

Chapter 31. Learning to Write Across Borders

Despite family and identity challenges, I grew up in a time, place, and social position that favored my intellectual and social mobility. Cultural, educational, and governmental institutions provided me the resources and spaces to work through my personal situation to form a satisfying and rewarding life. The immigration of my parents' families to melting pot New York in the early twentieth century buffered them from the holocaust. My parent's assimilationist efforts provided me with the social privileges of a largely unmarked white person, experiencing antisemitism only at the margin. Success in education provided a path to avoid the worst economic risks that come with class position in the US. The only major personal risk I felt was from the military draft to send me to a war I opposed from the beginning, but again educational success protected me. In this relative bubble of security, I explored the European intellectual and artistic culture that filtered into academic life of the sixties. Through my politics and my experience in teaching elementary school, I did learn in a small way what the lack of those privileges meant to those people within the US that were marginalized and lacked the access and expectations I had. But that still was in the dialectic of U.S. society and its Eurocentric cultural views.

Through my early adult years, I had not traveled beyond North America. A few touristic trips to Canada as a child and a young man allowed me to taste some North Americanized British and French flavors without challenging my ideas of what life was like. When I had taken leave as an undergraduate to be trained for the Peace Corps, I spent a couple of weeks in a remote Mexican town, where I did get a brief glimpse of rural poverty and a society steeped in a hierarchical Spanish Catholic culture, with a largely unacknowledged underlay of indigenous language and cultures. I did not understand much but I could see that life was different, even as I was protected by my role as an expert from the north. When I was on the verge of being drafted in grad school, I traveled to Canada to see whether immigration would be an option, but I was so filled with rage about how the politics of the US seemed to be stealing the country from me, I hardly could pay attention to what I saw—or rather what I was seeing was a marginalization that I could not bear to think of. In retrospect it indicates how privileged my social circumstances had been and how hard it was for me to imagine a life without that security.

Learning about Asia

I only started to get glimpses to the world beyond the US through my partner, whom I met in my final year of grad school. Shirley Geok-lin Lim was a

Fulbright-Wien student from Malaysia, also pursuing a doctorate with the same advisor. From her I began to understand the complex politics and history of her home country, along with its different family bonds and life cultures. Race relations and social inequities (as well as language policies) there were as complex and troubled as in the US, but in different ways. And the educational institutions which provided both of us opportunities sat differently within our national histories, economies, and cultures. All this started me on the path to understanding my own social and educational positioning within the context of greater international variation. Starting in the late 1970s I started to visit Asia regularly with Shirley, with frequent extended stays for family and work in the following decades. She was becoming a well-known poet and scholar in the region, and through her I made contacts and did assessment work for the National University of Singapore in 1982. I returned for a full year visiting professorship in 1985 to help establish a new program in Academic English.

Working with colleagues from across Asia and the U.K. that year, I started to see different approaches to language education and analysis, and how U.S. composition and writing studies fit within a broader mix of possibilities. I also came to see something of the complexity of the language situation in multicultural and multilingual Singapore where Chinese dialects, Tamil, and Bahasa were all community languages, but where the dominant language of education remained English, following British standards and colonial assessment practices. During the period I was working there, recognition of the value of the local variety of English was just emerging, although “correct” Oxbridge English remained a class and educational marker. It was easier to see the full import of these tensions as an outsider rather than in my own country. Likewise, from the outside I could see the effect of privileging particular literary histories and ideologies of writing, and their relation to the ascription of power. Further, I could see the advantages first language fluency in English gave me both in practice and prestige, during the period when it had become increasingly dominant globally, particularly at more advanced levels.

Even further, the workings of racial and national privilege became visible as I saw that the respect and collegiality offered me was not given to some colleagues from Asia, despite a policy to increase the number of regional professors and decrease the dominance of Anglo-American expats. I realized, oh, that is how white privilege worked and I was the beneficiary of it. I was regularly given the benefit of the doubt, treated politely, and listened to with respect. I know other forms of even more virulent privilege were granted to some Anglo-Americans, even allowing them to get away with malign behavior. Nonetheless, even absent those overt abuses, privilege is at play, based on people’s perceptions of who you are and the power you had access to.

On every trip to Asia we made it a point to visit other countries—sometimes to do academic work and sometimes to sightsee, looking for insights into the ways of life, politics, and society in different countries. As I started to develop an

academic network I began working with universities in other countries throughout Asia—developing ongoing relationships with people and institutions in Nepal and Hong Kong, then mainland China (fostered by the visiting scholars I hosted at UCSB once I moved to the education school). Each of these deepened my understanding and appreciation of the varieties of cultures, educational systems, and language educational practices. In working with each I had to freshly evaluate what I could offer and how that would fit with their educational systems and social needs. In the process, my assumptions about writing became more and more decentered, and I had to reframe my understanding to encompass all the variation I was meeting.

