

2013

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Tika Lamsal

University of San Francisco, tlamsal@usfca.edu

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Recommended Citation

Lamsal, T (2013). Cross-cultural and multilingual encounters: Composing difference in transnational contexts. *Journal of Global Literacies, Technologies, and Emerging Pedagogies*. 1(2), 89-104.

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Cross-Cultural and Multilingual Encounters: Composing Difference in Transnational Contexts

Tika R. Lamsal*
University of Louisville, USA

Abstract

A rapid increase in the population of cross-cultural and multilingual students and faculty in the U.S. universities has spurred the need to develop a culturally and linguistically more inclusive pedagogy in the teaching of writing. By analyzing the writing of a couple of multilingual and multicultural students from a freshman composition class in a U.S. university, this article explores the ways that help facilitate the writing process of such students. Stressing the value of students' previous experiences based on their social, cultural, and language differences, the essay argues for the need to recognize and promote the use of multilingual and multicultural resources in student writing.

Keywords: *Multilingual literacy, cross-cultural pedagogy, diversity, minority culture, difference*

Introduction

Many studies in the last couple of decades have called attention to the need for integrating cross-cultural and cross language issues in student writing (Shor, 1987; Severino et al., 1997; Canagarajah, 1999, 2002; Matsuda, 2006; Guerra, 2008). Due to a considerable increase of immigrant students in U.S. universities in the last decade, the heterogeneity of students' social, historical, and cultural contexts in their writing practice has started to become a norm within composition scholarship rather than a marginal concept. This essay studies rhetorical choices and cross-cultural patterns in

* Tika Lamsal is a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric and Composition program at the University of Louisville. His research interests include multilingual and cross-cultural literacies, digital literacies, postcolonial and globalization studies, and cultural rhetorics. Currently, he works as an Assistant Director of Graduate Student Writing in the University Writing Center.

the writing of two minority students from my freshman composition classes. I focus on the role social, cultural, and language contexts play to shape the writing of these students by exploring the ways they carve out in order to negotiate complex geo-political locations and cross-cultural relations in their writing.

Many scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition as well as literary studies have questioned the ideology that others and stereotypes minority cultures and their language practices (Said, 1994; You, 2010). Globalization and global spread of English have further complicated and challenged the monocultural and English-only policies in U.S. universities, questioning the existent models of English language teaching (Horner & Trimbur, 2002). As the dominant medium of intercultural communication, Standard English has become a norm in students' literacy practices, without recognizing their socio-cultural, and geo-political differences, and irrespective of its role as a vehicle of "cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and cross-national communication" (Khadka, 2012). In my discussion below, I analyze the writing of two of my minority students[†], in order to demonstrate how instructors can facilitate multilingual and multicultural students' writing process by recognizing their cultural and language differences.

Cross-cultural contexts and discursive practices in composition

As faculty and students in recent decades in the U.S. have been encountering an increasingly larger number of diverse student population from around the world (Matsuda, 2006), the use and promotion of cross-cultural and multilingual perspectives in composition becomes inevitable. Furthermore, compositionists' orientation towards multilingual and multicultural pedagogical strategies in recent years seems to mandate the faculty and students' urgency for recognizing and respecting multilingual and multicultural values in student writing. Similarly, the growing literature on cross-cultural and multilingual communication and the need for accommodating such communication styles in the U.S. universities push us further towards an urgency to integrating multilingual and cross-cultural strategies in teaching of writing by challenging the traditional monolingual approach, which, as Lamsal and Paudel (2012) argue, "forces non-traditional students to erase their language differences and learn the dominant variety or English in order to enjoy an equal opportunity for success" (p. 762). Better understanding of multilingual character of students at the local level (including in the U.S.) and greater contact across cultures or languages (Leung, 2005; Guerra, 2008) offer us a unique perspective to analyze multilingual and cross-cultural differences in writing.

