



## **The Threshold Potential of Transnational Pedagogies**

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**Abstract:** As a WPA at a linguistically diverse campus, I instituted “cross-cultural” (CCW) sections initially to address the needs of already matriculated L2 and Generation 1.5 students, and the needs of a growing number of international students recruited to the university. Drawing on examples from a CCW section involving a substantial transnational component, I show that such pedagogies help to create a significant *threshold potential* for student learning among both multilingual and monolingual writers. Working with partners in France and using technologies such as Skype, email, and Facebook, students collaborated on writing and peer review tasks, which were accompanied by opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences. Though there are limitations as well as benefits for both multilingual and monolingual students of transnational pedagogies within “mainstream” writing courses, transnational pedagogies help students reflect on and articulate new understandings of writing and the “work” writing can accomplish, both within and beyond the university. As significantly, students in transnational classrooms come to articulate a sense of change in their own identities as users of language, as writers, and as learners.

**Keywords:** transnational, cross-cultural, pedagogy, multilingual, threshold potential

### **Introduction**

In this article I examine the pedagogy of writing courses that have a transnational component and that incorporate opportunities for students—in particular English

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language learners and other non-“mainstream” students—to reflect on their developing language ability. I define the “transnational” classroom as one in which students use internet technologies to collaborate with peers in another national context on a writing project and/or other activities such as peer review. This collaboration among students enrolled at different universities and in distinct national/cultural contexts transforms the classroom environment by, for example, challenging the privilege attached (by students themselves, as well as by instructors) to English monolingualism and rigid conceptions of standard written English. Globalized higher educational contexts demand the development of curricula responsive to immense demographic, economic, and political shifts among students. Much of the scholarship on transnational and translingual approaches to teaching writing has emphasized the political and social justice aspects and potential for “intervention” (Payne, 2012, p. 6) of such pedagogies in economic, political, and educational systems. Such scholarship has critiqued, for example, hegemonic, “import-export” (Donahue, 2009, p. 226) models of U.S. writing instruction, and neoliberal, intercultural and multimedia pedagogies geared primarily to helping students accommodate themselves to existing “transnational structures of employment, residency, and commerce” (Payne, 2012, p. 2). The research described here follows the lead of such scholarship, and offers concrete pedagogical alternatives that address pragmatic needs while foregrounding context and students’ awareness of their own subjectivities and perspectives.

Pragmatically, transnational writing pedagogies rely significantly on students moving between cultural/linguistic contexts, listening rhetorically, and reflecting on their learning and collaborations with distinct others. Activities that ensure students enact these concepts include in particular collaborative projects, peer review assignments, and assignments (including reading assignments) that encourage students to explicitly reflect on their learning. Taken together, these practices create a sufficiently charged environment—what I am calling a “threshold potential”—that prompts student learning.

I draw the term threshold potential from the field of neurobiology. Necessary to the healthy functioning of nerve cells in biological systems, a threshold potential comprises not just an important but a required, charged context within which nerve cells are able to function to regulate physiology and produce conscious action. Distinct from (but nevertheless related to) the idea of “threshold concepts” articulated by Jan Meyer and Ray Land—who have compared such concepts to portals which “open up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (2003, p.1), and which in recent years has been extended and theorized in important ways by a range of scholars in writing studies (see for example Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015)—the idea of threshold potential I am proposing has to do with the necessary, albeit not always sufficient, *contextual* elements required for learning and for the subsequent transfer of learning to other contexts. Among other factors, the transnational classroom provides a threshold potential for learning because collaborations with overseas peers are almost

always as much about struggle as they are about dialogue. From the logistical considerations of using digital media across several time zones, to the practical obstacles that come from the need to negotiate language differences, to the kinds of misunderstandings and tensions that can emerge from differing socio-political and historical backgrounds—even such “trivial” misunderstandings as whether it is appropriate to wear a hat indoors (as happened in one exchange in my classroom) — transnational collaborations are potentially filled with setbacks and “critical incidents” (Robertson, Taczak & Yancey, 2012) to which students must respond and from which they can learn.

