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Emerging Writing Research from the Middle East- North African Region

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Emerging Writing Research from the Middle East-North African Region

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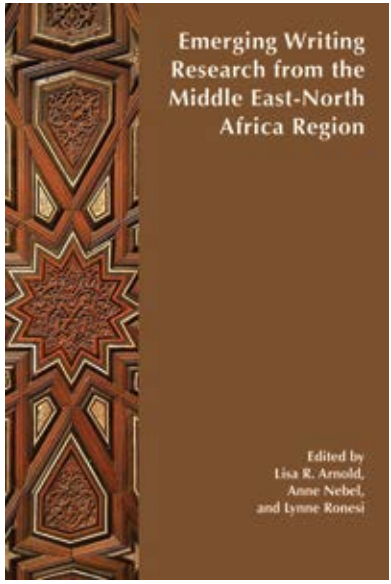

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Writing research has sustained interest, especially given its capacity to shape learning and its central role in constituting and advancing knowledge in a variety of fields. *Community Literacy Journal* readers will be drawn to this collection, which examines literacy practices in the Middle East-North African (MENA) region. This edited collection is divided into four sections, a foreword, an introduction, and an afterword. The introduction lays the foundation for the collection's focus by outlining the scenarios faced by instructors of writing in institutions from North Africa to the Middle East. In many of the scenarios offered, instructors are grappling with student needs within the broader constraints of their immediate culture, their aspirations to further their education in Western countries, and, indeed, to compete in the global workforce. The question at the heart of the book appears to be finding the right balance between teaching with U.S. textbooks and focusing on local contexts and cultures. To complicate matters, the majority of institutions surveyed in the collection are International Branch Campuses (IBCs) of Western universities in MENA. These IBCs represent a larger trend in transnational cross-border higher education. In Qatar alone, IBCs include Virginia Commonwealth University, Texas A&M, Carnegie Mellon, Georgetown University, Northwestern University, and University College London—just to name a few. The founding of IBCs has to do with the desire of MENA countries to educate the large expatriate population they now have and to offer citizens a quality education. For additional perspective it's worth considering that in early 2017 Qatar's total population was 2.6 million; however, of that number, 313,000 are Qatari citizens and 2.3 million are expatriates (28).

In establishing IBCs, in some cases, the government selects which institutions to partner with, defines the programs offered, and covers most of the costs. In others cases, namely in Dubai, everything is left up to the markets. The broader functioning of the institutions notwithstanding, in this collection, the editors make the case for re-

search in composition and rhetoric studies in the MENA region as part of an ongoing global conversation. What is at stake here is long-standing, American, post-secondary educational institutions, being positioned within a growing list of IBCs, whose mandate, in the case of Qatar, is to replicate the home institution's curriculum completely. As the contributors to this collection articulate, curricular replication entails coming to terms with the perceived and real cultural differences and oppositions between the region and the West, wherein the West is perceived as an exporter of curriculum.

What is also at stake is coming to terms with MENA's colonial past and its struggles for independence from the West, within the context of its broader Islamic and Arabic identity. Colonial ties, however, mean that linguistic influences both French and English persist with English being the *lingua franca* in most of the region (6). Moreover, in addition to multilingualism, cultural and religious pluralities exist—rendering the region always already global and diverse in its thinking and in its consumption of knowledge. This background helps lead us into the first section, which examines how English and its global spread in academia and US-based composition studies function in the MENA region.

MENA, as a global site for college writing, has grappled with issues of language. One question Anne Nebel appears to wish to answer in chapter one is the following: Does continued education in the language of the colonizer further perpetuate notions of hegemony over diverse regions? To find potential answers, Nebel, a professor at Georgetown University in Qatar, recounts her experiences with students, who, because they attend English institutions, belong to expatriate communities, and are exposed to global cultures both within the country and through technology, have already attained a level of fluency that belies the L1, L2, EFL categories through which they are perceived (28–29). Nebel calls this phenomenon linguistic superdiversity. Consider that "migration and mobility" have given us a superdiverse generation of young people who "resist traditional definitions and force new thinking" about who they are (31). These young people have exposure to a diverse array of linguistic and cultural resources, which they appropriate and remake. Moreover, these young people, often multilingual, easily navigate among languages spoken in the home, in the classroom, and in social spaces, demonstrating awareness of "language systems" and how language works (32). In this chapter readers learn, for example, that in Qatar, that students' multilingualism thrives both in and out of the classroom. Thus, Nebel calls for a disentangling from monolingualism to a postmonolingual world in which we dispense with categories such as "native speaker, L1, L2, ESL," etc., as theorized by composition studies in the U.S. I appreciate Nebel's thinking, as I have seen it reflected in any number of students I have met. Students who fall into the category of foreign or international often possess linguistic superdiversity and so efforts to confine them within ESL classes are waste of their time and disingenuous at best.

