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## Book Review: Writing and Learning in Cross-National Perspective - Transitions from Secondary to Higher Education.

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Foster, David and Russell, David R. (Eds). (2002) *Writing and Learning in Cross-National Perspective: Transitions from Secondary to Higher Education*. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English.

In the introduction to their edition of collected essays, *Writing and Learning in Cross-National Perspectives*, David Foster and David R. Russell (2002) articulate the importance of studying writing and the administration of writing programs within a global context: “There is a great deal at stake, for both individual students and the societies involved, in how and how well students write” (p. 1). Writing, whether it is taught in the national language or in English, plays an important role in secondary school examinations, the results of which often determine a student’s access to higher education and, ultimately, a better standard of living. They note, “In most nations, whether students can enter and remain in higher education—and thus move into positions of greater responsibility and status in society—depends in part on whether and how they have developed their writing. Thus, writing development is bound up with questions of equity in access to higher education and to powerful roles in society” (p.1). In short, the study of writing instruction and testing raises important issues of equity.

Given the importance of writing in determining a student’s access to higher institutions of learning, and, ultimately, higher levels within society, there has been surprisingly little research conducted on writing instruction at international institutions. And, yet, there is a silence surrounding scholarship about international writing instruction. In response, Foster and Russell have uttered some of the first words in an attempt to initiate a discussion of writing at international institutions through a collection of essays that explore six countries, China, England, France, Germany, Kenya, and South Africa. Each separately authored essay explores the role writing instruction and writing examinations play in the transition from secondary schools to higher education. They examine writing pedagogy and testing as students enter institutions of higher education. Although Foster and Russell’s collection represents a small sample of international institutions that teach writing instruction, it is enough to begin an academic dialogue.

The essays in Foster and Russell’s collection attempt to provide a broad background in secondary writing instruction and examination of each particular country, while examining and evaluating individual student writing. Some focus on the larger institutional background, while others focus more on the student samples. In his essay on China, Xia-Ming Li concludes that while reform in post-Cultural Revolution China seeks to make education equitable and writing instruction more meaningful (and less a gatekeeper to admittance into higher education), Chinese secondary schools and institutes of higher education retain traditional methods of teaching, including the translation and annotation of ancient Chinese literature and the de-emphasis of writing. Mary Scott observes

the same struggle in England. As it opens its universities to non-traditional entrants while at the same time trying to maintain "quality," writing has shifted away from the general education courses typical of American universities toward more disciplinary writing, or what is often termed writing across the curriculum. Christiane Donahue argues that it is important to understand the differences between American and French writing instruction, noting that "to understand the place of writing and its pedagogy in the French system is to understand a complex weave of historical, political, sociological, and institutional factors in some ways similar to those Americans face, and in some ways quite different." She continues, "Understanding those issues can help us see that U.S. assumptions are not universal, that 'good writing' is indeed largely a culture- and language-based phenomenon, and that monolithic, univocal composition pedagogies are not necessarily beneficial" (2002, p.138).

David Foster; Mary Nyambura Muchiri; and Suellen Shay, Rob Moore, and Antoinette Cloete make similar observations about the educational systems in Germany, Kenya, and South Africa, respectively. Foster observes that early in their education, German students are taught to negotiate disciplinary and professional ways of writing and speaking, especially in terms of the authority and ethos as novices or experts which they bring to the text. Muchiri argues that writing instruction in Kenya must be broadened from short, static, and acontextual compositions to writing that occurs within a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes, especially since writing instruction—and all teaching for that matter—occurs in English, a second language for most Kenyans. Shay, Moore, and Cloete ask why South African students produce texts in their university history classes that are at odds with their instruction. When the students were not given adequate instruction in argumentative writing, they were forced to select from "preconstructed authoritative accounts (i.e. secondary sources) in order to produce a single-truth account." Depending on the secondary source, the "single-truth account" differed. Foster and Russell frame these essays with an introduction and conclusion that focuses on the historical role of writing instruction.

