

# The negotiation of writer identity in engineering faculty - writing consultant collaborations

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**Abstract:** Negotiating faculty-writing consultant collaborations in engineering contexts can be challenging when the writing consultant originates in the humanities. The author found that one of the sites of negotiation in the formation of working relationships is that of writer identity, and disciplinary writer identity in particular. In order to confirm her experiential knowledge, the author interviewed her faculty collaborators to further investigate their attitudes and experiences about writing. Analysis of two excerpts of these interviews makes visible “clashes” between the faculty engineers’ and the writing consultant’s autobiographical and disciplinary writer identities. Implications of the role of writer identity in faculty-writing consultant collaborations include considering the value of extending this negotiation explicitly to students and the question of how writing curriculum can explicitly engage students in the formation of positive disciplinary writer identities.

**Keywords:** Communication across the curriculum, writing in the disciplines, engineering, faculty, writer identity



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## 1. Introduction

At the end of my tenure as a writing consultant embedded in an engineering department at a flagship state research university in the American West, I saw an opportunity to go back and interview the faculty engineers with whom I had collaborated for two years. I saw the opportunity to ask them questions about our work together integrating writing curriculum and pedagogy into existing engineering courses that there had not been time to address during the rush of the academic year. Because the program I worked for was a newly established Communication Across the Curriculum (CXC)<sup>1</sup> program, I was the first writing consultant to be embedded in the Chemical Engineering Department. There was therefore no precedence in the department for working with consultants from outside of the department. As a result, I had to build collaborative relationships with faculty from the ground up. Establishing working relationships with the faculty was not always easy or free of tension, in part because the CXC program did not prescribe roles or clear lines of authority for our work together. I hoped that these interviews would provide a low-stakes situation in which I could ask questions about our work together that had no explicit bearing on our regular work of developing and teaching writing curriculum. From these interviews I also hoped to collect some empirical data that would transform the experiential and intuitive knowledge I had accumulated over the two years into knowledge that would benefit the CXC program and contribute to research in Writing Studies.

In these retrospective research interviews, I particularly wanted to ask faculty questions about their identities as writers. They were all successful research engineers, and had achieved that status largely through succeeding at writing professional genres, such as research reports and grant proposals. The centrality of writing to their professional lives and success, however, seemed largely unacknowledged in the engineering curriculum, and was certainly not definitional to how they understood their work, or themselves as professionals. This was in contrast to my own professional identity as a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in creative writing student from the English department—I was, unequivocally, primarily a “writer”. While I certainly expected to encounter epistemological divergences regarding the function of language in knowledge making and professional identity between members of humanities-based and science-based disciplines, I had not fully anticipated how the implications of this divide would shape my working relationships with the faculty. These retrospective interviews would give me a chance to examine if, and how, the negotiation of writer identity had shaped our work.

The negotiation of writer identity, I felt, had not only shaped my interpersonal relationships with faculty, but also had implications for the engineering writing curriculum. For example, the negotiation of writer identity was in play when faculty modeled via their words and actions in the classroom the writer identity of an engineer as “bad,” “ineloquent” or “boring.” The quintessential example of this was the

inclusion of a PowerPoint slide in a presentation on writing technical reports warning against the error of the dangling participle. This over-emphasis on grammatical correctness had a punitive tone to it as well, as students' grades would be marked down for grammatical errors. At the same time, the negative construction of writer identity implied by this lesson invoked an alternative, positive writer identity. This alternative identity was one that I seemed to represent within my role as a writing consultant from the humanities, and even more so as a creative writer. This alternative identity, to the extent that it was ever explicitly mentioned, was also negatively defined by the words and actions of the faculty—engineering writers and writing are *not* literary or *not* “flowery” (Winsor, 1996, p. 91). In other words, how the faculty modeled the writer identity of an engineer contrasted negatively with the writer identity that I represented as a writing consultant from the English Department.

It is important to acknowledge that there is nothing inherently wrong with the negatively defined engineering writer identity modeled by the faculty in classroom presentations and assignment design. The goal of a CXC program in engineering is not to disrupt social or cultural norms. Quite the opposite, in fact. Winsor (1996) found in her study of four engineering students that, in general, a negative writing identity is normalized within engineering because it is generically necessary (p. 90). Technical documentation serves a primarily functional purpose for readers, and one way that this is accomplished is by minimizing the apparent influence of the author on the content of the document. As Miller's (1984) theory of genre anticipates, the engineering faculty modeled for students' attitudes about writing that would enable them to produce documents that were appropriate responses to recurring rhetorical situations in engineering contexts. But the definition of the engineering writer identity as positioned negatively against a literary ideal created a paradox within which I had to negotiate a position of authority with faculty and in the classroom: on the one hand my writer identity was an ideal that offered a great repository of expertise about writing; on the other hand, at every turn I had to minimize or deny this identity as relevant within an engineering context. This paradox, which went largely unacknowledged, shaped my working relationships with the faculty and was enacted in our work together developing curriculum and preparing classroom presentations.

This article argues that the negotiation of writer identity, and disciplinary<sup>2</sup> writer identity in particular, was formational to my collaborative relationships with the faculty in the Chemical Engineering department. The negotiation of writer identity is made empirically visible in this study via the analysis of two faculty interviews using tools from conversation analysis for the study of semi-structured interviews. This article also proposes that Ivanic's (1998) model for writer identity is useful for developing an interview protocol for studying writer identity in a CXC context. The conclusion considers the implications of this study for CXC pedagogy and research.

## 2. Method

In the Spring and Fall of 2006 I interviewed seven faculty in the Chemical Engineering department who had collaborated with me as a writing consultant in a newly established Communication Across the Curriculum (CXC) program. The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow for both structured and spontaneous exchange. Each interview lasted for 30-45 minutes. The interview protocol is discussed in more detail below, but was developed for the purpose of asking the faculty engineers questions about their personal attitudes about and experiences with writing that there had not been time or institutionally appropriate space available to discuss during my tenure as the writing consultant. Specifically, the interview protocol structure is based on Ivanic's (1998) model for writer identity. The protocol is structured to prompt interviewees to reflect on their attitudes and experiences with writing from different aspects of their writer identity.