Casanave's (1998) case study of four bilingual Japanese scholars educated at the graduate level in the U.S. offers a significant perspective to look at the writing

[†] By minority students, I mostly mean the immigrant, multicultural and multilingual as well as international students.

practices of Non-Native Speakers of English (NNSE) students embarking on disciplinary writing in English. These scholars and students mostly write from their home country (Japan) for publication in international journals. As they write, these scholars, however, shuttle between their comfort zone in using Japanese cultural and academic contexts, and their needs to address the expectations of Western audiences as mostly demanded by the English-medium journals. The challenges they face for publication are still like the ones they had to encounter as students in several academic settings in the U.S. Based on her findings from this research, Casanave (1998) argues that academic writing “should be viewed sociohistorically, as situated in a complex environment, in which interpersonal relationships, identities, practices, and local contexts ... interact” (p.176). The four writers in this study mostly represent the kind of struggle numerous minority scholars in the multicontextual and multicultural world have to undergo. In order to meet the demands of their Western-based academic journals, the writers have to develop and negotiate several interrelated identities that they juggle and balance when writing for publication in international journals (p. 196).

As indicated in Casanave (1998) study, one of the causes of such problems most of the NNSE students have to face in the U.S. universities is that of cross-cultural and multilingual identity. Japanese writers in this study have to constantly negotiate their identity as scholars writing in Japanese in their home institutions and as international scholars writing for multicultural audiences. Similarly, Leki (1995) demonstrates how home culture contexts become inevitable for Ling, a student from Taiwan, in order to assert her differential identity through her writing, and how she feels more comfortable whenever she gets to bring Chinese and Taiwanese contexts in her academic writing: “I am Chinese. I take advantage” (p. 241). However, the dominant trends in English composition dismiss the language and cultural differences as markers of deficiency or errors without recognizing the negotiating strategies and meaning making processes students utilize in their writing.

Lu (1994), in her analysis of “can able to” structure in a Malaysian Chinese student’s paper, underscores the role of negotiation in student writing. She claims that students’ negotiation of language contexts offers them a useful way of meaning making because doing so will provide them with opportunities to bring their community-based experiences to classroom for addressing the existent tensions in their writing. As Lu shows, negotiation also helps the Malaysian Chinese student bring her own perspective in a way to establish her authority over her writing in that in such writing, as Lu writes in another essay, “the decisions come from the sense of writer’s agency” (2009, p. 713). Lu’s mention of another Vietnamese-American Chinese-speaking student’s defense of “be able to” structure during class discussion underlines this process of negotiation because such process, in the words of Lu, helps the student “foreground the power of individual” based on his/her community principles (Lu, 1994, p. 455).

I find Lu's concept of negotiation in student writing very useful in my analysis of the writing patterns of minority students. Extending Lu's concept of negotiation as illustrated in the examples above, I examine how mainstream writing practices run in complicity with the educational institutions, which design programs and policies for assimilation rather than transformation by failing to authorize and recognize students' marginal experiences. Such experiences, in the words of Mohanty (1994), become a "crucial form of empowerment for students – a way for them to enter the classroom as speaking subjects" (p. 153). Authorization and recognition of students' marginal experiences also complicates power relations in a way to empower students as well as to engage them in a dialogue for knowledge making. According to Limbu (2012), such dialogical engagement "not only boosts up students' horizon of critical understanding of diverse cultures, but also encompasses their cross-cultural understandings in the local and global context" (p. 13). The question however is: to what extent do the minority students from different cultures negotiate their cultural identity in their academic discourse so as to involve in such a dialogic process for meaning making?

Rose (2003) acknowledges this question and offers ways to address it in a helpful way. Rose points out the problem that "though many insist that this continued opening of doors will sacrifice excellence in the name of democracy, there are too many economic, political, and ethical drives in American culture to restrict higher education to a select minority," making the story of American education "a story of increasing access" (p. 563). Rose's indication is towards the industrialization of education being limited to higher-class people who can afford it, leading to the dismissal of marginal voices in academic writing. He maintains that once writing is measured in terms of skills, it can be completed as a product, hence "writing [is] defined by abilities one can quantify and connect as opposed to the dynamism and organic vitality associated with thought" (Rose, 2003, p. 554). The approach to teaching based on the cult of efficiency, i.e. skills-based cognitive approach, thus relegates writing to a subordinate intellectual status because not making error becomes more important than articulating integrated bodies of knowledge that can emerge through the social, cultural, and historical experiences that shape student writing.

