Re-Addressing the "Problem of PCW": Rethinking a Bridge-Writing Course in the Interest of Supporting Multilingual Students

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how a first-year writing program evolved to provide better access for its multilingual students, many of whom are heavily represented in the bridge-writing course: PCW (or Preparation for College Writing) that precedes the program's required first-year writing course (WRA 101) at a large R-1 U.S. institution. Informed by a translingual approach and with the support of the department, a highly committed group of mostly non-tenured PCW teachers initiated and implemented changes that included three pedagogical changes: 1) the explicit framing of PCW students' languages and cultures as assets, sites of inquiry, and resources for learning; 2) the incorporation of multimodality as a primary tool for the students to use, as they expressed their ideas, cultures, and aspirations; and 3) an ongoing orientation of these students to the university and academic cultures. The article then provides specific curricular examples (activities and assignments) that enact these pedagogical innovations.

Key words: Translingualism, multilingual learners, asset-based pedagogy

Introduction

This article describes how a first-year writing program evolved to provide better access and support for its multilingual students, many of whom are heavily represented in its bridge-writing course: PCW (or Preparation for College Writing) that precedes the

required first-year writing course (WRA 101) at Michigan State University (MSU), a large R-1 U.S. institution. These changes were designed to meet the needs of a new student demographic and reflected our evolving understanding of first-year writing pedagogy overall.

Several years ago, six PCW professors and two administrators undertook a grant-supported review of the course, which at the time comprised as many as 80% multilingual students from countries such as China, India, and Venezuela, but also from the U.S. (children of migrant workers, refugees, and immigrants). At the time, the committee that advises the director of the first-year writing program had been discussing the 'problem of PCW'—a course that was widely recognized as a pedagogical headache, and one that many of our teachers, untrained in ESL, tended to avoid. But acknowledging this concern was also the impetus for change—as members of this committee formed a subcommittee that took on this course challenge, and with the support of the program director, wrote a grant to address it. Meeting monthly for the next two years (2012-2014), and drawing on translingualism (Lu & Horner, 2013) and asset-based pedagogies (Paris, 2012; Gonzalez & Moll, 2002), a team of first-year writing teachers then proceeded to revamp PCW, creating curricula and learning goals that now frame students' languages and cultures as sites of inquiry and resources for learning. In today's course, PCW's multilingual students are invited to incorporate aspects of home languages and cultures into their assignments, thus challenging many assumptions of standard English as an international lingua franca; conversely, it asks what ends up lost when a student's home language and culture are silenced. At the same time, PCW students are invited to place their languages and cultures in relation to the university and academic cultures of which they are also members. Finally, the revised PCW treats standard English, and academic culture, as respectively another "language" and "culture" to examine and question, along with the power structures embedded therein. Noting Canagarajah's (2013) remarks that the "trans" in "translingual" is also "transmodal," and that people utilize all semiotic means at their disposal (e.g., not just words) to negotiate meaning with others, the revised PCW has students expressing their languages and cultures *multimodally*: a pedagogical move that allows PCW multilingual learners to use means other than alphabetic text in standard English to communicate their ideas, cultures, and languages (Tan & Matsuda, 2021).

This paper describes the original PCW innovations, all designed to give the multilingual learners in this course greater voice, and provides curricular examples— many of which have also now been shared, vis-à-vis pedagogy workshops, with writing teachers on and off-campus. Indeed, PCW faculty and four multilingual undergraduates recently formed a team that has been researching linguistic injustice

across national borders (de Costa, 2020; Lippi-Green, 2012; Milu, 2021), and making related videos for use in workshops for teachers at Michigan State University and beyond. In short, our story is the story of how in querying the "problem of PCW," we developed an array of responses, curricular and pedagogical, that provide greater access and support for our multilingual students. Moreover, since the PCW teachers also teach the regular first-year writing course, and through their now-yearly workshops on teaching multilingual learners offered to all first-year writing faculty these PCW innovations have found their way into the other first-year writing courses as well.

Institutional Context and PCW History

The curricular moves detailed here occur in the context of a bridge writing class (PCW) at a large U.S. R-1 institution that experienced a marked increase in its international students—as high as 5 to 8% yearly—over a ten-year span (Statistical Report);[1] by 2012, one in every 13 undergraduate students was non-U.S., as well as most (as high as 80%) of the students in PCW.

The first change made to PCW emerged in response to this demographic shift. At the time, the learning goals and curriculum of PCW closely mirrored those of WRA:101, the required first-year writing (hereafter referred to as FYW) class that followed. Instructors dubbed the "old" PCW a "pre-peat" (and the WRA:101 a "repeat"): because minus one assignment, this version of PCW used the same FYW curriculum as the WRA:101 course that followed. PCW was also a course that instructors without ESL training tended to avoid. Discussing these concerns vis-á-vis a program committee and seeing the demographic change as an opportunity for pedagogical innovation, a group of six PCW teachers and two administrators (one of whom was the program's associate director) applied for and received an institutional Creating Exclusive Excellence Grant (CIEG) to implement curricular innovations that would support diverse students. From 2012-2014, seven of these faculty met monthly to query the PCW course, read and discuss relevant scholarship, and propose changes. In 2014, the FYW program held an all-day retreat, facilitated by the program's director, in which the group's work culminated in the first articulation of learning goals for the

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[1] Due to the pandemic, and changes in visa regulations during the Trump administration, that increase slowed, and in fact reversed over the past three years—though the university remains committed to its global mission, and anticipates bringing in significantly more numbers of non-U.S. students in the future.

course, which framed students' languages and cultures as "sites of inquiry and resources for student learning" ("Learning Objective," n.d.).