My analysis of the excerpts from the transcribed interviews is focused on exchanges from interviews that make visible the negotiation of writer identity between writing consultant and faculty interviewee. The excerpts are from interviews with two faculty members with whom I had the most developed working relationships. Interviews with the other five faculty, with whom I had only cursory contact, lacked the history of a complex working relationship and were less interesting from the point of view of studying the development of faculty-writing consultant relationships.

To make the negotiation of writer identity visible, I draw on Mazeland's (1992) observation from conversation analysis that the distribution of authority on a topic in a semi-structured interview is reflected in the structure of the exchange. In an interview that is structured by lengthy responses by the interviewee to the questions of the interviewer, control over topic setting and the length of response is largely determined by the interviewee (Discourse Unit, or DU, organization (Mazeland & Ten Have, 1996, p. 91). In the alternative organization, a turn-by-turn (TBT) organization, topic setting is shared with the interviewee, and both participants might contribute to the topic in a rapid-fire fashion. As I intuited from the conception of this project, and as the analysis below demonstrates, when the interviewer prompts the interviewee to speak from a disciplinary writer identity, the structure of the interview shifts to reflect a change in control over setting the topic, the definition of writer identity. This transition in the interview organization, I argue, makes the active negotiation of writer identity visible and emphasizes that this is a topic that both participants have a significant stake in.

This study was initiated and designed to document my two years of experiential knowledge and intuition gained from collaborating with engineering faculty in a CXC program. While the results of this study are not warranted for generalization beyond the context of my work in the Chemical Engineering Department, the findings of this study contribute to the body of experiential and practical knowledge available to faculty and consultants working in CXC programs. The focus on the writing consultant-faculty working relationship is of particular value because much of the research into the WID/WAC components of CXC programs has focused on students.

### 3. Theory

#### 3.1 Writing and Identity

The overarching argument of Ivanic's (1998) theory of the construction of identity in academic writing is that, "writing is an act of identity in which people align themselves with socio-culturally shaped possibilities for self-hood" (p. 32). By making these alignments writers reproduce or challenge "dominate practices and discourses, and the values beliefs and interests which they embody" (p. 32). As mentioned above, as a writing consultant I observed in my work with engineering faculty the reproduction of the disciplinary identity of engineering writers as bad and ineloquent, and the positioning of this identity against the writer identity of a writing consultant from the humanities. Ivanic's model is useful for recognizing that writer identity is multiple rather than monolithic, and that investigating multiple aspects of a writer's identity can turn up interesting insights when different aspects of the writer's identity come into conflict, or "clash" (p. 28).

Ivanic identifies four aspects of writer identity: 1. autobiographical self, 2. discursal self, 3. self as author, all three of which relate to the writer as an individual, and 4. "possibilities for selfhood," which are the prototypical identities available in the socio-cultural context of writing (p. 24). Of interest to my analysis here are numbers 1 and 4: autobiographic self and "possibilities for selfhood." These two aspects of writer identity are most relevant because they are accessible through writers' spoken reports about their attitudes towards and practices of writing. Finally, for the sake of simplicity and clarity, given that the socio-cultural context within which I worked with the faculty was defined by the academic discipline of engineering, and in particular the discipline of Chemical Engineering, Ivanic's "possibilities for selfhood" will from hereon out be referred to as the available "disciplinary identities."

For Ivanic each aspect of identity raises a set of research questions and a methodology of study. The autobiographical self is the identity of the writer that is shaped through personal experience. Ivanic proposes the following questions that inquiries about the autobiographical self can reveal answers to:

1. What aspects of people's lives might have led them to write in the way that they do?
2. How has their access to discourses and associated positionings been socially enabled or constrained?
3. More generally, how does autobiographical identity shape writing? (p. 25).

Given these questions, the first eight interview questions (see Figure 1) were drafted for the purpose of asking the faculty engineers questions about their personal attitudes about and experiences with writing that there had not been time or institutionally appropriate space available to discuss during my tenure as the writing consultant. In other words, interview questions #1-8 invite a response from the interviewee's

autobiographical self. Question #5 is the question that most directly prompts the interviewee to talk about his or her identity as a writer.

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1. Tell me about the first time that you felt really satisfied that a piece of writing truly represented your work. What was different about it? What was your writing process like when you produced this piece of work?
  2. Tell me about a time when writing was easy. How would you describe it? What was different about it? Tell me about your process of writing this document from idea to publishing (or finish).
  3. How has your profession shaped your writing? What has it demanded of you in terms of writing?
  4. Where and when do you write? Do you write outside of your professional life?
  5. So, would you describe yourself as a writer?
  6. (If not, how do you personally account for all of the time that you spend writing?)
  7. In your experience, how does the engineering profession value writing and the time it takes to produce written documents?
  8. How did you learn to write? When? From who? How has your experience of writing changed over the course of your career?
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*Figure 1:* Interview questions #1-8.

Disciplinary identities are defined as those social roles that are made available to individuals in the socio-cultural and disciplinary context in which they work and live. Ivanic poses the following questions as raised by research into the disciplinary aspect of writer identity:

1. What possibilities for self-hood, in terms of relations of power, interests, values and beliefs are inscribed in the practices, genres and discourses which are supported by particular socio-cultural and institutional contexts?
2. What are the patterns of privileging among available possibilities for self-hood?
3. In what ways are possibilities for self-hood and patterns of privileging among them changing over time? (p. 29)

Given these questions, questions #9 and #10 of the interview protocol addressed the disciplinary identities of the interviewee as engineer and teacher.

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9. What are the right questions to ask an engineer about writing? Have I
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- 
- been asking you the right questions?
10. So, knowing what you know about your own experience writing, what do you most want your students to learn about writing?
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*Figure 2:* Interview protocol questions #9-10.

