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## **Social Media at Academia's Periphery: Studying Multilingual Developmental Writers' Facebook Composing Strategies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article focuses on the writing strategies second-language students use to compose on social media sites. These alternative and unconventional sites for learning provide language learners opportunities to acquire language by using multiple modalities to respond to various rhetorical situations. In comparison to these sites, academic writing contexts, particularly the developmental-writing course, impose monolingual norms and deficient identities on students. Where these courses articulate these language learners as possessing inadequate skills to perform well in mainstream writing courses, the students' social-media compositions demonstrate that these students have the potential to respond to communicative situations in rhetorically complex ways. This study exemplifies both the deliberate and flippant decisions these students make in these contexts as they shuttle (Canagarajah, 2006) between the linguistic and cultural expectations they perceive their audiences to possess.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

At most institutions of higher learning, decisions of those who administrate or teach courses that engage students in literate practices have been informed by a commonplace syllogism: those who make surface errors in their writing are basic writers; those who are basic writers are inadequately literate; therefore, those who make surface errors are inadequately literate. This syllogistic reasoning, for reasons ranging from xenophobia to popular and unsubstantiated assumptions, tends to inform the writing placement of multilingual students, those students who communicate using multiple languages or dialects, because they do (or it is assumed that they will) produce errors in their written communication. The complex literacy practices that multilingual students bring to the academy should prompt us to interrogate the classification of "inadequately literate," and this label needs to be contextualized. At universities and colleges it would presumably refer to those students who, hyperbolically speaking, need to be cleansed of their errors and taught academic expectations before they pollute instructors' already busy schedules with their nonstandard prose. Or, as Bartholomae (2009) describes it, they are the students who are "inventing the university." They are the students whose literacy practices have provided enough evidence to get them admitted into academic institutions, but are deemed "works in progress" that need assistance to understand how to participate within academic discourse communities.

Yet, as the syllogism deduces, it is the inadequacies of these individuals that administrators and instructors focus on. Although many of these students reside in the United States and are privileged to attend institutions of higher education, the academy, because of the students' nonstandard writing, often bends to conservative ideologies and popular tropes about linguistic diversity by fostering a peripheral culture (i.e., basic or developmental writing) within its own walls. To correct these multilingual students' deficient skills, the developmental-writing courses' pedagogy often take the students "back to the basics," which gives them little to no opportunity to demonstrate the literacy competencies they do possess. These multilingual writers are seen through a deficit model that identifies the students according to the literacy practices they do not demonstrate, and de-emphasizes (or ignores) those reading and writing practices these students do well (Canagarajah, 2002; Delpit, 1988; Fox, 1999). Shaughnessy (1977) further explains that these students "write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, or indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes" (p. 5). Like others, Shaughnessy credits these students for the strategies and skills the students bring to the academy and challenges her audience to perceive these students' errors not as a deficiency but as evidence of learning—a completely radical paradigm for the late-1970s, as well as the present.

However, as progressive as Shaughnessy's description of basic writers is, especially for its time, she—like many people still do—privileges the goal of students producing error-free standard academic English. Research (Canagarajah 2007; House, 2003) has shown that fetishizing a standard that language learners should progress toward and achieve ignores many of these individuals' actual communicative practices. As Canagarajah (2007) details in his discussion of *Lingua Franca English*, each exchange between interlocutors bears its own norms by which successful communication is judged; therefore standards appear to be arbitrary, and the norming mechanisms we establish to support them seem unproductive. The academy certainly has its discourse(s) that contextually facilitate communicative efficiency, so students' initiation into the academy and their disciplines should include the respective discourse conventions. Yet, if interlocutors are capable of successful communication—defined as conveying one's intended meaning to one's interlocutor—as they negotiate the norms of their exchanges, why does the academy denounce any communicative feature that fails to achieve its own standards, especially so early in the students' academic literacy development?

Furthermore, the "linguistic facts of life" (Lippi-Green, 1997)<sup>1</sup> are that multilingual individuals who did not begin speaking non-accented will rarely, if ever, achieve native-like phonology. Similarly, multilingual students' writing often continues to be accented, suggesting that an infrastructure designed to separate and segregate these students until they achieve the appropriate standards may not be the most effective or efficient mechanism for helping students communicate within the academy. In spite of its problematic foundation, the developmental-writing course, at many academic institutions, is a hurdle for multilingual writers to clear. Like individuals in other peripheral cultures (Rassool, 2004; Sifakis, 2009; Wei & Kolko, 2005), students in the developmental-writing classroom perceive English proficiency, especially literacy, as a gateway to future opportunities. For the developmental-writing students, the gratification of being judged as proficient tends to be more instantaneous because the students are given the opportunity to advance toward their degrees' completion, or, in some cases, they avoid being excused by the institution. In framing the findings from her examination of first- and second-generation immigrant students in inner-city London, Rassool (2004) explains language use's close ties to identity and the negotiation of identity with dominant and/or colonizing power:

Peoples subordinated to the colonizing power were invariably reduced to one-dimensional cultural/ethnic/national stereotypes, their identities seen as mutable only in terms of their desire to approximate the ‘superior’ standards of metropolitan culture—its preferred ways of being, its ways of seeing, its ways of knowing. (p. 200)

Similarly, in the developmental-writing class, student success is based upon one’s measurement against a seemingly arbitrary hegemonic standard in which students divest themselves of their cultural and linguistic diversity, except when it has value for its exoticness or novelty. To matriculate to the mainstream (usually credit-bearing courses) multilingual students need to be normed (Foucault, 1977), and prove they can be, see, and know like the dominant domestic culture; thus they need to demonstrate they can read and write in prescribed ways.

The problem, as Rassool (2004) reports, referencing Hall (1983, 1993), is that the dominant culture has “the power to make [one] see and *experience* [oneself] as ‘Other’” (p. 200, original emphasis). In other words, the identity of being deviant or inferior to the dominant culture gets internalized and becomes the standard by which one sees and understands oneself. Students placed in developmental-writing courses will similarly identify themselves as “poor writers,” and many will continue to do so whether they pass this remedial course or not—as evidenced by how they introduce themselves to writing center tutors and subsequent writing instructors. The rhetoric of deficiency is so prevalent that it is difficult for these students, without being taught, to understand that they can functionally communicate with native English speakers, but more importantly with those already immersed in the students’ target disciplinary communities. Additionally, as the study described in this article demonstrates, that in spite of these students’ grammar and usage errors, they can make complex and deliberate rhetorical choices when composing in other contexts, such as social media spaces (e.g., Facebook).

