14 Beyond "Coping" to Natural Language Work: A Case Study at a Transnational Campus

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Abstract: Literature in second language writing often describes as "coping" a range of student activities, from creative attempts to clarify assignment prompts to relying on native/home languages to resisting teachers' demands altogether. While "coping" has provided valuable insights into the students' creativity that may be overlooked by their putative language differences, the term risks re-inscribing deficit-based thinking that students' creativity perhaps only appears in the face of intransigent faculty expectations. This chapter presents data from a case study of an undergraduate student at the Korean branch of a US-based transnational university. It argues that the student's nuanced academic work was consistently informed by her implicit desire to connect that work with other language acquisition in the complex ecology of the campus.

Keywords: second language writing, rhetoric, transnational, writing across the curriculum (WAC), Korea

Literature in second language writing points to a range of ways to theorize what Ilona Leki (1995) refers to as "coping strategies." Leki's qualitative analysis of interviews, observations, and assignment-based and research journal-based writing revealed student responses to writing tasks ranging from clarifying the demands of assignments to relying on their native/home languages to resisting teachers' demands altogether. In perhaps the most telling reported comment in Leki's study, her student "Ling" demonstrated her awareness of cultural/linguistic difference and her simultaneous desire to employ such difference productively:

> [T]he strategy that Ling used most effectively was taking advantage of first language/culture by relying on her special status as an international student. As the semester went on,

she attempted to incorporate something about China or Taiwan into every piece of writing she did, saying, "I am Chinese. I take advantage." Thus, her term paper in Behavioral Geography became a comparison of Taiwanese and U.S. shopping habits. Her term paper in World History became a comparison of ancient Chinese and Greek education and this despite her history professor's direct request that she not focus yet again on China. In this case she used a combined strategy of resisting the professor's request and of reliance on her special status as a Chinese person, and it worked. (Leki, 1995, p. 242)

As Leki's term has circulated in scholarship since, the concept of "coping strategies" has provided valuable insight into the creative ways students can exceed predefined limits imposed on them because of their putative language limitations. In Pat Currie's (1998) often-cited case study, her student, Diana, employed textual borrowing as a creative survival strategy, copying and pasting terms from a course text into her own writing as a way to satisfy her professor's and teaching assistant's goal of helping her adopt and adapt field-specific vocabulary. As Diana related to Currie in an interview,

Usually I stick to the book because they give you a better expression of what you're supposed to say. Usually you would say "department" but in the book they say "unit" and that will give you another terminology, so you won't just stay with certain areas. You try to expand your knowledge of what actually in society the people are using the term. (Currie, 1998, p. 10)

But while "coping" through imitation seems more positive and less academically or ethically fraught than "copying," I argue that the term risks re-inscribing deficit-laden implications that second language writers act with agency primarily, if not exclusively, in the face of intransigent faculty demands and rigid academic and disciplinary expectations. In other words, the term suggests not only that students can perhaps *only* "cope," but also that instructors and faculty members can *only* create inflexible assignments and evaluation/assessment mechanisms that necessitate students' coping.

My three-and-a-half-year longitudinal study of students and their instructors at a transnational campus (hereafter referred to as the "Asia Campus") suggests that students can and do act with considerably variable competence, and it also suggests that the ground for that competence is extremely nuanced and capacious. Despite assumptions that Korean students demonstrate

monolithic characteristics (including filial and social conservatism as well as a lack of spontaneous procedural knowledge of English), I have encountered students whose backgrounds, experiences, goals, and implicit awareness of the transnational campus' unique material and rhetorical affordances and constraints demonstrate surprising diversity. I have also encountered faculty informants who creatively negotiate their expectations, balancing a clear desire to support students' understanding of disciplinary expectations on the one hand with an awareness of how those expectations are under pressure in a transnational context on the other. In this chapter, I want to focus on one student's instances of "coping" that show not only her adaptive responses to writing/speaking tasks but that also hint at broader entanglements of assigning and doing writing, especially in a transnational setting. Overall, I argue, this student's work shows her development of more "natural" responses to the complex language ecology of her campus of a transnational university.

