



## Writing Proficiency Exams and the Internationalization of U.S. Higher Education

In the U.S., writing proficiency exams (WPEs) often employ a construct of writing proficiency that is based on U.S. English and essay-text literacy. As universities internationalize, they should reconsider whether such exams reflect the literacy requirements of a globalizing world. Since the ways in which universities respond to international students reflect their commitments to internationalization, this article presents the experiences of 8 international students taking a WPE. Results show that the exam did not always promote opportunities for participation, a sense of belonging, or respect for student knowledge, factors known to promote international student success. Concrete suggestions are made for redesigning WPEs such that the writing proficiency construct is based on the ability to negotiate a rhetorical situation. Doing so would be an important symbolic shift away from privileging the linguistic form of one social group, and it would benefit U.S. monolingual students and faculty as well as international students.

It is well accepted that changes in the global economy are bringing about fundamental changes to institutions of higher education. This process of change, or internationalization, involves many aspects of institutions, including the mission, organizational culture, curriculum, and pedagogy. According to Bartell (2003), “The clarion call for internationalization” has been sounded in the US (p. 49). However, Bartell also noted that U.S. universities have not been entirely responsive to the call.

Assessment is an important aspect of higher education affected by internationalization. However, little research has been done in this area. To fill this gap, this article focuses on assessment, in particular a writing proficiency exam (WPE), and its relation to internationalization. The study is particularly relevant because WPEs are a common graduation requirement in the US (Mott-Smith, 2006).

The ways in which universities respond to international students reflect their commitments to internationalization. Thus, this study focuses on the experiences of 8 international students with a WPE in order to assess how far the university has come in its internationalization process. The discussion of the

results is structured around three principles for success that were identified by international students interviewed by Ryan and Viète (2009). These principles are opportunities for participation, a sense of belonging, and a respect for their knowledge. Together, the principles describe a way of being in the institution that is central; when students cannot fully participate, do not feel that they belong, or sense that their knowledge is not respected, this may reflect a shortcoming in the internationalization process.

### **Local Constituencies, English Varieties, and Language Ideology**

According to Turner and Robson (2008), universities often have local or national missions, and these missions need to be revisited to accommodate a process of internationalization. They explained:

In the past HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] have embodied the social and intellectual spirit of a particular nation state and to a large extent the processes and products of HE have been defined within national contexts and shaped according to local need and utility. Now, however, fundamental questions of a practical as well as intellectual nature confront HEIs about the relevance and contribution of their activities in both local and international fora (AUT/DEA, 1999; McKenzie et al., 2003; Gabb, 2006). (Turner & Robson, 2008, p. 41)

An examination of the vision statement of the university in this study revealed commitments to both international and local constituencies. The statement, which appears in the university catalog, contains the following commitment to international students and internationalization: “The University ... sponsors and supports cultural diversity by helping ethnic and international communities to articulate and celebrate their cultural values and identities.” At the same time, it promises to “work to strengthen all businesses and local governments ... by providing an effectively educated workforce.”

In practice, the commitments to the local constituencies take precedent. The university needs to assure local constituencies, including the state government, which is its primary funding source, that it is producing graduates who can write English. These local constituencies often have a truncated view of literacy, seeing it as the ability to produce a text that has no grammatical errors in a genre commonly taught in the local school system, such as the “essay.” This view of literacy ignores communicative competence and authentic language use in real-world genres. However, in a society driven by accountability such as the US, accrediting agencies require universities to use assessment measures such as the WPE to ensure this type of literacy.

The construct of English writing proficiency employed by the WPE is thought to reflect the needs and values of local constituencies. It is built around standard U.S. English and a rhetorical style termed *essay-text literacy* (Gee, 1986). International students seeking “to articulate ... their cultural values and identities,” however, may not value this construct if they are not planning to

work for a local employer. Thus, the vision statement contains internal tensions because the commitments to its diverse constituencies may not be attainable at the same time.