Once one shifts the focus of students’ literacy competencies away from what students *cannot* do to what students *can* do, a series of exigencies becomes apparent and raises many questions about institutional policies and practices: What competencies do students bring to the developmental-writing classroom? What competencies that are expected within the academic discourse community do individual students need to learn, and how can these competencies be used as a foundation in the developmental-writing classroom? How do instructors learn which competencies students can already practice well and how to build upon these competencies? Finally, what, then, should the ultimate goal of the developmental classroom be? This research project examines the first question addressing the general literacy competencies developmental-writing students draw upon (both in and beyond the writing classroom). More specifically, I question what multilingual writers’ social media composing strategies are, whether these strategies entail any that are valued for academic writing, and how developmental student writers perceive (the value of) their social media composing strategies.

## **RESISTANCE FROM THE PERIPHERY & SOCIAL MEDIA**

Most college students, according to anecdotal evidence, have composed a presence for one or more social media spaces, particularly Facebook (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010). As of March 2010, Facebook had over 400 million active users (Fletcher, 2010, p. 37), and the largest group, 43%, of Facebook’s 45.3 million US users are of college-age (Facebook, 2010; Smith, 2009). On these sites, students are composing profile pages, reading

what their “friends” are doing, and recording their own activities at regular intervals through words, images, sound, and various combinations thereof. While there is a common trope that students’ participation with electronic media is ruining their ability to write (Baron, 2008; Keen, 2007)—especially for academic or professional audiences—an examination of the social networking sites’ interfaces also exhibits how students have the option to engage in what the New London Group (2000) calls multiliterate practices and can make sophisticated choices about their literacy experiences (DePew & Miller-Cochran, 2010).

Likewise these are spaces, albeit electronic, where individuals are literally prompted to define themselves. For individuals whom US society has already placed in peripheral cultures, especially those, like college students, who may be physically isolated from others who share this culture, the Internet may be a primary medium for these individuals to connect with those whom they identify. Likewise it is a forum for them to position themselves in the world by making arguments about how they want others to perceive them. But the Internet, in spite of its promise and potential, is not always conducive for making these connections or arguments about oneself. Wei and Kolko (2005) acknowledge that the Internet failed to meet its “initial optimistic projections,” and “while critics in many ways have moved past the most utopian constructions of the mid-1990s, each new wave of Internet communication, from Web pages to blogs to wikis, produces a subsequent fixation on the power of the Internet to transform discursive practices and reposition the power of the media” (p. 206). Once society, scholars included, gets past the hype of each technological iteration, they come to see the actual infrastructure of the technologies and how each one shapes individuals’ practices. Among these epiphanies is the realization that “Internet content and interface metaphors have been largely dominated by Western perspectives” that assume a hegemonic user, and are not “use[d] by isolated, peripheral cultures” that also have little participation in the technologies’ design (p. 206). Wei and Kolko further describe how dominant cultures’ nationalistic Internet practices—representing peripheral cultures (e.g., depictions of Africans as “aloof and exotic”), hyperlinking practices (e.g., linking to other sites within one’s country), and language use (e.g., [the Uzbek government page](#) written in Russian rather than the national language<sup>2</sup>)—present challenges that peripheral cultures constantly have to work against (pp. 212-213).

Similarly, the teens in the peripheral cultures whom Rassool (2004) studied are less concerned about being linguistically different than feeling a sense of belonging: “They are comfortable about their languages and their different identities, and are aware of the requirements of the Internet as well as the international labor market. They aspire to be a part of that milieu, and thus they wish to be fully integrated citizens” (p. 211). Individuals from countries around the world have certainly adapted to the Western content and interface metaphors; Facebook, alone, boasts that 70% of its users are outside the US (Fletcher, 2010, p. 37). Thus many of these users find strategies to be part of the dominant milieu. In spite of these users’ practice, emphasis should still be placed on programs being designed with the intention of getting outsiders to adapt, rather than fostering accommodation or collaboration.

Rassool (2004) concludes from her study that individuals will adapt, which means using one’s linguistic repertoire to fulfill one’s own purposes (p. 212). In some instances this will mean blending in, while at other times it will result in deliberate acts of resistance. For example, some Uzbeks in Wei and Kolko’s (2005) study reported Internet practices that pushed against the nationalistic practices from dominant outside cultures, such as using Uzbek in a predominantly Russian and English virtual space. Even if these “seeds of dissent” were unconscious, Wei and Kolko propose,

Using Uzbek within such a frame is... a refusal to follow what could be considered a natural inclination to continue the user experience in Russian or English, especially if he or she were facile in one or both of those languages. For users not fluent in Russian or English, struggling through the interface to participate in the Internet in Uzbek is an even stronger moment of resistance against the homogenizing forces of globalization. (p. 216)

Although the technologies' affordances push Internet users towards certain practices, as with how they use their language repertoire, these users can fulfill their desired purposes by applying their technological knowledge. Drawing upon Hall (1997), as well as Featherstone (1996), Wei and Kolko (2005) see opportunities for the creation of "third cultures/spaces" where two cultures create "localized versions of the global culture" (p. 210). Many popular social media sites, like Facebook, are designed as artifacts of/for the dominant culture; yet because of its interactive affordances, it presents an opportunity to create a third space.

The practice of creating this third space resonates with Canagarajah's (2002, 2006) principle of *shuttling* associated with the *negotiation model*. As in his other scholarship (2007), Canagarajah questions the "monolingualistic assumptions that conceive literacy as a unidirectional acquisition of competence" (2006, p. 589). Applying the negotiation model informed by evidence that "bilingual competence integrates knowledge of two languages and is thus qualitatively different from monolingual competence" (p. 591), the researcher adopts a different orientation:

Rather than studying multilingual writing as static, locating the writer within a language, we would study the movement of the writer between languages; rather than studying the *product* for descriptions of writing competence, we would study the process of composing in multiple languages; rather than studying the writer's stability in different forms of linguistic or cultural competence, we would analyze his or her versatility (for example life between multiple languages and cultures); rather than treating language or culture as the main variable, we would focus more on the changing contexts of communication, perhaps treating context as the main variable as writers switch their languages, discourses, and identities in response to this contextual change, we would treat them agentive, shuttling creatively between discourses to achieve their communicative objectives. (2006, pp. 590-591; original emphasis)

By altering the paradigm, the researcher can examine the deliberate rhetorical decisions that writers make, some which result in L2 errors. Likewise, as Canagarajah explains bilingual competence is not perceived as the "sum of two discrete monolingual competences added together;" it should be defined by the integration of one's "knowledge of two languages and is thus qualitatively different from monolingual competence. Because, as Canagarajah (2007) claims elsewhere, the focus is primarily placed upon mastering the target language, or L2, very little emphasis is placed on the bilingual individual's expanded repertoire.

