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Literacy Narratives Across Borders: Beirut and Dearborn as Twenty-First Century Transnational Spaces

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This chapter reports on a research and teaching collaboration among students and faculty at American University of Beirut and University of Michigan-Dearborn and suggests some of the paradoxes about the transnational spaces we and our students inhabit. The authors posit the locations of Beirut and Dearborn as representative of broader trends and as particularly “transnational” locales. Introductory writing students interviewed partners overseas via technologies such as Skype and then composed literacy narratives based on those interviews. The corpus for the analysis includes the literacy narratives and reflective writings of approximately 150 undergraduates at the two universities.

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In higher education, context is everything; the world beyond the classroom shapes research agendas, methods, teaching, and student learning. In recent decades, the global migrations of students and the proliferation of new communication technologies have opened up students' perspectives and complicated their backgrounds, increasing dramatically the cultural and linguistic diversity of our classrooms. Shifts in higher educational policies and practices worldwide—the rapid growth of new institutions of higher education and international branch campuses (IBCs); regional “harmonization” initiatives such as the Bologna Process aimed at fostering international student and faculty movement across national borders; and the surge in online programs—comprise a response to and consequence of higher education as an increasingly transcultural and transnational space (for more information about IBCs, see Hodges & Kent; Miller & Pessoa; and Rudd & Telafici, this volume). This chapter describes a pedagogical project that takes into account this larger picture of itinerant student bodies, changing subjectivities, and institutional flux, situating it in the context of the global turn in writing studies. This project suggests that writing and the exchange of ideas in transnational contexts are meaningful to students, and it considers what scholars might learn from students as a result of these exchanges. This chapter also suggests some of the paradoxes about the transnational spaces we and our students inhabit (for a faculty perspective on transnational exchange, see Theado, Johnson, Highly, & Omar, this volume).

This chapter reports on a pedagogical partnership among four faculty members at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and four at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (UMD), wherein students in eight first-year writing sections were partnered with overseas peers to conduct interviews and write literacy profiles and follow-up reflective essays. In creating this partnership, we wanted to give students the opportunity to investigate one another's literacy practices as they lived, studied, worked, and socialized in Beirut (Lebanon) and Dearborn, Michigan (US).

Beirut and Dearborn are representative of broader, global trends and are uniquely “transnational” in terms of their linguistic, cultural and national diversity. Lebanon's capital city confounds and defies easy categorization due to religious, ethnic, economic, and linguistic pluralism. In the *Hamra* neighborhood surrounding the American University of Beirut, for example, one finds western fast food chains alongside family-run bakeries specializing in *man'oushe*. Dearborn, Michigan, the home of Ford Motor Company and, for much of the twentieth century, a segregated, white residential community, has become home to large diaspora communities from many countries, including Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. Like the area around AUB, the immediate envi-

rons of the University of Michigan-Dearborn are multilingual (Lebanese-dialect Arabic in particular is commonplace), and commuter students can find a pre-class *man'oushe with zaatar* as easily as an Egg McMuffin. These two very different places are, at the same time, linked by the migration of residents as well as business and economic ties. In short, we posit these two locations, Beirut and Dearborn, as at once particularly “transnational” locales—for example, in terms of linguistic, cultural and national diversity among students—and at the same time as representative of demographic and socio-cultural trends in increasingly globalized, higher education contexts more broadly.

Beirut has historically been viewed as a meeting place of cultures. Many of the AUB students claim membership in diverse communities simultaneously. Often they have more than one nationality and have lived parts of their lives in different countries. They belong to privileged classes not only economically but also symbolically in terms of their knowledge of different languages, their ability to travel abroad, and their access to an elite, private institution of higher learning. Many of the Dearborn students come from lower-middle or working-class backgrounds, and many also have various “hyphenated” identities and labels (Arab-American, first-generation college student, Muslim-American, non-traditional), arguably placing themselves on the margins of dominant North American academic culture. This atypical situation of an encounter between the West, which has some roots in the East, and the East, which has claims on the West and its way of life, challenges conventional definitions of the local and the global and makes the distinction difficult and uncertain. Putting the local and global in contact and dialogue with one another moves the emerging context away from static and homogeneous notions of tightly bound context or community, as Canagarajah (2002) puts it.

University students require rhetorical dexterities and sensitivities to navigate increasingly postmodern, global contexts—contexts where identity and culture are dynamic and shifting, and where linguistic, racial, and ethnic differences are everyday realities. Further, as institutions of higher education respond to imperatives to provide critical and contextual literacy training, we believe they also (paradoxically perhaps) ought to consider local attributes, literacy practices, and material conditions as resources to provide these types of critical, literacy lessons (see also Nebel; Ronesi, this volume).