While the cult of efficiency approach characterized the 19th-century pedagogy, it still lingers in the teaching of composition. This approach is no less detrimental to the growth of minority students than the mainstream discourse of teaching in the 19th century when the error in writing was considered tantamount to god's punishment. As Fox (1994) indicates, such biased pedagogical assumptions of American universities towards the "other" cultural nuances in writing cements its foundation back to Protestant Reformation when any prose that was "unclear, contextual, symbolic or not strictly grammatical was judged as... an offense to God's natural law" (p. 21). Such writing practice is based on the assumption that universal cognitive strategies can be used to generate effective writing from students. Calling such cognitive model a form-focused

approach to writing, Canagarajah (1999) postulates that by this tendency “students are persuaded to accept the discourse conventions and rhetorical features of the dominant groups as the universal skilled means of communication” (p. 151). Deriving its impetus mainly from the cognitive approach to language, such a traditional notion of writing only limits the unique cultural resources of minority students, thereby circumscribing students’ engagement in meaningful literate practices.

In his critique of such cognitive approach to teaching writing, Canagarajah (2006a) contends that we should encourage minority students to use their home language as a resource for negotiation in diverse contexts because “rather than simply joining a speech community, students should learn to shuttle between communities in contextually relevant ways” (p. 593). “To meet these objectives,” Canagarajah adds, “rather than focusing on correctness, we should perceive ‘error’ as the learner’s active negotiation and exploration of choices and possibilities” (p. 593). However, uncritical reading of such an error without looking at the cultural relations as Canagarajah suggests may further inhibit minority students’ choice of writing topics. For this, we need to first make the students aware of the tensions between the academic expectations and their home culture interests. Analysis of such dominant discourse and ways to its resistance makes us aware of the discriminatory nature of what Horner and Trimbur (2002) call “unidirectional monolingualism” (p. 595), paving the way for a shift in the norm so as to help minority students use their cultural and language experiences as resources in their writing.

Minority students’ writing also manifests, what Guerra (2008) calls, an “alternative discourse[s]” they bring to a different culture from their diverse home culture. Such an approach, as Guerra points out also pushes educators towards becoming more serious for the better understanding of cultural diversity, whereby the students enhance their ability to write:

‘Appropriately (with an awareness of different conventions); *Productively* (to achieve their desired aims); *Ethically* (to remain attuned to the communities they serve); *Critically* (to learn to engage in inquiry and discovery); and *Responsively* (to negotiate the tensions caused by the exercise of authority in their spheres of belonging)’. (p. 299, emphasis the author’s)

Such intercultural interference in writing helps minority students utilize their cultural strengths in order to negotiate their multicultural and multilingual identity in the US universities.

Crossing the borders: Intercultural interference

In this section, I will analyze the essays of two of my multicultural and multilingual students. These papers were written in response to an English composition assignment, which asked students to talk about their cultural and academic growth in relation to their

past literacy experiences. The goal I had when assigning this paper was to encourage students to synthesize their personal experience with their literacy/academic growth in an academic genre of argumentative writing.[‡] I didn't explicitly instruct my students at that time to critique and contend with the complexities of their culture and society. While most of other students in the class chose to write generic essays based on their school experiences or individual events that had direct relations with their academic development, these two students decided to write about something that they said was meaningful for them. In so doing, they didn't seem to overtly follow what the assignment asked for; instead, they took risks in selecting topics about their culturally diverse background and their feelings of isolation in the face of mainstream American culture. On observing these two of my students' papers, I perceived that what I assigned to them, based on the model of traditional personal narrative along with argumentative writing genre, became mostly irrelevant to their daily experiences and cultural contexts. I would probably have to revamp the assignment, encouraging my students to include in their writing home culture contexts so that they could more explicitly discuss the issues on race, class, gender, and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

