Researching and Teaching Writing in Canada

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In a graduate rhetoric class at Ohio State one day, Professor Corbett asked me "How do they teach writing in Canada?" I stumbled through some kind of answer, though it seems clear now that he wasn't so much expecting an answer as providing a research question, one that motivated me then and, to some extent, does still. How do we teach writing in Canada? My dissertation advisor, Andrea Lunsford, had just come back to Ohio State from the University of British Columbia after a period of seven years and guided and connected me to people in Canada who could help answer this question.

For me, national identity has always been a front and centre part of my research in rhetorical studies. This has meant conducting descriptive research to understand the dominant pedagogical practices of the end of the last century. It has entailed critical research, too—investigating the conflicting cultural norms that I have felt

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sharply as a Canadian scholar trained in the United States while also teaching and researching in two nations (as well as being a migrant myself). Finally, identity also permeates innovative new research, specifically into new pedagogies that are possible within the context of Canadian higher education.

Canadian Genre Studies: Writing throughout the Curriculum

I was a Canadian, and part of a generation of rhetoric scholars that graduated and were hired in various institutions across the country in the late 1980s and through the early 1990s. Our mission, in part, was to identify the limits of existing practices and, through studies of language use in various contexts (academic and otherwise), to create new practices more in line with what our research revealed to us. I'm thinking of work done by Anthony Paré on the writing of social workers, of Natasha Artemeva on engineers, of Cathy Schryer on veterinary school writing practices, of Judy Segal on medical writing, Doug Brent on reading and rhetoric, Graham Smart on writing in financial contexts, Janet Giltrow on students and research writing, Heather Graves on writing in physics, and many others. Studies of genre and writing became so prevalent as to make Canada one of the leading countries in the world for genre-based rhetorical research. One of the outcomes of this work was to situate the teaching of writing firmly in the contexts in which the writing was done: introductory writing courses taught outside a field of study, for example, or outside the context that generated the texts was seen as having limited value.

My dissertation and early work focused on the contexts where writing was taught: *Writing Instruction in Canadian Universities* became my answer to Professor Corbett's question. The answer, in short, was everywhere. Writing courses sprouted up in engineering, education, law, agriculture, science, nursing—you name it. These courses were seldom taught by someone with a research interest in rhetoric or writing studies, however, and often taught with an "effective writing" or generalized pedagogy approach

that the researchers named above were busy identifying the flaws in. A follow-up book, *Writing Centres, Writing Seminars, Writing Culture: Teaching Writing in Anglo-Canadian Universities*, invited writing program and writing centre directors at institutions across the country to talk about how they were teaching writing, both how they organized their efforts and the theoretical approaches to writing they employed.

Cross-Cultural Research and Identity

Other work followed based on the same research, including articles in *Written Communication*, *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, and *Journal of Business Communication*. This last piece came out of my experiences while employed as an academic on both sides of the border: "junk" mail soliciting donations of one kind or another provided the textual basis for an analysis of rhetorical appeals made in the two cultures. The title, "'Dear Friend'(?): Culture and Genre in American and Canadian Approaches to Direct Marketing Letters," hints at what I noticed in living on each side of the border for a few years at a time. No Canadian direct mail ever sought to use the common "dear friend" salutation because of what to Canadian ears sounded like insincerity and a contradiction—if you were my friend, you would know my name and not address me with this odd salutation—but function to reduce power/distance relations. The warnings on cigarette packages at the time (in Canada, with direct assertions such as "Cigarettes cause strokes and heart disease") pointed to differences in cultural attitudes to medicine, health, and litigation.

I engaged in this work as both a student of rhetorical studies and as a Canadian. At one point in 2002, when it appeared as if I would be working in the United States for the foreseeable future, I applied for American citizenship. My "green card" allowed me to work, but full participation in American society required this extra step. I knew that Canadians could hold dual citizenship, so I felt that there was

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much to gain but little to lose in taking this step. At the point where my wife and I were to be interviewed (a step close to the end of the process), the INS officer informed me that I would not be able to remain a citizen of Canada: it was a forced choice that required the formal renunciation of Canadian citizenship. Further, my wife and I were separated and not allowed to communicate with each other while we were both required to decide. I was certain that, one way or another, I could retain Canadian citizenship, but I was not prepared to renounce my "foreign potentate" as the form required. In this windowless room in downtown Chicago I hemmed and hawed until the officer informed me that I could withdraw my application without prejudice. I took that option.

I agree with the premise that identity can be fluid, changing with the circumstances and felt more intensely at some times more than others. I think leaving your own country to live and work in another one for an extended period and without the expectation of returning after a set period leads to a consideration of identity that can be clearer and more defined. There are cultural practices—parades!—that take some getting used to and suggest questions and answers about cultural values. Being confronted with practices that just did not fit with my sense of culture gave me much to think about and greater insight into the objects of my rhetorical studies, and has freed me to explore new, innovative paths of research.

Un–American Pedagogy

The obvious connection between identity and rhetorical studies shows up in my earlier work on writing studies in the Canadian context, but the frame for this study derived largely from the American rhetoric and composition context of my Ohio State degree. Lately, my work has focused more on what is termed "academic writing" and "writing studies" rather than "composition." Teaching first–year (not freshmen) academic writing (not composition) in Canada leads to different pedagogical practices, practices that do not fit with the American history I came to know through Robert Connors and David Russell, among others. The first–year writing course I am teaching now has 200 students in it, uses blended learning approaches, and employs gamification to motivate online peer review. These choices put me at odds with, among other things, the NCTE and CCCC statements on class size ("No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class"). Gamification benefits from larger groups, not smaller, so exploring this technology does not fit with what I call the "craft" approach to teaching writing.

Further problems come with advances in pedagogy. The "Principles" statement asserts that "Sound writing instruction depends upon frequent, timely, and context-specific feedback to students from an experienced postsecondary instructor." Recent research suggests, however, that peer feedback is at least as important to student learning about how to write. Students in blended or hybrid courses who use technology-enabled peer feedback produced more lexically complex responses with more interactive competence (Chen 2016). The persistence of the feedback when stored online (as opposed to being delivered orally) also prompted more revisions (Chen 2016). We use gamification in a large class with an online peer feedback environment where students have the opportunity to both read and then comment on each other's drafts; this technique has been shown to improve student writing (Schunn, Godley, & DeMartino 2016; Ion,

Barrera-Corominas & Tomàs-Folch, 2016). Our early assessments of students and commenting in the writing course confirm what others have reported: that peer feedback is as valuable as instructor feedback (Guasch, Espasa, Alvarez, Kirschner 2013). The "Principles" statement actually prohibits this pedagogical method. This puts me into a forced choice, not unlike the citizenship application that forced me to choose between countries. I am choosing not to follow those guidelines because they are less important to me than research findings and advancing pedagogical practices.

Ultimately it does matter how you see your identity because that viewpoint will contribute to what you study and how you study it. If you are an American, you may not notice the Surgeon General's warning because it is too familiar, too much a part of the landscape. But if you travel to, say, Toronto, and see that it has been replaced

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with a colour photograph of a diseased lung, you can't help but sit up and take notice—and ask why would someone do that? How is that okay? When considering pedagogical practices or the goals and material conditions for first-year writing, you are bound to encounter cultural attitudes (university education in Canada does not attempt to create better citizens) that challenge your received understandings of how to structure that course. In my case, the resulting pedagogy puts me at odds with the dominant professional organization in the United States. Living the cross-cultural experience as a researcher, teacher, and citizen opens up research and teaching possibilities that might not come to the forefront within either country or culture. At least, that has been my experience.

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