Background and Methods

The idea for the transnational collaboration described in this chapter initially emerged from an extended collaboration between Willard-Traub's classes at UMD and classes at a French university, which in turn led to the establish-

ment of “cross-cultural” writing sections at UMD. When DeGenaro subsequently was appointed as a Fulbright scholar at the American University of Beirut during 2010–11, he and Willard-Traub established a “pilot” collaboration that joined their writing classes across institutions in doing literacy narratives of overseas partners. While working at AUB, DeGenaro met AUB co-authors Khoury, Sinno, Iskandarani, and Arnold. During the 2011–12 academic year, we, the co-authors of this piece, along with two additional faculty members at UMD (who later opted out of the data analysis for this project) collaborated to develop an IRB-approved joint pedagogical project called the “Beirut-Dearborn Writing and Learning Collaborative” (BDWLC).

Specifically, in this project we paired students across institutions and asked them to conduct interviews with one another using Skype, Facebook, or another form of social media, to learn more about one another’s literacy practices. We asked students to find out about the types of reading, writing, school, and social media activities that occupied each other’s lives on a daily basis. Students then composed literacy narratives based on these interviews—profiles of the literate activities of their peers abroad. The corpus for the present analysis includes the literacy narratives and reflective writings of approximately 150 undergraduates at the two universities who, working in English during the Winter/Spring semester of 2012, conducted interviews of overseas partners, wrote literacy profiles about their partners, and reflected in writing on their experiences.

Methodologically, the faculty participating in this project received IRB approval for their project at their respective institutions in Fall 2011, and a third party collected informed consent in early Spring 2012 from students enrolled in the faculty members’ respective sections of first-year writing. After the conclusion of the Spring 2012 semester, the co-authors anonymized the data, attaching pseudonyms to all student writing, and worked individually and then together to rhetorically analyze texts produced out of eight sections of first-year writing courses (four at AUB, four at UMD). During this collaboration the authors communicated electronically via Skype, email, and an online discussion forum in order to generate initial impressions about the data.

In formulating these initial impressions, each collaborator identified key themes in the writing and areas of pedagogical concern. We decided methodologically on a close, rhetorical analysis of the student writing in large part because the literacy narrative assignment itself was an inherently rhetorical task, one that required students to take into account in their writing and their own data collection (i.e., in their interviews) an initially unfamiliar “audience” (though many students came to know their partners very well, and even reported maintaining close ties after the conclusion of the assignment).

We compared our first impressions in order to identify overlaps and potentially to reconcile any conflicting interpretations (though we did not encounter these). Collectively, our analysis was informed by the work of scholars in rhetoric and composition, literacy studies and applied linguistics, especially those who have advocated for research and teaching that consider the consequences of composing in transnational and global-local contexts, such as Suresh Canagarajah and Alastair Pennycook (linguistics), Christiane Donahue, Bruce Horner, and Min-Zhan Lu (rhetoric and composition), Deborah Brandt (literacy studies), and Cynthia Selfe, Gail Hawisher, and Patrick Berry (technology and literacy).

Through this analysis, we identified the following themes and areas of pedagogical concern discussed in this chapter (N.B.: pseudonyms used throughout): students' conceptions about literacy development; the role of empathy in students' emerging sense of themselves as writers and critical users of language; students' attitudes toward language and the value they attached to multilingualism; and students' tendency to rely on overgeneralizations or simplifications about their overseas partners' experiences in ways suggestive of the material effects of globalization.

In our analysis of the student writing, we kept in mind admonitions by U.S. scholars Christiane Donahue, Chris Anson, and others against adopting a hegemonic, "import-export" model of U.S.-based writing instruction (see Donahue, 2009). We also hope that this transnational project will go beyond a neo-liberal "accommodation" model of writing instruction geared primarily to "equip[ping] students as 'global citizens' who are at ease with transnational structures of employment, residency, and commerce" through developing skills with intercultural and technologically mediated communication (Payne, 2012, p. 2)—alternately conceiving of our work as a pedagogy of "intervention" (Horner, 2012) that acknowledges pragmatic needs while foregrounding context and students' awareness of their own subjectivities and perspectives.

By encouraging students, as they generated complex definitions of "literacy," to consider the flux of contexts and their own shifting, hybrid, and dynamic identities, loyalties, and language practices (Starke-Meyerring, 2005, p. 476-477) this project ultimately challenged the usefulness of a notion of borders as rigidly "fixed" and supported Lebanese sociologist Samir Khalaf's (2006) emphasis on the importance of open exchange in a diverse public sphere among multiple, complex and shifting perspectives across national contexts. At the same time, informed as it was by U.S. writing studies, conducted only in English, and comprising a required assignment for students, this project was never free from ideology or cultural influence (an irony not

lost on some students). We continue to be attracted nevertheless to the ways in which the contours of a collaborative assignment, along with the unique sites of our institutions, have the potential for illustrating borders and contexts in flux, and to the ways in which such a project is generative of unique, transnational narratives of students, institutions, and geographic places.

