

Modeling Multivocality in a U.S.-Mexican Collaboration in Writing across the Curriculum

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Abstract

Since 2006 the 'Antwerp Group' group has explored student writing from various country perspectives to understand what practices and pedagogies are country specific and what issues cut across national borders. The insights of the Antwerp Group helped inform a 2009–2010 collaboration between *The Massachusetts Institute of Technology* and the *Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey* in which we combined Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. This paper describes how a theoretical model used by the Antwerp Group helped us identify the multivocality that each collaborating group brought to this new partnership. In the end, theorizing multivocality helped us recognize our diverse perspectives as a resource even as we sought to find a collaborative voice in setting project goals, defining a student survey, and implementing a curricular design for a WAC-EFL writing course.

Introduction

While there has been much attention to the use of English as the *de facto* language in professional writing and the growth of globalization in writing studies (Lillis and Curry 2006, Tardy 2003 and Thaiss and Porter 2010), there has been less discussion of how globalization is changing the way that English is being taught through international teaching partnerships (Starke-Meyerring and Wilson 2008). Since 2006, the 'Antwerp Group' has explored student writing from various national perspectives to highlight the complexities in writing development and pedagogy that international studies tend to ignore in a preoccupation with statistical comparisons (see other articles from the Antwerp Group in this issue). In our research, we are particularly interested in balancing what is country-specific about writing practices and pedagogies with issues that cut across national borders, such as developmental trajectories of student writers, students' attitudes towards writing, genre knowledge, and resource allocation for the teaching of writing. The insights of the Antwerp Group have proved helpful as we extend our collaborations to new sites. Specifically, those insights helped inform a collaboration between *The Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT), USA, and the *Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey* (TEC), Mexico. The goal of this new partnership (MIT-TEC) was to combine English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) pedagogy. In combining these pedagogies, we sought to understand how more robust teaching and research approaches can be developed out of cross-national collaborations.

Briefly, from 2009 to 2010 MIT and TEC collaborators¹ worked to develop teaching materials, including a student survey, assignments, and rubrics, for a disciplinary course at TEC – molecular genetics – in which students would complete their written work in English. In entering into this collaboration, we took seriously Donahue's (2009: 214) critiques of U.S. scholarship on

¹ MIT: Jennifer Craig and Mya Poe. TEC: Donna Marie Kabalen de Bichara, Celia Ann Durboraw, Dorina Garza Leonard, Maria Fernanda Gonzalez Rojas. (See also Craig, Poe and González Rojas 2010).

internationalization in which she argues that U.S. scholars especially need to move ‘beyond an “us-them” paradigm as it appears in “discovery of difference” scholarship’. We have also been sensitive to the fact that WAC is not a neutral pedagogy; while founded in the United Kingdom, WAC in the U.S. has developed along certain trajectories that are specific to U.S. higher education – namely, process pedagogy, an emphasis on the workplace preparation, close faculty collaborations, and a tension between disciplinary particularity in writing instruction and general writing skills. Finally, from the Antwerp Group, we’ve taken to heart the importance of paying attention to the meta-structures of international research (Anson 2008). Scholars acknowledge that international partnerships require ‘shared leadership and attention to power imbalances between partners; initiation by faculty from the grassroots or with faculty as a critical driving force; attention to relationship building and trust; and skillful negotiation of a shared vision, approaches, and practices’ (Starke-Meyerring *et al.* 2008: 19). In our experience, issues of difference are important, and participants need to actively attend to their differences if the project is to be generative. But exactly how to attend to those differences in a theoretically-informed manner is not clear in the literature.

Modeling Voices in Collaborative Research

One theoretical model used by the Antwerp Group for its international collaboration has been that developed by Sanne Akkerman and colleagues at the Universities of Utrecht. The model, which was developed out of a study in ‘formulating advice for educational policy for facilitating e-learning in secondary education’ among five partner countries, uses the Bakhtinian notion of voice to locate the vantage points of various participants in the international research collaboration (Akkermann *et al.* 2006: 467).

In the model, there are three nested circles to illustrate the relationship between individual voices and the multivocality found in the diversity of perspectives of the research group participants. The inner circle represents the ‘*collaborative activity involving a group of participants*’ speaking from the perspective of that collaborative (Akkermann *et al.* 2006: 464). The middle circle represents the *participants as individuals* who are influenced by their own specific contexts. Finally, the outer circle represents how ‘*individuals are informed by a broader socio-cultural context*’ that manifest themselves in the way participants contribute to the international project (Akkermann *et al.* 2006: 464).