Sensitizing to "Coping"

I refer to "sensitizing concepts" here following Herbert Blumer (1954) and Kathy Charmaz (2003), who define them, respectively, as ideas that provide "reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (Blumer, 1954, p. 7) and as "starting points for building analysis. . . . points of departure from which to study the data" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 259) rather than stable theory machines into which we feed data for predictable results. Previous research has certainly sensitized me to the emergence of students' coping and to other evidence of their creative agency. In detailing Diana's strategies, for instance, Currie (1998) noted that Diana deployed textual borrowing in the absence of direct instruction about or scaffolding of writing in her management course. But beyond Diana's uses of textual borrowing to approach tacit generic and stylistic demands, Currie argued that Diana's strategy more broadly provided evidence of ongoing natural language acquisition and allowed her to "enact . . . the role of competent [organizational behavior] student" (p. 11), appropriating language to identify herself as an emerging member of an academic and professional community. She sought assistance from and invited knowledge sharing among peer students, modified sentence and paragraph structures to emulate explicit models she found, and—tellingly—strategically *avoided* textual borrowing when a low-stakes assignment made doing so unnecessary. For Currie, this last action of Diana's highlighted her awareness of a need to manage cognitive load, but it also showed that Diana did not simply default to copying out of a lack of competence. Congjun Mu and Suzanne Carrington (2007) discussed their Chinese student participants' similar man-

agement strategies: while their students read extensively in their fields for conceptual knowledge, they also clearly read to collect choice idiomatic expressions they could then paraphrase and repurpose in their own writing.

In studying South Korean high school and university students, Kyoung Rang Lee and Rebecca Oxford (2008) noted even more elaborate and, crucially, adaptive strategies. Where their high school student informants memorized and/or dictated expressions they encountered in relevant language learning materials, university students apparently felt freer to use more entertaining content, such as music, film, and magazines, and in some cases, they imitated favorite English-speaking actors or attempted to predict upcoming lines of dramatic dialogue. Underlying such adaptation and creative use of academic and entertainment material is what Xiao Lei (2008), following Leo van Lier (2004), described as an approach to ongoing language learning that "potentially involves the whole world" (Lei, 2008, p. 219). One of Lei's student informants, Henry, described his tendency to "extract some beautiful sentences and words from literary works, keep them in [his] notebook, review, recite, and remember them," using them selectively in his own writing. He went on to relate that sometimes the expressions "pop[ped] up in [his] mind" as he wrote (p. 224). As Henry and Lei's other informant, Jenny, reported, they could feel "temporarily immersed in an English environment while living in a Chinese-speaking society" (p. 225) as a result of such language work—an environment that Lei argued afforded them opportunities to feel like more "natural" composers of English.

The transnational campus where I have conducted research is a rich site where natural and artificial ideas about place, nationality, and conditions for education are in flux. US-based assumptions about higher education—ranging from the role of general education to faculty informality with students to the idea that "participation" in class can and should mean "individual speech" —interact daily with Korean assumptions about educational specialization and about wide distances between faculty and students. The mix is sensible on a daily basis, and it has required creative adaptation. Again, as I argue, students' own complex adaptation is apparent—and not merely "coping."

Campus Ecologies and "Natural" Language Work: The Case of Alice

"Alice" is a South Korean national in her late 20s who majored in communication from her enrollment at the Asia Campus in 2014 until her 2018 graduation. She attended Korean primary and secondary schools throughout her education and traveled briefly to Canada during high school. She has been and

remains active on social media—especially Instagram and YouTube, where videos and images show evidence of her interests in travel, food, and differences in the ways Koreans and Americans interact. Like many of her peers, Alice found the dual adjustment from high school English courses (which emphasized grammar and speaking exercises over writing) into the required first-year writing courses at the Asia Campus—and *then* from those courses into gateway news and magazine writing courses in the communication major—highly challenging. An additional course on public speaking prompted further anxiety among many of the students, even though relatively formal speaking contests are a staple of Korean middle and high schools. In the following excerpt, Alice relates her response to a speech assignment that shows clear evidence of what Leki and other scholars might well call "coping":