Students' Conceptions of Literacy and Writing

Email discussions, reflections, Skype conversations, and drafts culminated in the literacy narratives. In examining these literacy narratives, AUB and UMD investigators noticed that student attitudes about literacy and writing evolved, both cognitively and affectively. We theorize that this maturation came about for two reasons: First, students engaged in discussions about the concept of literacy, in which traditional and non-traditional literate practices were explicitly considered. Second, students were involved in a transnational exchange that challenged their assumptions about the "other." In short, the particular demands of the assignment not only helped students come to terms with a theoretical understanding of literacy, but also encouraged them to recognize and articulate similarities, differences, opinions, and competing values as they examined the question of literacy together.

During their interactions, partnered peers negotiated their definitions of literacy, which ranged from a perception of literacy as the simple ability to read and write to a more elaborate awareness of literacy as intricate and multimodal. Some students equated literacy with awareness of context, "a way of life and without it, people can't live and function properly because they lack one of the most important necessities of life." Definitions also included "backgrounds[,] . . . parental support as well as childhood reading material." Students also discerned different types of literacies, including digital, social, and legal.

Student definitions or descriptions of literacy in their narratives assumed that literacy was rooted in education, but what constituted "education" varied for AUB and UMD students; discussions of literacy led to the realization that literacy was complex and composite, a sum total of diverse skills and resources in addition to those provided by formal education. For example, students identified interpersonal skills as part of literacy education, writing that "developing social skills at university, in a new environment, and meeting new people can also be defined as literacy." Adapting one's qualifications and skills to the context, being socially dexterous, as well as interviewing a stranger, became for students components of literacy.

Analysis of the literacy narratives and reflections also revealed students'

conception of writing. Having an audience in a different national context helped illustrate what adapting to a new reader really entails for students. Reviews completed by peers at their home institutions were especially helpful for making students more aware of the potential for disconnect between writers and readers. Advice received from peers refined their conceptions of academic writing to include validating claims and including sufficient detail to satisfy readers' needs.

The differences between personal, creative writing and academic, standardized writing was a central concern that came up frequently in the literacy narratives. To some AUB and UMD students, "creative" writing was seen as an expression of emotions and inner self, as a way to deal with life and its challenges. One student wrote, "... I came to the conclusion that ... expressive writing, varies depending on culture, the social constraints in academia put in place to standardize writing created distance between the writer and their audience." Thus, in this student's narrative at least, academic writing was seen as constrained and externally imposed whereas creative writing was perceived as more enjoyable and inspired. Creative and free-writing came to be a way to "work through the multitude of emotions [students were] facing." One student pointed out, "writing can be a way to escape solitude. ... a type of anger management, but also a place to express myself ... Like a diary with character."

Writing was also clearly seen as performative, a way to get good grades by following the prescribed conventions. Many AUB students seemed to learn from the example of their UMD peers to include more detail, examples from personal experience (which could be said to be more discouraged in the Arab world) and integration of authoritative sources. Thus AUB and UMD students had to negotiate the cultural dimensions of writing conventions and the institutional differences between, for instance, how much "the personal" was accepted in academic essays.

Further, AUB and UMD students sometimes incorporated classroom jargon, co-opting terms like *rhetorical situation*, *discourse community*, and similar disciplinary terms into their writing. That these are largely terms from U.S. writing studies suggests perhaps a hegemonic force at work, despite the best intentions of this transnational, global exchange. At times these terms also have a rote feel in students' literacy narratives, something the students themselves picked up on and wrote about. One student decried the "structural limits put into place by authority figures," finding them stifling and leading to the student's dislike of academic writing.

Nonetheless, AUB and UMD students alike felt that academic writing should please the teacher and meet with the assignment's predetermined cri-

teria. This was also noted in the peer review process (again, a peer review completed by local or overseas peers) that followed the interview and first draft of the literacy narrative. Although a systematic analysis of peer review comments was not a part of this study, we noted anecdotally that some peer reviewers seemed to replicate the teacher's role, while nevertheless seeming also to challenge their partners to think more metacognitively.

Differing levels of formality in format, style, tone and even content also allowed students to think more deeply about cultural dimensions of audience. Some UMD students expressed surprise at the level of formality of their AUB peers' texts, noting that the tone in their peer's emails was more appropriate for communication with teachers. The inclusion of formal components such as a salutation and complimentary closing, as well as formal tone, sentence structure and paragraphing, were surprising for UMD students who expected less formality in communication with overseas peers. Such encounters seemed to bring with them increased awareness of audience and content in a mediated context.

Empathy and Transnational Literacy Narratives

The long distance one-on-one conversations between AUB and UMD partners about their feelings revealed moments of empathy. Mead (1993, p. 27) defines empathy as the "capacity to take the role of the other and to adopt alternative perspectives vis-à-vis oneself." His definition highlights the cognitive component of empathy where the empathizer is actually able, through understanding the object of empathy, to actually put himself/herself in the role of the other. Rogers (1969) states that emphatic understanding "means temporarily living in [the other person's] life" (p. 4). Clearly, a reflective interaction between the self and the other is essential in the development of empathy among individuals. The current viewpoint that this generation's seemingly increased social connectedness and involvement is often only superficial was frequently challenged in our globally connected courses.

