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**Review: *Exploring European Writing Cultures: Country Reports on Genres, Writing Practices and Languages Used in European Higher Education* edited by Otto Kruse, Madalina Chitez, Brittany Rodriguez, & Montserrat Castelló**

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In September 2005, I found myself, in late middle age and more than two decades into my career, feeling like a student upon first studying abroad: general culture shock enhanced by academic culture shock. Coming from a writing center and writing program steeped in decades of US theory and pedagogy, I entered a space that, while partially informed by that theory and pedagogy, necessarily reflected a centuries-old British academic tradition and existed within a highly charged political and social context. As I navigated my way through the first few months working in the writing programme and writing centre at St. Mary's University College in Belfast, Northern Ireland, I began gradually to appreciate how thoroughly social and political forces insinuate themselves into the academic world. I had paid too little attention to this reality

in the comfort zone of my home institution. After spending a year immersed in this new culture, I came to view “writing centers/programs as cultural spaces subject to social, political, and cultural constraints” (Cain, 2010, p. 68), echoing Christiane Donahue’s (2009) contention that “major embedded political, economic, and historical factors [are] at work in each context” in which writing is taught (p. 222). The extent to which these factors influence writing practices in Europe is illustrated in *Exploring European Writing Cultures: Country Reports on Genres, Writing Practices and Languages Used in European Higher Education* (2016), edited by Otto Kruse, Madalina Chitez, Brittany Rodriguez, & Montserrat Castelló. Although this thought-provoking and worthwhile project calls to mind The National Census of Writing, the differences between the two highlight not only the different cultural contexts, but also the unique position that writing instruction holds in the European context: a new academic concept within an ancient academic tradition, struggling to define itself while accommodating multiple national languages and cultures.

Simply observing the focus of each of these two studies, the National Census of Writing and *Exploring European Writing Cultures*, reveals the essential differences between them. The National Census of Writing’s focus is on existing programs within a fairly unified academic culture within the United States; thus, individual institutions report on a set list of features, including writing sites, first-year composition, identification and support of differently prepared students, writing-across-the-curriculum and writing beyond first year, writing majors and minors, writing centers, administrative structures, and demographics of respondents (Gladstein & Fralix, n.d.). The assumptions underlying this US survey are obvious: institutions share a common understanding of what constitutes writing support and instruction, as well as a common definition of terms.

The European project, on the other hand, can make no such assumptions. In fact, as the authors note in their introduction to the reports, both genres and writing practices “are not context-free subjects but are bound to cultural considerations such as educational practices, linguistic choices, aesthetic preferences, and social relationships. They are embedded in larger and smaller national cultures which give them their meaning and explain their functionality” (p. 12). The survey, then, focused on 15 European countries’ “writing practices and genres within their respective national contexts” (p. 15). Respondents were solicited to provide narrative responses to questions about genre theory; national traditions and educational systems; national languages; the role of English in education; the structure and oversight of university systems; writing practices, development, instruction, and support; and disciplinary writing. Respondents were also asked to comment on the influence of the Bologna Process, initiated in 1999 “to create a common European

education area, connecting national systems . . . to make educational programs in Europe more transparent and more permeable across countries” (p. 12).

Kruse, Chitez, Rodriguez, & Castelló did not stipulate a specific methodology or format for responses, and the editors deliberately sought responses from within each culture rather than from an outside observer. As a result, respondents do not define terms in the same way. They also highlight different survey questions, some emphasizing national history, others political shifts, others almost exclusively academic culture. Nor did respondents gather evidence in the same ways: some conducted surveys, while others focused on one or more universities in particular, while still others relied on their own research and observations. Although this disparity results in reports of differing length and depth, the authors do not see it as detrimental to their goal. Nor should we. The lack of consistency may well be disconcerting initially, but the individual perspectives clearly reflect “the cultural relatedness of the authors and their individual preferences” (p. 18). Nor do the authors view the insider nature of the reports as raising questions of objectivity. Rather, they insist that “it accentuates the very essence of what this research is trying to address: Instigating a conversation on writing and literacy across cultures and languages” (p. 18). My own experience in Belfast, which introduced me to writing instruction and practices in the U.K. and Europe, led me to a similar conclusion: “Awareness of such [social, political, and economic] constraints affords us an opportunity to understand more fully the assumptions governing our work, to recognize points of convergence and divergence among cultures, and finally to refine our practices in light of this awareness” (Cain, 2010, p. 68).

