many students seemed to begin feeling more comfortable with me, and the majority of my interviews included at least some time in which the teacher candidates asked me for advice or direction. It became clear during the second round of interviews that the teacher candidates had not had synchronous conversations with their instructors or classmates, and many of the questions that arose at this point seemed to be some that they had been considering and struggling with for some time with no clear path to ask anyone about them. To me, this was a positive and crucial part of our interaction, as it allowed me to develop a sense of rapport with the participants (Glesne, 2016) and gather a range of narratives in which they connected their responses to their emotional states and lives beyond the immediate details of the online program.

The third and final set of interviews took place at the end of Session B and therefore the end of the semester during which this study took place. Before conducting these interviews, I carefully reviewed all the data from previous interviews and my class observations to develop finely tuned questions based on the positioning processes and participation patterns I was seeing in each participant. As I had been engaging in iterative analysis during the five months prior to these interviews, I used this time to explore any areas that had come up as points of interest in

my reflections, including clear patterns, repeated positioning, or apparent tensions or conflicts between their online postings and what I knew, by this point, about their personal feelings and lives. At this point, I felt that I had been able to develop a rapport and sense of trust with each participant, and I could feel our interviews loosening as they provided more details without my needing to prompt them. As in the second interview, many of them used this time to ask questions about topics that had confused them, to discuss their fears related to finding jobs or applying what they had learned, or to open up about the experiences they had gone through in the preceding weeks and how those experiences shaped their perspectives of themselves in the context of the class. Rather than simply responding to questions I had prepared, the teacher candidates engaged in a natural conversation with me about the topics I wanted to know more about, and I reciprocated by sharing my own stories from my personal experiences in turn.

Several expressed their feeling that engaging in such conversation made them think about things differently or feel more included as part of the TESOL community. Although I redirected the conversation in several instances when I felt that it had drifted too far from the core focus of the interview, for the most part, I allowed these discussions to take shape naturally as the participants attempted to make sense of their experiences verbally and in real time. As a result, many of the most surprising or revealing moments in my interview data took place near the end of these final interviews, as our positions as researcher and participant had become less rigid and we instead oriented to one another as peers engaged in a sort of mentoring conversation.

My Positionality and Participation as the Researcher

A key element in ethnographic approaches to research is the inductive learning process of the researcher (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). Because I had previously both researched and worked in the field of online language teacher education, I reflected on my personal background as

someone with significant existing first-hand knowledge about the subject and considered my own stances and beliefs, attempting to trace those stances to their points of origin. I carefully considered ways that my previous experiences as an online student, teacher, and administrator may have produced biases in my perspective and critically reflected upon how the larger discourses of online education had influenced my own thinking. The goal in doing so was not to delete my own perspective but to gain a critical awareness of it prior to beginning my data collection so that I could more meaningfully engage with my findings in ways that acknowledged that my perspectives as a researcher inevitably shape the way that the data were collected, prioritized, and understood (Blommaert & Jie, 2010) while also being aware of tensions produced as the data unfolded in ways that challenged my beliefs and personal experiences. I began writing reflexive field notes (Jeffrey, 2018) to recognize the ways that I as the researcher positioned myself in relation to online education and sought to soften those positions as a way of making myself more open to the data as the research progressed.

Deeply informed by postmodern and poststructural theories of identity and action as performative, I entered this research project with close attention to my own multilayered positionality as an advanced doctoral student, a mid-career TESOL professional with a wide range of international and online teaching and learning experiences, and a White, cisgender woman from a rural, working class background who was a first-generation college student. I reflected on this positionality throughout my data analysis in my reflective journal in attempts to understand how my own positioning impacted both my interactions with study participants and my interpretations of the full range of data I was collecting. I worked to better uncover my own personal biases that had developed around online and TESOL education as a result of my own

experiences, not to make attempts at exposing an underlying objective truth but to balance my own perspectives so that I could interpret and present the data as accurately as possible.

In the write-up of my findings, I recognize that, just as my data is based on the narratives of others, the ways in which I have chosen to structure the telling of my research in this manuscript is a narrative process in itself, equally shaped by self- and other-positioning. In recognizing this, I also recognize that my own voice and perspectives are woven throughout the design, execution, and telling of this study (Norton & Early, 2011). Simultaneously, however, a major strength of an ethnographic approach to data collection is that the sheer quantity and diversity of data accumulated serves as a constellation of points of triangulation, creating a tension between my interpretations and the perspectives and interpretations of others. I have worked carefully to locate and tease apart these tensions in ways that do not erase my own perspectives but present a fair and balanced account.

Although I was a silent observer in the online classes, my role in communication with the study participants was versatile, communicative, and reciprocating. As a doctoral candidate with a master's degree similar to the one they were in the process of completing and years of experience as an educator of both students and teachers of English as a second/foreign language, I recognized that I would be able to provide assistance to participants in a number of ways if they desired my help. However, I did not want to position myself as an expert or as someone with greater knowledge and/or power, so I was careful to discuss my own background somewhat sparingly unless asked directly by the participants themselves. Instead, I attempted to position myself as a fellow teacher and advocate for the TESOL profession.

However, the position that my advanced education and experience entailed was one that the participants in the study recognized, and many of them made use of it through requests for

help in understanding course work or discussions about the larger field of teaching English. For example, when one participant felt uneasy about his research proposal, as it was the first time he had taken on a project geared toward designing original research, I reviewed the work and provided suggestions for ways it could be clarified and in line with the objectives of the assignment and the class. Likewise, another participant, after having shared with me her concerns about finding her voice as a professional when she didn't feel qualified, sent me a written assignment for feedback on how she might be able to fit into the genre required without sounding, as she said, "too professor-y." I also suggested authors and readings for several participants as they told me about their areas of interest and topics they wanted to know more about. I was quite happy to learn in the final interview with one participant that she had used the Amazon gift card from participating in the study to purchase a book I had recommended. Throughout the study, I repeatedly reminded students that I was happy to help them in any way I could, and I continued to remind them of this fact after the study was over.

Because my data analysis was recursive, I was careful to consult with participants about my interpretations of the data, both during our subsequent interviews and in email exchanges during and after the semester. I view the participants in this study as experts within their own lives and therefore seek to represent them and their perspectives accurately and fairly; therefore, I have checked with participants in any case in which I felt as if I needed clarification. Due to the nature of this study and the busy schedules of the participants, full member checking was not possible, but the cyclical nature of my series of interviews, which served as two rounds of member checking of my initial interpretations, gives me confidence that I am portraying participants as accurately as possible.

Finally, I believe that a key element of the reciprocity I was able to provide to the participants in this study was my role as a sounding board, as a space for them to express their perspectives and emotions aloud, and as an active listener who valued their opinions and experiences. Multiple participants told me at the end of the study that their participation in this project was the most meaningful part of their work that semester, as it had given them a regular space to reflect on their experiences with someone who had a similar background. Although I find it somewhat troubling that I as the researcher was the only person who fulfilled that role in their lives, I feel strongly that the safe space our interviews provided helped to deepen their overall engagement with the material and reflect upon their beliefs, values, and practices in ways that are enormously beneficial to their overall identity development as teachers.

Data Analysis

True to the ethnographic approach I took in my data collection, I engaged in ongoing, iterative, multilayered data analysis (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Glesne, 2016). As mentioned previously, I took De Costa and Norton's (2017) micro, meso, and macro levels of language teacher identity formation as a starting point in conceptualizing this study, and this framework provided a lens as I worked to categorize and analyze my data. I began my analysis with a big-picture mindset—because the corpus of my data was going to be so large and so little work had been done in this area before, I wanted to enter the project with an open mind and identify major themes as a starting point. Once patterns in alignment with these levels had begun to emerge, I began to comb through the data in closer detail, looking for specific instances of positioning in moment-to-moment interaction that could help illuminate the enactments of these patterns on a micro level. From there, my research continued expanding and contracting as individual interactions brought out new insights, causing me to revisit the themes I had identified, and so

on. This resulted in three layers of data analysis, which reconsidered the data from multiple viewpoints. As Wood and Kroger (2000) state:

> The same issue should be considered several times in different contexts, which will allow for the exploration of different formulations of events, the refining and reworking of categories, and the examination of ways in which answers to one question are related to answer to another. (p. 73)

Indeed, throughout the analysis, links between the research questions emerged and took shape with each layer. These three layers of analysis, which are detailed below, were: (1) initial coding and categorization; (2) aligning codes with positions; and (3) multimodal positioning analysis.

Layer 1: Initial Coding and Categorization

Although the central form of data analysis for this study is based on positioning theory, I began organizing my interview data using coding techniques common in multiple forms of qualitative research, such as grounded theory (Saldaña, 2016). Because I was interested in de-centering the digital environment (Pink et al., 2016), examining scales beyond the moment-by-moment classroom interactions, and taking the participants themselves as the point of my departure into the organization of my data, I began this process with the data obtained from the first round of interviews, which I then connected to the patterns that were emerging in the online course site. In my *initial reading*, a term I take from Wood and Kroger (2000) due to the goal of identifying areas of further analysis, I read over these interviews multiple times, and using NVivo, I began tagging and coding sections that seemed significant line-by-line (Saldaña, 2016). The patterns that began emerging were key topics in my reflection journal, where I began to theorize about why certain codes were particularly prevalent and how they may be connected to one another and to other common themes in the literature I had begun reviewing previously.

During this time, I also began categorizing the codes in relation to De Costa and Norton's (2017) macro, meso, and micro levels to gain insights into the ways that participants included connections to each of these levels in their interviews with me. The macro level was defined as being larger discourses related to online education, the meso level was made up of topics related to the ecology of the online class itself, and the micro level included discussion of personal topics such as home life, emotions, and experiences related to globalization, mobility, and diversity. This initial coding resulted in 107 codes, a number within the range described as common in qualitative studies by Saldaña (2016). A full list of these initial codes is provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Initial Codes

Level	Subcategory	Individual Codes		
Macro	*Discourses of online education*	• Convenient • Busy • Independent learning • Student effort • Instructor effort • Education as commodity • Ease of access/ entrance	• Perceptions of online learners • Perceptions of online education • Online education quality/standards • Online instructor quality/expertise • Course design • Program curriculum	• Online learning as "different" • Face-to-face education as luxury • Online education as only choice • Non-traditional student • Internship • Student resources
Meso	*The online class ecology*	• Feedback • Communication with instructor • Familiarity with fellow students • Communication with fellow students • Class expectations • Instructor expectations • Discussion board structure	• Register • Voice and personal expression • (dis)embodiment • "finding my tribe" • Grades • Efficiency • Content learning • Avoidance of difficult topics • Conflict avoidance • Class debate	• Connecting with "like minds" • Developing friendships • (dis)comfort with technology • Possibilities of technology • Being "real" • New perspectives • Knowledge gained • Being the "good" student

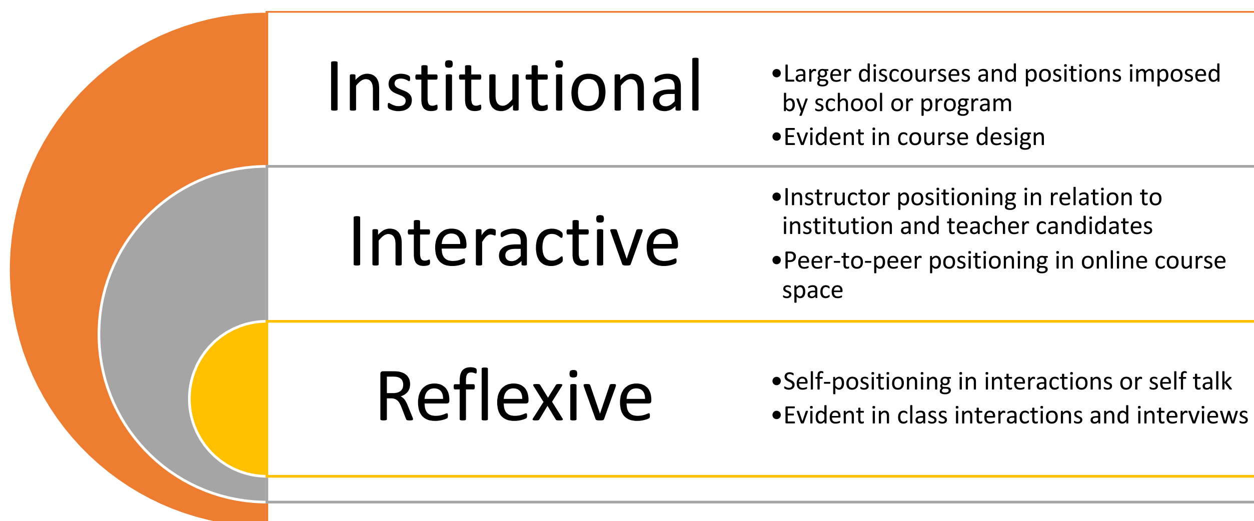
		• Instructor as audience • Classmates as audience • Participation strategies • Learning from peers	• Face-saving (self) • Face-saving (others) • Desire for synchronous communication • Desire to see classmates	• Time management • Redoing work • Too much to read • Repetition of ideas • Not asking for help • Suggestions for online community development
Micro	*Discourses of home life*	• Parenting • Paid labor • Mental health	• Being a role model • Teaching own children • Household duties	• Personal/home life problems • Money/bills • Being a "loner"
	Emotions	• Motivation • Sense of belonging • Sense of purpose • Excitement • Trust • Transformation	• Frustration • Isolation • Confidence • Intimidation • Perfectionism • Boredom • Confusion • Distraction	• Inadequacy • Depression • Lack of motivation • Lack of belonging Lack of trust • Concern about future
	Globalization, mobility, and diversity	• Travel • Study abroad • Living abroad • Teaching abroad • Non-US culture • Learning from other cultures • International students	• Migrants/ refugees • Advocacy • "Global values" • Global citizen • Political discourses of immigrants • Personal mobility • Deterritorial-ization • Home • Geographic location	• Immigration policy • Cross-cultural relationships • Being a linguistic minority • English as an International/ World Language • "Digital nomad"

Layer 2: Aligning Codes with Positions

After having established an initial framework of common themes and patterns, I began reframing the codes in alignment with *institutional* (macro), *interactive* (meso), and *reflexive* (micro) acts of positioning. Whereas the initial codes served primarily as a means of organizing my data and getting a big-picture perspective of the key points that had emerged, this connection to positioning theory allowed me to view them not simply as patterns of interaction but as

processes of identifying oneself and others within multiple levels of power and ideology. Within each category, as positions are afforded or constrained, individuals' rights and duties are "assigned, ascribed, or appropriated and resisted, rejected, or repudiated" (Harré, 2012, p. 196). Figure 4 provides a visual representation of these nested positioning processes as they emerged.

Figure 4: Nested Levels of Positioning



Institutional positioning, in this case, is the positioning carried out at the levels of the school or program; although the actors are invisible, the result of their work (i.e., the curriculum and course design) is a powerful force in constraining the positions that individuals (both instructors and students) may take up (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995). In this study, institutional positioning is most clearly visible in the rights and duties that are ascribed to instructors and students within the online course itself. For example, the assignment of a predesigned course to an instructor who has had little input into the content or design deletes some of the instructor's rights to carry out the course as he or she wishes and ascribes the duties of learning and

following the content and structure provided. Likewise, a course design that emphasizes student interaction via a text-based, instructor-evaluated, public discussion board does not fully delete but hinders students' rights to speak with one another "off the record" in an accessible way while ascribing them the complex duty of displaying their knowledge in writing to the dual audiences of their instructor and their classmates.

Interactive positioning, which takes place at what I consider to be the meso level in this study, is a form of positioning that happens between teacher candidates and their instructors in the online context. Being a level below institutional positioning, the positions that are available to individuals are constrained by those who control the semiotic resources that are readily available. However, power dynamics still come into play, as instructors are able to determine or otherwise influence the specifics of how students are expected to interact within the available affordances for communication and whether and how they will be evaluated as a result of these interactions. In a study on interactive positioning in an ESL class, Reeves (2008) describes this process as follows:

> Interactive positioning is…akin to the principle of indexical inversion…in the teacher-student relationship, indexes are imposed from the most to least powerful (i.e., from teacher to student). Teachers may index [students] as particular types of learners, and teachers typically have considerably greater power to enact that other-positioning in the school setting than do students. (p. 36)

Interactive positioning does not only take place at the hands of instructors, however, but by all teacher candidates active in the class. As detailed in Chapter 2, individuals may attempt to position themselves via pre-positioning or first-order positioning, but these positions must be accepted by others for them to be upheld. Such positions, bound up in clusters of rights and

duties, are a part of what Harré (2009) refers to as the "moral landscape," which is made up of practices such as "taking notice of someone or ignoring them, giving them tasks, praising them, and so on" (p. 9). In other words, individuals are constrained by others in the positions they may take up, and although the power dynamics inherent in the teacher-student relationship strengthen other-positioning carried out by the teacher, peers may also challenge or reinforce one another's positioning even while maintaining an equal footing.

Reflexive positioning, or self-positioning, is carried out by individuals as they align themselves with positions, or the characters they wish to take up in a particular storyline (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Tan & Moghaddam, 1995). Within this study, reflexive positioning may occur in either interaction with classmates and instructors in the course setting or in interviews with me as the researcher. This positioning, again, is constrained by both institutional and interactive positioning, and yet, individuals may resist these acts of positioning in a number of ways. For example, an individual may appear to accept a positional identity ascribed to them in the online course (e.g., a mediocre student) but challenge this positional identity via third-order positioning in interview data, repositioning themselves in a way that better suits their storyline (e.g., a busy parent who is doing their best to juggle responsibilities). In some cases, I was able to draw clear connections between what a participant had said to me in an interview and, for example, how they chose to introduce themselves to the class at the beginning of the course. In other cases, the positional identities that they had taken up in our interviews seemed quite different from how they presented themselves online. To illustrate, Lydia positioned herself as lacking direction and passion in our interviews, but she appeared confident, experienced, and knowledgeable in her online interactions with her peers.

It is important to note at this point that, although the patterns and themes that I had identified informed my analysis of positioning in the class interactions, they did not constrain my analysis. In many cases, as in the example given above, they provided interesting illustrations of or counterpoints to the positions I seen in other data, but I did not simply look for illustrations of the patterns as I examined the online interactions. I left myself open to highlight and analyze the "unique and atypical moments" that Kayi-Aydar (2019a) describes as "extraordinarily unique and powerful in that particular moment," which "must be shared with a wider audience" (p. 148). By keeping myself open to these moments, I was able to identify additional points that caused me to return to my analysis with new insight, thereby creating oscillating rounds of analysis within each layer.

Layer 3: Multimodal Positioning Analysis

As I analyzed the positions, with their associated rights, duties, and flows of power and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1977), I recognized the need to incorporate a third layer of analysis, which took into consideration the importance of multimodality and course design. It became clear that institutional positioning was apparent via the virtual semiotic landscape (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2011) in which the online courses took place; likewise, it was clear that the nuances and configurations within this landscape resulted in patterns of participation that played a major role in how individuals positioned themselves interactively and reflexively. Because these are forms of positioning that are not well addressed in traditional positioning theory, I turned to social semiotic theory (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988) and Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2004); this extended the flexibility of positioning theory to include an emphasis on interpretation of the

message and visual elements of communication that are increasingly essential in digital communication in a globalized world.

In doing so, I acknowledge that multimodal human creations, which carry indexed messages, have the ability to position actors in a multitude of ways, positions which then may or may not be successfully contested. In the online course setting, decisions made by the course designer, operating at the institutional level, result in a multimodal space made up of messages that carry with them a bevy of indexed meanings that serve to position individuals; in online settings, the technologies used (or not used) reflect the values and assumptions of the course designers, which may not be in alignment with those of the instructors or students (Lane, 2009; Murray & Christison, 2017).

It should be noted that individuals may attempt to contest this power dynamic and institutional positioning in a variety of ways. A student may, for example, position themselves interactively as an *exceptional student*, a *technology whiz*, or even a *class clown* by using a range of sophisticated tools to create multimodal posts that break the expected norms of the student position in an overwhelmingly text-based environment and challenge genres and other logonomic systems (Hodge and Kress, 1988) by using increasingly complex technologies. In some settings in which instructors have a high level of autonomy, an instructor may opt to forego the usage of the LMS entirely and instead design an interactive course website, perhaps incorporating blogs and social media. Such actions, which may be prohibitively complex or time-consuming for the most, could position the instructor alternately as an *innovator* or *disrupter*.

From a social semiotic standpoint, Räisänen (2015), makes an argument for the incorporation of the complexities of the multimodal space into overall analysis in stating that:

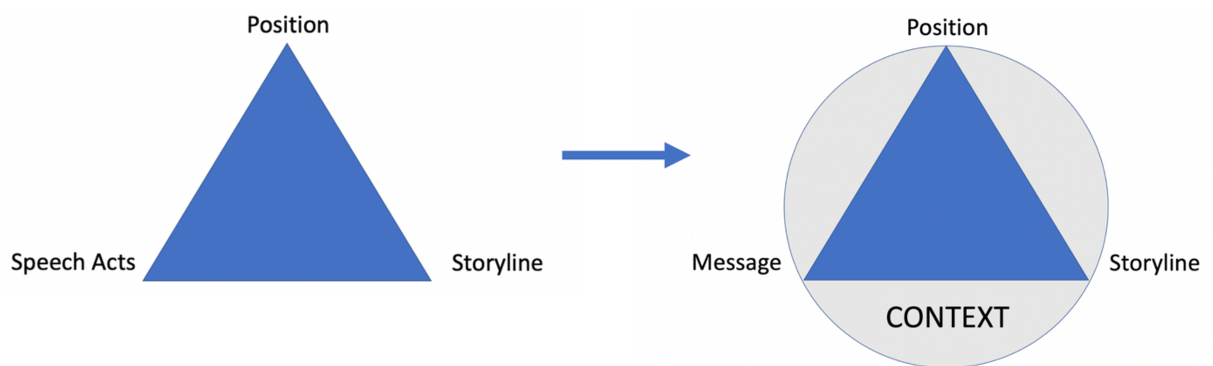
> Practice or activity needs to be viewed as social practice, involving the interaction of interlocutors, contexts, semiotic systems, artifacts, technologies, spatial arrangements, and time. In such interactions, there often exist inherent tensions between human and nonhuman entities and spatial arrangements in particular contexts of use…matter and materials also have agency, which we need to take into account when we prepare for participation in discourse practices. (p. 133-134)

I would argue here against Räisänen's contention that "matter and materials also have agency"—inanimate objects cannot have agency, but their creators can and do—but the point is clear. Semiotic landscapes are made up of not only people and language but also a kaleidoscope of other elements integral to the meaning-making process, which should be taken into consideration in analysis of communication and interaction.

As Hodge and Kress (1988) claim, "every semiotic act has an ideological content" (p. 40). By connecting positioning theory with social semiotics and multimodal analysis, the ways that this ideological content is embedded in individual semiotic acts can be more easily traced. The *message*, elevated in social semiotics, replaces the *speech act* in the positioning triangle (see Figure 5 below), making way for multimodal forms of communication and emphasizing the importance of multi-directional interpretation rather than the unidirectional illocutionary force, or intention of the interlocutor. This is an important difference from the original model because this highlights the ability for any of the three points on the triangle to be contested equally. The illocutionary force of speech acts, with their emphasis on the speaker's intention, followed by the perlocutionary force that this intention may have on others, is more difficult to contest given its unidirectional nature. The message, on the other hand, with contestation built into its interpretive nature, places this point of the triangle on a more similar, ephemeral footing as the other two.

This begins to address the concern voiced by Herbel-Eisenmann et al. (2015) that much research using positioning theory considers only one position or storyline; when multiple interpretations of the message are brought to the forefront, the multiplicity of positions and storylines in any interaction becomes more evident.

Figure 5: Modified Positioning Triangle



Adapted from Harré & van Langenhove (1999)

The position and storyline, interlinked with this message, help to connect individual semiotic acts of meaning making with larger narratives (the storyline) and the social expectations and norms associated with the characters in those narratives (the position). Likewise, the scalability of positioning theory, which in this study is exemplified by nested positioning processes at the institutional, interactive, and reflexive levels, provides a clear path by which semiotic analysis, including interpretations and indexed meanings, can take place in relation to a multitude of scales and levels of power.

In this third layer of analysis, as I examined processes of positioning at multiple levels, I did so using the modified positioning triangle proposed for multimodal positioning analysis. This

entailed a close look at not only the positions and storylines but also the semiotic resources used in designing, producing, and distributing the message, as well as a balanced view of the message as the nexus of *discourse*, *genre*, *style*, and *modality* (van Leeuwen, 2004, p. 91). This highlights the importance of context in situating the triangle within a context that is continually changing, thereby influencing the interpretations of the messages, positions, and storylines involved in any interaction.

CHAPTER 4:
Institutional and Instructor Positioning:
Influential Discourses and Messages within the Online Educational Context

This chapter, the first of three dedicated to presenting the findings of this study, will examine the positioning that took place at the macro, institutional level, as well as the interconnected positioning that took place at the meso, instructor level within the classes. In doing so, it will address the first two research questions that guide this study:

1. *How do the affordances and constraints of fully online course contexts shape positions available to both teacher candidates and course instructors?*
2. *How do online instructors position themselves in relation to the course content and the teacher candidates through participation in the online course environment?*

Research Question #1 is aligned with the macro, institutional level positioning. In answering this, I take a multimodal analysis approach in which I view the online course site as a representation of institutional discourses and the work of institutional actors to create a virtual semiotic landscape (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010) in which online classes are held. This semiotic landscape, in turn, has the power to position actors within it via its affordances and constraints, as well as the messages conveyed by its visual design and the associated user experience. Research Question #2 narrows the focus to interactive positioning that takes place surrounding the instructors of the classes. As this chapter will show, by being facilitators of the courses and, in many ways, the faces of the institution, their positions, and the resulting storylines of the classes they teach, are deeply affected by positioning at the macro (institutional) level, even when those processes take place beyond their control.

This chapter will begin with a descriptive analysis of the online course site and its design as a means of providing a backdrop for how the discourses adhered to at the institutional level result in the overall course design, which itself is a means of constraint on the positions that may be taken up within it.

Setting the Stage: Institutional Positioning

Meeting the growing demand for fully online education, a pressure that comes from both students and administrators (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018), requires intensive logistical planning and execution at the administrative level. In fact, universities with large numbers of online offerings frequently manage their online programs separately, with separate instructional designers and technology specialists (McMurtrie, 2017), student recruiting and support systems, and complex financial and staffing arrangements that direct funds and faculty members differently depending on whether they are associated with online or face-to-face programs (Gardner, 2019). These logistical considerations, although presumably necessary for integrating massive changes quickly and efficiently into often labyrinthine structures within large universities, have important implications for how both instructors and students are positioned within the online setting.

In alignment with this dual-system approach, the online and face-to-face MA TESOL programs at SU were largely kept separate, with little overlap in terms of students or faculty. As is the case with many universities (McMurtrie, 2017), faculty members for the online program were mostly different from those teaching in the face-to-face courses. Some faculty members were instructors within the home department, but they were not tenured or tenure-track professors and had less input into course or curricular content and structuring. Similarly, although the courses and objectives for the face-to-face and online MA TESOL programs were

the same, with the online program being modeled after the older face-to-face program, students enrolled in the online program could not enroll face-to-face courses, and face-to-face students could not take the online courses set up for online students. As a result, there was no course interaction between the two populations, even though they were pursuing the same degree at the same institution.

The sharp institutional distinction made between the online and face-to-face faculty and student populations provides the backdrop for this chapter, which will examine in detail the ways that decisions made at the institutional or administrative levels shaped the overall educational environment and its affordances for both instructors and fully online students. I will begin with a descriptive discussion of the visual and structural elements of the online course design, which may be shared in common with online classes created for on-campus students but, as the primary or even sole form of interaction between instructors and teacher candidates in the online program, hold even greater significance. Then, I will turn to the ways that these online courses, which are predesigned with the majority of materials and assignments provided directly to the instructors, altered the positions that the instructors were able to take up, shifting not only their duties but also the ways they were perceived by the teacher candidates enrolled in their classes.

Institutional Self-Positioning in the Online Space

Although educational institutions position faculty and students in a wide variety of ways, the institutional positioning that manifested in the design and structure of the online course sites was found to be the most powerful within the context of this study. The overall course design in the MA TESOL program at SU was set up to be almost entirely text-based. The courses were structured to be very clean in design, with solid white backgrounds and black or red text and minimal customization between classes. None of the classes I observed had any class- or subject-

specific images, banners, or customized webpages associated, as is sometimes seen in online classes; instead, they all followed the same basic structure in which multiple columns of text were aligned in predictable and simple ways. The austere design of the courses, with very little color or imagery but large amounts of text, prioritized information, particularly information shared in writing.

The course homepage, for example, was made up of a collection of abbreviated postings that could be clicked on to navigate to the full post, thereby allowing a large number of links to be arranged within a single screen (see Figure 6). Announcements posted by the instructor were placed front and center, and a section dedicated to "recent activity" such as private messages and assignment notifications took up the space immediately beneath. On the right, a button that linked to the course calendar was placed at the top, and a To Do list with instructor-created tasks in red text streamed down the page, with x's provided for students to remove tasks as they completed them. A column to the left linked to more teacher-created announcements, the course syllabus, modules, and grades, as well as institutional resources, policies, and a link to the university bookstore.

Figure 6: Example Course Homepage

The organization of the homepage appears to be set up to streamline students' engagement with the course by highlighting instructor communications, tasks, and upcoming deadlines. Instructor announcements were given special prominence, as they were not only displayed at the top of the center and widest column but also were linked in the bottom central section as well as the second link in the left column. Other than a line of text at the top of the screen and the top of the "Recent Activity" section, there were no visual indicators of the class, its content, or the instructor. In addition, the notification regarding "Conversation Messages," or private messages, was the only indication of one-on-one communication between the student and either the instructor or fellow classmates. Navigating to the various links on the homepage resulted in a similarly austere page in which text dominated the screen, prioritizing information and required tasks. This prioritization emphasized students' obligations of following instructions,

reading all course materials, and completing assignments in a timely manner. Importantly, this structure is not one created by the LMS itself, which offered options for course home page customization ("Course Home Page Customization," 2015), but one that was a default within the institutional configuration.

The reasoning for this design may be linked to discourses regarding online learners as a whole. Typically non-traditional (i.e., older) students, they are more likely to have full-time jobs and familial obligations (2019 Online Education Trends Report); combined with the flexibility of online classes, this results in a reported need for assistance with effective time management (Magda & Aslanian, 2018; Murray & Christison, 2017). By prioritizing due dates and class information, the course site helped provide this assistance so that students could check upcoming tasks, announcements, and other notifications at a glance. The lack of imagery placed course information squarely as the focal point of the page, limiting any need for scrolling through what may be seen as nonessential visual elements. Particularly for the increasing number of students who access their online course sites via handheld mobile devices rather than computers (Magda & Aslanian, 2018), placement of high-priority information within simplified structures is a key design consideration.

Additionally, this uniform design may highlight the ephemeral role that the instructors had in taking on the courses observed; because they were not the designers of these courses, they may have had less freedom, technology training, or feelings of personal connection to the courses, thereby leading to fewer considerations of homepage personalization or presentation of visuals (Lane, 2009). Extensive research has shown that instructors who feel more comfortable with online teaching and have more training in how to develop online courses are more likely to use a range of technologies selected and adapted to teaching purposes, while those who report

less comfort and training are more likely to use default settings or rely on the work of centralized instructional designers (Cheng, 2015; Comas-Quinn, 2011; Lane, 2009; Shepherd, 2008). As Lane (2009) succinctly states, “novices happily use the high-tech CMS [course management system] as a glorified copy machine” (n.p.) instead of as a hub for a diverse range of tools. Given the heavy workload that accompanies learning new technologies and constructing fully online courses, instructors who are assigned to courses only once are not likely to feel the strong level of investment in these courses to take on such a time-consuming challenge. As a result, the default settings imposed by the institution become the standard across the majority of classes, creating an internalized logonomic system (Hodge & Kress, 1988) of how online classes should look and function.

