

ATD Reviews

## ***A Review of Sojourning in Disciplinary Cultures: A Case Study of Teaching Writing in Engineering***

Edited by Maureen A. Mathison, 2019. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press. [ISBN 978-1607328025. 226 pgs., including index. \$27.95 USD (paperback).]

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In the edited volume, *Sojourning in Disciplinary Cultures: A Case Study of Teaching Writing in Engineering*, the various contributors document and analyze a multiyear case study of a writing fellow program integrated within a College of Engineering at a large R1 university. As editor Maureen A. Mathison elaborates in the introduction, the volume “examines Writing in the Disciplines (WID) from a cultural theoretical perspective” (p. 3). While each author approaches the case study from a slightly different theoretical angle, the researchers collectively render this WID initiative as a merging of two distinct academic cultures (i.e., engineering and composition) in order to develop “a ‘third culture’ that generally placed students at the center of learning” (p. 12). Quoting Casmir and Asuncion-Lund, Mathison defines this so-called “third culture” as a “situational subculture wherein temporary behavioral adjustment can be made by the interacting persons as they attempt to reach a mutually agreed upon goal” (p. 19). Drawing from the experiences of writing consultants and the engineering faculty and students who participated in the WID program, the researchers’ methods are largely ethnographic, inductively generating recommendations from their case study findings, including strategies for collaborative course planning or ways of fostering cross-cultural sharing as opposed to colonizing the discipline of the other. The collection documents how collaborators negotiated tensions regarding which disciplines make stronger claims to truth, what it means to generate new knowledge, or even which disciplines are easier or more difficult. What this collection ultimately lays bare is a narrative about ideological tension, how to mitigate those tensions, and how to consequently optimize writing instruction within STEM disciplines.

The collection is authored by a variety of scholars from different institutions who focus on various aspects of the College of Engineering case study through a cultural-theoretical lens. Early chapters of *Sojourning* consider how the College of Engineering generally understood and valued writing, including where it overlapped with and where it differed from the writing program. These differences typically involved the

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nature of writing itself – whether writing was epistemic or merely scribal, rhetorical or simply communicative. Pedagogically, however, the authors do find areas of cultural overlap. Some of the engineering professors, for example, intuitively employed pedagogies of practice, feedback, genre-emersion, and writing-to-learn. On the other hand, engineering professors did not teach writing strategies as rhetorical moves and in some instances favored indirect instruction and tacit learning through models over direct instruction.

Predictably, the authors of this volume do not write about the seamless marriage of two disparate academic and scholarly orientations into perfect disciplinary harmony. Rather, they understand “sojourning” as distinct from simply traveling or touring, since sojourners are often placed in a situation that indefinitely affects change, thereby rendering “[c]ulture [as] fluid rather than static” (p. 15). As Michael Carter (2007) points out, key areas of tension in collaboration between disciplines are often located in opposed conceptions of knowing. Faculty in the disciplines often assume that writing is “generalizable to all the disciplines and therefore distinct from disciplinary knowledge” (p. 385). *Sojourning* anticipates this discord and looks toward a productive and dynamic way of traversing the intercultural bridge.

Later chapters explore identity and ideology as sources of interdisciplinary tension. In “Ideologies and Gender,” Kedrowicz and Taylor uncover a gender bias among the engineering students aimed toward discrediting the writing consultants, characterizing the humanities as soft and sexualizing the feedback of female writing consultants with comments like “She was a bitch” or “Tiffany was hot, Rachel was mean and ugly” (p. 150). These characterizations demonstrate how superficial biases contribute to ethnocentric tendencies: how the predominantly male discipline views the perceived, softer female other. Considering the case study more broadly, Sundry Watanabe turns her chapter, “Intercultural Collaboration,” toward critical indigenous studies as an approach to interdisciplinary collaboration, where she considers differences between indigenous and Euro-Western world views and how the merging of two cultures fosters mutually beneficial learning experiences. She ultimately argues that “engineering and humanities collaborations can benefit when sojourners ... accommodate broader notions of power and knowledge” (p. 155).

Mathison’s contribution concludes the collection, discussing how the struggle for a sense of mutual credibility and trust between faculty and consultants can prevent productive collaboration. For example, writing consultants are not subject-matter experts in engineering; likewise, the engineering faculty or students are not experts in writing pedagogy. As such, engineering students might discount the feedback of writing mentors either because they lack sufficient disciplinary knowledge or because of misgivings a STEM discipline might have regarding a humanities discipline. What emerges as a deep problem to solve is this: how do we create productive writing instruction when the parties involved lack a basic level of trust? Mathison notes in the final chapter that “[s]ometimes the interdisciplinary tension became so great in one particular course that the professor said he had to mediate the consultant-student relationship because of ‘student hostility’” (p. 183).

