

## CHAPTER 12.

# XI'AN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES UNIVERSITY (XISU, 西 安外国语大学)

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*This essay introduces writing practice and related research conducted at Xi'an International Studies University (XISU), Shaanxi, China. As a university with foreign languages being the major disciplines, writing has been in the center of faculty teaching and student learning. Although the emphasis is more on language acquisition than on "writing-to-learn" concepts, writing practice and research have been the traditions here. With all the resources and possibilities provided by international collaborations, a majority of them being with US-based universities, XISU set up the first writing center in China, which has been housed in the School of English Studies and operated quite differently from writing centers in the US. This introduction of the US originated writing center concept and practice is among the new waves that XISU has contributed to higher education in China, as this model has begun to be adopted by a number of other institutions nationwide.*

## THE INSTITUTION

Xi'an International Studies University (XISU), formerly Xi'an Foreign Language University, was founded in 1952 as one of the first four foreign-language institutions of the People's Republic of China. It is located in Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, with three campuses totaling 263 acres. XISU remains the only higher education institution in northwestern China that has all major foreign languages. XISU was accredited to award master's degrees in 1986, and in February, 2010, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council approved the PhD program application of XISU and granted three years for

preparation before recruiting PhD students. The university also publishes three academic journals on foreign language education and human geography.

The major disciplines in XISU used to be only foreign languages, but now the university has been transformed to offer 39 undergraduate majors and seven minors in humanities, arts, social sciences, law, business management, education, and science. There are altogether 891 faculty members. The current enrollment is about 26,000, with half being undergraduate students and the other half graduate students, international students, and students in various training programs.

## STUDENT WRITING IN XISU

Writing takes place in all disciplines and majors. Writing occurs in Chinese and English, as described below, as well as in the various other languages students take. Thesis writing is the last requirement for their four-year undergraduate study. They also write in administrative-related activities, such as filling out forms for their academic study, writing reports or proposals for student societies and interest groups, and communicating in such personal forms as e-mails, mobile phone texting, instant messaging, and blogs.

Foreign language education is the unique characteristic of this institution that appeals to students and parents, and the language(s) these students write in depend on their disciplines: students in different language departments write in both Chinese and the target languages they choose to specialize in. All students also write in English, the required foreign language for all majors. In all of the language-related majors, there are writing courses with emphasis on language skills. In lower-level courses, short papers or compositions are embedded in reading courses as response to the class content or as part of quizzes or exams. In upper-level courses, a final paper (in the target language) is often required at the end of the semester for final evaluation or as a supplement to the quizzes/exams.

English majors need to choose another foreign language to study; therefore, they also write in another foreign language in this part of their training, but with limited vocabulary and length due to the limited time devoted to this “second foreign language.” In some courses such as College Chinese (focused mainly on literature), College Ethics, and Political Science, which are required for all majors, the professors normally require a final paper or an essay exam at the end of the semester; as the instruction of these courses is in Chinese, students write the papers and take the exams in Chinese, too.

Students write in Chinese for administrative-related activities. Student organizations always need to write proposals, plans, and reports on their activities.

These writing practices are in Chinese. Student organization leaders have more opportunities to practice their Chinese writing, and consequently their Chinese writing skills and other communication skills, such as speaking and giving presentations, are generally more satisfactory than those of other students. In the foreign-language-related clubs and student societies or interest groups, students write and speak in the language they choose for their activities. However, participation in these extra-curricular activities is voluntary, so not all students get a chance to practice their writing in these settings.

Foreign language education gives XISU tradition and prestige. Language teachers always pay much attention to writing, although sometimes they pay much more attention to accuracy and skills training rather than to the functions of writing in knowledge building and social construction. Almost all professors in language majors care about the improvement of student writing, and some of the faculty members in other disciplines have started to integrate more writing assignments into their courses.

However, because the main purpose for using writing has always been to evaluate students' learning, writing is still considered an assessment tool rather than a learning tool. Because a majority of the administrators of XISU have been promoted from professors in these disciplines, they also care about student writing. The most representative example of their commitment is the establishment of the Writing Center for English Majors in 2006, which was made possible by Dr. Hu Sishe, a French professor and President of XISU.

