Reflecting Upon American Academic Culture: International Student Perspectives

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Abstract

This work features the voices of international graduate students enrolled in a doctoral level Professional Writing course. Employing a collective auto-ethnographic approach, the work explores international students' perceptions of the writing and publishing cultures of Western higher education. The work further explores the students' perceptions of the writing socialization process into academe..

Review of Literature

Higher education institutions across the world provide both opportunities and challenges for students to study internationally for a semester, year, or to even pursue degrees. As the population of international students increases, a strong need exists for institutions to review and improve services to assist in the transition, retention, and graduation of international students. Literature across disciplines discuss the interactions of international graduate students, but not so much their lived experiences in the classroom. There is an even more scarce amount of research pertaining to writing and publishing in western culture. The literature that is available discusses international students and campus climate, social engagement, and academic engagement.

International Students and Academic Engagement

Literature on academic engagement expands from the topic of procrastination to classroom dynamics with faculty and peers. Kim (2012) discusses how international Asian students tend to exhibit procrastination behavior when stressed and struggling with English

language proficiency. Procrastination included tasks such as reading assignments and studying for tests. In addition, research suggests that stress, lower language proficiency, and self-efficacy could account for many academic problems (Kim, 2012).

Research also explores experiences inside the classroom. Mukminin and McMahon highlight the experiences of Indonesian doctoral students in the classroom and relationships to faculty (2013). Results of the study showed that these students faced significant barriers that limited their classroom engagement, especially related to completing readings in a short time frame. Many participants also noted their lack of confidence to discuss their work and thoughts in the classroom with peers and faculty (2013).

Abir Eldaba (2016) discusses the need for American institutions to help international students transition and succeed within and beyond the classroom. Her model proposes ways to retain and help international students succeed. Based on Astin's theory of involvement, Eldaba (2016) suggests a logic model that links resources and activities for international students based on their needs. These needs could include mentoring programs, international student orientation, and other support services that enhance their learning.

International Students and Scholarship

Sparse literature on the publishing and writing of international graduate students exist. Available sources discussed writing reflections of current or past international graduate students. For instance, similar to Kim (2012), Colombo (2014) describes the difficulties of writing field notes in English as his second language. Confidence in his ability to write both research findings and his own personal reflections were consistent themes. Through his challenges and lack of confidence, he discussed the use of mentors who had completed his program and a graduate advisor who was also a native Spanish speaker (2014).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this auto-ethnographic study is to examine perceptions of the academic writing and publishing cultures of Western higher education from international students' at a research intensive mid-Western university in the United States. In this research, writing and publishing cultures refer to scholarly practices and communities in the postsecondary sector.

Methods

Utilizing an auto-ethnographic approach, this work features a purposeful sample of three graduate students enrolled in a course entitled "Professional Writing" at a research intensive university in the United States. The three participants consist of men from Saudi Arabia ranging in age from 30 to 40 years old pursuing Ph.D. degrees in Education. They are bilingual, where Arabic is their first language and English is their second.

Reflective journaling provided data to explore the featured research questions. Writing about their experiences is consistent with the auto-ethnographic methodological approach in qualitative research. Researchers using the auto-ethnographic approach reflect on their lived experiences through writing (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). According to Schwandt (2000) auto-ethnography "commonly refers to a particular form of writing that seeks to unite ethnographic (looking outward at a world beyond one's own) and autobiographical (gazing inward for a story of one's self) intentions" (p.13).

While critics of auto-ethnography believe it does not hold the analytic outcomes required of research (Atkinson, 2006; Delamont, 2009), we believe reflection upon experience highlights the voices of traditionally marginalized populations and yields qualitative understanding that may prompt or expand future inquiry. The auto-ethnographic nature of this work requires collaboration between myself, as a teacher-scholar, and the participating journaling students.

Hence, the students who have volunteered to participate serve as the work's secondary co-authors. Stevens and Cooper (2008) note that "active attention to journal writing will guide students toward not only learning more, but also being able to critically examine their learning, their beliefs and basic assumptions." For these students, journaling promises to prompt examination and perhaps challenge their personal assumptions, goals, and beliefs, yielding reflective thought and practice, thereby rendering auto-ethnography a fitting method for this work. The constant comparative method was used to analyze the available data.This study seeks to answer two main research questions. These include:

1) What are perceived similarities and differences between writing culture and publication expectations of institutions from the students' homelands and that of the United States?