Conformity and Limitations for Interaction in the Course Environment

Regardless of the reasons that may have come into play, the lack of personalization and imagery and the minimized role of communication outside of instructions and assignments did little to support a sense of social presence, class interaction, or community. It limited the ability for the program or the instructor to develop visual “markers of group membership” (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 79) that would provide a sense of differentiation and cohesion upon entrance to the online course site that could potentially assist with the development of a virtual community. As a result, students were positioned as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active learners and collaborators with others within a customized learning community. Similarly, the visual conformity and lack of visual elements removed a possible avenue by which instructors may showcase their individuality (Johnston, 2011), creating instead an image in which all instructors in the program were homogenized and interchangeable, hidden and mysterious behind a wall of text.

The austere course design reflected not only discourses of efficiency and time management but also intense institutional attention to security and the need to verify students' identity. One place in which a space for images was allowed by the LMS, a section for profile pictures that users could upload to be displayed beside their names atop their postings, was disabled by the university, leaving the spaces where a picture could have been as a grey placeholder. Emily, who had extensive online teaching experience before teaching the English as an International Language class, found this concerning:

> I actually had a fit before I started this class. I don't have any faces in this Canvas application. Usually students are allowed to upload pictures, profile pictures or whatever, and for some reason [SU] said, 'No photos, no profile photos because we can't regulate them, and you can't make sure that those are who you are.' And I emailed everybody I could up to the day before class saying, 'This is really important for creating a community, class culture, making sure that people are really engaged, because if they put a face to a name, then they care about that name a little bit more.'

According to Emily, the decisions made by SU in terms of course design, including restricting students' ability to upload a profile picture that may help their instructors and classmates "care about that name a little bit more," were based on concerns arising from the disembodied nature of the online class and the corresponding need to verify student identity. However, prioritization of security in this case served to position students and instructors alike as being uniform and essentially faceless. By emphasizing conformity and efficiency and strictly regulating the images that students were able to include in their profiles to identify themselves, affordances for the inclusion of semiotic resources indicating individual or group identity, as well as what Emily referred to as "class culture," were limited.

Likewise, the structure of the courses themselves also served to position students in relation to one another by exerting control over the means by which they had interactional access to one another. In each of the four courses I observed, all interaction was asynchronous, which is the most common configuration for online language teacher education programs (Murray & Christison, 2017), and the primary form of peer-to-peer interaction was a text-based discussion board, in which teacher candidates were required to post responses to prompts that had been set forth by the instructor and then respond to the post of at least one of their classmates[6]. Requirements for word length varied, as did the overall number of discussion posts required within each class, but there were few other options for teacher candidates to interact with one another. The Methods of TESOL class included two teaching demonstration assignments that were submitted on Voice Thread, which allowed for a multimodal element, and on two occasions, individual teacher candidates posted videos of themselves alongside their text-based responses on the discussion boards. At the end of the Language Testing and Assessment class, teacher candidates were required to submit a final presentation in which they discussed an assessment project they had created, and many opted to use the voice-over recording feature available in PowerPoint to complete this assignment. Several teacher candidates also posted pictures of themselves alongside their self-introductory posts that took place at the beginning of their classes. However, other than Voice Thread, there were no requirements or built-in affordances for teacher candidates to communicate in ways other than written text.

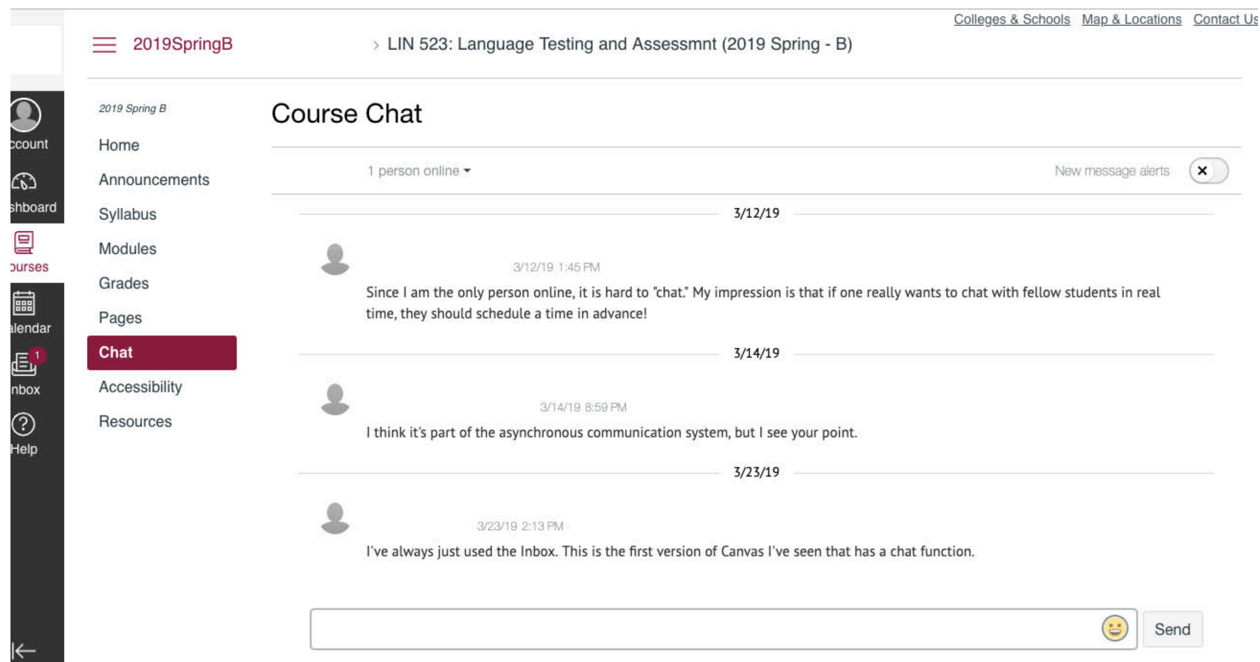
[6] Although instructors had some autonomy in shaping how their students were required to interact with one another, the text-based, asynchronous design was consistent across classes observed, pointing to the priorities and concerns of the centralized instructional designers and faculty members who initially designed the classes. This will be covered in greater detail in the following section regarding instructor positioning.

Jeff addressed the reasons for this directly in a recorded presentation he uploaded to the course site at the beginning of the Language Testing and Assessment class, mentioning that they could not have any of the "cool stuff" (i.e., synchronous, multimodal options) due to the fact that there were students taking the course from around the world with varying access to high-speed Internet and software programs. When I asked him about this in our interview, he said:

> We have lots of computer programs [available], but if it doesn't work, you know, then what's the point? So trying to use something that people are unable to use in other countries with different wi-fi connections and all those things, that's another thing you have to juggle.

Jeff's acknowledgement that there were numerous other possibilities for interaction that were perceived to be ineffective or not equally accessible by all students highlights a key point that online course designers must keep in mind as they select programs and applications: The incorporation of "cool stuff" in online settings may cause logistical challenges as students work in diverse settings outside the control of the institution with varying ease of access and comfort with a range of technological features (Shin & Kang, 2017). He had tried to partially overcome this challenge by incorporating a chat section in his class, which no one used, seemingly due to students' lack of familiarity with both the function itself and the non-evaluated, voluntary space for synchronous interaction it was meant to provide (See Figure 7).

Figure 7: Course Chat



The discussion that took place within this chat option offers insight into why it was not used. Built-in chats are modeled on synchronous chatrooms, one of the earliest forms of user-to-user communication on the Internet, but in their original, familiar form, their synchronous nature entails having multiple individuals present and active in the same space at the same time. When one user recognized that it could also be used asynchronously, another compared it to the Inbox, a private messaging feature in the LMS. The genre of an asynchronous, text-based chat section as an area in which informal or off-task talk (Armstrong & Manson, 2010) could occur was new to teacher candidates in this brief interaction, so they struggled to understand its purpose and functionality. Because this was not a regular feature of the online classes, these teacher

candidates did not have previous models from other contexts for how this function could be used, so without explicit instruction on its use, it was left largely vacant for the entirety of the course.

As a result of the difficulty involved in "juggling" the various limitations that different students may have based on technological access or comfort combined with the limited and inconsistent provision of other communication options such as the chat function, nearly all communication was funneled into the required, public, and instructor-evaluated online discussion forum. Discussion boards typically have the following components: (a) a prompt, usually written by the instructor and in reference to course content; (b) rules for participation, such as word length or required responses to classmates' postings; and (c) an evaluative framework, such as a rubric (Verenikina, Jones & Delahunty, 2017). Discussion boards may either be accessible by the entire class or to a smaller group as determined by the instructor(s); in either case, although the intended audience is ostensibly one's classmates (ergo the term "discussion"), the regulatory and evaluative components press the author to consider the course instructor or grader as a primary audience (Bell, 1989, 2002), a shift which will be returned to regularly in the remainder of this manuscript.

Imposed Positional Identities for Course Instructors and Students

The austere and text-heavy design of the course, with its focus on task completion and production of written discussion board posts that held the instructor as the primary audience, created a virtual semiotic landscape (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2011) within which all interactions took place. This landscape, carrying with it a range of ideologies as well as constraints on possibilities for interaction and positioning, effectively imposed institutional values and positional identities upon both the instructors and the teacher candidates in this study. This section will provide a brief overview of the ways that these positional identities took shape in

relation to this semiotic landscape and the institutional power it conveyed; a closer analysis of the profound effects on positioning and identity construction among instructors and teacher candidates will follow.

The primary audience for the discussion postings, understood to be the instructors rather than fellow classmates, had implications for how these "discussions" were approached by teacher candidates. In knowing that their contributions were being evaluated and were directly linked to their overall success in the course and therefore the program, the participants referred to a feeling of their work existing in a sort of panopticon in which they were under constant surveillance. Lydia, for example, stated:

> I do feel that pressure where you're being watched every moment. You know, all the engagement that you're having between your classmates is being observed, you know, or assuming that it's being observed by the professor or their TA. And you know, I don't want to come off as not taking the course seriously or not taking the material seriously.

Lydia's comment highlights the performativity inherent in the online discussion board postings. The importance of positioning oneself as a "serious" student underlies all interactions with one's classmates in these forums; not being seen as "serious" about the material means not being appropriately positioned as a *good student*. The relative permanence of discussion posts further elevates this tension—each communicative act is performed with the knowledge that it is being recorded and can be returned to at any given point during the class for inspection.

Within the typical instructor-student power dynamic in which the instructor wields considerable power over the grades that students may receive in a course, and therefore their opportunities within the larger degree program and beyond, this positioning placed teacher candidates such as Lydia in a vulnerable position that they needed to defend through careful and

consistent self-positioning. Other than the unused chat option described above, the teacher candidates did not have a meaningful area in which to speak with one another in private. As Gulati (2008) states in her criticism of constant instructor surveillance in supposedly constructivist online classes:

> Technologies may be set up to develop more open and democratic systems, but they are consequently transformed to increase surveillance. Increased surveillance removes individual choices that are initially used to promote technologies, while bringing to question trusting relationships among individuals and monitoring authorities. This dilemma is evident in these so-called 'democratic' online learning systems, where 'open' and 'safety' discourses are misinterpreted as increased teacher monitoring and control over the learning process. (p 187)

The availability of private or semi-private, non-evaluated spaces for communication, similar to what Goffman (1959) refers to as the "backstage," is an important part of providing safe spaces for individuals to engage with complex topics. In addition to being spaces in which individuals can try out and wrestle with new ideas informally, they are also spaces in which "off-task talk" can occur, an important form of personal connection and community building in which individuals are able to develop feelings of trust and familiarity with others (Armstrong & Manson, 2010). Without these spaces and opportunities for informal, off-task discussions, individuals are likely to continually gear their language toward the expectations that they perceive the instructor or other evaluator to hold for them. As will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter, this had important effects on the linguistic choices and positioning by the teacher candidates in this study; a highly formal, academic register was used as a means of "impressing the professor," as one participant stated, and it is one that did not feel comfortable or

authentic to some of the teacher candidates. The structure of courses that direct peer-to-peer communication almost exclusively to these evaluated discussion boards is one that creates a perception that idea exchange must occur within established rules as well as the mindset that interaction must be linked to evaluation.

To return to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, one that has deeply influenced many researchers investigating online identity construction for the simplicity and applicability of its metaphorical categorization, individuals in online courses without private opportunities for engagement are constantly at the "front"—on stage, in character, and performing for their perceived audiences via carefully rehearsed ways of speaking and being. The result is one that provides a clear example of how the Online Identity Analysis Model put forth by Aresta et al. (2015) is enacted in text-based, educational settings. The model illustrates how online identity performance "can be edited, deleted, arranged and reconfigured according to the character one desires to represent" (p. 82) and emphasizes the relative permanence of online postings; as individuals recognize that their identity performances are asynchronous, disembodied, and easily decontextualized and reinterpreted by others with whom they may not have trusting relationships, they place more importance on constructing an online identity that is less vulnerable to interpretation in potentially damaging ways. As such, the institutional positioning of the teacher candidates as being primarily responsible for engaging in interactions that are rife with consequences related to evaluation creates a space in which the ways that individuals discursively position themselves in classroom exchanges is likewise filled with tension and perceived consequence.

Finally, all courses observed followed a module format, in which there were a series of modules, each designed to be an essentially self-contained package of readings, lectures, and

assignments, that followed a clear progression in the course calendar as prescribed due dates signaled the closing of a module and the beginning of, or at least redirection to, a new one. Although the courses I observed gradually built on concepts from one module to the next, the topics within each module were designed to be as fully addressed as possible within the timeframe in which the module was to be completed. They were not closed or made inaccessible after the due date, but there was little reason for teacher candidates to return to them after their assignment deadlines had passed, creating a sort of lock-step, linear progression through the material. Although some class features such as course announcements, private messaging features, and chat forums (where included) were accessible for the duration of the class and were not linked to specific dates, the discussion boards, where many of the assignments were submitted and interactions took place, were located within these modules. For this reason, they were heavily used for a short period of time, after which they were all but abandoned as discussion boards associated with new modules were used.

This linear, module-based progression encapsulates content and assessment neatly and efficiently, for reasons quite similar to those that shape the austere design of the courses observed. Because online students are typically older, with more non-academic responsibilities such as careers and family obligations (2019 Online Education Trends Report), structuring courses for maximum efficiency is highly valued (Magda & Aslanian, 2018; Murray & Christison, 2017). Yet, this structure is one that may lead to the compartmentalization of topics and idea exchanges as the content in modules is "covered" and then, at least in some cases, left behind. As the next chapter will show, this compartmentalization had effects on how the teacher candidates in this study perceived their responsibilities toward the content and communication within each section.

The institutional positioning visible in the online course spaces reflects the larger discourses and ideologies to which the university was oriented. A uniform course appearance with prepackaged and shared elements supports discourses of conformity and standardization. The inability to upload photos to individual profiles supports discourses of security and regulation. The repetitive use of text-based, instructor-evaluated discussion boards that are linked with self-contained, content-based modules supports discourses that privilege assessment and structured displays of knowledge and over informal, gradual exchange and refinement of ideas. These discourses are different from the discourses to which the instructors oriented themselves as they considered their teaching practices, discourses more aligned with the importance of providing community and spaces for students to interact in meaningful ways. However, as I will discuss in greater detail below, the nature of these online courses, which were largely predesigned according to institutional priorities, limited the creative control that instructors had, particularly when in opposition to semiotic choices made at the institutional level. As a result, the institution's discourses and resulting design choices did not allow the instructors and the teacher candidates to construct a wide array of positions freely.

Positioning of Instructors: New Duties, New Storylines

This section will examine the ways that instructors were institutionally positioned via the framework within which online classes were carried out, as well as the effects that such positioning processes had on the ensuing interactive positioning that occurred between instructors and the teacher candidates. Two major shifts in the instructor position will be discussed alongside the ways that these shifts, and the associated shifts in rights and duties, were perceived by the instructors and teacher candidates in different ways, leading to multiple

interpretations of the overarching storyline of what occurred within the classes and the online MA TESOL program as a whole.

Positioning in online classrooms is influenced by a wide array of factors. One factor is the prevalence of predesigned courses, which are often created by a range of administrators, (senior) faculty members, and instructional designers and then provided to instructors to teach, complete with the course curriculum, assignments, grading framework, and overall schedule (Murray & Christison, 2017; Rodrigo & Ramírez, 2017). In traditional learning environments, positioning of instructors is one that is well established among many individuals, particularly in Western cultures, and the process of positioning instructors as having the duties of creating and discursively mediating content corresponds to a positioning of students as having rights to these acts of creation and mediation. To clarify, Harré (2012) situates the rights and duties associated with positions within a "symmetry presumption[7]" in which "for every duty there is a right and for every right there is a duty" (p. 197). Duties are taken on by those in positions of power (in this case, instructors) and denote responsibilities toward those with less power, whereas rights are, at least in modern, Western understanding, the deserved remedies and assistance for those who are in positions of vulnerability (in this case, teacher candidates).

The new duties required or expected of online instructors teaching predesigned courses, which decenter these traditional duties, instead include a major focus on course facilitation and troubleshooting. Time that was previously allotted to preparing and conducting in-person classes is frequently reallocated to time spent ensuring that students effectively navigate the course site and complete assignments correctly and on time; time that previously may have been spent

[7] Harré (2012) qualifies this statement by recognizing that not all cultures, including Western society, have such presumed symmetry between rights and duties and may be primarily rights-focused or duties-focused, and therefore, imbalances of rights and duties are actually common.

facilitating in-class discussions is instead spent moderating and providing feedback in online discussion board forums (Fletcher & Bullock, 2015; Hall & Knox, 2009; Hogan & McKnight, 2007). The altered duties associated with online teaching as opposed to face-to-face teaching have impacts on the storyline that takes place within the class environment as a whole, as well as the positions that both the instructor and the students (in this case, teacher candidates) take up. This section will explore two major shifts in instructor positioning that were identified in this study to demonstrate how the fulfillment of the new duties required of these positions shaped the ways the teacher candidates positioned their instructors in turn as well as how they interactively positioned themselves.

Shift in Positional Identities #1: From Content Creator to Course Facilitator

In the online MA TESOL program at SU, classes were taught by a range of individuals with varying levels of experience teaching in online settings or within the MA TESOL program as a whole. As is the case with many universities with large online programs (Gardner, 2019), online instructors were ancillary faculty members who were brought on to teach classes on an as-needed basis. After regular faculty members who had been determined to be "experts" in key course areas initially designed and piloted the online courses in collaboration with centrally housed instructional designers, the predesigned courses were assigned to "faculty associates," who were not tenured or tenure-track faculty members, to teach. Of the three instructors who agreed to participate in this study, two (Jeff and Leo) were instructors in the English department, where they typically taught First-Year Composition and Academic Writing courses, and one (Emily) was a writing program administrator at a different institution who taught online part-time for SU (for a full description, see Chapter 3). These faculty associates were known to be highly qualified instructors and were encouraged by the program director to inject their "voice"

into the courses, but they were limited in terms of the changes they could make to content, structure, or learning objectives. The one exception to this was Jeff, who had been identified as an expert in his subject (Language Testing and Assessment) and had been involved in the design of the course prior to teaching it.

Predesigned courses, otherwise known as “master” courses or, pejoratively, “canned” courses, are a common component in online programs, and they have been seen as a cost-effective way to package content and curriculum in ways that can be easily reused and/or repurposed multiple times, potentially by multiple people (Cheng, 2015). They have clear advantages—because online classes typically take significantly more time to develop than face-to-face classes and require online expertise that not all faculty members possess, they free up instructor time and help to ensure consistency and a baseline of quality across the online curriculum (Rodrigo & Ramírez, 2017). In cases such as that of SU, a core faculty member of a department can develop and pilot the course according to strict departmental or institutional controls, and other instructors who may not have the same level of expertise in the area can take on the teaching responsibilities, ostensibly without a reduction in quality of the content. As universities manage their multiple duties of providing a quality education while keeping costs low, the predesigned course has emerged as a useful way to achieve these goals in what appears to be a win-win solution.

The three instructors who participated in this study, all of whom had different levels of experience with teaching online and with teaching the subject they were assigned, appreciated the possibilities that the predesigned courses provided. Emily, who had the most experience teaching online, having taken classes in teaching online and doing so at multiple institutions, said that every class she had taught online had been predesigned:

> I haven't designed my own online class yet because it's just such a gargantuan task. And everywhere I've taught, they said, 'Oh, we already have the curriculum. Here's the core shell and make it your own.'

She also recognized the logistical reasons for using predesigned classes in the MA TESOL program, saying they were necessary "if they were ever gonna get it off the ground because their full-time faculty are strapped." For Leo, who had never taught online before teaching the Methods of TESOL class and felt quite uncomfortable with the setting, having a predesigned class was especially helpful as he adjusted to teaching in this new context. Importantly, he also appreciated that the faculty members who designed the courses were the same people who had been his own professors while he was pursuing his doctorate, and he looked to them as mentors both in terms of the content and the practice of online teaching. The support provided by the predesigned course offered him a greater sense of self-efficacy in relation to his new teaching duties (see Horvitz, Beach, Anderson, & Xia, 2014).

As a creator of the course he was teaching, Jeff's perspective was quite different. Although he felt greater freedom to adjust the course over time and had used his experiences in teaching a different online class the year before to make changes to the design of a project in the class observed, he was careful to maintain the packaged nature of the course. As he stated, "The next person who teaches this course might not be me. It might be a grad student or something." For this reason, he felt comfortable changing parts of the course that were easily documented, saved, and passed on to the next instructor, but he did not feel comfortable engaging in more spontaneous, ephemeral course activities such as synchronous discussions, which would not result in materials that could be reused by others.

Predesigned courses are indeed beneficial. They are time-saving and allow instructors like Emily the ability to pick up a wide variety of courses and focus their time on teaching them rather than creating them. They also offer opportunities to initiate new teachers into the online setting, as was the case with Leo, who was grappling with the new complexities and challenges of online teaching during his time as instructor of a fast-paced, 7-5-week, fully online course. In addition, they may be beneficial for the course creators, as was the case with Jeff, because they forced him to consider how to teach the material in ways that were more predetermined and less improvisational than he may have defaulted to if he had not been concerned about the need to maintain a cohesive package for others to receive when they are assigned to teach the course (Roblyer, Porter, Bielefeldt, & Donaldson, 2009).

However, because the responsibility for developing content within this MA TESOL program lay with administrators, senior faculty members, and instructional designers rather than the instructors themselves, the instructors were not creators and designers of the content they taught, as may be the case in face-to-face classes; instead, they were facilitators of the content and the course(s) in which it was packaged. As mentioned previously, the provision of some content and curriculum to instructors, particularly those who are not senior faculty members, is nothing new or specific to online education (Cheng, 2015; Rodrigo & Ramírez, 2017). However, the ways in which this strategy plays out in a fully online setting have important implications for the positioning of the instructor both in relation to the institution as a whole and in relation to his or her students within the online class, as this section will show.

To unpack these positional identities, social semiotics and multimodal analysis provide an appropriate additional analytical tool. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) outline four strata in which they contend that meaning is made: (a) *discourse*, or "socially constructed knowledges of

(some aspect of) reality"; (b) *design*, which is "the means to realise discourses in the context of a given communication situation" (c) *production*, or the "actual material articulation of the semiotic event"; and (d) *distribution*, or the means by which the produced, material articulation is actually disseminated to the audience (p. 5-7). Applied to predesigned courses, *discourse* aligns with the overarching theories of learning and teaching that are referenced, *design* aligns with the work of creating the course package, *production* is the process of actually teaching the course, and *distribution* is the way(s) that the audience, in this case teacher candidates, access the product of the course, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Four Strata of Meaning-Making Applied to Predesigned Courses

Stratum	Definition	Course equivalent
Discourse	Socially constructed knowledges of (some aspect of) reality	Theories of online learning and teaching
Design	The means to realize discourses in the context of a given communication situation	Creation of course package
Production	Actual material articulation of the semiotic event	Process of teaching or facilitation of course package contents
Distribution	The means by which the produced, material articulation is actually disseminated to the audience	How the audience (students) access the instructor's teaching (e.g., LMS, email, mobile device)

In most interactions, discourse, design, and production are unified into one seamless semiotic package. In conversations, for example, the design and production of an utterance are practically inseparable. In face-to-face teaching contexts, the design can be seen as being akin to lesson planning while production is the act of carrying out the lesson plan. Typically, with the exceptions of instances in which teachers are required to follow strict lesson plans developed by others, these two strata are carried out by the same individual. Although instructors may have predetermined learning objectives and course goals that direct the design of the class, they

frequently still have significant control over how these objectives and goals may be met both in terms of the overall vision of the course and the design and implementation of lesson plans. However, in the case of predesigned courses (held either online or face-to-face), discourse, design, and production are uncoupled. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) maintain that:

> When design and production separate, design becomes a means of controlling the actions of others, the potential for a unity between discourse, design and production diminishes, and there is no longer room for the 'producers' to make the design 'their own,' to add their own accent. (p. 7)

In other words, when the person in charge of the production of the message is not the same as the person in charge of the design of the message, an unequal power dynamic exists that places limitations on what the "producer" is able to do to inject their own personality, or "accent" into the message itself. When instructors are given predesigned courses, they may be allowed to add their own "voice" into the course, as these instructors were encouraged to do, but only in limited ways. In addition, the degree to which instructors feel comfortable taking advantage of the flexibility and control they do have may depend upon their overall comfort level with the both the setting (in this case, online) and course content itself (Horvitz, Beach, Anderson, & Xia, 2015; Lane, 2009; Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Shin & Kang, 2017).

To return to the modified positioning triangle (see Figure 5), in which the message, position, and storyline are interconnected, the change in the message that occurs as a result of the separation of design and production in turn causes changes in both the storyline and the positioning that occurs within that context. Here, the instructor's positional identity as primary *creator* of the course shifts to one as *content facilitator* or *course facilitator*, a shift which entails a different set of rights and duties. Even in the case of Jeff, who actually was an initial creator of

the course, his position as current though perhaps not future facilitator of the course limited his ability to incorporate spontaneous changes that could not easily be transferred to different instructors working with different students. Instead, he relied upon recorded, asynchronous lectures that could easily be passed along to anyone who may be assigned to teach the class in the future.

What may appear to be a subtle shift in instructor positioning had surprisingly large impacts on the ways that teacher candidates who were enrolled in the classes perceived their instructors' positions, as well as their associated duties, and ultimately the storyline of the class as a whole. Teacher candidates who were accustomed to face-to-face contexts and had clear understandings of the positions that their instructors held in those settings, as well as those who had experience in online class settings with different institutional priorities and processes, were confronted with a different set of positions and associated rights and duties than that with which they were previously familiar. For example, Guillermo struggled to understand exactly what his instructors' duties were, saying, "I don't know what their job is. Sometimes I think they have it really easy in terms of teaching these classes." Because he could not see the work that his instructors were putting into the courses behind the scenes, he had trouble visualizing their duties and responsibilities to the class and to him as a student. Likewise, Christina, who had expressed a positive outlook toward the online education she had received in high school, talked at length about her instructors' use of "recycled materials," videos and slideshows which had been created by other people and reused by the instructors. Because they were not creating the materials themselves, Christina struggled to feel as if the instructors were truly invested in the course.

> There's a sense with some of the professors, and some more so than others, that it seems like they're just there to grade the papers. There's no personality, there's no

> customization. And I have sometimes gotten the impression that they may not take the online courses as seriously…It's almost like they're a facilitator-slash-grader rather than the teacher of the subject.

Christina's positioning of the instructor as a "facilitator-slash-grader" is a positional identity shift that has been noted previously in the literature. In a particularly relevant self-study, an online instructor reported feeling more like an evaluator/grader than the traditional notion of a teacher, stating, "In one of my courses, it might be more apt to say that my teaching *is* assessment and evaluation—I feel that I do little more than that in my interactions with students and their learning" (Fletcher & Bullock, 2015, p. 699, emphasis original). Importantly, however, Christina connected the altered position of the instructor, and the presumed rights and duties that were associated with this altered position, with the feeling that the instructors of predesigned courses "may not take the online courses as seriously," perhaps because it was clear to her that they were not the creators of the content. Although she did not continue that line of thought, there is an implication that she was comparing online and face-to-face classes, with instructors taking face-to-face classes (in which instructors presumably take on more duties related to creating the lessons and content) more seriously than the online classes. This positioning of online students as perhaps less important than face-to-face students is one that echoes the institutional positioning discussed earlier, in which online students were positioned as separate but adjacent to face-to-face students, with membership within a thriving and reputable community hampered by limitations in access to opportunities designed for those situated on campus.

The perception that face-to-face classes and other responsibilities took precedence over the online class was a very common theme in my discussions with participants, and it was one

with clear and immediate repercussions. Because these teacher candidates felt that the instructors were not the primary creators of content and therefore not as invested in the online classes as they may be in their face-to-face classes, their position within the overall storyline unfolding in the class shifted. Although the teacher candidates described the class content as being high quality and positioned the instructors as experts in their fields, the expected duties of spontaneous content creation and customized instruction and feedback were, in their view, not being entirely fulfilled, thereby leaving a void in which they felt they did not know their instructors, nor did their instructors know them. Eleanor struggled with feeling like her instructors thought of her and other online students differently than the way they thought of their students in face-to-face settings:

> I don't know, like, how they see us. Because I feel kind of like, just a name on a list. You know, they have more classes with actual students, and I'm kind of just this like, non-entity.

By contrasting herself as a "non-entity" with "actual students" in the face-to-face setting, Eleanor made it clear that she felt her status as an online student was diminished. As nothing more than a "name on a list," she felt an overwhelming distance between herself and her instructor that made the possibility of a meaningful relationship seem out of reach.

The notion that instructors were busy with "more classes with actual students" was another common theme. All but one of the teacher candidates referred to their instructors as being busy with many responsibilities, including face-to-face teaching responsibilities, outside of class that may take away from their focus on the online class. As individuals with busy lives themselves, they seemed to be sensitive to this possibility, with six of the eight specifically

mentioning that they often chose not to ask their instructors questions because they presumed they were busy. Lydia stated:

> I feel like, oh, I don't want to burden my instructor with these sort of inane questions because I realize they're busy. They're teaching several classes, online and in person. I know one of my professors teaches high school during the day. So, I mean, they're busy. So I feel a little bit guilty about pestering them with questions.

However, by positioning their instructors as more concerned with their other responsibilities, the teacher candidates in turn positioned themselves as being less important, a position that implicated the rights that they felt they had as students. From the perspective of the teacher candidates, the predesigned courses, so helpful in saving time and effort among instructors with multiple competing demands on their time, demonstrated that their instructors were either *not invested in the class* or *too busy* to take on the duties of course creation and personalization and, by extension, too busy to take on other typical duties related to answering questions and interaction with their students.

Throughout my interviews with teacher candidates, the hesitance to ask instructors questions was a key theme. Although this reluctance was most frequently linked to concerns that their instructors were too busy to be bothered with their questions, Christina directly connected this with her sense of disconnection with the instructors as teachers of content. Shortly after she commented on her frustration with the "recycled materials" that she saw her instructors using, Christina claimed that, because her instructors were not who she perceived to be teaching the content, she would ask them specifics about the assignments but "it just doesn't occur to [her]" to reach out to them to ask questions about course content. She opted to perform Internet searches to find the answers to her questions instead. This strategy appears to have been a

pattern; in addition to this strategy being referenced by every teacher candidate in this study, Leo, who taught the Methods of TESOL course, stated that “back-and-forth conversations” between himself and the students were usually about “a technical problem.” Fiona echoed this sentiment, connecting the courses’ online nature with the additional influence of their short duration:

> I know all the professors, whether its online or in person, are there to answer questions. But [in face-to-face classes] if I had more interaction with the professor, I got close to the professor. If I had them longer, if I knew them and they knew me, I would be able to be more open with them.