When moving from classroom contexts to the Internet, students, according to DePew and Miller-Cochran (2010), will shuttle between L1 and L2, as well as between registers. While audiences expect this shuttling of registers as all writers move between their academic contexts to their online social contexts, popular tropes suggest that writing for the Internet is limiting students repertoires and shaping how they communicate in all contexts. Thus for peripheral students placed in developmental-writing courses, a register that is perceived to be carried over from online discourse presents, according to the institution, further evidence justifying why these

students need to be institutionally marginalized. This is particularly problematic for these students whose writing is already scrutinized for nonstandard constructions. But what if these constructions are deliberate or, as Wei and Kolko (2005) suggest, unconscious acts of defiance?

Vie (2008) and DePew and Miller-Cochran (2010) contend that writing technologies, such as social media, also expand students' rhetorical repertoire. For Vie (2008), the students use these technologies anyway, as suggested by the statistics above, but they "lack *critical* technological literacy skills" (p. 10, emphasis added). The affordances of creating and sharing texts that build off or directly parody others' teaches students to consider both their invention and delivery strategies. Furthermore, these technologies can also help writing instructors highlight power differentials. Vie believes that the disproportional ratio of students to instructors on social media sites foster an egalitarianism that poses "a potential threat to the established order of things in academia, particularly the classroom" (p. 19). While this argument suggests technological determinism, there is the potential for a student or a group of students to use the technology's affordances to make effective arguments. For example, they can use these virtual spaces to publically show solidarity against a classroom policy; this rhetorical move might prompt, at the very least, the instructor to examine the policy's efficacy. While a student could certainly make the argument through traditional ink and paper technologies, the social media gives the student a more expansive palette for creating a greater impact.

Case studies about social media use conducted by DePew and Miller-Cochran (2010) teach us that three advanced L2 students—an undergraduate senior, a master's student, and a doctoral student—use the tool of social media in much the same way that Rassool's (2004) London teens used the tool of language: to serve their own purposes. Similarly, they made deliberate decisions shuttling between registers, and sometimes languages, to develop a sense of belonging. Some of these decisions reflect a cultural hegemony, while others presented hints of dissent and cultural critique. For example, Kanya, a Thai student, chose an attractive profile picture of herself in a flattering dress, yet she really limited the amount of personal information she shared with her audience, which at the time was practically anybody with an Internet connection. Likewise, Brijesh, an Indian student, displayed pictures of his social outings to bars and clubs, but he also participated in cultural critique by posting videos of his antics imitating the film-maker Sasha Baron Cohen's *Borat* character, a bumbling foreign journalist who exposes America's hypocrisies. Arina, a student from Turkmenistan, presents herself (and is presented by others) as a relatively social individual on her Facebook site, yet she does not find the interaction on this media formal enough to warrant using a spellchecker, showing little regard for the language's formality in this space. None of these students have made commitments to any serious activist practices. However, we do see them using their repertoire of languages and technological affordances, including the composition of multimodal texts, to introduce themselves to global and local audiences.

DePew and Miller-Cochran (2010), however, acknowledge that these students' advanced academic status and their life experiences influenced the increasingly sophisticated literacy practices they chose. Thus, they wonder whether the students who are placed in developmental writing because they need to "develop a sense of different contexts and audience" (p. 291) may benefit from instructional practices that help them to *build* upon their current literacy practices—predominantly the multimodal practices afforded by social media. Developing such practices "may give writing instructors a useful starting point for helping students understand the implications of the rhetorical and linguistic decisions they make when composing their texts" (p.

291). It is to this end that I inquire how multilingual developmental writers, as part of a peripheral culture, use social media to both embrace and resist the dominant culture.

Although the focus of this study is on writing, one cannot easily divorce writing from reading practices on social networking sites; therefore this study will also highlight how these two practices complement each other in this literacy context.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was not designed to discover any universal truths about multilingual developmental writers' social networking practices; rather it drew upon case study strategies to elicit thick descriptions of individual multilingual developmental writers' practices. With these descriptions, one begins to learn which issues need further formal research and which suppositions might be further examined through classroom praxis.

These case studies were conducted at a public urban institution in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The researcher, upon being granted permission to speak to the students about the project during the first few minutes of three developmental-writing sections, requested volunteer participation from the multilingual students in these classes<sup>3</sup>. Students who do not pass the institution's writing placement test are encouraged to take these classes to prepare for retaking the test. For the placement test, students have ninety minutes to respond to a general prompt about a social or academic issue in which they draw upon observations and experiences for invention strategies. The writing sample is then holistically assessed. All students entering the university are required to take this placement test, even if they have taken and passed their composition requirements at another institution. Passing the placement test is required to enroll for the institution's exit exam, which is required for graduation. In these developmental-writing courses, students are taught to write better through a series of lectures, grammatical exercises and writing prompts.

Three multilingual students volunteered for the study<sup>4</sup>, and each participant was asked to meet with the researcher<sup>5</sup> and give a tour of her or his social networking profile site. This tour, a strategy used by DeWitt (1997) to study the rhetorical decisions that gay|lesbian|bisexual Web authors were making about specific features of their personal and/or professional Web sites, consisted of interview questions, with the participant sharing and explaining various features of their sites with the researcher (see Appendix for interview questions). Often during a tour the participant would point out specific features of their site, and the researcher would prompt the participant to talk about others. Although DeWitt was examining the personal and professional Web pages participants authored, the tour is a viable method for studying the decisions individuals make (or do not make) when they compose and communicate on social networking sites. This method is more rhetorically informative and, arguably more ethical, than the researcher conducting a textual analysis of these sites in the author's absence (DePew, 2007). DePew and Miller-Cochran (2010) originally modified DeWitt's tour to study the social media composing practices of academically advanced L2 writers. Unlike DeWitt's (1997) study, which mostly focused on a static text, the adoption of the tour to study social networking profiles allowed the researcher to study the interaction between the participant and their "friends" at a given time; thus, each participant explained how she or he read other students' post and how the participant responded to them.