One of the students, Shiva (pseudonym used for the purpose of this study), is an Indian American who was born and brought up in a multilingual and multicultural family in the U.S. The other, whom I call Chai, is a Vietnamese-born student. Chai was middle-schooled in Vietnam and high-schooled in the U.S. I chose these students particularly because in addition to being multicultural and multilingual, they are also shaped and "stereotyped," as they reflect in their papers, by the U.S. academic institutions in terms of their racial as well as cultural identity. While Chai writes about his personal experience of being alienated as an outsider in American academic institutions, Shiva recounts a story about his visit to India by complicating his minority racial and cultural identity, foregrounding his mixed cultural identity in both the U.S. and India. These cases also offer me an opportunity to closely observe the socio-cultural and linguistic tensions that most of the minority students, including myself, bring to American universities. The way they choose to write about some cultural and academic tensions unsolicited and non-required by the assignment but modified by them based on their interests itself speaks volumes about these students' rhetorical choices and their

[‡] The main portion of the assignment was: Write an essay by taking an episode from your life that represents an important moment in your cultural or literacy development. This episode can be anything ranging from an early memory about a cultural event or a subcultural practice to an event at school, home, or your surrounding that was interesting, humorous, or embarrassing. You need to make clear the ways in which the event you are writing about is significant for you now. As you develop your narrative, you can address the following questions:

- How did this event change or otherwise affect you?
- What aspects of your life now can you trace to that event?
- How might your life have been different if this event had not happened or had turned out differently?
- Why does this story matter to you?

negotiation of tensions through writing.

One of the factors to affect Chai's and Shiva's decisions for such challenging choices may consist of my own position as a minority instructor, both culturally and racially, which doesn't only help them acknowledge their difference as similar to that of their instructor but also encourages them to take it as an opportunity to utilize their cultural and racial difference as a resource in their writing. Mohanty (1994) sees such realization of difference as

not one of merely acknowledging difference; rather, the more difficult question concerns the kinds of difference that are acknowledged and engaged. Difference seen as a benign variation, for instance, rather than as conflict, struggle, or the threat of disruption, bypasses power as well as to suggest a harmonious, empty pluralism. (p. 146)

As an instructor, I see these students' choice to engage in writing about their difference as the one inspired by conflict, struggle, or the threat of disruption, as Mohanty might argue. Chai's assertion of such difference in his essay is marked by his seemingly harmonious pluralism when he says, "... But I felt alright after all, those kids didn't know me and they've never many foreign kids in their life." To interpret from what Mohanty says such a sense of harmony Chai tends to forge in relation to his classroom world is merely an empty harmony, suggestive of his conflictual relationship with the White students in class.

In one of his discussions about cultural and linguistic transition to a U.S. high school, Chai reassuringly explains his experience of being "more like stuck in a dark room and try to figure the way out" He further fleshes out an experience of being "othered" and "stereotyped" during his transitional period in a U.S. high school:

I felt like an outsider. People looked at me like I am an alien or something (maybe the way I dressed or maybe I looked different compared to other people at my school.) I remember that there were some girls walking pass [sic] me and laughing... . I looked like a goof or more like a weirdo in my high school. But I felt alright after all, those kids didn't know me and they've never foreign kids in their life.

This kind of perception towards a student from a different culture is the result of the monocultural and monolingual norms that exist in and become mostly representative of the mainstream educational practices in most of the U.S. academic institutions. Chai's experience of academic and cultural alienation in a U.S. school is similar to that faced by most of the culturally and linguistically diverse students and scholars in the U.S. academic institutions. As a student from a diverse cultural and linguistic background, Guerra (2008) recounts a similar experience of being alienated from his home environment in a school that he attended: "... we found ourselves locked into a world where half of our classmates were now White, where for the first time in our lives, we

were expected to sit and compete with children who had been trained at home in the dominant language and social practices valued by the schools” (p. 300).