Then from 2015 to 2016, a group of PCW faculty—at the request of the subsequent program director—continued to gather. The result of this work was a shared Wiki page of resources, along with the elaboration of two additional PCW goals (as subsequently approved by the program director). These new goals included a focus on multimodality and the orientation of PCW students into the university; the Wiki page ties these goals to specific PCW assignment examples. Thus, as currently presented on our program's website, PCW learning goals are:

- Drawing on students' languages and cultures as sites of inquiry and resources for their learning.
- Using writing and multiple other forms of communication (multimodal, embodied, reading, speaking, listening) as means to identify, understand, and place the "self," and to communicate that knowledge to others.
- Fostering the students' introduction to, and integration into, MSU cultures. (WRA 1004/0102: Preparation for College Writing Curriculum)

In creating the second goal (multimodality), the PCW teachers were especially influenced by the program's biennial First-Year Writing Conference, an end-of-term celebration of students' work in remix form (e.g., videos, podcasts, games, websites). The teachers noted the extent to which PCW's multilingual students give the conference an international appeal — one which in turn contributes to the rich intercultural understanding noted among the U.S. students who attend and participate (Meier et al, 2018). Indeed, the conference helped underscore the extent to which multimodality was a key mode of learning and expression for the program's multilingual students overall, who readily relied on non-verbal forms (beyond alphabetic text) to communicate their ideas to others.

Evolving similarly from ongoing PCW teachers' conversations, the third learning goal—that of orienting its students to the university—reflects instructor commitment to providing access to the primarily multilingual (along with first-generation, U.S.) students in the course. Overall, PCW teachers have noted the extent to which these course goals position students as experts and as one another's teachers, through the sharing of home cultures, home languages, and their growing understanding of academic cultures. In turn, the frequently multimodal means by which these ideas and experiences are expressed enhances class communication and understanding; the ideas and cultures thus becoming more visible, more available to

all. This is not to say that such practices do not also inform the WRA 101 course, but rather that they are the heart of PCW. Whether examining and sharing their own languages and cultures, or growing their understanding of academic cultures and MSU, the PCW students learn within a pedagogical framework that explicitly views their ideas, backgrounds, and knowledges, along with their communication repertoire (languages, codes, discourses) as assets, not deficits, and as key resources for their shared learning.

In the intervening years since the first PCW group of teachers came together though, many changes have occurred. For one thing, ravaged by the pandemic and anti-Chinese sentiment in the U.S., the population of international students at our institution has decreased by nearly four percentage points. In addition, the FYW program instituted a directed self-placement module, and this plus a shift in advising structure means that all incoming students are now placed by default into WRA 101, the regular FYW course that follows PCW. These changes mean the PCW course has shrunk significantly, from eight to ten sections per semester, to only a handful now. Still, many of the shifts in the PCW course have moved forward into WRA 101. Since nearly 10% of our student population continues to be non-U.S., members of the original team of PCW teachers regularly offer an annual faculty workshop for their colleagues on teaching the multilingual learners in WRA 101, through which the translingual approaches and assignments of PCW are shared with the larger community of FYW teachers. In addition, two of the original PCW teachers now mentor a team of four to five multilingual undergraduates (from Thailand, Malaysia, China, and Mexico) and one graduate student (from Ghana) through the research and production of a series of animated videos, on various topics related to teaching multilingual students from a translingual perspective. Elements of these videos have since been incorporated into faculty workshops both at our own institution and beyond, including annual workshops for our own FYW teachers, trainings for the university's Writing Center tutors, and most recently, for teachers in our college (through an Inclusive Pedagogies initiative) and university (through the Center for Teaching and Learning). Finally, Multilingual Learners team members are in current discussion with university administrators about incorporating aspects of our teaching videos into the mandatory DEI training for all faculty, students, and staff.

Instructor Profiles

The proud granddaughter of immigrants, Joyce grew up in a bilingual household, where Polish was often spoken as much as English. While her doctorate (from the

University of Iowa) is in English and American literature, she has done research and taught courses in African American and ethnic American literature. For seven summers, Joyce taught intensive English to Japanese college students, as part of a preparatory program at Coe College, Iowa, before these students went elsewhere in the U.S. for their college exchange programs. Because of the high number of international students at MSU—at the time, mostly from China—Joyce has also taught college students *in* China, at the Harbin Institute of Technology, during the summer of 2015. She has led multiple program initiatives in support of international and multilingual learners, and most recently, has been working with a team of teachers to develop an anti-racist pedagogy handbook for FYW.

Xiqiao is a Chinese-English bi-literate scholar who came to the United States as an international student in her early twenties. She received her graduate degrees in rhetoric and composition and literacy education and had taught FYW at other institutions. Her own struggle to add English to her linguistic repertoire and familiarity with FYW curriculum and pedagogy helped her gain an appreciation of students' languages and cultures as assets. Her own ethnographic research into Chinese international students' literacies, identities, and mobilities has also informed her pedagogy, which aims to unravel the inherent heterogeneity of Chinese international students' linguistic and cultural repertoires. It was through the programmatic initiative described here that she became informed of translingual theory and pedagogy.

Cheryl earned a doctorate in comparative literature (English, American, French and Russian) at the Sorbonne, writing a dissertation on Bakhtinian literary polyphony. She found the experience of studying in a foreign language and culture endlessly fascinating. Seeking to enhance her understanding of second-language pedagogy, she did a postgraduate degree with a small cohort of twenty international teacher-students at the British Institute in Paris, and then taught ESL (English composition, literature, translation and phonetics) at the Sorbonne, the American University of Paris and the Institut Catholique de Paris, as well as businesses and government agencies, for 20 years. Returning to the United States, she began working with FYW students, finding a particular connection with international students facing some of the same challenges and opportunities she had herself experienced. After a few years of attempting to use the existing PCW curriculum, she wrote a proposal for a more asset-based and translingual approach and was invited to join the group engaged in redesigning PCW.

Other teachers who have invested considerable time in the teaching and re-configuration of PCW include a teacher originally from China, whose (U.S.) Ph.D. from Purdue highlights ESL; a teacher originally from Nepal, who speaks six languages

and who edits multiple journals and books in multilingual pedagogies (including the *Journal of Global Literacies, Technologies, and Emerging Pedagogies*); and most recently, a Ph.D. writing and rhetoric student from Korea, who engaged the PCW changes when she taught this course; this teaching in turn has impacted her doctoral areas of research. In other words, supporting multilingual learners through both PCW and now WRA:101 has gone from something that many of our teachers once dreaded, to something that many of our teachers now embrace. One remaining 'problem of PCW' is that the demand to teach PCW has increased while the number of PCW students has gone down; in other words, there are no longer enough sections of PCW to teach.