Question #9 is of particular interest to this paper as it provoked the animated interactions analyzed below. Question #9 is a meta-question, one that purposely invoked the frame of the research interview. This question invited the interviewee to reflect, from the position of an academic engineer, whether the interviewer, a literary writer and writing consultant, had asked the right questions. This question gave the interviewee an opportunity to resist the identity that the previous interview questions had constructed for him or her. In addition, this question gave the interviewee an opportunity to respond to the possibility that the questions themselves erroneously assumed *similarities* between the experiences of the interviewer and the interviewee.

The big picture of the interviews emerged as one in which the interviewee reported on the biographical experience requested by the interviewer in questions #1-8. However, as structured into the interview questions, the interviewee was prompted to answer as an engineer in question #9 (What are the right questions to ask an engineer about writing? Have I been asking you the right questions?). This switch, from an investigation of the autobiographical writing identity<sup>3</sup> to that of the disciplinary identity of engineer, raised the possibility of a “clash” (Ivanic, 1998, p. 28) between the interviewee’s autobiographical and disciplinary identities as a writer. These clashes, as manifest in the transcript excerpts analyzed below, are productive, Ivanic claims, because “they have the potential to contribute to changing the possibilities for selfhood available in the future” (p. 28). In other words, these clashes are sites of negotiation of writer identity in the writing consultant-faculty engineer collaboration.

### 3.2 Making Ivanic’s “clashes” of identity visible

One of the affordances of the interactional frame of the research interview is the possibility of making visible in a relatively controlled environment aspects of interactions that might also transpire in classrooms or other more dynamic contexts. In the case of these interviews with faculty engineers, what became visible via an analysis informed by Ivanic’s model for writer identity and Mazeland and TenHave’s (1996) work on the structure of the semi-open research interview was the negotiation of writer identity. In the analyses of two transcripts below, this negotiation can be understood in terms of Ivanic’s “clash” between conflicting writer identities, in particular that of the personal, or autobiographical writer identity and the disciplinary writer identity.

In the semi-open research interview common to qualitative research, topic setting and turn-taking are generally, although not exclusively, determined by the interviewee. In this style of interview the interviewer asks the interviewee a question within the

interviewee's area of expertise and then remains silent except for short, neutral statements that encourage the interviewee to continue speaking. In this form of interview structure, the Discourse Unit (DU) interview structure, an interviewee may answer at length, in varying degrees of detail and may even change the topic. The contrastive structure, turn-by-turn (TBT), is characterized by both interviewer and interviewee contributing equally to the interaction in short and often overlapping contributions.

Of main interest to the analysis below is the fact that interview structure is also dependent on the distribution of knowledge between the interviewer and the interviewee (Mazeland (1992) summarized in Ten Have 1999, pp. 179-180). For most topics during the course of an interview the interviewee is the resident expert and answers to inform the interviewer-recipient (DU structure). For some topics, however, the interviewer and the interviewee may have equal knowledge and thus both be authorized to contribute as knowledgeable participants. This change in the distribution of knowledge is reflected in a change to a turn-by-turn (TBT) structure.

Semi-open research interviews may alternate between DU and TBT structure, as is the case in the transcripts of the interviews with the faculty engineers. In this analysis, looking at why and when the structure shifts is revealing about how the distribution of knowledge between the interviewer and interviewee changes with the topic, in particular the change between the topics of autobiographical and disciplinary writing identity. These shifts in structure, or clashes, make visible the active negotiation of writer identity.

## **4. Analysis and Discussion of Transcript Excerpts**

### **4.1 General observations**

Overall, the analysis of the two interview excerpts below makes visible the active negotiation of writer identity between the interviewer (the writing consultant) and the interviewee (engineering faculty). As might be anticipated because of the intent of the interview protocol (see Figures #1 and #2 above), the Discourse Unit (DU) interview structure dominated this series of interviews with faculty engineers. In general, the interviewer posed a question about an aspect of the faculty engineers' writer identity informed by the autobiographical self (interview questions #1-8) and the interviewee then answered from an expert position for the benefit of the recipient interviewer.

The interview structure, however, took on a different shape when the distribution of knowledge was equalized by a change in topic, as introduced by interview question #9 (What are the right questions to ask an engineer about writing? Have I been asking you the right questions?). This question prompted the interviewee to answer on behalf of the discipline, rather than from autobiographical experience. In the two critical incidents analyzed below, when the interviewee made a statement about the disciplinary writing identity of the interviewer, the structure shifted to the contrastive structure of a rapid

turn-by-turn (TBT). This change in structure foregrounds that the interviewer had been authorized to contribute as an expert on her own disciplinary writing identity. The shift in interview organizational structure from DU to TBT marks the shift from the interviewee speaking as an expert from his or her autobiographical self, such as: “I think it is important”, “I probably reacted very much in that mode”; to the interviewee speaking as an expert from his or her disciplinary identity as a faculty engineer, either explicitly or implicitly: “You see yourself as a writer [implied is the positioning of the interviewee as an engineer]”, “One of the things that engineers have to do...is writing persuasively”.

In short, by making a statement about the disciplinary writing identity of the interviewer from the disciplinary position of the faculty engineer, the interviewee has authorized the interviewer to contribute as a knowledgeable participant about her writing identity. Interestingly, these rapid exchanges expose assumptions about the disciplinary writing identities of both participants and make visible, however briefly, the negotiation of writer identity between faculty engineer and writing consultant.