An analysis of the narratives revealed that the most dominant layers of connectedness among students were Davis' (1983; 1996) perspective taking and empathic concern. Though it may not be surprising to find incidents reflecting empathy on the surface level, instances in literacy narratives based solely on online exchanges that show closer connectedness and more involved empathy seem significant. For example, Lina, an AUB student, speaks of her illiterate grandfather. Janice, her UMD partner, intrigued by this fact, concludes her paper saying, "Maybe I will write a book and I'll have it made into an audio book for all those who might not be 'literate'." This student's em-

phatic concern that motivates her to want to take action to help others shows what West (1993) describes as a “capacity to get in touch with the anxieties and frustrations of others. . . . The moment of connection means never losing sight of the humanity of others” (cited in Schneider, 2005, p. 206).

Indeed, some students demonstrated an attitude of receptiveness, understanding, humility, and ultimately empathy. Karim, an AUB student describes the process through which he learned about “himself” through his talks with his UMD peer, Gina:

When I first started talking to Gina, I was surprised that she was very nice and very helpful, but what truly shocked me is that Gina didn't think that American people are better than others. It was then that I realized that it wasn't Gina that was ethnocentric; it was me.

Talking to his peer allowed Karim to revisit his preconceptions about Americans. He was guided by the responses to interview questions he received from his partner and was able for the time being to lay aside the views and values he held for himself in order to enter Gina's world without prejudice (Rogers, 1969). More importantly, he was able to adopt alternative perspectives vis-a-vis oneself (Mead, 1993), for he learned more about himself through the process of getting to know his partner, and in the process he and “the other” juxtaposed their positions by discovering that he might be the source of prejudice, and his partner a victim of it. In this sense, Karim entered Gina's world through a mirroring process (Bloom, 2013) and realized that what separates the self from the other has become fuzzy and blurry.

Another example of the adoption of an alternative perspective, vis-à-vis oneself, is an AUB student, Yousef, who described his UMD peer in empathic terms:

Even though he doesn't have to pay for college, he works 35 hours per week at a grocery store. When he told me this, I was stunned and embarrassed because I have never worked in my life and always relied on my parents. I believe this experience not only made me realize how lucky I am but also broadened my mind because it let me see a real example of the American way of life, not the one we see in movies or read in books, far from preconceptions, far from the single story of the US aka the American dream.

Again, students had the chance to think about the literate lives and material lives of their partners, as Yousef in the above quotation comes to a

realization about the socio-economic realities of his partner David. The ethnographic and personal nature of the exchange allowed the students to go beyond simple us/them dichotomies. This sometimes resulted in clichés of homogeneity in their writing, but sometimes fostered very concrete specificity as they described one another's lived experiences around reading, writing, and living in the global twenty-first century.

In an even stronger instance of empathic involvement, another AUB student reached the point where he was reflecting on his own priorities:

[My partner] has put her priorities straight; work and education go first, and then goes leisure and fun afterwards. She is a non-stop worker. She barely has the time to enjoy her weekends or even her vacations. On a Sunday morning in Michigan, she was forced to cancel our Skype session because she was called into work. It made me sad. I wasn't sad because she canceled the interview, but I thought it was too much for a 17 years old girl. I remember that Sunday, I had nothing to do, I was lying on the couch watching TV after a tiring week, and she was still working. I told her every time we talked "I'm not going to pressure you, consider it part of your free time."

Thus, it could be argued that these exchanges not only precipitated peer empathy but, through this empathy, facilitated a better understanding of the self and other cultures.

Another AUB student compared her experience with bullying in middle school to her partner's experience:

Since I had myself been rejected during that time, I immediately related to his story. I couldn't believe that a guy like him would be categorized as a "weirdo" and he couldn't believe that a girl like me didn't have friends. This brought us closer, and I think that what I've learned from working with him is that, no matter how different we think we are, how our perceptions of the world can be divergent, we all face the same obstacles: having a blurred identity as teenagers, always trying to fit in, being judged by others and afraid of standing up for ourselves.

The AUB student analytically compounded both experiences into the universal narrative of being bullied, where the self is reflected in the mirror of the other. This is likely an example where our own assignments needed to

encourage students to go beyond the imperative to homogenize, connect, and empathize via signifiers like “bullying.” In this instance, students may have had the rewarding experience of connection but may also have lost an opportunity to articulate and grapple with nuance and difference.

Effectively, the transnational exchange gave students the chance to hear stories and share their experiences, thereby creating a dynamic interaction among voice, identity, and context. It is this interaction that helped them showcase their feelings of empathy and integrate the experience of the other into the story of the self. Not every experience was positive—or empathic. One AUB student, who happened to be Muslim, wrote that she was “disappointed about how little people in the West know of our lifestyle, religion, and traditions. I discovered this when my partner called the mosques ‘Muslim churches.’” The UMD student may have connected with the AUB student by linking the mosque with “the church” in her own background. However, this “connectedness” remained one-sided for it was not recognized as such by the partner, reflecting a one-dimensional perspective. Of course, the UMD student was an anomaly in many ways—studying (and perhaps living) in a city full of mosques and not being familiar with the term—but her lack of familiarity created a negative impression that her partner generalized (“people in the West”). However, across these varied moments of connection, it may be argued that the virtual journeys and communication mostly fostered transnational empathy with other individuals and contexts, the “unothering” of the other. In many instances, the journey turned out to be one of self-discovery where learning about the other was often a vehicle to unfolding the self or at times even an ingredient in knowing oneself.