The minority scholars and students like Guerra and Chai tend to overcome such frustrating experiences by foregrounding their cultural identity in their writing. In this sense, what they write becomes defined by who they are. Karamcheti (1996) has analyzed similar kind of racialized identity of a postcolonial scholar. Drawing on Aime Cesaire’s *A Tempest* and his (Cesaire’s) analysis about the role of Ariel therein, Karamcheti (1996) notes that the condition of a postcolonial academic in American institutions has become like that of “the hybrid cosmopolite, jetsetting everywhere, at home everywhere, belonging nowhere, alighting in the classroom momentarily to magic up a literary repast, perhaps to lead the class on a whirlwind literary tour of the global, yes, postmodern, literary bazaar” (p. 223). This reminds me of the situation most minority learners have to face in the U.S. academic institutions, despite the increasing efforts made by minority scholars to revise the Western-based standards that are used to preclude cultural and language differences in academic writing.

One location where the issues of race, class, gender, and identities get enacted is composition classroom. The classroom, as a conflictual cultural space, manifests the tension identified by Karamcheti (1996), and by Pratt (2008) as being typical of a “contact zone.” Drawing on Pratt, I consider the classroom to be one of the “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (p. 7). Incongruent with minority students’ assimilationist effort, however, is the internal realization of their racial identity. Chai, for example, shows his internal realization of such difference when he mentions in his essay about the feelings of seclusion and non-belongingness that he undergoes throughout his school years and that he says continues in a different form even in his college life. Although not directly marked for his difference in his college, Chai explains that the friends in his circle still look at his multilingual and multicultural identity as belonging to the “other” – not to the dominant American culture. Like my own and a couple of others’ in the class, his cultural difference adds to the heterogeneity of our classroom community but only to the extent of earning a tokenistic gesture from the other mainstream students.

As subjects of the contact zone, Chai and other minority students’ ethnic and racial identities, along with my own, clash with that of the dominant Western culture because “part of the ideological agenda of the first-year composition course,” as Williams (2003) observes, “is to introduce and indoctrinate new students into the values privileged by the institution” (p. 590). It is under such values that the “othered” students find their cultural agency threatened when it comes to the issue of their writing in American universities. Chai has revealed through his essay a frustrating experience of not being able to cope with the academic expectations set for him. However, he also

prepares himself in order to negotiate his cultural identity by learning American culture as well as utilizing the strengths of his home culture. Chai openly admits that “moving to this country, the United States is the best thing I’ve ever done in my life. I learn more about life, about people around me with different cultures. I gained a lot of confidence because of this.”

It is by helping minority students like Chai channel such confidence and cultural diversity into the resources of their writing that we composition instructors can work towards making their transition to academic culture more smooth and realizable for them. Our class can become a site of struggle and conflict so long as we can encourage students to include their social, cultural, historical, and economic differences in classroom discourse and help them engage such differences in meaning making practices through writing. On reflection, I think that I could have done more to help Chai utilize his cross-cultural experience as a potential for allaying his frustrating experience of being “othered” even in his college life. I could have talked more explicitly to class about the issues of race, class, and cross-cultural identities. I also failed to more openly share with students my embodied racial identity so that even other students in addition to Chai and Shiva could have engaged in a meaningful dialogue by talking about their racial, class-based, multilingual, and multicultural identities more revealingly. Chai’s promptness for taking “any challenge and do[ing] anything I want as long as it’s not illegal,” and his desire for learning that “my English is not very good and I write like a middle school kid but I won’t stop improve my writing skills” speak a lot about the negotiating process he wants to engage in. He probably could have more explicitly interacted in class as well as in writing if I had opened up clear discussions of race, class, and culture-related issues. That he openly expresses his frustration and hope at the same time in his writing suggests that composition class can work towards promoting cross-cultural values of linguistically and culturally diverse students in a way to creating a classroom space as a site for more productive composition and discussion practices. While he seemed more comfortable and engaged in his writing for Composition class, Chai revealed to me his frustration that he couldn’t freely articulate his previous cultural and academic experiences in the essays he was supposed to generate for other classes.