In scholarly discussions of English language testing, quite a bit of attention has been given to the question of what English form should be used. While some have argued that there should be one international English standard based on standard U.S. or British English, others have maintained that different English varieties should be used in different contexts. Much of this debate has been informed by Kachru's (1986) influential model of the Inner, Outer and Expanding Circles of English speakers (see Davies, Hamp-Lyons, & Kemp, 2003; Hamp-Lyons & Davies, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Uysal, 2010). Lowenberg (1997), for example, argued that in the Outer Circle (e.g., Ghana, India, Nigeria, Philippines, Singapore), test scorers should not take points away when students use Outer Circle varieties. Moreover, Lowenberg (2002) argued that English varieties in the Expanding Circle (e.g., Chile, China, Greece, Japan, Turkey) show unique and regular features produced through productive linguistic processes, and therefore he questioned the validity of using Inner Circle standards even in those countries where it is assumed that English is a foreign language. Within this logic, it is reasonable for U.S. universities to use standard U.S. English in their curricula and testing.

However, with the internationalization of universities comes an obligation to rethink this logic. In addition to the fact that Inner Circle universities now serve students who speak Outer and Expanding Circle varieties, the globalization of the world economy and changes in communication technologies are leading to a world in which even Inner Circle students may need to develop English writing proficiency beyond essay-text literacy in standard U.S. English. "Local" job demands are beginning to entail different types of literacy and the ability to comprehend if not produce different English varieties. For example, an employee of a U.S. company may need to be able to text successfully with a supplier based in another country and e-mail or videoconference with a manufacturer based in a third country. Thus, a reconsideration of the shape of university commitments to local employers may ease the internal tensions of the vision statement.

Such changes will not come easily, however, since the commitments that many U.S. universities have to local constituencies are caught up in a language ideology that constructs Inner Circle varieties of English as superior to Outer and Expanding varieties. The ideology polarizes native speakers of Inner Circle and other varieties, constructing the former as more intelligent, and Othering the latter. Thus, we tend to blame speakers of other varieties, commonly referred to as English language learners, for their low scores on English language and writing tests, rather than considering that the low scores may arise from testing bias or the failure of universities to support these students in their efforts to develop their language and literacy.

This understanding has been played out in conflicts that have been described in the research literature. For example, in the 1990s, the City University of New York made its WPE a graduation requirement. Despite the fact that stu-

dents at five community colleges in the system had not passed the test, only the supposed low standards at Hostos College, a Spanish/English bilingual institution, came to light (Schwinge, 2000). According to Schwinge, the press “publicly denounced bilingual education for creating radical students who could not meet academic standards” (p. 50). Similarly, in Australia, international students have been associated by the media with the falling of academic standards (Benzie, 2010). Thus, English language learners have been blamed not only for their own failure, but also for pulling down the standards of the institutions that accepted them.

Some scholars, however, avoid the logic of local or national requirements by pursuing a more internationalized, hybrid vision of English. Theorists such as Canagarajah (2006, 2011) and Pennycook (2011) have argued that Kachru’s model is too static. English testing, according to Canagarajah (2006), should not focus on any one variety, but rather on the abilities required to negotiate multiple varieties; these abilities include language awareness, sociolinguistic sensitivity, and negotiation skills. Canagarajah’s (2006) focus is on *code meshing*, a practice that involves incorporating two rhetorical styles into one text (p. 598). Canagarajah exemplified code meshing in his analysis of Smitherman’s (2003) use of both academic and African American styles in her article, “The Historic Struggle for Language Rights in the CCCC.” In his 2011 article, Canagarajah extended this line of scholarship to establishing standards for good code meshing.

While these types of skills are far from being incorporated into constructs of writing proficiency in U.S. exams, there have been calls for Inner Circle universities to reconsider their language policies. Writing in the U.K. context, Hall (2010) argued that universities need to address the issue of multiple English standards:

Given that foreign students are essential to Western HE’s [Higher Education’s] continued development and financial strength, ... receiving organizations need to engage much more deeply in a critical debate over language standards and consider the case for EIL [English as an International Language] varieties. (p. 327)

In the U.S. context, Horner and Trimbur (2002) argued that today’s students, including both domestic and international ones, have multiliterate needs, and therefore multiple language standards are appropriate.

### **Methods of Analysis**

This study focuses on the perspectives of 8 international students studying at a large, public, urban university on the U.S. East Coast. The sample included students on F-1 student visas as well as immigrant students who had arrived in the US immediately before enrolling at the university. These students were seen as similar in terms of their international perspectives; they were also similar in terms of age and length of time in the US, and they showed similar variation in domestic/international transfer status and desire to remain in the US. Table

1 shows the participants by student name (alias), home country, gender, age at arrival, years in US, current age, major(s), visa status, new student standing, desire to stay in the US, and number of attempts to pass the exam.

