A MISSING DIMENSION IN MULTICULTRALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE MARGINALIZATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' VOICES AND WRITING IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

This reflective essay highlights the realities, problems and possibilities multilingual writers face in negotiating North American mainstream academic discourses and developing their writing identities. Drawing on Russian literary theorist Bakhtin, I argue that language is the missing dimension in multiculturalism in higher education. His dialogic theory discourse and emerging selfhood assumes a fusion of languages and social worlds in human consciousness. The multilingual competence international students bring to North American campuses should be valued and seen as a resource and enrichment for empowering students to develop their writing identities and authorial selves in an era of diversity, equity, and globalization.

AGENDA FOR DISCUSSION: MULTILINGUAL WRITERS IN ACADEME

I did not mean to plagiarize. I am beginning to see the difference. But I do not understand why I was so punished and received a failing grade in the entire course for one mistake.

I feel like I am a dummy and cannot do academic writing.

I do not think I have a voice anymore 'cause I have to fit and write what they want.

I know I can write in French but many of my professors cannot read what I write if I do.

In the Tamil community here in Montreal we do mix and borrow codes from Tamil and Sanskrit

These excerpts reflect the recurring comments I keep hearing from decades of teaching and supervising international graduate students in my seminars on Multilingual/Multicultural Literacies and Qualitative/Ethnographic Research Methods. Many international students come from outside Kachru's "Inner Circle" countries such as Canada, United Kingdom or United States, write in more than one language, and have experienced a variety of non-Western literarcy traditions espoused by many Anglo-American scholars (Canagarajah 2002; Kachru, 1992; Kubota, 2001; Matsuda, 2006).

Writing is not merely a mastery of normative, uniform sets of codes, conventions, or registers that indicate proficiency in academic discourse. Ivanic (1998) argues that "writing is an act of identity in which people align themselves with socio-culturally shaped possibilities of selfhood, playing their part in reproducing or challenging dominant practices and discourses, and the values, beliefs and interests which they embody" (p. 23). Appropriating

new discourses is not just a matter of 'picking up' new information or new discursive practices as new ways of knowledge making. Many educators and policy makers may erroneously assume that international students have problems because they do not know or understand the expectations of academic discourse in North American academic institutions. In his *Geopolitics of Academic Writing,* Canagarajah (2002) uses the concept of "code meshing" to understand the bringing together of multiple discourses among multilingual writers and the powerful literacy traditions students from non-western backgrounds come from and bring to their classes in higher education. He also (2006a) argues that "not every instance of non-standard usage by a student is an unwitting error. Sometimes it is an active choice motivated by important cultural and ideological considerations" (p. 609).

Kubota (2001) argues that assumptions about "non-native speakers" of English can lead to the 'othering' of ESL students by stereotyping their cultures and languages. Such othering presumes the existence of an unproblematic 'Self' of Western images, of power relations, and feelings of superiority or inferiority. Framing "English Learners" as an essentialized group of students, who are somehow different from an invisible, unspecified but assumed mainstream norm, results in reifying uni-dimensional categorical concepts of identity (Gutierriz & Orellana, 2006) and reproduction of the academy (Lee & Maguire, 2011, in Press). Are prevailing mainstream discourses of academic writing for international students really about diversity or equity, or more about conformity to a sanitized "one size fits all" homogenized, normative view of academic writing?

What does authorship mean for international students as multilingual writers who border cross within two or three discourse communities and more than one language? How can those in higher education ensure that students are able to write with authority and develop their own writing identities and authorial selves? As students negotiate new contact zones (Bakhtin, 1981) and new ideological writing environments, many struggle with competing textual expectations and degrees of authority and freedom about what they should write, how they should write, and for whom. Lee and Maguire (2011, in press) argue that "the growing presence of international students from countries where English is not the dominant language raises academic, equity, sociolinguistic, and political questions within North American tertiary hosting institutions."