Scholarly Context: A Translingual Approach

Centering Students' Languages and Cultures

Informing our pedagogical innovations is the work of Horner, Donahue, and NeCamp, in their call that teachers move from "English only to a translingual norm" (2011). Such a view presents languages as fluid, negotiated, emergent, and contextual, rather than static and discrete (Lu & Horner, 2013; Horner & Tetreault, 2017), and grants "agency to language users" to mix and change languages without seeing such mix as evidence of "linguistic failure, cognitive incompetence, or cultural threat" (Horner & Tetreault, 2017, p. 4-5). The "translingual turn" in composition studies views difference as the norm, and as resources to be cultivated. Students are invited to "acknowledge and confront" their "relationship to language ideology" (Lee & Jenks, 2016) as well as to their own languages and cultures, thus developing a "disposition of openness and inquiry toward language and language difference" (Lu & Horner, 2013, p. 585) as well as a "rhetorical sensibility that reflects a critical awareness of language as a contingent and emergent, rather than a standardized and static, practice" (Guerra, 1998, p. 228). As Lee and Jenks (2016) argue, multilingual and monolingual students alike can engage in this examination of difference, as they consider the various practices of translanguaging, and their own responses to the languages of others. Such a view is coherent with translingual theorists' arguments that all meaning-making acts involve "traffic in meaning," where one manages the "passing to and fro of ideas, concepts, symbols, [and] discourses" (Pennycook, 2008, p. 33). It is this flow, co-constituted with languages and cultures, that PCW students are encouraged to surface and analyze.

The composition classroom is the ideal site for such translingual work, as it is a "space in which students develop a self-reflexive awareness of the complexities" of

the "ways in which knowledge is constructed and mediated through various forms of text and textual production" (Lee & Jenks, 2016, p. 322). Moving away from a deficit perspective, which views language differences and irregularities seen in student writing as problems to eradicate, a translingual approach supports student agency by building on students' funds of knowledge (Gonzales & Moll, 2002) and supporting students' practices and dispositions to explore "what they care about people, languages, and cultures in which they are identified and may identify, and how and why and when to do it" (Lu & Horner, 2013, p. 600). Within such an asset-based pedagogical framework, our instruction and assessment of writing honors, rather than punishes, students who produce language that differs from "the hegemonic norm" (Inoue, 2017 p. 129). Following Inoue's call, our classes theorize language difference as a "much richer matter than correct or incorrect usage" (Horner & Tetrault, 2017, p. 11): that is, as a resource that teachers respect, listen to, and work with students to negotiate. In our classes, assessments of student learning are tied to students' own metacognitive reflections on their own (trans)languaging practices, language conventions (e.g. grammar) are framed as rhetorical constructions rather than punitive standards, and cultural differences are positioned as venues for leveraging cultural expertise and developing cross-cultural communicative repertoires (Matsuda & Silva, 1999).

Expressed Multimodally

If translingualism focuses on the shifting complexities of linguistic negotiation as language users move meaning across languages, it becomes important to consider trans-modality as a key form of such communicative work. Students draw on their dynamic semiotic repertoires, encompassing sounds, visuals, graphics, gestures, and ecologies to make their stories, experiences, languages, and cultures visible to others. Canagarajah (2013) has long asserted that language users leverage all available semiotic resources for meaning making, making it necessary for translingual theory to go "beyond words and accommodat[e] other semiotic systems" (p. 450). Such theoretical insights have been supported by empirical research that demonstrates how multilingual writers exhibit enhanced sensitivity and communicative dexterity as they layer meaning through multimodal meaning-making (Gonzales, 2015; Wang, 2020). In similar ways, translingualism and multimodality speak against a monolingual/monomodal ideology that subsumes nonstandard languages, modes, and genres in ways that deprive students of access to valuable linguistic and semiotic resources (Horner, Selfe, & Lockridge, 2015). Scholars have called for strategies of multimodal composition as a means of cultivating students' rhetorical sovereignty: their "right to identify their own

communicative needs, to represent their own identities, to select the right tools for the communicative contexts within which they operate, and to think critically and carefully about the meaning that they and others compose" (Selfe, 2009, p. 618) and to provide multiple pathways towards meaning-making (Shipka, 2011; Wang, 2017). As Julia Kiernan (2015) puts it, "modality and semiotics are central components of the translingual approach" (p. 304).

Querying the University and Academic Culture

In a curriculum that centers students' languages and cultures, their broader transition into the university has evolved as a key site of inquiry, with the norms and practices of academic cultures becoming objects of analysis. Critiquing that teachers often attempt to "get students to engage with the academy, but not necessarily be inducted into it" (41), Canagarajah (2002) argues for a more critical and nuanced teaching stance that recognizes that multilingual students' relationship to the institution entails ongoing negotiation. Such negotiation begins with an acknowledgement of different axes of power; engages with arenas for negotiation as students shuttle between the linguistic and cultural codes of home, community, and university contexts; and provides space for students to develop critical and rhetorical understandings of how languages and cultures constitute axes of power in the world. Just as PCW students had been articulating in class their understanding of taken-for-granted codes from their own home cultures and languages, they came to see, identify, and interpret parallel (and differing) linguistic and cultural codes of the larger institution. Such work is particularly urgent in light of instructor reluctance to adopt a translingual perspective in their composition courses, as they are fearful of disciplinary or institutional pushback (Ozer, 2021). In PCW classes, learning and teaching about the languages and cultures of the university entail collaborative efforts to acknowledge, define, and question academic norms.

Considered together, these scholarly conversations informed the revised PCW as a site for translingual negotiation evoking ongoing processes of collaborative inquiry. Instead of approaching English as a lingua franca, PCW students' experiences with multiple varieties of English become resources that are surfaced and leveraged (Lavelle & Agren, 2020). Students in such a course gain authority through instructing other students and their teachers about their languages and cultures (Gramm, 2020), which creates a "learning opportunity" and a "nexus of inquiry" (Lee & Jenks, 2016). In short, a translingual approach has teachers "learning about, with, and from their students how to teach them" (Gallagher & Noonan, 2017, p. 168).