> Jay[1]: How do you feel like, well, do you feel like the way you write has changed since you've been here? You're in your fourth semester now, and, if so, how do you feel like it has changed as a result of being here?
>
> Alice: So, compared to my work during the first semester, I think it improved a lot actually. Yeah, because my English skills actually improved throughout the semesters and listening to professors' lectures, I guess-
>
> Jay: Listening to lectures helps
>
> Alice: Mm hmm, and actually reading a lot helps too.
>
> Jay: Can you be specific about how you've improved? Are there particular things that you've noticed that you feel more confident about?
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> Alice: So it's only about writing, right?
>
> Jay: Writing or speaking, I mean, they are related. So, if you feel like one has gotten better than the other, or things like that, that would be interesting to know.
>
> Alice: Yeah, ever since I took the public speaking class, it was Professor W.'s class, that one was a tough one. Cause he wouldn't give us an A if we tried to read from the paper. So

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1   All transcriptions use minimal markup provided by the professional transcriber. Deletion of end punctuation indicates at least some overlap with the next utterance. Ellipsis on an otherwise blank line indicates the exclusion of at least one line of quoted transcribed speech.

I have to memorize the whole speech. I had to. To get an A. So I did it for every speech.

Jay: Wow.

Alice: Like, which was about five to eight minutes.

Jay: So you were writing these speeches?

Alice: Yeah, I wrote the script and memorized the thing

Jay: Each time

Alice: Word by word. Yeah, each time, and I think that helped me a lot.

. . . Jay: memorizing, how did you go about memorizing the presentation? The speech you had to give.

Alice: The last presentation I gave was kind of huge because there was a speech competition. He [Professor W.] made a speech competition, like [Asia Campus] students, [another university's] students, yes, and I had to go there to just get an A. And for that, it was also long, it was an eight-minute speech. So what I did was I wrote the whole script and then I read it several times and then without script, I started giving a speech with my, what, recorder? And I, of course I would make mistakes. Whenever I would do it, I stopped that, and I'd listen to what I say and I'd do it again and again and again and finally I memorized the whole thing. I think it's also because I hear a lot what I'm talking about. Myself.

Jay: So you say the speech into the recording, you listen to it, and then you

Alice: Yeah

Jay: Okay, that was pretty fascinating actually.

Alice: So I don't think, cause even Professor W. didn't know that I memorize the whole thing.

Considering that the instructor had asked students to speak extemporaneously—not reading or memorizing—Alice's memorization appears similar to the kind of resistance Leki's student, Ling, showed. To be sure, Alice is highly motivated by assignment and course grades, and her perfect GPA at

graduation was a clear symbol of her desire to, as Leki's student, Ling, put it, "take advantage." Here, though, like Leki's student, Henry, Alice also shows complex awareness of and adaptation to other, less obvious considerations. Her listening to lectures, for instance, gave her a guide that could, like the expressions that "popped up" into Henry's mind, be available for later occasions, such as her speech.

Indeed, Alice's awareness of the importance of "natural"-seeming comfort with English even in academic or professional environments inflected her tacit definition of "research," a term that may have arisen in my student and faculty interviews more than any other single word:

> Alice: I think that writing well is, for students who are using their second language, I think research skill is actually different. So when I try to write my paper, I try to read it, just read news stories that are, even though, I mean . . . that are related to or not related to the topic I'm about to write. So that I can be prepared with my writing. And I think that's, that's research. No? Because it's really hard for us to create our own expressions. Cause it won't be natural.

> Jay: OK. You mean written expressions.

> Alice: No matter how we try, yeah.

> Jay: Why do you think, you said that research is especially important for students who speak English as a second language. Why is it especially important for students like you?

> Alice: Because without research skills, um, you won't achieve the, you won't be able to write what you want to write. I think whenever I try to write something, I try to find similar writings. I mean, similar expressions.

> Jay: So similar to the type of writing you want to do?

> Alice: Not even though when the writings are not related to my topic, at all, there might be similar expressions that I want to write.

> Jay: You're reading the sources that you feel you need to read in order to do the research. But then you also read other things.

> Alice: Other things too.

> Jay: And how do you find those other things if they're not related to the topic?
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> Alice: Just random things.
>
> Jay: Just random things.
>
> Alice: Yeah, I would, might be, I would maybe read textbooks or magazines. I don't know, and like, I just um skim through it and if I find similar expressions, that I want to write, I use that and after I do it like once or twice, it kind of, I can kind of memorize it so that I can use it again. It's not much problem later.