What might help assuage this hostility, *Sojourning* argues, is that both parties should, to one degree or another, acquire a level of ideological literacy of the other discipline. Such an exercise in literacy enables a productive relationship rather than a purely combative one. As Watanabe makes clear in her chapter, “The aim and consequences of such educational practice (and attitude) are not just socialization but assimilation and regulation, keeping power (and the powerful) in its/their ‘rightful’ place. When assimilation and regulation are not thought possible or desirable ... othering and ostracism can occur” (p. 155). In order to cultivate a more successful “third culture,” it is incumbent upon the respective faculty and writing consultants to better accommodate and acquaint themselves with the other in broadening their notions of what constitutes knowledge in the effort of cultivating mutual respect and reciprocity. Otherwise, what seems to be a natural occurrence is that – because one culture is the “host department,” while the other is the “sojourning” writing program – an inevitable power differential develops and the writing consultants have a difficult time leveraging power in the interest of optimizing in-discipline writing instruction.

Over the last couple of decades, WID scholarship has focused a good deal on the importance of acculturation in writing development in an attempt to move beyond many current models of interdisciplinary writing (i.e., STEM students taking a single required writing course offered by the English department). Bazerman (2009) in particular has focused on literacy and cognitive processes that depend “on the genre, situation, and social activity system within which the writing is taking place” (p. 282). The problem *Sojourning* seeks to understand is what happens when the in-discipline social activity system of a student writer resists the commonplace values and practices of composition pedagogy. The book’s cultural-theoretical analysis conceptualizes a WID initiative as the generation of a new, third culture that will produce different ways of writing and different ways of knowing. Consequently, the resulting amalgamation will *not look exactly like a writing discipline and will not look exactly like the host discipline* (in this case, the College of Engineering). In fact, this third culture might favor one discipline over the other, depending on how the negotiated culture shakes out.

Anticipating conflicts can be useful in the effort of staving off unnecessary and unproductive animosities in future WID initiatives. In their chapter, Mathison and Berkland generate five maxims toward creating a third culture:

1. *Having a common goal does not necessary translate into a common perspective or practice, nor even a common paradigm from which to proceed. ...*
2. *Performing without expertise may be uncomfortable for all involved, as assumptions about knowledge are transgressed, and scholars are asked to extend their academic reach beyond its current limits. ...*
3. *Interdisciplinary partners must learn to trust the other’s knowledge, understanding that both contribute, a different form of knowledge evolves that may resemble that of one discipline more than the other at certain points, or that may take on a novel form, new to each. ...*
4. *Stereotypes are prevalent and limiting. ...*

5. *Interdisciplinary collaboration is negotiated; at the heart of interdisciplinary interaction is the ability to minimize the cost to pedagogical interests and identity.* (pp. 30-32)

What is notable about this list is the recognition that negotiating involves embracing uncomfortable realities. For instance, there is an investment in *optimizing* writing instruction and minimizing the cost to pedagogical interests. In other words, there may very well be costs to what a writing program might consider essential for pedagogy. As experts in writing instruction, it may be necessary to sacrifice some research-based values in the interest of optimizing writing instruction in another discipline whose faculty has its own set of values and interests they are unlikely to relinquish.

By the conclusion of the WID initiative, the program seemed to be fairly successful. According to Mathison, “Professors perceived that student writing generally improved. Employers, too, reported to engineering faculty that writing improved [, ... and ...] students also reported to professors that their writing in engineering was enhanced” (p. 181). Ultimately, however, the program dissolved in its original iteration. The College of Engineering, “eliminat[ed] graduate consultants, and in its place, three full-time instructors were hired.” The college preferred instructors with literacy in both engineering and writing pedagogy, as opposed to the graduate consultants with a two-year turnover rate. According to the researchers, two years was just enough time for graduate writing consultants to acculturate to the language of the engineering, only to be cycled out for new, not-yet-acculturated consultants (p. 184). On an optimistic note, Read and Mathison report in their chapter that “[t]his was the first instance of the Chemical Engineering department bureaucratically adopting and ratifying the language and theory of writing and rhetoric studies, a sign that some common ground had been found” (p. 86).

*Sojourning* serves as a guide for future WID programs: a guide for the successful merging of disparate cultures and a guide for how to anticipate and mitigate unproductive conflicts. Importantly, as the authors point out, “‘merging’ is not *colonizing*” (Downs, p. 69). Rather, the authors recommend more diplomatic, negotiated grounds upon which to build such an integrated writing program. As the authors conclude, “implementing a WID program is as much about the politics of collaboration as it is about a theoretical or pedagogical endeavor” (Read and Mathison, p. 85). In other words, if our goal is to optimize writing instruction and create a productive environment that cultivates student-centered learning, a successful WID program will be unlikely to accommodate ideological purity – not on the part of the hosting department nor on the part of the sojourning writing consultants. *Sojourning in Disciplinary Cultures* is recommended reading for WAC/WID scholars and might serve as a great starting place for educators in STEM fields interested in developing writing programs within their respective disciplines.

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