In the online setting with predesigned courses, the instructors were positioned as *aloof*, *not invested* in the course they are teaching, *too busy*, and therefore disconnected from the students and perhaps the content itself. Fiona’s statement above illustrates how this positioning distanced her from her instructors in ways that made her feel that she could not be open with them as she had been with instructors in her past experience. In an especially stark comment, Violet connected the use of predesigned materials that featured someone else’s voice to a sense of there not being an instructor present at all:

> There’s one professor that I have now, and like, honestly, I don’t even know if he ever goes online…All of his videos and lectures, granted, they’re very good, they’re very helpful, but none of them are him. There’s some young girl, and it’s just her voice. So I don’t know like if it’s a TA or you know, what it is or if it’s being passed around. So I’ve actually heard her voice for other classes. I’m kind of like, okay, so you don’t do your own lecture videos, all your stuff, like the quizzes are automatically tallied….Honestly, at this point, I’m not sure that he’s not a robot. There’s no way he would know me. He

> wouldn't. He wouldn't recognize my name…I don't even know that he's online. I truthfully don't even know if he ever even checks our class. Like, it just seems to be like an automatic setup.

Because this comment was about an instructor of a course that I was not able to observe, I do not know how much of this perception may have been altered had the instructor worked to ensure an appropriate and supportive teaching presence in addition to the packaged materials for the course. However, her perception and the implications it had for the overall storyline within the classroom are clear. Like Christina, she understood the position of the instructor as being one with duties to create course materials, and when she saw evidence that this was not the case, she questioned his overall investment in the class. Violet, however, took this storyline a bit further in questioning the instructor's entire presence in the course, and without knowledge of what that presence may be, she felt certain that he would not even know her name, let alone her qualities as a student.

In this positioning, Violet, as an online student, felt she was not simply an outsider but a nameless, faceless user within a fully mechanized setting. Importantly, she noted that the materials being used were "very good" and "very helpful," and later in the interview she made it clear that she was receiving high grades in the class. From her perspective, the class was cognitively of high quality, and she felt that she was learning effectively and achieving the class learning outcomes. However, her sense that the class was perhaps overly prepackaged and impersonal disrupted her understanding of typical teacher-student positioning, creating tension in her understanding of her position as a student with a right to personalized, teacher-created content. She contrasted this with the feeling of connection she had with instructors who fulfilled the duties of the position of teacher as creator:

> Some of them, while maybe they give me great feedback, oddly enough, the ones I feel most connected to are the one that I saw on their own videos. Like, they would make their own lecture videos. And actually, for whatever reason, I feel like they know me more, even though they never saw my videos, you know. So I kind of feel like a stronger connection in that way.

Her statement of feeling a sense of connection to the instructors she "saw on their own videos" links in with the literature on visual or otherwise nonverbal immediacy and its role in developing trusting relationships in fully online settings (Dixson, Greenwell, Rogers-Stacy, Weister, & Lauer, 2016). However, it also underscores the importance of creatorship and ownership in this area: It appears that it was not sufficient to provide "great feedback" as a means of providing teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000, 2010; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006), nor was it sufficient to include visuals that were not directly linked to the instructor him or herself. They gained meaning when they were felt to be an expression of personal investment in the course, and by extension the students, in which the instructor took on the duties associated with traditional position of the instructor as creator, and through the use of his or her own image and self-created videos, provided evidence of an involved and supportive presence. This highlights the importance of the multiple positions that effective teachers are expected to hold simultaneously; in addition to being experts and facilitators of learning, they are expected to be caring, supportive guides with a genuine interest in and commitment to their students' learning. This interest and commitment is demonstrated through interactive exchanges that go beyond curriculum delivery to establish a sense of immediacy by "reduc[ing] psychological distance in the interaction between teacher and student" (Ni & Aust, 2008). In online settings, in which the psychological distance between participants is heightened due to the lack of face-to-face, synchronous

communication, the necessary trust for developing this immediacy and building relationships may break down (Jaber & Kennedy, 2017).

Importantly, in my interviews with the instructors, all of them positioned themselves as caring, thoughtful, and engaged facilitators of learning and proponents of community, and their postings on the course site as well as their comments made it clear that they were working to be the best educators they could be within the class environment. The perception that these instructors were not invested in their online classes or too busy to help their students was not one that was shared by the instructors in any way. Nevertheless, the feelings of inferiority or lesser importance compared with face-to-face students was something that the instructors seemed to understand. In our discussion of this phenomenon, Jeff provided a parallel, comparing the feeling of being inferior as an online student to the feelings of inferiority that online instructors may feel:

> Professors feel undervalued, like I'm just an online teacher, the same as students feel like they're just an online student. I can totally get how a student could feel like I'm just their online student. You know, they don't see me as a professor like when I'm in a classroom on campus, with all that, you know. So I get it. I think it's not only students who feel that way, but probably professors in many ways feel like, when they're teaching an online course that it's second rate or that they're not real, not seen as the real thing.

The perception that online instructors are not as active or invested in their students' learning seems to be linked to the common perception that online students are not as invested in their education due to a common point: The majority of work that needs to be done on both ends is invisible. As Jeff stated, "You don't really know what's going on on the other side of the computer. You can only base it on a certain amount of discussion, comments, and so forth, right?" Although this comment was made in reference to online students, it is equally applicable

to online instructors. Numerous studies have shown that teaching online classes is more time-consuming than teaching face-to-face classes (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Coneicao, 2006; Hogan & McKnight, 2007; Wickersham & McElhany, 2010), and even predesigned courses with significant amounts of prepared material require hours of moderating discussion boards, providing feedback, and responding to emails about a broad range of topics. Regardless, the invisibility of this work means that it may not be recognized or perceived as fulfilling the duties of an instructor in the same way the highly visible act of facilitating a class in person may be. In effect, just as is the case with the work of online students, much of online instructors' work takes place behind the curtain in the backstage (Goffman, 1959). This produces a shift in the semiotic landscape of the course as a whole, expanding the scope of the backstage for each group and obscuring much of the work from view, thereby producing the sense of a void in the storyline.

Shift in Positional Identities #2: From Discursive Model to Provider of Feedback

A second major positional identity shift among the instructors was a refocusing on the instructor as a provider of feedback and simultaneous decentering of duties related to modeling and mediating discourses through one's personal perspectives and experiences. Christina's comment listed above, in which she described her online instructors as "facilitators-slash-graders" illustrates this clearly: The first positional identity shift removed or reduced their duties as content creators and replaced these duties with those of course facilitators, and the second positional identity shift, to be discussed in this section, displaced traditional duties as discursive models in lieu of a new focus on serving as providers of feedback.

Certainly, the instructors did serve as experts in relation to the content that was included in the courses observed. Despite the use of "recycled material" in some classes, it was clear that the instructors were engaging in an ongoing mediation of content that, although backgrounded

and obscured compared with the same or similar acts in a face-to-face class, was still present and visible in multiple areas of the course site. However, the ways in which instructors mediated and interpreted content followed a delayed, inductive pattern—one in which interpretation took place after students had engaged in discussions with one another about the content. Although this is a common teaching strategy in face-to-face classes, its use resulted in frustration within the four online courses observed here, seemingly due at least in part to the shifted positioning of the instructor as course facilitator described in the previous section. Teacher candidates, who felt as if they did not know or feel comfortable with their instructors due to their use of prepackaged material, saw this inductive pattern of content mediation as requiring them to teach themselves the content without the guidance they desired, thereby reinforcing their viewpoint that their instructors were not invested in their learning and instead served primarily as *providers of feedback*, *evaluators*, or *graders*.

Observations of the classes provided clear evidence that, similar to the different positioning and storylines that took place in the positional identity shift detailed in the previous section, teacher candidates and course instructors had different perspectives of their positions and obligations within the course context. In all four classes I observed, the instructors were able to accomplish a degree of teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000) through clearly presenting topics of discussion and providing detailed instructions for how to complete course assignments. They also attempted to add an element of social presence through their ongoing, positive encouragement of teacher candidates in communications such as course announcements, discussion board feedback, and emails to the entire class. For example, Emily posted the following announcement near the beginning of the English as an International Language class as a way of applauding and encouraging teacher candidates:

> Great job on your first week's work! You all have such a diverse range of interests and past experiences. This is one of my favorite assignments because at the end of the course you'll be reflecting on your learning using this piece as a baseline to show growth. I hope you'll take a look at these from time to time and reflect on your learning throughout the class. I also hope you're all reading your first chapters already and getting prepared to write your first regularly scheduled discussion board posts. You all will be creating such intriguing discussion posts, and I know the discussion boards will be the most dynamic portion of the class, so please do your best to fulfill the requirements. These requirements are in place to maximize your learning, as I'm sure you're all aware.

As the excerpt here illustrates, this announcement, as well as many others like it, served as a way to recognize contributions made by teacher candidates and encourage them to reflect on their learning, read their assigned chapters, and write "intriguing" discussion board posts. However, the role of the *course facilitator* took precedence here, as students were still familiarizing themselves with the course requirements and overall schedule. It was future oriented, not only reminding teacher candidates that they should be working on their next assignment but also providing them with a long-term perspective of how that assignment would prepare them for the remainder of the class. It served to build upon the course structure, described at length in the previous section, in which the home page emphasized the completion of tasks, by reinforcing this message in a friendly, encouraging, and personalized tone.

Indeed, although the exact strategies taken by instructors as they fulfilled their duties as *course facilitators* varied, they all provided teacher candidates with reminders of upcoming assignments that were written in a friendly, approachable, and personable manner. The MA TESOL program director reported having asked the instructors to include their own voice in the

courses, and it was in this area that their unique voices were the most apparent. Particularly since the course sites were text-focused, with instructor announcements centered on the screen in each course home page, this inclusion of voice and personality was foregrounded each time a user logged into the course sites. This positive display of their personalities and positions as supporters and encouragers was not overlooked by the teacher candidates. For example, Danielle, who had begun her bachelor's degree on campus at a different university and completed the degree online with SU prior to entering the MA TESOL program, felt that her instructors were all "very supportive and very responsive" and that she felt closer with her online MA TESOL instructors than she had had with her instructors in her large, lecture-style on-campus classes as an undergraduate. Similarly, Eleanor stated that, although she could not say what her instructors were like in their "real lives," she believed that their "online persona is really nice. They seem very agreeable and interactive."

In large part, the ways that the instructors expressed themselves in relation to interpreting content was equally supportive and personable. The excerpt below, taken from an announcement in Leo's Methods of TESOL class that was posted in response to teacher candidates' discussions about a variety of teaching methods, illustrates this:

> I know that this discussion of Brown and Lee might have complicated more than simplified matters to you. Ah, how great it would be if we just had to learn about one effective "one-fits-all" approach! If I can contribute with my two cents to this discussion, I suggest that we turn to the idea of students' needs and constraints, and the school's goals and objectives as we think of a methodology that can fit a context.

This announcement, posted after the deadline for the discussion board assignment on the chapter referenced had passed, recognized the confusion that teacher candidates expressed about the

many different teaching approaches, empathized with their sense of amazement and perhaps frustration at the plethora of choices, and briefly provided advice for understanding the chapter as applied to real-world settings. It included a distinct personal voice and positioned the instructor as a guide through complex and confusing elements presented in the chapter. Nevertheless, for the teacher candidates in this class who desired a sense of their instructor's voice and perspective as a discursive model *before* they engaged with the content, this post-assignment feedback may have been too little too late.

The four instructors observed in this study all developed slightly different patterns of mediating or interpreting the content. Leo and Emily relied heavily on course announcements to discuss topics, while Jeff created audio recorded lectures over slideshows he called "State of the Class" lectures. Dr. Z posted similar audio lectures on each module's content and wrote extended responses to teacher candidates' work within the discussion board. Importantly, however, with the exception of Dr. Z's posted lectures on module content, the majority of interpretation and mediation of the content was done as a form of feedback, taking place after teacher candidates had completed their discussion board postings or other minor assignments. This typically included commentary on discussions that had taken place, and it was frequently used as a way to clarify what had emerged as misconceptions about key points. By including this interpretation after the content had been discussed by teacher candidates, it took the form of evaluation rather than modeling, a distinction that led to confusion and a reinforced sense of disconnection from the instructors and their expectations.

Without a clear sense of the instructor as an invested, active creator and discursive model, many teacher candidates struggled to find their own confident voice as they completed assignments. All of the teacher candidates I interviewed spoke explicitly about their concerns

surrounding assignment expectations and being potentially misunderstood or mischaracterized; in turn, many expressed concern that, because they were engaging with prepackaged course content rather than what they perceived to be the instructor directly, they had trouble understanding their instructors' expectations. The interview excerpts below illustrate these concerns.

> I'm never confident when I turn in an online assignment because I don't know my professors. And so I think that's affected me two ways. I sometimes put the assignment off longer than I probably should because I'm so panicked about it and it's like I can't even get started. I'm very overwhelmed or I think I have sometimes missed the point of assignments because I'm trying to make them perfect because I can't read my professors' personality and I don't necessarily know what they're looking for in this this assignment. Sometimes even if I think about emailing my professor and asking for clarity, I'm not quite sure what I'm asking or I'm not quite sure what I'm getting. When you have a person standing there, you can actually sort of narrow down the thought process. But I find myself going, I just don't get it. It's a lot. And there's no way to phrase that in an email where it doesn't sound like I'm just intentionally creating a block for myself. (Christina)

> The professor was kind of like the man behind the curtain. All of the lectures were out of the textbook…all the learning material was external. It was either a YouTube video or it was like reading material, something that was external to what [the professor] had provided. So that was a little weird. I think that makes it even harder to know what somebody is looking for. If you don't even, like, know their voice or their personality or whatever, right? It's tough. And I'm sure, you know, maybe on the ground on campus,

when you're sitting face-to-face with a person, you can kind of arrive at a common understanding a little easier than you can online, but for whatever reason, we were not able to make that connection at all. (Lydia)

These excerpts foreground the importance of the instructor's voice as a model for the use of new discourses that arise in the learning process, particularly in online classes that include a large amount of prepackaged content that may not showcase the instructor's voice, personality, and unique perspectives grounded in years of personal experience. The position(s) of the instructor include serving as a model for how certain practices may be carried out and discourses may be used in a variety of settings (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015; Clarke, 2008; Irwin & Hramiak, 2010). Instructors' ways of speaking, doing, and being in relation to the content help to mediate and decipher complex semiotic meanings that, without being clearly voiced by an embodied individual with his or her own lived experiences and perspectives, may appear overly abstract and theoretical. Indeed, in the education of future language teachers, in which close attention to linguistic cues and features is especially important in preparation for teaching of the language itself (e.g., Trappes-Lomax & Ferguson, 2002), such discursive modeling may be even more essential.

As Lave and Wenger (1991) state in their work on situated learning, learners' roles in becoming members of a community are grounded not in learning *to* talk but in learning *from* talk (p. 109). This learning *from* talk requires access to the discourses of those who are established members in the community to be able to negotiate meaning both receptively (through observation) and productively (through reproduction). The teacher candidates here, who referred to instructors as "the man behind the curtain" and reported not knowing what their instructors were "looking for," were signaling the need to experience their instructors engaging with and

mediating the material through the lens of their own sociohistorically situated, embodied perspectives. Not having this access resulted in Christina's feelings of being "overwhelmed" and "panicked" as she tried to intuit how she should complete her assignments. Lydia's desire to hear her instructor's voice as he or she is presenting content is linked with the need to incorporate the voices of others into one's own voice, to negotiate and recombine the two in heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981) forms of discursive meaning making so essential to learning and identity construction.

The feelings of disconnection that arose from the perceived void created by the use of prepackaged materials and behind-the-scenes work was reinforced by, and worked in tandem with, the feelings of confusion that this sense of disconnection created. The teacher candidates did not seem to truly know their instructors, and because they had positioned them as *too busy* or *less invested* in the class, they felt that their instructors did not or could not know them either. In one particularly telling pattern, five of the eight teacher candidates described frustrating situations in which they were unable to understand instructor expectations and struggled to find satisfactory answers through the communication medium of email. Part of the communication breakdown appeared to stem from a sense of anxiety related to losing what they saw as the precarious position of being a *good student*. Because there was not a sense of an existing relationship or mutual familiarity with the instructor, teacher candidates did not feel that they had an established reputation to buffer their expressions of confusion. Therefore, these one-on-one interactions took on greater importance in how they understood their positioning in relation to their instructors, leading to heightened emotional responses (suggesting connections to Krashen's [1982] affective filter hypothesis) as they attempted to gain the modeling and

clarification that they desired while upholding their positions as being *knowledgeable*, *intelligent,* and *good students*.

The disconnect in positioning between the instructors and teacher candidates in response to the predesigned classes and the ways they were facilitated highlights a situation in which multiple interpretations of the message (the materials provided and teacher-student interactions that took place), led to multiple storylines of what was happening in the online classes. Whereas the predesigned courses were perhaps essential at the institutional level and helpful at the instructor level, the separation between the design and production of the class content, or message, led to a noticeable shift in duties required of the instructor. Instructors and administrators may view this as a positive shift that allows programs to provide greater access to high-quality courses and allows instructors to reallocate their time to teaching activities, but the new position, if not fully understood by students or adapted by instructors, may result in a perceived void and a repositioning of students as being less important than their peers in face-to-face classes. Meanwhile, although instructors may work to provide a sense of their voice in course announcements or student feedback, learning is a discursive act that relies upon the mediation and deciphering of concepts by experts, or members of the community. Therefore, the modeling of new discourses, enacted through the individual voices and personalities of the instructors themselves (rather than previous instructors or content designers unaffiliated with production and student evaluation) is an important way to help teacher candidates negotiate these discourses and integrate them into both their coursework and identity development.

In addition to the need for discursive models, the findings presented in this section point to the need for greater connection between instructors and teacher candidates. As instructors relied heavily on facilitating prepackaged courses and providing feedback with minimal

discussion or visual representation of themselves, their personal identities remained behind the curtain, within the perceived void discussed earlier. The course design, meant to emphasize task completion and position instructors as interchangeable, had limited their ability to present themselves as multifaceted individuals and therefore their ability to connect with teacher candidates in meaningful, personalized ways.

Across this distance, the "mutual humanization" between teacher and student that critical educators such as Paulo Freire (1970) and Keffrelyn Brown (2013, 2014) deem essential may become more tenuous, and feelings of anonymity and disconnection may become stronger. This appears to have been the case in the courses I observed. Teacher candidates' descriptions of their instructors as being simultaneously friendly and approachable but also the unknowable "man behind the curtain" point to the ways that friendly course facilitation by itself is insufficient in developing relationships that give way to trust and openness to vulnerability. This sense of mutual trust and willingness to be vulnerable is essential to create safe spaces in which instructors and teacher candidates can work together to grapple with the many divisive and difficult topics facing the TESOL profession today. Topics such as the White and colonialist discourses that continue to dominate TESOL and the complexities of race, gender, language, and sexual orientation are central areas of critical pedagogy that play an integral role in shaping the beliefs, values, and identities of English language teachers around the world (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Motha, 2006, 2014). They must be prioritized and addressed in all teacher education programs, regardless of format; this entails the creation of an environment in which instructors and teacher candidates alike can discuss them jointly, honestly, and at length.

The next chapter will examine the discourses that arose within this depersonalized environment by narrowing the focus to interactive positioning processes that took place between

teacher candidates in their peer interactions. Strongly influenced by the institutional and instructor positioning processes described in this chapter, the peer-to-peer interactive processes made up the majority of the communication and coursework in which the teacher candidates engaged, making it a central part of their positioning and identity construction.

CHAPTER 5:
Register, Voice, and (Dis)Connection:
Positioning in the Asynchronous, Text-Based Environment

In this chapter, I will focus on the interactive and reflexive positioning that took place between peers in the online discussion boards with a close look at the ways that discursive elements such as register and responding to classmates' posts created or hindered connections between teacher candidates. This chapter highlights the ways that positions are navigated in an asynchronous, text-based environment, which makes up the majority of interaction in fully online teacher education programs today (Murray & Christison, 2017). Just as discursive choices in synchronous, face-to-face conversations serve to position and reposition individuals in relation to one another, so do the discursive choices that take place in the online discussion board settings, with important impacts on the ways that teacher candidates view themselves, and as a result, their rights and duties within the class environment.

Simply put, interactive positioning is the positioning of others, while reflexive positioning is the positioning of the self (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Kayi-Aydar, 2014). However, in practice, these two forms of positioning are often tightly linked to one another, as they work in tandem with one another during the course of an interaction. For that reason, this chapter, as well as Chapter 6, will jointly address the two final research questions that guided this study:

How do teacher candidates position one another through participation in the online course environment?

How do online teacher candidates position themselves through participation in the online course environment?

Because discussion boards and the varied assignments that were posted there made up the vast majority of the interaction in this study, their content will be the focus of this chapter.

Discussion Board Interactions: Positioning within a Limiting Genre

As was stated in Chapter 4, the online course settings were austere, text-heavy, and almost exclusively black-and-white, with few visual elements or opportunities for users to display individual or group identities. Teacher candidates had the ability to privately message one another via the Inbox feature, and the Language Testing and Assessment class included an unused chat function, but with the exception of two Voice Thread assignments in the Methods of TESOL class, all other interaction took place within the similarly text-heavy instructor-evaluated discussion boards. Therefore, nearly all self and other positioning was conducted and negotiated via asynchronous, instructor-evaluated, academically oriented discussion board posts. Regardless, this simplified and limited setting proved to be a rich area in which factors such as register, patterns of peer response, and the location of discussion contributions on the course page had important impacts on the ways that interlocutors in the class interacted with and positioned one another.

The use of discussion boards as a primary means of interaction in online educational settings is well established, and they have long been a key genre in the overall structure of online classes due to the need for ongoing peer-to-peer interaction in social constructivist approaches to learning (Hrastinski, 2009; Verenikina, Jones, & Delahunty, 2017). They have been linked to higher levels of critical thinking (Arend, 2009) and dialogical transformation (Lee & Brett, 2014), and a plethora of studies have examined the linguistic features common to discussion board postings (e.g., Delahunty, 2018; Lapadat, 2007) and recommended strategies for their effective implementation and facilitation (e.g., Armstrong & Manson, 2010; Verenikina, Jones,

& Delahunty, 2017). Most important for the purpose of this study, their use and integration is also associated with the need to imbue the online course site with social presence (Garrison et al., 2000), in which students "project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (p. 89). Students present themselves as "real" in three key ways: "*emotional expression*—emoticons, autobiographical narratives; *open communication*—risk-free expression, acknowledging others, being encouraging; *group cohesion*—encouraging collaboration, helping, and supporting" (p. 102, emphasis added).

In order to examine discussion boards fully, a baseline understanding of the structure, expectations, and multiple roles of these boards within the larger class context is essential. As an established genre, discussion boards typically have the following components: (a) a prompt, usually written by the instructor and in reference to course content; (b) rules for participation, such as word length or required responses to classmates' postings; and (c) an evaluative framework, such as a rubric. Discussion boards may either be accessible by the entire class or to a smaller group as determined by the instructor(s); in either case, although the intended audience is ostensibly one's classmates (ergo the term "discussion"), the regulatory and evaluative components that give rise to and shape the ensuing interaction press the author to consider the course instructor or grader as a primary audience (Bell, 1984, 2002). Correspondingly, within each class I observed, the interaction that took place in the discussion boards formed a major part of the course grade, ranging from approximately 1/3 to more than 2/3 of the total points allotted. This established the discussion boards as not only the main form of interaction between teacher candidates and the instructor but also as a primary way in which teacher candidates were expected to display their knowledge and attainment of course objectives, dual purposes also

recognized by Verenikina, Jones, and Delahunty (2017) in their extensive work on the roles of discussion boards.

Viewed through the lens of positioning theory, a successful discussion board post is one that positions the student, regardless of background, as a *good student*—one who has spent time meaningfully engaging with course materials and has made attempts to understand key concepts in relation to his or her personal experiences and the experiences and perspectives shared by others. Given the dual purposes that these boards hold, individuals must position themselves as *good students* and *members of the class community* in relation to their dual audiences in hopes that those positions will be accepted by both their fellow classmates and their instructor(s).

Adherence to the topic, rules, and expectations set forth by the instructor provide the framework for interaction, but there may be great variation beyond this point as individuals position and reposition themselves within the network of interactions. Differences in the way one chooses to express oneself in relation to dominant modes of thinking as well as register and overall posting length may have dramatic effects on the positions one is able to take up, as such choices index sociological categories and ways of being (e.g., the devil's advocate, the stuffy academic, the class clown). Therefore, finding one's voice in such a specific genre is a complex balancing act in which individuals engage in stylistic negotiation of presenting both content and self to the dual audiences of instructor(s) and peers (Delahunty, 2012, 2018; Verenikina, Jones, & Delahunty, 2017).

The tension between positioning oneself as a *good student* and engaging in actions that present oneself as a "real" *member of the class community* presented obstacles for both the instructors and teacher candidates involved in this study, as this section will detail. The semiotic and linguistic choices that individuals made as they attempted to fulfill this dual purpose were

grounded in their personal lives, beliefs, and experiences; their positions prior to and outside of the online class community shaped the ways they chose to position themselves in class interactions and the patterns of participation (Anderson, 2009) they used as they interacted with one another. These positions had both short- and long-term ramifications in the classes I observed; as this and the next chapter will discuss, within the ongoing interactions that took place, these choices increasingly segregated teacher candidates into groups with different interaction patterns, priorities, and eventually positional identities. Teasing apart these tensions and associated positions, with attention to the ways they manifest within the semiotic landscape of the online class setting, highlights the impact that fully online students' external lives and identities have on the experiences they have in these complex spaces.

Discussion Board Posts

The dual purposes of demonstrating knowledge and forming social and personal bonds in discussion boards is evident in the ways that they were set up and the expectations that they held. Although each course had slightly different approaches to how these boards were handled in terms of posting length and topic, they all followed a basic structure in which posts were required at least once a week on a topic relevant to module content, along with a required response to a classmate's post. This ongoing expression of ideas and responses to course content, as well as interaction with classmates via responses, is something that the instructors said they believed to be an effective way both for teacher candidates to reflect on the topics being discussed and share parts of themselves and their personal lives. All of the instructors reported that they saw the boards as an essential means of establishing a sense of community and group cohesion between enrolled teacher candidates.

Positioning Oneself as "Real" in Introductory Posts

It was standard practice to include as the first discussion board post assignment a section in which teacher candidates introduced themselves. They were encouraged to discuss aspects of their language teaching and/or learning experience as well as parts of their personal lives such as their hometown, home country, or hobbies. In two classes, teacher candidates were encouraged to post pictures of themselves. These boards created a way for teacher candidates to pre-position themselves (Harré, 2009) in relation to their classmates and/or the course topic and learn more about one another prior to beginning to interact with the content itself. Because pre-positioning is a means by which individuals can preliminarily position themselves in alignment with the traits, skills, and qualifications with which they hope to be identified, the ability to speak about one's personal experiences and beliefs allowed them to carve out a niche for themselves as they wanted to be positioned and understood going forward. They also allowed teacher candidates to offer a more well-rounded perspective of themselves and their motivations and interests than they were able to provide in later assignments. In the discussion prompt, Emily made a point to discuss the reason for these introductory posts:

> Creating a welcoming and safe community of learning, in which we respect and support each other as we go through a new educational experience, is particularly important for an online course where we do not get to see each other regularly and socialize before and after classes. To accomplish this, I ask you to introduce yourself to the class so that we all know who we are learning with.

These introductory posts were meant to substitute for the inability to "see each other regularly and socialize before and after classes," and to some extent, the students took up this orientation in the ways they positioned themselves. Because the introduction posts were not tied to the academic content (and therefore displays of knowledge and expertise), the overall register used

in postings was informal, and the topics discussed varied widely. For example, Christina opted to include information about her experience in stand-up comedy and her work creating a cartoon, while Chloe chose to include her goals to travel to every U.S. state and as many countries as possible. Eleanor and Danielle included references to their children, and Fiona described her love of Japanese and Korean cinema. Teacher candidates also took the opportunity to talk about themselves on a personal level, and their emotional experiences and challenges were a common topic. For example, Lydia mentioned her mother's recovery from surgery, Christina mentioned how the isolation and culture shock she felt when studying abroad influenced her decision to enter the TESOL field, and after a quick discussion of her professional experience, Eleanor stated that motherhood had been her "most challenging job by far." Chloe pre-positioned herself as an independent person who did not like to follow "the traditional 'rules' of society," Lydia pre-positioned herself as a lover and learner of languages, and Christina pre-positioned herself as someone with an active life in entertainment outside of academia.

Although all the posts had elements that served to in some way position the teacher candidates in relation to the MA TESOL degree or their desire to work in the field of English language education, a pre-positioning process that was approached somewhat differently by all participants, these positional identities were always situated within their personal life histories and future goals. They were rich with emotional expression, one of the three components of social presence, and they helped to illustrate the multifaceted lives that the teacher candidates had outside of their coursework. They were the sort of information that might be shared in more informal, face-to-face settings in which teacher candidates "get to see each other regularly and socialize before and after classes," as described by Emily in her discussion prompt. Likewise, they mirrored many elements of the introductory posts seen in Samburskiy (2013), providing

evidence of awareness of the audience, a sense of affinity with the group, and a multifaceted self-image. They balanced the dual needs of presenting oneself as "real" (Garrison et al., 2000) and pre-positioning oneself positively in relation to the academic context in which they occurred.

Positioning Oneself as a Good Student in Academic Posts

However, after the initial self-introductory posts, the discussion board posts turned away from social matters and toward academic obligations; the remainder of the posts in each class focused on responding to prompts about the topics covered. Sample prompts from each class observed are included in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Sample Discussion Board Prompts

Class	Instructor	Sample Discussion Prompt
English as an International Language	Emily	Friedrich argues for the importance of such concepts as intercultural sensitivity and communicative competence in an EIL course. Do you think that they are more important in an EIL course than they are in "regular" ESL/EFL courses? Do they play different roles? Explain your answer.
Methods of TESOL	Leo	This discussion can be found in Brown & Lee p. 217, number 4 (A). Look at the sample lesson plan (pp. 208-215) and use the six guidelines for lesson planning (pp. 202-203) to evaluate the plan. In your post, share two aspects of the plan that you liked, did not like, or found interesting/surprising. Also discuss how well the lesson follows the concepts from chapters 6-9. That is, you are welcome to comment on how well the lesson addresses the students' age, proficiency level, teaching of culture (pragmatic use of English), or appropriateness for the setting. Your initial post should contain at least 200 words, BUT your entire participation in the discussion (including original post and any reply) should be at least 400 words.
Language Testing and Assessment	Jeff	We are inevitably surrounded by standardized tests – from grade school to getting credentials for our careers – thus it's crucial teachers/instructors know how to support students beyond just teaching to the test. What are some ways we can adequately and appropriately equip students to be successful on these formal, summative assessments? Provide evidence for your response/justification from chapters 2 and 3 of the textbook.

Research Methods	Dr. Z	Initial post: 1. Find a published empirical study -- any kind of research design is ok, and any TESOL-related topic is ok. (This is a good chance to try to find a study that could be included in your final assignment, the research proposal.) Then, answer these questions: Why did you choose this study? (What do you find most interesting or useful about it?) What does the study "look like"? (Where did it take place? What question[s] was the researcher trying to answer? How did the researcher try to answer the question? What answer did the researcher find?) What is the main weakness of this study? * * As you think about your answer to this question, our principles of research design -- original, worthwhile, transparent, efficient, ethical, true -- might help you to come up with some ideas. Requirements for Initial Post: Your initial discussion post must be at least 300 words total. Response to a Classmate: when you are done, respond to at least one other person's post. Requirements for Responding: Discussion responses should demonstrate you have read and processed the materials for that day, and, you are able use them in a thoughtful discussion. Please use specific examples where appropriate. The responses to classmates' posts should be substantive, adding to the discussion. Please follow all of these guidelines to receive full points.

A review of the sample prompts provided above illustrates the shift in focus and emphasis on displays of knowledge in the discussion board posts. The posts created by Emily, Jeff, and Leo all asked teacher candidates to reflect on and discuss topics from specific readings, while the post created by Dr. Z provided a clear framework by which teacher candidates were expected to discuss a sample research article in a TESOL-related area of their interest. Both Leo and Dr. Z's prompts included specific word counts, although all of the classes stated expected word counts for discussion posts within the course site, even if it was not directly listed in the prompt itself. Teacher candidates were instructed to "demonstrate [they] have read and processed materials," and reference these materials in their responses. Only Dr. Z's prompt included instructions for the peer response, stating that they "should be substantive, adding to the

discussion." In turn, the language and purpose of these prompts, and the discussion posts and responses that followed, was distinctly different from that which was seen in the initial self-introductory prompts that emphasized the importance of community, experience, and personal connection. The focus here had shifted almost entirely to responses to the course material with clear rules for participation. As a result, for teacher candidates to position themselves as *good students* and receive full points for their participation in this area, they needed to re-orient themselves and their language toward the course content.