Students’ Attitudes to Language and Multilingualism

Our purpose was for students to develop a more critical and sensitive relationship not only to others, but also to language. While our primary concerns as teachers of English-language writing courses tend to focus on rhetorical situations in English, students’ attitudes towards multilingualism may in fact be important considerations that closely relate to conceptions of “self” and “other” (for a description of other students’ attitudes about multilingualism, see Ronesi, this volume). The transnational dialogue among our students elicited explicit writing and reflection about multilingual language practices. The literacy narratives therefore offer an important place to begin analyzing what attitudes about language(s) can tell us about literacy and learning as well as the ways in which transnational collaborations can benefit both students and teachers who are negotiating monolingual contexts and expectations. It

should be noted that these exchanges among students were not always English monolingual, even though students were enrolled in English-medium institutions. In several instances where the UMD student spoke Arabic, partners chose to communicate in a combination of English and Arabic.

For some UMD students the language practices of their peers in Beirut appear to have been central to their understanding of AUB students' identities—at least according to the titles of their literacy profiles: "A Language Beside One's Own," "Tongues of the World," "Fluencies," "An Outburst of Miscommunication," "The English Language," and "The Language of Lebanon." Often UMD students were fascinated by AUB students' multilingual lives: Beirut students' knowledge of multiple languages really distinguished them in the eyes of their American counterparts, though occasionally UMD students used diction ("outburst of miscommunication") suggesting a negative connotation for these same skills.

Students' actual discussions about language practices in the literacy narratives reveal a set of assumptions and stereotypes about what languages mean in context, particularly as they are used by "foreigners." For example, some UMD students expressed surprise about their partners' fluency in English, revealing no knowledge of Lebanon's multilingualism, sometimes juxtaposing this with admiration for their multilingualism. Of course, given the background of many Dearborn students, linguistic realities in Beirut were not unknown to many of them and in fact, many Dearborn students are also multilingual. However, this knowledge and personal capability did not keep students from commenting on their AUB partners' use of English in particular. For example, a UMD student points out that her AUB partner, whose "father is Lebanese and mother is German," "speak[s] to [her] mother in French and Arabic to [her] father." She then writes that "Listening to [her partner] answer my questions and speak in English was cool to me because I felt as if I was speaking to someone attending . . . [UMD]. Her English was really good and the more we talked, the more we figured that we are pretty similar." Even though this UMD student had the ability to speak in Arabic with her partner, she seemed to feel more comfortable communicating in English for this project and she felt a certain familiarity in doing so, perhaps because she considers English to be the most appropriate language for school or educational purposes. Other possible explanations are that because she and her partner were communicating across a social media platform, English seemed most appropriate, or that they associated English with youth culture (both students mentioned communicating with their parents in Arabic). Or, perhaps a variety of reasons—conscious or unconscious—prompted the students to use English. Regardless, the exchange itself gave the students agency to

make a choice about what language they preferred, or perhaps an opportunity to engage in code-meshing if they chose, and, later, to reflect on those choices.

UMD students frequently commented on the perceived, practical value of the multilingualism of their AUB peers, noting, for example, the professional possibilities language skills represent. Others focused on the educational and cultural use-values of English for their overseas peers. One UMD student (mis)characterized the study of English at AUB as the study of a foreign language, when in fact most Lebanese students grow up learning English from a very early age, synchronously with other languages. Drawing on her own experience as a monolingual student studying in the US, the student wrote of her partner's literacy: "I was intrigued by her wanting to pursue an advanced comprehension of English since I thought that a foreign language, in general, would be less focused upon overseas, as it is in the United States." This student's ready assumption about English's use-value, her assumptions about her partner's capabilities in the language, and her North American frame of reference led her to characterize other subjects as "more demanding" and the learning of languages, in general, as a "useless" pursuit. As with most facets of literacy, attitudes toward multilingualism among UMD students were varied and informed by lived (sometimes limited) experience.

For their part, AUB students also seemed interested in making connections with their peers' language capabilities or attempts to learn other languages. In the connections that they made, however, AUB students tended to suggest implicitly (and perhaps accurately) that they were the experts vis-à-vis multilingualism. For example, one AUB student noted that her partner "just speaks English, but he took one Spanish course at school . . . I took English and Spanish courses at school, but moreover, I can speak French and Arabic. The fact that he doesn't travel that much can be the cause of his lack of second language. He never traveled outside USA, he didn't need to use another language than English." Again, the subject of literacy allowed the students to explore each other's material lives—in this case, including contrasting exposure to language study and contrasting socio-economic status as well. On one hand, the UMD student is positioned (perhaps accurately) as being in a privileged position because he doesn't "need" to speak any other language, which, of course, might be an anachronistic observation if one believes that in the era of globalization we all "need" multilingual and multicultural skills. Paradoxically, this observation about the student also reveals that despite speaking a global lingua franca he still does not have access to international travel—suggesting, perhaps, a certain irony regarding elements of western hegemony.