### **Theoretical Framing**

The study described in this article focuses on one of my transnational courses, and enacts what Canagarajah (2006) has termed a “negotiation model” for studying the writing of multilingual students, wherein “rather than treating language or culture as the main variable, we would focus more on the changing contexts of communication, perhaps treating context as the main variable as writers switch their languages, discourses, and identities in response to this contextual change” (p. 591). In this study, accordingly, student writers are seen not as passively conditioned by their language and culture, but rather as “agentive, shuttling creatively between discourses to achieve their communicative objectives” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 591). Positioning students, in particular second-language learners, as creative agents in achieving communicative objectives is important because of how often such students are rhetorically positioned as operating at a deficit, a perception that undercuts their abilities and potentials.

The transnational classroom, in which students work with partners overseas as well as locally, affords opportunities for them to shuttle between linguistic and cultural contexts as part of their regular work in the course. Moreover, as part of this moving between contexts, students engage in what Krista Ratcliffe (2005) has termed “rhetorical listening.” Defined as a “trope for interpretive invention and, more particularly, as a code of cross-cultural conduct,” such listening is deeply dependent on context, and “provide[s] grounds for revising identifications troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance; [and] as such . . . may foster cross-cultural communication on any topic” (p. 19).

The transnational classroom also provides a real-world audience for students’ work that helps to spur reflection and their burgeoning assessment of their own language ability. More specifically, such collaborations provide students with an “external gaze” for their work, leading to deep self-reflexivity: “one needs always the eye of the other to recognize (and name) oneself . . . the external gaze is a compensatory way of returning a failed inward gaze” (Phelan, 1993, p. 15). Especially when such an external gaze or different perspective is incorporated into the writing, students are

prompted to engage profoundly with their own situatedness, motivations, and biases—what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) has termed *habitus*.

As in community-based or service-learning writing courses, but here with additional emphasis on linguistic and national difference and boundary-crossing, the self-reflexivity resulting from such transnational collaborations can help students confront what Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) have identified as the scholarly bias "more profound and more distorting than those rooted in the social origins or location of the analyst in the academic field"—that is, the "*intellectualist bias* which entices [the writer] to construe the world as *spectacle*, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically" (p. 39). Reading, reviewing, and writing transnationally moves students away from this intellectualist gaze: students are no longer spectators but active participants in constructing the terms of their own learning as they come into contact with overseas or culturally different peers, and as they inscribe those peers' perspectives into their own analyses. When students see the focus of their writing as a concrete problem or "involvement" to be explored practically rather than as a spectacle to be observed and interpreted from a distance, the way in which as writers they are always a part of a particular relationship with their audience(s) also is emphasized. The student in a transnational classroom (not always, but often) recognizes her relationship with her audience in part because she sees that audience as fully distinct from herself. To use another of Bourdieu's terms, she sees her audience as inhabiting a distinct "field" (or fields)—for example, a very specific academic, national and/or cultural-linguistic field. Ultimately, however, a transnational project such as the one described here further transforms the sense of audience from fully distinct to one of co-writer and collaborator in the project.

### **Institutional Background and Curricular Framing**

Undergraduates at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, a primarily commuter campus of about 9,000 students in the Detroit metropolitan area, hail from the suburbs and the city; many are recent immigrants or refugees, the children of immigrants, or international students from dozens of nations including Ukraine, Russia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine, Syria, Oman, the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Gambia, China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Spain, Mexico, and Argentina. Some international students have served as translators for the U.S. military overseas. Many domestic students are L2 and Generation 1.5 language learners, and some are military veterans. In recent years and as part of its metropolitan mission and strategic plan to increase the current enrollment by about 30%, the university has aimed also to enroll more students from the city of Detroit. The city of Dearborn, with the highest proportion of Arab Americans in the U.S., itself comprises a truly cross-cultural and transnational space. Many of the

university's students are non-traditional students, often with children and frequently with full-time jobs in addition to their college coursework.