Human consciousness comes into existence through the medium of surrounding ideological worlds and finds itself "inevitably facing the necessity of having to choose a language" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 295). I draw on Bakhtin's (1981) social theory of language and two competing and even coexisting discourses–authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse—to frame my questions. Authoritative discourse refers to privileged languages and official discourses, such as official government policy and legislation, the discourse of tradition, generally acknowledged beliefs and authority that cannot be disrupted. Internally persuasive discourse refers to everyday discourse that constantly changes in social interactions. It is the discourse of personal beliefs, values, and ideas that influence our responses to the world and others and allows for negotiation. The two discourses can create socio-political tensions between languages and power, texts and power, self and others. When international student writers are engaged in learning authoritative discourses in North American academic contexts, they may experience conflicts derived from the power relationships between the new authoritative discourse of others and their internally persuasive discourse as authoring selves (Lee & Maguire 2011, in press). Disconnects between their own cultural writing styles and those of North American mainstream academic discourse and the tensions between those at the core and periphery have been documented elsewhere (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Gentil, 2003; Mathews, 2003; Sadeghi, 2005).

Many research-intensive institutions readily affirm cultural diversity as a desirable source of institutional capital and symbol of academic excellence. Is this marketing of international student enrollment merely a source of revenue for universities competing in the global market place and are claims for increasing visible cultural diversity just rhetoric of 'political correctness'? What kinds of people are international students becoming in their new ideological environments? (Bakhtin, 1981). What are our ethical and professional responsibilities to these diverse "speaking personalities" (Maguire, 2010), who may or may not experience conflicting discursive academic literacy practices in expectations in knowledge making and developing their own writing identities and authorial selves? Certainly, authoritarian punitive practices for transgressions such as plagiarism are not the answer (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Decker, 1993).

Multilingual writers of "English" including other languages now outnumber mainstream native users of English in my classes. In learning to appreciate some of their challenges, realities, possibilities, and problems, I wonder why some international students who are multilingual experience discrimination and feel marginalized or like "dummies" despite the increasing internationalism of tertiary institutions that claim diversity is valued. Language is the missing dimension in multicultural education in tertiary institutions, especially those who claim excellence in their admissions and recruitment discourses of attracting the "the best and brightest." Most striking is

the marginalization of international students' multilingual voices, which includes writing in more than one language such as English and/ or many "Englishes" (Kachru 2002). Whose writing voices are privileged? (Maguire, 2010). Who is at the core and periphery? (Mathews, 2006)

DEVELOPING WRITING IDENTITIES IN ACADEMIA: WHOSE EXPECTATIONS DOMINATE OR PREVAIL?

A comprehensive review of studies on the publishing experiences of periphery scholars and students suggests that "international publication is more of a challenge to multilingual scholars than it is to others who are endowed with economic, cultural, and symbolic capital and thus able to respond to the demands of the core academic discursive practices with relative ease (Uzuner, 2008, p. 261). Pederson (2010) examined how a group of multilingual scholars in Jordan negotiated multiple linguistic and cultural affiliations, and experience empowerment and disempowerment in English.

Holland et al. (1998) view identities as "possibilities for mediating agency and the key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them". Canagarajah & Jersky (2009) argue "written competence in English has taken on added significance for students and scholars in the context of globalization" (p. 473). They identify six major challenges, realities, and tensions for multilingual writers: Authorship vs. Voice, Borrowing vs. Plagiarism, Description vs. Practice, Accommodation vs. Resistance, Process vs. Product, Grammar vs. Genre. They also see one of the most "complicated issues currently under discussion inspired by the social changes of globalization and philosophical change of postmodernism [is] the status of World Englishes" (Kachru 2002). International students' perceptions and experiences of academic literacy practices they are expected to appropriate and emulate can differ from and clash with those of their, mainstream North American professors. Not surprisingly, therefore, international students may experience a crisis of writing identity in North American institutions of higher education.

Several issues emerge in considering international students' developing writing identities in academia and whose expectations dominate or prevail: Whose "Englishes" are privileged in tertiary education? How ready are tertiary institutions to meet the needs of multilingual writers who write in English and more than one language in the high stakes contexts of academia? How can multilingual writers develop their own writing identities and voice/s in academic writing that privileges the hegemonic power of an idealized version of "Standard" English? Many composition scholars now argue that other languages are also gaining importance in the context of globalization (Dor, 2004), thus challenging claims that English **is** the language of globalization. New challenges and possibilities emerge for professors and students to be open to the possibilities that to use languages are to "people" them (Bakhtin, 1986) with their own intentions and interests. Language does not function as a culturally or ideologically neutral tool for human expression of ideas. What moral obligations do institutions have towards these multilingual writers' in respecting and acknowledging their multilinguistic competence and ensuring their writing voices are understood, heard, and respected in university classrooms and viewed as resources and cultural enrichment in academe?