**Table 1**  
**Study Participants**

<i>Name (alias)</i>	<i>Home country</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age at arrival</i>	<i>Years in US</i>	<i>Current age</i>	<i>Major(s)</i>	<i>Visa status</i>	<i>New student standing</i>	<i>Desire to stay in US?</i>	<i># exam attempts to pass</i>
Chihiro	Japan	f	18	2	20	Sociology, Psychology	F-1	1st-year	no	1
Francisco	Guinea Bissau, Portugal (from age 8)	m	27	4	31	Economics	F-1	International transfer	unsure	3
Huy	Vietnam	m	18	2	20	Computer science	immigrant	International transfer	no	1
Marko	Serbia	m	18	4	21	Music, Italian	immigrant	Domestic transfer	yes	1
Rocky	Nigeria	m	18	5	23	Economics	F-1	Domestic transfer	unsure	2
Sweeny	Germany	f	24	2	26	Anthropology	F-1	International transfer	unsure	1
Yong-Hi	Republic of Korea	f	18	4	22	Art	F-1	Domestic transfer	yes	1
Yulia	Russia, Israel (from age 13)	f	22	5	27	Art	immigrant	International transfer	yes	2

In order to understand the students' experiences with the WPE, I conducted three 1.25-hour interviews with each participant. I listened to the tapes of all interviews, and all interviews were transcribed. Transcripts were imported into the qualitative data-processing program, Atlas.ti (Version 5.0), and were coded in a number of ways: In vivo coding was used to capture particularly compelling phrases used by the participants; open coding was used to develop an inductive understanding of the participants' experiences, and theory-based coding was used to develop an understanding of the power relations involved. The coding process was generative and iterative, with returns to already coded transcripts and to audiotapes, as well as member checks.

To analyze the codes I used both categorizing and contextualizing strategies (Maxwell, 1996). For the cross-case analyses, I categorized salient issues such as imposing/resisting a language form, feelings about the WPE process, self-expression on the WPE, bias for/against English as a Second Language (ESL), and why the WPE exists. Quotes and codes were kept linked so as to avoid context stripping. They were grouped and regrouped to identify both the commonalities and the differences in the participants' perspectives. Additional analysis was pursued through memoing and concept maps (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Contextualizing strategies were used to produce case studies of individual students. For each, a narrative was developed of his or her exam experience and situated in his or her life context. This was facilitated by the fact that the interviews had followed Seidman's (1991) structure: The first interview established the life-story context; the second explored the specifics of the WPE attempts; and the third provided an opportunity for the participants to make meaning of their WPE experience. In addition, the student data were analyzed in the context of university documents, interviews with administrators, and my accumulated knowledge as an ESL instructor and WPE exam scorer at the university.

### **Background of the WPE**

The WPE in this study is a graduation requirement. If students do not attempt it before reaching 75 out of the 120 credits required to graduate, they receive a letter from the dean of undergraduate education informing them that they may be suspended. They meet with the dean and sign a "learning contract" that usually limits the number of credits the student may register for and determines the date upon which the student must take the exam. Students who enter the university with 75 credits or more are expected to take the exam at the end of their 1st semester. Students who fail the WPE must take it again. They are asked to come to the WPE office so that a counselor can go over the scorer's report and have the student sign an additional "learning contract" that limits credits, sets a test date, and usually requires the student to take an exam prep course or other writing courses as well. The counselor may also try to be helpful by suggesting study strategies or offering tutoring. Students who accrue 90 credits without having passed the exam are suspended until they pass.

The WPE is a carefully designed test. It is scored holistically, a process that allows scorers to look beyond form. It is based on a reading set that is handed

out beforehand, allowing students to develop their knowledge of the topic. To give students options, there are two versions, an in-class writing test and a portfolio. Students who take the test version have a choice of three topics but are not given the precise prompt until they enter the testing room. Students who do the portfolio do not have a choice of topics but receive the prompt along with the reading set. Students completing the portfolio must also submit three supporting papers from their course work.

While the portfolio was not designed specifically for international students, it is responsive to their needs in that it allows students to do their writing without time pressure. At the same time, the requirement of the supporting papers is difficult for transfer students to fulfill since they have not taken the courses necessary to produce the papers. This fact has a large impact, as 7 of the 8 students in the study, and 72% of all new students, were transfers (Office of Institutional Research and Policy Studies, 2002).

