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Review of Ben Rafoth's *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*

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At the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, our writing center sees quite the diversity of students. Although the majority of the students are native speakers of English, there is a significant number of nonnative English speakers that utilize our services; i.e., speakers of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean comprise 32.64% of unique clients. We also work with speakers of a myriad of different languages that span from European (French, German, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish) to Pacific (Tagalog, Vietnamese, Hawaiian, Indonesian, Thai). Although Hawai'i is known to be a mosaic of cultures and languages, it is both interesting and important that Ben Rafoth's *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* calls attention to the growing diversity of multilingual students in writing centers across the United States and the rest of the world.

Although Rafoth's is "a book written for writing center directors and tutors who take seriously the preparations needed to work with international multilingual students in the United States," the book is also a useful resource for writing center tutoring in general (1). As directors of and tutors in writing centers, it is our responsibility to not only "have the knowledge and skills to help multicultural and multilingual writers meet their goals of improving their written English," but also to act responsibly and with proper sensibilities that don't create needlessly hegemonic relations (138). As Bobbi Olson notes in her essay "Rethinking Our Work with Multilingual Writers: The Ethics and Responsibility of Language Teaching in the Writing Center [http://www.praxisuwc.com/olson-102]"

> we bear, in other words, a critical responsibility for acknowledging the ethical dimensions of our work, particularly given the historical functions writing centers have been made to serve within institutions of higher education as gatekeepers of access and conservators of particular conceptions of academic Englishes. And perhaps even more importantly, we need to consider the ways in which our own privileges and institutional positioning make us susceptible to perpetuating the unequal power distributions in which multilingual writers are frequently embedded.

In *Multicultural Writers and Writing Centers*, Rafoth provides an extensive array of interviews from his prodigious experiences working with composition studies, writing center studies, and TESOL programs. Each of these detailed accounts of students, tutors, and directors maps out particular pedagogical situations of interest that "invigorate the preparation of tutors and directors for the multilingual futures that await us all" (17).

In the first chapter, "The Changing Faces of Writing Centers," Rafoth notes how writing literacy in the English language is more important than ever throughout the world. As the world's population of college and university students increases—in the British Council's estimate, world enrollment is expected to increase by twenty-one million students by 2020—the number of international students in the United States also sees continual growth (19). These multilingual students bring different linguistic varieties of English to the writing

centers they frequent. Rafoth points out that writing centers are already spaces of negotiation among dialects of English and that even among multilingual students, there are disparate groups. For example, international students and refugees and immigrants can all be marked as nonnative English speakers, but there are strong differences within these groups. Although they all may be separated from their respective homes, "international students in the United States are here mostly because they choose to study in the United States, [while] many refugees and immigrants do not necessarily choose or want to learn English or any new language" (32-33). As such, Rafoth suggests a downside to labeling students in general; what is of utmost importance is to understand and respect the nuances multilingual students, and tutors, bring to their writing centers.

Rafoth addresses the interactions between tutor and student in his second chapter, "Learning from Interaction." Offered are a great deal of general tutoring instructions—e.g., the importance of listening in interactive conversations, the differences between incomplete understandings versus simple misinterpretations, the potholes of negative transfer—and many of the terms Rafoth uses are collected conveniently in a glossary. The chapter also provides insight into social and cultural contexts that can help tutors when working with multilingual students:

> For many, English is a means to attain social mobility, cultural and personal enrichment, and a path out of poverty, isolation, and tedious labor. Tutors are not usually aware of these factors, but they need to know that motivation, resourcefulness, will power, and even strong feelings of guilt, honor, and obligation may lie just beneath the surface in a consultation. (43)

Anxieties can arise for multilingual students, especially graduate students, since many peer-reviewed publications are dominated by the English language. This unfortunately creates a situation where students oftentimes privilege the product (publication) over the process (becoming a better writer) during tutoring consultations. But with this contextual knowledge and understanding that there are idiosyncrasies within language transfer, tutors are more capable of being successful in their sessions. Rafoth then discusses the concept of native-speaker privilege, and he makes an interesting observation. In a case of an international graduate writer whose writing is well-formed but is littered with non-idiomatic phrasings, only the tutor can sense the awkwardness in such phrasing. As a result, some nonnative English speakers specifically avoid tutors that aren't stereotypically native English speakers—in other words, white. But through my own experience working in a very multicultural and multiethnic writing center, such initial biases are often alleviated through the building of rapport and trust between student and tutor.