As director of my university's Writing Program and Writing Center from 2006 to 2012, I had stewardship over a general education curriculum that included eight different courses taught by about 20 adjunct lecturers and supported by 12-15 Writing Center undergraduate consultants. Generally one lecturer and one or two of the peer consultants in this group at any one time were bilingual. By contrast, culturally and linguistically diverse even in the absence of growing international recruiting, first-generation students comprised 50% of the university's undergraduate population. Even prior to the push to increase international recruiting, more than 40% of students using the university Writing Center identified a language other than English as their home language. Transfer students comprised approximately 60% of the undergraduate population.

As director of the Writing Program, I instituted several themes around which particular sections of our courses might be organized. One of these themes was cross-cultural writing. Themes grew out of the explicit teaching interests of our faculty, reflected how faculty were in practice approaching their courses, and aimed to connect the curriculum with the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of domestic students already on campus, leveraging that diversity in the learning of writing and rhetoric. Cross-Cultural Writing (CCW) sections, though intended initially to address the needs of domestic, already matriculated L2 and Generation 1.5 students, also have served international students transitioning from the English Language Proficiency Program (ELPP) to regular academic programs, though the ELPP was only starting to be conceptualized at the time we instituted CCW sections. CCW sections also preceded the formation of a campus-wide Global Learning initiative that very recently included global citizenship as a priority in the university's strategic plan.

Specifically, CCW sections have been of two types: those involving a substantial transnational component that has students collaborating with partners in countries such as France, Lebanon, and South Africa; and those without a transnational component but which nonetheless focus students' attention on how texts—both those students write themselves and those they read—attend to globalized contexts, exigencies, and audiences.

CCW sections I have taught in the past have involved U.S. writing students working with multilingual peers overseas in France and Lebanon in a range of collaborative activities via technologies like Skype, email, and Facebook. Tasks have included composing and peer reviewing collaboratively-authored business memos; composing literacy profiles based on interviews (and some additional research) of overseas partners; and (for writing center tutors) working with undergraduates overseas in the context of what I have termed tutoring collaborations.

In these courses students also have completed reading that addressed, for example, the ways in which the power and privilege attached to certain language(s)—but not others—is made material. Readings in the transnational, writing courses I have taught have included Amy Tan’s “Mother Tongue,” Rasma Haidri’s “Urdu My Love Song,” and Lisa Delpit’s “Other People’s Children”; advocacy texts such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderland/La Frontera*, Joe Sacco’s comics journalism *Palestine*, and Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s account of detention and torture (composed in the author’s fourth language), *Guántanamo Diary*; and book length reports of transnational research such as Daniel Wilkinson’s *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal and Forgetting in Guatemala* and Lawrence Weschler’s *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers*. I have also frequently included Chimamanda Adichie’s TED Talk, “The Danger of the Single Story.” Such texts exemplify the power of language to include and exclude, and the privileged status of (standard) English monolingualism. These readings also help the course meet the criteria of “honoring the power of all language users to shape language to specific ends; recognizing the linguistic heterogeneity of . . . users of language. . . ; and directly confronting English monolinguist expectations by researching and teaching how writers can work with and against, not simply within, those expectations” (Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011, p. 305).

In addition, these CCW courses have included a sequence of assignments which encourage students to reflect on their own situatedness and past experiences with language, both before and after their collaborations with overseas or culturally distinct peers. One of these assignments, typically preceding the transnational collaboration, has been a reflective, “literacy auto-ethnography” that asks students to describe their experiences with learning to read and write.

## Methods

In the CCW section under consideration, fifteen U.S. students (all domestic) and twenty-four French students participated in a guided, transnational collaborative writing project and peer review exchange. The U.S. students were enrolled in a second-year undergraduate writing course at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. The course focused on an exploration of rhetoric, genre, and culture, and included special attention to how academic/disciplinary, professional, and national cultures shape the expectations of written discourse. This 200-level course serves generally two groups of students: transfer students who, despite obtaining prior credit for the two-semester introductory composition requirement, do poorly on the writing placement exam; and students enrolled in programs in the School of Education for whom the course serves as a requirement.