CANADIAN CONTEXT: RHETORIC & REALITY

A commitment to diversity, equity, and multiculturalism, which is one of the primary principles of Canadian higher education, ought to be much more than simply having a token representation of international students among its student populations. In the light of Canada Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1981) and Official Languages Act (1969), one might logically infer that Canadian university students write in both official languages, English and French. Indeed, the policy at my own institution states that students have the opportunity to write their papers in English or French. How many actually do so is unknown. In writing this essay, I posted four questions to my own university senior administrators; no statistics are available for the first three questions.

1. How many international students are currently enrolled in graduate studies at McGill? How many are trilingual or multilingual?
2. How many of these students are multilingual writers and/ or write in more than one or two languages in their programs and disciplines?
3. Although we have a policy that affords students the option to write in French, how many graduate students actually do so other than those in the French Language and Literature departments?
4. Where are we in the debate this summer re extra fees for writing courses especially for international students? What can we expect in the future with respect to this policy and graduate student enrollment? And meeting the needs of advanced multilingual writers?

Even though I inform my francophone/bilingual students of university policy, very few actually do so. Why not?

A starting point for Canadian administrators in higher education should be to know how many and what types of bilingual and multilingual writers inhabit their campuses. Question 4 refers to a recent university policy to charge students, who may need writing instruction to increase their English writing proficiency, extra tuition fees if a writing course is not part of their regular program. One

can challenge whether this is unethical since international students incur larger tuition costs than local students. Thus, while my university seemingly welcomes diverse international students on its admission website, the self-reported realities articulated by these "English" or multilingual writers from outside Kachru's outer circles countries suggests quite the opposite. Considering the high stakes implications they experience in their "rite of passage", the issues are what kinds of writing is actually valued to graduate, pass written comprehensive examinations or theses and dissertations, and the kind of support they can expect. While it is well known that an increasing number of students in Canadian universities do not speak English as their first language less, well known is how many there are and who they are and what their needs may be.

While Canadian universities appear to welcome diversity, teaching international students at a research intensive university like my own and listening to their personal narratives about their academic literacy practices suggests that negotiate competing textualities between dominant North American academic discourses and their own internally persuasive discourses. These negotiations influence their engagement in various knowledge-making activities, including writing in their disciplines, and their own writing identities as bilingual/ multilingual writers. Even research in second-language writing tends to ignore these socio-cultural dimensions of academic writing from international students' perspectives and actual lived experiences. Educators in higher education need to challenge the assumed homogeneity of students' perceptions of academic literacy practices and institutional "identity" labels, such as "ESL writer" and "non-native writer." Lee and Maguire (2011) used Bakhtin's theory of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses to argue through case studies of two Korean students for a view of writing as situated cultural activity that is responsive to the experiences of increasingly diverse student populations in academic settings. Abasi and Graves (2008a; 2008b) examine how university plagiarism policies interact with students' academic writing in English as they develop identities as authors and students. They illustrate how such policies frame the professor-student relationship and influence student text production and even mystify academic writing and scholarly possibilities.

The problem international students face begins even before they arrive on campus and take courses – as they try to comply with admission requirements. How should bilingual/multilingual international students best present themselves to North American universities? For example, many universities ask students to write a letter of intent, introduction, or personal narrative. These texts are often used as part of an admission application and read by members of admissions committees who may or may not have experience in reading and understanding texts, let alone evaluating their worth. Much needed is research that aims to understand how multilingual writers decide how to present themselves and what compromises they may face in complying with what Bakhtin would describe as the "authoritative discourses" of the academy and the expected voice that will be valued to gain access to graduate studies. Many Canadian universities expect the students to be proficient in English and can demand proof of this proficiency. But the niggling question remains: Which standards of English are used in assessing this proficiency?

MANY ENGLISHES: WHOSE STANDARD/S?

Tertiary educators need to interrogate their institutional voice/s with respect to proficiency in English and assumptions about one version of English as the norm - be it standard, British, Canadian, or American. Pedersen demonstrates that even international students who are English speakers and writers who live outside Kachru's "Inner Circle" countries (such as the United States and Canada), bring varieties of World Englishes used outside the inner circle and rich nontraditional literacy practices. Canagarajah eloquently argues for the importance of understanding that as World Englishes border cross, students face challenges in making discourse choices to afford them the necessary linguistic capital to "gain access" into and to succeed in academe. To function as postmodern global citizens, many students from even dominant Anglo-American communities need to be proficient in negotiating diverse repertories of World Englishes.