2) How does academe in the U.S. promote or hinder the inclusion of the featured international students into the scholarly community?

These questions informed the guided journal prompts of the featured participants and have yielded the following journal data. Further, these questions will serve as the center of the work's analysis and subsequent discussion.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to understanding that "all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced; it is grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed" (Mann & Kelley, 1997, as cited in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 38-39). Participants in this work were encouraged to be reflexive in their journal responses to strengthen the end product.

Findings

The students individually answered journal prompts aimed at addressing the two featured research questions. The following illustrates their responses:

Student #1

In terms of his experiences of writing in a Western context, one doctoral student shares:

> Proofreading is my habit in writing, whether I write in my first language or my second language. I use the required academic styles. MLA, Chicago and APA style…Practice in writing using one language is a double-edged sword.

He further listed publication as a goal that he seeks to work towards. In comparing the academic settings of the United States and his homeland, he holds:

> The main similarity between the academic environments of the United States and Saudi Arabia is that the faculty have to publish. The difference is the language of publication. Both Saudi universities and U.S universities have the same writing expectations such as ethical responsibility. All writing types have to be professional, positive, and productive. Writers must demonstrate respect for human rights regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religious, moral, or political beliefs.

Fortunately, the student does not share experiences of stress or challenges with writing in his second language. In these ways, he contrasts the experiences of stress and academic struggle demonstrated by Kim (2012) and Colombo (2014) in the prior review.

Student #2

Student #2 shares his writing and academic experiences as follows:

> As a graduate student, there is a lot of writing required for my courses. Most of the writing that we do is research in our area of study and we research what others have studied before us. Some of the research is not exact to what we are trying to research and

we have to find ways to apply it to our topic.

In U.S. universities, most students are not required to publish until they reach the Ph.D. level. At this level, there are two kinds of writing. First, we write about research that has already been done. Second, we can do our own research and then write about what we discovered. Faculty are required to publish to receive their senior status as members of the university.

One of the differences about writing for U.S. universities is understanding some of the higher level research articles and managing the time to read everything necessary for my writing. Because English is my second language, some of the academic terms do not come naturally to me to understand, so it can take me longer to fully understand the meanings. Also, some of the English words that are used in daily conversation have a different meaning than in research.

In holding that "some of the academic terms do not come naturally…, so it can take …longer to fully understand" is an example of a challenge due to language proficiency and writing in a second language (Kim, 2012; Colombo, 2014).

Student #3

The final doctoral student shared his concerns of writing in Western culture in the following way:

Writing in English poses significant challenges for me. I am not a native speaker. English is my second language. There is nothing about writing in English that comes naturally to me, and I expend a lot of time and energy translating my thoughts from Arabic into English.

There is a greater degree of validity and legitimacy to publishing in the context of American universities as compared to Saudi universities. U.S. universities have the strongest standards of research, though in my experience Saudi standards are growing and improving.

Like Student #2, the final featured author shared concerns related to the challenge of writing in a second language. He illustrates the stress, as observed by Kim (2012), of having to "expend a lot of time and energy translating…thoughts from Arabic into English." While his writing experiences reflect those of Student #2, his perspectives on the standards of Western academic culture, as compared to that of his home country, contrasts with the views of Student #1, who considers the standards of the two research settings to be equal.

Conclusion

Two of the three participants expressed challenges with writing in and understanding English as a second language at the doctoral level. The challenges may be related to the length of time each has spent in the American context, as each is in their early years of doctoral study. Participants held different views as to whether or not the academic standards of U.S. and Saudi research expectations and outcomes were comparable. These differences may be rooted in the unique individual perspectives and experiences they bring to the U.S. context.

In terms of the limitations of this study, greater gender and cultural diversity within the research would produce expanded findings. Triangulating the data via the use of artifacts would strengthen the current study as well. Finally, findings are not generalizable, but may inform future studies on this topic.

Implications of this work center upon bridging the potential gap between some Western institutions' interest in cultivating climates of diversity and inclusion in the professoriate, with

the perceptions and lived experiences of the international students that they welcome. Specifically, this inquiry notes the importance of providing support for second language learners at the doctoral level to both offer guidance for degree completion and publication. Establishing a publishing history during graduate study positions doctoral students to be competitive for faculty and research positions at research centered universities. In this way, U.S. academic culture can promote the inclusion of the featured international students into the Western scholarly community.

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