

One of Many: Examining and Reconciling the “Need to Acquiesce” in Composition Classrooms

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Drawing from personal experiences as an undergraduate writing tutor, Kylie Wojciechowski describes how the bifurcation that separates the experiences of native English speakers from those of non-native speakers in a composition classroom can be manipulative in its attempts to mold one side to match its counterpart. That is, as instructors and professors must teach non-native English speakers to write according to the style demanded by higher academia in the United States, they often communicate that the student’s way of writing and thinking is not valid, even when their intention is to help students succeed in the professional context of American culture. By focusing on how well students can conform their writing styles to match styles demanded by American, English-speaking higher academia and using techniques that judge accomplishment by compliance, this approach lumps especially international students into one general category, one universal culture: “not from here.” Wojciechowski suggests a dangerous boundary is crossed when the way “they” write is vilified and dichotomized from the way “we” write.

Where I’m about to begin this article is not where I’m supposed to begin it; this is not necessarily how my professors and other scholars in higher academia want me to start. But, in the interest of pushing boundaries and challenging conventions (as all good radical college students must do), I will begin here.

This space is traditionally reserved for a general introduction to my article; I’m supposed to acquaint you, my audience, to the topic that I will discuss in the subsequent pages. In this general introduction, too, I should still be writing with strict adherence to the guidelines rhythmically belabored into my head during my time in American secondary and high schools: my writing should be a thesis statement, a concise sentence or two that effectively sums up my soon-to-be-revealed perspective on the aforementioned topic.

But I'm not going to follow those guidelines, not because I think myself better or smarter than the instructors who taught me those guidelines, and not because I think that those guidelines don't have their own unique rhetorical purposes. Instead, my diversion from these guidelines is because they don't effectively chronicle or communicate the purposes, processes, or results of the research that I conducted during my time working with Illinois State University's Writing Program.

This is because where I am now is not where I intended to be when I started this research a few months ago.

I began my research with a fairly narrow focus: finding the answer to a problem that I stumbled across while working as an undergraduate tutor in the Saginaw Valley State University Writing Center. I was hired as a peer mentor in the winter of 2013, my second semester of college. I adapted to the challenges of the job well; within a semester, I felt confident tutoring students from across the academic spectrum, representing varying disciplines, and from course levels ranging from remedial to graduate and those in-between. I had (and most definitely still have) one Achilles' heel when it comes to tutoring, though: international students.

As of fall 2013, 6.08% of the Saginaw Valley State University student body was from a country other than the United States. With 10,245 students total, that gives us around 622 international students. In the larger scheme of things, 6.08% is not significant ("SVSU"). But when that percentage is viewed through the filter of students who visit our writing center, the international student body presents exacting challenges, as it has unique needs that are often taken for granted in working with the portion of the student body hailing from the United States.

Don't think that my struggles in satisfying the unique needs of international students were in any way related to an incompetency in my tutoring ability. I had no real problems helping international students with the clarity or development of their writing. I could explain independent and dependent clauses or noun-verb agreements easily. Yet I struggled with something that, as mentioned before, I took for granted in sessions with English-speaking students from the United States: citation formatting.

Solving this problem wasn't as easy as hauling out the APA manual and finding the appropriate documentation for a particular source. Even though I had been exposed to this problem in my training, I was still entirely unprepared to handle it. In a training workshop dedicated to international students (specifically non-native speakers, or NNS), we watched a documentary written and directed by Wayne Robertson, funded by Oregon State University, called *Writing Across Borders*. In it, a student from China discussed her experiences with

copyright issues during her studies in the United States. In her mother culture, those issues are not a big deal, as “they are so used to sharing,” she said.

Another student, from Vietnam, talked about the risk of penalization for students who go outside the classroom or outside a lecture and put “extra” information into an essay. She shared a personal story about writing an essay about the atmosphere of her classroom. She looked outside the window of her classroom, describing the scenery and vibe, and she was marked down for utilizing that “extra” information.