Nine of the fifteen students were returning or nontraditional students (including one displaced auto worker, a current auto worker, and a retired postal employee) for whom the discourse of the university was as yet unfamiliar. Five of the non-traditional students were African-American, and five others were non-native speakers of English for whom English was a second or third language, and whose home languages were Arabic and French. The remaining non-traditional student was a white woman of European descent. Of the six traditionally college-aged students, one was a “generation 1.5” English speaker of Arabic descent and one was African-American. At the outset of the class, both L2 students and nontraditional students struggled similarly with standard, academic English, and with self-perceptions of being less capable as students.

The twenty-four French students were second-year undergraduates enrolled at Blaise Pascal University (Clermont-Ferrand, France). The participants were proficient users of English (C1-C2 level, on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), and all were language majors in the Applied Foreign Languages in Business & Technology program (*Langues étrangères appliquées*, or LEA). The students were taking a required course on written business communication in English, which focused on various types of written communication produced in the workplace (e.g. workplace letters and emails, writing for the web, job search genres).

Three in-class sessions were dedicated to the transnational peer review, which required students to answer the same set of questions about their overseas peers’ draft (see Appendix A). Students emailed their observations to their peers ahead of class time, and then used an online video-conferencing tool (Skype) to discuss their feedback during class time; French and U.S. classes were scheduled to take place synchronously. Peer review discussion sessions lasted one hour. During the first session participants introduced themselves, and during the two other sessions they explained their peer review suggestions and answered questions. The instructors circulated among the groups and made observations about what participants were saying, the tenor of their discussions, and other aspects of the interactions such as engagement and body language.

In preparation for the in-class sessions, participants had worked collaboratively, via Skype and email. Students worked in transnational groups of seven to nine students (i.e., each transnational group was comprised of three-four U.S. students and four-five French students) on a common set of business-writing assignments. Two different task-based scenarios had writers pose as a “manager” at a given company and write a professional text (memo or letter), either to other managers or to retailers, informing them of specific changes taking place, or describing a problem and providing instructions on how to correct it.

All participants (U.S. and French) had one week to prepare each draft, working collaboratively in their local, small groups. They emailed the drafts directly to their overseas peers two days prior to each in-class peer review session so as to leave

sufficient time for their long-distance peers to read and comment on the drafts before the exchange. Like the writing assignments, the guided peer reviews were prepared in advance and written collaboratively in the small, local groups. All participants were given the same peer review guidelines with the same questions and concerns to address as they reviewed their peers' drafts (see Appendix A).

At the end of this series of in-class sessions, all participants were asked to reflect on the transnational peer review experience in response to a common set of questions (see Appendix B, "Reflective Survey"). These questions targeted how useful students thought the exchange had been for helping them to rewrite their texts. This reflective survey also asked students to discuss other aspects of the exchange: the differences they had observed in educational expectations and practices between the two (U.S. and French) contexts; cultural differences among the writing of both their local and overseas peers; and the quality of the peer exchange itself, including if or how it strengthened or challenged their sense of self or self-confidence as communicators or writers. In some cases, U.S. students also chose to reflect on the peer review exchange as they put together final course portfolios at the end of the semester.

Reflective writing thus was a significant part of the pedagogy for the course before (U.S. students having composed literacy autoethnographies), during, and after the transnational, peer review exchange. Subsequent to the peer review, students (individually) reflected in writing on what they learned from their peers that helped them to revise their own business memos, the challenges of the peer review process, and what they learned about how cultural differences (relative to audience, in particular) affected their writing. These reflections were subsequently analyzed for themes related to students' feelings about linguistic and cultural competence. The overarching research question guiding this analysis was: what (if anything) did student reflections within the transnational context reveal about students' new (or renewed) sense of their own linguistic capabilities and/or cultural competence? The data suggests that as a consequence of the transnational exchange, second-language and non-traditional students who had been outside the academic mainstream for several years, in particular, shifted in their sense of themselves as writers and learners, thinking in new ways about their writing and what it can accomplish. This learning, in turn, set the stage for a newfound appreciation of their own language capability and cultural competence more generally.