Nonnative English-speaking students tend to fail the WPE at a higher rate than those whose home language is English. First-attempt pass rates for native and nonnative English-speaking students show a marked discrepancy: 83.0% and 65.5%, respectively (Murphy, 2001). This discrepancy has been shown at other universities as well (Ching & Moore, 1993; CSU GEAR Review Committee, 2003; Janopoulos, 1995; Ruetten, 1994). Of the students in this study, 5 passed on the first attempt, and 3 failed. However, 2 of the students who passed nevertheless experienced difficulty with the exam. One student had great difficulty obtaining the necessary supporting papers for the portfolio, accrued too many credits, and was placed on a learning contract before she made her first attempt. The other was accused of plagiarism.

## **Results**

### ***Opportunities for Participation***

As we saw above, one principle that leads to the success of international students is opportunities for participation. For Ryan and Viète (2009), opportunities for participation refers to opportunities to use one's own voice without being overly constrained by such things as "the prohibition against stories and emotive or passionate language," plagiarism rules, or a loss of confidence suffered when others focus on deficit (p. 310). While I touch on these things below, in this section I focus on a different type of opportunity for participation, namely, the opportunity to enroll in courses. As a high-stakes exam, the WPE can seriously threaten international students' opportunities to study at the university. The loss of opportunities for participation can be partial, as when a student's registration is limited, or it can be complete, as when a student's academic career is stopped. Even when opportunities are not actually taken away, the possibility that this might happen may cause extreme stress. Therefore, of the three principles, this is the one with the most direct impact on the success of international students.

First let us look at how registration was limited. Several students mentioned that their learning contracts prevented them from taking the courses they needed. To Yulia, limiting her courses was neither conducive to improving

her English nor to completing the requirements for her teacher-training program. Yulia thought that the university was not fulfilling its obligation to teach her, and she fought for her right to participate by pointing out the contradiction between the fact that she had passed the teachers state-licensing exam but had not passed the WPE: "So I am ready to go in to teach little children in terms of my expression and English and whatever, but I am not ready to study for it?"

The WPE also prevented students from participating fully in the university by stopping them in their academic careers. There were three primary ways that international students feared being stopped: financial hardship, suspension, and loss of visa. For Francisco and Rocky, the learning contract limited their registration to six credits, which not only meant that their financial aid award was pro-rated, but also that they would have to pay tuition for more semesters than planned in order to graduate. While both managed to remain in school, such unexpected costs can prevent students from pursuing their studies further.

Two students, Yong-Hi and Francisco, faced the threat of suspension. Yong-Hi faced suspension because she did not attempt the exam on time. In actuality, she had prepared the portfolio twice, but she had run into difficulty completing it while staying afloat in course work. She was able to avoid being suspended when she prepared and submitted her third portfolio and it was passed. Yong-Hi believed that suspension would mean the loss of permission from her country to continue studying abroad: "I would be questioned if I go back to Korea, 'Why didn't you take courses this semester?' ... And I would not get a visa again, you know?" She worried about the eventuality constantly: "I was really kind of like in tension in every semester not to be suspended."

Francisco faced a more serious situation. He had difficulty passing the exam, failing it twice, and spent 2 years on learning contracts. The third time he attempted to submit a portfolio but was unable to get the required signature for one of his supporting papers. For this reason, the portfolio was not accepted, Francisco was considered out-of-contract, and he was suspended. Francisco managed to avoid losing his visa by registering for Continuing Education courses.

### *A Sense of Belonging*

A sense of belonging is important for international students because it helps them engage in academic work. Many students in the study experienced the loss of a sense of belonging through the exam process when faculty or staff showed little empathy for them or positioned them as Other. At the same time, the experience of 1 student demonstrated that, through the WPE process, a sense of belonging could be built by overcoming previous experiences of exclusion and failure. Let us consider the stories of 3 students.

Chihiro's story, though perhaps not common, revealed one way a student can be made to feel as if she does not belong. Chihiro was accused of plagiarism on the WPE. When one of her writing professors offered to help resolve the matter by showing samples of her written work to the WPE director, the director refused to deal with the matter in that way. Instead, Chihiro was called to



the WPE office, quizzed about her writing process, and made to compose on the computer while several people watched (to generate a comparison sample of her writing). This treatment made Chihiro feel very distant from the university community and disappointed by her study-abroad experience: “It was disappointing because I thought people, teachers working here, are supportive, supporting students, helping students. But actually what they’re doing is doubting me, and making me embarrassed, ashamed, worried.”

