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## Review: *Writing Across Borders*

by Marcy Trianosky

“In American writing, writers have a lot of responsibility for their writing, but in Japanese writing, readers have more responsibility to understand and participate...” Maho Isono, Japan

“In Turkish...we pay attention to the fact that we need to have these essays look good, so we have different punctuations that are just designed for visual pleasure.” Setenay Yener, Turkey

*Writing Across Borders* is an engaging and useful introduction to the complex issues of language and culture that affect writing instruction for international students both in the classroom and in one-on-one tutorials. Instructional in nature, this 30-minute DVD is written and directed by Wayne Robertson, Assistant Director of the Center for Learning & Writing at Oregon State University, and is available from the OSU web site <<http://cwl.oregonstate.edu/wab>>. Used in conjunction with other instructional materials on second language writing and acquisition, *Writing Across Borders* would be a welcome addition to tutor training and faculty development opportunities.

Robertson's decision to focus primarily on interviews with international students for the bulk of the film results in thought-provoking comments like those shown above by Maho Isono and Setenay Yener. In the first and longest section of the film, students discuss the ways in which cultural differences affect their attempts to write in academic English. In addition to issues of reader/writer expectations and style such as those described by Maho and Setenay, students discuss assignment designs that privilege American cultural knowledge, the discomfort international students may experience when required to engage in cultural or political critiques, and cultural differences in the use of citations and source material. The students' lived

### About the Author

*Marcy Trianosky directs The Writing Center at Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia, where she also teaches in the English department and coordinates writing across the curriculum.*

experience serves as an important reminder that what American instructors or tutors perceive as “natural” may be quite different than what international students have been taught. Additional interviews with professionals in the fields of language and writing add depth to the film, with sections devoted to assessing international students’ writing and designing appropriate teaching and testing strategies.

On the DVD’s slipcase, Robertson suggests that the film’s purpose “is not to provide easy answers but rather to consider day-to-day practices in new ways.” While the structure and content of the film support this exploratory purpose, supplementing the film with the additional materials available on the *Writing Across Borders* website is crucial to getting the most out of the film as an instructional tool. These materials are separated into two categories: “Notes for Writing Assistants” and “Notes for Faculty.” Both sections include well-crafted discussion questions meant to help both writing center tutors and faculty use the film as a way to investigate the complexities of cultural differences as they intersect with writing. In addition, each discussion question includes background information and reflection on the topics, with some bibliographic references.

Even with the supporting materials, however, the film cannot provide a comprehensive introduction to the issues of second-language writing and acquisition, given the natural limitations of time and space. Careful presentation of and expansion on the topics introduced in the film and in the discussion questions will be needed to avoid oversimplifying these complex issues. For example, the brief discussion provided in the film of Kaplan’s well-known diagrams of organizational patterns in various languages is not explored fully; without careful contextualizing, the interviews with students that immediately follow the introduction of Kaplan’s models may serve to reinforce his contested theories of contrastive rhetoric. When showing the film, it will be important to also introduce viewers to the scholarly work of writing center and second-language experts who have identified the limitations of Kaplan’s contrastive rhetoric schema and who have offered alternative paradigms that concentrate more on the individual learner’s context (see Severino; Hornberger).

As writing center directors consider adding this film to their array of teaching and training materials, they should also consider the scholarly and political contexts in which such instruction is taking place. In the introduction to *Writing Across Borders*, Robertson notes that in 2004 over 600,000 students from other countries were studying in American colleges. Despite the inevitable impact of this increasing international student population on our writing centers, a recent bibliography of the last five years of *The Writing Center Journal* reveals only three articles which explicitly address these issues (Brown).<sup>1</sup> While the publication in 2005 of *ESL*

*Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth helps to fill this gap, writing center literature does not consistently address the complexity of working with international students. This is symptomatic of the “disciplinary divide” between composition studies and Teaching English as a Second or Other Language (TESOL) identified by Matsuda, which until just recently has minimized the sharing of theoretical and pedagogical strategies to address the needs of second-language learners. However, there are increasing opportunities for closing the gap between composition and TESOL, as demonstrated by the special issue of the *Journal of Second Language Writing* in 2004 which focused on writing centers (Williams and Severino). In addition to making contributions to the scholarly literature, compositionists and writing center directors can use multimedia presentations such as *Writing Across Borders* to introduce the complex field of second language writing and acquisition to tutors and faculty who are working with international students.

As the number of non-native English speakers increases in the United States, those of us involved in all aspects of writing instruction, whether in the classroom or in the writing center, have an increasing responsibility to educate ourselves. While we certainly cannot rely on any single instructional source in a field of this complexity, *Writing*

*Across Borders* is a useful tool for increasing our knowledge, providing important avenues for discussion among writing center directors, tutors, faculty and professional staff about second-language writing instruction and acquisition.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See articles by Sharon Myers, Beatrice Mendez Newman, and Bojana Petric.

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