These particular nuances of academic writing in those specific Vietnamese and Chinese classrooms sparked my interest, as it contrasted so deeply with the tendency of the United States to view words, language, and ideas as personal property, requiring students to “borrow” the personal property of more-distinguished others to appear credible in their own writing.

I wanted to figure out why this was the case; I wanted to know why students from different cultures were not expected to do research outside of their classroom, why they didn’t have to painstakingly create a references page in a defined sequence in the appropriate format, why knowledge was unselfishly shared without acknowledgment. Alternatively, I wanted to figure out *how* to explain to international students *why* those extremely-specifically-formatted references pages were so important. I wanted to understand *how* to explain this glaring inconsistency in cultural writing styles.

The fruits of such a research project would not only be useful to me in a pedagogical sense as a tutor, benefiting all students that I work with no matter their native language, but this research would also help me simultaneously as a student. Once I could determine why citation practices differed across borders, whether physical, cultural, or social, my research would be deemed fruitful. I wondered: if citations are concrete ways to institutionalize ideas of ownership and knowledge, could I determine what those ideas consisted of?



So I decided to figure out if I could find these answers—as a recipient of the Illinois State University Writing Research Scholarship, I worked with the scholarship’s coordinator, a graduate student at ISU, Emily Johnston, to create a plan that would aid me in attempting to answer my question. My research plan entailed interviewing a few international students enrolled at my institution (Saginaw Valley State University) about how schools in their native country view utilizing outside sources; that series of questions would be supplemented with academic articles about cultural citation practices. That is, articles about how various cultures conceived the ownership of ideas

and of knowledge—and to which cultural dimensions that conception was related. By cultural dimensions, I would refer to a framework for cross-cultural communication developed by Geert Hofstede. His theory originally identified four main dimensions by which a culture could be analyzed in a general sense: power distance (PDI), individualism (IDV), uncertainty avoidance (UAI), and masculinity (MAS). While subsequent studies extended the scope of Hofstede's theory, the number of dimensions available in cultural analysis was expanded too, including focus on pragmatism and indulgence. Of those six recognizable dimensions, I wondered about the potential impact of each on cultural conceptions of knowledge and ideas and how those conceptions influenced cultural practices of citations and the like. Could differences between the United States and China or Japan in terms of Hofstede's proposed dimensions explain the cultural inconsistencies in citation practices? I couldn't wait to pursue my research to find answers to these questions.



And then I hit a road block. After contacting my institution's Office of International Programs to get in touch with international students who would be interested in helping with my research, the director refused to help me unless I could get approval from Saginaw Valley's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is responsible for approving, monitoring, and reviewing any type of research that could potentially harm the humans participating as subjects. While the type of research I was looking to conduct didn't pose an obvious threat to the students I would interview, IRB approval was necessary to ensure the ethics of my research processes and the informed consent of my participants. However, in such a short time span, there was no realistic way to get approved and finish my initial research processes in a timely fashion.

I was frustrated. I cried once or twice. I wanted to give up, but, I guess as a good academic should, I adapted my research processes. With Emily's help, I determined that, instead of doing primary research on my topic, I would have to shift to secondary research. No longer would I have access to the rich stores of information inside the minds of the brilliant international students at Saginaw Valley. Those were locked vaults, guarded by the IRB. Unable to access them and conduct primary research of my own creation and design, I was forced to rely solely on secondary research that was already conducted and documented by other scholars. I wondered how I would do this research without simply reiterating what had already been done in the past.

Regardless, I set forth to dig through the databases provided by Saginaw Valley's library, in search of any articles that would give me insight into the problem that I observed in tutorial sessions with international students

regarding citation practices: specifically, their unfamiliarity with utilizing outside research sources and giving credit to those sources' respective authors in a very prescriptive manner.

I found some very useful scholarly articles, like “Learning How to Use Citations for Knowledge Transformation: Non-Native Doctoral Students' Dissertation Writing in Science” by Yu Ren Dong. I came across titles of and abstracts for scholarly articles that perhaps would have been very helpful to me, if Saginaw Valley's library had had the appropriate credentials or funds to allow me to access them.