#### **4.2 Analysis of Critical Incident #1: “Satisfying”**

##### **General observations**

This transcript is interesting because a close analysis of the clash exposes an assumption that is embedded in the interview protocol that both the faculty engineer and the writing consultant have a stake in: whether writing can be a satisfying experience for everyone. In this excerpt, the interviewee, when prompted by question #9 to reflect on whether she has been asked the right questions about engineers and writing, returns to the word “satisfying” introduced in question #1 to clarify her position on whether writing can be a satisfying experience for her. To do this the interviewee refers to the interviewer’s identity as a writer and proposes that as a writer the interviewer can’t imagine that writing might not be satisfying. By the end of the excerpt the interviewee has fully articulated an identity that finds mathematical problem solving “satisfying” in a way that writing is not: “I see myself as an engineer not a writer so problem solving I find really satisfying.” However, the interviewee also claims that, “I think that I can write reasonably well and I think I can communicate ideas fairly effectively.” These two statements seem to suggest that it is her disciplinary writing identity as an engineer that elevates problem solving over writing as satisfying, even though at the same time she personally identifies as being an effective writer, while not actually calling herself a writer because that identity has been attributed to the interviewer.

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**Interviewer (IR):** My last question is sort of a meta-question. I've been asking questions about writing as an academic engineer--am I asking you the right questions and are there any questions that I haven't asked that I should have?

**Interviewee (IE):** Ok, so your first question, so this actually goes back to rephrasing this first question about what was the first time that you thought writing was very satisfying: "Do you find writing to be a satisfying part of your job?" DO I FIND WRITING SATISFYING? AND I'M NOT SURE THAT I DO! (laughs) I think it is important, but I find oral communication to be more satisfying and I find actually doing the work to be more satisfying than I find writing about the work. So that would be one question, is "do you find it [writing] satisfying?" And I ask myself what types of things and experience can make writing more satisfying? A satisfying experience. You see yourself as a writer and so you can't imagine that someone might find writing to not be satisfying

**End DU structure, begin TBT structure**

**IR:** I don't know...

**IE:** ITSITSITS (coughs)

**IR:** I mean its not always satisfying for me either

**IE:** it's not always satisfying but..but, well, but, even

**IR:** but I'm really interested in unpacking what what what it

**IE:** you know I find it,

IF CAN COMPARE, I find it like like...

**End TBT structure, begin DU structure**

**IE continued:** ...going though, if I think of an experience it is like going through the mathematics of a problem has been really satisfying, developing the mathematics of it, figuring out how the math works is mentally very satisfying, and it's not that I dislike writing, I actually like writing, but I can't think of times when I have had that same sort of mentally satisfying experience from having put something down on paper. I guess maybe I see myself as an engineer not a writer so problem solving I find really satisfying and I don't find the writing things to be as satisfying as having solved the problems and I think that I can write reasonably well and I think I can communicate ideas fairly effectively. I've been pleased with some of the things that I write but I don't get the same sense of satisfaction out of that I get out of solving a problem.

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*Figure 3:* Transcript of "Satisfying" Excerpt of Research Interview #07. (See Appendix B for the fully marked transcription; See Appendix A for transcription key)

### Close Analysis

The excerpt begins with the interviewer restating that the interview questions up to this point have been about writing as an academic engineer. In making this statement the interviewer positions the interviewee in the primary disciplinary identity of academic engineer. The interviewer then proposes the possibility that there are “right” questions that haven’t been asked, implying that these “right” questions are outside of the disciplinary expertise of the interviewer (1.1-1.4; line numbers refer to the full transcript in Appendix B. The plain transcript above is easier to read to get a general sense of the exchange). This question is a strong rhetorical move that explicitly positions the interviewer as outside of the disciplinary expertise of the interviewee, both in terms of engineering and writing *and* engineering. At this point in the interview, the interviewer has called into question the expertise of her primary role as interviewer, that of knowing what are the right, or at least useful, questions to ask the interviewee about writing, and invited the interviewee to contribute to that role as an expert. Unlike the questions (#1-#8) preceding this one, the interviewer has framed it in disciplinary rather than personal terms and in addition included herself in the frame: “Are there any questions that I haven’t asked that I should have?” (1.3-1.4).

The question is followed by a long pause—the longest in the interview at 17 seconds—while the interviewee carefully considers a response. The interviewee’s response begins by returning to the very beginning of the interview (1.6). The interview began with the interviewer asking the interviewee to recall a time when a piece of writing or a writing process had been particularly satisfying (Question #1). At the very beginning of the interview the interviewee chose to postpone an answer to this question. The interviewee said, “...move on to some other questions and I’ll see if I can come back and think about some way to put a context on that one because it doesn’t make sense in the context of my experience.” Here the interviewee reposes the question as: “DO I FIND WRITING SATISFYING?” (1.9-1.10) and then suggests that the question be revised again to “Do *you* find it [writing] satisfying?” (1.13-1.14, my emphasis). Here the interviewee has exposed and challenged an assumption embedded in Question #1, that is that writing can be satisfying for *anyone*, at least to some degree, some of the time.

Next the interviewee explains this assumption by ascribing it to the fact that the interviewee is a “writer” and therefore, “can’t imagine that someone might find writing to not be satisfying” (1.18-1.19). This “you” statement can also be read as evidence that the interviewee is struggling to define herself in relationship to a contrastive disciplinary identity of writer which *is* inclusive of experiencing writing as a satisfying experience.

This definitional statement about the writing identity of the interviewer is the statement that re-equalizes the distribution of knowledge about writing identity between interviewer and interviewee and initiates the TBT structure of the interview. While the exchange began with the interviewer revoking disciplinary expertise, the interviewee’s direct definitional statement implicitly challenges the interviewee to

enter, if she chooses to, into the exchange from an expert position about her own writing identity.

The interviewer enters the exchange by resisting the interviewee's statement, "I don't know," (1.21) and then hedges that, "writing is not always satisfying for me either" (1.20). The transcript shows a rise in the volume and pitch of the interviewee's voice and the hedge that, "it's not always satisfying but..." (1.24) overlaps with the interviewer's statement of resistance. Having regained the floor, the interviewee holds the floor by slowing the pace and lowering the intensity of the exchange, "yeah, well, but...you know" (1.24-1.25) while thinking about the next topic, which is introduced by the interviewee (1.30). Even though the interviewer proposes a further "unpacking" (1.27) about this word "satisfying," the interviewee declined to share the control of turn-taking and introducing new topics in order to continue the TBT structure for more than two turns. Instead, the interviewee forced a return to the DU structure<sup>1</sup>. Finally, the interviewee returns (1.30) to the more comfortable mode of reporting on biographical knowledge to an interested audience, the interviewer.