## CASE STUDIES

Each student took different paths towards her or his respective enrollment in the developmental-writing course. Bakul, born in Gujarat, India, grew up with Gujarati as her first language and later learned to speak Hindi and English. When she reads and writes in English, Bakul says that she translates into Gujarati even though she does not read or write in either Indian language. Likewise, she wondered whether the grammatical structures of Latin, which she took in high school, had negatively affected her grammatical structure when writing English. She did not pass the placement test due to grammatical errors, especially with commas and verbs. When she did not originally pass the placement test, she decided that she was simply going to take it again until she passed. A philosophy professor, after reading her writing, suggested that Bakul read her writing aloud before she submits it. While this professor found that using this strategy helped Bakul improve her writing, the professor recommended she seek further writing assistance. After some inquiries, Bakul learned about the developmental-writing course.

Another student of Indian decent, Dhanesh, was born in Maryland. However, since his parents spoke Gujarati around the house and he started speaking English in elementary school, Dhanesh would be considered a *Generation 1.5* student (Harklau, Losey, & Seigal, 1999). When talking with his parents, he explained, it is not unusual for them to speak to him in Gujarati while he responds in English. In addition to learning English, Dhanesh had learned Hindi and Polish (which he used during his year abroad in Poland to start medical school). Although he was in honors English in high school in the US, he did not pass the placement test because his thoughts often get jumbled when he tries to write them down; therefore, his introduction and transitions tends to be weak. He also believes that he had problems with commas on the test.

Victoria, a native of the Dominican Republic who grew up speaking the local variety of Spanish, had already earned a bachelor's degree in her home country. In addition to Spanish, she learned Italian from her boss and customers while working at a resort in her home country. After coming to the US and enrolling at the local community college, she passed English composition. Yet, she did not pass the placement test when she transferred to the four-year institution where this study occurred; she thinks she had problems with run-on sentences, prepositions, and verbs. Victoria saw the developmental-writing course as an opportunity to be engaged in academic writing, a strategy she believed would help her pass the placement test.

Despite their differences in personal language development, all three participants saw grammatical issues (especially comma usage) as an area in their writing in which they needed to improve. Bakul and Victoria also assessed that they needed to pay attention to verb usage. Dhanesh, however, believed that he needed to also focus his attention on global writing issues because of the difficulties he had structuring his papers. All three participants viewed their invention strategies as the strength of their writing. Both Dhanesh and Victoria prided themselves on their imagination, and Bakul thought she did well at finding information and creating examples.

As one would expect with the use of a social media site, all three participants had idiosyncratic reasons for signing up for their Facebook accounts: they wanted to connect with specific (types of) people for specific (types of) purposes. In spite of these differences, their goals for the writing technology were similar—to show their chosen audiences arguments about themselves, based upon the ideas, actions, and pictures they chose to display. They each chose strategies from their respective rhetorical repertoires to make these arguments. Likewise, as the descriptions of their own literacy practices will detail, they each struggled to shuttle between

different registers, and sometimes different languages, as they moved from the academic developmental-writing classroom to the online social sphere.

Bakul, reflecting upon her initial participation on Facebook during high school, commented upon the importance of expanding her audience of “friends,” and that she would be online “every five seconds” updating her status. Now, she was hesitant to take me to her Facebook page because she had just deactivated it due to the “drama” her friends were creating: they were criticizing her for her delayed responses. After graduating from high school, she explained that she has been more selective in choosing her friends, limiting her audience to only people she knew personally, and leaving 154 friend requests unanswered. She further limits her audience by setting her security preferences so that only her friends can see her wall, personal information, or pictures: Bakul makes deliberate decisions about who is allowed to view her profile page. Moreover, due to the time demanded by the biology courses for her major, she has only been able to go to Facebook once or twice a week. Her practices demonstrate a maturing sense of what function this site can serve for her. While it seemed like an important status marker when she was younger, the constant connection seemed less practical as she focused on her professional aspirations. Similarly, she has lost constant contact with many of her Facebook friends from her high school because they also have busy lives. As a result, her primary Facebook audience consists of the friends she has made over the past few semesters from the university and from her temple.

As a reader, Bakul mostly goes to her Facebook account to read what others have posted to her wall (and to see the pictures they have posted). She does, however, seek out a few of her friends’ sites to read their writing. In particular, she enjoys reading a college-age friend’s Facebook blog. Bakul describes this friend as a talented writer who makes her audience feel as if they are within the scene she illustrates; these posts give Bakul new ideas. When her friend adds pictures to her blog post, she feels as if she is standing in the middle of the depicted place trying to observe what this friend is talking about. In many ways, these written passages and images have an inventive quality for Bakul, even if it is just to reflect upon herself—which is then represented on her profile page.

In composing arguments about herself, Bakul is not an active Facebook user (see Figure 1). She rarely posts a status message because she does not want “stalkers”<sup>6</sup> to know what she is doing. Yet she will post when she will be out of town or when her phone is not working so that her friends will know to use Facebook to contact her. The other function that Bakul uses is the photo album in which she posts pictures that she has taken; she does not really strategize which photographs she chooses to post. Yet, her pictures do shape how people perceive her; she says that her lab partners have thought she is “wild” and “out there” because of the pictures that she posts of herself in traditional Indian clothes, a perception that she does not try to foster. This traditional Indian picture is one of the many she has used as her profile picture; others are of her dressed like many other American women of her age. With the choices of these different profile pictures, she uses visuals to shuttle between cultures. But as with a nonstandard written English construction, this picture disrupts some of audience’s sense of what is appropriate. Her subsequent choice to change the profile picture demonstrates the influence one’s online audience can have on one’s decisions, especially if one does not want to be seen as disruptive.