### **Results and Discussion: The threshold potential of transnational pedagogies**

Students' written reflections suggested that the Skype-mediated sessions concretized the notion of audience for students, and put in the "driver's seat" second-language learners who were able to put to good use their knowledge of French or Arabic as they helped translate between domestic and overseas peers. These heteroglossic



exchanges appeared to challenge the deficit model of second-language learning for multilingual students (as well as for other, non-traditional students who were unfamiliar with academic discourse).

### **A case study: Huda**

“Huda,” an Arabic speaker who struggled with written English in particular, was taking the course after failing a qualifying exam in her education program because of her English skills. As part of a reflective portfolio centered on literacy she put together at the end of the course, Huda wrote of the time she spent as a girl with her family in a Saudi refugee camp after fleeing Iraq, incorporating excerpts of her poetry (written in Arabic) from those years along with reflections about how her experiences might inform her work as a teacher. While Huda reflected in writing about her frustrations with English, her teaching ambitions, and how much she hoped to model for her own children a commitment to school, she remained mostly quiet during class meetings and rarely participated in large-group discussions unless called upon directly.

Yet while Huda struggled with written English and generally was quiet in large-group class discussions, she—like other multilingual and nontraditional students during the transnational exchange—took the lead in her small group, helping to translate between U.S. and French peers who were having some difficulty understanding each other’s comments. (Many French students were recent immigrants from North Africa to France, and so were also speakers of Arabic.) Huda mentioned in class, and reflected in her writing, about how the small group work (especially her collaborative work with peers in France) was enjoyable and encouraging for her. During one in-class Skype session, for example, one of her French partners who (like several others in the French class) also spoke Arabic, not only praised Huda’s facility with English but also asked her admiringly, “You speak Arabic, *too*?” At first clearly taken aback by the question, Huda’s surprise quickly turned to obvious pleasure: “Well, yes, I do!”

Similar to others in the class, in the subsequent assignment (Appendix B) asking her to reflect in concrete ways on the challenges and benefits of the collaborative, transnational exchange, Huda described her interactions with peers in overwhelmingly positive terms, noting in particular her own ability “to help” her local and trans-Atlantic peers in “learning to understand” each other. Like it had for other students, the “mirror” held up to her by transnational peers allowed Huda to recognize how language ability (or lack thereof) is rhetorically constructed. Given her *habitus*—the non-“mainstream” background she brought with her to the transnational exchange—Huda was primed, given sufficient encouragement, to recognize how much context impinges on perceptions of language ability, and thus was able to revise “(self-)identifications troubled by . . . (the) uneven power dynamics” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 19) accompanying English monolingualism/hegemony. In short, Huda was able to shuttle between

contexts of language “deficit” and language surplus, leading her to see herself and her language ability differently.

The transnational collaboration brought into convergence the heterogeneous linguistic and cultural makeup of the French classroom with that of the U.S. classroom, and made explicit the manifold quality of each classroom in a way that did not replicate the linguistic hegemony of English. This transnational exchange thus created valuable opportunities for students such as Huda to function translingually, and to recast their identities as language users and writers in ways that challenged their previous self-perceptions as operating always at a deficit within English writing classrooms. In the context of the transnational collaboration Huda was able to interact with her peers as an expert, not just a novice, and as a language-user, who could leverage her strengths in Arabic despite her relative weaknesses in English.

### **A case study: Chris**

Chris, a non-traditional, English monolingual student from Detroit, was a displaced auto worker on a “No Worker Left Behind” tuition scholarship, and a student who often took the lead in moderating the discussion between his mostly younger peers (both local and overseas). In small-group discussions with both his U.S. and French peers he clearly relished this leadership role.

