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## Review: Writing in Multicultural Settings

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## Reviews

**Severino, Carol, Juan Guerra, and Johnnella Butler, eds.**  
*Writing in Multicultural Settings*. New York: MLA, 1997. 370  
pages, \$37.50 (ISBN: 0-873-52583-3).

*Reviewed by Paula R. Golombek*

Multiculturalism is a loaded word that has, in its worst forms, materialized as token representation, victimization, or a celebration of diversity that ignores the discrimination and suffering of marginalized groups. Because of the political and often mean-spirited debate over this word, a more sophisticated discussion, along with practical applications, has been needed. *Writing in Multicultural Settings*, edited by Carol Severino, Juan Guerra, and Johnnella Butler, elevates this discussion. In the introduction, the editors lay out their definition of multiculturalism as “an approach to living that respects, incorporates, and mediates the differences and similarities in our population” (1). As I began to read this book, I found the authors rejecting a dichotomous classification of marginalized writers as homogenized into dominant discourses or compartmentalized into their vernacular discourses. Still, I felt impelled to uncover what each author conceived multiculturalism to be, especially in response to the potentially malleable definition offered by the editors.

The four parts of the book deal with cultural and linguistic diversity, the roles of teachers and texts, ESL issues, and sociocultural and pedagogical tensions. The breadth of topics and authors reflects the book’s commitment to represent multiple voices in a discussion of multiculturalism. Each part is followed by a “cross-talk” essay, which reinforces critical points, critiques, and suggests other points or interpretations. The content represents the interactions that writing center practitioners engage in—negotiating multiple voices and engaging in cross-talk; the format represents the ways that writing center practitioners can avoid falling prey to narrow conceptions of multiculturalism and of our students. Even so, the “cross-talk” essays could at times have been sharper in their critiques of how the authors conceived of multiculturalism: Severino’s metaphor for her class as a “United Nations Microcosm” belies the inequality of nations within the United Nations, as well as its ineffectiveness.

However, the authors present many theoretical and practical suggestions through their students’ narratives for creating a third space that represents a genuine multicultural literacy. These narratives authenticate their power as methodological, classroom, and tutorial approaches

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in several ways. The narratives not only exemplify the authors' ideas, but show how teachers and students can learn about each other and about themselves. Likewise, writing center practitioners engage in active narrative and have to contextualize the tutorial within the identity presented through the narrative of the student. The stories provide a dialogic tool for inquiry, a way to negotiate understandings of and to problematize the issues that mainstream and underrepresented students face. In some cases, they provide a way for students to take action, an option students often do not know that they have. Tutors, while respecting the views and position of their students, can thus work towards helping them understand the possibility of action. Moreover, the narratives present alternative conceptions of how student-teacher interaction can and should be; as a result, we do not have to question the feasibility of a theory that does not seem grounded in classroom realities.

The authors highlight the interdependence of the linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural backgrounds of students with their self-concepts and the need to maintain their sense of identity. Blalock's chapter specifically addresses the need of writing center tutors to acquire knowledge about the cultures and rhetorics of students. Some more openly call for the positioning of students' first discourses into academic discourse (Campbell, Troutman, and Mangelsdorf), positioning of students' rationalities into academic argument (De and Gregory), inclusion of social aspects of language and identity formation (Hesford), inclusion of oral traditions into written language (Troutman, Grijalva, and Campbell), students' investigation of the relative proximity of their first discourse to Western discourse (Hamp-Lyons, De, and Gregory), and specific self-identified culture and identity exploration to produce a multicultural environment (Evans). Further exploring these foci, I began to see how writing center practitioners could fall prey to a narrow conception of multiculturalism. We also should recognize the complex interplay between such determinants of identity as race, gender, class, urban/suburban/rural affiliation, and other socializing forces, as De and Gregory assert is necessary. Otherwise, the search for commonalities among different groups or simply acquiring knowledge about students' cultures and rhetorics runs the risk of looking like the additive approach that Lisle and Mano decry.

The section on ESL, in particular, seems at odds with the other parts of the book. This takes a normal scientific tone that stands in sharp contrast to the openly political commitment of the authors in the other sections (though it might be considered as inclusion of other voices). Connor and Silva, reviewing research on contrastive rhetoric and differences in ESL and native-English speaker writing, respectively, both stress that teachers need to be sensitive to their students' different interaction

patterns, and sociocultural, linguistic, and rhetorical behaviors. This stress on sensitivity does not include a call for integrating ESL students' differences into a multicultural rhetoric; teachers can be sensitive to student differences while simultaneously appropriating the hegemonic discourse. Although Leki highlights how researchers in contrastive rhetoric have failed to acknowledge the ideological implications of their work and points to the dangers of cultural essentialism, she ultimately suggests that the findings of contrastive rhetoric may provide ESL students with options and choices about rhetorical strategies.

Writing center practitioners can also benefit from contrastive rhetoric by understanding the potential strategies that ESL students are bringing to their texts and by then sharing the strategies and knowledge it provides. Again, it is critical that we recognize that a complex interplay between socializing forces exists, and, thus, culture does not equate with one rhetoric.

Despite the loaded nature of the word "multiculturalism," this book should be read by all educators, for a multicultural rhetoric cannot be sustained only in writing courses and centers. Writing teachers and writing center practitioners can imagine other ways of interacting with students, whereas content area teachers might begin to see the skills that marginalized students bring to a class rather than the deficits. This book cautions us to reflect on our identities and the theoretical basis of our interactions as tutors to recognize our location—our dominance and student otherness. Furthermore, this book cautions us to be explicit, lucid, and judicious in our own use of multiculturalism and to question how others use this term.

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