I expanded my topic a bit to compensate for the lack of research that I could unearth. Instead of focusing solely on the citation practices of international students, I broadened my filter to look at the writing styles of international students and of the cultures from which they hailed.

I had a fairly solid foundational grasp on the variety of writing styles of different cultures; in the Saginaw Valley Writing Center, after working with international students for over a year, I became aware that the key, valued aspects of “good” writing in the United States were often very directive, upfront, and left no real room for misinterpretation on behalf of the reader. This is most commonly exemplified by an introductory paragraph that neatly funnels a reader into an explicit thesis statement and then the rest of the author's ideas, in the exact sequence that was laid out in the thesis.

In this traditional fashion, the article you are reading may be marked with a low grade in a composition class in the United States. My introduction did not funnel you, the audience, into an explicit thesis statement. I disregarded these social guidelines for writing in that they did not fit my rationale for writing or my purposes in research. I failed to write the way that “we” write. (In writing for this particular journal, though, I have had more freedom to structure my words in a fashion comfortable to me; this luxury is not typically afforded to students in composition classrooms.)

In saying and acknowledging that there is a way that “we” write, a very ethnocentric view of effective writing styles is revealed. Through tutoring students from other cultures, many of them expressed to me that this way of writing is considered backwards and odd, forced upon them.

For example, I can vividly remember a session I had with a student from Japan. Her organization of a personal narrative seemed convoluted to me, but she was able to explain why she did it that way. She told me a story:

There are two daughters at the string shop in Osaka.

The oldest daughter is sixteen years old and the youngest daughter is fourteen years old.

Japanese samurai kill their enemies with arrows.

The Japanese daughters at the string shop kill men with their eyes.

This is called “The Daughters at the String Shop” and is sometimes used in Japan to teach students how to write a proper essay.

Line one is referred to as the introduction, or “ki.”

Line two is the development, or “sho.”

Line three is the turning point, or “ten.”

Line four is the conclusion, or “ketsu.”

There was no place for a clear thesis in this writing style, or the turning point (“ten”) would be foiled. The student and I worked to dismantle her exquisite Japanese narrative to meet the admittedly-dry standards that her professor was expecting.

I had to teach her, persuade her, the way “we” wrote was the appropriate way for this writing situation; to succeed in an American university context, she would have to learn to write like “us.”

In other tutoring sessions I’ve conducted, I can remember times when I’ve explicitly said, “The way that professors want you to write in the United States is a bit different.” I never really thought that saying that was a big deal; all I had to do was show the international student how to reframe his or her thoughts to meet conventional standards, to include a clear thesis and discernible speaking points. But to explore this idea further, I needed to find research that supported my thoughts and observations, as I wasn’t allowed by the IRB to do the research I wanted to do in the timeframe I wanted to do it.

I remembered an article that I had read about a year ago as I was training to become a tutor. I couldn’t remember the title or the author, but I could recall pictorial diagrams that illustrated writing patterns of various international authors. With only a fuzzy mental picture of those diagrams, I scoured the databases (and, rather desperately, Google) for the article that explained those diagrams. I searched for hours, typing in keywords like “writing patterns cross-cultural,” “pictures of writing patterns international,” “visual representation of international writing.” And I got nothing.

It was not until a lucky chain of events that I happened across Robert Kaplan’s article, “Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Communication.” **Thought patterns.** Not writing patterns. Thought patterns. These thought patterns are broken down into:

- Germanic (English, German, Danish, Dutch, Norwegian): Communication is direct, linear, and digresses.
- Semitic (Arabic, Hebrew): Thoughts express a series of parallel ideas, both positive and negative.
- Asian: Topic is not addressed head on, but viewed indirectly from various perspectives, working around the point.
- Romance (French, Italian, Spanish): It is acceptable to introduce extraneous material, adding to the richness of the communication.
- Russian: Communication is often digressive, may include series of parallel ideas.