**Figure 1.** Bakul’s Facebook Profile Page

We see Bakul shuttling between registers most in her linguistic production. When Bakul writes on her own or another’s wall or leaves them messages in their Facebook Inbox, she uses English, although not “correct English.” She says that she uses this “slang” because she writes like she talks. Because this is a not a paper to be submitted for a class, she says that she feels comfortable communicating with slang (e.g., “yaa”), text abbreviations (e.g., “bc”), and informal punctuation (e.g., overuse of ellipses). As with most Facebook writers, Bakul has chosen to shuttle into an informal register conducive to the cultural practices of the site; no one expects standard academic English in these spaces. But Bakul related an incident when she did write in “correct English” and her friend—ironically—comment, “Oh my God, you are using correct English.” Did they question whether Bakul was capable of producing correct English or why, after establishing a relaxed persona with a slang register, she chose to adopt a formal register? In either case, she was discouraged from shuttling between the cultural registers. This is further reinforced by a friend in Detroit who has commented that she cannot understand what Bakul writes, which prompted Bakul to go back and revise her posts to make them more understandable. Bakul, on the other hand, gets the opportunity to correct her friend whose written English has suffered because the friend is currently studying in Poland. Therefore, as an active audience, Bakul also shuttles between expectations, causing other multilingual writers to question the rhetorical choices of register and style they have made. Unlike the advanced students in DePew and Miller-Cochran’s (2010) study, Bakul believes and supports Baron’s (2008) observation that one’s writing on Facebook has influenced how one writes in the classroom because it has made her hyperaware of the type of writing that she should not transfer into her academic or professional life. Like the students in the previous study, Bakul perceived that the only significant difference between the two contexts is the level of formality with no mention of any similarities.

Dhanesh, as a Generation 1.5 student, is culturally at the crossroads between his Indian and American heritage. Like most young adult Americans, he wants to fit in, but he values his connection to his Indian culture. Arguably, Dhanesh’s Facebook profile reflects aspects of this negotiated identity (see Figure 2). Like Bakul, Dhanesh left high school with a lot of Facebook friends, and subsequently *unfriended* some of them; he mostly kept those friends he was actually

still interacting with. Since then, he has been more selective by only *friending* people that he knows personally, which tend to be people in his fraternity, both on campus and in chapters at other campuses, and Greeks he has met. Although he receives friend requests from people he has met once at a party or a study session, he has made it a rule to personally know his Facebook friends. Thus, like Bakul, he wants control over who has access to his information.

**Figure 2.** Dhanesh’s Facebook Profile Page



In Dhanesh’s Facebook use, friendship is important. Dhanesh values how his interactivity on Facebook supplements some of his face-to-face interaction, especially with his Greek friends whom he connects with on a regular basis. But he also appreciates how the application affords him the opportunity to connect with those he culturally identifies with—an opportunity for cultural shuttling that the local campus population does not provide. Facebook, in short, promotes the social life Dhanesh values. He pointed out how he modified the interface of his profile page to put the “Friends” box as high up on the page as he could have it. He relates that he has 650 friends and wants to show this off; he remarks, “I guess it is an ego thing.” However, because he values an audience that he knows, he emphasizes that he does not want this interaction with his audience to be completely computer-mediated. For example, in high school he wrote a long description of himself in the “About me” section. Now he has reduced this down to “Just come up to me and ask seriously do it.”<sup>7</sup> Dhanesh wants people to interact with him rather than form conclusions based upon what he has written. This rhetorical decision goes beyond shuttling; Dhanesh is very cognizant of the technologies’ communicative limitations, and feels that other modes of delivery—that is, face-to-face communication—better support his arguments about his identity.

In terms of superficial characteristics, Dhanesh wants to use his Web presence to give people the opportunity to know who he is. Unlike the other two participants, Dhanesh is thorough in filling out the Info page (see Figure 3) by listing his favorites—from music (i.e., Lil Wayne) to movies (i.e., *Titanic*) to interests (e.g., partying, hookah, taking crazy pictures). With this group of interests, he wants his audience to read these items and think, “Wow! He does cool things.” He personalizes his profile with quotes from his friends (e.g., “No I did not fall off the

firetruck during a party and not get workmen's comp"). The pictures that he has posted are consistent with this persona. Most of his pictures are of him "doing funny stuff," such as his profile picture of him opening up a random mailbox in the middle of local zoo. He explained that if I were to ask anybody who knew him, they would tell me that this is what Dhanesh does; he makes people laugh and brings people together. Dhanesh puts up almost any picture, except those of him or his fraternity brothers drinking or those where they are holding red plastic cups (as per fraternity guidelines). As with Bakul's use of slang, Dhanesh adopts the expected register of Facebook in his choices of which fields to fill in, as well as the linguistic and visual choices he makes. Reading through Dhanesh's Facebook profile, his audience would see a typical American college student, which, for the most part, is the goal Dhanesh is trying to achieve, much like the participants in Rassool's (2004) study who mostly want to fit in.

**Figure 3.** Dhanesh's Info Page



This image of Dhanesh as a quintessential college student is further supported by what he writes. Of the three participants, Dhanesh is the most interactive with his audience. He logs onto Facebook a few times a day to post what he is thinking. For example, he recently thought it would be interesting to take up long boarding, so he posted a message on his wall about it. Soon thereafter, some friends began asking him if they could join his efforts, while others gave him advice on how to buy a board or how to surf on a long board. Although he is not too concerned about what others post on his site, he asserts that anybody who writes anything negative on his wall will be unfriended, unless he knows the individual is joking, because he hates negativity. Similarly, he says that he returns the respect by not writing anything mean on others' sites. Yet when looking through his Facebook page there is a lot of cursing, like "Grow the HELL up Bitch" and more recently, "fuck trees | i climb buoys | motherfucker." I suspect that Dhanesh does not see these utterances as disrespectful for a few reasons: First, it is directed at a general audience, rather than an individual. Second, this is the discourse of this college-aged population; therefore, the audience to which these utterances are directed probably see this less as disrespectful than as a typical means of communication. Finally, he justifies some of his friends' seemingly negativity posts by deeming them acceptable if one is joking, and there are clear

elements of humor in these posts. These clear departures from an academic register rhetorically position him against certain institutional and cultural authorities.