While Chihiro was eventually cleared of the plagiarism charges and passed, the unfairness of the accusation and the way in which it was resolved led her to speculate about the role of bias in the WPE:

I’m not sure if I should say this, but many people tell me that there’s a racial thing going on. Actually, so some nonnatives, nonwhites, tend to get a letter like mine [accusing her of plagiarism] more often than American students. And when I submitted my portfolio, they asked my first language, how many years I spent here in the United States, and when I started studying English, or that kind of thing, that I was thinking about why. . . . I am nonwhite, and at the same time I’m nonnative. Nonnative, non-American or nonwhite, it seems like they’re being discriminated. I don’t know.

Here, Chihiro’s list of adjectives, “nonnative, non-American or nonwhite,” pointed to her perception that she had been constructed as Other.

Several other students also had their sense of belonging eroded when they were constructed as Other. For example, Yulia thought that she and nonnative English speakers in general were constructed as Other by a WPE counselor. She related this interchange, referring to an appeal letter she was writing to be allowed to take more than 12 credits:

And he said, “Yeah, you know what? When you do this appeal letter, you can write about your weakness, but don’t write about it in the first place.” And I was like, “Excuse me, what are you calling a weakness? You know, it’s not my weakness. It’s my situation. Don’t name things that you . . .”

—So he’s calling your Russian style a weakness?

A weakness, yeah. Or not Russian style, but being ESL.

To Yulia, the distinction between *weakness* and *situation* was crucial. This was because *weakness* has a negative bias and implies that being a nonnative speaker is an inherent character trait rather than a situational factor. In her substitution of *situation*, Yulia attempted to counter the Othering, the reification as inferior.

One student stood out from the others in that, although he had great difficulty passing the WPE, nevertheless he did not experience a loss of belonging. After Francisco failed the WPE, a learning contract determined *all* of his courses for 2 years; he was allowed to take only two courses per semester, both in writing. Eventually Francisco was suspended, and he managed to pass the WPE only thereafter. It is easy to point to the ways in which Francisco might

have felt that he was not allowed to participate fully. However, Francisco had an overall positive assessment of the WPE. Why? Simply put, Francisco felt he belonged at the university; he felt it had given him the opportunity to learn. Francisco summarized his WPE experience this way: “So for me it was a rich experience that enriched me.”

Francisco’s perspective can be understood when placed in the context of his earlier schooling. He had experienced exclusion before, and his experience at this university felt different. Coming from Guinea Bissau, Francisco had been schooled in Portuguese rather than his home language of Portuguese Creole, and he had a sophisticated postcolonialist analysis of the situation. When Francisco left home to attend boarding school in Portugal, he saw his schooling there as an extension of the neocolonialism he had experienced in Guinea Bissau:

Because, for me, that’s just a way to keep going the colonization. I call that the new colonization because the superpower that used to colonize you is gonna teach you education. Sometimes, even in a hidid way, they show that their language it’s better than yours. And then the pattern that they gonna teach you, sometimes is not going accordingly with your values sometimes.

Francisco had experienced being positioned as inferior by this education system. In addition, he had several negative racialized experiences in Portugal. Thus, Francisco had felt that he did not belong in the Portuguese university, and he left after repeated exam failure.

By contrast, even though the WPE process had lasted 2 years, in the end Francisco was successful. Through the process he learned the important lesson that writing is a skill that can be learned through practice. While Francisco was aware that racialized minorities failed the WPE at a higher rate than whites (Murphy, 2001), he did not see this as relevant to his experience. Instead, he felt that his difficulty arose from cultural differences between English and the Romance language tradition. He embraced the learning of standard U.S. English and essay-text literacy, and he was grateful to the university for taking the time to teach it to him.

### ***Respect for Knowledge***

Respect for knowledge is important in part because it engenders a sense of belonging. More specific to the main argument of this paper, respect for the ways that international students construct texts is important because such literacy reflects the diverse literacy needs of a globalizing world. Some students in this study thought that the literacy requirements of the WPE were not particularly relevant to their goals. However, because international students often share the understanding that they must accommodate the requirements of the U.S. university (“When in Rome ...”), this principle may not have struck them as being as immediate or as profound as the other two.