Another student found her partner's interest in French "intriguing" but

also problematic. In response to her UMD partner's explanation that "I wanted to major in French because I find it so interesting that one person can just switch languages and it is not gibberish," the AUB student offered a soft critique, writing that, "His remark was very acute, yet it overlooked an important aspect of being multilingual: one does not simply 'switch' between two languages. In fact, the transition between two tongues is often paved with struggles." Again, the AUB student is in the position of speaking from experience and authority.

Some AUB students articulated similar assumptions connected to the monolingualism of their UMD partners. One AUB student, for example, was surprised by her monolingual partner's perceived imperfections with written English, writing that "As I was expecting, Denise was fluent when it came to speaking English. It's the main and only language that she speaks. However, I was amazed how she never got the hang of writing!" Another AUB student, however, offered a telling anecdote: She asked her UMD partner what languages she speaks and was told, "It is funny to ask such a question, because it is uncommon for Americans to know more than one language." The AUB student reflected, "I think maybe their language is the worldwide used language so they are not in need to know another one." In this case, the AUB student did not belittle her partner's lack of languages other than English but rather understood her partner's monolingualism as evidence or consequence of English's global value. Further, her words at the same time offer a subtle (or perhaps not-so-subtle) critique of the hegemony of English, suggesting her coming to a tentative conclusion that monolingualism might itself represent privilege.

Challenges and Limitations of the Project

As our collective experience attests, and as some of the examples above illustrate, the integration of a transnational exchange within a writing class—while certainly providing students with an innovative and engaging learning experience—does not mean that students' writing will achieve the level of richness or complexity we know, or hope, is possible during an opportunity such as this. Ultimately, we realize that our students are still practicing writing: in writing classes, students are attempting to find a voice that will be legible within academic contexts (for a discussion on students' struggles to achieve authorial voice, see Jarkas & Fakhreddine, this volume); they are often negotiating the social, educational, and cultural differences between high school and college; and more practically, they are struggling to understand and meet the expectations of their teachers. It is not a surprise, therefore,

that we found our collaboration not only rewarding, but also challenging and limiting. We articulate some of these limitations here and consider some revisions we have undertaken in subsequent collaborations.

As we have already noted, students on both sides of this exchange expressed surprise and often delight at finding that their partners were so much “like” them. For example, they felt they shared a sense of the importance of relationships with family, and some shared affinity for European and U.S. literature and music. This identification at times led to expressions of empathy and concern for each other, with some students reporting they planned in the future to stay in touch over Facebook or hoped to meet some day when traveling abroad. Such reflections, taking place outside the assignment proper, exemplify the potential materiality (Bleich, 2013) of transnational language exchanges. That this exchange was, itself, focused on the uses of language in students’ lives—on their own experiences with literacy—perhaps made for an even more profound experience of this materiality.

As has been pointed out, however, students tended also at times to over-generalize about their own and others’ experiences: presenting (or at least being perceived by their partners as presenting) their own individual experiences as representative of either the US or Lebanon (or the Levant more generally), and then generalizing yet again about how their peers’ experiences were like or were different than their own. Ironically, perhaps, feelings of empathy in students could increase a tendency to over-generalize: in such a transnational exchange and collaboration, over-identification with partners’ experiences may be as problematic for students’ critical reflection about how literacy, schooling, and culture are complex within and across geographic, national and institutional boundaries, changing over time and as individuals and contexts change. In other words, a “simple” kind of empathy or over-identification could well undercut the exchange’s potential for promoting a strong, material agency on the part of students for whom the conclusion, “Well, we’re so much more alike than I ever would have imagined,” neglects important differences.

We are not suggesting, of course, that we would want to discount our students’ discoveries about similarities or discourage their feelings of empathy in favor, conversely, of overstating the scope or significance of difference (which would be just as inaccurate). Still, with such projects it is important to keep in mind, as feminist rhetoricians Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol (2005, 2011) also have suggested, that western representations of o/Others may serve uncritical, globalized discourses and political hegemonies (even when those representations purport to serve purposes of advocacy) if—in attempting to prompt western audiences to connect or empathize with o/Others—they

elide important (material) differences in lieu of newfound “understandings” and feelings of empathy, or take on a “paternal,” “maternal,” or “rescuer” orientation.

This outcome—the ability to recognize commonalities without defaulting to uncritical, “universal” understandings—requires time built in to the assignment for the kind of reflection that Jacqueline Royster and Gesa Kirsch (2012) call “strategic contemplation” (p. 84). Relatively early on in her literacy profile, for example, one UMD student reported that even though her AUB partner very much enjoyed writing, including writing for pleasure outside of school, her partner had decided not to pursue writing as a career. Mary quotes her partner first as giving this reason for not pursuing a career as a writer: “Becoming a writer is one of my dreams but in this digitized world, I believe there isn’t a place for writers anymore. In Lebanon and even in other countries people don’t tend to read like before. These days people are on the internet 24/7.”

