

Reflections on the Symposium on the Teaching of Writing in Lebanon: An Interview with Malakeh R. Khoury

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to document and critically reflect upon the significance of a symposium for teachers of writing in English language medium universities in Lebanon that took place annually over the period of 2013-2019. To gain knowledge of this event, two of the authors conducted an interview with the symposium's co-creator and main organizer, Malakeh R. Khoury, and contextualized it in reflective discussions of local conditions. The article frames the symposium as a key national-level event in the local community of practice that responds to the need to organize local teachers of writing in the absence of other relevant channels of communication and exchange of expertise.

Keywords: symposium, writing instruction, community of practice, activity analysis, Lebanon

Introduction

Beginning in the fall of 2013 and continuing for six years, the *Symposium on the Teaching of Writing in Lebanon* offered an annual venue for instructors of writing to meet “where they can be in conversation with each other to understand the specifics of their teaching context” (The Annual Symposium). This context entails teaching writing in institutions of higher education in Lebanon in which the language of instruction is English, and which operate within a complex educational landscape where Arabic is the primary spoken language, but formal education can occur within Arabic, French, English, Armenian, and other educational systems. The idea for the symposium emerged at the American University of Beirut during a period of institutional and programmatic change accelerated by the process of university reaccreditation that led to animated discussions about the teaching of writing in English in Lebanon. The original conception of the symposium spoke to a felt need for something that was missing: a space to foster reflective teaching practices, affirm a sense of agency, and build a sense of professional identity among writing instructors across institutions in Lebanon. In December 2019, the symposium was put on hold because of a precipitous economic downturn, and since then the hiatus has continued due to a number of challenges to universities and public life in Lebanon, including the COVID 19 pandemic lockdown, a devastating explosion in the port of Beirut, and war.

This article was conceived as a way of honoring the symposium as an effort to create a space for the exchange of local expertise and chronicling it as an important step towards forming a learning community for the teachers of writing in Lebanon, an effort that is also relevant across the region. Our goal is to redefine this forced “down time” as a moment of remembering, reflection, and exploring possibilities for renewed engagement in the local community of practice (Wenger, 2000), an in-between bridging past events with possibly new formats of engagement. We also wish to keep alive the memory of the symposium, to break what Hafeli (2009) terms as the cycle of oblivion and eternal

return and Thelin (2009) calls institutional amnesia, and to archive it for those who may wish to revive it or be inspired by this story in their own efforts.

Method

To create a more permanent and official record of the symposium and open it up to larger conversation, we invited Malakeh R. Khoury, the primary organizer of the event for five years, to an interview. In the process of developing the article, our project grew into a form of activity analysis (Palmquist et al., 2012) in which we began to see the symposium as “an expression of the will of existing community” or an enactment of its “public face” (ibid., p. 241-242). To develop as accurate as possible an understanding of what the symposium was and how it functioned in the local context, we compared the data generated via person- and text-based methods. We thus conducted an interview with Khoury, the symposium’s co-creator, and unearthed the hidden archive (Lamos, 2012) of personal communication and other documents tucked away in files between our personal and office computers, flash drives, and e-mail. Our original set of interview questions grew from our individual experiences, as we, too, were involved in the symposium over the years as participants, speakers, and co-organizers. To record our conversation, we met via Zoom and used the software to create an interview transcript, which we cleaned for minor infidelities and then collectively coded for most salient themes.

Next, Khoury edited her responses to clarify emphasis of emerged themes, and the two remaining authors wrote the introduction, a concluding note, and introduced critical commentary (reflections) interspersed at key points throughout the interview to 1) clarify context where necessary for readers unfamiliar with the local writing community, 2) ground emerging themes in existing scholarship, and 3) understand how the symposium was continually shaped by complex interactions and at times contradicting motivations of its participants. One decision we faced involved privacy. The story of the symposium is made up of personal histories of individuals with varying levels of institutional support and powered largely by individual motivations. In our writing, we decided to weave as impersonal a story as possible, both to protect individuals and to allow them to tell their own story, should they choose to do so in response.

The Interview

Principled Practices

Dorota Fleszar: What was the symposium? How would you describe it? How did it start? What actually happened?

Malakeh R. Khoury: So, a number of things brought the idea into fruition. Part of it was the interest of myself and others in going to conferences and meeting people in the same profession. Part of it was the idea that was brought up a number of years ago about having a

kind of association or society for teachers--at the time it was teachers of English, but later teachers of writing. It didn't develop into anything. At that time the idea was to have a kind of association where everybody from all over the country could join. Also, you know, the idea of having some sort of society where people could meet and exchange ideas. I thought it should be something fluid, not something like AUB training teachers at other institutions. Unfortunately, eventually it turned into that in the last two symposiums, not because of the individuals, but because of the way people in the country view AUB. But that was not the idea at all.

We were inspired by the *Writing Research Across Borders* [conference] where they take the conference every four years to a different context. So, we were thinking of how we can do something similar and take it from one campus to the other, and I think people loved that. So, people started applying to have the symposium on their campus. Part of it was also when the director of the program at that time met with the different teachers, asking them what their dream thing was for the program, and I said, having a conference on writing. From that came the idea of this cooperation with the CTL [Center of Teaching and Learning and organizer of the *Annual International Conference on Effective Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*]. But we wanted also something on writing exclusively, and then the idea of the Symposium [came about], which is not really a conference.