Based on his training in school, Chai believed that his writing had to be mostly objective and detached, following the standard norms prescribed by the school, including avoiding the use of first person in his formal writing. When I asked the class to write about their personal experiences, Chai was very much excited to be able to write on something that he found to be interesting and also that he felt ownership about. He also saw English class in college as his “favorite class where I could express my ideas and talking about or making arguments about interesting things.” He felt more authentic in his writing that projected his distinctness from rather than similarity to the dominant

trends. He wrote in so-called “standard” English but at the same time appropriated it in order to indicate his implicit resistance to the dominant standards.

Chai’s mimicry of standard language in this context functions as “a difference or recalcitrance, which coheres the dominant strategic function ... and poses an immanent threat to both normalized knowledges and disciplinary powers” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). Chai’s strength lies in his assertion of the self, irrespective of academic constraints, and is guided by his own cultural experiences and freedom of articulation. He becomes more assertive despite his linguistic and cultural differences. He knows where his strength lies and is ready to use it as a resource for his academic growth: “Even though I was not good at English but I was the best at the other subjects. I was still a quietest boy in my class but it was not about my English. It’s the way I am for sure. I was not afraid people laughed at me when I tried to speak, because I knew that they’ll [be] like me if they were in my situation.”

Like Chai, Shiva also chooses to write about his experience of being secluded from the mainstream culture in U.S. academic institutions. As a response to the same assignment as Chai’s, which asks them to write about their cultural and academic growth, Shiva decides to write about his background of being an Indian American, how he becomes different as a student from minority culture, and how he feels as hanging between his American and Indian identities. In addition to this, he uses more space of his essay to talk about cultural rituals of a wedding ceremony that he celebrates with his relatives in India.

Shiva was born of Indian parents in America, and was schooled in the American education system. But because his family is multilingual and multicultural, as his family speaks Hindi and other Indian regional languages at home, and observes almost all of the Hindu religious activities and festivities in addition to Christmas, his fixed and subjective positions always make him appear as an outsider in America. In his account of a visit to India, Shiva recounts his complex identity, for, by his appearance, he becomes a part of the mainstream in India, but his taste and language make him an outsider in his parents’ home:

My whole life I have only known what it is like to be a minority. I was now part of the majority, and I felt somewhat surreal but more so confused. In America I am not the norm, I was a different skin color, a different hair color, and a different culture. In India, however, I was the norm. And for the first time in my life I was able to compare what it was like to be a part of both.

This feeling of otherness and non-belongingness in either culture helps him define his identity in a different way. By virtue of his being rooted in the mixed cultural identities, Shiva in his personal narrative suggests that he cannot be categorized as either American or Indian. His situation is suggestive of mixed identity relations that also become representative of a considerable demographic of students in U.S. universities in

the recent decades. Shiva takes pride in being different and wants to assert his differential identity more openly when he says:

I enjoyed being different. I enjoyed being the minority. In India, I felt no sense of pride in the fact that I was Indian. This was due to the fact that most of the people there were of the same race. It just felt normal. In America, however, the feeling is totally different. I feel I have something that other people don't. I feel I speak for most cultures in America in the fact that they are proud to be different. So in no way am I promoting my race, or that it is better to be a minority.

Shiva's assertion here challenges the traditional assumption of categorizing minority cultures based on their origin. Fox (1994) recognizes the need to challenge such an assumption in terms of multicultural students in the U.S. when she suggests that "it would not be a good idea to assume that anyone who comes from abroad, or worse, anyone whose last name is Wong or Das Gupta or Hernandez must have a particular writing or thinking style, or must be affected by cultural differences to the same degree or in the same way as other world majority students, or even at all" (pp. 110-11). Such an approach merely reifies the cultural identities of students based on which varieties of English they use in their writing in a problematic way. Paudel (2011) rightly warns against such reifying possibility when looking at the varieties of English as cultural and language markers because "in its attempt to give validity to diversity of English languages, it replaces one prescription with the other" (73).

