

Everyday Borders of Transnational Students: Composing Place and Space with Mobile Technology, Social Media, and Multimodality

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Abstract

Students living and attending institutions of higher education near the border of Mexico and the United States use mobile devices, multimodality, and social media to challenge institutional spaces in a number of ways. The study presents the results of mixed-method research designed to examine how students living in this context employ mobile devices and social media to negotiate this idea of space when doing writing work. The article also examines how the uses of mobile technologies affect writing practices including student awareness of popular modes of writing, academic genres, and rhetorical concepts affecting writing practices. Through examining such issues, the author argues for the development of multimodal pedagogies that can supplement and validate the lived experiences of the writing student who regularly move between different national, cultural, and educational contexts.

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1. Introduction

Transnational student writing refers to the academic work done by students “who hold close ties to two or more countries” (Tardy, 2014, Chapter 10, para. 1). Moreover, when transnational student writing takes place, it also *makes* place. In terms of lived writing practices—the writing and communicative acts individuals and groups use for daily interactions—this situation has important implications. For students residing on the border region of Mexico and the United States of America, lived writing practices include the use of mobile devices,¹ multimodality, and social media to communicate for professional, personal, and academic purposes. When used for composition work, these practices can challenge institutional notions of location and promote equitable participation among peer groups. They do so by affording students expanded freedom to do their academic work when and where they prefer—often outside the physical and temporal parameters their institutions or instructors might expect. This situation merits future research because it reveals how transnational students make their own institutional place and academic space by expanding what it means to be “at school” to locations beyond the classroom, the campus, or their homes.

The overarching issues this manuscript seeks to examine are:

- What are the lived mobile and social media writing practices of border and transnational students?
- How can knowing and understanding such practices inform composition pedagogies?

¹ “Mobile devices” can refer to a number of things: cellular or smart phones, iPads or tablets, e-readers, watches, etc. Although varied in size, shape, and functionality, all of these things are also computers that can be used in writing classes, writing programs, and writing research.

In order to answer these questions, this manuscript presents the results of a case study of the mobile writing practices used by a group of transnational college students who live, study, and work within the US-Mexico border region and who do not necessarily define themselves—or view their writing practices—in terms of traditional concepts of nations states (Crack, 2007). Through examining these issues, this manuscript moves beyond emphases on official, institutional places and spaces where writing work is done; instead, it reveals how, why, and where border and transnational students write when *in between* these locations and *in transit* from one location to another. Such factors are important to teachers of writing and of rhetoric and composition because they

- Illustrate changing demographics of contemporary college students by complicating understandings of where students do the writing work that instructors assign, and;
- Reveal complex and hybrid ways transnational students do their writing work that can be used to inform teaching practices.

As writing online for and with globally-situated audiences increasingly becomes the norm, it is important that scholars and teachers of writing studies and rhetoric and composition think about and address issues of writing in modern global and online contexts. This is because our disciplines are increasingly transnational in our scope and interests, even those of us at institutions not located in border regions.

2. Scholarly context

Access to and use of different technological modes are core concepts of transnational writing. Tracy Bowen and Carl Whithaus (2013), observe that modern-day students are skilled at “drawing on the stuff of everyday social interaction to rethink the shape of written academic knowledge” (pp. 1-2). Yet, along with these anticipated benefits associated with access and use of technology cited by Bowen and Whithaus, border contexts necessitate questions of economy (Griffin & Minter, 2013), what “counts” as writing (Wolff, 2013), and social justice (Buelga, Cava, & Musitu, 2012). Furthermore, the under-representation and under-valuing of mobile writing practices by academic institutions has tacitly devalued these students’ lived experiences (Ruecker, 2012; Ruelas, 2014). As a result, when students familiar with using such tools transition to college writing work, they can face both disciplinary and social barriers. Understanding and addressing such factors requires instructors to familiarize themselves with a number of different but overlapping dynamics including

- Transnational movement of students in regions near the international border joining the countries of Mexico and the United States of America;
- Access and use of technology as a function of political and social power;
- Use of mobile devices in or as composition classroom space;
- Use of social media to do composition work.

2.1. Transnational movement of students

“Transnational students” refers to those students who attend college in the U.S. but who regularly travel to Mexico for a range of personal and professional reasons throughout the academic semester. The definition expands on Victor Zúñiga and Edmund T. Hamann’s (2006) definition of “transnational” to account for hybrid identifications (which Koehne (2005) defined as possessing multiple, sometimes seemingly contradictory, subjectivities and national identities), and mobile identifications (explored by Pflugfelder (2015) as the ways students define themselves by their use of mobile devices). This expanded definition also draws directly from Jennifer Jang (2010), who found a thread connecting transnational students’ “cross cultural” experiences with their “highly mobile lifestyle[s]” that are “flexible and adaptable to new environments” (pp. 137-138). Additionally, it borrows from Bello-Bravo et al. (2011), who identified how mobile technologies can bridge the access gap created by physical space, particularly for students living in impoverished and rural areas. Finally, the ways class, race, and economic status play a role in mobility and the negotiation of identification is relevant because the Mexico/U.S. border region, broadly defined, is home to groups that are systemically underprivileged and underrepresented with institutions of higher education and U.S. society more extensively (Lee, Elkasabi, & Streja, 2012; Kopinak and Soriano Miras, 2013). Therefore, in accordance with prior

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