Several students resisted the textual requirements of the WPE, specifically the requirement, carefully spelled out in the scoring criteria, to produce essay-text literacy. One student was particularly concerned that essay-text literacy was based exclusively on U.S. English. As a Nigerian, Rocky spoke a different variety of English and thought that the WPE needed to take this into account:

Maybe in other countries they speak English a different way. But when you're colonized by English, I mean by the British, or whatever it is, I mean, their English will be different. I mean, the way they spell a lot of things, like if you go and spell-check the Queen's English and American English, it's totally be different. You're going to have a lot of errors in the United States about "Oh, this line's spelled this." So they should actually put that into consideration.<sup>1</sup>

While it went beyond the scope of the study to investigate how WPE scorers actually scored, I do not believe that they would mark an exam down for British spellings. However, it is possible that they might mark an exam down for less recognizable but nevertheless equally valid styles of other Englishes, such as the preference for a florid style, as described and produced by one of my Sri Lankan students.

It is clear from the study that textual styles from other languages were marked down. For example, a WPE counselor explained to Yulia that one of the reasons her essay was failed was that she had not used transition words. For Yulia, this was an issue of cultural awareness and respect, because she saw her omission of transition words as part of her native Russian style. Yulia (correctly) explained to the counselor that omitting transitions did not mean that a piece of writing was unstructured. Yulia, like some of the others, thought that writing proficiency should not be so narrowly defined.

Half of the students believed that, in addition to setting limits on acceptable linguistic form, the WPE limited their ability to express their own ideas. This was because they were told to write text-based essays and not to draw on their own experiences (in order to include summary, textual borrowing, and critique in the design and to forestall narratives). While essay-text literacy does not in and of itself prevent self-expression, the WPE insistence on not bringing in life experience even when it is relevant led several students to believe that the primary task was one of summary and comparison of the reading texts. In an e-mail, Chihiro made this claim:

Academic writing, at least what the [WPE] is looking for, is supposed to be impersonal in nature and there is a "correct" way to write the paper (especially given that the task was basically to summarize three articles in a coherent way and make an argument based on them. They picked the three articles with an idea in their mind what "good" papers/answers would look like.). So, no matter how coherent, critical, etc. the thinking is, people "original" thinkers run a risk, though not always so, of deviating from what's expected, thus labeled as "wrong."

Similarly, Marko, a Serbian student, poignantly commented: “There is not much me in my papers, that’s the thing.” For him, not allowing students to develop their own ideas seemed so pointless that it made him question why the WPE existed:

I was thinking about it a lot and I still don’t really understand the point of the [WPE]. (*Laughs*) I understand that they want you to be able to do the reading and understand it, and understand the facts and write about them, but if you can’t include your personal opinions or anything, I wasn’t sure why, what’s the point of doing [the WPE]. I’m still not sure.

Thus, the WPE inhibited some students from expressing their own ideas. Even if this was the result of misunderstanding, it is important because it revealed one of the ways in which international students felt that their knowledge was not respected.

In the following section, the findings around the three principles of opportunities for participation, sense of belonging, and respect for knowledge are discussed in order to make suggestions about how the university might internationalize the WPE. Important themes are teased out and the results are connected to previous research. Then, in the final section, a concrete suggestion for the redesign of the WPE is laid out.

#### **Discussion: A Different Sensitivity**

*If I could contribute my experience for the writing proficiency exam to improve was that: Create a different sensitivity. Because to me it seems like somehow people—maybe they don’t do it intentionally; I’m not meaning they doing it with the bad intention—but they not so sensitive about seeing that people comes from different backgrounds. (Francisco)*

This study points to ways in which the university could “create a different sensitivity” that is both more responsive to international students and better suited to an internationalized university in a globalizing world. Let us consider how each of Ryan and Viete’s principles contributes to an understanding of needed changes.

First, the WPE can have severe impacts on international students’ participation in the university community. Because nonnative speakers fail the exam at a significantly higher rate than native English speakers, sanctions such as having one’s courses limited and being suspended disproportionately affect international students. Moreover, these sanctions have disproportionate effects. For example, international students may lose their visas and have to return home. In addition, they may face financial burdens greater than those of domestic students because they pay out-of-state tuition rates and differences in the economies of home countries and the US may make the financial burden more onerous.