Alice here relates her adoption of an autodidactic method that foreign language teachers have long advocated—that is, reading whatever you can get your hands on in the target language. Interestingly, she shows (as a university student) some of the material selection techniques of *both* Lee and Oxford's (2008) high school *and* university students: among the "random things" at hand are secondary sources for class research, class texts themselves, websites, and quite likely, other textual and not-so-textual sources from social media, given her habits and interests. The combination of those interests and relevant media plus Alice's motivation to learn and rehearse course content for the A grades she felt she needed generated a storehouse for her expressions—and one that I believe is available to her in ways that are not strictly a function of memorization. Alice's hedging around how she "kind of" memorizes is telling: while individual expressions may themselves be important as task-based demonstrations of language competence (much as creating real or virtual decks of flashcards can help language learners expand vocabulary), Alice's browsing practices suggest routines and habits in line with her affective orientation to ongoing English learning.

In a very different assignment, Alice balances "natural" expression, formal writing, and a similarly broad implicit definition of "research" that to my reading demonstrates her negotiation of a need to be credible and creative within complex course- and institution-based expectations. As with "memorization," Alice's approach to "research" in this instance also points to an expansion of that concept's definition:

> Alice: So uh, for the abnormal psychology paper [in a course with the same title], I focused on defining the actual and true meaning of sexual masochism and sadism disorder.
>
> Jay: Okay.

Alice: Cause if it's going to be called a disorder,

Jay: Mm hmm

Alice: It has to have like some characteristics, 'cause um, not all the sadists, sadistic and masochistic behaviors are disorders. And the textbook defined what it was,

Jay: Yeah.

Alice: Shortly. So I kind of wanted to define it with more examples-

Jay: Okay.

Alice: From, I decided to use news articles, because I thought it was going to be easy for me to use real examples, like incidents that happened, with sexual harassment-

Jay: Yeah?

Alice: Yeah. Things like that. For the articles. So I, I did use news articles, two news articles for the paper and one, one scholarly article for the paper

. . . Alice: I chose it because I thought it would be fun, but actually it wasn't because it was harder for me to find like sources, scholarly sources, that was written about that. I mean, there were a lot of sources about that, but not many that I could actually use for the paper.

Jay: Why's that?

Alice: I don't remember exactly, but I think it was because it was too specific. And the textbook only defined the meaning, so to match with the textbook, I had to, yeah, I think that's why it was so hard, there wasn't a lot of sources.

Jay: So you thought it was going to be easy, it was not as easy as you thought it was going to be, how did it turn out? Like, how successful was it?

Alice: So, at first, I thought it was going to be easy, but then I realized that it wasn't too easy. But when I was using news articles, when I decided to use news articles, it became better.

Jay: Okay.

> Alice: Because my idea was to first talk about the subject, sadists, sadistic disorder. The sadistic disorder, I define it first, and then um, sadistic disorder and sadistic behavior are two different things, and then I thought, what is actual incident that is a disorder? If it's on the news, and the person was caught by the police, that's going to be a disorder.
>
> Jay: Yeah, sure.
>
> Alice: So yeah, that's how it became more easy.
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> Jay: I understand, because if you're seeing, if you're seeing examples in the news, those are very clearly very bad examples-
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> Alice: Yeah, criminal that has disorder, mostly, yeah.

For Alice, the textbook definitions and descriptions of specific disorders, while technically useful, did not provide enough descriptive range to motivate her writing. While she read her professor's insistence on APA formatting as a clear *formal* requirement, she also detected significant topical and evidentiary affordances beyond that documentation style, and she turned to news articles covering sexual assault to provide compelling heuristic detail. While her easy equation, "if it's on the news, that's going to be a disorder," is highly questionable, her strategy responds to the assignment's content flexibility, rehearses her copious approach to identifying and repurposing diverse source material, and specifically uses examples of newswriting—a collection of genres with which she had become familiar through other coursework and which she was motivated to learn to produce herself, owing in part to her already growing proficiency with and interest in social media.

