

Response: “Trans-“ Work Takes Place

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I intend for my title to suggest two meanings. First, as all the articles in this special issue clearly demonstrate, transdisciplinary, translingual, and transnational work has occurred for some time, is occurring now, and will continue—regardless which terms are employed to describe it. Given the richly diverse cultural, curricular, linguistic, and professional considerations implicated by virtually all WAC/WID work, the appearance of this issue in ATD will not surprise readers at all. In her contribution to the issue, C.C. Hendricks notes that WAC/WID since its inception has carried the promises of “distributed expertise, interdisciplinary collaboration, and reflexive assessment”—that is, principles and practices well suited to (re)orienting compositionists to working with colleagues across disciplines and institutions and to following students’ own agentive work. And Bruce Horner helpfully reminds readers that this work can and does happen even where colleagues may be especially anxious about challenging disciplinarity within institutions composed of separate (and separately funded) departments.

A second meaning I intend, though, is that “trans-” work not only “takes place” in daily occurrences but that it also *requires* a sense of *emplacement*. Indeed, while none of the contributors explicitly addresses it as a focus for research or as a theoretical context, place—both metaphorically and literally—is compellingly relevant across the issue. Transdisciplinary, translingual, and transnational scholarship, pedagogy, and other practices can be criticized for overlooking meaningful and material institutional constraints—not to mention disciplinary integrity (Matsuda, 2013), for leveling salient differences among linguistically diverse students (Gilyard, 2016), and for risking entanglement with neoliberal projects that advance globalization while exacerbating inequities (Donahue, 2009). In more idealistic claims about the benefits of composing, learning, and otherwise working across borders, “trans-” work can seem utopian—tied to no particular place at all except a brave new world order. But throughout this special issue, contributors clearly articulate how local affordances and constraints are always relevant: indeed, contributors’ often-sharp focus on specific material contexts reveals that responsive local work both warrants and benefits from “trans-” work.

Alyssa G. Cavazos, Marcela Hebbard, Jose E. Hernandez, Crystal Rodriguez, and Geoffrey Schwarz offer a strong reminder of the power of place and of local linguistic and institutional resources. Of course, all educational institutions are intimately tied to broader communities, whether they explicitly recognize and honor such connections or not. But situated as it is in an urban context on the historically contested border with Mexico—a border that is currently highly visible in US politics and policy—UTRGV could not overlook local exigencies or overlook the ways its local considerations are literally also transnational ones. Even at the level of the unique department under focus in their article, the multicultural and bilingual mission of the university is immediately legible in challenging but productive interactions among colleagues in modern languages, applied linguistics, and rhetoric and composition. These interactions may promise a long-overdue revisiting of connections between rhetoric and composition and bilingual education: while literature on bilingual pedagogy can reinforce ideas about discrete language boundaries that run counter to translingual scholarship, bilingual educators typically employ locally responsive methods and pedagogies that stand to enrich composition. A public health scholar’s interest and participation in UTRGV’s context signals that transdisciplinary impact can extend even further across

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otherwise wide conceptual and disciplinary gaps—here, in response to the medical needs of South Texas’s linguistically diverse residents.

Guillaume Gentil as well as Joel Heng Hartse, Michael Lockett, and Melek Ortabasi consider the role translation-based scholarship and pedagogy can play in Canada’s multilingual context. Again, a clear need for transdisciplinary work is thrown into relief by specific exigencies of place. As Gentil relates, while language boundaries are always porous and always shifting over time, political and cultural allegiances that support “well-entrenched order[s] of linguistic nationalism” evolve differently, and usually much more slowly. Equally important, language users themselves may feel compelled to work *as if* linguistic boundaries are clear, and they may also have strong affective attachments to specific languages—both factors that might mitigate the desirability of at least some explicitly translingual work. In Canada, as in many other English-dominant areas, there is relatively less attention to translation *from* English to another language than there is to translation *into* English, a condition that helps explain the relative lack of translation-focused work in (English-dominant) rhetoric and composition. That imbalance presented a specific obstacle to Katia, the student in Gentil’s study: while courses in translation would have helped her take advantage of different linguistic affordances between French and English, their relatively higher cost to her as a student not already specializing in translation studies made them inaccessible. Hartse and his colleagues encountered a related challenge. Translation is most often featured in advanced undergraduate or graduate-level curricula, but Ortabasi became interested in teaching it in introductory courses, given students’ need to write about challenging, linguistically diverse texts. Rather than simply importing translation theory to approach literary texts, Ortabasi’s approach combined some literary translation with literacy autobiography and a community-engaged language project. The curriculum thus attempted to engage students’ own multilingualism in their own multilingual communities as a way to make translingual work a “hands on” experience. In taking an opportunity to teach “French” outside his home department, Gentil attempted to pilot a genre-based biliteracy course modeled on Katia’s own complex negotiations. An important implication of his (and, of course, Katia’s) work is that biliteracy is more than a traditionally defined reading and writing skill: it is also “the social validation of such savoir-faire across linguistic and cultural contexts.” Ultimately, then, bi/multiliteracy requires a kind of ecological fit—a sensitivity to inhabiting (and building) communities in which such literacy is a clear, locally responsive resource.