Composition studies document a long history of privileging monolingual writers and attempts by North American institutions to contain or restrain this diversity. This reproduction of the image of the ideal monolingual English graduate student and corresponding neglect of linguistic diversity has profound consequences for graduate students' academic trajectories, consequences that start with their admission to graduate programs and continue when applying for fellowship and completing their programs. The challenges international students face raise questions about writing and knowledge-making in academic settings (Canagarajah, 2006a; Matsuda, 2006) and "reinventing the university or reproducing the academy." Traditional institutionally, discursively constructed and attributed labels, such as native/non-native writers or ESL writers need to be challenged for their assumed cultural and linguistic homogeneity of international students and cultural groups. Lee and Maguire argue for reconceptualization of L2 writers and international students within a discourse of possibility

(Canagarajah, 2006a Holland; Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998) rather than painting portraits of their struggles as deficits or transgressive appropriation of texts.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ON CANADIAN UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES: WHAT KINDS OF PEOPLE ARE THEY BECOMING?

Obviously, international students bring foreign capital, increase visible ethnic diversity, and enhance the international reputation of the hosting institutions (Matsuda, 2006). Lee and Maguire argue that international students on Canadian campuses face numerous challenges, which include adapting not only to the country, but also to new educational systems, social relationships, and discursive academic literacy practices. Their perceptions of the academic literacy practices they are expected to appropriate and emulate may differ or clash from those of their North American professors. How do international students negotiate taking on new positionings in Western academic settings that are different from those in their home country? What kinds of people are international students becoming in universities? What might we as teachers of writing imagine as authorial activities and identities for international students, who are often labeled as ESL writers? How have we traditionally imagined these "non-native" students in our prevailing discourses? Kubota (2001) maintains that studies in contrastive rhetoric, for example, tend to dichotomize Western and Eastern cultures and draw rigid cultural boundaries between them. They have perpetuated reifying labels such as "individualism, self-expression, critical and analytical thinking and extending knowledge to Western cultures on one hand and collectivism, harmony, indirection, memorization, and conserving knowledge to Asian cultures in general on the other" (Kubota 1999, p.14). This reductionistic line of thinking ignores the complexities of L2 students' diverse identities and knowledge-making processes and the roles that languages play in this process.

Bakhtin argues that language lies on "the borderline between oneself and another. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (p. 293). For international student writers studying in a North American context, this usually means appropriating the norms of academic writing in "English". What are the textual possibilities for international students? What are our ethical and professional responsibilities as educators in responding to the needs, goals, aspirations and expectations of international students? What should authorial activity look like in tertiary academic institutions as our student populations become increasingly diverse? What kinds of textual possibilities can institutions envision for international students? In reorganizing their sense of being and how they are relating to their social worlds, they may experience what Bakhtin calls the process of "ideologically becoming," which refers to the process of "distinguishing between one's own and another's discourse, between one's own and another's thought" (p.345). Lu (2004) stresses that educators need to delay assessment of what novice writers need and how they need to use English until they have studied their understanding of different ways of writing. Their writing problems may have more to do with the influence of oppressive normative expectations and systemic influences on their writing rather than with not knowing those expectations.

A commitment to linguistic diversity and multiculturalism should be more than simply having a stereotyped "diverse" representation of international students. A multilingual commitment inevitably means openness to change, linguistic and cultural diversity. This requires systemic strategies and transformative practices that help everyone adopt a critical approach to languages, texts and power relations. It offers new possibilities for addressing the questions raised in this essay: What kinds of selves, writers, people are we asking international students to become when they inhabit our academic institutions and engage in authorial activities? In classrooms? In communities? In society? Silverstein (2003) argues this is the era of anxieties about identities and crises of identity politics. More documented case studies of international students' lived experiences and rhetorical agency are good starting points, including their perceptions of cultural textual borrowing and "code meshing." If a dialogic view entails being responsive and answerable to the voices of others, how should those in higher education respond to students who say *"I do not think I have a voice anymore 'cause I have to fit and write what they want" – "In the Tamil community here in Montreal, we do mix and borrow codes from Tamil and Sanskrit"* How can international students write with authority and voice, to develop their writing identities in higher education?

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