In one exchange, for example, a French student jokingly—but rather pointedly—suggested to a U.S. peer who was also in Chris’s group that wearing a hat while in class was impolite. Though the student with the ball cap took this comment in stride, a young woman in the U.S. group expressed offense at what she perceived to be the French woman’s overstepping boundaries of decorum by making the comments she did. This was one of several times that Chris, as a non-traditional student with a greater number of life experiences and personal observations of changing cultural norms, was able to mediate among various cultural perspectives, good-naturedly referencing the changes in custom and hat-wearing culture in the U.S. he himself had observed over time.

During these in-class Skype sessions, Chris was also often the first to ask questions of his group’s French partners and to offer clarification when they had questions about feedback they had received. While at the beginning of the semester Chris had self-identified as a weak writer with little to contribute to the learning of others, subsequent to the collaborative project with French peers he articulated in writing an emerging sense of confidence that was echoed in the class by other non-traditional students: “This exchange reinforced that my abilities as a communicator and a writer were good. It helped to build my confidence. I believe that the Skype sessions and our written exchanges have made me realize that I can compete and interact with all of these smart students.” Such confidence was exemplified in final papers for the course, which served as yet another opportunity for students to reflect on their development as

language users. The final paper assignment asked each student to examine a particular community or culture of which they were a member, describing (using concrete and specific details) some selective aspects of the ‘languages,’ customs or rituals, or values or beliefs of this group. Having completed this description, students needed to analyze some of these details, considering their significance in light of our class discussions about culture, language, and rhetoric. This assignment also asked students to envision specific readers whom they would persuade or teach something of value about community, culture, and/or language.

Chris’s final paper focused on his membership in the African American community and his view of the role Ebonics might play in formal education. In this paper Chris demonstrated an ability to connect with or persuade an audience—rather than simply present or narrate a set of experiences—that went far beyond what he had been able to accomplish at the beginning of the semester. For example, drawing on essays by both Lisa Delpit and Amy Tan, Chris simultaneously acknowledged his connection to and made a judgment about his subject, in the process creating a discourse which invited his intended audiences—the African American community as well as those who would doubt their abilities—to consider their own connections to the subject:

The topic Ebonics (sic) is very interesting to me because I wonder what they would teach in the classes, what the words are that would be translated into proper English. A very serious problem I have with Ebonics is I do not want people to get the understanding that Blacks cannot speak English. I hope this does not cause Blacks to shortchange or limit themselves with the misconceptions that they can speak any way they choose to and still be a very productive part of mainstream culture. . . How do you encourage and inspire people to achieve who are not thought of as high achievers—particularly young Black people who are told repeatedly by society that they are not expected to achieve? Speaking as an individual involved in the education system, whom (sic) communicates with educated people on a daily basis, I think approaching Ebonics as a tool or a method to teach people English is acceptable. On the other hand, if we’re trying to create some romantic notion that this is a new language . . . we are somewhat deluding ourselves.

In his paper, Chris exudes a confident tone, even pushing back against experts who might propose Ebonics as equally effective as standard English in all rhetorical contexts (admonishing them not to “delude” themselves) or those who would choose to ignore hard realities and the pressures to ‘perform’ linguistically imposed on “young Black people who are told repeatedly by society that they are not expected to achieve.” The transnational exchange, which provided Chris with multiple opportunities to demonstrate both cultural flexibility and communicative competence in mediating opposing

viewpoints and misunderstandings among his younger (U.S. and French) partners, clearly also had provided him with a threshold potential for shifting positively in his sense of self as “an individual involved in the education system,” and in his sense of his own abilities.

Compared to Huda, Chris more strongly transfers the knowledge and practices learned through the transnational exchange to a new task and rhetorical situation, explicitly addressing the predispositions of his intended readers (for example, young African Americans who might view Ebonics “romantically”). In doing this, Chris exemplifies what Bakhtin (1981) would call the dialogism of his discourse, as he inscribes the “external gaze” of those readers in his own text—a gaze prompting him to engage with his own situatedness or *habitus*—someone who is both a member of the African-American community yet who brings to an analysis of Ebonics a distinct background and years of life experience others might not have.