Hacer Hande Uysal moves the conversation forward in chapter two by examining the global spread of English, specifically in Turkish academic institutions. Her focus is on the impact on academic scholarship of requiring English as the medium for scholarly publications. Tracing the rise of English in Turkish education, Uysal details how English was mandated in Turkey's education system as a foreign language from

grade school onward. At institutions of higher learning, however, there has been more flexibility. English and Turkish have been accepted languages for academic publications until a shift towards English journals for scholarly publications became a state means to encourage Western integration. The justification is that English "has become the widely accepted language of science and research publication" (60). Pushing back against this state-driven demand, Uysal bemoans the intrusion of English academic writing into Turkey because not enough time has been built into the curriculum to properly instruct academic writers in English (61). Uysal's argument is helpful to readers who are unfamiliar with the trends in the Turkish higher education system and the continuing debate of the role of English in academic institutions in Turkey.

In chapter three, James P. Austin reports on how his former department in Cairo adopted a U.S.-based curriculum and the ensuing positive impact that had on both programmatic needs and students' interests. Among the pluses, students gained access to literacy knowledge and skills applicable locally in Egypt and internationally; they learned creative nonfiction techniques necessary to practice public discourse; moreover, faculty benefited from the professional development that came with curricular revision and expansion. These benefits complicate notions of linguistic hegemony, especially given the wholesale importation of a U.S.-based curriculum into a country that not only sees itself as autonomous, but also seeks to break with its colonial past. Austin finds that instituting curricular changes in the rhetoric and writing minor, following U.S.-based models, increased disciplinary understanding and offered a specialized language with which to characterize scholarship. Further, the workshop approach instituted in creative nonfiction classes allowed students to explore their cultural and writing concerns in a supportive learning environment. Moreover, given that most faculty had training in literature, TESOL, creative writing, or other disciplines, the curriculum changes came with weekly seminars in composition and rhetoric, offering all faculty professionalization. Still, Austin described lessons gained from globalized composition studies and the impact of curricular changes on "local factors, institutional, and national dynamics" (79). Austin's chapter pushes back against the long-held narrative from transnational and composition studies concerning the exportation of U.S.-based models of rhetoric and composition. Austin calls instead for an embrace of a transnational literacy studies framework when analyzing curricular revisions and tensions.

In chapter four, Samer A. Annous, Maureen O'Day Nicolas, and Martha A. Townsend offer lessons from research at the University of Balamand in Lebanon. The authors situate their study within a linguistically diverse university in MENA, where Arabic is an official language, but French, English, and Italian are spoken. To help matters, the legion of expatriates in the region have rendered English the *lingua franca* and the language of instruction (87). English instruction carries through to the University of Balamand in Lebanon, which is a contradiction because it goes against the Lebanese Constitution which recognizes Arabic as a national and official language. The authors maintain that English in Lebanon is for instructional rather than communicative or out of the classroom purposes. Annous, Nicolas, and Townsend's data originate from a review of syllabi in the School of Business, a study of teachers'