If Kruse, Chitez, Rodriguez, & Castelló do not consider the diversity of reports problematic, the editors do acknowledge the problematic nature of another feature, namely the use of English as a *lingua franca*:

Can we neutralize these meanings or do we always import the values of the Anglophone cultures when using English? We have to be aware that a *lingua franca* not only stresses certain issues for which it provides words and concepts, but that it also filters things out for which no English words or expressions exist. (p. 14)

This conundrum infuses almost all international dialogue in the field, pitting the value of a common language against both the inability of that language to convey precisely concepts from other languages and—more significantly—the hegemonic tendency to unwittingly (or not) “import the values” of the *lingua franca*. That English is fast becoming the common language of academe throughout Europe, and the challenges that its near ubiquity present, is evident in almost every report.

The extent to which a nation’s history, political and social realities, language, and culture influence writing in higher education is evident in the reports. The four reports from former Soviet satellite nations, for example,

highlight the challenges faced when attempting to revive a national culture after decades of subjugation. Filitza Sofianou-Mullen acknowledges the post-Soviet shift in her country: “After Bulgaria’s emergence from behind the Iron Curtain, there has been a marked tendency and aspiration towards Europe and America, both in politics and in culture” (p. 39). Similarly, Mirela Borchin & Claudia Doroholschi note that “the Romanian educational system underwent a period of rapid change in the decades that have elapsed since the fall of Communism in 1989” (p. 179), attributed to increased Western influence, the rise of English, and the ability of academics to travel freely throughout the E.U. Ola Majchrzak & Lukasz Salski, on the other hand, note that Polish universities are still organized on a Soviet model (p. 149). And Tatyana Yakhontova, Halyna Kaluzhna, Tetyana Fityo, Dmytro Mazin & Volodymyr Morenets go so far as to attribute the lack of an academic writing culture in Ukraine to repressive Soviet policies, citing “the isolation of Ukraine as a part of the former Communist empire from the rest of the world for many years” (p. 269). Other countries in which political and social forces exert an impact on education include Italy, where Irene Vogt reports that more than sixty governments have been in power since the end of World War II; Greece, where a recent influx of immigration, especially refugees, has altered the linguistic homogeneity of the population (Kitis, Hatzitheodorou, Kontouli, & Mattheoudakis); and Spain, where five autonomous regions each have their own language and educational system (Castelló).

The influence of multilingualism on writing practices emerges as a distinguishing feature of several reports. In addition to those mentioned above, Switzerland stands out as the only European country with three distinct language regions: German (the majority language), French, and Italian. This linguistic diversity is complicated in the German-speaking region in that Standard German is the official language, but multiple Swiss-German dialects are spoken throughout the region (Kruse, Chitez, & Peyer). And despite the fact that Swedish is the national language of Sweden, Cornelia Ille reports that English has become the *lingua franca* of many universities. The predominance of English is evident throughout the reports, whether as the *lingua franca* for theses and dissertations, the preferred L2 in secondary and tertiary education, or the language of instruction in certain programs.