All in all, the TBT episode of this part of the interview was extremely brief, about 10 seconds, and the interviewer only made three statements before the interviewee reclaimed the floor and the DU structure of the interview. Within this whole exchange, however, can be read an important negotiation of assumptions about disciplinary writing identities. The interviewer/writer began the interview by proposing that writing could be "satisfying" for writers across disciplines; in this exchange the interviewee/faculty engineer questions this assumption and then attributes the assumption to the disciplinary identity of the interviewer as a "writer." The interviewee further explains (1.32-1.44) that "not dislik[ing] writing" (1.35) is not the same as finding writing "a mentally satisfying experience" (1.37) in the same way that problem solving is: "I see myself as an engineer not a writer so problem solving I find really satisfying" (1.38-1.39).

In the end it is impossible to cleanly tease apart biographical and disciplinary writing identities; both aspects of identity of the interviewer and the interviewee are in play during this exchange. These identities, in particular the disciplinary identities, prove to be dependent on each other in the sense that they are defined as contrastive relative to the attribution of writing as "satisfying." It proves uncomfortable, as evidenced by the negotiation over topic and turn-taking control, when this dependence is revealed, and challenged, even momentarily.

Arguably, it could be said that both the interviewer's and the interviewee's writing identities were reified by being articulated in this exchange. The productive aspect of this exchange, however, is that the clash (Ivanic, 1998) of writing identities that is *always* in play during CXC work was momentarily made visible.

### 4.3 Analysis of Critical Incident #2: “Grey”

#### General observations

The excerpt below is interesting because it is another example of how the negotiation of writer identity between a faculty engineer and a writing consultant was explicitly articulated when the faculty engineer was prompted to reflect about writing at a disciplinary level. Specifically, in this excerpt the binary of “creative writing vs. the engineer” is set up and then deconstructed by a move to admit a “grey in the middle” when it comes to the definition of these writer identities. The narrative that begins this excerpt is also interesting because it reflects the significant evolution in my working relationship with this faculty engineer. Initially, as he narrates, he was skeptical about my contribution to the program and in the classroom. However, over the course of two years we developed a strong working relationship founded upon a mutual understanding that engineering students struggled when it came to understanding and writing technical reports as persuasive documents. However, it is notable that even after two years of collaboration the binary persisted in the engineer’s initial attempt to differentiate our writer identities.

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**Interviewer (IR):** Do you feel that when writing people, like me, or whoever else you have talked to, do you feel ever that they’re talking about things or asking questions that are really just barking up the wrong tree when it comes what is important about writing for engineers?

**Interviewee (IE):** When I started down the path with the XX project I probably reacted much in that mode of I want to know what it is that you want to bring into this classroom because I have certain ideas of what is needed. And I had some preconceptions about the sort of thing that you were going to bring. And I just wanted to make sure that we were on the same page and that what you were going to present was going to be useful to the students.

So I think that to some degree we are worlds apart in terms of the logic and the reasons and the desire for the end product, but that’s not to say that there isn’t important things that a novelist can bring to the engineer in terms of writing skills. And certainly one of the things beyond just information exchange that the engineers have to do is this writing persuasively, and a good engineer will get caught in this area of writing persuasively quite a bit and information exchange is not good enough to construct arguments in such a way that persuades somebody and that’s a skill set that the novelist can bring to the table that an engineer needs.

#### End DU structure, begin TBT structure

**IR:** Now when you say novelist do you mean...

**IE:** The one who is writing the flowery language

**IR:** Me, specifically in that I wrote a novel

**IE:** No, no no

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- IR:** Is that just an alternative to  
**IE:** There's the person who is in creative writing vs. the  
 engineer  
**IR:** Ok. Those feel to me like two extremes  
**IE:** I expect you are right. (laughter) Where is the poet in all of that?  
**IR:** Is there any [laughter]...  
**IE:** grey in the middle? Of course...

**End TBT structure, resume DU structure**

**IE continued:** ...there's lots of grey I think. The engineer that gets wrapped up in promoting products, sales documentation, things of that sort might be more in that persuasive area and require better use of language than a technical report. Some people are also involved in government policy area and are engineers, they again need high skill sets language wise. Also engineers that are involved in the legal profession would require just better writing skills than a standard engineer.

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*Figure 4:* Transcript of "Grey" Excerpt of Research Interview #01  
 (see Appendix C for the fully marked transcription)

### Close Analysis

As with the excerpt "Satisfying," the critical incident "Grey" begins with the interviewer framing a question in terms of disciplinary writing identities: "Do you feel that when writing people are talking about things or asking questions that they're really just barking up the wrong tree when it comes to what is important about writing for engineers?" (2.1-2.4; line numbers refer to the full transcript in Appendix C. The plain transcript above is easier to read to get a general sense of the exchange). In contrast to the preceding interview questions (#1-#8), which ask the interviewee to speak from biographical experience, this question frames the interaction to include the interviewer by naming disciplinary identities for both participants: "writing people" and "engineer."

The relatively informal language of this question reflects that overall this interview was more conversational in tenor than the interview analyzed above. This interview, however, still maintained a dominant DU structure with the majority of the content of the interview in the form of the interviewee reporting to the interviewer autobiographical information about his attitudes towards and experiences with writing. The use of the self-deprecating term "writing people" (2.1) by the interviewer and the disciplinary identification of the interviewer as a 'novelist' (2.16) by the interviewee, rather than the more general 'writer' as above, reflects the relatively greater amount of time the interviewer and the interviewee had spent collaborating in the context of the CXC program.