Shiva in this sense belongs neither to American nor to Indian culture; instead, he evokes his minority context from a unique position in a way to use it as the strength of his identity. It is by engaging such unique hybrid position in their writing that most of the minority students interface with the mainstream academic culture. Such home-culture-related identitarian contexts become instrumental in engaging minority students to meaning making practices, for "the most effective pedagogical response," as Miller (1994) suggests, "lies in closely attending to what our students say and write in an ongoing effort to learn how to read, understand, and respond to the strange, sometimes threatening multivocal texts they produce while writing in the contact zone" (p. 408). However, from my position as a minority instructor, I probably had to do more to encourage my students to flesh out their racial, and cultural identities in this essay assignment because doing so would also enable my students to be more vocal about their hybrid identities. As Fox (1994) notes, "Talking with students about cultural influences on their writing means that I must be constantly aware of these influences, constantly demonstrating to students that I understand – or want to understand – where they are coming from" (p. 109).

On reflection, I see that although both Chai and Shiva write assertively about their cultural differences, they hardly complicate their hybrid racial identity. Instead, they focus more on the accounts of the events. Shiva, as the above example suggests, feels more at home to explain about his background and socio-cultural experience in his

writing than to simply talk about his academic and cultural growth in the U.S. as demanded by the assignment. He also devotes larger portion of his discussion to explaining the marriage celebrations in Indian culture, with particular reference to one of his family members' wedding ceremony. He digresses a lot in his discussion to reinforce the cultural richness of this ceremony to the extent of committing his desire to go back to India and organize a similar wedding ceremony for his own marriage: "With deafening music blaring through some speakers, we danced our way to the wedding ground. No car was able to drive on the street that night. The wedding ground was beautiful. The place was lit up, it almost reminded me of scaled down version of a nighttime Las Vegas." In his paper, instead of talking about his academic achievement and making its connection with his cultural growth, as implied by the assignment, Shiva presents in detail the ceremonious observations, and, maybe indirectly implies that the readers make the connection by themselves. I describe what I see him doing here as his reflection about something that enormously interests him and that he feels more authority over as an Indian American. If I had explicitly talked about racial, and cultural identities by giving my own example, Shiva could have hopefully explored in more details about the racial identity issue. At this point, he only mentions it in short, as shown in the above quote, and stops it there without developing the idea further in the essay; instead, he digresses a lot to offer details about the rituals of the ceremony.

I find these students' examples regarding the choice of their cultural contents in their writing to be a crucial issue to examine in the writing of minority students. What may be the purpose of choosing to write on something they feel more comfortable about? How does these students' writing about their cultural identity help them assert their differential identity in an academic institution dominated mostly by monocultural and monolingual norms? I see these students' choice of their cultural experiences as a way to appropriate the assignment and use it as an opportunity to talk about their home culture resources, which, as Canagrajah (2006a) interprets, come as interference in their writing. While Chai and Shiva are trying to fulfill the requirement of an assignment in class, they are also constructing a different version of their narrative that is more meaningful to them. By doing so, they are also suggesting that academic writing becomes a site for them to reflect upon their diverse cultural identity. I find Chai's and Shiva's choice of telling their stories this way as a deliberate rhetorical choice to assert their multilingual and multicultural identities and show their complex process of transition in a U.S. university. A closer look at such writing practices of minority students makes composition teachers aware of the need to transcend the developmental model and adopt a cross-cultural and dialogical heuristics for teaching composition.