The idea was to have conversations about the challenges specific to context in which we teach writing. I mean the idea of teaching writing in these multilingual contexts. The first time that we met at AUB, it was conversations, you know, just people talking to each other. And then so in the last two symposia, it was more of like a workshop setting, I don't think that is what we wanted to be honest, but it seems it was what the audience wanted. I prefer the earlier setting of having a theme, having questions and having people discuss these questions and come up with certain conclusions and maybe recommendations.

DF: So how was the symposium organized each time when it went from one university to the next? You said that people, universities applied for hosting this. If you could tell us a bit more about how the organization happened.

MRK: The first time there was a committee, and it was organized at AUB and the different members were tasked with different things to do, and the invitations were sent both by [traditional] mail and by e-mail to the different universities. There was a list of the universities, and we contacted people there. There was a big audience and at the end of the symposium the idea of holding it the following year somewhere else was brought up. It was done rather informally. We never had to formally go after people and convince them.

I thought we should have a symposium at LAU¹ and that was done through my effort. I contacted somebody there whom I'm friends with and she reciprocated. I know that she is interested in such things and she used to be a teacher at AUB. So much of it is done because of personal connections, and because people know you and trust you. And they would come because there is a name they recognize. There wasn't a formal structure [for] approaching people. Many of them were connected to AUB in one way or the other. The LAU symposium was well covered by the media. We worked with the AUB Communications Office, and they produced at different times articles about the Symposium.

DF: And from what I remember, you were involved in organizing all of those, for seven years.

MRK: From the third Symposium, which was in Balamand, I was the one following with a committee, and basically, we thought that it was important to emphasize collaboration among the institutions. So, if it was AUB and Balamand, for example, we'd have a session, where someone from [each institution] will collaborate to lead that session. And they would work together too. We would meet and agree on a general theme, and then we would think of sub themes and certain questions that the people in that session would be interested in talking about, and then people from AUB and from Balamand, they will be facilitating that session.

Yes, [we had a task team] for inter-institutional research, one for communication with the media (whether social media or conventional), one for checking or investigating, not necessarily through research, but to look into the links between what is being done in high schools, and what's being done in universities. Another task team was to look at the possibility of giving the symposium a legal status and to check with a lawyer. What needs to be done, and what framework it should be given, you know, to investigate all of these things, and of course bring it to an assembly of the Symposium to see what people think of it. There were many challenges. It takes a lot of time and takes a lot of energy of a few people, even the people who are, you know, very motivated.

Reflection

The first *Annual Symposium on the Teaching of Writing in Lebanon* took place on the 9th of November 2013. Meeting minutes retrieved from emails reveal that the symposium was originally conceived as a meeting during which a representation of the teachers of writing at major universities in Lebanon with English as language of instruction would make professional contacts and generate ideas for projects to be presented at the *International Conference on Effective Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. Partially then, the symposium was a means to activate the local writing teachers and populate the writing strand of the aforementioned conference, also hosted at AUB.

¹ Lebanese American University

Symposium invitations were addressed to heads of writing programs and the main text was followed by the day's program (Appendix A):

Dear ____:

We are happy to announce a Symposium on the Teaching of Writing sponsored by AUB's Communication Skills Program, which is scheduled for Saturday, 9 November 2013. We'd like to invite you and up to five other interested colleagues from your institution to participate. We envision the Symposium as an opportunity to initiate a conversation around the teaching of writing at the university level in Lebanon.

We hope, also, that the conversations that begin during the Symposium will continue at AUB's 4th annual International Conference on Effective Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (7-8 February 2014; see attached CFP), which this year will have a strand devoted to writing research and pedagogy.

As the invitation clearly indicates, participation in the first symposium was solely by invitation and application. This is further confirmed by email communication among the organizing AUB committee and invitations sent to AUB writing program, inviting writing instructors to send their preferences for a full day attendance or guest role, the former of which was subject to confirmation and "understood as professional commitment to attending", while the latter as participation in opening, lunch, and closing remarks (L. Arnold², personal communication, October 29, 2013). The final guest list revealed fifty-one participants from eight universities, and twenty-seven additional AUB guests joining for the opening and closing remarks and lunch. In its later iterations, the symposium indeed became open to all interested writing professionals, but at its inception participation was limited to program leadership and a few select faculty members. Existing documents do not explain whether such limitations were dictated by limited funds or other considerations.