The interviewee begins his response within the DU structure (2.6-2.23), reaffirming disciplinary differences between the interviewee and the interviewer in their past roles as writing consultant and faculty engineer and at the same time affirming that the “novelist” does have a “skill set” (2.22) of value to the engineer (2.23).

What is interesting about this interaction is that while initially the disciplinary identification of “novelist” was rightly and literally attributed to the interviewer, when asked to clarify whether the interviewee’s category of novelist includes the interviewer (initiating TBT structure), the interviewee redefines the category in negative terms, “The one that is writing the flowery language” (2.26), and excludes the interviewer: “No, no” (2.28). What had begun as an attempt to positively resolve the distance between the personal and professional identities of the interviewer and the interviewee as writing consultant and faculty engineer (2.15-2.16) turned into an attempt to define abstract disciplinary identities. Novelists, as a category, write “flowery language,” which had been established earlier in the interview as what engineers don’t do (see also Winsor, 1996). In fact, the interviewee explicitly names the conflict in abstract terms: “the person who is in creative writing vs. the engineer” (2.31).

Interestingly, as in the “Satisfying” excerpt above, the articulation of this binary suggests that the disciplinary writing identities of the novelist and the engineer, in the abstract, could be contrastively *dependent* on each other. When the interviewer challenged this binary as “extremes” (2.33), the interviewee quickly conceded and what followed was a good-natured (laughter, 2.35) and conversational resolution of the binary (2.29-2.40) by raising the possibility of “grey in the middle” (2.38).

At the point of resolution (2.40) the interviewee returns to speaking from the position of expertise and the interview structure returns to that of DU. At this point as well the interviewee resumes affirming the relevance and importance of “writing skills” (2.49) to the engineer, although still in the abstract terms of engineers in general, in contrast to the more personal “we” (2.14) of earlier in the interaction.

As in the “Satisfying” excerpt, it could be said that both the interviewer’s and the interviewee’s writing identities were reified by being articulated in this exchange. However, this interaction shows evidence of 1. the contingency of disciplinary writing identities in a CXC context and 2. the power of abstract disciplinary assumptions about writing identity and the struggle to reconcile these with real world interactions.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of these transcript excerpts makes visible the negotiation of disciplinary writer identity that shaped my collaborative relationships with faculty in the context of a CXC program in an engineering department. In particular, these excerpts make visible, as anticipated by Ivanic’s model for writer identity, a productive clash between the personal and disciplinary writer identities of myself and the faculty engineers. These clashes are productive because they open up the possibility for a collaborative relationship based on a more complex and nuanced recognition of what faculty and

writing consultants have to contribute to the curriculum and in the classroom. In the case of this study, these clashes occurred in the relatively controlled environment of a research interview. In this sense the research interview functioned not so much as a data-gathering tool for writing research, but as a forum for developing faculty-writing consultant working relationships in a context where making time for this work was very difficult.

The most practical implications raised by this negotiation of disciplinary writer identity are the applications for curriculum development and classroom pedagogy in an engineering CXC program. If the negotiation of writer identity is formational to the writing consultant-faculty engineer working relationship, and students are witnessing, if not implicitly participating in, the outcomes of this negotiation in the classroom, then we must consider if and how identity negotiation should be explicitly incorporated into the curriculum. The remainder of this paper will consider this issue from two angles: 1. The value of the writing consultant actively disrupting disciplinary-based stereotypes about writer identity in collaborative relationships with faculty and students; 2. The value of developing writing curriculum that broadens the available writer identity for engineers beyond the stereotypes of “bad,” “ineloquent,” or “boring” that are often attributed to writers in technical disciplines.

### **5.1 The Value of Disrupting Disciplinary Writer Identity**

One implication of the impact of the negotiation of writer identity as formational to the faculty-writing consultant working relationship is whether or not the writing consultant should work explicitly to extend this negotiation to include students. This question is of particular importance when it comes to developing new writing curriculum. As in the broader field of Composition & Rhetoric, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) practice and scholarship has had to confront the issue of whether writing instruction empowers students to engage in disciplinary discourse, or whether it is assimilationist by coercing students to conform to normalized dominant discourses. LeCourt (1996) reiterated the points of criticism that WAC/WID has long weathered, most notably that WAC/WID curriculum often participates in the acculturation of students into already normalized discourses at the cost of silencing socio-economic and gender differences, and alternative literacies and ways of knowing (p. 390). Bazerman et. al. (2005) summarize the call to address this issue from within WID scholarship and concluded, as Bazerman has elsewhere as well (1992, 2005), that it is through direct “engagement” with disciplines that students are empowered to resist, reshape and effectively “exercise” the powers of the disciplines. In fact, the underlying philosophy of the CXC program within which I was a writing consultant was built upon the values espoused by Bazerman and his colleagues. A CXC program imbedded in the disciplinary environment with which it is in collaborative relationship, practices, by virtue of its physical location as well as its pedagogy, the value that instruction in oral and written communication practices cannot be meaningfully unsituated from its disciplinary contexts. The philosophy of the program already took into

account that who a writer is and what a successful writer practices will vary across the disciplines: the writing consultant originating in English and the engineering students and faculty will have different, although not necessarily mutually exclusive, identities and practices.

This is not to say, however, that it is unproductive for faculty and students to challenge and renegotiate disciplinary identities and practices. In fact, generating curriculum and modeling practices that challenge normalized disciplinary identities is one of the contributions that a consultant from the humanities can make to the target discipline, in particular a technical discipline such as engineering. Bringing attention to and challenging disciplinary writer identity can be a strategy for interdisciplinary diplomacy in writing consultant-faculty engineer working relationships, as well as meet curricular goals that are increasingly important in engineering education.