In spite of appearing to be a typical American college student, Dhanesh also acknowledges his Indian heritage, and sees Facebook offering affordances for him to shuttle between the two cultures. Consequently, this positions him to justify his rhetorical decisions to some of his audience. There are several features on his Facebook profile that uncompromisingly portray Dhanesh's Indian identity. The most obvious choice is his decision to use his real name and post a picture of himself, both of which identify him ethnically. Additionally, among the features that identify Dhanesh as young college-attending male on his info page, his audience will see his AOL Instant Messaging account name which has the term "desi" in it. Dhanesh explained to me that this is one way that he identifies with his Indian heritage, even though his audience has harassed him for it because they read it as "daisy." Although this audience has suggested that he change this moniker, Dhanesh refuses to do so because it represents who he is. Some of Dhanesh's audience, who are clearly ignorant of his cultural heritage, question what his choice of monikers says about him. Like Bakul's "wild" pictures, this feature of his profile is viewed as different, disrupting his audience's Facebook sensibilities. Yet this rhetorical disruption is important to Dhanesh and seems like the act of defiance described by Wei and Kolko (2005).

Other possible acts of defiance can be found under "Pages"; along with his links to his university and the university organizations he has engaged with is a link to "I am Hindu and i am proud to be one!" As Dhanesh points this link out, he laments that he has had little connection to his Indian culture since coming to this university, so the people he interacts with through this link give him an opportunity to connect with his home culture. In the right column of that page is a plethora of "bumper stickers" he has collected. Most of these are sayings and images that he finds funny, such as parodied pictures of Miley Cyrus (American actor, singer-songwriter) and the grammatically incorrect, "a best friend rides in your car no matter how many times you nearly killed them." Near the top of the bumper stickers, and thus visible without scrolling, is an anime version of Spiderman surrounded by Hindi words (Figure 4). Dhanesh explained that the humor of this image is that the words are Hindi curses. Toward the bottom of his bumper stickers, if his audience cares to scroll down so far, there is another one that simply states, "i'm INDIAN be jealous." Although Dhanesh primarily presents himself as someone "who does cool things"—at least by homogenous college student standards, he makes several rhetorical decisions using both linguistics and visual symbols to subtly remind his audience about his heritage's importance.

**Figure 4.** One of Dhanesh's Bumper Stickers



Unlike the academic writing he does, Dhanesh does not worry about writing in complete sentences on his Facebook posts. Another way that he distinguishes these writing experiences is based upon his audiences' responses. Writing instructors have critiqued Dhanesh for drifting off point, yet his Facebook audience just wants him to be himself. He sees his English courses as opportunities to express himself, but recognizes that the same kind of self-expression is inappropriate for his biology course. Thus he does not only demonstrate an understanding of the need to switch registers when he moves from social to academic discourse, but from one academic community to another, which counters descriptions of basic writers (Bartholomae, 2009; Flower, 1979). When interacting with others through Facebook, Dhanesh mostly uses English. Like Bakul, Dhanesh blames his Facebook writing, in addition to the year spent in Poland not writing in English, on his placement in basic writing<sup>8</sup>. Yet, he questions the validity of this assumption when he states that he was in Honors English in high school, and at that time was writing on Facebook. Just as he sees Facebook as potentially having a negative impact on his academic writing, he sees his academic writing having a positive impact on Facebook writing because he has learned to grammar-check his posts and has noticed he correctly uses FANBOYS (an acronym that stands for seven coordinating conjunctions: for, and, not, but, or, yet, and so). With these participants we begin to see a breakdown in shuttling, or at least the perception of a breakdown, in which the register used for one cultural interaction influences—appropriately or not—the register of another. In this instance, the academic register becomes privileged by the user.

Dhanesh mostly writes in English on his Facebook pages, but his posts do extend beyond the usual linguistic repertoire. As a joke, he will copy and paste other's words that American audiences will not understand and post them to American friend's walls to elicit the response, "What are you saying to me?" For more serious interactions with his Polish friends, he will occasionally use a few words he knows of their language. But he never uses any Indian languages because he does not know how to write them. Dhanesh takes advantage of his linguistic repertoire to communicate and deliberately miscommunicate with his various audiences. Since his literacy repertoire does not include Indian languages, he is unable to shuttle into these languages to support his Indian identity as he has done with images and English pronunciations of one of his cultures.

The third participant, Victoria, primarily uses Facebook to keep in touch with family and close friends. Unlike the other two participants, Victoria's friend count was under a hundred, which is closer to, but below the average of, Facebook members (Facebook average is 130; Facebook, 2010). Like the other two participants, she limits her Facebook friends to individuals whom she actually knows. While most of these are individuals she would correspond with offline, she also has friended her husband's friends because he refuses to develop his own account, and ten to fifteen of his friends stay in touch with him through her.

Arguably, unlike Bakul and Dhanesh, Victoria has a narrow and focused purpose for having a Facebook account. Like Kanya in DePew and Miller-Cochran's study (2010), Victoria's primary purpose for her Facebook is profile to keep distant friends and family current on her and her family's life with updates on her wall and posting pictures from various events. This connection is particularly important for her audience who want to track her toddling little girl's development. Similar to Kanya, the value she places on being a parent becomes the primary claim made about her identity. Since about half of her Facebook friends are in the US and the other half are around the world (Dominican Republic, San Diego, Spain, and Japan), time and place limits face-to-face and phone interaction. Although the synchronous and asynchronous

computer-mediated communication that Facebook affords and phone conversations allows her to stay connected to these individuals, she also keeps in touch with other relatives through texting. For example, her mother-in-law has a mostly inactive Facebook account—without a profile picture—solely to see the pictures that Victoria posts. She also uses the site to maintain her close relationship with her sisters. One purpose of their posting pictures to each other is to give one another something to talk about, such as weight and fashion. But there are some pictures, such as the messy rooms being renovated, that she had emailed to her family members to prevent her other “friends” from judging the state of her house. Victoria demonstrates an awareness of how she is presented to her audiences by various media, and, therefore, makes deliberate decisions about how to convey certain information to different audiences.

On her “Info” page, she has chosen to reveal little information about herself. Under education and work, she describes how she tried to have fun with some of the categories afforded on Facebook’s interface. For example, since they only provide one space to list one’s undergraduate institution, she placed a local community college and the university in the Dominican Republic there and her current institution in the graduate school field, even though she is only repeating her undergraduate accounting degree at her current university. Also, for “Employer,” she writes, “[Husband’s Name]’s household” because she thought it was funny. While these are examples of how Victoria responds to the form fields, they also reveal the rhetorical decisions that she makes despite the limited options of the program.