In the responses above, Khoury specifies being "inspired by the *Writing Research Across Borders* [conference] where they take the conference every four years to a different context. So, we were thinking of how we can do something similar and take it from one campus to the other." Described this way, the symposium is recast as a "best practice" imported to Lebanon *because it works well elsewhere*. In other words, we – the broader community but also the three authors as active participants in the symposium effort – transported "the what" before we were able to ascertain that this transported activity would align with "the local why." In his 1986 editor's introduction to *Research in the Teaching of English*, Applebee warned against expecting activities to thrive in

² Lisa Arnold directed the Communication Skills Program at AUB in 2013 and chaired the SIG that organized the 1st Symposium on the Teaching of Writing in Lebanon.

contexts they were not originally intended for. Reflecting on teaching but in ways relevant to our discussion here, Applebee writes:

This process of taking from the new approach often – perhaps even usually – preserves the form of the approach, but is equally likely to subvert the original purpose, unless the original purpose is well understood. If we truly understand why a particular approach is working, on the other hand, it is quite possible it will be successfully implemented in new contexts, without incorporating any of the "model" activities at all – if the functions of the original activities can be better served by other activities in the teachers' repertoires. (p. 6)

Applebee's words invite us to reflect on Symposium's purpose and form and thus dictate our reading of available archival documents relating to the event. In reviewing them, we *both* seek a documented theoretical expression of local needs *and* analyze the event's format for how our purpose – articulated or not – manifested itself through form. Does evidence exist that we, as members of the organizing committee, paid attention to the principles underlying our actions? Did we adhere to what Dippre (2024) calls *principled practice* or "decision making that is informed by values, by expertise in the field, and by the particular needs of the contexts" (p. 15)? In today's reflection upon the event, both its origins and development over six iterations, we find little evidence of an articulated and widely accepted set of principles (or, maybe more accurately, a recognition that what we share are in fact such principles) that would have allowed the event to respond more systematically and transparently to a local or locally formulated need. The closest we came were "symposium notes" (Appendix B) and minutes (Appendix C), which were shared with the community once via the listserv after the second symposium in 2014 and thus could have been the basis for a common articulation of local principles.

Today, it may look like a missed opportunity. For as we aimed to transport an inspiring practice, we overlooked the importance of transforming it into a "principled practice" (Dippre, 2024), one responsive to values expressed by local teaching community. Indeed, the first symposium emphasized learning about each other and making future plans that would reflect and respond to the local conditions. To that end, a brief program survey was created and all eight participating universities completed it with basic program information to better understand labor and learning conditions within the separate writing programs or units. Also, the Symposium's minutes (Appendix 2) are a seven-page document with details of programs' needs, visions, and future directions as specified by its participants. Interestingly, offering workshops for teachers of writing is in the minutes, as is inviting school representatives. As an activity system then, the symposium began with decisions taken by a group of nine main organizers, and over the six following years, developed to both more accurately represent the needs of community members whose actions it mediated and to broaden the community itself. At no point, however, was there a conscious, collective effort to name the emerging principles underlying the activity (Applebee, 1986; Dippre, 2024) and expressing the will of the whole community (Palmquist et al., 2012).

Language of Instruction

DF: Whom did you want to involve? And what do you understand this community to be? Who do you think the community is made up of? What kinds of teachers?

MRK: Originally, we thought of teachers of writing that teach these foundation courses similar to the courses in the Communication Skills Program³. So we're thinking of these general requirement courses that work on students' writing. We didn't think of people who teach creative writing, or who teach writing in the disciplines. Then because of the discussion of the challenges, people started talking about what we need to teach and what we need to unteach. And maybe students are not well prepared because some students come, and they deal well with certain learning objectives and [not] others. Most of the students in universities in Lebanon come from high schools in Lebanon and they come from programs like the Lebanese Baccalaureate, the International Baccalaureate or the French Baccalaureate. So that's in line with the idea of that, we are teaching in a multilingual context because some students come after having studied all the lives in French. Also, maybe a small percentage would have studied most of their lives in Arabic and have taken English only as a subject on its own, not used it as a medium of instruction. So there, there was all this variation that needed to be taken into account. So, it is really a mixture. I mean, the community would be a mixture of the teachers who teach writing and composition in these foundation courses. And the teachers called, you know, English teachers in high schools. Many of our students have English as their home language, others have Arabic as their home language, but also others have Armenian as their home language. So, all of these elements make the context different from other contexts and maybe requires I don't know different approaches to what is being used in in North America, or you know other contexts.

When LAU was involved our contact person there had a very good connection with the Ministry of Education. So, we started involving the Ministry of Education. and they kind of expected to have their teachers come and get professional development. I thought it was worth involving teachers from public schools, because we need to understand what's happening in the high school exit classes to understand what's happening in our classes at the university. So, we started inviting teachers of English who teach exit classes in public schools, through the Ministry, and a few private schools through personal contacts. The attendance grew from like 80 people to I think at one point we became 120, or 130 participants, which is a big number, if you think of Lebanon, and the community we are targeting.

³ Communication Skills Program is the name of first-year composition program at AUB.

Reflection

This response is interesting because a question about who the teachers are leads not to a description of high-school and university teacher identities but rather a particular common reality that they operate in -- “a multilingual context” (Khoury), or highly complex sociolinguistic space which sees the Lebanese switch not only between their native Arabic and second languages, typically French and/or English, but also between the low-variety of spoken, colloquial Lebanese Arabic and the high-variety of Modern Standard Arabic (Bahous et al., 2014), or heritage languages, such as Armenian. In educational context, the essence of such a linguistic complexity seems to reside in the phrase *language of instruction* (LOI). It is easy to gloss over the term as familiar and *prima facie* well understood. D. Wagner and Hedidar (2023) however, offer an eye-opening LOI overview which counters this apparent simplicity and unpacks some of the complex social realities the term can signify and many of which are mirrored in the local realities, some of which were in fact acknowledged during the 2014 Symposium themed “Creating cultures of research: Studying writing contexts in Lebanon.” According to the minutes (Appendix C), participants of small brainstorming groups raised three relevant questions: (1) Define context in Lebanon? What does that mean? (Code-switching, language etc.), (2) Importance of different student backgrounds in French, English or Arabic schools and learning styles, and (3) How does Arabic contribute to the learning of English as a ‘positive’ thing? (ibid.) And yet, such deeper questions underlying the ongoing debates on English as language of instruction have yet to be explored by the local writing community⁴. Indeed, an online search for records of scholarly conversation with keyword combination of (“language of instruction” AND “higher education” AND Lebanon) yields barely 10 results, only four of which are authored by people with local-sounding names and thus promise to offer an emic perspective, three were published in the 1990s – so three decades ago – and with no record of being cited or otherwise taken up by later studies, while one was commissioned by the World Bank.