## **INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS AND THE WRITING CENTER**

The Writing Center at XISU is the first writing center in China. At present, it is dedicated to English writing. The establishment was largely due to a long-standing exchange program between XISU and Bowling Green State University, Ohio, US (BGSU), that began in 1985. Both of the universities have been sending one or two professors each year to study or teach in the other institution. The majority of the professors sent to BGSU by XISU have been English professors, and they were sponsored to conduct their two-year master's study in BGSU. All of the BGSU participants have taught English courses in XISU, in areas such as writing, speaking, reading, literature, and American culture.

There are two recent highlights of this exchange. First, Dr. William Coggin conducted a semester-long scientific and technical communication workshop for English faculty members in fall 2004. This was the first workshop of its kind in mainland China and started a new chapter for the exchange program,

as three of the faculty participants in this workshop ended up studying in the MA program in Scientific and Technical Communication in the English Department of BGSU, which helped in forming an incomparable and promising faculty basis for possible technical communication courses in XISU. At the same time, Dr. Coggin taught a graduate seminar on technical communication to a class of students in the master's program in English studies.

The second highlight was the establishment of the Writing Center at XISU. Dr. Hu visited BGSU as part of a trip to the US in 2006. He was invited to visit the BGSU Writing Center and was convinced that this concept would be very beneficial to student learning and would help EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in XISU. Thus, in 2006, XISU became the first university in mainland China to open a Writing Center. A second center has since opened (June 2010) at Zhejiang University.

The XISU Writing Center was built on the American model used by BGSU, but with its own characteristics. The Writing Center operates under the administration of the School of English Studies, but without a budget or staff members. As there has not been a systematic graduate assistantship program in Chinese higher education institutions by which to hire graduate students to work for departments, this writing center is run by volunteer faculty members. The first group of tutors was trained in XISU by Dr. Barbara Toth, Assistant Director of the BGSU Writing Center, in summer 2006. The following groups of tutors did not receive formal training as writing center tutors, but most of them are English professors teaching writing courses to different levels. Their participation is indeed voluntary, as they only get a very small amount of compensation, which should rather be regarded as a token of their contribution. Each semester, the Writing Center recruits interested professors to tutor a number of sessions according to their schedules; only because of the support and sacrifice of the professors can the Writing Center continue to serve the needs of the students. The tutoring group has been changing over these several years, but the passion for and devotion to student writing has remained.

Because there are no staff members, every week the Writing Center Director posts available sessions on the door of the office. Students then sign up for appointments by filling their names on the posted session table. Each session lasts 30 minutes, during which the student and the professor talk about the piece of writing brought in for improvement. Some of the pieces have been written for assignments in the courses, but the professors have found an increasing portion of overseas graduate school applications and job application materials, such as CVs, personal statements, and writing samples. As this is an English writing center, the students who come are mainly from the School of English Studies. Each semester, there are always several students who come to the center quite

frequently, as they have found the service very helpful after trying it at the beginning of the semester. Some of them even have preferred professors to work with, so they particularly pick the sessions that these professors facilitate.

However, research and publication about this writing center have been limited by the fact that the director and other professors who work as tutors are full-time teachers. They do not have time to think about designing studies or collecting data from their practice in the center. Furthermore, none of these professors has received training in composition studies; most of them are either literature or linguistics specialists. Therefore, it is difficult for them to connect their practice with the theories or practices in composition and writing center studies without proper guidance or sufficient research interests. Another reason is that writing center practice has not yet been discovered by most Chinese higher education institutions, thus making it difficult for the research to find outlets in the journals published in China.

Although it has been a great success to have this writing center run without a budget for five years since its establishment, this condition will greatly impede its development and related research. And it would be very difficult to include attention to student writing in other languages, if there is no appropriate and healthy operation that is powered by research.

## WRITING RESEARCH AND EXCHANGES

Improvement in student writing has been an objective in various language courses in all the languages departments, but it has not been stated as an objective of the overall curriculum. Faculty members discuss writing in the disciplines, but not much “across disciplines” practice or discussion has happened. There is no general education program in most of the Chinese higher education institutions, so there is little incentive for professors from different disciplines to come together to talk about teaching. The boundaries between the disciplines are clearly drawn, and upon entering the university the students start their study in the disciplines they choose to specialize in.