Jonathan Hall and Bruce Horner separately address the challenges that the translingual perspective on composition poses for the field’s disciplinary inheritances and identities. I will admit to some personal stakes here. As Hall notes, there is a curious overlap between scholar-teachers who have endorsed both the “Opinion” promoting a “Translingual Approach” to writing (Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011) and the “Open Letter” “Clarifying the Relationship Between L2 Writing and Translingual Writing,” which was critical of what its composers saw as confluences of diverse scholarly perspectives on multilingual composition (Atkinson, Crusan, Matsuda, Ortmeier-Hooper, Ruecker, Simpson, & Tardy, 2015). I myself am in that overlap. As then-Co-Chair of the CCCC Committee on Second Language Writing, I was not asked to help compose the letter, but I was asked to sign it. I did so because I felt a clear need to represent visibly the longstanding work of that committee, which for roughly 15 years had held open meetings, staged well-attended workshops, promoted scholarly panels, and hosted popular Special Interest Group meetings. I did so because I shared with many SLW colleagues the feeling that the bulk of the field of rhetoric and composition was, as Hall puts it, “sleep[ing] in” instead of paying broader attention to multilingual writing. And I did so despite my concerns that the letter ran the risk of casting scholar-teachers who were not disciplinarily grounded in second language writing as less-than-expert respondents to increasing linguistic diversity. As Hall observes, and as the letter emphasizes, L2 writing has been a transdisciplinary field from the start, which makes some L2 writing scholars’ full-throated defense of discrete disciplinarity puzzling on the surface.

But Horner suggests an interpretation. Rather than imagining disputes over boundaries “between” (if “between” is even appropriate sometimes) L2 writing and translingual approaches to be a matter of *disciplinarity*, Horner believes they reflect concerns about “departmentality”—a more local and institution-specific phenomenon marked by anxiety about how scholarly and pedagogical work is valued and recognized within the places it is most visible and vulnerable. While, Horner asserts, many compositionists have come to accept that multilingual classrooms and multicompetent students are a lived reality, we persist in acting as if we can more or less cleanly separate teaching and learning along highly questionable conceptual borders, such as “native” and “non-native.” While we may often imagine maximal diversity and plurality, we inhabit what Yasemin Yildiz (2012) has termed “post-monolingual” places in which traditional linguistic etiquette (and all the elitism and implicitness that term implies) still holds sway. Much as with debates about the identity, role, legitimacy, and effectiveness of “basic writing” at national and local levels, debates about what terms, theories, pedagogies, and structures constellate around multi/pluri/translinguality show a “productive gap” between discipline and department/program/curriculum. For instance, I often request meetings on my campus to discuss “international students” or “second-language writers” or even “ESL,” but I identify with fields that apply many bodies of scholarship to question what such terms include and exclude. And that, it turns out for Horner, is OK. It has always happened. Working the friction between critical thinking about the nature of “field” or “discipline” on one hand and the local force and vitality of departments and programs on the other is part of the job—another effect of “trans-” thinking that is also inescapably local.

Of course, students themselves do especially substantial work as they move among departments, institutions, homes, workplaces, and countries. Christiane Donahue has focused considerable scholarly energy on making arguments for writing as an international praxis. As she has consistently observed, *composition* is a US-centric discipline, but *writing* is, of course, global in teaching and research. It must be: students’ increasing demand for locally and globally responsive curricula and programs represents just one example of intensifying transnational mobility. Such trends mean that writing work is indeed also *language* work—a claim supported not only by contemporary exigencies but by historical connections among writing studies, linguistics, and foreign language pedagogy. As Donahue relates here, that history as well as ongoing scholarship across fields can productively inform composition’s discussions of both “code” and “transfer”—terms that carry different meanings and stakes outside the US. C.C. Hendricks strongly agrees that the field’s conception of transfer needs more nuance. She expresses concern that efforts to consolidate theoretical approaches to transfer and to measure transfer’s presence and impacts can lead to narrow generalizations about how students navigate unfamiliar academic contexts. While transfer scholarship can, she asserts, bolster WAC/WID’s conception of how students do in fact “write to learn” and “learn to write” across disciplines, WAC/WID can provide perspective on the diversity of writing as a context-specific tool: “moments of non-transfer,” Hendricks writes, “[can] serve as the impetus for critical explorations into the unpredictable interplay between writing, learning, and disciplinarity.”