Despite her audiences’ expectations, it seems as if she spends more time posting on other people’s wall than her own. The few times the researcher has viewed her site, there were more notifications that she had posted to other’s profiles than actual posts to her own wall. Likewise, she does not keep her pictures updated on a regular basis. Victoria’s busy schedule as a mother and student allows her to read and write on her profile page two or three times a week. And even with this frequency, she does not get to update her pictures regularly; she mentioned that she had just posted pictures of the holidays almost two months afterwards. These decisions to limit her composition are arguably also cultural decisions. They push on Canagarajah’s (2007) notions of cultural shuttling to include how socioeconomic class and gender—the expectation placed on mothers and students—influence the decisions that these rhetors make. With Victoria, a few features from her rhetorical repertoire are selected and presented to her audience, including the choice to be silent.

In addition to the pictures and status updates on her wall, Victoria limited information that she had posted about herself, only telling her audience a little about her personality. Like Bakul, Victoria presents herself as reserved by restricting information on her profile, limiting her posts, and setting her security settings to only give select audience access—a feature she appreciates about Facebook, as opposed to Hi5, another social-networking site she had used. She had decided to put up enough information to be left alone. Furthermore, she elaborated that she feels old-fashioned because she has intentions of making sure her daughter does not have a Facebook account until she is in high school. She believes this electronic environment can be dangerous because “there are a lot of crazy people out there.” Although Victoria has a more focused purpose than the other two participants, her purpose and international audience give her more opportunities than them to shuttle between cultures and languages.

When her Facebook friends go to her profile, they see a picture of her sitting in a festive dress next to her husband; they look like they are at a social gathering (see Figure 5). Unlike Dhanesh, Victoria is not concerned that she is holding alcohol, a glass of wine, in this picture. As with Arina’s Odnoklassniki profile picture (DePew & Miller-Cochran, 2010), the glass of wine

within a reserved setting can connote sophistication, as opposed to someone holding a red cup amid mayhem and debauchery. She explains that she originally had a picture of her and her baby on the site and then changed it to this one. Although her husband balked and questioned why she used a picture with him in it, she told him that he was her husband and left it at that.

**Figure 5.** Victoria's Facebook Profile Page



Unlike the other two participants who composed mostly in English on Facebook, Victoria composes mostly in Spanish. On her wall above a video of her daughter playing the drums, she has posted, “La buenamosa me estaba dando un concierto hasta que vio la camara!” (“The attractive (or pretty) girl was giving me a show until she saw the camera”)<sup>9</sup>. A friend (with an American-sounding name) responded to this in English, and Victoria replied back to her in English. She is unsure whether her friends in other countries are seeing her posts in the language she writes in (i.e., English or Spanish) or if the portals that they use to access Facebook locally translate what she writes to the national tongue. Moreover, because she sees her sisters as a primary audience for her posts, and they pride themselves on their sisterly bond in which they can effectively communicate without speaking much, she does not worry about being grammatically correct.

However, with an American audience she tries to be more careful. Once she made a faux pas (when she wrote, “How are you gays doing?” instead of “How are you guys doing?”) for which she felt embarrassed. Also, Victoria is discouraged that her American friends do not correct each other when they make an error, but they seem quick to correct her when she does. Although she appreciates the help, she is frustrated by the double standard. Yet, in most cases, she just write that they should call her if they do not understand her posts. In any case, now she uses Microsoft Word’s spell-check before she posts. She has noticed that her use of this program has been reduced from every other word to every few words. As with her classes, her audience has made her hyperaware of her communicative ability in written English. Thus, Victoria has developed strategies for attempting to meet her audiences’ linguistic expectations. The difference between Victoria’s communication with her Spanish audiences and her America audiences demonstrates her strategies for shuttling between languages and cultures. Where with the

Spanish audience she is not concerned about linguistic accuracy—mostly because her audience is not either, the America audience, in spite of their own social-media writing practices, expect her to compose error-free prose. As with Bakul, this raises some questions about why multilingual writers are subjected to a double standard.

## CONCLUSION

What do these case studies tell us about the literacy strategies of individuals who have been judged, because of their writing, to be placed at the academy's periphery? We learn that these multilingual writers make usage and mechanics errors, even in their social media posts. But we also learn that they are capable of drawing upon their multilingual repertoire to make interesting and deliberate decisions about how they use words and visuals to compose arguments about their respective identities to different audiences. When presented with this evidence of grammatical errors and rhetorical sophistication, what, then, are the implications for developmental-writing courses?

All three participants talked about using nonstandard linguistic constructions in their Facebook posts both for deliberate (i.e., using the accepted slang) and carefree (i.e., this is a space where error is tolerated) reasons. A lot of their linguistic choices resonated with those made by Rassool's (2004) participants who wanted to fit in. Considering the social, and often colloquial, nature of the online space, one would not expect this to be a problem, unless there is any confusion. One expects Facebook members, especially those who write more formally in other cultural contexts, to shuttle into this informal register when they compose in this space, as evidenced by Dhanesh's friendly, yet sometimes sophomoric, posts. Yet these developmental writers, as opposed to the three participants in DePew and Miller-Cochran's (2010) study, were sometimes hyperaware of their grammatical constructions in this space. Both Bakul and Victoria have Americans critiquing them for errors in their posts, and Victoria and Dhanesh would spell-check their posts. While creating an efficient reading experience for one's audience is certainly valued, how necessary is it in this context? As Victoria highlights, her American audience did not critique each other for their errors. These criticisms do not account for aspects of the participants' personal relationships that might foster such exchanges (e.g., inside jokes, the participants critiques of these individuals, etc.) or the rhetor's attitude toward correct linguistic production (especially in this space), but the participants seemed annoyed by this treatment.

Do these errors, in this social space, matter if the interlocutors can successfully negotiate meaning in situ, as Canagarajah (2007) questions? If these multilingual individuals are being targeted for such criticisms, might there be more to how their audiences perceive these errors than just the desire for grammatical accuracy? And do these prejudices also pertain to those who judge their writing for institutional placement? While I do not mean to suggest that all students who get placed in developmental writing cannot use the literacy instruction that will help them write for academic audiences, I think we need to examine how extralinguistic information might influence placement decisions.