In some way, our abilities to write mirror our abilities to think.¹ So, apparently, in telling international students that that they couldn’t write in ways that were comfortable to them given their cultural background, maybe it seems as if I was telling them that their *way of thinking wasn’t valid*. When I told international students that “we don’t write like that here,” was I telling them “we don’t think like that here; you shouldn’t either?”

It seems as if I was essentially manipulating the way that international students thought, changing beautiful spirals of thought into straight, hedged paths. Is that right? Is that right for me to tell them? (Not a chance.) Am I the one telling international students that their ways of thinking aren’t valid, or am I just the messenger? The messenger for whom?

“Our ability to write well is our ability to think well.”
–Ruth Braun

A lot of reservations can be brought up at this point. I expressed my guilt to a few of my close friends, those who also work at the Saginaw Valley Writing Center. They told me not to worry about it; they told me that I wasn’t telling the students I worked with that their way of thinking was *entirely* invalid, but that it

¹Ruth and Ted Braun, generous benefactors at Saginaw Valley State University, fund a writing scholarship program. Every year, a publication of the winners’ work is printed. As a recipient of the scholarship last year, I was invited to attend the awards ceremony. I picked up on what I think to be the “buzz phrase” of the scholarship program: a quote by Ruth Braun herself.

was simply inappropriate for this specific context in an American university. So, yeah. I guess that's a way to assuage the guilt. But is that correct? Is that true?



Opening up the conversation a bit, let me tell you about my younger brother. He's 17 and just graduated high school in May. He has big dreams of becoming of a physical therapist. One Sunday night a few months ago, he was working on a scholarship application. He had finished the essay portion of it and wanted me to look over it. Being the nice sister that I am, I agreed. His essay had to explain what his greatest success was, and how it would contribute to his future career.

Regardless of what he wrote, I had no idea what the prompt for his essay was until I dove into the fourth paragraph of his work. Judging by the standards that I typically assess papers by, both in my work at the writing center *and* my own academic writing, the organization was clearly ineffective. I asked him why he chose to organize his paper in the way he did. He said, "I built my paper like this, I guess. It goes up-and-up-and-up. But that's not how I'm supposed to do it, I guess."

"How are you supposed to do it, then?" I asked him.

"Well, you should kind of go up, then down, then up again."

"Yeah, okay."

We began working on revising his essay. I suggested that he construct a thesis statement that clearly laid out his topic and how it would relate to his future career. He refused to do that: "I can't do that in the first paragraph!"

"Why? Your topic isn't some sort of secret you're revealing," I said.

"But that doesn't make sense to me. That's not how I think!" he stormed off.

He and I argue all the time, but this one was different. Here, again, I was pushing some agenda about *how to think* when I was teaching writing. And my brother is not an international student; he was born in Bay City, Michigan, and has resided there his entire life.

The standards of academic writing are not just manipulating the way that students from different cultures think, but could they also be manipulating the way that some domestic speakers think?



Peter Elbow echoes my concerns—sort of. In his article “Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond ‘Mistakes,’ ‘Bad English,’ and ‘Wrong Language,’” he asserts that Standard Written English, or what is considered appropriate academic language, is “no one’s mother tongue” (362). However, “the common attitude toward ‘wrong’ language [or anything not SWE] is to want to get rid of it” (360).

Here, Elbow is mainly talking about less-valued dialects of English, like Black English Vernacular. He clearly distinguishes that he is not addressing the dialects or languages of ESL students. And I don’t want to twist his words to seem like he is. But what he’s saying is *so* applicable to the almost-coercive manipulation that higher academia imposes on the thought patterns of native and non-native speakers of English alike.

“For writing, there is still a need to acquiesce, to give in,” he writes (362).