The collection's greatest contribution to scholarship on the teaching of writing is its willingness to initiate a conversation that to this point has been almost non-existent. As several of the contributors note, composition research tends to be parochial, limited to those institutions and practices in Canada and the United States. North American composition scholars, they argue, often ignore any type of writing instruction that might take place in international institutions whose native tongue is different from English, or they assume that writing instruction is the same. Donahue is the most critical of this attitude, arguing that the *commentaire compose*, the *etude d'un texte argumentative*, the *dissertation*, and the *discussion*, the four forms common to French Lycee and University instruction, must be understood within the complex background of French social, cultural, and historical assumptions. However, when American scholars attempt to see all writing and writing instruction through the prism of Anglo-American conventions

and values, they remove the context of this instruction. The edition also seeks to understand how such a parochial view of writing arose and what should be done. The problem is in part attributable to different assumptions between American and international thinking about when writing should be taught (secondary or university?), how it should be taught (as part of general education or within disciplines and professions?), how centralized or decentralized education should be overall (should one agency, such as a ministry of education, determine all the outcomes, or should each university or university system be allowed to establish its own policy?), and what purposes writing will eventually serve (is it to create citizens or future employees of business?).

What may be of more value to the scholar of international education, however, is the collection's attempt to understand how all instruction is situated within historical, cultural, and political structures. Often writing instruction in these countries is caught between a market economy that seeks workers who can communicate effectively and a traditional system of education that prefers writing as a gatekeeper that can shut out movement among social and ethnic classes. Li's chapter on China is an example of this. In it, he outlines a Chinese system that is in transition from the thinking of the Cultural Revolution, which devalued certain intellectual activity, especially within the humanities, and which often imposed a certain social and class hierarchy through a rigid entrance examination, to post-Cultural Revolution thinking that has placed a greater value on private industry and capitalism while also opening up the university system. Where students once outside private school education trickled slowly into Chinese universities, many of the same students now flood the gates of higher education. Yet, Li is careful to note that writing instruction—and most instruction for that matter—in China has not quite made the transition, instead vacillating between the two extremes. Through student surveys, he finds that there still exist remnants of the old education: writing is taught, but devalued; entrance examinations are still important, though less so than before; etc. In a closing anecdote, Li relates the difficulties of this transition with an email sent from his nephew about a recent examination:

Our department started to offer Chinese as a required course for everyone from this semester [spring 1999]. The course mainly teaches the history of Chinese literature, yet we had to take an exam at the end, during which we were asked to write 600 words on the topic, "On Joy." I looked during the exam and saw many sour faces in the classroom. It took me an hour to finally find "joy." (2002, p. 83)

China, like many of the countries surveyed in this collection, seeks to increase the number of students entering its educational system and to reform its pedagogy to help feed its growing economy with young workers. In so doing, though, it cannot quite let go of its former system.

It is difficult to find anything to criticize about Foster and Russell's collection. Rather, it leaves us—as it should—with a sense that more scholarship is needed

in this area. As Foster and Russell themselves note, this is but a collection of six different systems. In furthering this conversation, we might ask these questions:

- What other countries teach writing?
- How is writing instruction within these countries shaped by the social and political conditions of that country?
- Within those countries surveyed and to be surveyed, is the writing consistent from school to school or university to university?
- Which countries provide writing instruction in their own language and which provide instruction in a second language, most notably English?
- How has writing instruction in other countries been influenced by American composition pedagogies?

In many Turkish universities, for instance, writing instruction occurs in both English and Turkish. The English writing instruction is influenced by American models of composition, the result of several factors: Turkey's emulation of the West; the rise of university writing centers that are modeled on American writing centers; and active participation by writing faculty in such groups as the European Association of Teachers of Writing (EATAW) and the International Writing Centers Association. In summary, one might put together an entire library of similar studies. For right now, Foster and Russell have placed the first book on the shelf.

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