DEVELOPING TUTORS' META-MULTILITERACIES THROUGH POETRY

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In 1996, the New London Group introduced the term "multiliteracies" to describe the ability to effectively communicate using multiple languages, multiple Englishes, and even multiple media. According to the New London Group, students who wish to succeed in the globalized world would be wise to develop some form of multiliteracy. Writing center scholar Nancy Grimm argues that adopting a multiliteracy approach in writing centers means, among other things, hiring multilingual tutors. While it seems obvious that multilingual tutors would be an asset to writing centers, Grimm points out that they also come with a built-in "metalinguistic ability" to talk about how they negotiate multiple discourses (18).

Grimm's claim, however, becomes contestable when we consider the work of Suresh Canagarajah, who describes how a Sri Lankan scholar, regularly writing in Tamil and English for different audiences, was unable to explain how he negotiated those discourses. Canagarajah notes, "the lack of a conscious awareness of one's writing strategies is not uncommon" (173). Thus writing centers should recruit multilingual tutors *and* offer professional development opportunities to help the tutors effectively leverage their language experience. The target of these potential professional development opportunities is building a tutor's "meta-multiliteracies," a term I propose to indicate one's ability to explain strategies for communicating across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Following the New London Group's original emphasis on critical engagement, I argue that meta-multiliteracies could include the ability to talk about how these communication strategies are shaped by power and identity.

How might meta-multiliteracies be developed? In a *Writing Center Journal* article, Lynne Ronesi described her training course for multilingual writing tutors at the American University of Sharjah, in which students read and discuss the work of multilingual writers.

According to Ronesi, the discussions "elicit the vocabulary for and understanding of notions like additive and subtractive bilingualism and code switching as well as prestige, status, and identity with regard to first and second language use" (80). Students also write their own narratives, essays, short stories, or poetry about their identities as writers in English. Research on second language poetry writing shows why poetry about language and literacy can be an effective tool for developing multilingual writing tutors' meta-multiliteracies.

Writing Poetry for Deep Understanding

In his book, *Poetry as Research: Exploring Second Language Poetry Writing*, David Hanauer describes how writing poetry can facilitate personal discovery. Hanauer studied the poetry writing of students in an ESL college composition course at an unnamed university in the United States. Through the revision process, the student poets discovered the essence of particular experiences. As shown by the sample poem below, even inexperienced poets and second language writers can tap into this discovery process through writing short, "image-driven and emotionally-laden" poetry (85). The following poem was written by a Chinese student in Hanauer's study:

> Untitled
> I'm using the language, I don't know what I mean
> I'm thinking with a five thousand year language
> Translating them into a simple world language
>
> I'm writing poems
> It is me
> If you know what I am talking about (qtd. in Hanauer 102)

The author of the poem was able to achieve a deep understanding of language, identity, and power through her composition. As Hanauer puts it, "the development of self knowledge is a basic aspect of the process" (83). In the poem, the author articulates her

strategy of thinking in her first language and translating her thoughts into her second language. Identity is a point of tension in the poem; she obviously feels disconnected from English when she says, "I don't know what I mean," and yet while writing poetry in English she still finds a way to express her identity, saying "It is me." In addition, she questions the relative power of English and Chinese. She presents English as "a simple world language," lacking the prestige of her mother tongue, "a five thousand year language." Yet she is compelled to learn English and write poetry in English.

Prior to writing this poem, the student might simply have said: "writing in English is hard." However, after a rigorous process of drafting and revising her poem, her understanding was much more complex. According to Hanauer, the practice of working to distill an experience into its most important images is what makes a deeper understanding possible. Hanauer's study helps explain why writing poetry about their own use of language helps Ronesi's multilingual tutors become more conscious of the strategies they use as they negotiate multiple discourses.

Hanauer's research suggests that a sufficient amount of time must be devoted to drafting, revision, and feedback for poets to achieve this deep understanding. Poetry writing can be incorporated into a tutor training course, but it might not be possible in centers without enough professional development time for ongoing engagement with the writing process. For those writing centers without tutor training courses, reading and discussing poetry about language and literacy can easily be added to staff development sessions.

Reading Poetry about Language and Literacy

Reading poetry about language and literacy, such as the poem quoted above, can stimulate a greater awareness of the issues writers face as they communicate across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. While visiting an Asian university where English is the official language of instruction, I was able to discuss the poem quoted above with a group of multilingual writing tutors. The tutors could immediately relate to the poem and began to discuss their own feelings about writing in English.

I have also read the poem with a group of writing tutors in a North American university, most of whom are native English speakers with limited experience learning other languages. In the North American group, tutors first said the poem reminded them of second language writers they tutor. As the discussion continued, one of the tutors expressed a realization that, as a native English speaker, she has the privilege of choosing to learn another language, while the author of the poem is compelled to learn English. This tutor's insight made me believe that even tutors who do not have first-hand experience with linguistic disadvantage can become more aware just by discussing second language poetry. The poems included in Hanauer's book can help generate such a dialogue.

Reading and writing poetry about language and literacy could give multilingual tutors—and perhaps monolingual tutors, too—deeper insights into the multiliteracies they bring to their work, which could then in turn help the tutors talk about multiliteracies with their student writers. By participating in these activities, tutors can become aware of the choices they make as they negotiate different discourses. They can find a language to explain these choices and to present options to their peers, and they can talk about how different rhetorical moves are made within different contexts. In short, they can develop meta-multiliteracies.

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