Reflecting on interactions with faculty members, Alice relates her attempts to cultivate relationships that in turn afforded her not only additional opportunities to understand assignment and course expectations more explicitly but also to develop more "natural" language abilities. During an interview in her third year at the campus, Alice recalled a shift in her approach to reading that suggested an advantage of the small size of the campus:

> Alice: Before, I think, I think writing took more time for me to finish. Cause, I don't think I knew exactly what professors wanted. And, I was focused on understanding all of the materials I had, but I, as time went by, I realized it's not about understanding everything, so I started using some tactics that I could write things faster, and for, to be able to like, satisfy professor's needs, I think.

Jay: Okay, what kinds of tactics, you talked about tactics?

Alice: For example, like I told you um, if I was, if it was my first semester in language and culture class [introductory linguistics course], I think I would have tried to understand all the things in the articles.

Jay: If you had taken it during your first semester, yeah, okay.

Alice: Yeah, and I would have cried or something, every day. But I knew that the professor didn't want me to do that. I mean, he would want me to do that, but he knew that it was difficult, and what he mainly wanted was for us to focus on more important things that he taught during classes. Yeah, it's not, not um, it's not. Important things don't mean difficult things. I tried to, I kind of started understanding order, main things I have to focus.

Jay: So you were getting better at figuring out what the important things were.

Alice: Yeah, what to focus, and what to not use too much energy for.

Jay: Okay, okay, okay, how did you decide, do you think? What was difficult, and what was actually important?

Alice: Mm, first, I looked at abstract, and-

Jay: Okay, so the article, as you're reading the articles.

Alice: I mean, I read the articles, and I think I should understand everything, so I try to understand everything about abstract only, and then-

Jay: Okay.

Alice: Maybe a little bit about the conclusion, read the conclusion, and then I keep my, choose what to use from the body. Is if it's about articles, using articles, yeah. That's what I do.

Jay: Okay, okay, okay, yeah, are there other tactics that you've used? It sounds like the tactic there is that you've learned to read, like if you're looking at really difficult articles, you read them, you choose what to read, you're being selective about

> what you read, rather than trying to like start at the beginning and go all of the way through?
>
> Alice: I talk to professors. And I focus on what they say, because I think, if they're giving us what to write, like, assignments, they want something, I think. And I think the most important thing to focus on is to that, what they want. What they want to try to teach us, through the whole classes. Um, yeah, I try to think about that, and then I try to listen to what they say, and I try to talk to them personally, if I can. I could all the time, because it's a small campus here. That was really helpful, for me to understand what they wanted.

Alice's general approach is easy to characterize in terms she, herself, provides: give the professor what they want—an approach that underlies many coping strategies. Beneath that superficial description, though, lies a more complex response rooted in Alice's ongoing language learning and socialization. Granted, even as an introductory course, the language and culture class Alice remembers typically includes at least some examples of scholarly literature, which can overwhelm students with jargon and give rise to the kind of survival impulse ("understand all the things in the articles") Alice mentions.[2] Again, on the surface, Alice's habit of regularly meeting faculty members in office hours appears to be a ploy to determine what they really want. But the motivations surrounding Alice's interactions with faculty members are nuanced—as are faculty members' own motivations for meeting Alice and other students. While Alice relates, for instance, that the instructor for her language and culture course may ideally have wanted her to learn "all the things in the articles," she suggests that his more pragmatic attitude was that "important things don't mean difficult things." It is not clear from Alice's comments whether that phrase came word for word from her instructor or whether it represents her pithy summary of what she was learning as she developed time/load management strategies through the language and culture course. However, her comment provides evidence of at least implicit negotiation of expectations between student and faculty, and it also points to a range of both academic and social rationales for individual meetings.

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2   That impulse to "understand all the things" was visible one of the first days of my first semester at the campus, when I walked into the classroom to which I was assigned to find the whiteboard covered with math terminology. I asked one of the students why it was all there, and she told me several students had been in the room late the night before writing and memorizing the terms for their online math course.

Alice repeats her goal of learning more and more about "what they [faculty members] want," but she also expresses that she consistently tries to listen to them—in class and one on one. Read in a wider context of Alice's desire for more natural English language ability, that emphasis on listening reflects the specific goal of listening for evidence of assignment/course criteria, but it also reflects a broader goal of listening for acquisition more broadly.