In Singapore I worked with a number of people trained in the British applied linguistics tradition and met John Swales on one of his trips to the region. I also co-taught a course on Varieties of Written English with Vijay Bhatia, one of his students, and formed a continuing friendship with both. I made a number of visits to Britain and became familiar with some of the applied linguistics faculty at different universities, gaining an insight into their methods and theories as well as their perceptions of issues surrounding global academic English. Applied linguistics and scientific language led to an invitation to Australia where I became more familiar with Systemic Functional Linguistics. Other connections with Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe broadened my interdisciplinary perspectives and awareness of different educational systems and approaches to language education.

Engaging with Ibero-America

Two nodes became particularly important to the expansion of my view of writing. The growth of the Santa Barbara research conferences on Writing Research Across Borders—resulting in the formation of the International Society for the Advancement of Writing Research—made me more aware and appreciative of the different research traditions, intellectual influences, practical work conditions of scholars and teachers, and educational practices and institutions in different regions. At the same times as WRAB and ISAWR were growing, I started to make connections with Mexican and South American scholars. Encounters at the 2005 conference in Santa Barbara led to a series of consulting visits at the Benemerita Universidad de Puebla, Mexico, to support the nascent writing centers and emerging national network of writing programs led by Fatima Encinas. At about the same time I hosted a visiting scholar, Angela Dionisio from UFPE (Universidade Federal de Pernambuco) in Recife, Brazil. Her mentor, Antonio Luis Marcuschi, a major force in Brazilian linguistic theory and writing education, suggested she make the contact. This began an ongoing relation with UFPE and the newly formed Simpósio Internacional de Gêneros Textuais (SIGET) in Brazil. Recognizing the benefits of supporting networks and organizations, I volunteered to coordinate international participation and co-edit publications that would help share communications internationally. For over a decade I traveled regularly to Brazil, teaching and

lecturing in a number of places, with eventually five books translated into Portuguese (thank you, Angela and her colleague Judith Hoffnagel).

During this period I also heard about how Paula Carlino was developing *Writing Across the Curriculum* in Argentina, and began communicating with her. Through her I met other scholars in the region, learning more about developments in Chile, Colombia, and other South American countries as I started to extend my trips to the region. Then I had the good fortune of having Fulbright Scholars Natalia Avila from Chile and Elizabeth Narvaez from Colombia join me in the same year for doctoral studies. We began a collaborative research group to map out the growth of writing studies and writing programs in the region and to support regional connections (Iniciativas de Lectura y Escritura en la Educación Superior en América Latina—ILEES). Drawing on our several networks, we enlisted other scholars of the region into varying roles in this project.

This growing network of Latin American scholars also participated in ISAWR to make that an even more global organization and to increase the multi-linguality of writing studies, with special focus on first language writing. The WRAB conference in Bogota in 2017 connected local scholars with the global writing community and the conference volume made selected work more visible alongside other international contributions. Not long thereafter, a Latin American organization (Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios de la Escritura en Educación Superior y Contextos Profesionales—ALES) was formed and publication venues for writing studies increased. To make work from Latin America more available internationally, we have been working with the WAC Clearinghouse to republish works originally published regionally and to translate influential articles into English. This work started with selected papers from the SIGET conferences, but has expanded into an International Exchanges book series with a subseries on Latin America.

The institutional good fortune of my School of Education seeing international visitors as an important asset to our school and UCSB's supportive campus Office of International Scholars and Students has facilitated bringing visiting scholars to campus. I am sure there are historical reasons for both the GGSE and the campus to have such favorable policies, but this certainly helped expand my experience and vision and the roles I was able to take on as an international editor.

I have here, as elsewhere, benefited from the Matthew Effect (Merton, 1968), where good fortune fosters access to even more resources and opportunities, placing one in a more central role. I am highly appreciative of having been in this position, but I am also somewhat abashed, knowing that such good fortune does not fall to most scholars. I cannot deny, nonetheless, that such good fortune has fostered my learning and growth as a writer, particularly as I have matured in the profession. I have tried to pay it forward by reconfiguring systems as much as I could to better serve the needs of our profession and society, in building international networks, in trying to advance open access, in editing the work of others, and in providing reference resources for the profession.