perceptions, and an analysis of students' perceptions of writing. Additionally, the authors interviewed a WAC expert regarding observations from the Writing Program. The results show that students failed to demonstrate effective writing skills in English both during and after their studies. They attribute this failure to lack of transfer. What is worse, instructors at the University of Balamand do not value writing as crucial in teaching and learning. Instead, greater value is placed on content acquisition and mastery. Moreover, students themselves place little value on learning writing as a critical means for persuasive communication. To compound matters, the instructors are themselves non-native speakers and may lack the confidence it takes to turn students' skills around. The authors recommend ongoing professional development to emphasize instructors' "competence in English" (104). The first observation I have of this chapter is that it falls back on what I thought was a threadbare narrative of the challenges faced by students writing in English as a second language and their struggle to gain proficiency and develop writing strategies (85–86). In any case, the authors examine territorial borders, geographic borders, and disciplinary borders where non-writing disciplines do not see their role as the teaching of writing. And yet, the site of their study, the University of Balamand in Lebanon, requires students to take at least two courses in English. What the authors are concerned with is if the skills acquired in these courses transfer to their writing across the disciplines. Concerning Annous, Nicolas, and Townsend's recommendation to improve instructors' proficiency in English, I wondered if such a recommendation might be seen as a recolonizing attempt; one that might, in fact, deny the Lebanese people employment in order to justify the hiring of expatriates. I say this given the official Lebanese language policy preference for Arabic, whereas English is only the medium of instruction. However, Annous, Nicolas, and Townsend's call for a breakdown of disciplinary borders has the potential to initiate important conversations regarding how to teach writing through content-based courses across the curriculum to begin.

In chapter five, Mysti Rudd and Michael Telafici examine first-year composition (FYC) textbooks at an IBC in Qatar. Their argument is that a proliferation of IBCs—mostly Anglophone, mostly American—has brought with it the FYC curriculum requirement for university studies. The purpose of that requirement is to "accommodate English as an additional language" (116). Keeping in mind that the mandate of IBCs is to offer a similar education to that of the home institution, this means similar textbooks at both institutions. The authors contend that adopting textbooks used by home institutions is not always a reasonable fit for IBCs. They put this hypothesis to the test through the texts, *They Say/I Say* and *Writing about Writing*—both used at Texas A&M (the home institution) and at TAM-Q. The questions Rudd and Telafici seek to answer pertain to the marginalization and the privileging of voices, and how these elements play out at TAM-Q. The authors are mindful of the NCTE and CWPA guidelines for teaching FYC, along with the Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) and how these guidelines broadly guide their teaching writing at TAM-Q using U.S.-based textbooks. The authors are wary of teaching an "Americanized view of writing" (119). The results of the study, though positive, do not seem conclusive. While students' attitudes to the FYC texts are not negative, the perception is that there

may be a cultural element that precludes students from giving a negative response because it might sour the relationship between the teacher and the students. This result might also speak to the power imbalance that defines teacher-student relationships, and may, indeed, be compounded by cultural constraints of power and social distance. Students implicitly trust that an instructor's choice of text is made with the best intentions. Rudd and Telafici blame English hegemony for students' preferences for American texts. Additionally, although the students are accepting of *They Say/I Say*, they had to be primed in American cultural elements before focusing on composing skills. The authors conclude the study by committing to incorporate textbooks that are less U.S.-centric.

In chapter six, Aneta L. Hayes and Nasser Mansour explore the context of English language policy transfer in Bahrain. The question they seek to answer is: when programs and pedagogies are imported, what happens to help them thrive? Because this question is posed within the indigenization of a language teaching program in Bahrain schools, Hayes and Mansour answer it by analyzing the role communal, parental, and student influences play in indigenization. For context, education in Bahrain is valued for economic as well as knowledge and skill acquisition. Bahrainians take a very pragmatic view of education, making it primarily transactional. Additionally, while Arabic is the primary and official language, the importation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), elevates English. Given that education is transactional, Bahranians want to acquire English quickly and without hassle so they can take up positions in government. So, while the government's goal for CLT is to "develop students' communication skills in English, self-expression and thinking" the genre-based approach that came with CLT and focused on "developing skills for communication" was seen as an added burden (136). These cultural attitudes doomed CLT because teachers bowed to student and parental rejection of what was considered extraneous work. And teachers, even though they saw the value of CLT, were not prepared to be evaluated negatively by requiring their students to be assessed by its standards. It appears both CLT and the genre-based approach were not "locally situated" enough for stakeholder buy-in (144). Perhaps the top-down approach to implementing this imported curriculum—without accounting for existing perceptions on education as transactional—doomed it from the start with the result that the government's "great expectation" for improved communication in English was no match for participants' "internalized approaches to learning and teaching through nationally held beliefs about education" and its value (146).