Discussion regarding course materials is a key part of any course following social constructivist/sociocultural approaches to learning, as these approaches view discursive engagement with the topic in relation to one's own and other's perspectives as an essential part of the learning process (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). Regardless, the strict structure found in online discussion board postings in this study reoriented the teacher candidates from contextualizing their readings within lived experiences in a conversational style to more deeply analyzing the literature from a cognitive stance.

For example, in second week of the English as an International Language class, Fiona posted:

> In the text, it states that "beliefs are more deeply ingrained than we care to acknowledge, and many times intangible even to the most aware among us... (47)." Unforeseen circumstances and situations will definitely come about, but to know the difference instead of being ignorant will ensure less offense. Being able to teach students how to interact and prepare for these situations is highly important instead of not teaching them at all and ignoring it.

This example is characteristic of many of the posts that I observed in all four classes. Fiona quoted directly from the text, then spoke about the content and ideas in the third person, distancing herself and her personal stances and experiences from her discussion of the topic. She used very formal, academic language such as "unforeseen circumstances" and "ensure less offense" in place of the more informal, personal tone that was seen in the introductory posts. Although some teacher candidates stated their personal opinions and used first-person pronouns to situate themselves in relation to the topics being discussed, they regularly cited from the text, providing full in-text citation with reference to authors, specific page numbers, and figures. Additionally, the register in the content-related discussion boards was notably more formal and academic than was the case in the introductory posts. Such changes indicate that the interaction had shifted from being between the author and classmates, as was the case with the introductory posts (i.e., learner-learner interaction), to being between the author and the class materials (i.e., learner-content interaction; Moore, 1989). In order to fulfill the duties of the *good student*, teacher candidates shifted to position themselves as *learners of content*, linking themselves and their opinions tightly to the ideas put forth in the course material while backgrounding their personal experiences, emotional responses, and relationships with their classmates.

Although these postings were ostensibly "discussions" in that they were posted in the discussion board section and were intended to be an area in which conversations about the topics could develop, the main interaction that was occurring was not between teacher candidates and their peers but between teacher candidates and the content (Chamberlain, 2015). Theoretically, discussion board interactions are designed to be spaces in which debate can occur and social presence can take root (Garrison et al., 2010; Verenikina, Jones, & Delahunty, 2017); however, revisiting the three key components of social presence raises the question of whether or not this

space fulfilled that function. Some emotional expression was evident, such as in the following comment written by Christina: "I was initially very impressed with this lesson plan and I like the idea of all the activities involved individually." Regardless, for the majority of participants, there was no real sense of an autobiographical narrative included, with the exception of references directly to one's teaching or learning experiences. The wide array of teacher candidates' diverse opinions grounded in non-academic lived experiences, personal histories, and cultural knowledge was, like their physical representation via images, largely silenced. Therefore, participants had few opportunities to come to view their classmates as multidimensional people from whom they could learn in ways beyond structured responses to class content. This echoed the position of the instructors, whose own presence had become chimera-like, known only through the aspects of their professional identities that they had shared and feedback they had provided, but not as discursive models or dynamic individuals filled with passion for their work.

Likewise, there was very little of what could be categorized as open communication or group cohesion, seemingly in response to the institutional positioning that emphasized the completion of tasks rather than communication and relationship building with peers. Just as the instructors had positioned themselves as facilitators of the course content, teacher candidates positioned themselves almost exclusively as *learners of content*—in other words, in ways that demonstrated that, as *good students*, they were present in class to learn the material, not to express their emotional responses or develop friendships with their classmates. The predetermined curriculum of the class remained central and was treated neutrally; discussions almost never veered from the topics presented by the instructor or the readings, which were determined safe. This created an environment that was largely peaceful, but also lacking the meaningful debate necessary for critical engagement and personal transformation. To allow room

for teacher candidates to engage in the difficult and vulnerable work of transforming themselves through critical reflection and integration of course content with experiences that may not be addressed in the classroom context, a feeling of trust of not only with the instructor but also with classmates must be present (hooks, 1994). However, despite Emily's initial post calling for "a welcoming and safe community of learning," the overall structure of the classes not only did not actively work toward the development of this community, but its reliance on instructor-evaluated prompts as the main form of peer interaction actually discouraged it. With this environment shaping the behavioral expectations of what it meant to be a *good student*, it is no surprise that several participants expressed their concern that working to develop relationships with their classmates via the discussion board posts would have been inappropriate, despite having no other options where it would have been more appropriate to do so.

Positioning among Divergent Registers and Unclear Expectations

In contrast to the many teacher candidates who structured their discussion board posts in very formal, academic ways, one of the participants in this study opted to take a different route. Violet, an experienced teacher who was in her final semester of the program, chose to use a more conversational style with references to her personal experiences as a teacher to explain her answer:

> I feel like I'm kind of cheating on my answer because my favorite part of this lesson is the warm-up, or what they call the "Pre-Task: Introduction/schemata activation." I feel like this is cheating for me, because I love most warm-up exercises. It's my favorite part of my own lessons. It's the one place to give relevance to an issue. It's the first line of the first chapter of a book, it's the first word a child says, it's the first bite of a great meal (I know, I'm going overboard). But I really give a lot of time to my warm-ups because it's

> the chance to sell the students on the rest of the lesson and create a need and excitement for what they are about to learn.

Unlike the majority of posts that surrounded the excerpt above in its original context, this post used emotional expression in multiple ways. Violet described her feeling of "cheating" and used the term "love" in reference to the topic. She provided fragments of her own autobiography by making clear that she was an experienced teacher and that she had put significant emphasis on warm-up activities in her own teaching. She also was engaging in risk-free expression by allowing her personal voice to shine through in her use of anaphora to describe warm-up activities using a series of metaphors, then subtly poke fun at herself by admitting she was "going overboard." Although she referenced a specific part of the book, she contextualized this reference within her own unique perspective and experience, and she spoke about it in an informal register that more closely approximated speech than academic writing. I include her post here to provide contrast and highlight the extent to which her response stood out due to the level of social presence it contained. Violet positioned herself in this post as *emotionally invested in teaching* rather than simply *cognitively invested in the class material*, an important distinction that was not taken up by most members of the class in this or other responses. However, in our interview, she addressed this positioning as one that she had been reprimanded for in the past:

> I'm much more informal [than my classmates] in my writing online, but if a teacher tells me, look, this isn't, you know, you need to step it up, I can be very formal. But that just feels so rigid to me. It doesn't feel natural. I don't mind it because they're just trying to see what I know, and I respect that. They want me to properly cite sources. But I do that anyway, because I'm used to it. But I'm more informal unless I'm told not to. And I have been.

Violet's experience of having been told to "step it up" in the past when she wrote informally in online discussion posts is one that did not seem to have had a lasting impact on her overall style of communication in the genre, but it calls into question the variation of register and style expected by instructors in the discussion boards and the ways that emotional expression may be at odds with academic requirements for a more formal register. As was discussed previously, the online setting, and predesigned courses in particular, can result in a source of stress for students who feel that they do not have a clear understanding of what their instructors expect of them (Verenikina, Jones, & Delahunty, 2017). Without clear instructions for style and register or being able to hear their own instructors' voice and use that as a model to follow, the majority of the teacher candidates here opted to take the safe strategy of gearing their language to a high register and reducing the emotional expression that would otherwise serve as key component of social presence and the possibility for presenting oneself as "real."

The tendency for teacher candidates to position themselves as *good students* through posts in which they demonstrate being *cognitively invested in the material* was one that the instructors of the courses noted in our interviews. Jeff expressed his own mixed feelings toward this tendency: "They're pushing each other. They're writing their responses in APA format and with like, citations and stuff, and that's just definitely not required. It's supposed to be kind of just a conversation about the ideas." Here, Jeff highlighted the central tension that I heard throughout my interviews with instructors and teacher candidates: The tendency to go above and beyond course expectations, and to use highly academic language and features, was a strategy used to display knowledge and comprehension of the content in a forum that counted heavily toward the overall grade, particularly in a setting in which teacher candidates felt uncertainty regarding their positioning in relation to the instructor. This strategy positioned the teacher

candidates as academics engaging directly with complex material in a formal setting and therefore as *good students* deserving of high grades. Because this positioning took place in the discussion board forum, an area in which teacher candidates could see what others were posting and model their language after what others had done, the discursive norms that were initially set forth in the discussion prompts and stated rules for participation were "pushed" to be even more academic than was required by the instructor.

Christina, who had extensive prior experience in online educational settings, having completed her high school degree as well as large portions of her bachelor's degree online, expressed concern over the difference between how she perceived the genre expectations of the discussion board postings based on her previous experiences and how others in the class perceived and acted upon those expectations:

> I've always felt it is supposed to be like an organic conversation. But there are students that will write essays in every group discussion. And that's great, but when you read it, it gives you a bit of uneasiness overall, because then there's that feeling of, oh my gosh, I look like a slacker. Is this supposed to be as casual as I thought it was? Am I doing something wrong? It could be an ego thing, if they see other students that are posting a little more informally, they're like, I'm really going to impress the professor.

Her feeling of looking "like a slacker" in comparison with other classmates when she opted to use more informal language is one that was echoed by several other teacher candidates I interviewed. Positioning oneself as a *good student* meant distancing oneself from the position of *uninvested student* or *slacker* by adding in as much structure and formality as possible; even if other students posted using a more informal register, using language and other features that felt more academic became a way of distinguishing oneself from others in efforts to, as Christina

claimed, “impress the professor.” Christina’s comment highlights a key point: Due to the ability to carefully edit and rehearse one’s postings and an acknowledgement of the importance of the instructor as their audience, teacher candidates engaged in extensive impression management to be able to appropriately portray their “characters” as what they believed to be appropriately invested and academic (Aresta et al., 2015). The role of the instructor as designer and evaluator of these discussion boards made them the primary audience rather than their peers (Bell, 1984, 2002). As a result, in the high-stakes world of the virtual environment, in which the teacher candidates claimed that they had no personal connections with their instructors, using a high register became a seemingly safe strategy of online representation.

Yet, there appeared to be a divide between the level of formality that the teacher candidates perceived in their own writing in relation to the writing of their peers. Fiona, whose post included above contained very formal and academic language, felt that she was less formal than her peers, leading to feelings of confusion and isolation:

> It feels not like a conversation. You know, not like a discussion. It’s like a mini essay. And I read some of them and I feel like my language is not the same as theirs because sometimes my posts are like, I don’t want to say stupid because I know I’m not stupid, but it sounds like I’m trying to have a conversation rather than being formal….You don’t want to sound stupid or like you don’t know anything because then people might not want to reply.

In her efforts to not sound “stupid” and in hopes of getting replies from her classmates, she also raised the register of her posts, perhaps without even recognizing that she was doing so. Paradoxically, her desire for more connection with her peers led her to alter her writing style to be *more* academic and *less* personal, a strategy that was counterproductive and the source of

stress for her. As someone who identified herself as a writer, she was highly aware of the register and language she was using in her assignments, but the dual audiences of her peers and her instructor, combined with the tension produced by her feeling that the discussion board was a "mini essay," led her to be preoccupied with the details of how she came across in her written posts. In our interviews, she expressed on multiple occasions her struggle to find a balance between presenting herself as capable and knowledgeable without sounding "arrogant" or "professor-y" when she knew that many teacher candidates were privately struggling with the material. The distance she felt between herself and others in the class seems to have made this a challenging task; the intense attention to crafting the language of each post became a means of compensation for not knowing the voices of her classmates or her instructor, and therefore, how her own voice would be heard.

The Struggle for Authenticity and Finding One's Voice

Without corresponding opportunities for informal, non-evaluated discussions, the academic register in discussion board postings may result in a struggle to reconcile ways of speaking with personal beliefs and stances. Because positions and identities are bound up in the discursive practices that take place in these settings, linking the position of *good student* to that of *serious academic* and thereby distancing oneself from important components of social presence such as emotional expression and open communication created feelings of tension as teacher candidates worked to find their own voices as they considered and discussed the material. Guillermo, for example, stated:

> [The discussion board] is so focused on academics. You know, and I think it's hard to have a voice, your own voice, when everything is geared towards what the literature said. Basically, that's the voice you try to take on, as opposed to just talking about it.

By feeling the need to position himself continually as a *learner of content*, someone who was academically and formally engaged with the material rather than speaking informally about the topics, he had trouble feeling as if the language he was using in his class postings was authentic and connected with who he felt himself to be. As a result of having taken several semesters of classes in which he was interacting with academic writing through his own readings and then replicating this writing in his discussion posts, he claimed that "it almost feels like what I'm writing is the research articles I read," calling it "scary" and "weird."

Guillermo was far from being alone in his feelings of disconnection from the voice he felt he had to "take on," as many of the teacher candidates expressed similar viewpoints. Fiona, for example, also directly addressed her struggle to find an authentic voice in her postings:

> I like seeing everybody discussing things, but to be honest, some people use such a language that I don't even understand what they're saying…it sounds like they're just trying to use big words sometimes. But I don't know, sometimes I don't know if I have my complete voice in it. And I know that you're supposed to be like an expert on the topic, so you're talking like you know everything. But still, after all that reading and research, there's still so much stuff I don't know. I don't know if I feel enough like an expert.

Fiona's quote here provides an interesting counterpoint to her comment above in which she expressed her concerns about appearing "stupid" in her writing. This quote illustrates the overtly performative nature of writing discussion board posts, similar to Christina's contention that much of the formality in postings is a means to "impress the professor," by claiming that "they're just trying to use big words." In an interesting alignment with her own reflexive positioning as someone who is not "stupid" and needs to demonstrate this through her writing,

she positioned her classmates as needing to rely on academic vocabulary at the expense of clarity and the possibility of real discussion. In discussion posts with dual audiences, the audience of the instructor, who held greater power due to the right to evaluate and grade student work, took precedence, thereby diminishing the importance of writing in a way that invited conversation and felt more in line with one's authentic voice.

Meanwhile, similar to Guillermo, Fiona seemed to feel insincere and disconnected from her personal identity as she attempted to understand and incorporate the material. Her feeling that she was supposed to talk "like [she] knew everything" even when she felt she did not have her "complete voice in it" points to a feeling of ventriloquy rather than a gradual integration of the personal and academic voice. This feeling of ventriloquy had particularly negative repercussions for Fiona. As someone who considered herself to be a writer, she reflected deeply on her use of language as she discussed class concepts, and she described the use of this language as being central to her sense of self and identity. When she was unable to reconcile her perceived lack of expertise with the language she felt she was expected to use, she lost confidence in herself and her comprehension of the content.

This sense of being separate from one's discursive practices calls for the revisiting and application of previous research that has shown that an essential part of effective teacher education is the act of becoming "bi-Discoursal," or incorporating new and familiar "big D" Discourses (Gee, 1999) into existing identities via what Alsup (2008) refers to as "borderland discourse." In Alsup's study, teacher candidates who were able to successfully integrate new professional Discourses were more confident in their new identities as teachers, while those who experienced tension were more likely to leave the teaching field altogether. In a related concept, Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson (2005) refer to the ways that identity is discursively

constructed as *identity-in-discourse*, which recognizes that becoming proficient in the discourse of a community one wishes to enter is a key part of gaining membership and feeling a sense of belonging within that community. In the public forum of the online discussion board, the act of positioning oneself as a *good student*, particularly when that positioning entails the use of linguistic features that do not feel like one's own, that eliminate aspects of emotional expression and personal autobiography, and that distance individuals from their classmates, is an act rife with tension and loaded with implications for integrating new discourses within teacher candidates' emerging identities as professionals.

This sense of needing to perform for the instructor as the primary audience also led to a distancing of classmates. Lydia, who was quoted in Chapter 4 in reference to her constant feeling of "being watched" in the discussion boards, said that this feeling pushed her to adhere to formal, academic language in her posts:

> I definitely feel like in the online classes I'm trying to be as professional as possible. I don't tend to use, you know, contractions. In my text, when I'm typing, I try to be kind of like business-level relationship with everyone. I don't get on the discussion post and go, "Hey, what's up man, that was a cool post."…I guess I could be more gregarious, but it just feels like it's a professional academic space and it should be you know, geared more towards business.

Due to the public and evaluated nature of the discussion boards, she felt that the way to position herself as a *good student* was to be a professional, "business-level" teacher candidate who through her language and professional demeanor was proving that she was a serious student. However, this positioning impacted Lydia's relationships with her peers. By discursively positioning herself as "professional," she also carefully controlled the ways that she interacted

with her classmates, preferring to keep them at a "business-level relationship" rather than engaging with them at a personal level within the discussion board setting. On the contrary, her reference to what she perceived to be "gregarious" language was extremely informal (although perhaps exaggerated for effect), highlighting a divide in linguistic expectations; without a clear path by which to engage in more personal interactions in a public and academic space, she abandoned this as a possibility in her discussion posts altogether.

A clear line between the positioning of instructors in the online setting and the struggles that teacher candidates encountered in attempting to develop their own voices emerged here. Without strong discursive models on which to base their own incorporation of new discourses (as discussed in Chapter 4), as well as the desire to present oneself as formally as possible in a public sphere in which they would be evaluated by instructors with whom they did not feel they had developed relationships, the teacher candidates resorted to a sort of ventriloquy of concepts in their discussion board posts. To return to Goffman's (1959) notions of the backstage versus the front, the teacher candidates appeared to feel less comfortable in what they perceived to be a high-stakes situation in which they were being evaluated by an instructor with whom they felt unfamiliar, so they carefully shaped their discursive performances until they no longer felt as if they were authentically their own. Likewise, as mentioned in the previous chapter, because the teacher candidates could not imagine the voices of their instructors as they negotiated new ideas, they struggled to integrate those voices into voices they recognized as their own.

Through my observations and interactions with the teacher candidates and instructors, I questioned how these tensions could potentially be resolved. In the same interview as excerpted above, Christina placed the responsibility for modeling informal yet appropriate posts on the course instructor:

> Until a professor comes out and formally explains what they're looking for in a discussion post, whether or not it's supposed to be free form or they want more, everybody's just going from past experiences with classes. And if you've never done online classes before, you only have school to go off of. And I think the act of typing makes it seem more like an essay. So they may not be relating or thinking of it as, this is like when the teacher asked us questions and we raised our hands. The teacher didn't expect us to speak formally. But even though it's called discussion on there, it really does feel more like an essay.

Because Christina had extensive prior experience with online education, she had a larger range of experiences from which to draw as she worked within the genre dynamics of the discussion board. Although she felt that it was challenging to understand her instructors' expectations without being familiar with their voices and personalities, her grasp of the purpose of a discussion board as a whole was strong, and she was able to adjust her language, albeit cautiously, as needed. She contrasted this with the ways that the discussion board may appear to those new to online education, particularly in the MA TESOL classes observed in this study. Without a background understanding of the purpose and norms of the genre, students may resort to following a genre with which they are more familiar in academic settings and are likely to associate with the embodied "act of typing"—the class essay—particularly if they see the instructor as being their primary audience.

Emily agreed with this from the instructor perspective, pointing out that discussion board posts are a "learned genre" that, to do well, required experience that not all students had; she felt certain that some students in her class, particularly those who did not receive any responses from their classmates, struggled with "being fully comfortable in this genre of interaction." However,

although Emily had taught discussion board posting norms in previous online classes, these were not a part of her class or any other that I observed within the MA TESOL program. Perhaps equally important is an understanding of the complexities of the discussion board genre by the instructors themselves; Violet's claim that she needed to "step it up" in terms of her academic language points to the existence of instructional discrepancies in how discussion boards are to be used and for what purpose.

The central role that the discussion boards play in terms of both displaying knowledge and forming community in fully online settings elevates the importance of a clear understanding of the genre and its purposes. As Verenikina, Jones, & Delahunty (2017) advise:

> Effective engagement in a productive online discussion requires the learner to master a particular set of language-based academic communication skills. These skills are not often explicitly taught. Even though it may be fair to assume that modern students are quite experienced in everyday social media interactions, this does not necessarily mean that they possess the skills for participating effectively in academic online discussion, which leads to creating new meaning in a particular discipline area. These strategies need to be made explicit to students to support their participation in online discussion forums. (p. 11)

Importantly, however, the findings discussed here suggest the need to link these strategies with an analysis of the dual audiences implicit in most discussion board configurations as well as the role that positions and their associated "characters" play. If the understood way of positioning oneself as a *good student* in a storyline is to use academic language that works well to display knowledge but less well to carry on meaningful discussions, the power of the instructor as

evaluator may override the desire to engage in potentially vulnerable negotiations of meaning or create relationships with others that may lead to the development of a sense of community.

Positioning and Participation Patterns in Discussion Board Responses

As detailed previously, teacher candidates were also required to post at least one response to a classmate's posting for each discussion question. The reasons for this requirement are multiple. First, it ensures that teacher candidates do not simply post their own work and ignore the work of others; as was stated by all of the instructors and teacher candidates in this study, the perspectives that other students bring to their posts are viewed as important learning opportunities for the entire class. Danielle addressed this in stating:

> My classmates are doing some really interesting things. They live in different countries, they're teaching very different groups of students. The thing I appreciate about the discussion boards is that I get to explore the variety of experiences that the other students are bringing to the table.

Indeed, a true strength of the fully online MA TESOL program in particular is the ability it provides to engage with colleagues who are currently teaching English around the world in a variety of settings with unique cultural and pedagogical considerations. Although peer experiences and contributions have been shown to be cornerstones of identity development in pre-service teacher education programs (Yazan, 2017), the ability in online classes to engage directly with the experiences of those currently working abroad presents the opportunity for an even stronger benefit. It provides a plethora of recent anecdotes and current challenges from culturally, linguistically, and geographically diverse settings, all in one virtual space. Requiring a response to at least one of these posts is designed in accordance with social constructivist principles by foregrounding the perspectives of students and the role that those different

perspectives have in producing a more well-rounded discussion of the topics being covered, both in the initial discussion posts and the responses to classmates' posts.

In an online environment in which students' opinions were given primarily in response to content within a structured assignment, providing students with the ability to view others' posts and choose which post(s) to respond to provided a level of autonomy not otherwise possible. Because the rules for responses were less strict, students were not obligated to reference readings and could instead work primarily from their personal experiences and beliefs, which, in theory, allowed them to discursively integrate their identities with the content. They could choose to agree or disagree with viewpoints espoused by their classmates, provide advice or encouragement, and engage in back-and-forth discussions about topics of particular interest. As the only form of interaction that took place directly with a person, they were also sites where the positions that individuals took up for themselves or attributed to others in their initial posts could be accepted, contested, or reshaped through commentary.

However, the relative freedom that discussion board responses allowed compared with the initial posts resulted in dramatic differences that highlighted the multiple positions that teacher candidates were able to take up as well as the varied patterns of communication they used in their interactions. In the previous section, teacher candidates' preoccupation with positioning themselves as *good students* through orienting themselves toward the course material and using a very formal, academic register emerged as a key feature of the initial discussion board posts. This section will analyze in greater detail how subtle differences in these positions and interaction patterns had important effects on how teacher candidates participated in the class, leading to fundamentally different experiences in what appears at first glance to be a rather straightforward and collaborative interactional environment.

Finding Commonality in Introductory Posts

Because peer responses involve engagement with classmates, beginning the analysis with the initial self-introductory posts provides an important preliminary look at how teacher candidates respond to the ways that their classmates pre-position themselves in relation to the class and discuss aspects of their personal lives. Sample responses to the introduction posts, excerpted in Table 6, illustrate the ways that multiple teacher candidates used linguistic features associated with strong social presence in response to their peers. Peer responses to the introduction posts commonly commented on details of teacher candidates' lives that overlapped with one another, such as geographic location, international travel experiences, or family life, a participation strategy Job-Sluder and Barab (2004) refer to as "linking identity" due to the goal of finding commonalities with one another. As with the original post, they were written in relatively informal language and included personal details about experiences, preferences, and goals for the future. Many also included questions aimed at getting the initial poster to elaborate on some aspect of what they had begun discussing in their post, often with multiple questions asked back to back, a feature that is unusual in face-to-face conversation but has been previously documented in online discussion forums (Blanchette, 2009). Features such as emoticons, exclamation points, and emotion words such as *love*, *inspiring*, *hope*, and *envious* served to convey emotions, and the frequent references to the initial poster's first names provided a personal touch. All three key components of social presence (emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion) were fulfilled in these responses.

Table 6: Sample Introductory Post Peer Responses[8]

Teacher Candidate	Peer Response
Eleanor	Hi Violet! I didn't realize you were from CA! Me too ☺ I live in [region]. Sounds like you have had lots of adventures teaching—very inspiring!
Danielle	Hi [student], I'm also from [state] originally and always love connecting with a fellow [resident]. I grew up in the [city] area and went to [University]. Where did you grow up? Also, I'm curious about your CELTA certification. I'm considering doing this next year and wonder if it is a nice complement to the MA TESOL. Happy birthday to your son and kudos to you for juggling a master's program with a baby in the picture. That is not easy. Best, Danielle
Christina	Hello [student], It sounds like you're living the life my husband and I hope to pursue one day once our son is off to college! We talk quite a bit about getting a teardrop trailer and just traveling and hiking and doing some kind of freelance work where we can. I'm curious when you say full-time rock climber, do you mean you have sponsors? A YouTube channel? A website? If so please feel free to dm me a link if you're willing! You could most definitely add my husband and I to the list of fans!
Chloe	Hello [student]! I'm also in the MA TESOL program and one of my majors for my undergrad degree is Special Education! I also love to travel! What is your favorite state? I have been to 26 (I think) and my favorite is Tennessee so far. Where would you like to go in Europe? I am going to 15 countries this year and I believe they are all considered Europe. I actually just got back from Spain, France, and Andorra on Sunday night.
Fiona	Your life sounds so interesting so far! My goal is to actually go to Riyadh or in Saudi somewhere. I haven't studied Arabic so intensely, but my goal is to get better than I am now. I would only consider myself as a beginner. How long have you been in Riyadh? How did you get over there to start with? I know some of the requirements are harder in the Middle East, or they want more years of teaching before going over there! Was that the case for you? I absolutely love the culture and the differences!
Guillermo	Hi [student], Great to have you as a colleague in this class. Wow, you live in the Middle East? I'm envious. Arabic is a language that intrigues me a lot. That along with Mandarin Chinese are languages that I would really like to learn. I'm very interested to hear more about your perspective based on your background.
Violet	How exciting that you are reinventing yourself, that sounds like an adventure. You seem to be drawn towards cold places, besides Mexico, that must have been an adjustment. I love Mexico, it's such a beautiful country and I feel so drawn to it. I'd love to live there and may spend some time there when I graduate. How did you enjoy your life there? Politics sound like an exciting field, what made you leave it? American politics stress me out a little bit. However, I love world politics and think online activity and teaching English can bring about some great changes that everyone can benefit from (worldwide). Good luck in this class and with your new successes.

[8] Some posts have been excerpted for brevity or adapted for confidentiality.

Nevertheless, although the personal tone of the initial posts and the social presence demonstrated in the peer responses established a welcoming environment in the class, it also foreshadowed a pattern that persisted throughout all of the classes. Despite what appear to be peers' attempts to form a connection and begin a conversation in their responses, the questions and other content in them were frequently ignored. The original posters often did not respond to the questions and comments in the peer response, and the conversation was dropped, leading to an awkward situation in which an informal conversation that appeared to be taking shape between two or more eager and enthusiastic participants ended abruptly. Similarly, in several cases, the original poster did indeed respond to the peer response, only then to have their subsequent contributions to the conversation, including direct questions to a person who seemed to be interested in their lives, left unanswered. These dropped conversations, which became a regular feature of discussion board interactions throughout all four classes, disrupted the sense of a "discussion" or feeling of engagement with fellow classmates. I will return to this aspect of interaction in greater detail later in this chapter.

On a similar note, despite several teacher candidates having had multiple classes with the same classmates, there were few instances in which they overtly mentioned that they recognized one another. One example, seen above in Eleanor's response to Violet's post, indicates that she recognized her from a previous class but didn't know the more personal detail that they shared a home state. Only Guillermo received multiple responses from classmates who claimed to recognize him and remember his work from previous classes, an anomaly that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Academic Discussion Board Responses and the "Paradox of Flexibility"

Discussion questions following the introductory posts, as I mentioned previously, turned almost exclusively toward questions about the course content, and the associated discussion responses followed suit. Despite the different class topics and rules for discussion board interaction, several clear patterns of interaction emerged. There was, as to be expected, a clear shift in orientation to more academic matters, particularly those that were being addressed in the selected discussion post. Responses most often were related to the main point being made in the post, although some addressed details that the teacher candidates found important, interesting, or wanted to know more about. The register was significantly more formal than what was seen in responses to the introductory posts, with use of class-related academic terminology such as *reliability*, *corrective feedback*, and *data pool*, as well as formal phrases such as *could become negated*, *concise yet informative*, and *perhaps there is a link to be explored*. However, it was less formal than what was written in the initial discussion posts, with a greater proportion of short or simple sentences, as well as a greater number of features such as exclamation points.
Some aspects of the social presence that were seen in the introductory responses were included in these responses as well, such as addressing the original poster by his/her first name or including informal asides such as *Congrats on passing!* Notably, those indicators of social presence occurred much less frequently in these responses, as the goal of the interaction seems to have been discussion of the course content rather than creating connections with classmates via comments on personal topics.

A prevalent trend in these interactions is the posing of additional questions to the original poster about certain aspects of his or her post. Posing questions demonstrates interest in the topic while also serving to further the discussion, a major factor in instructors' evaluations of posted peer responses. As in the responses to the introductory post, it was common to see these

questions posed back to back, typically about related issues. Responders also referenced their personal opinions and, at times, expressed ideas that contradicted or challenged the opinions stated by the initial poster. For example, in the following quote, Fiona pointed out a section in Chloe's post that seemed to contradict her main idea:

> I think your post focuses more on the need for corrective feedback in classrooms depending on the level of the students, but what about the fact that there are different varieties of English? What if a student is actually 'not wrong' because of where they learned English at the beginning? For example, what if they came from India and the definition of a word is completely different than what you were taught? Would you correct the student? From your post, it doesn't sound like you would do that.

In the quote above, Fiona asked Chloe four separate yet related questions in efforts to evoke a response related to a part of her initial post that she found confusing or potentially contradictory. Politeness was clearly a consideration here as well: She hedged her statement with "I think" and "it doesn't sound like," perhaps as a means of softening her critique. Additionally, and in line with what was common for discussion board responses, her register was notably more informal than in the original post, with shorter words and sentences.

The need for the teacher candidates to position themselves as *good students* through extremely formal, academic language and writing as "experts" in the field subsided somewhat in the responses they posted to their peers, pointing to the possibility that they had shifted their primary audience from being the instructor to being their classmate. In addition to the relatively more informal register, they were more likely to point out ideas they had not previously considered or topics with which they were unfamiliar, something that they appeared to be more hesitant to do in their initial posts. For example, Eleanor positioned herself very humbly in

relation to the course and her classmates in stating, “I’m not a researcher or even a teacher yet,” Christina thanked a classmate for helping her better understand the Total Physical Response method, and Chloe mentioned her previous limited application of the concept of reliability to a language teaching context. Although these moments of vulnerability could be found throughout the initial discussion posts as well (to an extent that varied by individual), they tended to be less frequent. The genre confusion that occurred with the discussion posts, in which teacher candidates felt the need to write academic essays rather than engage in conversations about the topics, appears to have partially disappeared when the task shifted to posting a response on a peer’s post, even though the topic continued to focus primarily on the course content. Instead, a balanced, academic yet friendly tone emerged that incorporated linguistic features associated with social presence and community membership alongside discussions of content.

Although clear patterns emerged that seem to hold true across the board, the individual differences that teacher candidates displayed in their responses to classmates played a major role in how individuals were positioned by their instructors and classmates. Each of the classes observed required that students respond to at least one of their classmates, but there were no further obligations beyond this point. For example, individuals did not receive extra points for responding to more than one classmate’s post, and they also did not receive extra points for responding to the peer responses that they had received on their own original posting. For this reason, there was a wide variety in the efforts that were made from one teacher candidate to another to post more than the minimum required amount related to the discussion board responses. This variety of effort exhibited what Delahunty (2018) refers to as a “paradox of flexibility,” in which the same flexibility that provides a bevy of opportunities for communication also provides opportunities for disengagement. Indeed, Emily noted this paradox

in my interview with her, reimagining the famous quote by comic author Stan Lee in saying, “With great flexibility comes great responsibility.”