PCW Learning Goals, Enacted through Class Activities and Projects

The sections below describe three key projects by PCW teachers, along with accompanying assignment "riffs" from other instructors. Note that in presenting these, we present somewhat different projects that still fit one or more of the learning goals cited above. Our program's philosophy toward the PCW course is exactly this: as long as the course goals are met (and assessed through the program's Annual Review processes), assignment variations and innovations are possible, especially as teachers are then urged to share these out with the larger FYW community. Indeed, our shared PCW Wiki page is designed around the three learning goals listed above, with links to the specific assignment examples that meet these. Borrowing the metaphor from jazz musicians, who improvise based on a single line of music, the word "riff" suggests the collaborative, interactive quality of the pedagogical conversations that the PCW teachers have engaged in, as they evolved similar but differing curriculum that supported the newly articulated learning goals. Also, though each section illustrates a particular PCW learning goal, their implementation frequently addressed more than one.

Crossing Cultures: Multimodally

I Am From Poetry is an assignment that Xiqiao offered to support students' development of strategies for inquiring into linguistic and cultural differences. The assignment responds to calls to position translingual practices as enabling "students to construct and constantly modify their sociocultural identities and values, as they respond to their historical and present conditions critically and creatively" (Garcia & Wei, 2014, p 62). Undergirding the assignment was an interest in understanding transnational students' literacy identities as negotiated through the mediation of artifacts, rituals, narratives, and texts (Leander & Rowe, 2006; Wang, 2020). According to Stewart and Hansen-Thomas (2016), *I Am from Poetry* sanctions a space for students to purposefully examine transnational experiences, to experiment creatively with translanguaging, and to leverage cultural and linguistic resources for critical reflection, thereby encouraging students to understand their literacy repertoire and identity as shaped by and shaping their social worlds.

This poetry assignment consists of whole-class reading of multicultural texts, freewriting about cultural themes, sharing of artifacts, and collaborative writing and reading of multimodal poems. Each element connects to students' transnational lives and allows multiple opportunities for translingual performance. At the outset, the class

reads biographical poetry about the transnational life of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, and autobiographical accounts by multicultural authors (Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue," Judith Ortiz Cofer's "The Myth of Latin Woman"), with the conversation focused on understanding culture as a fluid composite of experiences. Such conversation is followed by inventive activities that encourage students to name culturally significant memories and experiences. Using photos from their personal albums, students explore visceral experiences with their home communities, with one student recalling the spectacular blossom of a magnolia tree planted by her grandfather, another describing a family ritual of making rice dumplings and yet another detailing daily trips to the local wet market for groceries. Students are then invited to select artifacts representative of such cultural experiences, which invite additional inquiry. Following such inventive activities, students use the original *I Am from Poem* template (Lyon, 1993) to develop sensory details encapsulating memories of homes, neighborhoods, cultural beliefs and practices, or culinary traditions. Using prompting questions such as the following, students integrate sensory details into a multimodal poem, with key concepts illustrated with photos.

- Which smell reminds you of your favorite season? Is it associated with a local plant, a cultural activity, a dish, or an animal?
- What is a childhood activity you enjoyed doing with your family?
- Which family tales were passed on from one generation to another in your family?
- Where do you spend the most time in your home? Why?
- What spiritual rituals are performed in your home?

This assignment provides students with an opportunity to explore important cultural, religious, and gender frames that shape their identities, as illustrated in the following example.

I am from farming hoes.
From ancient versatile and agricultural hand tools.
I am from a compound house painted in red and yellow colors.
From fairly, quiet, and small neighborhood, where residents are well acquainted with one another.

I am from the beautiful yellow tassels of corn cob, at all corners of the market.

From buyers bargaining for low prices and some sellers practicing black market.
I'm from moon-time stories of folklores and riddles from Nafisah and Amina.
I am from cooking, housekeeping, and guest hosting, from "a way to a man's heart is through his stomach" and "don't play with boys."

The above excerpts provided Albina, a Gender Studies major, with an opportunity to explore myriad cultural narratives that inform her social, academic, and professional identities. She tapped into a wealth of cultural tropes to represent and analyze her Ghanaian roots. In doing so, she explored the multifaceted and dynamic nature of her identity. As Albina's poem beautifully illustrates, her hometown, a small rural village in southern Ghana, still upholds conservative values that prescribe for young women, "a way to a man's heart is through his stomach" and "don't play with boys." In a culture where young women are ultimately placed within the boundaries of the domicile, parents are especially reluctant to send young women to attend schools. Simultaneously, Albina connects her experiences to her reading in gender studies to reflect on the various forms of injustice inflicted upon women and to explore ways in which literacy could help to liberate women and propel broader social changes.

Assignments like these give PCW students the opportunity to provide increasingly sharpened commentary and critical reflection on culturally inscribed norms and conventions. Such exploration positions students as agents of their own learning and their cultural experiences as objects of analysis, for which critical reflection and proud celebration are equally powerful tools to propel students' personal, academic, and professional growth. For Albina, this assignment provided one of many opportunities to articulate her interests in gender studies, which not only directed her coursework at the university, but also encouraged her to participate in and lead advocacy initiatives that help young women in Ghana to gain access to educational resources.

This curricular move specifically connects to the revised PCW learning objective, which encourages students to use writing and multiple other forms of communication (multimodal, embodied, reading, speaking, listening) as means to identify, understand, and place the "self." The poem, with its focus on the sounds of the household, sights of one's community, smells of food, and words of wisdom, creates many opportunities for students to discover the affordances and limitations of language in communicating the sensory, affective, and visceral parts of their experiences. Such limitations are often highlighted when students bring small objects that others could see and touch, inquire about, and connect with, therefore prompting

additional questioning, sharing, and experimentation with multiple modes of representation. Such moves not only create a space to discover and construct a multifaceted self through collaborative inquiry, but also invite students to engage with the challenging task of making the unfamiliar familiar to others. Doing so often requires that students suspend established assumptions, leveraging all available semiotic resources, and shifting frames of reference, all important strategies for cross-cultural communication and negotiation.

Riffs on Xiqiao's Assignment

If Xiqiao's *I Am from Poetry* project takes the form of a text with linked images, other PCW teachers engage their students in sharing their cultures through class activity. As do other PCW teachers, Joyce incorporates two activities—*Sharing Cultural Objects* and *Culture Circles*—into her PCW from early on. Both build classroom community and provide several in-the-moment opportunities for students to share and negotiate knowledge across axes of cultural and linguistic differences.

  Sharing Cultural Objects begins with the instructor sharing a "cultural object" of her own, telling a story about it, and then inviting the students to ask questions. Not only does the instructor thus model the class activity that follows, in which each of the students is invited to do the same, but her sharing gives the students the opportunity to know her better, and this pedagogical move also provides the opportunity for her to initiate class discussion around the fact that "culture" goes beyond just nationality to encompass family, school, club, and hobby (for example, sports, dance, video gaming, etc.), each of which has its own implicit language and codes of behavior.