In chapter seven, Connie Kendall Theado, Holly Johnson, Thomas Highley, and Saman Hussein Omar describe the benefits to faculty of cross-institutional partnerships but with a twist. The authors suggest that Westerners need to, first and foremost, recognize the "localness" of their own knowledge and traditions—rather than see them as universal—in order to fully engage colleagues working in other regions of the world (152). The authors aim to challenge dominant Americentric approaches to higher education and particularly the wholesale importation of an "American-style college experience" to promote our "shared humanity" (152). Because "all knowledge is inherently local" and the "terms of knowledge construction" are dynamic, it is

self-defeating to impose wholesale a system of knowledge from the U.S. to the rest of the world. Further, by definition collaboration involves a give and take. Therefore, biases need to give way to pluralism that takes into account transnational partnerships. Accordingly, authentic partnerships can result from "[r]ewriting resistance into the process of negotiating curricular and pedagogical change [. . .]" (171). This notion of productive resistance is intriguing, particularly because it describes a battle of ideas before arriving at a détente.

In chapter eight, Ryan T. Miller and Silvia Pessoa examine a major challenge of IBCs, which is how to adapt to the expectations of the host country. Because host countries expect instruction that parallels the home institution, IBCs often have to compete with local demands while attempting to realize that mandate. The focus of this chapter is on writing assignments and how to integrate them in IBCs, given the challenges outlined in preceding chapters. However, they also introduce the clash of expectations to instructors not indigenous to MENA; these include mixed-gender classes, shared governance, classroom management, and academic freedom. Moreover, not many faculty at these IBCs are versed in the local language nor steeped in its culture (179). Accordingly, results from the faculty's' perceptions about student challenges with writing at an IBC in Qatar show that overall, more value was placed on oral rather than written communication. Some of the ways faculty deal with perceived student writing shortcomings was to do away with reading requirements or limiting students' literacy to the humanities. Miller and Pessoa offer that a WAC approach to reading and writing, along with using scaffolding in assignments, might help students develop writing skills, learn structure, and read texts beyond the humanities.

Amy Hodges and Brenda Kent close out this section, in chapter nine, with a look into hybrid writing positions within WAC/WID to align faculty writing expectations with MENA cultures. Hodges and Kent argue that IBCs have so far attained one goal, shifting the definition of knowledge acquisition from "rote learning and fixed curricula" to more applied forms of learning (202). The students in Hodges and Kent's study are learning to write as engineers, a feat their Western counterparts also grapple with. To compound matters, the engineering faculty, themselves products of U.S./Western education from which they hold terminal degrees, do not, for the most part, have shared ethnic ties with the majority of their students. Underlying this tension is the fear of the loss of cultural autonomy. Hodges and Kent see their students as products of their society—one that does not question sources of knowledge, interrogate ideas, nor possess a sense of audience (203). Hodges and Kent articulate that using direct instruction and one-on-one conferences to pass on "western academic and professional writing conventions" was productive (211). A teacher-centered pedagogy seems to be preferred because students respond well to direct instruction. Mere importation of U.S.-based WAC/WID does not translate well because students benefitted more from explicit teaching of the skills in question through lectures and demonstrations of the material. Hodges and Kent further articulate that when engineering faculty—who find themselves in hybrid writing positions in MENA universities—can begin to think of themselves as both engineers and writers, the relevance of both domains may become more apparent to their students.

In chapter ten, Lisa R. Arnold, William DeGenaro, Rima Iskandarani, Malakeh Khoury, Zane Sinno, and Margaret Willard-Traub describe a partnership between students in Beirut, Lebanon and Dearborn, Michigan in which students investigated each other's literacy practices through interviews, profiles, and reflective essays. These two sites were initially paired for their built-in transnationalism, both linguistically and culturally (221). However, where students at the American University of Beirut attend an elite institution and therefore hail from a privileged economic class that affords them the mobility of international travel and exposure, their Dearborn counterparts are at a public institution and are mostly Arab-Americans (with one foot in two worlds), first-generation college students, and/or working class (221). The authors' findings—concerning students' conceptions of literacy and writing—indicate that students became aware that in order to develop affiliations they needed to articulate some kind of relationship to the cultures and languages of the communication context (236). In turn, their engagement resulted in self-awareness that made transnational dialogue possible.