We extend Khoury’s recognition of the incredibly complex multilingual reality as an invitation to engage in research-based inquiry that could support the teaching community with relevant scholarship. Local writing instructors and writing scholars have much to add to existing discussions on literacy in the language of former colonizers as strategies for unification and development of nations (Williams, 2006), rejection of standardization in favor of “developing the flexibility to use a range of registers in multiple contexts” (Goodman & Goodman, 2006, p. 347), foreign language curricula as a mechanism of interpellation or a process in which people learn to identify with the culture of the former colonizers (Hickling-Hudson, 2010), the role of language in engaging students intellectually and emotionally in discussions on memorializing a nation’s past and reflecting on cultural-historic perspectives (S. Wagner & Hoecherl-Alden, 2020), or issues of access and socio-economic mobility and stability that sometimes manifest in resistance to mother-tongue instruction (D. Wagner & Hedidar, 2023). We know firsthand that questions of sociocultural shifts brought

⁴ Remaining annual symposia were themed: 3rd Academic integrity in the Lebanese context. Issues and challenges, 4th Writing assessment, 5th Technology and writing across the curriculum, and 6th Writing research.

about by schooling in language of instruction different from the society's native language remains among the most important considerations for the teachers of academic writing in Lebanon who continue to navigate this complex reality of competing language needs on daily basis.

Fluid Genres and Shifting Communities

Amy Zenger: That brings me [back] to the 1st symposium. There were people from different institutions, but they knew each other in different ways. Maybe they went to school together, or they were related through their families or through marriage. I just thought that was interesting. It was a new way of collaborating, but the people themselves weren't always completely new to each other.

MRK: We're not new to each other. You're right. Many of the contact people in other universities were AUB graduates, previously worked at AUB, or had some sort of connection with AUB. Many of the participants turned out to be AUB graduates or have some sort of connection with AUB. The Symposium events were good networking opportunities, and some used them as opportunities to try to get a job at AUB and other institutions. But yeah, I see for it a potential to make it. Because even, you know, over six symposia it was still growing. I think it didn't take its final shape, the shape that we wanted for it, which is making it as a get together to talk about issues related to teaching, writing, and composition in this multilingual context, in -- I don't know how to describe Lebanon -- in a third world country outside the northern hemisphere. And I tried after each symposium to ask people in the Core Organizing Committee to send reflections. Not many send their reflections. Not many thought about it. Some did, but not everyone.

AZ: Yes. If it were training, then it should take a different shape.

MRK: That's how I see it. But you know, I don't want it to be just, you know: "Come, we'll train you." These are workshops. There was no committee to say, "You can say this. You can't say this" because we felt it should be open, and people would put ideas on the table, and others would, you know, reciprocate and respond to them. But if it turns into training, then maybe there should be a committee to look at the quality of these workshops.

AZ: I understand that it was hard to maintain the organization and to continue to do it. But people did attend. So, what's your sense about what they needed from it, or what they wanted to get from it?

MRK: I think getting in contact with people from other institutions would open people's eyes to things maybe they were not aware of. You will notice things that maybe have never crossed your mind. Contact and the exchange would open your eyes to things that I think will impact one's

teaching and one's design of courses, not design of the course, but what could one include, or take into account when talking to students coming from different contexts, and so on. But, like I said before, many of the teachers expected a kind of workshop setting where they will come to take a certificate that they have attended a workshop. So that was what they wanted, some of them, not everybody.

AZ: Having a symposium makes sense when you're an instructor who has the ability to shape your course to some extent, or to choose different aspects, even if you're not just creating it from scratch. But I think some in some institutions where the syllabus is fixed that isn't the case. So, attending a meeting like the Symposium would become like, how can I deliver this syllabus better, but it isn't about how can I rethink what I'm doing, or how can I come up with a new assignment that I've never tried before? So, people would have a different range of possibilities in terms of what they're allowed to do as instructors. I would guess.

MRK: Yes, true. Even in our program, there are certain assignments that have to be more or less the same across different sections, because the expectation is that if a student takes section 1 of English 203 their experience should be more or less similar to taking section 29. But within the major assignment there will be different ways of approaching it. So, attending the symposium and talking about this, maybe we'll give people ideas about how to approach it in different ways. I remember, for example, at one of the sessions at the Hariri University Symposium related to socially engaged learning and community-based learning somebody came to me and said, "I never knew that you could have a rubric for an assignment like that."