By contrast and in her final project for the course, Huda continued to be more tentative than Chris, for example relying on a narrative summary of her experience forming a ‘writing group’ with her sister when as girls they were living in a refugee camp, while offering little interpretation of that experience. She also only reluctantly (and at my gentle but persistent urging) included in her project an example of the poetry she wrote (in Arabic) during that time, which was essentially tacked on rather than integrated into the paper. Though she went through with my suggestion to include the example of her poetry written in her home language, Huda clearly felt less comfortable challenging received knowledge or what she previously had been taught—for example, about the form of traditional, academic writing—by including such a personal and linguistically ‘strange’ example. The differences between Huda and Chris in their willingness to challenge received cultural and linguistic norms were related perhaps to gender as well as to the fact that Chris, but not Huda, was writing in his home language, and his nation of origin.

Nevertheless, both students in their culminating work for the course demonstrated a capacity for rhetorical listening that is at the heart of transnational and cross-cultural pedagogies. While there were important differences in their projects, both Chris, a monolingual but multi-dialectical language user, and Huda, a multilingual writer working in other than her home language, in their final projects drew on their own specific, individual histories of moving between multiple cultural and linguistic contexts. In this way both of them showed an emerging awareness of context and audience in a way that “revised identifications troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p.19).

## Conclusions

For students in this class, collaborating across significant national, cultural and especially linguistic differences and then reflecting on those collaborations threw into relief the extent to which *context* matters significantly in the definition and assessment of academic “achievement.” This new awareness of context appeared to offer lessons for L2 and nontraditional students—and potentially for other students, including monolingual students—not only about how to create discourses more attentive to the needs of audiences. This new awareness also prompted students to leverage what they already knew about mediating competing languages, discourses, and attendant ideological positions, and to apply those abilities within the complicated communities of practice comprised by the transnational classroom. Transnational writing pedagogies, in other words, rely significantly on students reflecting on their learning and collaborations with distinct others. This was in evidence in Huda’s relationships with her overseas peers in particular, and in Chris’s relationships with both local and overseas partners.

The transnational classroom’s socially situated language use provided students, in particular those students who are often marginalized by traditional academic discourse such as nontraditional students or multilingual students, with the threshold potential—the necessary degree of ‘charged’ context, or perhaps more accurately a mix of charged contexts—required for thinking in new ways about their writing and what it can accomplish. This learning, in turn, set the stage for a newfound appreciation of their own language capability and cultural competence more generally. Indeed, the shifts in sense of self and in writing demonstrated by Huda and Chris have been typical of the non-traditional and multilingual students in my transnational classrooms.

Such a threshold potential can be achieved using a number of pedagogical strategies. First, meaningful collaborative activities—e.g, peer review exchanges or other partnerships with overseas peers that students see as productive rather than as perfunctory—facilitate the practice of rhetorical listening and recognition of students’ own *habitus*. Second are frequent and robust opportunities, during class discussions and individually, for reflecting on past and current, language-related experiences. Lastly, the transnational collaborative activity should be part of an assignment sequence that includes readings and/or other preparatory research and reflection, such as research about the partner university overseas or a literacy auto-ethnography.

In sum, pedagogies that engage students in transnational and cross-cultural experiences with peers overseas have the potential for intervening in hegemonic agendas imposed by institutions (and often internalized by students) by encouraging students to see themselves and their abilities differently—in part by highlighting for these students the facility they already have for constructing rhetorical and material contexts that work for them. Both Huda and Chris, as well as other students in the class,

brought with them to the classroom multiple, past experiences moving between linguistic and cultural contexts, and the transnational collaboration made clear (or reminded them) that contexts are, also, always being (re)constructed. Indeed, Huda's experience forming a writing group with her sister while living in a refugee camp, and Chris's experience interacting with young, African American men he knew had different beliefs than his, were both examples of their creating new contexts that *worked* for them.