In mapping and analyzing the group’s texts using this model, Akkerman *et al.* found that the diversity of voices was not recognized among the participants as they discussed the outcomes of their collaboration. Participants did not explore each other’s viewpoints—i.e., the outer circle in the model. . As a result, participants did not understand why certain disagreements or misunderstandings persisted. They concluded:

When project members do not consider what is particular about the arguments made by the other, the world that the other is expressing does not come to the fore and therefore does not play a meaning-generating role [...] diversity has to be actively worked on. Meaning to be generated through diversity requires first that the particularities and the possible boundaries between group members become actually visible to them (2006: 482).

In applying the Akkerman *et al.* model, the Antwerp Group itself has worked to maintain the generative aspects of multivocality. Boundaries have become visible to the group members through various conversations about ‘what it means to conduct collaborative research on literacy teaching and learning internationally’, including sharing of scholarly resources, negotiations of ongoing research plans seen through national/local lenses, and negotiations of ongoing research plan seen through collective lens established by the team (Anson 2008). By understanding and theorizing the processes within the Antwerp Group that have helped sustain that partnership, we were able to apply this understanding to this new collaboration.

Multivocality in Goal Setting, Research Design, and Pedagogy

Because the intent of the MIT-TEC collaboration was to provide reciprocal research between the U.S. and Mexico, we had to think from the beginning what collaborative structures and systems held

promise for obtaining deliverables and for improving our own understanding of research. In identifying our goals, research methods, and pedagogical approaches, we found ourselves speaking from various positions – as individuals, as a collective, and as culturally-situated speakers. In the following sections, we explain how the Akkerman *et al.* model helped us see this multivocality.

Goal setting

From the MIT perspective, we entered into this collaboration because we recognized the importance of better teaching our English language learners, yet we were confronted by institutional barriers that made a WAC-EFL collaboration difficult for us. We saw the collaboration with TEC as a way to break from institutional barriers while developing teaching approaches that would be applicable in the U.S. At our institution, English writing instruction for non-native writers typically occurs in stand-alone EFL classes. Such classes are useful at beginning levels but this approach does not usually help students attain advanced professional literacies (Johns 2001). Stand-alone EFL classes do not engage the support of disciplinary faculty, which is important in helping students model communication practices of professionals (Matsuda 1998). For example, in such classes students may not learn conventions for peer review at a professional journal or how to respond to feedback from a technical reviewer.

Our collaborators at TEC wanted to know if WAC could add new information to the scholarship and practice about second language acquisition. Language acquisition is seen as essential to the development of Mexican students and it is also important because of a TOEFL graduation exam requirement. Moreover, English acquisition is seen to be important to the development of the country itself. Thus, the researchers at TEC wanted to learn more about how WAC worked not only in English classrooms but also with Spanish language classrooms and disciplinary courses taught in Spanish. (Donna Kabalen, personal conversation, April 21, 2009). TEC collaborators, thus, were also coming to the partnership with a voice that was shaped by institutional and cultural contexts.

In articulating our goals, it further became clear that both groups of collaborators were not just interested in training better workers for employment in a global workplace or a limited partnership but in using English language and WAC to help facilitate the flow of knowledge across borders. As we worked together, we came to recognize the global forces that were already at work prior to our collaboration. Assessments such as TOEFL are not country specific and neither is research on second language acquisition. In thinking about how our institutional contexts and pedagogical approaches were shaped by domestic and international forces discourses, we reflected on how certain discourses cross national borders to take root in specific contexts while others do not. By noticing that complex background, we found that our collaboration was, in fact, not cross-national but transnational because of the wide circulation of ideas and practices that move back-and-forth across national borders (Sassen 2003).

Development of the student survey

Multivocality would again be important in the collaborative process in establishing research methods. As part of our teaching approach, both groups thought it would be useful to survey students about their previous experiences in writing and speaking in school. By understanding students' experiences, we could better tailor English language instruction in the genetics course that had been chosen as our initial WAC site.