Within the historical, political, social, and linguistic contexts, the concept of genre is revealed to be exceptionally fluid. As the authors of the study note, “[g]enres and practices are not fixed units outside of their respective teaching and learning cultures” (p. 15). Some reports involve extensive theoretical discussions of genre. Isabelle Delcambre, for example, introduces the concept of genre in French education with the Bakhtinian articulation of “the historical and social dimensions of linguistic productions (their matters relatively stable, historically produced, shared by all, etc.) and their necessar-

ily individual dimension” (p. 70). Sofianou-Mullen (Bulgaria) offers her own definition of the term, as signifying “the binary division of perception and expression into the self and the world. In everyday life, there is a constant shift of centers from the self to the other, or the world, and vice versa” (p. 37). Most reports, however, keep to practical interpretations of the term, referring to genres such as reports, exams, essays, dissertations, theses, and seminar papers. Helmut Gruber (Austria) views genre through the lens of disciplinarity. He considers the latter three forms to be “central kinds of texts that are relevant in all courses of study. These terms are not genre names but rather cover terms for a whole variety of discipline-specific genres” (p. 25).

Instruction in such genres and requirements for producing texts vary widely depending upon the academic culture, but two common observations are shared by almost every report: secondary students are generally unprepared for writing in university genres, and very little instruction (and in some cases, support) for writing in university genres is provided in European institutions. With regard to the former, Gruber’s statement is reflected in most reports: “The major challenge for students entering higher education in Austria is that secondary school students are more or less unprepared for the kind of writing they are expected to produce at university” (p. 28). And the latter is illustrated by Lotte Rienecker & Peter Stray Jørgenson’s observation on writing instruction in Denmark: “Faculty are still generally more reactive than instructive to writing” (p. 62). A notable exception to this is Sweden, where students enjoy the benefits of

- (i) practical instructions (written guidelines) provided by the course teacher;
- (ii) recommended textbook(s) on academic writing;
- (iii) peer-review seminars during which students present their own draft essays and also review each other’s drafts (before the teacher’s final review); and, obviously,
- (iv) teacher/facilitator feedback. (p. 223)

Universities in Sweden also support writing through writing centers. Chalmers University of Technology, for example, employs peer tutors who take a credit-bearing training course (p. 219). Peer tutoring has become more common in Germany as well, notably at Viadrina University (p. 98). Some of the well-established writing centres in the UK (Liverpool Hope University, Aston University, the University of Coventry) feature both face-to-face and online tutoring (p. 255). The concept remains relatively new in Europe, however: The first writing center in Poland, for example, was opened at the University of Lodz in 2011 (p. 154).

Enhanced attention to writing instruction and support can be attributed in large part to the Bologna Process. Bologna is undoubtedly an admirable enterprise, creating shared degree programs, easier transfer of credits, greater student mobility, and comparable requirements across the Continent. But it has also placed stress on member nations. Long established systems have had to

significantly revise program requirements, institute time limits on completing degrees, and pay long-overdue attention to writing support. Both the value of the Process and the challenges it has presented to member nations are evident in virtually every report.

In 2006, Bonnie Devet, Susan Orr, Margo Blythman, & Celia Bishop (2006) argued, “Cross-cultural comparisons enable us to challenge our fundamental assumptions and to recognize the socially constructed nature of ideas we might otherwise have regarded as universal” (p. 196). This statement is especially relevant to those of us who have become accustomed to believing that the kinds of writing practices, instruction, and support found in the U.S. can be—or should be—replicated throughout the world. What Kruse, Chitez, Rodriguez, & Castelló have accomplished in this collection is to uncover the profound impact that historical, cultural, political, social, and linguistic contexts have on academic culture, specifically writing practices, instruction, and support. The primary audience for this book, as indicated by the authors, is European. And the primary purpose is to offer “a comprehensive view of writing in European Higher Education” (p. 15). That said, the voices in this volume speak to issues that should resonate with scholars and teachers in the U.S. as well. As we address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and navigate our way through increasingly challenging social and political incursions into our work, the experience of colleagues who have been dealing with such issues for decades can provide us with invaluable guidance. Rich in theoretical and practical descriptions of writing instruction across Europe, *Exploring European Writing Cultures* promises to facilitate dialogue among scholars and practitioners well beyond the borders of that continent.

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