The university’s failure to fully analyze the ramifications of WPE regulations on international students reflects a domestic bias. The university not only

needs to recognize the profound impacts of the WPE on international students in terms of visa status and finances, but it should also consider other ways in which the design of the exam may unfairly affect international students. For example, the regulation that transfer students must take the WPE at the end of their 1st semester has a particularly negative effect on international students. Because the initial period of adaptation is known to be a particularly difficult time (Gu, 2011; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Skyrme & White, 2011), requiring international students to take the WPE during this period may exacerbate hardships and is not likely to set the students up for success. As we consider how international student participation reflects the state of the internationalization process, we see that work needs to be done. The WPE needs to be redesigned so that it does not unfairly penalize international students.

Second, the WPE can have various impacts on international students' sense of belonging in the university community. This study confirmed the finding that relationships with faculty and staff are particularly important to international students' affective experience (cf. Cadman, 2000; Skyrme & White, 2011; Zhou, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2011). Three themes threaded their way through students' accounts: the desire for empathy, university obligations, and Othering.

As for empathy, students appreciated faculty and staff who listened to them and worked with them to find ways to resolve their problems. However, when faculty and staff adhered to regulations rather than considering individual cases, several students thought that they were being officious, and their sense of belonging was negatively affected. For example, Francisco was beside himself when he was suspended after submitting a portfolio that was missing one signature. He thought that the staff should have made an allowance for the facts that he was known to the testing office and was working in good faith. Conversely, although Chihiro was exasperated when the WPE director refused to even discuss her writing with her writing teacher, it was the professors who advocated for her who kept her active in the university community. The university could better serve international students if it reflexively analyzed its own culture and considered making changes to it. Changes in campus culture are a difficult but necessary part of the process of internationalization.

Students' sense of belonging was also related to their sense that the university was meeting their expectations and fulfilling its obligations to them. Yulia felt an increased academic distance resulting from her belief that the university had retreated from its obligation to teach her. In contrast, Francisco felt a greater sense of belonging resulting from his belief that the university was committed to his learning. Thus, this study confirms Parris-Kidd and Barnett's (2011) finding that "it is the psychological dimension which shapes the responses of each individual student to their experience of academic and social distance" (p. 183). The university needs to further analyze why it is that students had such different experiences and seek out ways to continually send the message that it is committed to teaching its international students.

Students' sense of being constructed as Other is a serious concern affecting students' sense of belonging as well as the university's commitment to equality

and diversity. Because discourses of xenophobia, racism, and linguisticism are omnipresent, it is important that the university be intentional about disrupting them. Yulia's experience reflects the very real positioning of bilingualism and ESL as inferior (Kubota, 2001; Spack, 1997). The university needs to seriously address ways in which its faculty and staff may be constructing students as Other in order to develop ways to end these practices. Chihiro's experience of being asked her native language and country of origin at the exam offers a place to start: The WPE should end this practice.

Third, the WPE can affect international students' beliefs that their knowledge is respected. Specifically, their knowledge of linguistic forms, textual construction, and writing styles come into play. Because, as Gee (1990) and many others have argued, one's language is intimately connected with one's identity, values, and social group, lack of respect for a student's knowledge can be experienced as a form of Othering. For instance, while Rocky's worry that an exam might be scored down for British spellings remains unconfirmed, it nevertheless reflected his larger concern that members of the university community did not respect his knowledge and were constructing him as Other.

The WPE should expand its construct of writing proficiency to include alternative ways to construct texts. Doing so would not only be a demonstration of its respect for the knowledge of international students, but it would also reflect the changing literacy demands of a globalizing world. The university needs to recognize that, both within U.S. communities and abroad, we all need to be able to communicate with people from other countries and cultures. Thus, the university needs to develop both curricula and assessments that reflect this need.

At the same time, the university should continue to teach essay-text literacy. It was clear from this study that not all students fully understood that, while essay-text literacy is a form that distances the writer from the text, it nevertheless allows for the expression of core beliefs. The students who thought that they could not express themselves in essay-text literacy remind us of the need to teach students how to express themselves in essay-text literacy by building a position based on their interests. The fact that so many students thought that they could not express themselves reveals a shortcoming in the representation of essay-text literacy by the WPE. The university needs to redesign the WPE and its writing curriculum to better teach essay-text literacy and to allow for alternative writing styles.