My experience over the past several years with transnational pedagogies that emphasize students' collaboration with peers across multiple kinds of "borders"—national, institutional, disciplinary and linguistic—suggests that such pedagogies help to create a significant *threshold potential* for student learning, and for the transferability of that learning as well. Though not without limitations, transnational pedagogies help students articulate new understandings of writing—what it is and how it is practiced; and these pedagogies help students reflect in profound ways on the 'work' writing can accomplish, both within and beyond the classroom and the university. As significantly, students in transnational classrooms come to articulate a sense of change in their own identities as writers and as learners.

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## Appendix A

### Instructions for Peer Reviews

**When peer reviewing a text, be as specific as possible in your observations and suggestions.**

**1** Read the text draft over once while you sit on your hands. Focus on the information, purpose, and style.

**2** Analyse the draft thoroughly. Check:

- Is the audience obvious ? Is it the right one?
- Is the authors' purpose for writing clear ?
- Is the information complete?
- Is it well organized ?
- Do the author(s) use the most effective model/structure for the task ?

If you have answered 'no' to any of these questions, suggest to the author(s) how they might improve on those points.

**3** Edit the text to increase its effectiveness. Identify and circle :

- unnecessary words and information
- passives
- nominalizations
- long sentences (10-20 words)
- places where the author(s) should use a vertical list
- problems in paragraph structure
  - are the topic sentences clear ?
  - are the other sentences in the paragraph clearly related to the topic sentence ? If not, suggest to the author(s) how they might improve their draft.

**4** Tell the author(s) at least two things you thought were effective about the draft.

**5** Tell the author(s) what you have learned by reading their draft that will help you when you revise your own text.



## Appendix B

### Reflective Survey

#### The Skype intercultural exchange

- What words would you use to describe – ‘in a nutshell’ – the intercultural exchange with your overseas peers?
- How did the final Skype meeting go in comparison to the other two? If there were differences, why do you think those existed?
- Did you correspond with your overseas peers outside of class? About what, specifically?
- What did you find most significant or surprising about your overseas peers, individually and/or collectively?
- Were there any ways in which this intercultural exchange affected your sense of your own abilities as a communicator or writer? Did it strengthen, challenge or not impact at all your sense of self or your self-confidence as a communicator or writer? How so?

#### Educational differences

- What surprised you the most about the university system in France/ the U.S.? What do you think surprised your overseas peers about the your own system, and why?
- For you, what does it mean to be “a student” in the American/the French university system?

Based on your observations, what aspects of your overseas peers’ university system, if any, do you think it would be beneficial to ‘import’ into your own university? Why do you think so?

#### Peer review

- Did you feel more comfortable, less comfortable or about the same giving your overseas peers feedback on their writing the second time?
- How was your experience getting feedback on your texts?
- Did this feedback help you enough in knowing how to rewrite your texts, or would it also have been useful to have models or other types of support to revise your texts? How so?

- How would you compare the approach used in this class (intercultural peer review) with other writing experiences you have had in school?
- What are some of the main things you learned about communicating or writing from your overseas peers?

### **Intercultural differences in writing**

- Did you notice differences in the way your overseas peers wrote their texts (“*LA Times*,” “Perrigo”) in comparison to the way your group wrote? If you noticed differences, how would you describe or explain them?
- Did you notice any differences between the way a peer from your university had reviewed your draft of Assignment #5, and how your overseas peers reviewed your “*LA Times*” and “Perrigo” texts? If you noticed differences, how would you explain them?

### **Small-group collaborative writing (relates to American peers only)**

- Overall, how well did your group of American peers function in accomplishing the tasks required for the last two assignments (#7 “*LA Times*” and #8 “Perrigo”)? What challenges did your group encounter and how did your group address these?
- Please assess your *two (American) peers’ individual contributions* to your group’s writing and revising: exactly what contributions did each of them make and how important were their contributions to achieving the group’s goals in each assignment?
- Please assess *your own individual contribution* to the group’s work: exactly what contributions did you make and how effective were these contributions to achieving the group’s goals in each assignment?
- Would you suggest assigning a group grade or individual grades on these two assignments? Why?