Reflection

Today, we also find it helpful to reflect on symposium as a genre. Our guiding questions include: What exactly did we aim to transport from other localities? Specifically, what limitations and affordances came with our understanding of symposium that its organizers were working from? Upon closer inspections, the genre of symposium reveals no rigid style, form, or content of academic exchange but a fluid construct adapted to each iteration of the event.

Discourse studies confirm that genres are fluid, change over time, and are continually co-constructed and transformed by all active members of discourse communities. That meanings are always situated, "grounded in actual practices and experiences" (Gee, 2003, p. 53), and therefore depend on specific contexts of use. And that genres, as concepts that are not only cognitive but also social, must imply variation brought about by the diverse community membership (Hyland, 2008) which depend on them to mediate activity. Such an ongoing co-construction comes to full view when we observe gradual shifts of form and function over time in six writing symposia. What all six had in common were speeches by experts and food. But on closer inspection, even the speeches evolved, and only food breaks remained unchanged. In the first year, speeches were made by individual program leaders to tell stories of writing instruction at their universities, and themed

discussions took place at round tables which emphasized the flat hierarchy among mixed groups of discussants and whose results were reported back to the whole gathering by table representatives. As years progressed, participation became open to all interested community members, and the event was hosted by new co-organizers who each had a say in how the symposium was organized and which or whose needs it spoke to. The structure began to shift towards a key address by an invited speaker-expert, followed by a series of simultaneous theme-based 20-minute presentations by community members deemed by the organizers to possess enough expertise for the task, with hands-on, workshop-style participant involvement and free-flowing conversations. Participants were free to choose from among the consecutive sessions. Conversations continued and new acquaintances were made over lunch sponsored by each host university.

This evolution of form is interesting insofar as it shows how even in the absence of articulated principles, the local writing community was able to modify an imported “best practice” and adapt it to the needs and expectations of a (different) real time and a (different) real place. And how making the event more inclusive and thus larger necessitated a change of form. Round table discussions became unrealistic, and reporting back on the separate discussions to the whole gathering was forced out of the schedule by dwindling interest. And while community response reshaped the form in an organic way, the new form began to afford new ways of engagement previously unplanned for by the original group of organizers. The theme of change expressed by Khoury in “I don't think that is what we wanted to be honest, but it seems it was what the audience wanted” returns on several occasions throughout the interview – and it does so with a hint of regret that the organizers were not able to convince the audience to keep the original form.

Support and Materiality

DF: I wonder about the material support. Has it always been a question of forging those connections and kind of creating support? Or are there any existing structures or mechanisms of support in terms of money, space, anything? Or was it something that you had to create and work for?

MRK: When you know, it has to come from the institutions. If you're asking about AUB, you know that if we need a budget, we need to apply ahead of time. And there are limited sources. And we need to think ahead of time about what we're going to do and apply in time. And then whoever it is that takes the decision will decide whether our project gets priority over other projects, and so on. And for the budget of the first symposium, if I remember correctly, it came from the budget of the Communication Skills Program. It covered stationery, renting the room in West Hall, and the sandwiches that we offered the participants. The other symposia were funded by the institutions that were hosting the events on their campuses. They even sent transportation to AUB and participants who were leaving from AUB vicinity.

DF: Do you have any materials, a budding archive of the symposium?

MRK: Yes, I have a folder with the abstracts and the article that the Communication Office wrote, and what we used to have on our website.

AZ: Did you at the time also share things with the Archives Department in Jafet Library about the Symposium?

MRK: No, it didn't. I mean interesting idea. It didn't occur to me to do that. But I think I still have material between my laptop and my computer in the office. I have a lot of material like the posters and it's a good idea to keep these records in the Archives Department in Jafet Library. Originally, the idea and one of the targets for the Symposium was to develop a kind of database for publications by people who teach writing and composition in Lebanese institutions. But first you need people to collaborate and to produce something. So, the idea of inter-institution collaboration was the essence. The whole point is to create an atmosphere of exchanges and communication about teaching of writing in Lebanon's multilingual and complex context taking its idiosyncrasies into account, but not necessarily ending up with answers and solutions; rather, or at least, identifying and asking the right and needed questions. As Voltaire says: "Judge a [person] by his questions rather than by his answers."

Of course, we can draw on the repertoire of knowledge and experience of teaching writing and composition in other contexts, especially in the US. However, the idiosyncrasies of the Lebanese context must be considered because one could learn something from other contexts, but certain elements will be missing and would not help to understand all the intricacies of teaching writing in Lebanon (as mentioned earlier given the special model of multilingualism).

Reflection

In her response, Khoury lists an application for financial support, a conference room, stationery, and snacks. We can thus imagine the electronic pathways these documents travel as they are circulating in due process of securing permissions, roads and highways the organizers travel to meet their counterparts in other universities, the paths they walk and stairs they negotiate to ensure that conference rooms are fitted with appropriate tables and a specific number of chairs, a podium, audio-visual system, or that the air conditioning is working and food stays fresh. What we conclude through our reflection fueled by our imagining of the physicality of those processes is that it is the symposium itself that emerges as the central material activity of our local community of practice. Pieced together from other relevant material support accessible to organizers at their respective organizing universities, it is the symposium that gives substance to the mental activities and professional needs of the group in question. As we follow this line of thinking, we remember other attempts to maintain the material status of the group: The first symposium was tweeted (the handle no longer exists today), a LinkedIn group was created (with forty-four participants but inactive

today), and a listserv was set up with the goal of creating access to the community and invigorating scholarly activity.