Although many of the discussion board responses contained a number of questions prompting the original poster to elaborate on the ideas that he or she posted initially, many of these questions were left unanswered, and any semblance of a “discussion” was dropped. Dennen and Wieland (2007) comment on this common occurrence in asynchronous online discussions: “What at first appears to a be interactive and locally managed as a group effort may in reality be a collective of individual messages written over time but not actually received by discussion partners” (p. 283). In other words, a casual observation of a discussion board may give the impression, through the inclusion of detailed postings and thoughtful responses, that a strong and collaborative conversation is taking place when in fact, what is seen is more of a patchwork of disconnected posts that are never even read by their intended recipients, much less responded to as they may be in synchronous interaction. The turn-taking processes of a conversation break down, leading to a gradual decay or abrupt halt to the discussion taking place (Freiermuth, 2011).

In the classes observed, at least part of the reasoning for this appears to be related to the way the online courses were set up as a series of self-contained, independent modules, each with a different topic or series of related topics and associated assignments. This was a common pattern within this program; a course schedule was provided that scheduled a certain number of days, which varied from one class to another, in which students were required to complete an inclusive package of readings, lectures, and other materials that presented content followed by assorted assignments that assessed comprehension of the materials covered within that module. Modules, and all the work required within each, had a set due date, at which point work on the

following module was scheduled to begin. In a module-based arrangement, the topics being discussed from one module to the next may vary significantly, sometimes with little overlap.

The self-contained structure of the modules, which not only contained different content but also required navigation to different boards, seems to have contributed to an environment in which many of the teacher candidates not only did not respond to the questions they received on their posts, but did not even return to the boards to read them. For example, Danielle stated:

> I don't think I ever once went back and looked to see what anybody said to what I had to say. It didn't even occur to me to participate in what I don't think is a discussion…especially if you're moving on and you're trying to take care of the next thing, then do you want to go back and keep scrolling through all that stuff again?

To Danielle, her work as a *good student* who needed to prioritize her time was to "move on" and "take care of the next thing," referring to the next module and its assignments, not linger on a page with previous content on which she had already completed her assignments. It is possible that a different setup, in which the instructor addressed this issue directly in the prompt or overall class rules, or in which the LMS was set to notify students when they received a response to their posting, could have minimized this issue. Such a setup would therefore redefine the associated rights and duties of a *good student* as one who returned to discussions even after the module was complete and continued conversations beyond what was required as a minimum for the grade. However, without such controls and clear instructions in place, Danielle and others economized their time by placing a greater emphasis on their positions as *good students* who completed tasks on time than their positions as *members of the classroom community*.

Tellingly, Danielle felt no conversational obligation to respond to her classmates as she might in a face-to-face situation because she did not actually think of those responses as a true

discussion. Just as the initial discussion board posts exist in a genre of their own with separate rules from synchronous online or in-person conversations, so do the peer responses to them. They may be less formal than the initial posts and include more linguistic cues for interaction, such as questions, but because they exist within an evaluated, asynchronous module with clear instructions and due dates, there is no obligation or perhaps even expectation that those questions are actually going to be answered. Despite having the appearance of being more conversational avenues for social presence, they are for many individuals purely performative ways of showing engagement and interest for the sake of evaluation.

Importantly, even those who did return to these comments and post their own response recognized that doing so was neither an academic nor social obligation. As Lydia said, "It's not a graded requirement to go reply to all of those. But I have replied to a few just, you know, because it's a good thing, a thought experiment." If responses to discussion board postings are viewed as nothing more than a "thought experiment," they are unlikely to hold high value for individuals with competing demands on their time and cognition. Fiona addressed this point directly:

> I think in a face-to-face setting, students can ask each other [questions] and someone kind of has to answer. But in this discussion post online, they don't really have to answer. The professor gives you a criteria, you have to make a post and then you have to post one comment only. And I know it's me. Sometimes I don't answer. I'm not gonna lie. I've been guilty of that. But it's also because I have two jobs and I'm not going back every single time each week to answer a question.

Notably, Fiona did not refer to responding to a classmate as engaging in a discussion but as answering a question. Whereas true conversations (whether held in face-to-face or online

contexts) include a sense of mutual exchange of information and a gradual building and sharing of ideas (not to mention a plethora of social cues and niceties), the act of simply answering a question may not, to use a financial term, provide a high return on investment.

I use this metaphor to illustrate the fact that, despite students' busy schedules, the decision of whether or not to engage fully with classmates is almost always a voluntary one based on a measurement of perceived value, and the "paradox of flexibility" described by Delahunty (2018) raises questions about the obligations that online students have toward content and assignments they would prefer to avoid. When the duties that are associated with their positions are primarily oriented toward the completion of tasks that are to be graded, and when the primary audience is the instructor rather than their peers, there is little incentive to engage in the sometimes difficult work of navigating multiple and potentially conflicting ideas in a discussion setting. As I will discuss in the next section, teacher candidates who positioned themselves as being *learners of content* rather than *members of the class community* were particularly prone to disengage from the discussion boards after their graded requirements had been met, leading to a lower sense of community with their classmates as well as less constructive criticism or fewer alternative viewpoints that could have enriched their learning experiences.

In an interesting case study of three teacher candidates who initially failed an online course and then retook the same class face-to-face (Thompson, Miller, & Franz, 2013), a similar issue arose. In online classes, the flexibility and lack of rules for politeness in the online setting made it easy for the teacher candidates to avoid or only minimally engage in discussions about topics they found uninteresting or too challenging. When they retook the classes in a face-to-face setting, they were again required to discuss the topics, but the in-person context did not allow

them the freedom to simply "skip that stuff" (p. 243), so they were unable to avoid engaging with the material. Forced engagement such as this may work best in small classes, but the study highlights the greater level of control instructors may have in face-to-face, synchronous settings in which they determine the amount of time and classroom discussion that should take place in response to the topics they present. It also suggests that the modality in which the discussion takes place may have an impact; due to the permanence of writing, especially in asynchronous settings in which posted words are distanced from the author temporally, written discussions may evoke a higher level of discomfort when dealing with complex or controversial issues (Anderson & Simpson, 2007; Freiermuth, 2011). In the present study, teacher candidates had a large amount of flexibility and freedom to disengage from topics or discussions they thought were boring, difficult, or not worth their time and effort (i.e., less valuable in relation to the time spent), a freedom that is lessened in classes in which synchronous discussions play a major role. This is counter to common claims that participation requirements in online courses make it harder for individual students to disengage from the class due to strict participation requirements. When the minimal participation requirements had been fulfilled to achieve the desired grade in the class, there was no backdrop of social obligations or instructor control to encourage ongoing participation.

In the next chapter, I will take a deeper dive into teacher candidates' positionings by connecting the patterns described in this chapter to the possibilities that the teacher candidates perceived themselves to have access to as a result of their positional identities, particularly those related to experience and self-confidence. Whereas this chapter linked the macro, institutional processes to the positions and interactions within the class setting, the next chapter will situate these interactions within the complex and unique lives of the teacher candidates involved.

CHAPTER 6:
Accumulating Positional Identities:
The Interplay of Experience, Community, and Course Design

Reflexive Positioning and Possibilities of Choice

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this chapter will continue addressing the last two research questions posed within this study:

> *How do teacher candidates position one another through participation in the online course environment?*
>
> *How do online teacher candidates position themselves through participation in the online course environment?*

However, this chapter will further narrow the scope to analyze how teacher candidates' personal experiences shape the ways they interact with their classmates and the positional identities that they accumulate over time. With a stronger emphasis on reflexive positioning, specifically that which Moghaddam (1999) defines as "the process by which one intentionally or unintentionally positions oneself in unfolding personal stories told to oneself" (p. 75), this chapter serves to highlight the importance of the multifaceted individual perspective and its effects. Moghaddam (1999) states that:

> Certain storylines and particular reflexive positions…may become more salient to a person than others. The respective narratives of the 'former alcoholic,' 'orphan,' 'underdog,' 'struggling artist,' or 'future lawyer,' and the accompanying range of positions these themes make available, may tempt the speaker into compelling narratives that fit so comfortably that they may even conceal possibilities of choice. (p. 78)

These "possibilities of choice" shape not only what one believes are feasible options but also the ways that individuals choose to act in social settings. For example, someone who reflexively positions themselves as a strong public speaker may be more likely to seek out opportunities to speak publicly and view their accomplishments more positively than would someone who positions themselves as ineloquent or prone to becoming "tongue-tied," who may use this positioning as justification to eliminate the possibility of growth or success in this area. These possibilities also shape the ways that the ensuing narratives are told to oneself and others. To use one of Moghaddam's examples above, the narrative that is formed when someone who positions themselves as the *underdog* achieves an ambitious goal is quite different from that which is formed if that same person is reflexively positioned as a *champion*, and the autobiographical orientation of oneself toward what may be possible and how those possibilities may be made real are also altered. Rather than adhering to a narrative of unquestioned success or innate ability, the *underdog* is more likely to construct a narrative in which values such as hard work, ambition, and persistence are extolled.

I have noted previously that the majority of research that has analyzed identity construction and performance in online settings has done so through the social identity lens espoused by the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000), in which identifiers of membership in the group or community have been the central focus. So far, I have taken a similar approach in positioning teacher candidates more or less as a group in relation to the institution, the online setting, their instructors, and their peers. In this chapter, I will shift the focus to the individual identities of the participants in this study, particularly as they relate to the TESOL field, to gain insight into how aspects of teacher candidates' individual identities may influence the positions already noted in this manuscript as well as others that may shape their

identities going forward. A key focus will be the ways that the positions that individuals take up influence their understandings of what is possible and, as a result, influence their subsequent patterns of participation and options for interaction.

As Table 1 in Chapter 3 of this manuscript illustrates, the participants in this study had widely varied experiences related to language teaching and learning prior to entering the MA TESOL program, with some having years of international and domestic language teaching and learning experiences and others having none. This wide range of experiences affected the reflexive positioning processes that the teacher candidates negotiated throughout their coursework, and as Moghaddam (1999) stated, they shaped what they saw as “possibilities of choice.” In turn, these positions had profound implications for the ways that they opted to interact with both the content and the community of their peers and instructors, allowing some to develop a sense of community even with the limited semiotic and discursive resources provided, while others oriented themselves instead toward a cognitive understanding of the course content.

Pre-positioning in Introductory Posts

As discussed briefly in the previous chapter, teacher candidates were required to post a self-introduction on the discussion boards at the beginning of each class I observed. These posts, which provided a way for individuals to highlight any aspect of their personal lives they wished, allowed them to pre-position (Harré, 2009) themselves in relation to their classmates and the content they expected to cover in that class. Because they were given a considerable amount of freedom in terms of what they could post (although instructors did provide some guidance), these posts were quite varied in content. A range of topics, such as personal hobbies, hometowns, and family situations were included. Table 5, provided in Chapter 5, offers four example introductory posts given by participants in this study. Whereas these posts were examined previously in terms

of how they were used to create a sense of social presence in the class, in this section, I will now shift to examine instead how teacher candidates positioned themselves in relation to the content and the MA TESOL field in particular.

Within the introductory posts, teacher candidates aligned themselves with the MA TESOL program and course content primarily via six positional identities, some of which were overlapping but had different points of emphasis. The positional identities were: (a) *experienced teacher*; (b) *experienced language learner*; (c) *traveler*; (d) *advocate*, primarily for immigrants and refugees living in the United States; (e) *lover of education/academia*; and (d) *global citizen*, used here to refer to individuals who positioned themselves as constantly seeking out and moving between experiences with diverse cultures. Table 7 shows which teacher candidates aligned with each positional identity and provides example text from the discussion board postings to illustrate how these were achieved discursively.

Table 7: TESOL-Related Reflexive Positions in Self-Introductory Posts

Positional Identity	Aligned Teacher Candidates	Examples
Experienced teacher	Guillermo Violet Fiona	I currently teach 3 classes: Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, and Advanced Conversation – American Culture. (Guillermo) I have taught in Spain, Thailand, and America. They have all been great experiences, but Thailand is where I received the bulk of my experience, developed my teaching philosophy, and found a true passion for teaching, languages, and cultures. (Violet)
Experienced language learner	Guillermo Violet Eleanor Lydia Fiona Danielle	I speak Spanish and of course English. I lived in China for 2 years and at the time I had a relatively good handle on Mandarin. Now I really only speak English and Spanish, although I'm trying to relearn Mandarin and pick up Portuguese. I would like to study Arabic also. (Guillermo) I got a BA in Spanish and French at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and studied abroad in Puerto Rico. I love languages, and right now I'm working on Arabic and Farsi. (Eleanor) I am a native English speaker and I also speak Spanish…I have positive language learning experiences that have led me to

		transition to a new career path…I am a language learner myself and can relate to the challenges of acquiring a new language and also navigating an environment in which you are not a native speaker. (Danielle) I studied Spanish throughout high school and in college…I have also studied some Mandarin, and am also currently working to achieve some fluency in Danish. (Lydia)
Traveler	Violet Christina Fiona Chloe	I love traveling, which is what has led to the TESOL degree…I am finishing up seeing all 50 states this year! I also will be going to about 13 different countries this summer! (Chloe) The idea of traveling appeals to me and I am never one to turn down a potential opportunity! (Christina)
Advocate	Christina Fiona Eleanor Danielle Lydia	I'd like to teach English to immigrants and help them not only get acclimated to their new lives in the US but also to help them navigate the waters towards citizenship or whatever services they may need. I'd like to be an advocate as well as a teacher. (Christina) I was led to the MA TESOL program because of my love to combine language and culture and study how its infusion can bring us closer to world peace, which I actually believe is possible. (Violet)
Lover of education/ academia	Violet Christina Chloe	I absolutely love school and I love learning. I hope to inspire my future students to also love learning. (Chloe) I have a lot of experience with qualitative data and anecdotal evidence…but if I wanted to prove any kind of theory or try to find different trends in populations of individuals I would be at a total loss…I hope that [this class] will help me be more thorough and skeptical as I read scientific studies. (Christina)
Global citizen	Violet Fiona	I am from California, my home base between homes in other countries. (Violet) Due to the fact that I'm constantly watching foreign films (I'm obsessed), I can understand quite a bit of Japanese and Korean from that…I studied the Arabic language in Dubai for about six weeks…I absolutely loved it and would like to get back…so I figured the [MA TESOL] was the next best step to reach a dream and goal of mine. (Fiona)

Some positional identities were more commonly referenced than others, with the positional identities of *experienced language learner* and *advocate* being the most common, with six and five participants aligning themselves with them respectively. The positional identity of *experienced teacher* was taken up by three participants, with two others mentioning experience in their introductory posts but immediately repositioning themselves as novices. Although all but one teacher candidate referred to some traveling experience, only four positioned themselves as

being motivated specifically by the act of traveling. Three teacher candidates positioned themselves as being *lovers of education/academia*, either by directly saying so, as Chloe and Violet did, or by emphasizing their academic mindset as a core part of their identity, as Christina did. Violet and Fiona positioned themselves as *global citizens*, meaning that they situated themselves within a kaleidoscope of intercultural and international experiences that had shaped their worldviews and life trajectories and encouraged them to pursue language teaching.

Seven of the eight teacher candidates had some relevant teaching experience, although the amount and type of experience varied significantly. For this reason, only the three who had the most extensive teaching experience (Guillermo, Violet, and Fiona) chose to position themselves as experienced teachers, in addition to other positional identities with which they aligned. The others chose to focus on a selection of the other five positional identities, related areas in which they felt more comfortable that allowed them to situate themselves within the values and attributes they associated with the TESOL community. This positioning echoes previous analyses of identity construction in online discussion boards in which individuals who lacked what they perceived to be sufficient teaching experience redirected what Delahunty (2012) referred to as a "negative identity" toward positive qualities that they associated with an ideal language teacher. According to Delahunty, the ability to reposition oneself in a way that is positive connects them to their areas of expertise and what they have to offer. Rather than being defined by what they lack, they are able to be positioned by what attributes they have.

Throughout the span in which I observed classes, as well as in my three interviews with participants, the teacher candidates continued to align themselves with the positional identities they had introduced in their self-introductory posts. Christina, for example, spoke at length about her ideal job working in a nonprofit organization in which she had duties as an advocate for

immigrants and refugees, as well as her underlying values and experiences that shaped her viewpoint and directed her toward advocacy as a career. Chloe not only described in detail her travel experiences and plans for future travel but also put her goals into action by traveling to six countries during the semester in which this study was conducted and making concrete plans for additional travel shortly afterward. Danielle drew on her positional identity as an experienced language learner and speaker of Spanish by creating demonstration teaching videos in the Methods of TESOL class in which she applied pedagogical concepts to Spanish lessons she gave her children. As lovers of education and academia, both Chloe and Violet considered the possibility of pursuing doctorate degrees in the future and actively sought out information about potential programs and career paths that were of interest. They had not only aligned themselves with these positional identities as a means of adding value to the identities they performed in the self-introductory posts, but had taken them up in their personal lives in ways that colored the lenses through which they approached the course material and the impacts that completing the MA TESOL program would have on their lives. They imagined themselves in these positional identities as they engaged with the coursework, and they filtered their understanding of the content through the lenses that these identities provided.

Teaching Experience and Legitimacy: Learning Opportunity or Limiting Dichotomy?

Although the teacher candidates were able to pre-position themselves in empowering ways that they then returned to throughout the classes on a personal level, not all of these positional identities were in alignment with the class assignments and what they understood to be their positions as *good students*. In the context of the classes, which focused heavily on the practicalities of teaching, the majority of positional identities enacted in the initial introductory post were abandoned, as the positional identity of *experienced teacher* was elevated in

importance above the rest. This pattern corresponds with Delahunty's (2012) study that found that experienced teachers were given a privileged position in MA TESOL classes. As a professional experience, it was one of the few elements of personal history that regularly made its way into academic discussion boards otherwise inundated with formal discussion of readings.

As teacher candidates worked to comprehend concepts related to pedagogical concerns, many of those who held teaching experience referred to it regularly in their discussion postings as a means of contextualizing potentially abstract or theoretical topics within their own real-world experiences.[9] For example, Violet referred to her teaching experience frequently in terms of an autobiographical narrative:

> When I became a teacher to primary students that didn't even know the alphabet, I knew they wouldn't have the same self-regulation that I did, so I had to think of what would motivate them to learn English.

The quote above is characteristic of the sort of personal anecdotes that were common among experienced teachers in the classes I observed. They used the first person and past tense, and they frequently connected ideas to problems they had faced previously or solutions they had devised. Guillermo, another experienced teacher, regularly referenced the specifics of one of the jobs he held at the time of the study, where he had been an ESL teacher at a language college:

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[9] Notably, this was not the pattern with all teacher candidates who pre-positioned themselves as experienced teachers. Fiona, who had three years of experience tutoring international students as well as a year of teaching English in China, repeatedly referred to herself as a "new teacher" and did not at any point draw on her teaching experiences in her discussion posts as she wrestled with a number of issues related to teaching ESL/EFL. Instead, she opted to focus on her experiences dealing with the emotional support and advocacy that international students, particularly Arab Muslims, need during their study, experiences that went hand in hand with her teaching experience but did not appear to directly inform her approach to thinking about pedagogical issues.

> My former setting involved teaching Advanced Conversation – Idioms, Advanced Conversation – Business English, and Advanced Conversation – American Culture…Each class was confined by its theme "business," "idioms," and the language had to be geared for that. However, when the students demonstrate missing pieces in their language use, it would be a disservice to not try and fill the void.

The experienced teachers' language was also peppered with phrases such as "as a teacher," "my students," and "in my experience," continually tying their opinions to their professional work as teachers and the insights it had given them. These references also came up frequently in their interactions with their classmates, as they compared and contrasted one another's experiences in ways that encouraged one another to consider complex topics from a variety of perspectives informed by the diverse and global experiences represented in the class. As a result, they were held in high esteem by the other teacher candidates, particularly those who did not have extensive teaching experience, as well as their instructors. For example, Jeff thought of many of his experienced students as "equals" with "incredible experience."

Indeed, other teacher candidates appeared to also view them as experts holding equal or near-equal status with the instructors in terms of overall teaching knowledge. All of the participants in this study, including those who positioned themselves as experienced teachers, stated that the most valuable aspect of their classes was the amount that they were able to learn from their experienced peers' perspectives. Eleanor described the sense of confidence she felt after a classmate who was an experienced teacher provided her with positive feedback on one of her teaching demonstration videos:

> I really value their feedback and their real-life experiences that they share in the videos or the discussions because they're actually doing it, you know, and I'm not yet. I mean, at

> this point, I just feel like I'm making it up, and with very limited kind of experience and background knowledge, but when someone in my group watched [my video], and they're actually an ESL teacher, and they mainly gave me positive feedback, that makes me think, like, hey, I'm doing it. I'm going to teach English.

By juxtaposing her feeling of "making it up" with what she perceived as expertise by a classmate who was "actually an ESL teacher," Eleanor positioned herself as a novice who was only beginning to try out aspects of her teacher identity, in contrast to others in the class whose experience meant that they were able not only to produce high-quality work in response to class assignments but also provide valuable feedback to others. As members of the imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of TESOL professionals, they held a higher status that likened their feedback to that of the instructor. Likewise, Chloe, who had no prior teaching experience, positioned her experienced classmates' contributions as being as central to her education as the instructors she had:

> Most of the people in my online class have already been teacher or like are teachers, and I barely have any experience. So I feel like I'm learning a lot from them. I mean, obviously, I'm learning from the teacher but honestly, I'm learning a lot from my peers.

The fact that some of the teacher candidates were already professionals in the field that the remainder of the class was hoping to enter, often with years of experience, placed them on a pedestal of sorts that set them apart from those with less experience, regardless of any other relevant and positive positions that they may have held. They were already active, legitimate (Bourdieu, 1977) teachers, working in diverse and challenging contexts around the world, and their ability to connect theoretical concepts to their own personal experiences alongside engaging anecdotes resulted in their contributions being perceived as highly valuable, both in the ways

they conceptualized course content and in the ways their opinions and suggestions were accepted by others. Their positional identities as experienced teachers provided them with social capital that included the *right* to be critical of readings and their classmates' work, a right that those who did not position themselves as experienced (even when they may have had significant relevant experience from which to draw) did not possess.

The separation of the more and less experienced teachers, and the ways that this distinction altered not only their interactions with their classmates but also the ways they approached the material, was a major theme throughout my observations and interviews with participants. Jeff noted a very practical reason for this distinction:

> I feel like the ones that actually have had teaching experience or are teaching now are the ones who can adopt these materials and kind of see the understanding of this concept a lot better than those who haven't…Because it's really hard to apply theoretical concepts to practice that you really haven't had, or haven't had much of.

The less experienced teacher candidates were in a situation in which they not only had to learn theories and complex concepts but also imagine how they may be able to apply them within real-world settings. This cognitively demanding task was very challenging for many of them, particularly those with the least amount of overall experience. As a result, the work and contributions of the more experienced teachers served as a sort of bridge for the less experienced teachers, which in some cases may have helped to provide the discursive model they were missing from their instructors.

Less Experienced Teachers as Less Valuable

The combination of experienced and less experienced teachers in a supposedly level learning environment created a double-edged sword: Although having highly experienced

teachers in the class provided those with less experience access to a variety of perspectives, it also positioned those who did not have this experience as having less valuable contributions to the class as a whole. Previous research has offered evidence of how varying levels of teaching experience in online settings can be mutually beneficial in structured settings, in which individuals have clear roles as mentors/mentees (e.g., Chen, 2010), but the egalitarian, nondifferentiated nature of the discussion boards positioned all teacher candidates, regardless of experience, as being equally responsible for learning and commenting meaningfully on course content. In this nondifferentiated space, teachers who did not identify as experienced teachers were limited in their ability to position themselves in ways other than the "negative identities" (Delahunty, 2012) they possessed, highlighting not their experiences but their lack thereof.

The result was a situation in which some of the less experienced teachers were unable to speak from a place of authority on topics that were being addressed, thereby miring them in static positions similar to what Glazier (2009) found in her analysis of a teacher education class in which one student was recognized as an authority on a subject. In her study, an African American individual in a group of mostly White teacher candidates established a positional identity as "cultural expert" that, in turn, benefitted class discussions in some ways but also limited other teacher candidates' positions in ways that left them frustrated and with lessened capacity to engage in the class discussions from their own personal perspectives. This experience simultaneously mired the African American student in this role, forcing him to be a representative of an entire culture based solely on his race. Although the realm of expertise in this study is clearly different, the static positioning that resulted is very much the same. The high value placed on teaching experience by both instructors and teacher candidates devalued all other positional identities and the knowledge and perspectives that they held, which led to several of

the less experienced teacher candidates feeling less confident in their ability to contribute to class discussions in meaningful ways.

Chloe, the only participant with no teaching experience at all, struggled deeply with the ways she felt her lack of experience placed her at a disadvantage. After taking the Methods of TESOL class, in which her lack of experience was made evident through multiple mistakes in her assignments, she positioned herself in opposition to her classmates who were already teaching:

> I'm a student. I've never even [taught] in a classroom, and other people are teaching overseas already. Other people are teaching in the US, in second language classes…I feel like other people do have more knowledge of what they're doing…They kind of know what's more appropriate, whereas I don't.

In both our interview and in a reflection she wrote and posted within the course site, Chloe described two incidents in which she had posted teaching demonstration videos but, due to her lack of experience in teaching in language learning contexts, the language she used was not properly adjusted and scaffolded for her intended audience. She received multiple negative comments on her work regarding these two issues, both from her instructor and her more experienced classmates, which she said lowered her confidence in her ability to apply the class concepts effectively. Her instructor linked these problems directly to her lack of teaching experience, stating in feedback to one of her videos, "I know you may not have the experience to come up with this information, but you would benefit from at least imagining it." This feedback, posted publicly within Voice Thread, was available for her classmates to see, which reinforced Chloe's accumulating positional identity as someone whose lack of teaching experience hindered her ability to complete assignments successfully. Consequently, she began positioning herself

not only as an *inexperienced teacher* but also as a *deficient student*, someone who struggled to keep up with the course content and contribute to the course in meaningful ways. In speaking about the responses that she posted to her classmates' work, she claimed:

> That's a requirement, you have to write. But I feel like usually it's just blah blah blah. I try to like, give a suggestion or something awesome, but I feel like it's mainly me learning from them. I try to reciprocate, give them something I think would help them, but there's not much I can say.

Over time, Chloe's sense of confidence in herself seemed to progressively erode, and her comments on her classmates' work held less substance and more praise, while she emphasized her lack of experience in her online posts increasingly throughout the semester. Without sufficient discursive modeling from her instructors, Chloe looked to her classmates to provide the models she felt she needed to be able to complete her assignments and become an active member of the class discourse community. By the second session, this resulted in a pattern in which she postponed submitting her assignments until shortly before the due date so she could have a variety of models to serve as a basis or guide for her work:

> I kind of look at like my peers' work. I don't use their content but like, how they structure it and stuff and then I just put it all together…I just like, watch their videos and then you know, judge myself, reflect upon myself, whatever, based off their videos and also off the teacher's comments…I'm not asking my peers. I'm just like, using their stuff to reflect on my own.

Chloe increasingly began to position herself as a *deficient student*. This reflexive positioning began to affect her patterns of participation in relation to the course content as well: Because she had struggled with meeting expectations previously, she positioned herself as being

unable to correctly complete subsequent work without following the models that her classmates' work provided. As the semester went on, she became increasingly reliant on her instructors' willingness to let her revise and resubmit assignments on which they had already given her feedback. This dependence, shaped by her reflexive positioning as a *deficient student* unable to complete her work without such detailed guidance and support, disengaged her from the critical thinking necessary for growth and left her feeling that her main goal was simply to "do what's necessary to get a good grade." The two positional identites of *inexperienced teacher* and *deficient student* reinforced one another, which over time limited Chloe's potential for repositioning herself as a knowledgeable, emerging professional in the field. Her experience echoes Norton's (2013) assertion that increased social capital is linked with greater investment in learning; as Chloe felt her social capital stagnate and eventually wane, she felt less invested in engaging in proactive learning strategies, opting instead to "just make it through."

Lydia, who had limited language teaching experience from a TA position she held during her undergraduate studies, followed a similar strategy in dealing with a lack of self-confidence by postponing her submission of her assignments until she felt certain that they were accurate and appropriate:

> By the time I've written my discussion posts, I've gone through all the material, right? I viewed all the lectures, I've completed the reading. I don't like to jump the gun and post on something before I feel like I've gotten a good understanding of the material that we're talking about.

Although Lydia wasn't purposefully waiting so that she could benefit from the work that her classmates had done, she positioned herself as someone who needed to take the extra time to immerse herself in the content to be able to have "a good understanding of the material." Her

deliberate approach, in which she ensured that she had carefully studied the material from each unit prior to posting, aligned with her positioning as primarily a *learner of content*—someone who needed to engage deeply with the material in order to make sense of the course concepts, but not someone who was able or willing to offer constructive criticism or make comments based on personal reasoning or experience. By carefully constructing her discussion posts, she prioritized presenting herself as knowledgeable and competent over engaging in conversation with her classmates. Combined with her feeling that she needed to present herself as "professional" as possible, as detailed earlier, this resulted in discussion posts that, in addition to being submitted just before the deadline, sounded cautious, formal, and heavily edited.

In both Chloe's and Lydia's cases, their lack of previous experience led to changes in their participation patterns; because they did not see their own contributions to the course as being as valuable as the contributions of those who had more experience, they preferred to read and observe silently to learn about the content as much as possible before producing work of their own. In the online setting, such silence, often referred to as "lurking" (Lu & Curwood, 2015) or "quiet participation" (Wilton, 2018), equates to invisibility, as only active participation in the form of postings provide evidence of presence and engagement. Gulati (2008) connects this silence, and the corresponding invisibility, with feelings of disconnection and disempowerment:

> If one chooses to remain silent and not acknowledge their presence, they may be seen as not being part of that community. This may further create power in those seen to be leading the community through active participation. Thus, individuals may also experience power differences among themselves, where one learner contributes more than others, or one learner displays greater depth of knowledge. If such displays of

knowledge are not constructively facilitated to create a notion of mutual support and choices of learning pathways, some learners may be left feeling inadequate and disempowered. (p. 188)

In a situation in which individuals lacking teaching experience were already positioned as having less valuable contributions to the class discussion, the silence created when those same individuals submitted their work later served to exacerbate this unequal power dynamic.

By the same token, the privileging of teaching experience backgrounded nearly all other aspects of personal experience, such as the positional identities related to advocacy, education, and travel that were included in the initial posts, as well as more complex and potentially uncomfortable aspects of identity such as race or gender. This process, potentially an unintended effect of a long-term focus on social identity rather than individual identity in online settings (Garrison et al., 2009), forced teacher candidates into one-dimensional positional identities with unquestioned—and widely divergent—levels of value and prestige. Having performed the job functions of an ESL teacher in a professional environment provided experienced teachers a level of social capital that was difficult for less experienced teachers to contest and nearly impossible for them to attain. Meanwhile, expertise drawn from non-teaching experiences was largely silenced. Without being able to represent themselves fully, either through semiotically rich representations of their embodied selves or informal opportunities to engage in ongoing conversation about complex topics, the identities of the teacher candidates were reduced to biographical facts and static characters. The diversity of perspectives, referred to by nearly all of the participants in this study as the strongest aspect of the program, was stifled arbitrarily, depriving the class of stories and opinions that didn't fit well within the rigid structure of the class.

This self-perpetuating cycle of imbalanced positioning related to expertise in the classroom also had negative effects in terms of cognitive engagement with the content for the individuals who positioned themselves as focused on learning the content the most. Lydia's and Chloe's strategy of posting later denied them the opportunity to receive potentially valuable feedback from their peers and integrate their perspectives dialogically and critically with their own, thereby distancing them from the socially mediated negotiation of meaning essential in the social constructivist approaches to learning that discussion forums purport to uphold. The next section will examine the effects of these altered participation patterns in greater detail.