  In the next class period, each student brings in their own object for sharing: the Thai student has an amulet her mother gave her, to keep her safe in the U.S.; the Chinese student a piece of calligraphy she has made; the Saudi student a turban that represents his tribe; the Dominican Republican student a "street baseball;" the U.S. student the golf ball that represents his awareness of the cultural tie between that sport and his major of business. The class forms a circle,[2] so that one by one, each student can talk about their object, and/or tell a story about how it is used, why it is valued, and what else we might need to know as background, to understand its meaning more fully. As each student speaks, the class passes the object around, so that everyone can *feel* it (a form of embodied learning), and in turn, ask more questions. After the object

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[2] Much of this activity derives from a restorative justice workshop that both Joyce and Cheryl attended on campus, in 2019.

has made its way around the circle, the owner is asked to place it on a table in the room's center, where it becomes a symbolic offering of individual cultural richness to the classroom community. Once every student has had a chance to both speak and to answer questions from their classmates, each student is then invited to go pick up someone else's object and return it to its owner, telling them why that object had meaning for them too (the returner). This activity invites keen listening and paraphrasing (or Say Back, to use Mimi Schwartz's phrase) for each "returner," as each listener acknowledges the original speaker and their corresponding cultural object in their own terms. The exercise becomes an exchange and negotiation across difference, so that both sameness and difference are acknowledged, examined, and refined. Another effect is to create multiple webs of community and connection across classroom lines of seeming difference.

In the *Culture Circles* activity that follows, students are organized into small groups that will constitute informal panels; on assigned days, each panel will do a mini-presentation, in which each student shares where they come from, using whatever resources they choose (objects, internet images, sample food/drink, aspects of clothing, and classroom demonstrations—for instance, how to skateboard or do calligraphy). Unlike *Sharing Cultural Objects*, this second activity focuses less on a single object, and more on the multiple experiences and backgrounds of each student, so that the objects shared here work in service of the students' points about their home languages and cultures. Culture is examined in the plural, as students in this exercise frequently choose to express and share multiple cultural identities and examples (for instance, their cultural identity as family member, high school student, ballet dancer, and Chinese student, respectively). Meanwhile, the others *listen*, take notes, and write/ask questions, so that the focus is again on listening to others, and to paraphrasing back. Frequently, classroom discussions ensue that build on the presenter's in-the-moment incorporation of a semiotic resource: for instance, in response to a U.S. student's question, "But why can't you just drive out to the country?" when a Chinese student showed images of his 14th floor Shanghai apartment, the latter responded by pulling up a Google map, to demonstrate just how many hours it would *take* to get to the "country" from Shanghai's urban center. The students rely here on images and other semiotic resources as well as stories (the "for example…") in making their cultures clear to their audience—and both resource and story may be leveraged in the writing activities that follow. As with *Culture Objects*, *Culture Circle* posits the presenter as the expert in this multicultural and multimodal communicative exchange—as, for example, U.S. students learn of the complex variability of Chinese cultures, and non-U.S. students learn of the rich social capital of

Detroit neighborhoods (a view that opposes their more negative stereotypes). In alignment with PCW course goals of centering the students' languages and cultures, such activities not only place students as experts of their own histories and stories, but the other students and teacher as learners.

Eventually, the students write an essay that reflects on these activities in terms of what was learned—not just about the objects and cultures of others, but also what they learned as "cultural" observers and speakers through this exercise. What, for example, did their sharing suggest about the complexities of explaining taken-for-granted aspects of their own home culture to others, those relative "outsiders" who lacked the same cultural construct or background? What steps did they have to take to make their own "story" clear? Conversely, what did they learn about themselves as a *listener* through this exercise? What did they notice about the steps *others* took, to make their stories and experiences evident? Which stories resonated most with them and why? Considerations of audience (Kiernan, 2021) and one's own positionality in relation to others thus become paramount. Such reflection also informs the *Translation Project* as well as the projects that invite PCW students to examine university languages and cultures, as described below.

Crossing Languages: Metacognitive Analysis of Translation Practices

In sharing aspects of their cultures in class and in writing, students (and their teacher) frequently evoke the metaphor of "translation," as in performing the activities described above, students work to explain their experiences and cultures to one another; an audience of classmates and teacher who do not share the same cultural context or background. This metaphor is of particular use in the *Translation Project*, in which students are asked to translate a cultural song/poem/story from their "mother tongue" (to use Amy Tan's phrase), then compare their own translation to those of a small group of classmates who have translated the same, paying attention to both the differences and similarities of the translations.

While this assignment has already been described at length (Kiernan, Meier & Wang, 2016), we wish to say a few words here, to demonstrate how such an assignment might be embedded within a translingual course such as PCW, that begins with the students' languages and cultures, and moves toward shared examinations of university cultures. As the activities described above reveal, the *Translation Project* invites rich classroom conversations about differences across cultures, and specifically across languages, as students examine the syntactical, lexical, and cultural challenges of translating and moving from one language/context to another. Such challenges

emerge for both multilingual and the "monolingual" (that is, speaking only one national language) students in class (e.g., the group of U.S. students who chose to translate, compare with one another, and share with the class a popular country and western song, full of culturally-determined phrasing and references). Ultimately, the students write translation narratives, in which each reflects on what they have learned of the challenges and opportunities of "translating," of negotiating communication across axes of difference (e.g., what gets lost, what is gained). They are also invited to compare the challenges evoked by the *Translation Project* to other translating moments experienced in their lives. Assessment of the narrative is tied to the extent to which the student brings into this work examples from their own translations and those of their classmates (including instances of home languages), to make their points about the translation process clear. Thus, not only does this unit surface discussion of multiple differences between and within languages—thus embodying that curiosity about language which so many translingual teachers identify as key to their pedagogy— but it also incorporates an inclusive mode of assessment: there is no right or wrong here, only examples that the students themselves chose, as "translation experts." The students' various assumptions about their audience also come into play: for instance, the extent to which they imagine their audience's knowledge about the cultural resonances of the original text, or of the linguistic patterns from their "mother tongue." This assignment also highlights how much language and culture are inextricably intertwined — a realization that both the multilingual and "monolingual" students come to acknowledge.