A deliberate act of diplomacy that I undertook at the beginning of the second year of my tenure was to research and present to the faculty a curriculum resource guide and bibliography about integrating writing and engineering curricula sourced from the engineering education literature. In retrospect, however, I recognize that my main motivation was to disrupt the disciplinary writing identities of both myself and the faculty. Most of the articles were from recent issues of the *Journal of Engineering Education* and *Proceedings* from the ASEE/IEEE Frontiers in Education Conferences, followed by a few key articles from the WID and WAC literature. While I hoped that this bibliography would serve as a resource of practices for integrating writing curriculum in an engineering CXC program, I was more certain that it would function diplomatically to improve my ethos with the faculty and to raise the faculty's level of investment in substantive writing pedagogy. My aim was to demonstrate that developing engineers as writers has long been the concern of engineers. In addition to this precedence, I aimed to demonstrate that my understanding of what it meant to be a writer in engineering was informed by literature from their own field, as well as my own. In other words, I aimed to create a common ground.

## 5.2 The Value of Broadening Disciplinary Writer Identity

Implementing writing curriculum that is informed by attention to writer identity also has the potential to address emerging curricular goals in engineering education. Incorporating opportunities for students to challenge and disrupt disciplinary conventions is recognized within the engineering education literature as important for graduating students capable of negotiating a fluid and complex professional world. Haghihi (2005) is concerned that students have the skills to navigate a "shifting societal framework," skills that demand ways of knowing and doing not available from a strictly technical curriculum. Haghihi proposes research questions for improving engineering education that are grounded in the same recognition of diversity and multiplicity as the concerns of Bazerman and his colleagues: How do engineers learn in ways that are similar or different from learning in other disciplines? How do we articulate, develop and transfer that understanding [students' conceptual understanding of engineering

subjects] across multiple academic disciplines? How can longstanding issues regarding gender and ethnicity be evaluated and addressed? Engaging students in an active negotiation of their writer identities as individuals and as engineers is but one avenue for achieving these curricular goals.

A recognition that the negotiation of disciplinary writer identity contributes to the larger curricular goals of an engineering program raises the question of what kind of writing assignments and instruction can achieve this goal. During my work with the faculty engineer of the “Satisfying” excerpt, we developed an innovative writing assignment that challenged students to broaden their identities as writers. This assignment asked junior-level heat transfer students to write a conceptual explanation of critical insulation thickness to a real audience of high school students. The engineering students received written feedback from the high school students about the success of their explanations. Overwhelmingly, the college students discovered that they had failed to explain the concept in a manner accessible to high school students who possessed a fraction of their technical and mathematical knowledge. Predictably, the explanations had been heavy with technical terms that the high school students had no experience with. The college students also discovered the limitations of their own understanding of the topic. The few successful attempts made use of metaphorical language and other rhetorical figures that were within the high school students’ realm of experience and knowledge.

Unfortunately, the faculty engineer and I did not take full advantage of this assignment to teach a lesson about writer identity because we had not yet explicitly identified writer identity as formational to our work together. In the end this assignment was a missed opportunity to *explicitly* place students in an alternative writing identity of teacher or mentor. The assignment was pitched to students as a conceptual writing assignment meant to improve their understanding of an engineering concept, rather than one that explicitly asked them to step into an alternative writing identity in order to communicate with a new audience. It is interesting to consider, however, whether the college students would have had more success explaining the technical concept to the high school students if they had begun by thinking about the rhetorical demands placed on a *teacher* addressing an audience with substantially less expertise. Such an exercise would force students beyond their own comfortable autobiographically and institutionally supported identities as students in a technical discipline and challenge them to experience a writing identity that would likely be transferable, ultimately, into a professional context. Finally, students would learn that sometimes engineers are teachers as well, including their professor, whose dual identity as a teacher and researcher may previously have been an unacknowledged condition of the context. Given this example, complicating the disciplinary writing identities of engineering students, as well as faculty engineers and writing consultants, is well within the reach of a CXC program.

## 6. Future Research

It is important to recognize in closing that the insights in this article are an outcome of the collection and analysis of data from retrospective research interviews deliberately planned outside of the institutional time allotted to CXC work. This is because the time-intensive nature of day-to-day CXC work precludes attention to issues that are outside of immediate course management. Given these time constraints, I recommend the use of the research interview, and the interview protocol developed for this study, as a tool for developing CXC programs. An interview can be scheduled during the down times of the academic year when reflection is a more normal mode of interaction. In addition to gathering data for CXC research, the semi-structured research interview provides a low-stakes frame for talk that has value for developing consultant-faculty relationships. Faculty also benefit from an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with the CXC program. The faculty member in the “Satisfying” episode remarked that she appreciated reflecting on what she had learned from me about teaching writing and the writing process.

The interactions documented in this article, however, represent only a microcosm of what could have been documented in the classroom through extensive ethnographic data gathering over the two years of my tenure. A future study could use the proposals of this article as a foundation for a classroom-based ethnographic investigation of Ivanic’s “clashes” of writer identity, or related questions. Ultimately, I believe that engineering faculty and students, and CXC staff, can benefit from witnessing and participating in these writer identity clashes, in both research interview and classroom contexts, because of their potential to complicate and multiply the writer identities available to them as individuals and disciplinary professionals.

## Notes

1. A Communication Across the Curriculum (CXC) program is broader than a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) or a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. A CXC program includes oral presentation and teamwork curriculum as well as writing curriculum. My role as the writing consultant engaged me with primarily WID and WAC curriculum development and classroom instruction.
2. In this paper “disciplinary” is defined in terms of the socio-cultural context for writing, in this case the academic and professional field of Engineering, and Chemical Engineering in particular, and the academic field of English. In the US, “English” is still erroneously understood from an extra-disciplinary perspective to be primarily concerned with the study of literature. Academic disciplines, or discourses, are, of course, neither static nor monolithic. The connotation of the oversimplification of disciplinary writer identities in the language of the engineering faculty is further evidence that writer identity is an issue that is an under-discussed in working collaborations.
3. Ivanic (1998) acknowledges that the different aspects of identity are not “hermetically sealed” (p. 24) from one another, as I will do as well. While a professional identity may be in large part determined by the disciplinary context, it is not exclusively so determined. Each individual’s biographical experiences will also in part determine what it means to him or her to be an “engineer,” or other disciplinary identity.