Patterns of Participation and Placement on the Page

The distinction that emerged between the experienced and less experienced teachers was strengthened by the fact that, just as Chloe and Lydia tended to wait until the last minute to post their work, the teachers with the most experience tended to post their work first in the discussion board forums. Guillermo, for example, who not only had years of teaching experience but was also a current ESL teacher in the US, frequently completed his discussion posts days or even weeks prior to the deadline. As someone who felt the classes were, for the most part, "easy," and exhibited a strong sense of confidence in his teaching ability and his comprehension of the subject matter both in our interviews and in his online posts, he struggled to understand why his classmates often waited until the deadline to complete their assignments:

> I'm usually one of the first to post on these discussion boards. And then obviously, I'm going to, you know, I try to wait a few days for people to kind of catch on and contribute to the discussion board. I don't know if procrastination is like, a graduate student, like a condition or something. We're all afflicted with it. Because like, all these people don't post until, like, the day of or like the day before. And so by that time, like, I'm kind of

> like, done thinking about it in a way. And so I'll read like, the first few, maybe, but beyond that, like, it just gets kind of boring to scroll through everybody.

Due to the social capital Guillermo had attained as an experienced teacher, he had trouble recognizing the unequal power dynamic that had arisen in his classes, which had benefited him but marginalized others. Not having dealt with the lack of confidence and associated coping strategies that some of his less experienced peers felt, he could only rationalize this behavior as being the result of procrastination. On the contrary, he had the confidence necessary to work quickly through all the open modules and complete the majority of his assignments before receiving feedback from either his instructor or his classmates, and the ongoing positive feedback he received appears to have strengthened this tendency. He trusted in his experience, his intuition, and his ability to produce strong work that met the class expectations, so he did not rely on others' opinions to guide what he considered to be minor assignments.

Patterns of participation held surprisingly steady during the five months of this study. Teacher candidates tended to post in a similar order for each discussion question, and this pattern held true across classes as well. Although not all experienced teachers posted early and not all inexperienced teachers posted late, there was a definite tendency for this to be the case, with a blend of levels of experience making up the middle. The timing of posts is important in this study for two major reasons: (1) teacher candidates reported being less likely to return to previous modules after they had completed their assigned work, meaning that they frequently did not see the posts of their classmates who posted after them; and (2) the visual design of the discussion board was arranged in such a way that the first posts were permanently pinned to the top of the board, with each subsequent post appearing in chronological order beneath. This structure created a scenario in which the individuals who had posted early were always nearer to

the beginning of the string of text and therefore more easily visible and accessible to their classmates. On the contrary, posts submitted closer to the due date became buried at the end of the discussion forum and were only visible after a large amount of scrolling through previous posts and responses. This seemingly small and inconsequential aspect of the course design resulted in large differences in how teacher candidates were able to interact with one another, further highlighting the importance of the semiotic context in which the interaction took place.

Although the work required to return to a previous board, read a classmate's comment, and respond may seem insignificant, the act of navigating to a different module in and of itself often required clicking through multiple pages. Once the correct discussion board was reached, the layout of the page, which did not allow for easily collapsing or hiding discussions or provide clear visual markers to indicate new posts or users, required a significant amount of scrolling through long posts and responses to find the correct post. It was, as Lydia stated, "information overload":

> It ends up being like a just a huge thread, you know. Like when you go on a really old internet website and the threads are just posting in a post in a post and it goes on through eternity. So that can make it difficult to navigate. It also makes it difficult for me to be able to view where a student responded to my response and so forth. You know, I keep expanding these endless webs of discussions.

Several teacher candidates referred to the discussion board forums as being overwhelming due to the amount of text that they included and the difficulty of reading such long strings of text with few visual cues on a computer or, even more challenging, on a mobile device. Certainly, they provided a way for them to view one another's work as well as comments that their classmates

had posted, but the long strings of text that created what Lydia referred to as "endless webs of discussions" created a visually intimidating space that many opted to avoid as much as possible.

Despite being the primary form of peer-to-peer interaction, the discussion boards echoed the text-heavy design of the course overall and further emphasized the information- and task-centered aspects of the semiotic landscape by sacrificing user experience for presentation of text. Their design, entirely imageless and lacking options for easy personalization or recognition of fellow classmates, represented students simply as names beside lengthy responses to instructors' questions. This erased nonlinguistic, non-task-based forms of self-presentation and reinforced the position of the *good student* as someone who interacted primarily with the *content* of the course, even when the task entailed interaction with peers. In addition, the visual salience afforded to the earlier posts represented conversation as occurring in a purely linear fashion, despite studies demonstrating that online discussion outside of structured classroom-based discussion boards is more often characterized by significant overlap, repetition, and a lively yet messy exchange of ideas (Freiermuth, 2011). By imposing a static visual structure based entirely on the chronological order of initial postings, the first voices to be heard were nearly always the loudest, while those that followed faded into a cacophony of text.

The effects of these elements of the course design were immediately evident not only to me but also to all of the instructors and teacher candidates with whom I spoke: People who posted earlier got more feedback, and people who posted later got less, if any at all, despite being those who could perhaps benefit the most from additional feedback. With very few exceptions, those who submitted their discussion board post early received quantitatively more feedback from more classmates than those who submitted theirs later. Table 8 provides a breakdown of the

average number of unique commenters on each participant's discussion posts as well as the average total number of comments per post.

Table 8: Discussion Board Interaction Breakdown

Name	Average Unique Commenters Per Post	Average Total Comments Per Post
Guillermo	1.93	2.86
Violet	1.00	3.08
Christina	1.57	1.70
Fiona	1.44	1.44
Danielle	1.13	1.13
Eleanor	.93	1.21
Chloe	.96	.96
Lydia	.38	.57

As Table 8 illustrates, Guillermo, an early poster, had the highest average number of unique commenters per post at 1.93. In other words, each post received a response from approximately two individual classmates. This small number may not seem significant until it is compared with Lydia, who had an average of only .38 unique commenters per post, meaning that the majority of her postings, which were often submitted shortly before the deadline, received no feedback whatsoever. In fact, the order provided in the table roughly corresponds to the typical order in which the participants posted in each discussion board, showing a clear connection between the order of posting and the amount of feedback received. In addition, although the analysis here is based only on the interactions of those who participated in this study, this pattern appears to hold true for all teacher candidates in the courses I observed. In fact, this pattern seemed to strengthen over time, as Guillermo and several others began completing their assignments further in advance while Chloe, Lydia, and other typical late posters settled into a more predictable pattern of completing their assignments at the last minute. Violet's posts, with

an average of only one unique commenter each, were the only ones to break this pattern, for reasons I will explain below.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) emphasize “the absolute interrelation of discourse and its mode of appearance” (p. 24), and this point is clearly evidenced within the discussion board forums I observed; the repeated central placement on the computer screen of early posters’ work made their posts not only more easily accessible to their classmates but also more memorable. An analysis of the overall comments made in the discussion board posts indicates that the early posters’ peers were more likely to use their names when addressing them, refer to previous posts or comments they had written, and mention aspects of their personal lives or professional experiences than other teacher candidates received in their peer responses. In my interviews with participants, although they often stated that they had trouble connecting their classmates’ names to their postings or biographical information, they were more likely to remember the names and other details of the early posters. This phenomenon extended to the class instructors. For example, in the Research Methods class, as the instructor provided feedback on teacher candidates’ perspectives at the end of each module, the early posters’ ideas were more frequently mentioned than were those who posted in the middle or near the end of the forum. Because not all experienced teachers were early posters and not all early posters were experienced teachers, the extent of the privileged position that experienced teachers held on this salience is unclear. What is clear, however, is that experienced teacher candidates like Guillermo, who felt a strong sense of confidence and therefore posted early, were able to have this confidence further bolstered due to the design of the discussion board; on the other hand, teacher candidates like Lydia, who felt less confidence in her comprehension of the material and thus posted at the last minute, became almost invisible.

An unequal distribution of power among teacher candidates emerged in the discussion board as a result of the relative visibility of their posts. People who posted early, regardless of prior experience, eventually accumulated positional identities within the classes as *star students* or *overachievers*, due at least in part to discussion board structure (although see discussion earlier in this chapter about the role that experience played for some). Their visibility had elevated their social capital within the class, such as what may be seen in a face-to-face setting in which students who regularly sit in the front row and provide more commentary. Early poster Guillermo, who had accumulated social capital as both an early poster and experienced teacher, was quite aware of his positioning and visibility, referring to himself as the "nerd in the class." On the other hand, late posters such as Chloe and Lydia, whose contributions went largely unnoticed, were unable to achieve similar levels of visibility or interaction.

Whereas the early posters had recreated an online version of being seated front and center, the late posters' contributions, relegated to the bottom of the screen, were reminiscent of students who take their seats in corners and back rows of physical classrooms, silently observing others while remaining largely invisible themselves. Chloe used this metaphor in one of our interviews, stating that she felt as though she was "sitting in the back of the class" as a result of her delayed participation. The online setting, often considered to be a more neutral and egalitarian space than brick-and-mortar classrooms, came to reproduce power relations common in face-to-face settings. Rather than neat rows of desks facing an instructor, with increasing social capital accompanying students' proximity to the front of the class, there were long lines of text written in response to instructors' prompts, with social capital afforded to those who were able to post their ideas well in advance. However, due to the increased potential for students to feel isolated in online settings, as well as the well-documented pattern of lower achievers

struggling disproportionately with online settings and having a greater chance of dropping out entirely (Xu & Jaggars, 2013), this replication of power dynamics has perhaps even stronger potential for perpetuating educational inequities than that which is commonly seen in face-to-face settings. Jaworski and Thurlow (2011) state:

> We create our identities in part through the process of geographical imagining, the locating of self in space, claiming the ownership of specific places, or by being excluded from them, by sharing space and interacting with others, however subtly and fleetingly. (p. 7)

As Chloe imagined herself "sitting in the back of the class," she located herself in a place removed from the instructor and the *star students* who made up the discursive center of the class; her feeling of exclusion from their interactions not only limited the feedback she received but also her access to reciprocal acts that build the trust and sense of belonging necessary to begin to enter a community.

In a face-to-face environment, instructors may bring certain students into the fold through common techniques such as rearranging desks, shuffling students to new locations, or shifting the "action zone" by changing their own locations in relation to students (Adams & Biddle, 1970). In fully online settings, however, more complex approaches that consider individuals' emplacement and navigation within the virtual semiotic landscape are needed. Further discussion will be provided in Chapter 7.

The Development of a Mini Community

Chloe's experience of being excluded from much of the dominant class discussion stands in sharp relief to the experience of a small group of students in the class who were able to form reciprocal relationships with one another, even within the impersonal and highly academic

confines of the discussion board. Although the number of unique commenters was the most highly concentrated near the top, many of these commenters were the same from one post to the next, meaning several of the same individuals began an ongoing interaction with one another near the top of the board that was not replicated in any other area. Whereas the majority of postings made by teacher candidates were characterized by a feeling of distance, with little evidence of social presence, the early posters, who interacted with one another repeatedly, showed linguistic markers of recognition of one another as individuals (i.e., repeated use of names, reference to previous posts, use of biographical information), positioning other members of the mini community as "real" (Garrison et al., 2000). This mini community, with approximately five to six regular contributors who changed somewhat (with significant overlap) from one class to another, was an active space in which individuals not only engaged with the content critically and reflectively, but they also engaged directly with one another as familiar colleagues whose life histories, values, and experiences were recognized and commented on by one another. This created a sort of mini community made up mostly of fellow early posters. Guillermo commented on this pattern:

> Sometimes it does seem like you're only in a classroom with, instead of 40, you're only in a classroom with like, the same 10 people. We kind of identified kind of who's who in the class in terms of what they think, who you might agree with, and who you might look to kind of just contrast yourself with, because, you know, you feel like your mind needs that or whatnot. And so, I think that has definitely kind of grown over the past two semesters, and I think it will continue to grow.

This feeling of "who's who" provided a sense of what Violet, a fellow early poster, referred to as "camaraderie" that carried over to different classes. With a sense of camaraderie that oriented

them not only to the content but to one another as individuals, the members of this mini community interacted with one another in ways that were much more like a conversation than what was created by the remainder of the class. Although they also used highly formal, academic language, their responses to one another's work were detailed, thoughtful, and more likely to provide constructive criticism. They were also much more likely to reply to their classmates' responses on their discussion posts, leading to a more well-developed back-and-forth pattern in which they frequently elaborated on or clarified ideas.

In one particularly engaging thread in the Research Methods class, Violet examined the concept of linguistic imperialism in her original discussion post, setting off a flurry of activity that resulted in 14 lengthy comments in an ongoing conversation among Violet, three classmates, and the course instructor. This thread involved a multifaceted negotiation of meanings that linked personal experiences with a wide array of academic readings, values, and beliefs related to topics such as history, culture, socioeconomic status, and identity, and responses continued to be posted well after the module's deadline had passed. In fact, it was the only conversation I witnessed in which discussion of ideas continued after the following module had begun, raising the question of whether this was due to the particularly engaging nature of the debate itself or the social cohesion of the participants. Regardless, as if in recognition of the discursive limitations the discussion board itself was reaching, the thread eventually concluded with the comment, "If only we could have this conversation over a cup of coffee, eh? ☺"

In our interviews, Violet expounded on the strong connections she felt with her classmates and the benefits she reaped from her interactions with them:

> It's very much my community. Like, meeting the teachers and meeting the students, I was like, oh my gosh, these are my people. I felt like the swan that finds all the other

> swan ducklings….I think most everybody are teachers, so it's really nice to get like, hey, this is what I do in my class. And like, some of them have been an English teacher for 30-something years, some of them are returning [to school]. So they have great experience, you know, but they're not catty about it…even if I don't love their teaching methods and they don't love mine, we can exchange ideas. Because when you're a teacher, you're like, tell me more. I need to learn.

In a semiotic landscape that, due to various issues discussed previously, provided few resources for teacher candidates to develop community and lasting familiarity with one another, a small group was able to accomplish this in a way that was not only very meaningful to them as they exchanged ideas with one another but was also very visible to both the instructors and the other members of the class. However, the clear delineation between the sorts of interactions taking place within this mini-community and the remainder of the class, particularly among those who were late posters, indicates that the presence of this community may not truly be a sign of a successful discussion board but merely the inverse of the exclusion experienced by others.

The Mini Community Member and Non-Member Divide

Returning to the data in Table 8, the amount of back-and-forth interaction that characterized posts by members of this community is evidenced in the right-hand column, which includes the average number of overall comments per post. Guillermo had an average of nearly three comments per post, and Violet, who had an average of only one unique commenter per post had an average of more than three comments each due to her ongoing engagement and conversation with her peers. In fact, her quick responses to her classmates' posts, such as those in response to her post about linguistic imperialism, may have been a reason why she received fewer unique commenters overall; several teacher candidates mentioned that they typically

preferred not to comment on a post that already had a large number of responses for a variety of reasons. Conversely, Christina, who frequently engaged with this mini community as a relatively early poster, received an average of 1.57 unique commenters per post, but she was not as engaged in back-and-forth conversations with her peers, leading to a smaller increase in the number of posts total. Notably, Eleanor and Lydia both also responded to their peers' comments, but perhaps because they typically posted later and were not members of the mini community described here, these interactions were less likely to be sustained or repeated in subsequent posts. Fiona, Danielle, and Chloe did not respond to any of their peers' comments. Danielle addressed this in one of our interviews:

> I've had a few classes with the same people, and so I know who's going to post early and post really long and have like long responses to each other. And I think that's really probably really nice for them, and really valuable for them. But I'm never in the position where I can do that. Like, my time is so planned down to the minute, and I don't have time to go so far above and beyond.

Her description of this pattern of responding to one another as going "so far above and beyond" offers an important insight: When a discussion board is not perceived as a place in which actual discussion should take place and instead is understood as a place where assignments are submitted, engaging in back-and-forth conversation with classmates means doing more than what is expected. Interaction with content and submitting assignments is the obvious priority, so for individuals who do not have time limitations, interaction with peers, even if it is seen as "valuable," is pushed aside.

Unfortunately, in this case, the established patterns of interaction, the relationship between time of posting and salience within the discussion forum, and the types of discourse that

ensued put in motion a self-perpetuating cycle in which those who were members of the mini community received rich and detailed feedback that encouraged them to continue engaging with one another, while those who were not members of this mini community received less personalized and more general comments, which gave them little reason to attempt to further the conversation. As previously mentioned, Chloe and Lydia were often at or near the bottom of the discussion board, and each received an average of less than one comment per post, with Lydia receiving an exceptionally low average number of comments at only .38 per post. Their strategies for overcoming their lack of prior experience by instead orienting themselves to either their classmates' work or careful and prolonged engagement with course materials may have helped them feel more confident about the work they eventually posted, but it served to isolate them from the rest of the class and deprive them of potentially very valuable feedback. Chloe and Lydia both emphasized how much they felt they were able to learn from their experienced classmates, but they rarely had the opportunity to interact with them in a meaningful way within the primary means of interaction, the discussion board.

Although Danielle positioned herself as a busy student who had to prioritize her learning of the material over engaging in practices similar to this mini community, she may have been more inclined to do so had she received the feedback its members provided to one another:

> If I saw [debate] happening more often, I would be checking the board. I'd be more engaged in the boards. But generally speaking, they're a very boring place. I'm not going there to engage in lively debate. Unfortunately, you know, because I would love that.

The lack of meaningful feedback and the criticality and suggestions that she called "debate" left her with a feeling of what she referred to as "discussion board fatigue," in which she saw little need to do anything that was not required and explicitly evaluated by the instructor. As someone

whose posts were obscured near the middle or end of the board, she blended in, as Eleanor stated, like "a name on a list," and her contributions to the board meant progressively less to her during the course of the semester. As a result, so did the contributions of others, making it increasingly difficult for her to feel a sense of motivation to develop relationships with them.

Three important points must be made here. First, perhaps because the mini community developed among early posters, it contained a disproportionate number of teacher candidates who positioned themselves as experienced teachers compared to the remainder of the class. As was the case with Guillermo, whose confidence allowed him to complete course assignments well in advance, this same sense of confidence appears to have had an impact on the makeup of this mini community. However, it does not appear that experience is the reason *why* some teacher candidates posted early or engaged in the ongoing discursive interactions that they did. As a counterexample, Christina, who was less experienced, was a regular early poster and contributor to postings made by group members (though see below for discussion), and in turn, she received comments on her own work by members of this group, showing reciprocation and acceptance. Likewise, and more importantly, there were numerous experienced teachers who did not post significantly earlier than their peers or join this or other similar mini communities. This suggests that being experienced was not a requisite for legitimate interaction in the community, nor was experience itself a causal factor in the creation of the mini community. Rather, it appears that the development resulted from the confluence of multiple distinct but related factors: (a) a discussion board design that grouped the early posters together in a highly salient way; (b) the asynchronous environment that encouraged individuals to respond to posts submitted close in time to their own for the sake of efficiency; and (c) the tendency for less experienced teachers to postpone their discussion board postings until closer to the deadline.

Second, the distinction between the interactions among members of the mini community and the rest of the class was not 100 percent definite. Perhaps because of the sense of peer support they received and the social capital they had accumulated, many of the members of the mini community made concerted efforts to provide feedback on their other classmates' work, albeit with less frequency. In these situations, those who were experienced teachers took on the role of a guide, pointing out additional considerations that may have added to the discussion overall. Given their heightened status, they had not only a *right* to offer critical perspectives but perhaps, in some teacher candidates' views, a *duty* to do so. However, these interactions only took place sporadically, meaning that those outside the mini community did not receive the same sustained level of feedback that those within the mini community did.

Finally, despite the disproportionate number of experienced teachers among its ranks, the mini community differed from previous studies (Çelik, 2013; Meskill & Anthony, 2005) in which class members with greater levels of experience and associated authority dominated class discussions in ways that inhibited the participation of their peers. Members' posts and exchanges were highly visible due to their placement at the top of the discussion forum, but their presence did not hinder others' ability to share their own ideas, particularly since doing so was a required component of the course. Later posts were less visible not because of the contributions of these active and engaged members but because of the inefficient design of the discussion forum in which the contributions were posted. While it is possible that the legitimacy and authority certain members of this mini community exhibited due to their positions as experienced teachers may have caused other, less experienced teachers to feel disempowered due to their perception of having less valuable contributions, this is an issue related to the uneven power dynamic between experienced and less experienced teachers across the board, not the relationships that formed

within the mini community. To ascribe characteristics such as dominance and control to the members of this community would be a highly erroneous misplace of blame. As the modified positioning triangle in Chapter 3 emphasizes, positions, storylines, and messages must be interpreted within their complete context. The underlying context of the overall course design not only made this mini community possible but also, through the same mechanisms, hindered the formation of similar communities among individuals with different patterns of participation. Therefore, a more appropriate placement of responsibility for the relatively less visible status that other teacher candidates achieved lies with the structure of the courses and the ways that they produced an imbalance of power and dominance.

The existence of the small group of experienced teacher candidates who engaged in ongoing, detailed, and highly visible discussion of their own and others' work was a phenomenon that served to sort the class into essentially two groups: those who were members of the mini community and those who weren't. Whereas those who were in this group demonstrated in-depth knowledge of the other members, those outside of this group did not use as many clear linguistic markers to demonstrate their recognition of their classmates as individuals, nor did they interact with the same classmates repeatedly. This led to a discursive pattern in which the majority of teacher candidates, regardless of prior teaching experience, interacted not with *people*, but with the *ideas* or *content* they contributed (Moore, 1989). For example, Lydia stated, "It's hard for me to pick out certain individuals in the class. I kind of base my comments on what they say in the posts. I base it on what they submit." Even Christina, who initially appeared to be a peripheral member of the mini community due to her early posting pattern and reciprocal comments from group members, admitted to typically not knowing

anything about the classmates on whose posts she commented. She referred to her relationships with her classmates as “essentially non-existent” and explained:

> Since there are no pictures next to the names, I have no way of really keeping track of who I’m responding to. There’s one girl, I know her because she has a really unusual name. So I know that I’ve read her posts before, every once in a while, seemingly at random, and it just happens to be her discussion board post…I think a lot of [the problem] is not having a way to identify people’s faces because there very well could be somebody I’ve commented on for all the group discussions, but I don’t remember them because I don’t remember the name. So I could have commented on the same person three times. They don’t exist, right? It’s finding the words. It’s not like, oh I always really like what Joe says or whatever. It’s more you’re just reading the comments and trying to find something to respond to. Like, I got that. That will count for the discussions.

Christina’s comment is an eye-opening reminder that appearances, particularly in the disembodied online context, are not what they may seem to be. Although she was an early poster who regularly provided detailed comments on other early posters’ work, she did not identify as a member of the mini community because, unlike others, she did not orient herself to the people and therefore develop a sustained understanding of their work and personalities, but instead commented on their work just to “find something to respond to.” She was also enacting the institutional positioning created through the deletion of students’ ability to post pictures of themselves as part of their profiles: To her, the fact that there were no pictures associated with her classmates’ postings meant, quite frankly, they didn’t exist. Only their words and ideas existed, and that was what her comments were directed toward, regardless of whether it may have seemed that she was fostering relationships. Her contributions are another example of the

need to distinguish interaction, or a set of actions and behaviors, from social presence as an underlying, less easily observable psychological state, which will be discussed in the next section.

Her perspective also helps to illuminate the impact of the institution's decision to eliminate profile pictures as a supposed security measure; this form of control deleted students' abilities to provide visual representation of themselves and erased students' physical embodiment, including race, gender, and alignment with macrosociological categories. Later in the same interview, Christina drew a distinction between her ability to make friends in the online setting versus classes held in person. As someone who identified as "punk," she had long relied upon what she called "the markings of [her] tribe," such as choices in clothing and hairstyle, to recognize individuals with shared interests. Without these semiotic resources, she searched the posts for linguistic indicators of identity, an endeavor in which she was mostly unsuccessful. Significantly, she also hesitated to include such linguistic indicators in her own work for fear that she would not be seen as a serious student if she brought non-academic aspects of her identity into her contributions. The multiple layers of control and distance of the online setting—the stripping of visual content, the funneling of interaction into instructor-evaluated academic posts, and the lack of trust created by reliance on depersonalized, asynchronous teaching methods—created a situation in which presenting oneself as more than simply a one-dimensional *experienced teacher* or *learner of content* was seen as a potentially dangerous act.

Problematizing Social Presence

The feeling of belonging within the mini community described above highlights a debate about the nature of social presence as it is commonly applied in research and other evaluations of online class effectiveness. The previous chapter offered numerous examples of how the language

that was used in the self-introductory posts provided clear examples of what Garrison et al. (2000, 2010) define as social presence, followed by a discussion of the abrupt shift that the course took as soon as the topic of discussion moved to more standard academic work. Aykol & Garrison (2008) suggest that all three presences within the CoI framework, as well as their internal components, fluctuate over time as the focus of the course changes. They suggest that, as group cohesion naturally grows, there is less need for overt affective expression, and therefore, the indicators of social presence decrease with time. However, in this case, the drop-off of such affective language was not gradual, as may be expected alongside the development of group cohesion, but sudden and within the first week of class. Although the discussion board posts appeared to foster a strong sense of community, cohesion, and portrayals of teacher candidates as well-rounded individuals with lifetimes of experiences and interests, this sense was short-lived.

This raises the question of why, in four separate classes, what appeared to be such a strong and supportive community remained beyond the reach of all members of the class except the small mini community that formed. A potential key for understanding this lies in the performativity that was illustrated previously, in which individuals used linguistic markers to show interest and engagement for the sake of fulfilling what they perceived to be the duties of a *good student*, but their attitudes were not in alignment with their posts. The feelings of ventriloquy that several participants expressed were echoed in their performances of social presence: In recognizing that their work was meant for dual audiences, with only one audience (the instructor) having the power to evaluate them in consequential ways, the less powerful audience of their peers was neglected. This aligns with Bell's (1984, 2002) theory of audience design in that the primary audience (i.e., addressee) for the discussion board posts, ostensibly fellow classmates, was exchanged for the secondary audience (i.e., auditor) of instructors. As a

result, this shift gave the instructors stronger influence on the formation of the discussion posts and diminished the influence of classmates. What appeared to be interaction with classmates was, for many, completion of course requirements or, as will be elaborated upon shortly, interaction with content, not people.

To have any lasting effect on the development of relationships or community, social presence cannot be equated to a set of actions or behaviors that may not be accurate representations of the underlying attitudes. Rather, it must be viewed as a psychological state, or as Jaber and Kennedy (2017) suggest, “the *product* of online interactions that ease such tensions around multiple and shifting identities” (p. 223, emphasis added). As the product of the interactions rather than the interactions themselves, social presence becomes more closely aligned with individuals’ feelings of trust and ongoing willingness to represent oneself authentically, an issue that exists in face-to-face contexts as well but is exacerbated in the hidden and heavily rehearsed virtual world. Kim, Song, & Luo (2016) point out that social presence is conflated with interaction in many studies, although the two are distinct constructs. They suggest this distinction may be clarified by beginning with a face-to-face understanding of social presence, which they liken to Goffman’s (1963) concept of *co-presence*, a feeling that occurs when individuals “sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived” (Goffman, 1963, p. 17, qtd. in Kim et al., 2016, p. 674). In other words, like co-presence, social presence requires mutuality of affect. Mere performance of affective expression without ongoing and predictable reciprocation is not sufficient to build trust and therefore cannot be considered meaningful social presence. Like their classmates, members of the mini community exchanged much of their overt affective expression for formal, academic discussion

once the topic shifted away from personal introductions, but unlike their classmates, their detail-oriented and supportive commentary on one another's work was reciprocated predictably over multiple assignments, providing a sense of togetherness and companionship that was missing elsewhere. By being able to come to know and respect one another as dynamic people rather than "names on a list" or anonymous authors of academic responses, the members of these mini communities were able to fulfill class requirements while upholding the intended primary audience of one another—fellow teacher candidates—rather than exchanging it for the instructor. They were able to establish a strong sense of social presence as a psychological state that remained steady across multiple assignments and classes, which in turn encouraged them to position themselves in ways that demonstrated increased investment and critical engagement with both their peers and the class content.

Community and Content: The Importance of Individual Differences

A final point of discussion is the role of personality and individual approaches to developing relationships and communities within the online course setting. Much like CoI (Garrison et al., 2000), the Communities of Practice framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) tends to downplay individual differences in the ways people learn new skills and join new communities, depicting instead a relatively similar and steady process of motivation, legitimacy, and integration toward the "center" of the community. However, these differences have important effects on *who* joins *what* communities and *how* and *when* they do so.

The mini community I observed, and the lack of a similar community among other members of the class, is tightly linked to reflexive positioning and the individual approaches to the class that teacher candidates demonstrated. The mini community consisted of teacher candidates who were quite community-oriented in the ways they positioned themselves in

relation to the class and the larger teaching community, regardless of their prior teaching experience. Not only did they feel a sense of social presence with the other individuals in the mini community, they also expressed a feeling of connection and belonging to the larger teaching community outside of the class.

As Violet's effusive quote earlier in this chapter demonstrates, she felt very much at home in the community she had created with her classmates, and she hoped to stay in touch with them after completing the program so she could continue to learn from their experiences and vice versa. Perhaps more important, she felt at home within what she referred to as the "SLA community," a group of scholars and teachers whose values and perspectives she felt aligned with her own, and she distanced herself decisively from other communities that she had experienced, such as one that had emerged in a literature class she had taken as an elective. Likewise, Guillermo described the TESOL community as being a small one in which he was likely to see and hear from the same individuals regularly, whether at conferences or workplaces, and he placed a high degree of importance on the network he was forming due to the support and opportunities he felt it could provide him as he continued in his career. He felt especially connected to classmates that he saw as "like minds," who were those who "gave a damn" about their work and continually pushed themselves to learn more and become better teachers, characteristics that Guillermo highly valued in himself and worked to embody. He saw the connections that he was forming in the larger context of his long-term career and the imagined communities that he would be a part of as a result. As Kanno and Norton (2003) note:

> Such communities include future relationships that exist only in the learner's imagination…these imagined communities are no less real than the ones in which

> learners have daily engagement and might even have a stronger impact on their current actions and investment. (p. 242)

Because they were both experienced teachers, it is possible that Guillermo, Violet, and other experienced members of the mini community brought with them a sense of belonging to the larger community, which encouraged them and several others to extend this sense of community to their classmates. To return to Moghaddam's (1999) "possibilities of choice" that are intertwined with the reflexive positions with which individuals align, Guillermo and Violet came into the class with experience and positioned themselves in ways that enabled them to look beyond the basic class content and requirements and engage in meaningful, critical conversations with like-minded classmates. These possibilities theoretically existed for everyone, but they fit most neatly within the positional identities that they had accumulated and the interaction patterns that they enacted. Because they had a stronger connection with the identities of a teacher and TESOL professional, they exhibited less fear of self-expression (as clearly seen in Violet's markedly informal post included in Chapter 5) and appeared to be more willing to participate in spontaneous conversations with their classmates about a wide range of topics. With the patterns of early posting and corresponding visual salience as one support system and the higher status of experienced teachers as another, an environment developed that marginalized many but nonetheless could nurture a small community, needing only a group of active and community-oriented individuals to bring it to fruition.