Like the advanced L2 writers in DePew and Miller-Cochran's (2010) case studies, these multilingual writers' rhetorical decisions ranged from being flippant to being deliberate and sophisticated. It seems that most Facebook members will post linguistic or visual texts on their pages because they "think it's cool" or they "just want to share it" with their friends. In many ways the individual is looking for affirmation of values. But these multilingual writers also

composed their identities by shuttling between rhetorical features, including linguistic and visual, from their ethnic heritage and the dominant culture, including features from academic discourse. In making arguments about their respective identities, all three chose features that connected them to their ethnic heritage, whether it was a picture, a moniker, or one's language choice. These decisions help them make connections with certain members of their audience, and, in the cases of Bakul and Dhanesh, it disrupted some of their audiences' expectations of an appropriate Facebook profile. These strategies to unapologetically draw upon these cultural markers resonates with Wei and Kolko's (2005) "seed of dissent" and gives these individuals the opportunity to use writing to carve out a "third space" where they can be part of both cultures at once. Although the participants were not always successful in doing this, these multimodal writers considered the real-world consequences of their compositions. When most student writers see writing as an activity done solely for a grade, these participants' strategies, especially with the varied multicultural audiences they have created, can be an important foundation for their academic literacy development.

Although I believe Facebook and other social media sites, as demonstrated by this research, have value as one of many tools to facilitate academic literacy education, I anticipate such suggestions will be met by resistance. Roblyer et al. (2010) concluded from their survey of faculty and students at the same institution that "students seem much more open to the idea of using Facebook instructionally than do faculty" (p. 138) based upon 53.2% of the faculty and 22.5% of the students agreeing that Facebook is for personal/social use and not for educational use. If this study is coupled with anecdotes of faculty resistance to Facebook and other social media technologies and how they think these technologies are ruining students' writing abilities, changes to writing curriculum will probably only happen in individual classes, not programmatically. But I doubt this is the end of the conversation. Roblyer et al. (2010) also speculate, based upon these conclusions, that "as the rapid evolution in societal perception and uses of the Internet has shown in the last decade, attitudes towards technology change over time" (p. 138), a fact which is highlighted when one remembers early faculty attitudes toward email. Thus, as more students who grew up composing with social media become the literacy instructors of tomorrow, we may see a change in attitudes toward social media's academic use.

Elbow (1991) argues that "the intellectual tasks of academic discourse are significantly easier for students to learn when separated from its linguistic and stylistic conventions" (p. 149). Although Elbow makes this claim to support what I see as essentialistic critiques of academic discourse, I believe he accurately assesses most students' relationship with this discourse. Many students, like the participants of this study, have the capability to perform the intellectual work of academic discourse, but they are placed at the periphery because they have not mastered the mechanics and, sometimes in the case of multilingual writer, usage of this discourse. Yet one of the ways they demonstrate these intellectual capabilities is with their extracurricular literacy activities, such as writing done for social media sites. Therefore, as we discuss how to work with multilingual writers, developmental writers, and multilingual developmental writers, we need to bring all ideas to the table and assess their educational efficacy—even if the new pedagogies we design are a philosophical about-face.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>I reference Lippi-Green (1997) to explain what occurs in the developmental-writing classroom, understanding her concern about the emphasis placed on written language over spoken language. In spite of the different modalities, her explanation of the public's ignorance about how languages are learned and operate (i.e., "the linguistic facts of life") still has relevance to my argument.

<sup>2</sup>Since the publication of Wei & Kolko's (2005) article, there have been revisions to the Uzbek national homepage. Now the audience has the choice to view the page in Uzbek, Russian, or English. I thank Elzotbek Rustambekov for helping me understand how the page was designed.

<sup>3</sup>During the spring 2010 semester in which these case studies occurred, five sections of this developmental-writing course were being offered at the institution where the research occurred. The researcher did not attend the other two sections to request participation due to schedule conflicts. Also, students were offered modest compensation (ten-dollar gift certificates) for their time.

<sup>4</sup>Using Joseph LoBianco's (2000) description of multilingual writers, the researcher invited students who communicated in one or more languages or dialects to participate in this study. While case studies were conducted with other participants, the three participants discussed in this article are the ones who, based upon their answers to questions about their language production and their language use on their social networking site, were multilingual in ways that would be recognized as such by applied linguists.

<sup>5</sup>All three participants chose to meet at the researcher's office; thus they all used the researcher's iMac computer. Some participants were not familiar or completely comfortable with the operating system's interface.

<sup>6</sup>Social media users evoke the term "stalking" to refer to actions ranging from a nonthreatening, yet uninvited, curiosity about one's postings to acts of violence. Because Bakul never made it clear to which she was referring, I use quotations to denote the different definitions.

<sup>7</sup>I have not edited the linguistic data from any of the participants' profiles to preserve the original rhetorical techniques used and what the participant's audience saw and might have responded to.

<sup>8</sup>The reference to Poland made me wonder whether Dhanesh might be Bakul's friend in Poland; however, out of respect to the participants' privacy beyond the scope of the study, I did not pursue this line of questioning.

<sup>9</sup>I would like to thank Allyson Gometz for her help with the translation.

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**APPENDIX**

Place of Birth:

Gender:

First Language:

Other Languages:

Other Dialects:

Status at [university]:

Major:

Years with technology:

Knowledge Using Computers (1-10):

Comfort Using Computers (1-10):

Strengths as Writer:

Writing Features that Need Improvement:

Reasons for [developmental-writing course]:

- You have self-identified as a multilingual writer for this study, why do you describe yourself as such?
- Please show me the profile page of one or more social networking sites. Talk to me about what I am looking at and the decisions that you made while creating this/these profile/s.
- What languages/dialects do you use to communicate with on your profile page? Why?
- How do you imagine your audience for your profile? How do you control who your audience is?
- How do you want your audience to respond to your profile? How have they responded it?
- How does the composing process for your profile page compare to the writing you do for your classes?
- How does your audiences' expectations for your profile compare to your instructors' expectations for academic your writing?
- Has the way that you compose your social-networking profile influenced the way you write for your classes? Has anything that you have learned in your writing courses influenced how you compose your profile?