The sharpest focus on students’ experience with and even creation of such unpredictability is in Anne Ruggles Gere, Anna V. Knutson, and Ryan McCarty’s contribution. In response to the frequent assumption that writing develops alongside increasing disciplinary expertise, Gere et al. present three students who traversed conventionally defined “humanities” and “STEM” with varying levels of comfort and success. In each case, the student was motivated by nuanced individual goals that did not comport with “disciplinarity” as a linear process of acquiring and emulating expert writing. A pre-med student who learned what he believed to be the important writerly ability to separate “scientific” from “interpretive” writing achieved high grades but suffered a loss of satisfaction as he felt compelled to prune “meaning” from STEM-based generic compositions. A second pre-med student also sharply distinguished STEM-based and humanistic writing, valuing writing in the sciences highly because, while formulaic at times, it seemed more straightforward and relevant to her career trajectory—a distinction that became

much blurrier in the actual delivery of her end-of-writing-minor portfolio, which featured creative writing and photography about addiction. A third student, earning a BS in English, employed personalized writing styles to make his detailed analysis of moves in an online game accessible to novice players. Where Hendricks argues that measures of transfer must be grounded in student reflections, Gere et al. point to the limits of metacognitive work among students in disciplinary “borderlands,” where affective considerations (including students’ complex motivations) and literal senses of place (such as one student’s belief that her research lab afforded collaboration in a way other academic spaces could not) inflect composition.

LuMing Mao also attends to place in an article that, ironically, represents a line of argument that seems quite overdue in WAC/WID, rhetoric and composition, second language writing,¹ and other intersecting fields that inform this special issue. For Mao, studies in comparative rhetoric proceed from a “profound respect for local histories and traditions as coevals with the dominant or the already-recognized,” while they simultaneously seek to discover and develop “terms of interdependence and interconnectivity” among all rhetorical contexts and actions. Comparative rhetoric can, he argues, encourage scholars and students to adopt a “meaning-making disposition” that they can carry into archives and other locations, sensitizing them to a need to ask both what is *present* (in the metaphorical or literal place) that may give rise to rhetorical similarities/differences with other locations, and what is *absent*. Those absences, Mao’s “facts of nonusage,” may be telling traces of rhetorical activities that have been ruled out/ruled unimportant by dominant/dominating Western academic ethnocentrists. This is the point on which Mao sees the most promise of connection and cooperation between comparative rhetoric and translingual approaches: if both are concerned with uses of language and instances of rhetoric that may be overlooked by those who hold inflexible views of “rhetoric,” “English,” and “writing,” both employ methods that may complement one another. While it may be that comparative rhetoric has often been in search of cultural and linguistic sources about which translingualist scholars might pose critical questions, the idea of thinking in fine-grained ways about place—its presences and absences—could productively bolster translingualist methods.

It may be best to conclude by recalling Jonathan Hall’s suggestion that “boundary play” may be among the most important work to be done now. “Play” may too easily suggest a lack of care or rigor, or it may suggest something like the “Wild West” metaphor Paul Kei Matsuda (2013) deploys to allege what he considers translingualism’s “fashionable” fixation on exotic differences (p. 132). But if “trans-” scholarship and pedagogy, as these contributors variously argue, need to follow specific composers as they do both metaphorical and very literal boundary work, scholars, teachers, and students need to take the playful part of such work seriously. They need to be prepared to encounter the productive and reflective idiosyncrasies Gere et al.’s student informants demonstrate as they adapt (and sometimes flout) emerging understandings of discipline for their own local goals. They also need to anticipate that invitations—even playful ones—to boundary crossing may be highly unfamiliar and uncomfortable. As Gentil and Hartse et al. observe, for instance, many composers no doubt feel strong attachments to local and historically sedimented language affordances. And dominant language practices, policies, and expectations can exert powerful pressure on professional and student writing in disciplines. Hall recognizes that students are not necessarily “chomping at the bit to code mesh, or to experiment in other ways with bringing their full communicative repertoire to bear on their academic written work.” But “writing to learn,” a foundational premise of WAC/WID, must include learning that what students may have thought they came for (error correction, discrete generic forms, received knowledge about code and/or disciplinarity) may not be the most important or relevant lessons at all. In many other fields with which WAC/WID scholars interface, students expect that their prior expectations will be challenged. Writing should never be an exception. “Trans-” work takes place: expert and novice composers already play, experiment, and invent across disciplines and across national and linguistic boundaries all the time. “Trans-” work also takes place: as

contributors to this special issue variously attest, it requires richly diverse empirical, theoretical, and pedagogical attention to local material, ecological, and cultural pressures and possibilities.

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Notes

1. In my own ongoing study, in which I am tracing uses of "rhetoric" through literature in second language writing, I was initially surprised to see that "comparative rhetoric" appeared so infrequently over the last 50 years of peer-reviewed scholarship. Xiaoye You (2014) observes that comparative rhetoric scholarship appeared in linguist Robert Kaplan's (1966) introduction of contrastive rhetoric—a hypothesis that has been widely influential in SLW scholarship and pedagogy. However, Xiaoming Li (2008) quickly dismisses comparative rhetoric's application to second language writing, citing her view that it is (solely) "historical, interpretive, and not directly pedagogical" (p. 19).

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