

Review of *Writing Across Difference: Theory and Intervention*

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Daniel, James Rushing, Katie Malcolm, and Candice Rai, editors. *Writing Across Difference: Theory and Intervention*. UP of Colorado, 2022. 256 pages.

This book is the first text in composition that brings together multiple areas of studies, positionalities, and perspectives into a deeper and more comprehensive conversation on difference—a construct and modality that divides, excludes, and perpetuates inequalities yet, at the same time, opens possibilities for forging alliances and connections. At its core, the contributing authors attempt to address two main questions: How does difference—existing across social, political, institutional, and linguistic forces—function, presented, and misrepresented in language, writing, pedagogy, and administrative policies? In what ways can writing and instruction help negotiate such difference and create more equitable, inclusive, and diverse classrooms? Readers of this book could walk away with not only a better understanding of how to teach writing more equitably and ethically across difference but also practical ideas and strategies for advancing the work of racial and social justice in composition studies, both in the classroom and at the programmatic level.

In my own reading, I identified three primary themes of the book: (1) the translanguaging strategies that can enhance the practice of writing across difference; (2) the narrative-based interventions, the invitational rhetoric and whole-self rhetoric that can promote inclusivity, accessibility, and equity; and (3) the approaches and practices that challenge many of the current orthodoxy of race, gender, class, ability, and disability.

With regard to the first theme, translanguaging and translanguaging, Juan C. Guerra begins the conversation by offering an incredibly vivid narration of his own engagement with languages and issues of language identities. After nearly five decades of teaching, the author affirmed that there is no such thing as a “silver bullet” that would once and for all address the myriad challenges faced by multilingual writers and that the teaching of writing needs to build on students’ “learning incomes”—the repertoire of rhetorical and literacy skills that students bring to the classroom (p. 29). Guerra then discusses a variety of approaches to writing across language

differences, including code meshing (Young, 2009), shuttling (Canagarajah, 2006), and his own transcultural repositioning (Guerra, 2004), concluding that the goal should be to find ways to help students develop “intercultural literacy,” which is the ability to consciously and effectively move back and forth, among, and in and out of various discourse communities so that they can become more effective writers and communicators (p. 35).

From another angle, Iris D. Ruiz joins the conversation by sharing her literacy and academic experiences as a Chicana. She brings in the concept of *nepantla*—which, in her words, is the idea of a comfort zone in-the-between and an act of crossing the borders of languages, discourses, rules, conventions, limitations, identities, experiences, and traumas. Ruiz argues that *nepantla* is her way to resist the erasure of difference, to navigate the territories of mainstream, to practice decoloniality, and to be able to “breathe in the crossroads of contradictions” (p. 56). She further suggests employing the rhetoric of *nepantlerx* as a conceptual framework for re-knowing and de-linking from colonial teaching practices that privilege the dominant language and discourse, and by default, marginalize others and incite divisiveness.

On the second theme, how to develop and practice narrative-based interventions, invitational rhetoric, and whole-self rhetoric in ways that better promote inclusivity, accessibility and equity, *Writing Across Difference* provides readers with a wide variety of approaches and strategies that can be applied immediately into the practices of teaching writing across contexts and areas of study. Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, in “Exploring Discomfort Using Markers of Difference: Constructing Antiracist and Anti-ableist Teaching Practices,” discusses the intersection and interconnection between disability studies and teachers’ professional development practices. Kerschbaum shares a narrative of her own experience as a graduate teaching assistant who had a very different way of conducting class discussion compared to her colleagues. As Kerschbaum grappled with such a “marker of difference” a concept she developed referring to the rhetorical cues that signal the presence of difference between two or more interlocutors in communication—the author came to conclude that by recording, listening to, and reflecting on our own pedagogical stories, teachers of writing could further consider how these narratives present themselves, the teacher’s beliefs, positions, and underlying assumptions that shape many of their teaching practices. Kerschbaum, in addition, shared a series of guiding questions encouraging practicing teachers to deeply and critically reflect on moments of discomfort and vulnerabilities in teaching. This reflective practice, according to the author, is to help teachers begin to tell their most

authentic and meaningful pedagogical stories, and furthermore, use these stories to challenge racism and ableism in their classrooms.