Orienting to Academic Cultures & Languages: MSU Student Clubs as Sites of Inquiry

The part of the PCW class that involves orienting to academic cultures and the university at large thus becomes a matter of translation, culturally and linguistically informed; that is, here we ask students to "translate," or make sense of, the multiple languages and cultures of the academic institution. Additional class activities that focus on the institution's language and scaffold up to this assignment may include having the students translate various iterations of the university's "language" (e.g., its learning goals, land acknowledgement, mission statement, etc.) into their home languages, and then back, to do the kind of comparative analysis among the translations that is cited

for the *Translation Project* above; for the monolingual[3] student, this may mean translating these statements into an English that they think the others in class will understand. Other exercises include having the students translate academic words typically found in their examinations and other assignments (such as *explain*, *synthesize*, and *analyze*—some of which translate to the same word in the students' home languages, even though these words have distinct meanings and expectations in academic English). Some PCW teachers also ask students to translate portions of a scholarly article. Such activities effectively invite PCW students to "turn the tables" on the institution, so that the students see the extent to which university language is itself "coded" and even inscrutable to outsiders, as the instructor asks, "What do such examples say about university cultures and values as well as its assumptions about audience: who its members are and what they already are expected to know and understand?"

Like Joyce and other PCW teachers, Cheryl incorporates Culture Circles into her scaffolding of the MSU project. Cheryl similarly works to have her students understand the concept of "culture with a small c" by having them work through a series of exercises that query the concept of "culture" itself: what culture is and might be. In Cheryl's view, when the PCW teachers first shifted the focus of PCW from "literacies" to the students' own cultures as resources and sites of inquiry, the experiences of the international students presented themselves as low-hanging fruit. That is, many of these students were ready to share in the Culture Circles the tourist-friendly features of their hometowns or regions, the giant apples or giant pandas. But then, Cheryl wondered about what to do for the home-grown students who protested, "I don't have a culture. I'm from Okemos [a bedroom community about four miles away from the MSU campus]?" To serve both cohorts, Cheryl intentionally foregrounds MSU culture(s), and the idea of "culture" itself, as subjects of inquiry in her PCW course.

Cheryl's MSU assignment asks students to choose a student organization from the list of hundreds recognized by the Associated Students of MSU, and then to investigate it, using the concepts of culture studies [see Appendix A] and the tools of ethnographic research. Adopting the metaphor of culture as an iceberg, the students examine its surface (artifacts, behaviors, insider languages, rules, official hierarchies), to better understand what lies beneath the water (values, beliefs, ways of seeing). Such scaffolding encourages PCW students to problematize the assumptions they are

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[3] Of course, all students are in some respects multilingual: that is, they speak various languages, or registers of language, on social media and/or in particular contexts, like sports or music, for example.

making about their university clubs, as well as to complicate more conventional understandings of culture.

After choosing their organizations, each of Cheryl's students emails the president of the club for permission to attend a meeting or event. While waiting for replies, they note their expectations or assumptions, and do some secondary research on their organization through their website and/or social media, articles in MSU's key publications (such as the *State News* or *MSU Today)*, and yearbooks in the MSU Archives. A research librarian devotes an entire session to helping the students find relevant sources. In turn, this secondary research forms one side of the triangulated research study, with the other two being field observations and interviews. The latter two stages allow the students to interrogate assumptions made during the first.

For this work, one invaluable text is *Field Working: Reading and Writing Research*, by Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (2011). The two authors share their double-column system of taking field notes: objective sensory data on the left; thoughts, questions and interpretations on the right (This distinction alone can yield some deep reflections and discussions). They then suggest interrogating these raw data with the three ethnographer's questions: (1) What surprised me? (2) What intrigued me? (3) What disturbed me?

These questions reveal disconnects between prior assumptions and the reality of what was observed, as well as entirely new insights into a subculture. With peer response and discussion, the class uses the framework of these questions to locate their own robust and interesting research questions for their paper. After this, the class can proceed with the steps of brainstorming, organizing, offering peer review and revising. Along the way, students will realize that "research" isn't a rarefied activity that happens only in the library – that research just means asking questions and making new knowledge, and they have been doing it the whole time. Take as an example Cheryl's student who described an activity at MSU landmark The Rock and wrote that The Rock is located on Grand River Avenue. "But look at your photos! You can see that it isn't – that it's by the Red Cedar River!" "But I read this online!" she protested, in genuine bewilderment. "Who's wrong, then, you or the anonymous online writer?" Cheryl demanded. It was a genuine threshold moment for the student, an advancement in her sense of agency.

What kinds of organizations are researched, and what discoveries are made? Here are a few examples, from Cheryl's PCW class of the fall semester 2021:

The Artificial Intelligence Club at MSU is not just for learning about AI. They invent and carry out practical projects, like facial-recognition software to help professors take attendance in large classes. Mohammed, a Saudi student, was impressed by the level of work the club was

doing, which dovetailed with his own studies of engineering. He continued attending the club after the assignment was completed.

MSU Dance Club did not offer what I expected, classical dances like waltzes. Instead they did jazz and hip-hop, which were unfamiliar to me. But everyone was friendly, all levels were welcome, and we all got a good workout! Huseyin, a Turkish student, chose not to join the club, but he was proud of stepping out of his comfort zone, so to speak, by trying it out. He noted in his reflections that he felt more confident to sample new activities afterward.

MSU's chapter of the American Institute of Graphic Art is a hands-on group where students bring their designs-in-progress, and share feedback and resources. It is "dedicated to finding and inspiring people's understanding of the heart of design: the meaning." Xinyan, a Chinese student, continued to attend some of the group's meetings, and stayed on the mailing list. Later that year, she submitted a poster to a university-wide design contest. She also led her Remix group in PCW in creating an interactive poster for the First-Year Writing Symposium: the image of a Chinese woman in a flowing traditional garment revealed hidden messages about Chinese "deep culture," that is the underwater part of the iceberg, when the viewer held up a magic penlight.