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## Appendix A

Transcription Key: Adapted from the "Jefferson system" (Antaki, 2008).

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(.)	Just noticeable pause
(.3), (2.6)	Examples of timed pauses
↑word, ↓word	Onset of noticeable pitch rise or fall
A: word [word	Square brackets aligned across adjacent lines
B: [word	denote the start of overlapping talk.
.hh, hh	In-breath (note the preceding fullstop) and out-breath respectively.
wor-	A dash shows a sharp cut-off
wo:rd	Colons show that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound.
(words)	A guess at what might have been said if unclear
( )	Unclear talk.
A: word=	The equals sign shows that there is no discernible
B: =word	pause between two speakers' turns or, if put
	between two sounds within a single speaker's turn,
	shows that they run together
<u>Word</u> , WORD	Underlined sounds are louder, capitals louder still
°word°	Material between "degree signs" is quiet
>word word< <word word>	Inwards arrows show faster speech, outward slower
→	Analyst's signal of a significant line
((sobbing))	Representation of something hard, or impossible, to write phonetically

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## Appendix B

### Transcript of “Satisfying” Excerpt of Research Interview #07

- 1 IR My last question is sort of a meta-question, I’ve been asking questions, um, about writing as an academic engineer, am I asking you the right questions and are there any questions that I haven’t asked that I should have?  
(17.0)
- 6 IE Ok, so your first question, so this actually goes back to rephrasing this first question about what was the first time that you thought writing was very satisfying is do you find writing to be a satisfying part of your job? So that would, is a question that, um.... ↑ DO I FINDWRITING SATISFYING? AND I’M NOT SURE THAT I DO! (laughs) I think it is important, ↓ um, and, but I find oral communication to be more satisfying and I find ACTually DOing the work to be more satisfying than I find writing about the work. So that would be one question, is is DO you find it satisfying? writing satisfying? And I ask myself what..um..what types of things and experience can make writing more satisfying? Um, a satisfying experience.
- 17 **End DU structure, begin TBT structure**
- 18 IE Su, see, ↑ You see yourself as a writer and so You can’t imagine that someone might find writing to not be satisfying.  
(1.5)
- 20
- 21 IR I don’t know
- 22 IE ↑ ITSITSITS
- 23 IR I mean its not always satisfying for me e[ither]
- 24 IE [it’s ]not always satisfying but..but, ↓ yeah, well but...you know, even  
(1.5)
- 26
- 27 IR But I’m really interested in unpacking..what what what it [what ( )]
- 28 IE [you know I find it, I
- 29 IR [( )]
- 30 IE [find it ↑ IF CAN COMPARE, SO,SO if I compare, I find it like like]
- 31 **End TBT structure, begin DU structure**
- 32 IE ↓ going though...you know, if I think of an experience it is like going through the mathematics of a problem has been really satisfying, developing the mathematics of it, figuring out how the math works is mentally very satisfying, um, and it’s not that I dislike writing I actually like writing but I can’t think of times when I have had that same sort of mentally satisfying experience from having put something down on paper, um, so, yeah...I guess maybe I see myself as an engineer not a

writer so problem solving I find really satisfying and I don't find the writing things to be as satisfying as having solved the problems and I think that I can write reasonably well and I think I can communicate ideas fairly effectively and, um, I've been pleased with some of the things that I write but I don't get the same sense of satisfaction out of that I get out of solving a problem.

45

End excerpt

## Appendix C

### Transcript of “Grey” Excerpt of Research Interview #01

- 1 IR Do you feel that when writing people, like me, or whoever else you have talked to, do you feel ever that they’re talking about things or asking questions that are really just barking up the wrong tree when it comes to what is important about writing for engineers?
- 5 (.5)
- 6 IE Well, as you and I started down that path with the XX project I probably reacted very much in that mode of I want to know what it IS that you want to bring into this classroom because I have certain ideas of what is needed. And I had some preconceptions of the sort of things that you were going to bring. And I just wanted to make sure that we were sort of on the same page and that what you were going to present was going to be useful to the students.
- 13 (.5)
- 14 IE So I think that to some degree we are quite worlds apart in terms of the logic and the reasons and the desire for the end product, but that’s not to say that there isn’t important things that the novelist can bring to the engineer in terms of writing skills. And, ah, certainly one of the things beyond just information exchange that the engineers have to do is this, uh, writing persuasively and a good engineer will get caught in this area of writing persuasively quite a bit and information exchange is not good enough that you have to construct arguments in a way that persuades somebody and that ‘s a skill set, that I think the novelist can, can bring to the table that the engineer needs.
- 24 **End DU structure, begin TBT structure**
- 25 IR Now when you say novelist do you mean
- 26 IE The, the one that is writing the flowery lan[guage]
- 27 IR [Me, ]specif[ically in that I wrote a novel, or]
- 28 IE [NO, no↓ no]
- 29 IR is that just the, is that just an alternative..[to
- 30 IE [There’s, the, the person who is in creative writing
- [vs. ]the engineer
- 32 IR [OK] (1.0)↓ok...ok..um, um, Do you, um..Those to me feel like two extremes?
- 34 IE Ya, I expe[ct you are right.
- 35 IR (((laughter.....)))
- 36 IE Where is the poet in all of [that?]
- 37 IR [Is] there any, uh

- 38 IE grey, uh, grey, in the middle?
- 39 IR ya, where's, is, is there..
- 40 IE ya, of course, ↓ of course
- 41 **End TBT structure, resume DU structure**
- 42 (1.0)
- 43 IE um, there's, there's lots of grey I think, um.. The engineer that gets wrapped up in promoting products, sales documentation, things of that sort might be more in that persuasive area and require better use of language than a technical report. Some people are also involved in government policy area and are engineers, they again need high skill sets language wise. Also engineers that are involved in the legal profession would require just better writing skills than a standard engineer.
- 50 End excerpt