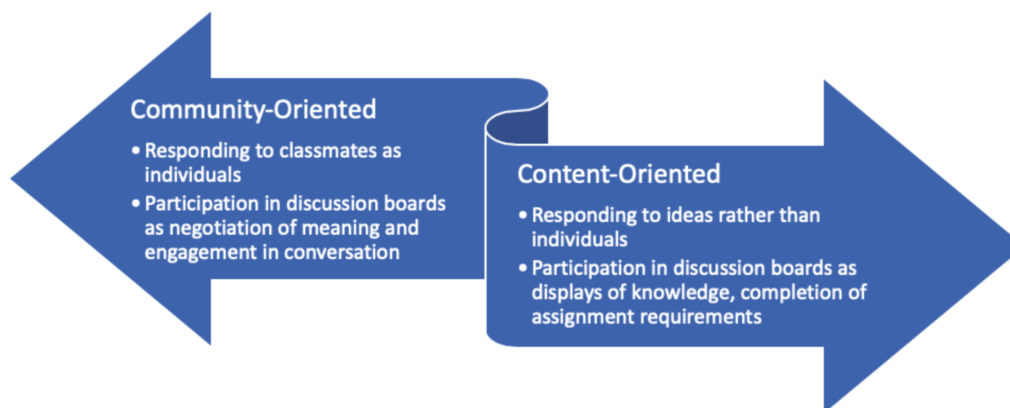
On the opposite end are Christina and Chloe, who despite their very different posting patterns, oriented themselves fully to the content with little attention to the people who wrote the discussions on which they commented or the responses to the discussions that they themselves had posted. Although Christina was an early poster who reported having a high level of comfort

in the online class setting, her difficulty connecting names to individuals without corresponding images was a hurdle that she did not work to overcome, so much so that the community that was developing in her periphery, as well as her burgeoning connection to it, were invisible to her. Meanwhile, Chloe, a late poster who suffered several setbacks as she was given negative feedback by her instructor and classmates and began positioning herself as a *deficient student*, preferred to keep to herself and focus on just "doing what's necessary to get a good grade." Her lack of interest in developing friendships with her classmates, self-description as a "loner," and focus on "getting through" meant she was concerned primarily with completing her assignments and moving on with other meaningful aspects of her life, such as her travel. Each had initially pre-positioned themselves as *lovers of education/academia*, and from their commentary in our interviews, it appears that their engagement with the academic content itself rather than sustained interaction with peers was something they deemed satisfactory, particularly given the amount of work they perceived it would take to develop relationships with the limited semiotic resources and affordances for communication to which they had access. However, as less experienced teachers who felt they had much to learn and frequently mentioned how valuable they believed their classmates' experiences to be, they would have benefited tremendously from their classmates' perspectives if they had been able to interact with them in a sustained way. Unlike Guillermo and Violet, who felt and acted upon a great sense of possibility for connection with their classmates, Christina and Chloe's reflexive positions closed them off from this sense, leaving them to view their classmates as optional extensions of the content provided in the class rather than potential social connections or members of a larger professional network.

A continuum between community-oriented and content-oriented approaches to the class emerged, in which teacher candidates like Violet and Guillermo took on a personal, collaborative

approach to their online discussions while teacher candidates like Christina and Chloe focused instead on completion of assignments and understanding the course material, while expressing little desire or need for building relationships with classmates. Regardless of teaching experience or posting patterns, participants who positioned themselves as more community-oriented in our interviews were more likely to comment on their classmates' responses to their own posts and use linguistic markers of social recognition, such as names or references to previously shared information (albeit to a much lesser extent outside of the mini community described). Individuals who were more content-oriented were less *socially invested* in the class but were highly *cognitively invested*. Figure 8 illustrates this concept.

Figure 8: Community-Oriented vs. Content-Oriented Approaches



The remaining half of the participants made up the middle of the continuum, as their interaction patterns and their desires were in conflict and their inherent orientations to community and content were malleable and context-dependent. In both their class interactions and in their interviews with me, Eleanor and Lydia seemed eager to engage with their classmates when the opportunity presented itself, but they were not able to develop relationships at least in part due to the discursive patterns that had resulted from the semiotic landscape of the online course. Lydia's late posting and reliance on excessively formal language served as barriers to the sort of personalized, ongoing interaction that the early posters developed, and Eleanor's posts often got lost in the shuffle of the middle of the discussion board, placing her in a varied and unpredictable space in which she received some meaningful feedback but no sustained interaction. On the other hand, Danielle's posts were similarly placed near the middle, and although she said she "would love" to experience engaging debates with her classmates, her boredom with the lackluster discussion board interactions she had experienced caused her to simply post what was needed to get credit for the assignment and move on, never even looking back to read what others had commented on her work. Finally, Fiona, a relatively experienced teacher and frequent early poster, backed away from her pre-positioning as experienced and chose to reposition herself instead as a "new teacher" who was very content-oriented and struggled to find the confidence to develop a strong voice that showcased her strengths and integrated her professional experiences. She opted not to connect class content to her teaching and tutoring experiences and, although she claimed to want to build relationships with her peers, like Danielle, she didn't take the step of engaging with them in a reciprocal and ongoing way.

The teacher candidates in the middle of the continuum are those who seem to be hurt the most by the lack of semiotic resources available for connecting with classmates and establishing

a sense of community in the online setting I observed. They wanted to establish connections with their classmates, but because they were unable to do so in the austere and content-oriented class setting, they felt frustrated and isolated. Because they did not position themselves as experienced teachers, they did not have the higher status that those who held those positions enjoyed, nor did they have the pre-existing feeling of connection to the larger community that Guillermo and Violet expressed. Without these advantages, they were unable to forge a sense of community in a setting that required active and sustained work to do so. The desire they expressed for connection was tempered by the common feelings of boredom, lack of confidence, or simply struggling to develop a relationship with a fellow classmate; as a result, it was left unfulfilled, with potential implications for their ongoing commitment to the program as well as their continual identity development as teachers.

Such individual differences, whether they are based in professional experience, personality, patterns of participation, or any other number of individuating factors such as prior educational experiences, variations in nonacademic demands, or technological access, can strongly affect teacher candidates' investment in learning or joining a community. Norton's (2000) landmark research on the ways that the identities and private lives of five women profoundly influenced their investment in learning and using English is remarkably similar for language teacher candidates such as those involved in this study. The more experienced teachers, who had higher levels of social capital (Bourdieu, 1977), exhibited high levels of investment in actively learning not only from their instructors but also from their peers. On the other hand, the less experienced teachers struggled to achieve the same degree of legitimacy and associated sense of value in a setting that privileged positions of experience above all others. Without this sense of value in their contributions, they approached their discussions performatively, as

assignments to be completed as a means of achieving a grade, and eventually a degree, but not as having value and the power to enlighten and transform in and of themselves.

These differences affected teacher candidates' ability to visualize themselves as members of the larger teaching community as well. In a class environment in which the instructor was backgrounded and some students already had years of professional experience with the subject being taught, those individuals became representatives of the imagined community, of the world on the other side of the degree, from the opposite perspective of the teacher-student relationship. However, in the misleadingly level playing field of whole-class discussion, these representatives of the community could also be the source of an unequal power dynamic, in which less experienced teachers may have tried to measure up to their classmates and found themselves lacking. Although they may have been able to learn perhaps even more from their experienced classmates' rich and diverse experiences than they did from their instructors, they may also, like Chloe, have begun to lose confidence in themselves as they navigated the complexities of the identity work that lay in front of them. In doing so, it may have seemed easier to put their heads down and focus on the readings or to simply model themselves and their actions after others without trusting in their own instincts and personal perspectives. Indeed, without a support system that allowed teacher candidates to develop these relationships and communities in a way that felt natural, putting their heads down may have seemed like not only the easier option, but the only one.

These nuances of identity, shaped by experience, beliefs, values, and ongoing positioning, are well documented in the literature on face-to-face teacher education. The clear effects they have on participation practices and the potential for transformation and empowerment among the teacher candidates in this study underscore the need for identity

research to be more fully applied to the online context. Notions of online education being a democratizing force, combined with the relative invisibility of online students, have created a situation in which students in online programs are frequently characterized as homogenous by researchers or stereotyped by educators and administrators. It may be true that their lives are often busier and filled with greater responsibility than the majority of on-campus students (2019 Online Trends Report), but that does not negate their need for a feeling of community and belonging. Likewise, it does not negate their individuality and the complex, emotional, tension-filled processes of identity formation that accompany their learning.

It is not enough for a small group to develop a meaningful community in an online class while others attempt to form connections that never fully take hold, nor is it enough to assume that cognitive, content-based orientations to entering the teaching profession are sufficient preparation for the sociopolitical and emotional labor of being a teacher. It is certainly not enough to assume that simply requiring students to respond to academic prompts as faceless, impersonal "names on a list" is sufficient for drawing out authentic perspectives, valuing the stories of those who come from marginalized communities, or allowing for education to act not merely as a form of "banking" information in students' minds (Freire, 1970) but to transform them into critical and engaged members of society. Removing students' ability to present themselves and interact with others as whole people, with lived experiences that are intricately linked to their embodied, raced, and gendered selves, likewise removes the possibility for education to be more than a cognitive act. It removes its potential to be an act of resistance to oppressive systems, as well as an act of empathy, compassion, and formation of communities with the capacity for empowering individual and social change. True community, in which individuals provide ongoing and reciprocal support, recognize one another as whole people with

diverse and valuable contributions, and feel a sense of trust and mutual responsibility, should be the goal of any class, whether held online or in a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom. In the presence of such a community, one's "possibilities of choice" (Moghaddam, 1999) are expanded, and the teacher candidates have the "safe spaces…to wrestle with issues" (Varghese et al., 2016, p. 564) they need to be confident, reflective, and empowered—so that one day, their students will be able to do the same.

CHAPTER 7:
Discussion and Conclusion

Overview

The goal of this study was to illuminate the ways that teacher candidates who were enrolled in a fully online MA TESOL program both positioned themselves and were positioned by others within the altered discursive context of the online class setting. Viewing the interactions that took place through a poststructural lens and drawing on positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré et al., 2009; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) and social semiotics (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) as both theoretical frameworks and methodological tools, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the affordances and constraints of fully online course contexts shape positions available to both teacher candidates and course instructors?
2. How do online instructors position themselves in relation to the course content and the teacher candidates through participation in the online course environment?
3. How do teacher candidates position one another through participation in the online course environment?
4. How do teacher candidates position themselves through participation in the online course environment?

This study was informed by the rich literature on the importance of identity development in language teacher education programs (e.g., Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Lee & Schallert, 2016; Yazan, 2017), and in particular, the roles of discursive processes and membership in communities (e.g., Ajayi, 2011; Soreide, 2006; Varghese, 2018) as teacher

candidates integrate their experiences, values, and beliefs with new concepts introduced in their coursework. In recognizing that any discussion of identity construction is inherently linked to larger ideological frameworks that play out in small and mundane everyday interactions, I was particularly influenced by De Costa and Norton's (2017) multilayered framework for analyzing language teacher identity, which provided a scalar perspective in which micro, meso, and macro levels interact and are discursively co-constitutive with one another. That framework, modified here to reflect reflexive (micro), interactive (meso), and institutional (macro) positioning, helped to connect the discourses that informed institutional decisions to the effects that these actions had on both course instructors and teacher candidates as they negotiated meanings and positioned themselves and others within the storyline of the online classes and the MA TESOL program as a whole.

However, although I was fortunate to have a large body of literature on which to draw in regards to the ways that teacher identity is developed and enacted in educational settings (e.g., Alsup, 2008; Aneja, 2016; Golombek & Jordan, 2005; Ilieva, 2010), as well as a growing pool of studies on online identity negotiation (e.g., Aresta et al., 2015; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Cover, 2015; Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014), this study is, as far as I know, the first of its kind to combine in-depth, ethnographically informed data collection and a poststructural perspective on identity in fully online educational contexts. For this reason, this study should be seen as a first step in applying existing strategies for exploring long-term, intercontextual teacher identity construction processes as they take place within the discursive constraints and affordances of the digital environment.

This study was conceptualized, designed, and carried out in accordance with my overarching concern that fully online language teacher education is an important and growing

means of initial education and teacher licensure around the world that must be given the same level of attention and pedagogical planning that traditional, face-to-face programs receive. Unfortunately, to date, that has not been the case (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014; England, 2012; Murray, 2013; Murray & Christison, 2018). The findings in this study, preliminary as they may be, point to an array of significant implications that fully online educational contexts hold for new teachers as they engage in the complex and challenging work of resituating themselves as professionals in schools around the world. It is my hope that the urgency of additional research in this area will soon be addressed with attention and nuance comparable to that currently guiding work regarding teacher education in face-to-face settings.

Discussion of Findings

Institutional Positioning and the Semiotic Landscape of the Online Class

In taking a multi-scale approach to examining positioning within the online setting, this study illustrates the interconnected nature of positioning at the institutional, instructor, peer, and personal levels. In particular, it draws attention to the ways that ideological alignments and forms of control at the institutional level have the potential to limit and define the positions that instructors, then students, may take up. As institutions engage in large-scale decisions ranging from the choice of LMS and default course design settings to the amount of connection or separation between online and face-to-face programs, the ideologies and values that inform those decisions are embedded in the semiotic landscape (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2011) within which the online classes are held (Lane, 2009; Murray & Christison, 2017). The emerging field of semiotic technology, which "investigates how social and semiotic assumptions and norms are inscribed in software and other forms of technology" (Poulsen, Kvale, & van Leeuwen, 2018), is beginning to provide insights into the effects of these decisions—how they both shape and are shaped by

dominant discourses regarding the role and scope of formal education as well as notions of what communication can and should look like in the digital age.

The semiotics of technology are especially important to consider in a fully online educational context, in which the course site becomes the central space for interacting with content, completing and submitting assignments, and communicating with instructors and peers. Its multifaceted use goes even beyond this, however. For those students who never have the opportunity to step foot on campus or experience first-hand the culture that is enacted in the brick-and-mortar location, it becomes not merely a form of curriculum delivery or container for interaction but the architecture of the classroom, the campus, and the core means of communication between students. It is, according to Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), “a context for human action and socio-political activity, while at the same time a symbolic system of signifiers with wide-ranging affordances activated by social actors to position themselves and others in that context” (p. 6). It is a space in which ideological discourses are given visible form, as well as a space in which those discourses shape actions and possibilities for positioning while individuals, in turn, position themselves in ways that accept or challenge these discourses.

Locating the self and others within a semiotic landscape, alongside the notions of access or exclusion that this location entails, takes place as much in the virtual world as in the physical world, with equally powerful effects. The visual elements, technological features, and overall design for use and navigation are messages that users interpret, consciously or unconsciously, each time they enter the course site, and act in accordance with or resist in the positioning of themselves and others.

Different institutions have different ways of packaging their online courses in terms of design and overall appearance. Institutional branding, choice of LMS and applications, default

settings, accessibility concerns, and varying levels of class site customizability are some of the many factors that play into how the online courses actually appear to students (Lane, 2009). These factors are based in agentic decisions made by individuals within the university, who have different perspectives and experiences and may adhere to different and sometimes conflicting ideologies related to teaching or instructional design (Cheng, 2015). These ideologies, in turn, may be in conflict with those of the instructors who then facilitate their courses within the predetermined online configuration. As Murray and Christison (2017) state in their report on considerations in online language teacher education:

> Because LMSs are prepackaged, they may come with their own philosophy of learning that is contrary to the learning philosophy of the instructor. An LMS that views education as course and content, for example, will facilitate cognitive behaviorist pedagogies at the expense of constructivist or connectivist ones. (p. 27)

Institutional and administrative decisions are made in reference to a set of discourses and priorities that may be significantly different from those of instructors or students (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack, & Long, 2012; Wickersham & McElhany, 2010), and when the discourses and ensuing decisions are in conflict, the greater power of the institution effects changes in the positions that are perceived to be available from the outset. To place this within the four strata of meaning making put forth by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), which are *discourse*, *design*, *production*, and *distribution*, the discourses at the institutional level, rather than at the instructor level, informed the design of the courses. The instructors, who had varying but limited levels of control over the design of their courses, occupied the strata of production, where they had less power to challenge the discourses adhered to by the institution as well as the logonomic systems that conveyed those discourses. Emily's repeated pleas to allow online

course participants to upload photos to their profiles, pleas that were refused, is one example of the distinction between the discourses in conflict. As the roles of design and production were separated, and as instructors were positioned as interchangeable in relation to the prepackaged courses, Emily and the other instructors had less autonomy to enact visions of the class that were not explicitly in alignment with the visions put forth by the institution or the limitations it imposed. Therefore, the position of instructor as *course creator* was shifted in many ways to that of *course facilitator*. With such a shift in instructor positioning and the associated rights and duties, the storyline of the entire class shifted, leading to teacher candidates' confusion about instructor duties and investment.

The discourses and priorities of the university were especially evident in the visual design and technological features of the online course sites themselves; designed to be text-heavy with minimal color or imagery and with course requirements as the main focus, the messages they conveyed upheld discourses of conformity and efficiency and aligned with a problematic yet common "one-size-fits-all" notion of course design (Cheng, 2015). At the same time, they minimized the roles that meaningful peer-to-peer communication and relationship building play in learning and the construction of one's identity as a member of the larger teaching community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The absence of visual elements, including pictures of classmates that may have helped create a stronger sense of connection with others as "real" people rather than what Eleanor referred to as "names on a list," repositioned teacher candidates. Rather than having responsibilities related to getting to know their classmates and becoming active members of the community, these institutional positions emphasized efficient and timely interaction with the course materials and completion of assignments, and for the most part, these were the positions that were taken up by teacher candidates.

Learning and teaching are not merely cognitive acts but embodied, sensory experiences (Fors et al., 2013; Pink, 2011; Porter & Tanghe, 2016) that take place within the entire classroom ecology (van Lier, 2004; see also Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012). In a discussion of their work in a face-to-face MA TESOL program in South Korea, Porter and Tanghe (2016) draw attention to the importance of an *emplaced identity*, which they define as the "relations between material settings, objects, and spaces, with particular respect to the ways they contribute to experiences of the self" (p. 773). They describe an activity they call "fill the space," in which teacher candidates enact their identities visually and physically in lieu of traditional discussion techniques, stating that "our physical reactions and placements expressed what words had previously struggled to say" (p. 775). Through moving and relocating the body in relation to physical space and the bodies of others, they were able to add a new dimension to class discussions that decentered the cognitive, linguistically focused approach that has long been the norm. Engagement with the physical space unveiled frustrations and power dynamics in ways that helped to break down barriers to understanding and communication. This is particularly important in the preparation of teachers—for those who will be working in a face-to-face setting, teaching is an intensely physical act. In recognizing that identities are shaped not only through linguistic interaction but also through engagement with one's physical, emplaced body, the question arises of how fully online educational settings can best make use of the technologies possible to allow for such non-linguistic breakthroughs to take place.

Instructor-Student Relationships within the Predesigned Course

The dual-system approach to providing online education as adjacent to but not fully integrated with the face-to-face programs (Gardner, 2019; McMurtrie, 2017) positioned both teacher candidates and instructors differently from their in-person counterparts, which had ripple

effects that led to multiple interpretations of the storyline(s) and individuals' positions therein. Instructors, who were not tenured or tenure-track faculty members or (in most cases) course creators, were given predesigned courses that allowed them to take on new classes while allocating the majority of their time to teaching (Rodrigo & Ramírez, 2017), but their shifted positions as course facilitators were interpreted by teacher candidates as evidence that they were not as invested in the online classes as they may have been in their face-to-face classes—and as a result, that they were also less invested in their online students. In addition, teacher candidates struggled to feel a sense of connection with the instructors who relied more heavily on prepackaged elements; at least in part because they felt unfamiliar with their instructors' personalities or voices, they struggled to interpret instructor expectations or feel comfortable developing trusting, multifaceted relationships with them.

The importance of a strong foundation of trust in the instructor-student relationship cannot be overstated in any context, but within the field of language teacher education, this sense is perhaps even more central. As teacher candidates grapple with the sociopolitical implications of teaching English as a second or foreign language and engage in discussions of complex and challenging topics, they must feel a sense of trust with their instructors in order to be vulnerable, open, and honest in their reflections and perspectives (Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Motha, 2014). Critical teacher education pedagogies require these feelings of connection—and indeed, humanization—between teacher and student to allow for the process of learning *with*, not simply *from*, to occur (Freire, 1970; Brown, 2013).

In relation to the literature surrounding online pedagogies, the link between instructor-student trust and feelings of community are well documented (Garrison et al., 2000, 2010; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006). However, the results of this study highlight the effect that prepackaged, or

"recycled," materials may have on developing and maintaining a supportive teaching presence that makes space for these feelings of connection. Overreliance by some instructors on prepackaged elements hid their individual identities and voices from view, turning them into what Lydia referred to as "the man behind the curtain." By approaching the course primarily as a *facilitator* rather than a *creator* of content, they reinforced the institutional positioning in which they were faceless and interchangeable. In doing so, despite their efforts to appear approachable and friendly in their facilitator roles, they erased much of their own perspectives and lived histories as members of the teaching community, leaving a void that teacher candidates felt keenly.

On the other hand, the creation of one's own instructional materials, imbued with the instructor's unique voice and personality, appeared to be one of the most important factors in fostering teacher candidates' feelings of being supported and valued, supporting the viewpoint that teaching presence is not merely a set of interactions or a degree of immediacy but, like social presence, a psychological state resulting from a sense of personal connection (Kim, Song, & Luo, 2016; see discussion below). Although all the instructors in this study were equally committed to the education and well-being of their students, the ways they navigated the shifted positions available to them in the online space led to multiple interpretations of their commitment to the course, as well as teacher candidates' perceptions of their overall approachability and accessibility.

Feelings of not being familiar with instructors' voices or personalities appeared to be exacerbated by the structure of the courses, which followed an inductive approach in which instructor mediation of the content was carried out primarily via forms of feedback provided after the assignments for each module had been completed. The simultaneous repositioning as a

provider of feedback rather than a *discursive model* deemphasized the instructors' roles as mediators and interpreters of the class content. Although this strategy successfully decentered the instructors from the traditional "sage on the stage" position, it also removed the possibility for instructors' identities, and the multitude of positionalities that these identities carry with them, to be integrated with the course content and the discussions that followed. As a result, the content was presented in a homogenized, neutral manner for teacher candidates to reflect upon and interrogate from their own perspectives, either as they applied them to their previous experiences or their understandings of the imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of English language teachers.

Without clear discursive models to guide their own written reflections on the content being presented or easy ways to discuss complex topics with peers in non-evaluated spaces (Alsup, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012), teacher candidates opted to position themselves as *learners of content*, students who were cognitively engaged with the material from a purely academic standpoint that rarely included integration of personal experiences outside of language teaching or learning. They struggled to incorporate the voices of their instructors and those in the teaching community with their own in ways that felt authentic (Bahktin, 1981), leading instead to a ventriloquy of concepts using excessively formal, academic language.

Self- and Other-Positioning among Teacher Candidates

Just as the design of the course impacted the ways that instructors were able to position themselves and interact with teacher candidates, it was also a major factor in shaping how teacher candidates interacted with one another. Concerns regarding access to technology and opportunities for synchronous communication limited the forms of interaction provided, funneling nearly all peer-to-peer communication into the instructor-evaluated discussion boards.

Because the postings on these boards made up a large part of the overall grades in each course, discussion board posts and responses to peers were high-stakes activities in which displays of knowledge and positioning oneself as a *good student* took priority over interacting with classmates or forming a cohesive community; in effect, they were not discussions but performances of the duties they associated with being a *good student* in that setting. As a result, the majority of teacher candidates did what they thought "was necessary to get a good grade" by writing formal, essay-style posts and a single response to a classmate in accordance with assignment instructions, frequently not bothering to answer questions, engage in back-and-forth conversation, or read the comments that had been made on their own posts.

This finding echoes the "academic othering" Phirangee and Malec (2017) describe in their study of students in online courses in Canada, in which one participant reported feeling as though her classmates "only cared about expressing their own points of view" (p. 167) and getting good grades in the class, rather than engaging in ongoing conversations and establishing supportive relationships with one another. This othering resulted in her feelings of disengagement and isolation from her peers, ultimately leading to a negative overall experience in the class. This form of participation is also noted in the literature on asynchronous discussion board posts; as Dennen and Wieland (2007) state, "students often engage in message posting more often than actual dialogue…they nominally fulfill class discussion requirements by posting, but fail to engage more deeply with their classmates" (p. 281). Without this deeper engagement, topics can be dealt with only superficially, and there is little opportunity for individuals to discursively work through challenging topics, despite the possibilities that discussion boards may hold for critical thinking activities in some contexts (Arend, 2009; Delahunty, 2018). Guides such as that developed by Verenikina, Jones, & Delahunty (2017) address these issues and may

provide some solutions that allow for continued use of asynchronous discussion boards while instilling a greater sense of community and reciprocal communication. However, the multiple factors that came into play as teacher candidates adapted their language and interaction, such as their lack of trust with the instructor and emphasis on positioning themselves as *good students* rather than *members of a community*, suggest that additional modes of interaction among all class participants is needed to create a safe space where honest and open discussion can occur.

An additional contributing factor to the dropped conversations was the visual layout of the discussion forums, with their long strings of text and few visual guides that discouraged individuals from revisiting prior discussions that may have been buried in the middle of a dense, text-heavy, and difficult to navigate page. These "endless webs of discussions" foregrounded the teacher candidates' interaction with the content, and in doing so, erased their personal attributes, just as the prepackaged courses erased the personalities and voices of the instructors. Christina's comment that, without images next to her classmates' names, "they don't exist," shines a harsh light on the effects that removing even small means of identifying oneself and others can have on interpersonal relations. For Christina and those in the classes who were not fortunate enough to have been able to be a part of the mini communities that formed in each, their classmates were anonymous producers of content to be read and commented upon according to class requirements. This striking finding points to an urgent need for the consideration of multimodal means of expression in online contexts. However, although relative anonymity in the virtual world and its effects on interaction are discussed frequently in the literature (e.g., Freiermuth, 2011; Howell, 2016; Jaber & Kennedy, 2017; Lin & Tian, 2018; Lu & Curwood, 2015), the relationship between visual indicators of identity and community development in fully online classes remains limited.

This visual design of the discussion forum also intertwined with teaching experience and individual patterns of participation, as the earlier posts to the discussion boards were pinned to the top of the page, making them highly visible to anyone visiting the board, while later posts were obscured in the middle or at the end of the page. Teacher candidates with earlier, more easily visible posts received substantially more feedback than did those who submitted their work later, and their ongoing salience within the class resulted in those teacher candidates being more easily recognized than their later-posting classmates, who were largely hidden among the long strings of text. Unfortunately, teacher candidates with the least experience were frequently the last to post to the board, meaning their contributions became nearly invisible to their classmates. As a result, they received very little feedback, despite perhaps being those who could benefit the most from this interaction. This created an uneven power dynamic within the class, in which those who posted early accumulated positional identities as *star students* and *overachievers*, highly visible and memorable to others in the class, in contrast to the relative anonymity of their classmates.

The pattern in which early posters were more memorable and achieved greater social capital among their classmates appears to be linked to a phenomenon in which those who regularly posted first were able to create something of a mini community in which they engaged in ongoing, back-and-forth conversations with one another *as individuals* (i.e., with overt references to knowing aspects of one another's personal lives, previous classwork, or personal attributes), whereas the remainder of the class appeared to have engaged primarily with one another as somewhat anonymous additional creators of content. The fact that it was made up primarily of experienced teachers echoes previous studies (Çelik, 2013; Meskill & Anthony, 2005) in which more experienced members of an online class community dominated discussions,

which inhibited participation by others who were less experienced. However, this group differed in that it developed its own mutual community of support and commentary, and because there were clear rules for participation that included required posts and a variety of topics, all teacher candidates had an opportunity to voice their opinions. Rather than being a negative display of dominance and control, the mini community that formed was a source of engaging debate among a group of invested individuals who developed strong ties (Tseng & Kuo, 2014) and expressed familiarity with one another, and its dynamics followed an ideal pattern for successful discussion boards. The development of this mini community, the only one I saw in this study, demonstrated how such meaningful communities can develop even in text-based, asynchronous, instructor-evaluated settings. However, its small size suggests that it is not the norm, and its existence should not be seen as evidence of a successful exercise; the mechanisms that allowed it to form are the same that marginalized the contributions of those who posted later. Additional resources or alternative designs need to be put in place to allow multiple users' posts to achieve salience and regular feedback so that other such communities have space to form.

Finally, due to the extensive focus on academic content that emphasized the practicalities of teaching, the dynamic and multifaceted positions that teacher candidates brought with them to the online class were gradually narrowed to focus on the level of prior teaching experience they had. Teacher candidates who positioned themselves as experienced teachers received disproportionately elevated positions and associated social capital in the class in relation to their less experienced peers, a distinction that has been shown in previous research in online teacher education studies (Delahunty, 2012). Their ability to pre-position (Harré et al., 2009) themselves in the introductory posts, where they highlighted their professional experiences, served to set them apart from their classmates from the beginning of the class in ways that may not be as

immediately evident in face-to-face settings. They were openly held in high esteem by both teacher candidates and instructors, and their contributions were evidence of the different rights that they held within the class. Their heightened social capital gave them the legitimacy to be more critical of class materials and others' work than less experienced teachers, and their frequent anecdotes from their own teaching experiences were seen as being extremely valuable windows into the imagined community of TESOL professionals living and working around the world (Kanno & Norton, 2003). They were, in many ways, essential to the social fabric of the entire online course; in my interviews with teacher candidates, the one resounding point of satisfaction with all of their classes, regardless of topic or instructor, was the appreciation of being able to learn from experienced peers.

On the other hand, the design of the classes, with messages conveying the importance of orienting oneself to the content rather than one's peers, was strengthened for those who did not feel that they had sufficient prior experience on which to base their opinions or discussions. In essence, the course design limited the ways that less experienced teacher candidates could position themselves, creating a static dichotomy between the experienced and less experienced teachers that proved difficult to contest (for comparison, see Glazier, 2009). Without being able to position themselves in relation to their non-teaching experiences in ways that they felt would be appropriate and valuable in the class discussions, inexperienced teachers positioned themselves as *learners of content* who were less likely to provide critical commentary or feel that their feedback was going to be valuable for their peers. In turn, this led to a pattern of delayed participation: In two cases, the less experienced teachers posted their work near the due date so they could spend additional time receptively engaging with the content provided by the instructor or their classmates, which may have resulted in higher quality posts but also resulted in their

work receiving less feedback from their classmates and their posts going largely unnoticed near the bottom of the page. This self-perpetuating cycle created a scenario in which many of the less experienced teachers were *cognitively* engaged with the course and their classmates' postings, but they were not *socially* engaged. Because both types of engagement are critical to learning, this indicates a deficit in terms of course design.

Implications and Areas for Future Research

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study suggest a number of theoretical implications for future research in fully online educational contexts. The first, and perhaps the most important, theoretical implication is the need to examine online discourse within the virtual semiotic landscape in which it appears. Throughout this study, the design of the course site and idiosyncrasies of the LMS's discussion forums had large effects on how teacher candidates interacted with one another, as these reshaped messages and texts within the affordances for communication they offered. Although online communication shares many elements with face-to-face communication, there is a key distinction in its visual representation; it is removed from the embodied individual and emplaced within a digital grid (Aresta et al., 2015; Cover, 2015; Freiermuth, 2011), recontextualizing the message in such a way that multiple interpretations are of heightened importance in understanding the positioning processes that ensue. Its placement on a computer screen, in whatever form it may take, intertwines the linguistic message or text with the semiotic environment that surrounds it (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). This placement may make certain messages more salient while other messages become nearly invisible, thereby positioning individuals differently based on nothing more than their location on a page. Likewise, the presence or absence of non-linguistic visual elements such as personal pictures

may affect how one's words are interpreted—as additional content on a screen or as the contributions of a human with emotions, needs, and a lifetime of experiences that shape the language chosen. As Hodge and Kress (1988) claimed well before the advent of online education:

> Social semiotics cannot assume that texts produce exactly the meanings and effects that their authors hope for; it is precisely the struggles and their uncertain outcomes that must be studied at the level of social action, and their effects in the production of meaning. (p. 12)

By shifting the locus of interaction from the embodied individual to a web page replicated on screens far removed from one another in space and time, the individual loses some control over the ways his or her message is received and therefore interpreted (Aresta et al., 2015). A recognition of the role that the larger virtual semiotic landscape of the classroom context plays in the process of meaning making, including not only its design but the affordances its technologies for both students and instructors, can lead to more refined and accurate analyses of discourse that takes place in virtual settings.

A second theoretical implication is the need to reexamine the ubiquitous Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, particularly notions of social presence and their relationship to identity construction (Jaber & Kennedy, 2017; see also Anderson, 2016; Burr & Otoya-Knapp, 2014; Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Lam, 2015). In this study, the linguistic features associated with social presence were found in multiple interactions, particularly self-introductory posts, but they did little to form real bonds between individuals in the long term. Several teacher candidates crafted posts that could be seen as indicators of social presence, only to privately report to me that they felt no connection to or memory of their classmates as individuals and in fact struggled

to see them as “real,” a distinction that echoes the disconnect between actions and attitudes found by Çelik (2013) in a similar study. This indicates that social presence cannot be defined as simply a set of observable actions or behaviors but rather as a feeling or psychological state; it supports previous arguments that simplistic definitions of participation that do not include feelings of belonging are inadequate measures (Hrastinski, 2008, 2009).