From introductions on the first day through the final semester reflections, students in Cheryl's PCW class work together in pairs, in small groups, in whole-class presentations to uncover the mysteries of varied cultures—their own and the institution's—the tops and bottoms of the icebergs. These cultures (and the students' evolving understanding of them) *are* the course content: the "sites of inquiry and resources for their learning." While the skills developed involve active communication in multiple forms—reading, writing, speaking, listening and multimodal design—the students gain a third benefit that most were not expecting; that is, one or more pathways toward integrating into MSU cultures. As indicated by the quotes from Cheryl's class, many of the students also developed a relationship with a specific MSU community, such as a club that they subsequently joined. Such relationships foster PCW students' sense of belonging then, within the larger university community.

Riffs on Cheryl's Project.

While other PCW teachers created their own versions of the MSU assignment (one PCW instructor, for instance, has his students collaboratively make an infographic that defines, unpacks, and explains the otherwise inscrutable acronyms of the institution), Joyce's version closely mirrors Cheryl's ethnographic approach, with some minor differences. If Cheryl's project has PCW students ethnographically examining MSU *student* clubs, Joyce's students focus on MSU *sites* (e.g., the library's Map Room, the

campus's organic student farm, etc.). Also, if Cheryl's *MSU Culture Project* encourages PCW students' *belonging* to the institution, Joyce incorporates a critical lens as well. That is, while Cheryl begins the project with a series of scaffolded exercises enabling her students to better understand and define "culture," Joyce's project starts with the students' querying a range of MSU's various linguistic and cultural "oddities" (e.g., its mission statement, land acknowledgement, learning goals, and even the nature of an academic day that has classes scheduled at 10 and 20 minutes past the hour). Joyce also supports the students' using one another (and herself) as resources for their evolving projects; for example, she has the students name and share their topics early on, and classmates are then surveyed respecting their varied levels of pre-existing knowledge. The students may then interview and survey one another more extensively, for the purposes of gathering useful data (for example, a student examining MSU's cafeteria services may thus discover, and interview, a classmate who works there). Joyce also leverages her role as Associate Director of the writing program, and her extensive university connections, to help her students locate people across campus (as well as herself) to interview for their projects — a move that also enhances the PCW students' sense of belonging.

In Joyce's view, one of the project's main issues, though, is the challenge some students may have putting their growing information in relationship to what she and her students call the bigger "So What?" question—that is, the conclusions that an observation of a particular site or data piece might lead to (for example, why *is* the MSU Dairy Store located in central campus?). But *because* her students have already examined and discussed various iterations of the university's public messaging— unearthing contradictions and alliances between the institution's larger, outer-facing messaging, and the university as the student experiences it—the students are poised to think more critically here. In other words, Joyce encourages her PCW students to make claims that juxtapose the overarching values expressed by the institution with the students' own observations and experiences. Thus, PCW students come to understand the particularity of the local within larger frameworks and axes of power. Moreover, because this project evolves into a class presentation as well as a paper (with images), the assignment provides her students with the opportunity to trace their growing understanding of university culture. The students share their differently shaped understandings of the institution and its values, as informed by each person's particular view, and given their own positionality and cultural context (for instance, the Chinese student's stated surprise at the lack of "walls" separating the campus from the nearby town, because "that would never happen in our own country"). As the students "make

sense" of the institution's linguistic and cultural peculiarities, so too does the instructor, thereby seeing the university anew, with fresh eyes.

Overall, then, assignments like these provide PCW students with the opportunity to orient themselves to MSU practices and academic cultures, and to share their evolving understandings. The assignments can help students develop many practical skills, such as learning how to ask questions, take effective field notes, construct a survey and interpret its results, prepare for and conduct an interview, and incorporate multiple forms of data in one's own writing/presentation. But more importantly, such a project also encourages students to view their own (and others') evolving ideas and knowledge as resources for their learning and project production; to value their own expertise and observations; and to come to better understanding (and thus have better access to) the larger institution.

Conclusion

As a whole, these projects support the students' becoming resources for one another's (and the teacher's) learning: whether that be through their individual sharing of aspects of their languages and cultures, or through their collaborative learning and examination of the university. This sharing creates space for both metacognitive awareness (the students' growing articulation of their understanding of the importance of context and audience, for example), and for discussions around the underlying power structures that may shape our thinking on specific languages and cultures. Take as an example a signature class discussion in Joyce's PCW class, in which a Venezuelan student, fluent in Spanish and English, challenged the arguments in Vershawn Ashanti Young's classic piece on code-switching, demanding: "Why should I be encouraged to code-switch, in light of the fact that I am here on scholarship to learn the 'right' way to do things in English?" But then the Mongolian student piped up with examples from recent class periods, in which students had shared with great relish (literally) the foodways of their families, cultures, and countries. "If we want to celebrate and protect our home foods," this Mongolian student asked, "why should it be any different for our languages?" Discussions such as these are invited by opportunities for students to share their growing understandings of U.S.-centric academic practices and attitudes: for example, toward intellectual copyright and plagiarism, quoting other sources, peer-review, and group work. The impulse is both toward understanding, and toward questioning. Such pedagogy does not ignore the existence of dominant beliefs and conventions, but rather "facilitates students' ability to engage more critically in the standard that they live in" (Ozer 2021, p. 1428).

Moreover, our learning goals as applied have relevance for other courses, and for students who are marginalized in other ways than so many of the non-U.S. PCW students are. Isabel Baca asserts that good teaching for multilingual students is good teaching for all, a claim we can extend to students who bring different identities and backgrounds to the FYW classroom. For example, how might such learning goals apply to Black students, for whom African American Vernacular (AAV) is an important resource and a language in its own right? In PCW, we already welcome AAV into the students' writing, encouraging Black students to put such language strategically into their projects. What might such pedagogical moves look like in the WRA 101 course that follows?