Discussion: Language Work in Transnationally Nested Eco-Systems

Writing teaching and learning at the Asia Campus inevitably interanimate with other activities and phenomena, exemplifying what Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) in the context of human development termed "a system of nested eco-systems" subject to perturbing or ripple effects from one scale to another. Thus, Alice's "coping" is more appropriately understood as a range of actions that account for ecological complexity, and teachers' expectations are more appropriately understood as negotiations within the ecosystems that nest and overlap at the Asia Campus.

To be sure, Alice's language acquisition continued throughout her time in her major. But as van Lier (2004) argues, language learning is emergent: it arises from a collection of elements in ways that, even if the elements can be counted, exceed that sum. Using the metaphor of young children learning the game of soccer/football, van Lier notes that basic rules eventually give way to young athletes' development of a "feel for the game" in which "the game reorganizes itself from 'running after the ball wherever it rolls' to 'moving the ball around collaboratively in strategic ways'" (p. 81). Elsewhere, van Lier argues that "teaching does not cause learning" (p. 196) any more than rules "cause" the game. While the "rules" of the "game" remain consistent, the ways players orient themselves certainly evolve as play continues so that knowing the rules however well does not directly translate to effective play. As Christine Casanave (2009) argues in describing the "language games" of graduate students in her study, the game metaphor, while seeming to be an unserious way to describe the importance of language work in multinational/transnational settings, accurately captures the tenuous balance of rules, boundaries, and creativity inherent to language acquisition. Indeed, Diane Larsen-Freeman (2015) presses on the term "acquisition" itself and argues for a shift in applied linguists' thinking from *acquisition* to language *development* because she understands the former term to be inaccurate. Acquisition for Larsen-Freeman implies that there is a stage at/beyond which a person developing language competencies may "have" the language, while development suggests precisely

the kind of emergence "through use in real time," evolution, and synergy that is more typical of ecologies (p. 494; also see Marshall & Marr, 2018; Marshall & Moore, 2013).

If the contexts in which Alice and her faculty members/instructors teach, learn, and work are nested eco-systems, it is perhaps no surprise that "natural" emerges as a way to describe desirable language development. Lei (2008) argued that the students in her study "felt that they could write real English, that is, create a natural English flavor" (p. 225) in a predominately Chinese-speaking context to the extent they had access to English-language media and literary models. Lei analyzed students' work, following tenets of activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999; Prior, 1998; Russell, 1995, 1997; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996), as "mediated actions which are consciously taken to facilitate writers' practices in communities" (p. 220), and it seems clear that Alice's work responds to a very wide set of community considerations. Alice's memorization-for-extemporaneity approach to composing and delivering a public speaking assignment was strategic, and even resistant. Her academically purposeful research and frequent office visits were clearly also socially inflected opportunities to habituate to what she considered natural expression and interaction.

Reconceptualizing students' coping as a range of "natural" adaptations to a nested ecosystem should prompt greater awareness for teachers, students, and researchers. The "linguistic environment immediately increases in complexity when we envisage a learner physically, socially, and mentally moving around a multidimensional semiotic space" (van Lier, 2004, p. 93). So, the shift from seeing "coping" to detecting "natural" language work is a way to recast multilingual composers in terms that foreground their agency and also the agency and adaptability of instructors.

However, given the complexity of this transnational educational experiment, it is important to note that students' agency may lead to outcomes many educators may not prefer or may critically question. In Alice's case, for instance, her experiences in major coursework, as a teaching assistant, as a social media user, and as a media intern led her to an initial career choice as a so-called "star teacher" in Korea. Korea's overheated English education market makes such a choice indeed seem to be a natural one: the most famous teachers in after-hours "cram schools" (called *hagwons* in Korea) and/or on television can earn millions of dollars annually (Fifield, 2014). Thus, Alice's own awareness of Korea's educational ecology prompted her to act in a way responsive to available resources not only within her transnational campus but also within the whole transnational educational and social scene she inhabits. Just as there is no way to disentangle the educational experiment from

the nested university, national, and neoliberal/international ecologies that inform transnational education, there is no way to disentangle students' and instructors' interactions and reflections from the affordances and constraints that enable and help direct them.

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