Material foundations have then been laid not just for sustained cooperation but also for the decentering of power and authority with the community. It is within those structures that individual community members were encouraged to mentor each other and maintain the momentum through email exchanges and discussions, update reports on the achievements of several SIG groups created in the wake of the first symposium (groups whose specific charges we cannot recall today but whose echoes we recognize throughout Khoury's narrative), and together build a robust support system "to take advantage of opportunities for sharing experiences with community and scientific audiences" (Teufel et al., 2019, p. 3). But – if these community structures are to fulfill their function – they need to be continually repopulated and made active use of. Novice participants need scaffolds, modeled interaction, and access to scholarship to progress from periphery to active center of a community and the professional expertise it symbolizes. And that type of leadership – possibly enacted within individual writing programs at separate universities (Toth & Sullivan, 2016) – has been insufficient or missing altogether.

Recognizing that these material structures did not work as intended, organizers of the 7th symposium set to convene at the American University of Beirut were brainstorming alternative ways of community engagement and hoping to organize an event more accurately aligned with the intellectual activities and professional needs of the group in question. The reflective and more welcoming spirit was reflected in the agreed theme for the 2020 Symposium, "Writing for a More Inclusive World."

Original and Future Plan

AZ: It's good to recognize and remember what's happened, because I can see how [when] you're working, you become invested in what you're doing and you create things. And then new people come in and they don't know anything about it, it just fades. They don't pick it up and carry it further. So, it's really nice to make sure that things build on each other. And that what happened gets recognized and continued.

MRK: We were thinking, before Covid, that the following symposium would be number seven, at AUB. We thought seven is a nice number to bring it back to AUB. And we talked about whether it would make sense to have it online or not. And we thought the essence of it is to have people sit together and talk in person and have lunch together in a celebratory ambiance and exchange different experiences and opinions. Maybe we should prepare for next year and apply for funding for next year to have it in person. I feel that we should continue with it. We need funds for stationery, for the location, because we don't have a big room in our program, and we needed to offer participants some food. Sharing the food, I think, is an important part of this

gathering because it brings people together over something nice, like it is a celebration of our profession and of our getting together. You know. Sometimes you think that you're doing something new, if you like. One has access to what has been done before they could continue. Instead of starting from scratch, and they could build on what was done before.

AZ: And respect the work that has happened. This has been so rich. I'm really, really happy to have this conversation. So, thank you so much, Malakeh.

MRK: Thank you so much.

DF: Thank you.

Invitation to Archive and Build Local Expertise

Belonging to a professional community of practice centers on “doing things together,” on engagement (Wenger, 2000, p. 227). In our conversation, we record six years of history of an annual event we found to be important for building a community of practice of teachers of writing in Lebanese universities. In our reflections, we point to what we see as important considerations in nurturing the self-perception of writing teachers as members of a viable community of practice, an egalitarian one, with as flat a structure as possible, one in which things are in fact done *together* and leading to the collective articulation of local principles, contexts, and related expertise. In the year the symposium was suspended, the date was set, funds were secured, and its organizers hoped to address a future format that would best sustain the community. What models of organization exist that suit a grassroots movement like ours? What formats support inter-university cooperation? What trade-offs must we reckon with within formal, government-sponsored syndicates versus informal associations driven by the sheer willpower of its members? How does the specificity of the Lebanese context influence those considerations? In essence, what structure would make the symposium a relevant activity within the learning community and help it sustain its sense of purpose and long-term functioning?

The interview discloses a certain tension between the imagined and actual ways of participating which, upon reflection, may point the way forward. While the organizers, most of whom occupy important positions in their respective writing programs, wanted to see all participants engage in equal exchange, a large group of the participants appeared to view the symposium as an opportunity to learn quietly and passively, rather than discuss actively, or to seek future employment, rather than bring expertise back to their institutions. Recognizing this tension opens space for acknowledging a perceived hierarchy within the community, which – in the absence of sustained professional development – may block movement from novice’s periphery to expert’s center. Recognizing the tension also opens up space for exploring how writing is taught, how writing instructors’ work is organized, and how instructors are managed across the various institutions in Lebanon. If participants seek workshops, is this because they lack sufficient opportunities in their

own institutions? If they express interest in attendance certificates, is this because certificates, rather than empowered voices, are valued by their employers? How do writing program coordinators or directors encourage professional development that shapes attitudes towards the symposium as one of the events within the community of practice? What is and is not done to help practitioners progress from the periphery into the center of the community and claim expertise (Cabusao et al., 2019)? What are the separate institutional contexts which programs navigate and how do they function? And, finally, how are programs conceptualized: as managerial units, or as teams of experts at different stages of self-realization? In this sense, the symposium emerges almost as a provocation for self-reflection.