As related to writing instruction, James Rushing Daniel introduces a pedagogical practice rooted in the work of public writing, advocacy, and service learning. In a writing course designed for undergraduate students, he developed a service-learning component that helps connect students with local community partners. Throughout the course, his students were engaged in tutoring practice and community literacy work. They were also invited to do research and write about the history, goals and purposes, and day-to-day operation of the communities they served, using the lenses of critical theory, intersectionality, and the framework of resistance. Daniel argues that, through such ways of working with community partners and conducting in-depth analysis of inequalities, his students can grow as more effective writers, be better positioned for academic and professional work, and can contribute to long-term and more sustainable social change.

Approaching writing instruction from the perspective of restorative rhetoric, Nadya Pittendrigh asserts that restorative justice, as opposed to the conventional forensic practice, could provide a more fruitful avenue of inquiry for interrogating structural inequality. Restorative practice, as Pittendrigh believes, is also a more ethical and equitable approach to communication across difference. The author further proposes the conceptual framework of whole-self rhetoric and advocates for implementing it in the writing classroom, clarifying that this framework with its particular emphasis on “dialogue, not persuasion” and “openness to being changed” (p. 107–108) can offer something to writing pedagogy that neither rhetorical listening nor invitational rhetoric does.

Sharing a similar approach, Shui-yin Sharon Yam offers a rich account describing how she employs invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995) and deep-story practice (Hochschild, 2016) to help her students, especially those from marginalized groups, write their counter-stories and engage with various social and political issues, more openly and critically. From the science writing classroom, Megan Callow and Katherine Xue introduce pedagogical practices that help writers challenge the conventional notion that the basis for difference among human groups (i.e., the constructs of race and sex) in science studies is purely biological. The authors suggest “a flipped teaching model” in which foundational scientific knowledge is presented to students via “case-based pedagogy” as an alternative to the abstract presentation with occasional, limited examples (p. 127), could provide a meaningful way for writers to engage with the broader sociopolitical and moral dimensions that have not been adequately considered in both science studies and science writing.

Expanding the conversation from classroom practices to “Institutional, Community, and Public Transformation,” the rest of the book discusses theoretical and methodological frameworks for creating changes at the programmatic and institutional levels. Neil F. Simpkins, drawing on results of his research studies, asserts that disability identities are “culturally and historically contextual” (p. 142) and that many diagnostic theoretical frameworks currently used in institutions, writing programs, and writing classrooms provide “unreliable and inaccurate vocabularies” (p. 146) for describing the complexity and difference in disability studies. Simpkins calls for writing teachers and WPAs to re-examine their policies and pedagogical practices. For instance, would their course and program policies approach disability as merely a deficit? Would the program adequately consider various markers of difference concerning disability and disability identities? Would the classroom and program policies flexibly and effectively address the singularities of disability across individual students?

From another teaching context, Laura Gonzalez and Ann Shivers-McNair propose a multiperspectival approach—rather than a single theoretical framework—to redesigning teaching practices that position difference “not as a problem to solve” but “as an opportunity to seek new collaborations, understandings, and innovations” (p. 175). The scholars share their experiences developing a culturally sustaining writing program at their Hispanic-serving institution. They explain that, with three conceptual topoi (intersectionality, interdependency, and community sustainment) and the multilingual user experience (UX) initiatives, their instructional designs have worked to move away from the deficit-based model of teaching writing that treated multilinguals as in need of remediation and enculturation to the dominant discourses. Instead, their writing program has strived to (re)include, celebrate, and centralize Latinx students’ histories, perspectives, and their rhetorical traditions and skills.

Building their work upon the antiracist translanguaging praxis, Sumyat Thu, Katie Malcolm, Candice Rai, and Anis Bawarshi posit that “translingualism conceptualizes language use as an active process of *linguaging* in which language by its very nature is always performative, dynamic, emergent, and relational,” rather than “a monolithic, transparent, standardized tool that writers use more or less effectively depending on the assessment of readers in dominant positions of power” (p. 196). The scholars further describe the ways they translated such praxis into teaching and administrative policy. Specifically, they developed an antiracist policy that upholds the principles of antiracist pedagogy, for example, building on writing assessment practices that emphasize the writer’s development process, language choices, and rhetorical effectiveness. Writing instructors in their program

actively participated in various professional development activities, such as naming and mapping instructors' teaching identities, collaboratively developing antiracist assessment and response praxis, and attending portfolio-assessment sessions. Thus, Malcolm, Rai, and Bawarshi argue that these activities could help teachers explore and reflect on their holistic and intersectional identities. The activities also provide the space and opportunities for teachers to examine various ideas and develop their own antiracist teaching practices.