The generalization made by Mary’s partner that there is no “place for writers” in a digitized world is one that appears to have stood briefly without challenge in the interview/conversation though not, ultimately, in Mary’s essay. Mary further goes on to quote her partner as identifying yet a different (and perhaps more compelling) reason for setting particular career goals: “I’d love to become a writer but unfortunately writers don’t make money these days and you know what a big role money plays these days. . . . Despite that I have to tell you, something changed my mind a little bit and gave me some hope. I watched a video called Chimamanda Adichie: The danger of a single story. Please try to find this video on YouTube and watch it. Because of this video now, I believe that if I have the will to deliver my words to people, I will find a way to do so one day.”

In this example, Mary’s partner reflected upon Adichie’s TED talk, which had been shown to her class, as an opportunity for strategic contemplation trained on her own generalizations about literacy. Mary, on the other hand, ended her essay by coming to two conclusions, both generalizations unsupported either by her own or her partner’s experience, or by other data: Mary concluded first that U.S. students see writing as a more viable career option than do students in Lebanon; and second, she concluded that this was true because of the relative, greater freedom of expression that exists in the US compared to Lebanon. Further, Mary came to these generalizations despite also saying she believed that “all college students” everywhere have been “brainwashed” to think they must choose careers based on how much money they stand to make in the future. While she says in her essay that she is struck by her partner’s mentioning a few times having “hope” for a less circum-

scribed future, Mary fails to follow up on how or why such hope might exist for her partner—losing an opportunity to reflect critically on the limits of her own generalizations.

Once our study was completed, two team members (Willard-Traub at UMD and Iskandarani at AUB) continued to engage our students in the transnational exchange during four additional semesters, through Fall 2015. The extended collaboration/interview/literacy narrative was again assigned to students, but with three major changes designed to increase the opportunities for all students to engage in strategic reflection and revision. First, the student exchange was preceded with a required writing task that formed a shared basis for exploring notions of literacy. This task also focused students' attention on a nuanced argument about generalizations based on cultural difference. Specifically, the assignment asked students to summarize the main points and respond personally to Adichie's TED talk entitled "The Danger of the Single Story" mentioned in Mary's essay. In the talk, Adichie speaks directly to how single "stories" that generalize the experiences of those who are culturally and/or linguistically the "Others" function, and how these stories have material consequences on their lifestyles, literacies, and career opportunities.

Secondly, the two collaborating team members involved themselves in the large group dialogue with all of their students, each Skyping into full class meetings with each other's students to talk a little about themselves and answer questions about the aims of the assignment. During these Skype sessions, the two team members introduced themselves and opened the floor to student questions that often paralleled the sample interview questions that were an integral part of the interview process. Students asked about their professors' lifestyles, their literacy habits, and they often ended up sharing with them little vignettes from their lives. In effect, they modeled a collaborative interview, with whole classes participating in the exercise.

And finally, the two team members used reflection as a critical intervention strategy, asking students to send copies of the revised essays to their partners who, after reading what was written about them, reflected on those texts. Specifically, they asked them to respond to the following questions:

How does it feel when others have written about you? Were you surprised while reading your partner's paper? Did your partner present a new perspective about your culture? What do you have to say about "seeing yourself through your partner's eyes"?

Through this opportunity for critical reflection about their own and their partners' observations and values, and the differences among these, students

repositioned themselves as emerging writers who could analyze and generalize the experiences of those coming from another cultural and/or linguistic background, and who also could interpret the impact of these narratives on their own material lives.

In Fall 2014, the assignment was further enhanced through the addition of another opportunity for strategic contemplation—and for accountability—on the part of students. Indeed, once the students had exchanged their final drafts with overseas partners, they filled out peer review forms which required elaborate feedback in the form of comments, criticism, and suggestions. In this way, students were involved in a more focused type of reflection while maintaining some level of control as well. These transnational peer reviews allowed students not only to correct mistakes of fact, but also to negotiate the meanings and limits of generalizations about experiences.

Even with these revisions in place, we acknowledge that improvement in critical thinking and writing practices takes time; no single assignment or assignment sequence should be understood as a “magic bullet” that can resolve the difficulty every writer experiences as he or she navigates the numerous rhetorical choices involved in composing for a variety of audiences. With this caveat in mind, we see the transnational exchange required in our assignment as particularly fruitful in that it encourages students to consider perspectives and lives other than their own. The exchange required students to listen and respond to a peer, leading them to identify commonalities and differences toward a better understanding of themselves and others. Even when these commonalities and differences are expressed in stereotypical or simplistic fashion, we believe the process of engagement and dialogue—and the moments of empathy and recognition that students experienced as a result—suggest that they are primed to think in new ways about the world and the people who live in it. We argue that such priming represents a positive consequence of the exchange, in that it may inform future ways of writing and will certainly last far beyond any given semester.