In chapter eleven "The Dance of Voices," Najla Jarkas and Juheina Fakhreddine examine the notion of authorial voice in students' argumentative writing at the American University of Beirut. To help students acquire voice, the authors designed a study that involved direct and explicit instruction of structured rhetorical moves. In their study, the authors put Joseph Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* to the test in instructing students how to incorporate external sources into their own writing. They wanted students to articulate a stance and not simply rehash existing literature. Their assignments aimed at teaching three rhetorical moves: "coming to terms, forwarding, and countering" to support students to build authorial voice and cultivate rhetorical awareness (243). Jarkas and Fakhreddine found that while social practices within MENA culture could "inhibit voice and authorial identity" through explicit instruction, students could learn to "incorporate external voices" (259–260). However, Jarkas and Fakhreddine were unable to sustain that ability as the students' argument progressed. Further, students either disagreed or agreed too much with the external voices rather than entering into a discursive questioning of their sources. Interestingly, informal writing exercises yielded some benefits, with regard to authorial voice, but those gains did not translate consistently into students' longer argumentative research projects.

In chapter twelve, Lynne Ronesi's study is grounded within the emerging literacy phenomena known as "Let's See" research, wherein the goal is to understand a new social practice and the literacies associated with or mobilized within it (267). This study was an attempt to "display an openness to and support for students' out-of-classroom use of English" and translingual practices (284). Ronesi wanted to investigate students' interest and involvement in a participatory literacy event, namely performance poetry (267). Ronesi's New Literacy studies framework is ideal for her study because it takes into account the factors that make performance poetry possible. Performance poetry is an out-of-classroom practice where identity and social context are of paramount importance. The sites of performance poetry practices may be physical or virtual and through these sites performers can gain affinity with one another (268).

Performers take up and give up roles as they see fit to ensure the success of the event. As a literacy practice, performance poetry depends on affinity, accessibility, and authenticity because it has a populist element to it. It draws more from oral and aural stylistics. Ronesi discovered that the performers exhibited a sense of agency that they often lacked in their academic writing. That may be because performance writing is decidedly different from academic argumentation and the rigors of FYC. Moreover, the types of writing required in writing classes is different from that exhibited in performance poetry. Ronesi sees in "affinity spaces" (268) possibilities for empowering students to "drive their own learning" (284).

Readers of this collection will appreciate the insight that contributors bring to discussions of global composition studies. It is possible that many in the U.S. have not given much thought to the complexities associated with exporting composition studies wholesale to other countries. Several chapters addressed the level to which MENA students are not considered prepared for university-level writing in English. Contributors cited MENA students failing to exhibit independence or critical thinking in the curriculum, wholesale importation of U.S.-based curricula, push-back from local stakeholders, and socio-cultural differences in the region which strip students of agency and authorial voice. While Anne Nebel's chapter on linguistic superdiversity compels readers to view MENA students differently, it was nevertheless disheartening to see that there wasn't more in the collection like her work. Some chapters left me with the sense that there is much to do to bring students up to speed with, say, their U.S. counterparts. But it should not be the goal of global composition to remake all academic writing in the U.S.' image. In that sense, the collection recounts what dominates the scholarship on teaching composition to non-Americans. But as Michele Eodice writes in her afterword, perhaps what is needed is a true partnership in an effort to create a global community of writing-proficient learners (289). Most contributors expressed a desire to value students' linguistic skills, rather than considering them as problematic. Moreover, in this era of a U.S. backlash to globalization, readers will perhaps pause and contend with what it would mean for their careers if they were compelled by the state to publish in a language other than their own, which is a concern author Hacer Hande Uysal presents in chapter two. The last thing global composition needs is to come across as trafficking notions of linguistic and cultural hegemony, especially given that language and culture are often intertwined. Nonetheless, the contributors are to be commended for primary research in the MENA region, where they learned directly from local faculty and students how experiments in globalizing composition are being received. What we learn is that the issues students in the MENA region contend with are not so different from their counterparts in the U.S. where academic voice, agency, entering a conversation with others' views, preparedness for academic argument, and more are at stake. These similarities ought to compel readers to think of all students as potentially benefiting from the discipline-specific knowledge rhetoric and composition professionals can provide. We must also endeavor to understand that the contexts in which we teach writing and rhetoric ought to reflect the fact that "communities of writers are always communities in context" (292).