One exception to this pattern in XISU is the business school, in which Business English professors discuss student writing and their teaching of writing with business or management professors, as their curriculum is a combination of both fields. Therefore, although the faculty members are from the different disciplines of English and business, they have exchanges on writing because they work for the same school and the same group of students. However, this close relationship of two or more disciplines cannot be easily found in other schools.

Language professors put emphasis on writing because writing is regarded as one of the language skills for their students, but they do not really conceptualize writing as a tool to enhance learning and critical thinking, although the learning of languages is indeed improved through writing. Instead, the emphasis on writing has been promoted as “practice makes perfect.” Professors in other disciplines employ writing assignments as evaluation tools and consider them as “by-products” of their courses, not as “writing to learn,” as writing researchers would think of it. However, this seemingly “naïve” emphasis on and attention to writing has been passed down through generations of language teachers and should serve as a very solid foundation for introducing WAC (Writing-Across-the-Curriculum) research and practice. This lack of association of writing with learning is not a rejection of the concept, but simply evidence that WAC has not been introduced into China yet.

An example from a recent study (Wu, 2010) on faculty perceptions of student communication skills illustrates this point very well. One of the participants was a professor of international laws in XISU. He studied and conducted research in the US and was influenced by the writing components his professors used in their courses. He found these writing components very helpful for him in understanding and learning the course content, so he decided to practice in his own courses after he returned to XISU. However, he was distressed because his students complained about these “extra” writing assignments in their course evaluations and some of them even plagiarized by using documents downloaded from the Internet. He was so disappointed that he said he would not recommend this pedagogy to other professors, but he also said that he still wanted to try it by making adjustments to the assignments. This example illustrates the faculty interest in adopting and adapting educational innovations like WAC into their courses for better teaching and learning. However, it also warns that faculty interest can become faculty resistance if no proper support is provided.

Another reason why XISU or similar institutions would be such a good entry point for WAC research is that faculty and students in the languages disciplines, especially English, are the gatekeepers of writing research and practice. Many of the graduates of XISU are now middle school teachers or professors themselves, as education is the major career path for the students. Therefore, the introduction of WAC into XISU would not only benefit the current students but also the students of the students. XISU students will not only learn better through “writing to learn,” but also will become “changing agents” and make the learning experience better for their students.

The majority of the current writing research in China has been done by linguistics professors. Some of the major studies are on ESL writing with focus on linguistic corpus (Yang, 2000) and China English (Du & Jiang, 2001), and

the theoretical influences primarily come from Michael Halliday (1973), Noam Chomsky (1986), and Graeme Kennedy (1998).

A major achievement for English writing instruction and research is the National Award for Excellent Courses in 2009. The writing program in the School of English Studies at XISU was given this prestigious recognition for their efforts since 1984. Dr. Yang Dafu is the primary investigator and professor for this project, and Professor Guo Fenrong, the current Director of the Writing Center, is also a member of this research and teaching group. Also cited was a project funded by the Ministry of Education on the quality of English MA thesis writing in China and strategies to improve it. This project was started in 2009 and is still in progress; it is hoped that the results will be made available to colleagues in other countries.

The School of English Studies has also started another exchange program, with Raymond Walters College of the University of Cincinnati, Ohio, and has been sending professors both to conduct research and to teach writing courses there. This exchange program helps to build a better basis for understanding US rhetoric and composition; this better understanding has begun to influence XISU classrooms through a project funded by Shaanxi Province that focuses on renovating the curriculum for English majors from separate reading and writing courses to an integrated course with both writing and reading components. This curriculum experiment has gone on for two years in the School of English Studies, and the primary investigator, Dr. Dafu Yang, has collaborated with several colleagues toward reporting the results in an international conference. This goal was realized in February 2011, at the Writing Research Across Borders Conference (Fairfax, Virginia, US), the first time that writing research in XISU has been shared with the international writing research community.

International exchanges have pervasive influence on writing practice and research in XISU. However, researchers at XISU are finding that our research should not be limited to sharing with colleagues in China; the international research community might also benefit from these studies. Hopefully, challenges such as lack of budget and lack of information on research resources will not impede these exchanges; the unique research being carried out here in XISU needs to be available to all who are interested in writing and its development.

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