Unlike the developmental model, the dialogical model forges harmonious relationship between the teacher and the students by allowing them to communicate in a meaningful way. Privileging the developmental may lead to a widening gap between the minority culture and the dominant discourse. Villanueva (1999) illustrates such a

gap between listening and hearing prevalent in the university environment by giving an example of a South Asian woman, who complains of being dismissed as a “person of color,” as “one of those colonized by another’s empire,” not being listened to every time she wants to communicate. “She speaks about the difference between speaking and being heard,” Villanueva postulates, “that if one is constantly speaking but is never heard, never truly heard, that is, in effect, silence, a silencing” (p. 653). This is such a dominant discourse of silencing that excludes multilingual and multicultural students, who mainly hail from the minority and non-privileged backgrounds. I see that my role as an instructor from a diverse cultural background is that of a facilitator or a coach, who can better understand their difference and help them use their different cultural contexts as resources in their writing practices in U.S. institutions.

As such, we can help the minority students like Chai and Shiva to utilize an academic institution as a transitional space, whereby they shuttle between their home culture and academic culture. The academic site also becomes a contingent space that allows students to perform their differential identity momentarily by helping the students like Shiva and Chai towards evoking their differential racial and cultural identity. Bhabha (1994) epitomizes such crucial identity effect when he says, “The margin of hybridity, where cultural differences ‘contingently’ and conflictually touch, becomes the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience” (p. 207). Such borderline experience, however, can be turned into a positive strength by helping minority students assert their subject position and perform their hybrid identity for the purpose of generating meaningful writing.

Conclusion

Through the analysis and interpretation of a couple multicultural and multilingual students’ literacy practices in this project I don’t mean to generalize the literacy practices of minority students in U.S. universities; neither do the ideas expressed by these students in their papers represent minority students’ views in general about the existing composition practices in U.S. universities. My purpose here is to portray the cross-cultural and discursive practices of minority students and see how such practices are mostly stereotyped and looked down upon as the “other-wordly.” I believe that this discussion also points out an urgency to recognize differences as resources in the context of U.S. university writing. As Matsuda (2002) points out, the increasing demographic shift in the faculty and student population in U.S. colleges and universities in recent decades has in fact led to a shift in expectations of what is the norm. Such change, Matsuda notes, arises “as a result of institutions actively recruiting students and scholars with various socioeconomic backgrounds as well as, by implication, linguistic and cultural backgrounds” (p. 194).

To help the students from marginalized communities use their cultural experiences as resources of their writing, we composition teachers need to share the values, interests, and knowledges of their distinct cultures more intimately so as to encourage them to break the hierarchy between the higher order writing (that meets the standard academic expectations) and the lower order writing (that works with distinct approaches dealing with students' home culture, notwithstanding the dominant cognitive model of teaching writing). In the words of Canagarajah (1999), "We should stop conceiving second language literacy as an acquisition of decontextualized grammatical structures, rhetorical skills, thought patterns, or discourse conventions. We should develop a perspective that is grounded in the broadest possible social context" (p. 148). Only by valuing the different rhetorical traditions of international students can we properly address the ideological conflicts facing these students. By the same token, only explaining rhetorical differences according to each individual's social, historical, and economic contexts and their unique cultural experiences can minimize the inequality and difference these students have to face in composition. Recognizing the need to pull down the wall that "others" these users of English as their second language, Ortmeier-Hooper (2008) rightly argues, "We shouldn't return to monolingual assumptions about our students; nor should we retreat from writing opportunities that encourage all students to reflect upon their literacy experiences, their cultural and linguistic legacies" (pp. 409-10). The gap between the traditional pedagogy's academic expectations and the minority students' representation of cultural and linguistic identities in their writing needs to be narrowed down.

My contention in this essay is that minority students' cultural backgrounds that shape their academic writing as well as their academic and professional developments should be recognized and valued as resources that teachers can understand and use towards helping those students overcome frustration and fear of writing. Pedagogical strategies designed against the backdrop of multicultural, and multilingual theories might ease such minority students' learning process by providing writing teachers with a more useful way of understanding issues of cross-cultural relations, and transnational identity that underlie the academic performances of minority students.

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