### **Redesigning Writing Proficiency Exams**

If the university commits to alternative writing styles and to essay-text literacy, how can the WPE be redesigned to fit this vision? Rather than having students demonstrate proficiency in a particular linguistic form or writing style, the WPE could be redesigned to have students demonstrate proficiency in navigating a rhetorical situation. Navigating a rhetorical situation would include a consideration of the writing context and intended audience, and how these affect the decisions the writer made. For example, students could make connections between the amount of background information they supplied or

their word choices and the intended audience.

This redesign would mean that essay-text literacy would still be taught, but it would not be the sole basis of the writing proficiency construct, and its mastery would no longer be a high-stakes affair. It is reasonable to downgrade the importance of essay-text literacy not only because it is not the only style needed by students in a globalizing world, but also because it is not at all clear that it is needed to be successful in the classroom. At the university in this study, many students did not pass the exam before becoming upperclassmen as they were expected to, and nevertheless they were able to complete upper-level course work.

The redesign of the WPE would be an important symbolic shift away from privileging the linguistic form of one social group. The redesign would not erase bias that scorers might have in favor of essay-text literacy, but it would shift the basis of scoring away from the textual form and toward the fit between the form and the rhetorical situation. The shift in scoring would go beyond the injunction not to focus too much on form that now serves to protect nonnative (and nonstandard) English speakers from bias.

To gauge students' understandings of the rhetorical situation, students would be asked to produce two texts, one along the design of the current exam, and an additional one in which they explained their process of making rhetorical choices. This newly designed exam would allow for more flexibility in that students could construct their first texts in diverse ways. It would also be more rigorous, in that they would not only have to be able to produce a text, but they also would have to be able to explain and justify the decisions they made in the process of constructing the text.

Students could use their metatexts either to reveal their knowledge of the purpose and audience of the testing situation or to direct the scorers to a different, hypothetical rhetorical situation. In a few pages, they would discuss why they used the form they did (including comments on the use of U.S. or another English form, their organizing structure, and use or omission of devices of coherence), what writing process they followed to produce the text, how they envisioned their audience and what choices they made to reach that audience, who they are in relation to the writing and how they felt invested in the writing, and how they established their authority (through the use of lived experience, expert support in references, evidence supported by references).

We can see that such a design would avoid many of the difficulties experienced by students in this study. Rocky would have had a place to state his worries about the acceptability of his British/Nigerian English, and having had such an opportunity, may have felt that the university was more open to his difference. Yulia would have had a place to explain her choice to omit transition words and point to the logical structure of her text, thereby helping the scorers read her essay and possibly leading them to pass it. Chihiro would have had a place to describe her writing process, forestalling accusations of plagiarism.

Because it would be the responsibility of the students to explain their rhetorical choices in their metatexts, faculty would not have to be masters of many different styles or forms to be able to score the exam. They would need only to

have an understanding of how authors make rhetorical choices. The emphasis would not be on the choices made but on the students' ability to intelligently discuss those choices. While such an understanding is of course the specialty of Second Language Writing, Composition, and Rhetoric professors, it is not in fact new to academics in any field. It is what we do when, for example, we are involved in a revise-and-resubmit process: We write a cover letter about our texts in which we describe and justify our writing choices. Faculty across the curriculum could draw on this knowledge to become good exam scorers.

Of course, a redesigned WPE would require a redesigned curriculum to help students develop the metalanguage they would need. Such a curriculum would benefit the university at large, not just international students. All students would be engaged in a process of developing authority over their writing. Monolingual U.S. students would learn that essay-text literacy is not universal but rather culture based, which, in turn, would open their minds to other ways of writing and better prepare them to work in a globalizing world. And, through interactions with students, faculty could expand their knowledge of differing writing traditions at a historical moment when we are not all familiar with a variety of English forms and writing styles.

While international students may willingly accept that it is their job to accommodate the culture of their institutions (Cadman, 2000; Tian & Lowe, 2009), it is no longer considered appropriate for universities to expect all of the cultural adaptation to be borne by the students and none by the university (Cadman, 2000; Turner & Robson, 2008; Zhou, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2011). Part of the internationalization of universities will come from the adaptations we make to our gatekeepers such as the writing proficiency exam.

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### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed discussion of Rocky's language attitudes, see Mott-Smith (2011).

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