In writing for my courses and my professional endeavors, I admit, I do give in. I do feel a need to acquiesce, to organize my writing and my thoughts into streamlined, clean documents of communication that are easy for readers to digest. In doing so, I’m manipulating my thought patterns; writing in the way that is valued in higher academia in the United States is not comfortable, at least for me that is. We all give in in our writing; in this particular article, I was given enough freedom to not acquiesce. Reading this article, I fear that, you, as the audience, may have been aggravated at my apparent inability to focus on any subtopic for an extended period of time. You may have been unimpressed with my lack of a thesis statement. In communicating the nature of my research project, though, it was necessary to break uncomfortable conventions, to write in a way that actually mirrors my thought patterns.

Then, if the various thought patterns that are reflected in the writings of students from other cultures are being squashed (and, judging by the existence of writing tutoring centers and less-than-perfect marks in composition classrooms, those of students of English-speaking cultures are, too), why are so many members comprising higher academia still pushing this uncomfortable format on students AND ourselves?

“It’s to help the reader,” you might say. This particular English method of writing and thinking, ruthlessly impressed upon students during their secondary education in the form of a five-paragraph essay, puts little to no responsibility on the reader, offering clear, important points of an argument in bite-sized chunks right up front. As young American students are taught to write three body paragraphs, sandwiched by a general introduction with a thesis statement nicely folded in and a conclusion that restates what’s already been said, though not in a repetitive way—a task that I’m not even

sure how to perform at this point—there are main values being taught implicitly. For example:

- Clarity
- Coherence
- Conciseness
- No room for misinterpretation (or, a different interpretation than intended)
- Convention

Even as American students learn to develop their composition skills beyond the constraints of five paragraphs and are capable of crafting a more sophisticated type of essay, the main values remain blatantly present. That is, while an essay may have more than five paragraphs and deviate from the standard logistical structure granted by an introduction and conclusion, the text therein will often still remain as it was taught so many years ago in secondary school, influenced beyond repair by those main values. By providing readers with clarity, coherence, conciseness, no room for misinterpretation, and convention, this standard of American writing proposes writing as a mere vehicle for information, a way to directly, unambiguously, and easily transmit ideas from one person to another.



Other cultures don't let their readers off so easily—to follow an argument around the digressive zigzag of Russian writing or the winding spiral of Asian writing, a reader must be fully engaged and prepared to sort through it. Writing is rather viewed as the advent of a relationship with an audience; the topic being discussed is a way to bond. It's clear that different values are being taught and thus represented in the writing styles that these other cultures teach. Speculation into these values is beyond the scope of this article and could easily entail a graduate thesis project, but it remains that these values are simply *different* than those propagated in American classrooms.

I guess, then, differences in writing styles (and citation practices) can be attributed to differences in cultural values. The valued styles of communication come across in the way that students are taught to write, as writing is a tangible, malleable, documentable form of communication. By teaching writing in a specific way, educators are able to propagate a culturally valuable form of communication that will help a student succeed in the culture of their native country.



There could be many more reasons why differences in writing styles exist, though; I could be completely wrong in my assumption—but I’m okay with that. That’s the beauty of this research, and of all research.

At the advent of this project, I wanted a tangible conclusion and results that would directly help me and anyone who teaches composition to non-native speakers of English. That was how I personally valued knowledge—quantifiable results.

The way I value knowledge has shifted a bit, though. I now welcome inconsistencies, questions (rather than answers), and frustration. Research never was and never will be a neat, streamlined process; it doesn’t mirror the final drafts of our essays.

Research is a convoluted mess, and I can almost guarantee that you won’t end up where you began. Loose ends may never be tied up; instead, they may unravel further.

I never thought I’d find myself questioning the acceptable writing style that frames so much of what I do, of what I value. But for the sake of students for whom English is not their native language, and also for English-speaking students like my brother, I think that this status quo is worth challenging. I can still value and appreciate clear, concise communication; it’s what I was raised to expect and deliver, although I can appreciate the beautiful nuances of writing and communication that wind deeply into themselves, digressing into relevant asides when necessary. I’ve learned that the way “we” write is not the only way to write; it’s just one of many.

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