Jaber and Kennedy (2017) approximate this distinction in their definition of social presence, cited previously, as “the product of online interactions that ease such tensions around multiple and shifting identities” (p. 223). This highlights the need to recognize social presence not as the interactions themselves but as the *product* of these interactions, which results in a greater feeling of comfort with expressing oneself authentically. Social presence as a feeling or experience is one that arises through moments of vulnerability, exchanges that are not so carefully rehearsed or structured and that allow elements of the individual’s personality to “leak” out. Acts of “academic othering” (Phirangee & Malec, 2017) and the excessively formal writing style to which many teacher candidates adhered in their postings created a sort of rehearsed and guarded communication that reduced opportunities for social connection and development of trust. In addition, the reliance of some instructors on formal, impersonal, prepackaged materials placed those instructors at a distance that obscured their own personalities and voices, thereby reducing the level of trust and connection they were able to develop in relationships with teacher candidates, even when they attempted to inject social presence into their communications via an array of linguistic features (Dixon et al., 2016; Ni & Aust, 2008).

The final theoretical implication is related to the initial purpose and rationale for this study. To date, much of the research on identity in online settings has taken one of three approaches: (a) a community-based approach that emphasizes group cohesion or social identity

(largely inspired by the CoI framework initially put forth in Garrison et al., 2000; e.g., Rogers & Lea, 2005; Swan & Shih, 2005); (b) a synchronic, "snapshot" approach that examines identity performance within a single assignment, such as an introductory discussion board post (e.g., Delahunty, 2012; Samburskiy, 2013); or (c) analyses of identity performance and construction in non-educational settings such as social media (e.g., Birnie-Smith, 2016; Davis, 2016; Leppännen, Kytolä, Jousmäki, Peuronen, & Westinen, 2014). In contrast to the rich literature that applies poststructural notions of identity to teacher education in face-to-face settings, studies of individual identity construction as it takes place discursively over time in online educational settings are limited in the literature. This study followed Dennen (2007, 2011) in applying positioning theory, a theoretical lens and methodological tool that is ideal for poststructural analysis, to multiple levels within a fully online setting. Despite its initial formulation as a tool for analyzing conversation, it is a useful means by which much-needed future research on identity construction in online settings may be successfully carried out. In this study, I augmented positioning theory with principles from social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis to extend it to the complexities of the online discursive context. This model, which provides a form of multimodal positioning analysis, is only a rough sketch of how these approaches may be combined, but it is a glimpse into a new, hybrid style of analysis that may serve the growing need for nuanced positioning and identity research in virtual settings.

Pedagogical Implications

In addition to theoretical implications, the results of this study point to a number of pedagogical implications that may help improve the design, administration, and teaching of fully online MA TESOL programs, as well as others, in the future.

Designing Courses for Community Building and Opportunities for Repositioning the Self

A central point, which is one that has been discussed widely in the literature, is the importance of designing courses that actively facilitate community building and peer-to-peer relationships (Cho, 2016; Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014; Jaber & Kennedy, 2017; Tseng & Kuo, 2013). In particular, this study points to the need to ensure that the visual design of the course prioritizes these considerations through the inclusion of images (particularly the ability to upload pictures of oneself to a profile), the ability for instructors to easily customize course sites, and centering means of communication with one another in a prominent and user-friendly way.

Although designs that prioritize efficiency are likely useful for the online student who has multiple competing demands on his or her time and needs to be able to complete coursework in a systematic and hassle-free manner, this does not mean that efficiency is the only or even primary need that online students have (Hrastinski, 2008, 2009). Indeed, even the participants in this study who reported being the busiest expressed desire to have better social relationships with their peers, and the lack of easy means to establish those relationships meant that they were the ones who were least likely to be able to form them as they juggled their personal and academic lives. This also means approaching potential limitations related to technological access with greater creativity and a solutions-based mindset; as Murray and Christison (2017) point out, institutions are not taking full advantage of the technology that is available to them, and educator input into the development and adoption of learning technology is an essential conversation that must be ongoing for improvements to be made. Decisions based on student access should not be focused entirely on limiting the technologies that are used; rather, these decisions should take an innovative approach to providing a flexible range of opportunities for interaction that fulfills needs related to both access and social connection.

Due to the closed nature of the LMS, which has earned a reputation as being a "walled garden" (Kipp, 2018) as a result of its inflexibility and isolation from the outside world, pursuing opportunities for class interaction outside of the immediate course site may offer ideal options for bridging the divide between accessibility and interactivity. For example, instructors or programs could create private Facebook groups in which teacher candidates can connect with one another and continue to post well after their involvement in the class or even program is over. Similarly, Twitter chats, which can be followed through the use of hashtags, have been shown to be a successful means of providing teachers with learning opportunities and maintaining topic-focused conversations over months or even years (Evans, 2015; Goodyear, Casey, & Kirk, 2014; Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017; Visser, Evering, & Barrett, 2014). Such opportunities for interaction may disrupt the one-dimensional positioning of the self as a *good student* that was pervasive among teacher candidates in this study and open up new pathways for exploring ideas and expressing divergent perspectives.

Concerns about surveillance and evaluation (Anderson & Simpson, 2007; Gulati, 2008; Kapatamoyo, 2015) also point to the need for non-evaluated spaces in which teacher candidates can collaborate with one another or participate in off-task discussions in ways that are outside the view of the instructor (Armstrong & Manson, 2010; Goertzen & Kristjansson, 2007). These spaces could take the form of private group video chats or multimodal options available in communications applications such as Slack (Irvin & Reille, 2018), Padlet (Porath, 2018), or Voxer (Carpenter & Green, 2017). The use of multiple forms of technology to develop and maintain professional learning networks (PLNs) and teacher-created online communities may provide insights for potential innovations in teacher education programs as well (Booth & Kellogg, 2015; Holmes, 2013; Liu, Miller, & Jahng, 2016; Tour, 2017; Trust, 2012). To ensure

that the spaces are actually used, ongoing projects, clear topics for interaction, or components of assignments that require communication with one another are all possible, even with limited technological access and a fully asynchronous setting. In addition, a major advantage to using forms of technology outside the LMS for communication is its ability to continue well beyond the end of the course itself, offering not only a means of developing in-depth discussion of topics during class, but also a way to maintain networks with classmates and instructors after teacher candidates have moved on into other classes or graduated and transitioned into their careers. It may also help to counter the institution's ideological adherence to the notion of classwork as completion of tasks by reframing learning and becoming a teacher as ongoing, self-motivated processes that involve dynamic, multimodal interaction and the sharing of resources and ideas.

Within the class itself, increased attention to the need for diverse, multimodal forms of communication could be beneficial in overcoming the "discussion board fatigue" that Danielle described, and it could allow teacher candidates more opportunities to visualize (and therefore reflexively position) themselves as teachers. The teaching demonstration in the Methods of TESOL class, which was held via Voice Thread and carried out as a small group activity, was one of the most memorable and effective activities that teacher candidates in this study reported taking part in, as it allowed them to see and hear one another and provide feedback in a small, relatively private setting. Additional use of these sorts of activities could be a very effective means of allowing individuals to see one another as "real" people. Synchronous activities have also been shown to assist in community development due to their unrehearsed nature (Jaber & Kennedy, 2017), with benefits in both text-based and audiovisual contexts (Hrastinski, 2008; Peterson, Beymer, & Putnam, 2018). To accommodate for differences in time zones, teacher candidates may be assigned to groups with similar availability to meet, or ongoing synchronous

activities such as a class lecture or chat can be held on an optional basis for those who are able to attend. Additionally, the use of multimodal teaching materials, such as videos of actual classrooms/lessons that teacher candidates can view and analyze from a number of perspectives, can help to bridge the divide between the experienced and less experienced teachers. Visual representation of class concepts may help less experienced teachers visualize themselves in the physical setting of the classroom and, like the teacher candidates in Porter and Tanghe's (2016) "fill the space" activity, begin to break out of cognitive blocks to develop *emplaced identities* as teachers.

Customizing Predesigned Courses

The suggestions for integrating additional multimodal opportunities for interaction discussed in the previous section may not only help teacher candidates feel more comfortable and open with one another but with their instructors as well. However, this study highlighted a central need that online teacher candidates shared: for their instructors to supplement the predesigned courses with custom-made materials that showcased their voice and personality. Even with materials that the participants in this study referred to as being "very effective," and with substantial written feedback from instructors, the teacher candidates felt isolated and disconnected from their instructors due to their lack of familiarity with the ways they as professionals in the field spoke and acted. In addition to providing a greater sense of trust and connection, personalized materials that include discursive modeling of key concepts, particularly when provided before teacher candidates are expected to turn in assignments, may help socialize teacher candidates into the discourse of teaching and help them feel more confident in their own contributions. This may help them have a better sense of their own authentic voice as they engage with new concepts and mitigate the feelings of ventriloquy that the teacher candidates in

this study reported feeling. There is a rich body of literature that shows the importance of socialization into a discourse as a means of developing a strong teacher identity (e.g., Alsup, 2008; Pavlenko, 2003), as well as evidence that this socialization is particularly important for individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds who are enrolled in online courses (Sadykova & Meskill, 2019). Therefore, ensuring that teacher candidates in online programs have ample access to their instructors' individual discourses is an essential component in equalizing face-to-face and online teacher education programs.

Customization of content may be done in a wide variety of ways. First, if the course design within the LMS is customizable to allow for elements such as visuals and color, simply shifting away from default settings can help create a unique classroom culture and send the message that the instructor cares about establishing a personalized context and is therefore invested in the class as a whole. Likewise, instructors should not shy away from sharing their faces or voices with students. Feelings of trust and connection are not formed unidirectionally: If students are expected to interact with one another using a range of modalities, the instructor should be willing to model this behavior first. This can be done in any number of ways, including short weekly video check-ins, video lectures, or synchronous chats that can be recorded for those who are unable to attend at the time they are held. Non-video options could include regularly updating images with associated audio files, placed prominently within the course site to contribute a feeling of dynamism or indicate shifts in key topics being discussed.

Importantly, serving not simply as a *course facilitator* but as a *discursive model* should be a key focus in these instructor interactions. Access to instructors' voices as a mediator and interpreter of concepts and as a representative of the community of TESOL professionals may help teacher candidates incorporate those voices into their own as they complete their

assignments, reflect upon what they have learned, and engage in discussion with their classmates. Therefore, providing synchronous or asynchronous, multimodal instructor engagement with the content prior to assignments, rather than solely as a means of feedback, can help forge feelings of trust and connection, as well as offer a template for the sort of register and language expected within the class.

Making Space for Diverse Experiences and Critical Pedagogies

Teacher candidates bring a wide range of experiences with them to the class, not simply their relevant language teaching or learning experience. To create an environment in which they feel as if their voices are truly heard and valued, it is essential to incorporate learning activities through which they can explore their identities and, in doing so, illustrate to themselves and one another the strength that comes with a diversity of experiences and perspectives. For example, the non-teaching related positions that were identified in Chapter 6, which included *traveler*, *advocate*, *lover of education/academia*, and *global citizen*, are some of the many valuable and relevant positions that even teacher candidates with zero teaching experience may feel comfortable taking up. Ensuring that there are multiple opportunities both at the beginning of the class and throughout may help ameliorate the adherence to “negative identities” (Delahunty, 2012) created from a deficit perspective of themselves. In situations in which teaching experience truly is a significant advantage to success in completing an assignment, pairing less experienced teacher candidates with those who have more experience, such as the mentor/mentee dyads described in Chen (2010), may better structure classes with varied experiences so that no one feels unfairly disadvantaged or unprepared due to their personal experiences.

In addition, the disembodied nature of fully online education can offer a false sense of neutrality and equity, as the outward physical identifiers of qualities such as race, gender, sexual

orientation, or ability are largely hidden from view. Despite research that has indicated that this disembodiment allows for a greater freedom for individuals to choose how they wish to "represent corporeality" (Cover, 2015) and challenge existing hegemonies (e.g., Howell, 2016), it may also, by the same token, erase aspects of individuals' identities and contribute to the historical centering of White, Western, colonialist, and neoliberal ideologies in educational practices (Brown, 2013; 2014). This possibility is particularly problematic in the inherently sociopolitical field of TESOL given the worldwide spread of English as a *lingua franca* and the unequal power dynamic that its usage upholds (Motha, 2014; Pennycook, 2001). In a fully online MA TESOL program, in which individuals' bodies and differences are hidden in the backstage, there is a danger that, in Motha's (2014) words, "ignoring differences allows us to construct a narrative of power neutrality, in which everyone is assumed to have received equal treatment and opportunity" (p. 82).

The online setting itself, despite appearances, is not neutral. Research has shown that the inequities that are so well-documented in face-to-face interactions are reproduced in online classes. For example, although African Americans are more likely to enroll in fully online education programs, they tend to have lower grades and are more likely to drop out (Salvo, Shelton, & Welch, 2019); likewise, in the U.S., international students report being othered by their classmates and feeling alienated and alone in their online coursework (Erichsen, 2011). In addition, the online setting is not as anonymous as it may seem. Linguistic differences associated with age (Subramaniam & Rasak, 2014) and gender (Lipinski-Harten, 2012) carry over into the online setting; not only are students more likely to chat with others who share their race (Helsper, 2014), but instructors are more likely to respond to students they perceive to be White males (Baker, Dee, Evans, & John, 2018).

Additionally, teacher education programs themselves are far being from neutral spaces. Both the faculty members and teacher candidates in teacher education programs are disproportionately White. During the 2012-2013 academic year, 74 percent of students enrolled in teacher education programs in the U.S. were White, as were 84 percent of bachelor's degree graduates who had a first or second major in education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Teacher identity research has long linked teachers' race and ethnicity to their beliefs and pedagogical practices (e.g., Ajayi, 2011; Motha, 2006), which indicates a perpetual bias toward White perspectives in education, even in subjects such as English language teaching, in which the majority of students are non-White (Motha, 2014). Critical race theory, now gaining purchase in teacher education programs, works to address these inequities and tackles implicit bias and structural racism, both of which educators have a central role in upholding and perpetuating, even if they are not aware that they are doing so (Brown, 2014; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Kubota and Lin (2006) note the importance of race in the TESOL profession in particular:

> The idea of race, racialization, and racism are factors that shape social, cultural, and political dimensions of language teaching and learning. English language teaching entails complex relations of power fueled by differences created by racialization…It is vital that our field move beyond its color-blind vision imagining itself to be inherently filled with understanding and sensitivity toward diverse cultures and people. (p. 488)

As fully online MA TESOL programs allow teacher candidates opportunities to construct their identities in contexts in which individual aspects such as race can be easily erased, it is doubly important that the "color-blind vision" that Kubota and Lin (2006) refer to, as well as the

centrality of the White, colonialist status quo that this vision entails, is not perpetuated in notions of politically or racially neutral educational practices.

In *Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching*, Motha (2014) introduces a Singhalese phrase that describes learning as "looking at the light cast by someone else's lamp" (p. 3). This metaphor can be useful in conceptualizing how a fully online setting can incorporate critical pedagogies and begin to address the inequities that abound in education and the field of TESOL. Romero (2017) proposes refocusing attention on the "decenter," or the spaces outside the traditional discourses of education that hold "forms of expression [that] are absent, forgotten, or overlooked" (p. 327). A particularly powerful way of engaging the "decenter" is the use of "counterstories" (Solorzano & Yasso, 2009), which counter and challenge the majoritarian stories that dominate language teacher education practices. This practice makes space for and legitimizes the experiences of students of color, and in doing so, recalibrates the central focus to allow divergent voices and perspectives to be heard. In online teacher education programs, in which non-congruent identities (Hughes, 2007) and positions are at even higher risk of being erased, as was seen in this study, incorporating critical pedagogies that decenter traditional discourses and encourage thoughtful discussion of challenging topics is an even more essential task. Rather than erasing teacher candidates' identities through prolonged focus on engaging directly with content, encouraging them to share their stories and aspects of their identity from a broad range of lived experiences can help to nurture a classroom environment that is welcoming and supportive, thereby creating a fertile ground for trust, connection, and authentic negotiation of meaning and identity to take shape.

Reconceptualizing the Online Course as a Semiotic Landscape

A final implication is the need for critical attention not only to content and teaching practices in the online setting but a perspective that views the entire course site as a virtual semiotic landscape (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2011) in which individuals continually position and reposition themselves via a range of semiotic affordances. A wide divide between course designers and course instructors, in which the acts of *production* and *design* are separated (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), has led to a situation in which online courses, particularly those that have been predesigned, are viewed uncritically as neutral containers for interaction instead of as agentively created landscapes rich with potentially problematic ideologies and values. As online education becomes more mainstream, it is increasingly essential that instructional designers as well as administrators and instructors develop a holistic, ecological mindset that considers the ways that interaction is shaped by the virtual environment and seeks out ways to adjust that environment actively when necessary.

By pulling back the lens to view the entire semiotic landscape, educators, administrators, and designers alike can more easily see the ways that seemingly innocuous decisions may have profound effects on interaction and possibilities for positioning and community building. From the instructor perspective, this may mean recognizing that a discussion forum is too long and unwieldy for the average student to read through (particularly given the reality that many of them will be reading it via a mobile device), and opting to split the boards up into smaller groups (see Hew & Cheung, 2011 for discussion). These groups could potentially be designed with multiple topics to allow for more student autonomy (Gulati, 2008), or potentially with assigned smaller groups to encourage familiarity and community through repeated communication with the same individuals. This may also mean paying close attention to how and whether students engage in sustained discussion, either with one another or with the instructor, as well as which students are

included and which are excluded in the discussion, and why this might be. It may mean taking stock of the visual design of the course site before class begins and carefully considering how the visual elements, or the lack thereof, may affect the class culture going forward. Emily's protests about the lack of profile pictures, for example, did not result in change at the institutional level, but her attention to this seemingly minor detail and the effects it could have on her classroom culture gave her insight into the dynamics that ensued in her class. Had more instructors raised similar concerns, it is possible that the institutional decision would have been overturned, and teacher candidates may have felt a greater sense of connection with one another as they read through their classmates' discussion posts.

From the institutional perspective, this requires thinking of online course offerings as representative of the larger culture that the institution hopes to foster, drawing comparisons between the architecture of the physical spaces on campus with the corresponding spaces that welcome their fully online students. In addition to branding, this could mean opting for an LMS that allows for appropriate customization, establishing default settings that emphasize relationship and community building as well as task completion, and then providing directed training to instructors that focuses on creating a welcoming and effective user experience through visual design and course structure in addition to language use. It could also mean ensuring that central instructional designers and instructors share a vision not only for course content and objectives but also, and of equal importance, the class culture they want to create. The integrated model for online education proposed by Picciano (2017), which situates the learning community within a blend of multimodal, collaborative, and instructor-led activities, may provide a conceptual starting point for course designers, administrators, and teachers as they

consider how to integrate more diverse activities to develop the course structure that is most conducive to the community and culture desired.

Perhaps most important, reconceptualizing online courses as ideologically rich semiotic landscapes has the potential to fundamentally disrupt much of the current research in online education that focuses not on culture and identity but on quantitative indicators of success, such as grades, the attainment of learning objectives, and the results of student satisfaction surveys. Just as is the case with face-to-face classes, these data points are key areas for overall evaluation, but focusing on them at the expense of the nuances that come about through qualitative inquiry into students' experiences, which are bound up with prior educational achievement, personal expectations, and the complexities of identity (trans)formation, produces a myopic view that does little to elevate the status of online education—or the students enrolled in online classes. A perspective shift at all levels is needed, in which the work that takes place behind the curtain, whether by designers, instructors or students, is just as valued as the work that, after careful rehearsal, is brought to the stage.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

Although this study was designed to be as comprehensive as possible, it has multiple important limitations. A major limitation is the duration of the data collection, which took place over the span of five months. This was enough time to observe multiple classes over two 7.5-week sessions, but one semester is approximately only ¼ of the entirety of the MA TESOL program. A long-term study in which teacher candidates are followed from the beginning of their coursework through to the completion would provide a fuller picture of how the multilayered positioning processes detailed in this study influence the positional identities they attain as they progress through the program. This short length of time also offers limited insight into how

teacher candidates' experiences in the program influence their decision making and professional identity performance in the workforce. Follow-up studies that take a longitudinal approach to identity construction throughout a fully online degree program or across pre-service and in-service years are needed to determine whether and how the discursive differences between traditional face-to-face and fully online settings have any lasting impact on teacher identity development within the professional sphere.

This study is also limited by the access I had to the classes and the teacher candidates in the full program. Of the nine total courses that were held during the semester when I collected data, I was able to observe four. In addition to four other online classes, one was an internship that required teacher candidates to locate an appropriate language teaching facility where they could carry out required observations and other tasks. Because the participants in this study were spread across the country and most had not yet completed their internship, I was not able to incorporate information about this aspect of their education in my analysis. The important role that the internship or teaching practicum plays in the formation of novice teachers' professional identities is one that cannot be overlooked, particularly in situations such as this one, in which it may be the only component of the entire program that is held face-to-face. In addition, of the 47 teacher candidates who were enrolled in the online program during the semester of this study, I was able to obtain participation consent from eight. This number is sufficient for exploring a range of experiences, but in multiple instances, my inability to use contributions from teacher candidates who were not participating in the study limited the ways I was able to analyze and report the data (and potentially its representativeness). The analysis of back-and-forth conversations between individuals is a key area that would be greatly strengthened by expanded

access and consent to participate. Future methodological designs that include consent from a greater number of individuals for observation would allow for expansion of analysis in this area.

Other limitations include factors that potentially have some effects on the data, such as participant demographics and time spent in the program. Seven of the eight participants were White women, with the other participant being the sole male and person of color. This makeup is in line with the demographics of teachers in the United States in general (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2016), but it provides a skewed data set that centers the experiences of White women and positions the one male person of color as an anomaly. The deep links between identity and the body have been discussed at length, from Bourdieu's (1977) concept of the *bodily hexis* as central to one's habitus to the importance of physical characteristics such as race (e.g., Roth-Gordon, 2016), gender (e.g., Butler, 1990), and ability (e.g., Dirth & Branscombe, 2018). Bodies are socially and culturally inscribed with myriad meanings and assumptions that serve to position individuals in ways that they may choose to accept or contest. Particularly due to the importance of intersectionality and embodiment in identity development, studies designed to examine factors that include aspects such as gender, race, sexuality, and culture are needed to develop a more in-depth perspective on the ways that the disembodied, relatively anonymous environment of the online class setting effects identity construction and performance among diverse groups (Howell, 2016).

Finally, the structure of the program had a rolling admissions timeline that allowed new teacher candidates to begin the program at four different times during the year. This, along with the flexibility of the order in which classes could be taken, means that there were not clear cohorts, and the participants in this study were at quite different points in their progression toward the degree. For example, Lydia had just begun the program at the beginning of the study,

and Violet graduated at the close of the data collection timeframe. Two related limitations arise from this setup. First, programs that follow a clear cohort-based model may exhibit more cohesion and familiarity between teacher candidates due to their repeated interaction with one another in multiple classes. Second, it is not clear what, if any, effects that were explored here may have been related to individuals' relative amounts of experience with the online setting and the MA TESOL program itself. As a hypothetical illustration, it may be possible that Lydia's reserved and excessively formal approach to writing was due in part to her newness to the program, while Violet's informal and conversational approach was linked with her relative experience. This study does not attempt to make generalizable, causal claims, but instead focuses on the observable positions taken up. However, future studies conducted in programs with a clearer cohort-based model or with controls for the variation in participants' length in the program may offer valuable insights into how progression through online programs over time effect the ways that teacher candidates position themselves and construct their professional identities.

Conclusion

Online education is a rapidly growing sector around the world today, and its place in language teacher education is sure to only continue growing in the future. The speed with which online classes have spread is a source of fear for many and hope for others; all too frequently, conversations about online education are characterized by unrealistic optimism or unfounded doom and gloom (Selwyn, 2014), but in reality, the truth is more often in the middle. Online education offers the possibility of access to tremendous numbers of people who otherwise would not be able to further their learning, and its benefits in terms of reflection, higher-order thinking, and cognitive engagement have been very well documented. However, it also is ensconced in the

reality that looking at or talking to a computer screen is simply not the same experience as having a conversation with a person within arm's reach, for better or worse, and that key difference has numerous implications that researchers are still only beginning to understand. As technological affordances and access to high-speed Internet continue to grow, the ways that individuals interact with one another virtually will change dramatically as well. A clear-sighted recognition of the strengths and weaknesses inherent in current educational systems will help shape these technological innovations in ways that allow for new and exciting pedagogies and platforms that draw upon the strengths of both online and face-to-face education.

The interdisciplinarity of this study points to the need to draw upon fields such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, and digital media studies in addition to education and applied linguistics as future research in online education is conceptualized and carried out. The virtual world, with its ever-changing affordances for the production and distribution of meaning and information, poses conceptual challenges that cannot be addressed by any one discipline or methodological approach alone. Research into teachers' identity development, already woven into a rich and colorful tapestry of influences, must continue to do the same as heightened awareness of the effects of intersectionality, emotion, and environmental factors are integrated into our increasingly nuanced understanding of how we come to understand and enact who we are and where we stand in relation to the world around us. By the same token, as the online and offline representations of that world continue to blend and merge, identity studies must incorporate virtual acts, in whatever realm, equally seamlessly alongside those that take place corporeally.

My goal in conducting this research was to acknowledge as objectively as possible that online education is no different from traditional, face-to-face education in being riddled with

problems and limitations but also full of exciting possibilities that can be truly transformative for everyone involved. I believe strongly that it is our duty as educators to reflect upon and examine with a critical eye all elements of our teaching practices with the central goal of not only improving attainment of learning objectives but creating a learning environment that allows our students to become the best versions of themselves, academically, professionally, and personally, that they possibly can be. This requires doing the hard work of extracting ourselves from the minutiae of the everyday to gain a big-picture perspective of the vast and complex webs that link even our smallest actions to the larger processes that seem to be far beyond our reach and influence. This study, with its scalar approach that linked the macro to the meso to the micro and back again, was meant to do just that—to illuminate the myriad effects of seemingly disconnected events as they overlap and disrupt one another like ripples on the surface of a lake. In a time when the very definition of education is being reconfigured and reshaped, maintaining such an interconnected, big-picture approach is more necessary than ever to ensure that we are able to make decisions and effect change based not on passing fads but an unwavering commitment to helping *all* students, regardless of the contexts in which they learn.

EPILOGUE

As anyone who works with technology can attest, one of the biggest challenges is keeping up with the pace of change, particularly in long-term projects such as the one carried out in this dissertation study. However, the sudden and unprecedented shift to online education in Spring 2020 in response to concerns related to the global COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically accelerated even the most rapidly changing sectors of online education, breaking down barriers between online and face-to-face education and thrusting online education into the limelight like never before. In essence, the "curtain" described in this manuscript *was* raised for many, and it was done so without allowing the majority of educators the benefit of prior training or preparation for a smooth transition to a wholly virtual classroom. Classes were held in busy classrooms one week and in students' and teachers' homes the next; educators who had never used technologies such as the popular video chat software Zoom suddenly found themselves navigating an entirely new way of communicating with their students—and one another—in the midst of a steep learning curve for everyone involved.

During the two years in which I was researching and writing up this study, I had no way of knowing how dramatically the face of online education would change almost immediately after the full draft was completed. After the move to fully remote teaching took place, I began following with interest the discussions that began arising around this new reality. Issues that had long been the concern of a relatively marginal branch of education, such as determining online attendance and participation, facilitating feelings of community, or ensuring equitable access for students with unstable home lives or limited access to high-speed Internet, were suddenly topics of wide debate. Indeed, as I write this epilogue, schools across the U.S. are facing demands from the federal government to return to face-to-face education, directing even harsher scrutiny on online teaching practices and provoking a nationwide discussion about the role of education in

brick-and-mortar schools within the larger societal structure. Questions and concerns that so recently were relegated to specialists have now become topics of conversation around dinner tables and on front pages of newspapers.

There is no doubt that online education, in all its forms, has forever changed as a result of this seismic shift. For some, it is very possible that the change was too abrupt, too difficult to integrate, thereby placing online modalities in the realm of last-resort options for use when no other means of teaching are possible. For others, it may be that this worldwide crash course in online education and communication technology has opened up (and will continue to open) new possibilities for innovation and creative approaches to solving the problems that have long haunted online educators. Indeed, research has shown that attitudes toward online education are more positive among those who have experienced it for themselves (Pew Research Center, 2011; Ulmer, Watson, & Derby, 2007), indicating the potential for greater acceptance of and appreciation for fully online modalities going forward. Similarly, the stresses and feeling of isolation that have accompanied quarantine in the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated the importance of building and maintaining communities in digital spaces, but they have also illustrated the longing for physical closeness with others that can never be fully satisfied via even the most advanced technological affordances.

Only time will tell how people involved with education will begin to reassemble these currently disparate pieces once the pandemic passes and options for face-to-face instruction are again safe. However, the same goes for all of humanity, as we return to our daily routines of work and play, surrounded again by others in crowded theaters or intimate dinner parties at home. Who will we be after months of seeing others only from a distance or through a computer screen? How will we have changed, and how will we have stayed the same? Despite the ways

that life has been fundamentally uprooted since the time this manuscript was initially drafted, the central question of what it means to construct and perform our identities and to become members of new communities in today's online-offline nexus seems to loom even larger now than it did before. In this period of social and cultural upheaval, these questions—and the messy, incomplete answers we will inevitably formulate and reformulate—are essential to a clear understanding of our places in this altered society. They can indeed be the catalyst for a fresh commitment to continual growth and the pursuit of a more interconnected, equitable, and sustainable future for all.

APPENDIX A: Interview Questions for Instructors

1. Briefly describe your educational and work background.
2. How does teaching in the online MA TESOL program compare or contrast with previous teaching experiences you've had?
3. What drew you to teach in the online MA TESOL program at [SU]?
4. What is your background in teaching [insert class subject], either online or offline?
5. How would you describe yourself as a teacher educator?
6. How you would describe your current group enrolled in your [insert class name] class?
7. Walk me through your process of designing an online class in the MA TESOL program.
8. How do the sociocultural backgrounds of your students affect your online course design?
9. What do you do to create connections with your students in the online setting?
10. How do you feel the online setting of your classes affects your interaction with your students?
11. What is your perception of students' interactions with one another?
12. What do you look for to determine whether or not your students are engaging with and understanding the material?
13. What do you do when it seems as if a student is disengaged?
14. How do you address conflict, tension, etc., if any, in your online class?
15. Tell me about a time you could see definite growth in a student in the span of your class.
16. Tell me about a challenge you've faced in teaching in the online MA TESOL program. How have you addressed this challenge?

APPENDIX B: Questions for Teacher Candidates (Interview 1)

1. Briefly describe your educational and work background.
2. Why did you decide to enroll in an MA TESOL program?
3. Why did you choose the online MA TESOL program at ASU?
4. What do you hope to do when you complete your degree?
5. If participant has teaching experience:
    a. How would you describe yourself as a teacher?
    b. How do you feel your experience in the MA program is changing the way you see yourself as a teacher?
    c. Tell me about an experience you've had as a teacher that you see differently as a result of the MA TESOL program so far.
6. If participant does not have teaching experience:
    a. How would you describe the teacher you hope to be?
    b. How do you feel your experience in the MA program is changing the vision you have of yourself as a future teacher?
    c. Tell me about an experience or perception you had prior to entering the MA program that you see differently as a result of the program so far.
7. How do you feel the online setting of your classes affects the way you engage with the material, the instructor, and your classmates?
8. How would you describe your relationship(s) with your instructors?
9. How would you describe your relationship(s) with your classmates?
10. Tell me about a time in your coursework so far that you felt particularly challenged. What did you do?

11. Tell me about a time in your coursework so far that you have sought feedback from your instructor or your peers about your work or a new idea. How did you do this, and what happened?

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