Lastly, Johnathan Benda, Cherice Escobar Jones, Mya Poe, and Alison Y. L. Stephens contribute the conceptual framework of superdiversity. According to the authors, this framework helps them better describe the ever-changing and more complex characteristics of the student populations they serve. Superdiversity as a conceptual framework, furthermore, provides a lens for observing the teaching and writing at their institution, Northeastern University, and the "mobility, complexity, and unpredictability" associated with how they teach, how they research, and how they think about the landscape of their institutional context (p. 233). The scholars also share their experiences putting this framework into practice of measurement or placement of multilingual students into categories or classes. Their students in first-year composition classes, for example, were invited to consider and respond to how they are represented and "placed" in the university. In terms of coursework, their "Writing in Global Context" class uses the concept of superdiversity as a through line to help writers explore their linguistic heritage and identity, not only as an individual experience but also in connection with the linguistic landscape of their community. In essence, superdiversity could be a powerful conceptual framework for recognizing and responding to the constantly-in-flux, dynamic, and complex needs of student writers.

Reading this book from the perspective and experience of an emerging scholar in the field of rhetoric and writing studies who is also particularly interested in the work of building a more accessible, equitable, inclusive, and antiracist teaching practice, I was a bit overwhelmed yet, at the same time, appreciated the broad and diverse scope of discussion of this book. I would assume that readers with a similar background and interest could, in the same way, gain a more comprehensive understanding of what it means by "writing across difference," as the book is concerned with an array of positionalities and orientations. The broader audience, who are writing teachers, scholars, and administrators across contexts and teaching focuses, could in many ways benefit from the approaches, methods, and practical strategies the contributing authors offer for developing course design and pedagogy. Practicing teachers, for instance, could approach writing across

difference from a translingual perspective, and as Guerra suggests, find ways to help students develop their “intercultural literacy” competence. Writing scholars could also employ Ruiz’s concept of *nepantla* and the rhetoric of *nepantlerx* to continue advancing the work of anticolonialism in writing studies. The conceptual frameworks of invitational rhetoric, deep-story telling, and whole-self rhetoric, could be introduced in writing classes across levels to help students engage with various social, political issues in a more open and critical manner. The practice of incorporating service-learning into a writing course, suggested by Daniel, could spark insights for many writing teachers who are seeking ideas for how to contribute to the long-term and more sustainable social change and help students better prepare for their academic and professional work. Similarly, the “intensive case-based pedagogical model” introduced by Callow and Xue could be a great reference example for writing teachers who want to help students explore the social, political, and moral dimensions of various scientific and technical constructs in science studies. The methods and strategies for telling a meaningful pedagogical story, as Kerschbaum introduces, could be adopted to help writing teachers constantly reflect on and enhance their teaching practice.

For WPAs in particular, this book offers abundant resources for innovating programmatic and institutional policies and administration. The multiperspectival approach to redesigning teaching and sustaining community, which Gonzalez and Shivers-McNair developed from the conceptual frameworks of intersectionality, interdependency, community sustainment and multilingual UX initiatives could be successfully adapted to either similar teaching contexts or beyond a Hispanic-serving institution. Many professional development activities suggested by Thu, Malcolm, Rai, and Bawarshi could be multiplied broadly to help teachers continue mapping their identities and building their own antiracist teaching praxes. WPAs should also pay attention to the complexity and singularities associated with individual disability identity, because, as Simpkins suggests, defining and categorizing disability without adequately considering the difference would greatly affect access and accessibility for student learning. The concept of superdiversity could be incredibly beneficial for WPAs to reconsider the ways international students, multilingual writers, and other student populations are described and placed in writing programs, and how it would shape placement, tutoring, and teaching practices.

From my reading experience, I have learned that working with difference is the first and foundational step to advancing the work of equity and social justice in composition studies. To this end, *Writing Across Difference* does a great job providing most necessary theories and interventions to help

writing teachers, scholars, and administrators engage more deeply in the conversation, and furthermore, begin to take actions and foster changes for their classrooms.

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