Furthermore, we would argue the PCW changes were enabled by our program's overarching FYW values. Indeed, none of the PCW changes might have taken place were it not for this course nesting within overarching program goals that support reflection and metacognitive awareness, along with an overall focus on students' stories, experiences, and cultures.[4] Finally, the changes were enabled by the two first-year writing program administrators who supported, rather than stood in the way of, these curricular innovations. Overall, our program has a highly collaborative group of teachers, especially the PCW instructor cohort – the majority of whom are non-tenured, albeit with relatively stable, renewable three-year teaching contracts. Over time, the course has also attracted instructors of non-U.S. background, and/or with strong international and/or ESL teaching experience (e.g., Cheryl's 25 years teaching in France and Ireland; Joyce's teaching in China; still another teacher's extensive work with the multilingual students in our migrant worker program). In addressing the "problem of PCW," this group developed strong, synergistic relationships that continue into the present. PCW is now taught by a highly committed group of teachers who view the course as both intellectually rich and personally rewarding. Numerous projects, conference presentations, and scholarly papers have evolved as a result. In fact, in writing this very article, it was sometimes hard to determine where one teacher's ideas ended, and another's began – hence the metaphor of riffing, which allows us to discuss the inter-animating ways in which we continue to develop, refine, and repurpose our assignments, bringing the distinct melodic lines of our own pedagogical trajectories into a harmonic programmatic initiative.

[4] The larger program goals for FYW include putting "learners at the center of learning," focusing on students' acts of "inquiry, discovery, and communication" in the context of "purpose, process, and cultures," supporting culture as an "idea that is surfaced, named, and referenced through writing and learning to write," and moving "students from reflection on experience to analysis of cultural and institutional values and discourses to inquiry into rhetorical production and to informed goal-setting" ("Learning Goals").

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Appendix A: Class activities for learning basic concepts of culture studies

1. **Four metaphors**. Culture can be seen as:
   - an onion;
   - a pair of glasses;
   - the water a fish swims in; or
   - an iceberg.

   I project images of each of these, and ask the class to brainstorm how culture might be like, say, an onion. ("You peel it and peel it, and sometimes you cry," said one astute class member.) Some generalities that emerge are:

   - Culture is like an onion because there's always another layer to peel;
   - Culture is like a pair of glasses because when you're wearing them, you don't see them; you just see the rest of the world through them;
   - (Similarly to no. 2) Culture is like the water a fish swims in because if you asked the fish to describe the water, it would only say, "What's water?"
   - Culture is like an iceberg because only a tenth of it (food, clothing, monuments, festivals) appears on the surface. But that surface tenth is supported by the hidden nine-tenths (values, belief systems, ways of seeing).

2. **Culture shock**. Choosing our MSU campus as a culture (with many underlying subcultures) to study offers advantages beyond the most obvious one of helping first-year students to adjust and feel at home. We all read Junzi Xia's article, "Analysis of Impact of Culture Shock on Individual Psychology" (2009), tracing the stages of culture shock and trying to locate our present position on the culture-shock curve. The article also proposes strategies for coping with culture shock and integrating into the new culture, which stimulate valuable discussions in the class.

3. **Capital-C Culture vs. small-c culture**. During this assignment, students begin to see culture in new and expanded ways: not just Capital-C Culture, like Shakespeare or the opera, but small-c culture in the multiple subcultures that all of us move among, every day. I ask class members to work together to identify the main groups that populated their high schools: athletes; academics; artists and

musicians; party people … How could we identify them? What artifacts (e.g. clothing)? What behaviors? What insider language? We can put these on the top of the iceberg, and then speculate about the values and beliefs underlying them. Here emerge some wonderful opportunities for students to become knowledge resources for each other, as the Chinese students explain the arduous *gaokao* examination, and American students demystify proms, homecoming and varsity jackets.

4. **Artifacts, behaviors, language and rules.** Another approach to understanding small-c culture is to think of a group activity in which we participate regularly, and ask students to analyze these aspects of its culture. Cheryl might give the example of a poetry open mic, showing the "hat" or other container where readers throw slips of paper with their names (artifact), explaining how an emcee-led open mic operates differently from a popcorn-style event or how to snap fingers to show appreciation (behaviors), defining phrases like, "You're on deck" (language) and sharing rules about length of reading, subject matter and trigger warnings, etc. Students are then invited to make lists or spreadsheets of the cultural elements of their own group activities.

5. **Personal, cultural or universal**? A standard Peace Corps activity asks students to identify behaviors as personal, cultural or universal. Sometimes I will stick the three words in various places in the room, then ask students to "stand where they stand" as I read out a list of behaviors. "Eating every day?" Most will say universal. "Eating with a knife, fork and spoon?" More will say, cultural. What about, "Liking spicy food"? There will be some disagreement here. I ask students to explain their choice of position, which leads to some interesting discussions.

6. **Some further concepts**. According to need and interest, I may also share some basic terms from culture studies, such as Geert Hofstede's six dimensions of culture, Edward Hall's work on chronemics, proxemics, haptics etc. and Fons Trompenaars's universalist vs. particularist cultures. These are all useful in mapping out areas below the surface of the iceberg.

Appendix B: Where I Am From Poetry Assignment

Our home cultures have significant impact on our positions in the world and the questions we ask. In this assignment, I invite you to reminisce about a community that reminds you of where you come from. Note that culture here is not defined in narrow, national terms (French versus Japanese culture), but rather extends to cover all the experiences one may have from being immersed in a community. Therefore, your home culture might include your childhood home, a familiar route to and from school, a bus ride you often took as a child, a neighborhood street where you used to play with friends, a park or a garden, or a restaurant or a food stand. To better focus your reminiscence of your home culture, please consider how authors we have read throughout our unit allow us to enter into their home culture through vivid depictions of sounds, sights, persons, plants, food, family activities, music, and many other manifestations of culture. Using Lyon's poem as a guide, please write your own Where I am from Poem. Please also search your personal and family album for images that you could embed into your poem. Details that you wish to highlight and illustrate with images are up to you. Please select images according to your levels of comfort with sharing aspects of your private life.

For this assignment, you are to work with others in your team to explore cultural differences while pursuing a shared theme. This project gives you the opportunity to see your culture from familiar and unfamiliar lenses. What makes your home culture unique? Which cultural assumptions and practices do people embrace? Which aspects of your culture most powerfully shape how you think, act, behave, and interact with others? Why are certain details and images important to you? How are other's interpretations of such details different or similar to that of your own? I invite you to consider these questions, which will generate materials for a short reflective essay (3 pages, double-spaced), in which you discuss your discoveries and learning about your home culture. Your essay should be reflective as well as informative. One particular writerly move required of you is the effective integration of evidence from your own poetry, your writing process, and your conversation with your peers.

Your past and present activities and tastes will guide you as you make a decision about what question to ask and how to answer it. Considering who you are and your own interests is going to be an important part of making this project meaningful for you, and this is true for most projects you engage in.

About the Authors

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