In sharing this conversation and our reflections with the readers of *MENA Writing Studies Journal*, we wish to invite other local voices to join in creating what Ritter calls collective memory (Ritter, 2018), including archiving related events or program experiences that grew from individual participation in the symposium. Of course, the process of recognizing and recording local writing endeavors cannot be complete without including other forms of engagement in the local community of writing teachers. This interview is a beginning. We believe there are many more stories waiting to be told by other co-organizers and participants of the symposium, stories about how this event helped position their programs or influence the visibility of writing on their campuses, how it fit or did not fit into their multilingual realities, about drawing on material support offered by academic units, how the conversations helped share writing instructors' daily pedagogical practices, highlighted their professional sense of self, identity, direction, and their sense of belonging in the community, as well as many more.

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Appendix A

Program for the First Symposium on the Teaching of Writing

Symposium on the Teaching of Writing

hosted by the Communication Skills Program
at the American University of Beirut

9 November 2013
West Hall, Auditorium B

Coffee (9-9:30am)

Introductions (9:30-10:15a): Dr. David Wrisley, Chair of English at AUB, will introduce the Symposium. Each program represented at the Symposium will give a 5-minute presentation that provides an overview of the program's history, relevant facts (enrollment, number of full-time instructors, etc.), types of courses taught, and the recurrent questions or concerns about teaching that arise for program administration and faculty.

Program Needs (10:30a-12:00p): Participants will work in small groups to outline the overlapping and diverse needs of each program represented. Afterwards, each group will summarize its discussion for the seminar participants.

Lunch (12:00-1:00p)

Program Visions (1:00-2:30p): Participants will work in small groups to outline the shared and differing visions of each program represented. Afterwards, each group will summarize its discussion for the seminar participants.

Coffee Break (2:30-3:00p)

Conclusion – Where to Go from Here (3:00-4:30p): Participants will consider various options and opportunities for future collaboration, in an effort to promote a mutually beneficial conversation around, and support for, the teaching of writing at universities across Lebanon.

Appendix B

Email Correspondence of Meeting Minutes

Twitter: @AUBCommSkills

Symposium: #STW2013

Minutes of the 2013 Symposium on the Teaching of Writing by Nicole Khoury, Assistant Professor, Department of English, AUB

Session 1: Mapping Our Programs' Needs

Needs of our programs from the perspectives of students, faculty members, administration, facilities, university and program policies, resources, inter- and intra-departmental relationships:

1. Administration/University and Program policies:
 - a. Support and empathy from administration, colleagues, and university community
 - b. Clarification of Learning Outcomes
 - c. Transparency when assigning courses
 - d. Need to understand the value of our writing programs
 - e. Understanding the effects of financial pressure
2. Facilities
 - a. Flexible spaces for faculty development, cross-disciplinary coordination
 - b. Providing facilities
 - c. Ensuring working facilities for instruction
 - d. Technology enhanced classrooms
 - e. Writing support: through Writing Center or other centers or facilities
 - f. Access to online databases and research facilities
 - g. Technological (IT) support for instructors
3. Students:
 - a. How to engage, motivate (and entertain) students
 - b. Approaches to grade-oriented university culture
 - c. Need to learn how to learn: attention to information literacy
 - d. How to make connections between their past and present education and various styles of learning; ensuring there is a relevance and promoting the relevance of writing
 - e. Awareness of cultural difference
 - f. Placement
 - g. Awareness of real-world writing situations
 - h. Rethinking assignments for students
 - i. Autonomous learning practices in university

- j. Addressing “remedial” work and approaches
- k. Supporting students within the university: including health care centers, acknowledging students’ personal situations
- l. Student aid
- m. Transparent grading practices and assessment
- 4. Teachers:
 - a. Awareness of cultural differences of students
 - b. Need to develop “best practices” for teaching writing
 - c. Manageable workload for writing instructors, including consideration for course-load, caps on courses, etc.
 - d. Job security, mobility within the university, salaries
 - e. Providing coaching and mentoring to faculty; Peer coaching
 - f. “Native vs. Non-Native” gap/dichotomy needs to be addressed
 - g. Constant revision of writing courses; self-reflection of teaching pedagogies
- 5. Inter- and intra-departmental relationships
 - a. Development of faculty across campus, involving faculty in professional development communities
 - b. Dialogue between teachers of writers and various faculty across campus
 - c. Addressing issues of plagiarism
 - d. WAC: Incorporating writing across the university curriculum
 - e. Providing support for teachers across the university to incorporate writing in their courses
 - f. Providing opportunities for part-time and full-time faculty to meet
 - g. Need for more full-time faculty
 - h. Support from cultural centers
- 6. Writing Programs across Lebanon
 - a. Cooperation and collaboration across universities and writing programs (instead of competition)

Session 2: Mapping Our Programs’ Visions

Visions for the future of our programs addressing the needs of students, faculty members, administration, facilities, university and program policies, resources, inter- and intra-departmental relationships:

- 1. Administration/University and Program policies
 - a. Standardized assessment for instructors
 - b. Standardized syllabi and/or learning outcomes