In Chapter Three, Rafoth reminds us all of the difficulty of producing academic writing, not only for nonnative English speakers but for native English speakers as well. Pointing out that "most international students do not enter college with the vocabulary they need for studying at the college level," he notes that the same can be said for many native English speakers (76). When Rafoth shares an example of multilingual writers receiving "searing comments from instructors" that banish them to the writing center to "learn to use Standard English," one can only recall the multitudes of instructors across universities that also fail to teach writing to native English speakers as well (81). With this in mind, tutors must be flexible with their help. As Rafoth continues, "[t]utors who come to their jobs with narrow views about writing based on the belletristic conventions of literary works or who overgeneralize the conventions for writing in any discipline will almost certainly mislead the writers they tutor" (91). Rafoth advises tutors to learn metatextual markers for academic writing, such as thesis, summary, counterargument and parallel structure, but also warns against the overuse of lexicon devolving into a dense intimidating discourse (89).

Editing has always been a topic of contention for writing centers. As tutors, we do not want to mechanically sift through student writing and highlight fixable errors, and yet we also don't want to vindicate a negative reputation of writing centers "dismissing students' concerns about editing and proofreading" (108). In Chapter Four, "Corrective Feedback," Rafoth builds on Mina Shaughnessy's notions of error to offer insight

into how to approach revision in an informed and productive manner. First off, it's important to note that errors are reflective of "writers' literacy background, age, and experience, but not any moral failings" (106). One strategy that Rafoth focuses his attention on is recasting, often enacted through a student reading a passage and a tutor rereading the passage with corrections: e.g., "a student writes, 'Last week I write him an e-mail,' and the tutor repeats, 'Last week you *wrote* him an e-mail'" (114). However, without "discussion about how the tutor was spotting errors or what proofreading strategy was being followed," recasting can become mere editing (116). Proper corrective feedback not only points out specific errors in writing, but also provides thorough reasoning on why and how to approach such errors.

Rafoth's final chapter, "Preparing Ourselves and Our Tutors," is a reminder for writing center directors on the many facets of running a writing center. He borrows University of Manitoba's writing services coordinator Kathy Block's tutor prep program as a good example of acclimating new tutors to their work: starting with fourteen hours of tutor development (e.g., learning a basic knowledge of the structure of language along with the day-to-day duties of a tutor), and followed by shadowing experienced tutors and being tutored themselves (127). Again, Rafoth emphasizes flexibility as a tutor, which entails being prepared to "encounter writers who speak a wider variety of languages, including varieties of English" (138). Finally, he ends with a poignant note that directors and tutors alike have much to learn from multilingual writers and the literacies that they can bring to the writing center.

One criticism of Rafoth's book is the lack of specific praxis-related techniques that can help tutors work with multilingual writers. As such, perhaps the book is best utilized early in the tutor development process, preparing nascent tutors and reminding experienced tutors "with growing numbers of minority and multilingual college students . . . who speak a wider variety of languages, including varieties of English" (138). Afterwards, more praxis-focused work can help tutors negotiate among writing cultures to "identify the cultural variant[s] and then offer some consulting techniques that might be used to create a common ground based on [those] variant[s]" (Mosher, Granroth, and Hicks 3). For example, writing consultants Mosher, Granroth, and Hicks recommend tutors use an acronym they refer to as the WATCH approach during a writing consultation:

> **W** – Talk about the **WRITER**.
> **A** – Talk about the **AUDIENCE/ASSIGNMENT**.
> **T** – Talk about the writer's **TEXT**.
> **C** – A few **COMMUNICATION CAVEATS**.
> **H** – Remember, **HELPING** the writer is your primary purpose. (3)

A praxis-oriented tool, WATCH reminds tutors that each writer brings a unique cultural context to a writing consultation, especially multilingual writers. Although strong multilingual competence is a desired trait for all tutors to have, what's realistically achievable is harnessing cultural awareness through the building of tutor/student rapport.

Another problem with Rafoth's discourse is that it sometimes implies that all native English speakers are homogeneous. When preparing to work with multilingual students, "tutors must be prepared well," he argues, "beyond what comes naturally to an earnest, well-read, and verbal native speaker" (137). But just as multilingual writers vary broadly, so too do native English speakers. It is important to take note of these numerous voices when we provide students with corrective feedback, so as not to marginalize them or their writing.

Overall, *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* gives a good context for our contemporary writing centers as multilingual spaces. Rafoth's discourse also serves as a reminder of one-to-one tutoring problematics, which are not specific to multilingual students but rather practical for tutoring in general. Paired with a book specifically on the praxis of ESL writing, such as Eli Hinkel's *Teaching Academic ESL Writing: Practical*

Techniques in Vocabulary and Grammar, Rafoth's volume is a great complementary read into multilingual issues for directors, tutors, and scholars of writing centers. Nevertheless, *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* is an important reminder for directors and tutors alike that the populations of writing centers, and universities as well, are always changing. As such, our pedagogies too, whether they align with Stephen North's or Muriel Harris's, should remain dialectical and in flux. Understanding situations of multilingual writers not only benefits the writers that come to our writing centers, but it also strengthens the pedagogies of directors and tutors.

Works Cited

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