MIT collaborators offered an initial draft of survey questions to assess students' writing experiences. We based our initial survey instruments on those used by the Antwerp Group and our previous research (Questions 4–10 in Appendix 'Student Survey'). Again, our individual and cultural identities were important. From our work at MIT, for example, we knew that we needed to differentiate scientific writing from engineering writing because the two areas often require quite distinct kinds of writing not captured accurately by general terms like 'technical writing'. The Antwerp Group's previous efforts at survey design had also taught us the importance of identifying cultural context in *how* and *where* students learn to write.

The TEC collaborators spoke from the perspective of educators familiar with teaching English as a foreign language. In doing so, TEC collaborators helped identify the multiplicity of ways that non-native speakers learn English (Dorina Garza Leonard, personal email, August 9, 2009). TEC collaborators identified specific questions about English language learning (Questions 1 and 2 in Appendix 'Student Survey'). They also identified the importance of inquiring about the amount of

English and Spanish writing/presentations that students were completing in classes as well as when student learned English (Questions 3, 4, and 5 in Appendix 'Student Survey').

By discussing our different orientations towards learning and teaching English, and finding a collaborative voice, we were ultimately able to design the survey instrument. The process taught us that in multi-vocal research partnerships, one element of successful collaboration is the ability to relax one's grip on specific and familiar terminology and learn from others while still remaining in touch with one's basic theoretical orientation. Working actively and steadily over email and Skype, we learned from each other and the survey was administered on time.

Development of class assignments and rubrics

From the survey design process, we discovered that not only did we need to attend to cultural differences in the sense of national identities and institutional structures but we also needed to attend to our disciplinary differences; WAC and EFL perspectives meant that we could bring different orientations to the collaboration. While each collaborating group taught writing, we found some of our pedagogical approaches were different. However, rather than having this difference be a barrier in our collaboration, we again found attending to difference helped us manage the design of curricular materials.

The genetics course in which our collaboration was realized was a place to find a collective voice. Dorina Garza Leonard was an experienced EFL teacher at TEC who offered to work directly with the molecular genetics professor. In looking at the ways in which Garza taught her EFL students, the three of us identified elements that were similar to WAC practices: commenting on student papers, use of rubrics, student revision. For Garza, these practices were fundamental. What was new to her was the idea of conferences with students on drafts of papers and the idea of working with disciplinary content in a disciplinary classroom. She was also interested in the idea of linking oral communication with written communication to help students extend their critical thinking and develop ideas more thoroughly. Finally, she was interested in when and how to point out sentence level errors in her students' writing. Together, we sketched out a semester curriculum for communication instruction, specifically tailored to the genetics course. For each piece of writing, each student submitted a draft, had conferences with Garza, and received comments based on grading rubrics created by the disciplinary professor and communication teacher. Addressing topics such as audience, organization, content, clarity, and precision in writing brought together WAC and EFL instruction.

Blending WAC and EFL pedagogy, albeit time-intensive, was ultimately not so challenging, perhaps because our group had already worked through the goal setting process and survey design in which we had to address our different perspectives and decide when to work from a collaborative voice and when to retain an individual institutional or cultural point of view. However, when last minute staffing changes introduced a new disciplinary professor into the project, it was challenging to help him understand the objectives of the research. Like some other teachers we had met, he was more comfortable in a conventional model of teaching in which students took tests in order to demonstrate their learning. He agreed to review a grading rubric that Garza had composed, and he used it to respond to some short student writing. However the contrast between his more traditional pedagogy and the student-centered, process-driven approach we attempted was difficult to reconcile. While discussion of differences might have helped bridge these diverse viewpoints, time did not permit such a negotiation

From this experience, we learned that bringing in additional members into a group changes the voice of the collective. More importantly, while the Akkerman *et al.* model presupposes collective groups that may have differing perspectives or agendas, it cannot account for the power differences found in various partnerships.

Conclusion

The work of the Antwerp Group was critical in providing us a theoretical model for recognizing the multivocality that informs any collaboration and appreciating that diversity as a resource in working to combine WAC and EFL approaches to teaching writing. As Akkerman *et al.* write, 'Diversity in collaboration not only should be considered as an *initial* resource that needs to be overcome by

'sameness' between people's viewpoints, but it can also be considered a *continuous* resource for generating new meaning' (2006: 463; emphasis in original).