Conclusion

The transnational exchange fostered an awareness of what Eileen Schell (2006) has termed “rhetorical location” (p. 168), an awareness that forging an effective relationship with a particular audience also must involve articulating a relationship to the culture(s) and language(s) of the communication context. As students communicated with their partners and gained more understanding of their peers’ ideas, circumstances, experiences and context, they not only gained more understanding of themselves and their situations as writers,

but also entered and constructed a mediated, transnational community. All of this made them more aware and hopefully more critical of their role and position as writers, of expectations and conventions, and of possible alternatives for communicating their ideas, helping them to realize that as writers they make choices about strategies. They could contest, negotiate and or adapt as they practiced their agency (Bourdieu, 1986).

Part of the appeal for students which they expressed in their reflections was that the subject matter meshed with the reader, and inevitably with the writer him- or herself. Writing about their partners became a way to write also about themselves, as they reflected on how their and their peer's experience, ideas, values, and understandings compared. This Russian-doll situation fascinated students and made the assignment appealing in spite of the difficulties AUB and UMD students faced with logistics like conflicting time zones and very different university calendars. Students in academic writing courses do not always have opportunities for writing about themselves and/or their peers as literate agents but, in this instance, they had the chance to at once analyze literacy practices and take part in those practices as well. Students experienced a sense of satisfaction because in the context and community of an academic writing course they practiced agency in giving a voice to a subject which is usually alienated, to borrow Foucault's notion (Rabinow, 1991). The context in which students' writing was created was the most notable aspect of the transnational exchange. Though the students were composing in a supposedly global context, they were creating through their exchange their own local context, or perhaps more accurately, a local-global context that contradicted stereotypes about Orient and Occident.

A consideration of students' individual reflections, both contained within their literacy profiles and as commentaries upon reading the profiles others had written of them, offer insights about a larger institutional ethos for such projects—an ethos centered not simply on preparing students for living and working in globalized economies but rather (or also) centered on students' ongoing development as language users and as critical thinkers about language use within contexts that are both local and global simultaneously. When we think then of larger, institutional ethos, we might also consider how projects such as these both communicate and help shape an institutional awareness about rhetorical location, especially on the part of universities which are notoriously slow to change despite the fact they serve students coming from increasingly diverse socio-economic, cultural and geographic backgrounds—students who themselves are already (or soon will be) moving into and out of complicated transnational and transcultural spaces. Such transnational pedagogies challenge programs and institutions more broadly

to conceive of their mission also as interventionist, as not simply preparing students for jobs and careers within a global marketplace but as preparing them also to act within those contexts in ways they ordinarily might not, perhaps ways that even subvert widely held values or practices of the marketplace. In short, transnational projects such as these model for students the agency they purport to teach; that they model that change over time is a necessary condition for such agency.

For programs and institutions as well, such opportunities for critical reflection about shared values and differences in mission are important to initiating and evolving partnerships. What does each program/institution have at stake in any given project? In what ways (if any) do students have the opportunities to examine their home—and partner—university’s “stake”? An analysis of our collaboration, for example, might also profit from a consideration of how being at “American-style,” English-language universities affected the outcomes of the exchange. An analysis also might profit from considering how differences in students’ socio-economic status—in addition to national and cultural backgrounds—affected the exchange. Many students at UMD for example were in awe of AUB students’ relatively extensive experience with private secondary schools and travel abroad, and AUB students were in equal amazement about the number of hours a week students at UMD work at outside jobs. It’s fair to ask the question whether students’ differences socio-economically, even more than culturally or linguistically, weren’t some of the most important differences in this exchange, especially given the realities of the globalized economy in which all of them find (and will continue to find) themselves living and working.

Projects such as ours have the potential for turning institutions “inside out” in ways that can drive other changes. These changes might include new programs and courses, such as the “cross-cultural writing” sections now offered in the writing program at UMD, as well as broader, institutional changes such as a greater appreciation and integration of translanguaging approaches to language difference advocated by many scholars (e.g., Canagarajah; Horner, Lu, Royster & Trimbur; Tardy). Such projects also might be expanded as part of signature efforts in the first year. In *Developing and Sustaining Successful First-Year Programs* (2013), Greenfield, Keup, and Gardner describe programs and the “high-impact” pedagogies attached to them which are designed to promote student engagement and help ensure success and retention in the all-important first year—optimally on any one campus a constellation of programs, curricular and co-curricular. Often, however, such programs necessitate a change in institutional culture, in particular because they require collaboration with a range of constituencies on campus and involve signifi-

cant faculty development. Having said this, what would a project like ours look like were it to be expanded to include faculty and students working in courses in the social or natural sciences, or professional schools? How might beginning students in engineering, for example, benefit from a collaborative exchange about professional aspirations within globalized, corporate contexts? What would be the benefit for students new to a pre-med major, or to a major in education or business, of a transnational exchange that emphasized collaborating with diverse others? Projects such as ours raise many exciting questions and possibilities.

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