Becoming an 'Autonomous Writer':
Displays of Agency and Understanding in the Writing Conference

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The concept of membership categorization was introduced more than 40 years ago by Harvey Sacks, but only recently has it begun to receive the attention of researchers focused on social interaction. This renewed interest perhaps relates to discursive psychologists' push to demonstrate the relationship between sequentially ordered action and mental states such as identities. Indeed, one of the questions that has been receiving recent attention in discursive psychology is how members' categories are invoked through agency and epistemic stance, and that is my focus here. Analyzing videorecorded writing conferences from a university writing course, I focus on how the participants describe the actions of student writers. The participants' utterances describe not only how students should act, but also what kinds of knowledge they should display, as well as how that knowledge should be displayed, all of which implicate the membership categories of student (and teacher), categories that Sacks might have argued are "omni-relevant" in this institutional context. The participants' descriptions are also important in creating the 'ideal' goal of the course, which is for students to become 'autonomous writers,' a term used in course documents to mean displaying responsibility for one's own writing and revising. However, Schegloff has argued that already formulated descriptions such as *autonomous writer* alone do not constitute support for membership categorization; these categories must be shown to be relevant in the ongoing talk or other participant action. With this in mind, I analyze the writing conference interaction to determine what it means to be an autonomous writer (or more generally, a student and teacher) in this context. The example below is illustrative.

1. Alicia: (.) take a quote from the text.
2. Wendy: (.) okay.
((4 lines omitted))
3. Wendy: so: instead of using my:?
4.   (.7) definition?
5. Alicia: (.) you- you can use yours but,
6. Wendy: [kay].
7. Alicia: [but] still you know?
8.   you should have-
9.   (.7) you should have a definition from the text
10.   that shows that (.) you're not lying.
11. Wendy: (.) oh okay (.) so like support my:?
12. Alicia: (.) °yeah:°.

Alicia directs Wendy to "take a quote from the text," invoking the membership categorization 'teacher' (lines 1-2). This action also creates what Billig has referred to as an "ideological dilemma," as Wendy's question (3-4) reveals, suggesting that the directive is misaligned with her own epistemic stance (or understanding of 'autonomous writer'). Alicia's next utterance resolves the dilemma by agreeing with Wendy's proposal (5) and adding more explanation (7-10). The reformulation in line 11, along with *oh*, which Heritage refers to as a "change-of-state token" display Wendy's revised understanding of Alicia's utterances as designed to explain what autonomous writers actually do.

In their recent work, Potter and Hepburn have argued that ideological dilemmas are resources for managing the smooth operation of institutions. Indeed, the situated moment-by-moment negotiation of the dilemmatic stances seen here enact the goal of the writing conference, and in the process, invoke the membership categorizations of student (or autonomous writer) and teacher in an emergent and constantly contested and renewed fashion.