In our attempts to combine WAC and EFL pedagogies in a cross-national partnership, we believe more robust teaching and research approaches can be developed out of cross-national collaborations. However, certain caveats are warranted. First, it is useful to draw upon the resources of existing cross-national groups in entering new collaborations. Our participation in the Antwerp Group had prepared us for certain potential complications and had provided a useful theoretical model for working through our different perspectives. Second, participants must allocate the planning time necessary for sustained conversation around issues of teaching. Without sustained discussions at the beginning of the project and throughout the implementation, differences are likely to bring about misunderstandings that result in failure. Third, it is useful to engage the support of seasoned teachers for initial collaborations. In this collaboration, our combined experience allowed us to draw on different ways to manage teaching in a new context. Finally, it is important to accept that an appreciation for diversity in collaboration does not always translate for other audiences. In this case, we found that the Akkerman *et al.* model does not acknowledge power differences in the collaborator relationships. In the end, multivocality is a resource when finding a collaborative voice. If WAC and EFL pedagogies are to be integrated successfully, participants must move beyond 'us-them' perspectives to a model that sustains cross-national collaborations.

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Appendix: Student Survey

Name: _____
 Male _____ Female _____
 Major course of study (carrera): _____
 What semester of school are you in? 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____ 7 _____ 8+ _____
 Full Time student _____ Part-time student _____
 After you graduate, where do you hope work? In Mexico: ____ In another country: ____ Which one(s)?

Learning English

- How have you learned English?
 Classes at school
 Classes outside of school
 Independent study
 From my family and friends
- How old were you when you began to learn and use English?
 0 to 3 years of age
 3–5 years of age
 7–10 years of age
 10–15 years of age
 15–20 years of age
 20–25 years of age
 More than 25 years of age

Writing/Oral Presentation Experiences

- Where do you write and give oral presentations? In English language classes? In Spanish language classes? In disciplinary classes?
- In your current studies, what types of writing and how much writing do you produce? An estimate of the number of pages is fine.

Type of Writing	In English	Number of pages?	In Spanish	Number of pages?
Scientific writing (Lab reports, proposals)				
Engineering writing (Design reports)				
Business writing (Business plans, memo, resume)				
Research articles (essays that include citations)				
Personal Essays or creative writing				
Short answers to questions				
Other?				

- In your current studies, what types of oral presentations do you give?

Type of Writing	In English	In Spanish
Technical talks		
Informal discussions in class		
Individual presentations		
Team presentations		
Other?		

6. When you write a paper or essay, do you usually. . . ?:
- make an outline
 - talk about your ideas with friends or family
 - write a rough draft
 - revise several times
 - show your draft to friends or family
 - show your draft to a teacher or tutor
 - read your writing aloud
 - What else do you do? Please explain.
7. When you give an oral presentation, do you usually . . . ?
- make an outline of your points
 - talk about your ideas with friends, family, other students or your teacher
 - write out a rough draft of your presentation
 - practice your presentation with friends, family, other students, or teacher
 - What else do you do? Please explain.

Writing/Oral Presentation Instruction

8. What kind of instruction have you had about writing and about oral presentation? (e.g., how to organize a paper, how to write a thesis statement, etc.)
9. What kind of feedback do you receive on your writing or oral presentations? Check all that apply.
- From your peers
 - Written feedback from your teacher with specific suggestions for improvement
 - Verbal feedback from your teacher with specific suggestions for improvement
 - Grade only from your teacher
- Comments?
10. If you needed help with writing or oral presentation, where would you go or whom would you ask for assistance?

Help for English	Help for Spanish
<input type="checkbox"/> teacher	<input type="checkbox"/> teacher
<input type="checkbox"/> other students/peers	<input type="checkbox"/> other students/peers
<input type="checkbox"/> writing center or independent language learning center	<input type="checkbox"/> writing center or independent language learning center
<input type="checkbox"/> parents or family	<input type="checkbox"/> parents or family
<input type="checkbox"/> online service	<input type="checkbox"/> online service
<input type="checkbox"/> handbooks/reference guides	<input type="checkbox"/> handbooks/reference guides
<input type="checkbox"/> internet	<input type="checkbox"/> internet
<input type="checkbox"/> library	<input type="checkbox"/> library
<input type="checkbox"/> other resources: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> other resources: _____

Self-Assessment

11. What has been the most difficult writing or presenting experience that you have had in college so far? Why? (If you have not written in English, please mark N/A.)
12. In your opinion, what is the importance of learning to write and to present well in English?