- c. Transparency of course outcomes
- d. Updating writing instruction curriculum
- e. Improve admission criteria
- f. Faculty work load/ pay/ benefits
- g. Mini English departments across Lebanon
- h. Address writing in schools
- i. Reciprocity of allegiance to the university
- j. Implementing standards for admissions
- k. Continuous support and constructive feedback through professional learning communities across faculties
- l. Writing Across the Curriculum: developing support thorough student experiences
- m. Support for smaller class sizes
- n. Autonomy for programs to direct student placement
- o. Administrative support for collaboration between writing instructors and instructors from various disciplines
- p. Empowering instructors to reach our goals
- q. Authentic assessment of program goals and implementation
- 2. Facilities
 - a. Highlight continuous training for teachers and students in technology
 - b. Making/creating our own textbooks
 - c. Providing Writer Center support for students
 - d. Technology-enhanced classrooms
 - e. Self-access English labs
 - f. Providing resources for students; encourage an egalitarian approach to resources
 - g. Ability to order books for personal use
 - h. Access to internet, books, libraries
 - i. Maintenance of facilities
 - j. Bridging and supporting online collaborations between departments (including blogs, social media, etc.)
 - k. Logistical issues: Classroom size
- 3. Students
 - a. Engaged teaching and learning
 - b. Creating a social contract
 - c. Creating rubrics
 - d. Transfer of skills to other disciplines
 - e. Creating spaces for students to write/read and share their writing
 - f. Informing students about social issues to foster understanding
 - g. Providing opportunities for students to write for real audiences (visibility of student writing)

- h. Making courses relevant to student needs
 - i. See themselves as autonomous learners
 - j. Provide international exchange programs
 - k. Work in parallel with international programs
 - l. Community-based topics
 - m. “Make English Cool” by providing opportunities for students to develop writing
 - n. Motivation for writing; Address students’ personal goals
 - o. Encourage their native tongue and multilingualism
 - p. Global citizens
 - q. Opportunities to connect the classroom with the real-world; meeting students’ needs; address accuracy vs. fluency
4. Teachers
- a. Faculty development and workshops
 - b. Include literature in curriculum
 - c. In-house training for faculty members
 - d. Off-campus retreats
 - e. Access to state-of-the-art technology
 - f. Less teacher-centered classroom; more autonomous learners and confidence in their range of language skills
 - g. Envision teachers as good citizens, contributing to the teaching community as a whole
 - h. Contributing as writers
 - i. Addressing approaches to plagiarism and its relationship to writing; theorizing plagiarism
5. Inter- and intra-departmental relationships
- a. Increased collaboration
 - b. Establishing lasting liaisons with other departments
 - c. Creating focus group: writing instructors, instructors from other disciplines, and students across the university
 - d. Providing support for writing in other disciplines faculty from various disciplines
 - e. Increased collaborative teaching with faculty from various disciplines
 - f. Implementing an ESP course in each faculty
6. Writing programs across Lebanon
- a. Developing community-based topics and assignments that encourage universities to work together
 - b. Foster collaborations across universities
 - c. Visibility on the global map of teaching writing

Conclusion: Where Do We Go from Here?

Key words:

- Collaboration
- Communication: communicate with administrators (rhetoric)
- Communities: online, outside the university, learning comm.
- Culture: understanding the culture of the students and the university
- Value: ways instructors can be valued, value of languages
- Motivation: student, teacher motivation, engagement in teaching and learning
- Accountability
- Bridges & Transfer

- TESOL Lebanon: Association of University-Level English Faculty in Lebanon
- Informal learning community among faculty across universities that encourage research, collaboration between faculty in conferences
- Think tank
- Teachers Blogging
- Digital Archives for Literacy Narratives
- Highlighting and administrative support for student talent
- Links between universities and schools
- Offering writing workshops for teachers of writing
- Collaboration across universities focused on community-based learning and assignments
- Spaces for students to come together and write across universities
- Involve policy-makers local or national
- Requesting assessment from graduates, include them in the conversation
- Making our work visible to the university
- Ask for financial support
- LinkedIn Online Group
- Invite universities to events on campus
- Sharing the process: custom published books, Writing Center development, pedagogy, etc.
- Inviting faculty from various disciplines to discuss the importance of writing
- Continued efforts to sustain the Symposium on the Teaching of Writing in Lebanon (also invite school representatives)

Appendix C

Minutes of The Second Annual Symposium on the Teaching of Writing in Lebanon

December 6th 2014

Creating Cultures of Research: Studying Writing Contexts in Lebanon

Universities Attending the Symposium: NDU, Balamand, LIU, LAU, AUB, Hagazian

Introduction:

Malake Khoury

Speaks briefly about the question of exchanging knowledge on the teaching of writing across the country and the region

Lisa Arnold

- Reflects on last year's symposium in order to create new contexts
- Concluded on a need for dialogue and collaboration through intra-institutional support
- We did not talk about research in particular. What is this, in context? Lisa speaks of her background in order to clarify this dimension in the discussion (includes assessment, research in the classroom, curriculum development, how to achieve the goals of the university, the teaching of writing as content and ideas through showcasing evidence in student writing)
- Larger need for research beyond institutional research is to introduce practices of research and teaching across the globe, and to international researchers who know little about literacy practices in the MENA region
- We need to articulate these research questions as a group in Lebanon

Small Group Brainstorming:

Group one:

- Involvement of students in these discussions and symposiums
- Define context in Lebanon? What does that mean? (Code-switching, language etc)
- What is the nature of interest in writing practices by MENA and international researchers
- Different cultural backgrounds of students in one class?
- How does social media affect student interest in writing? How does it contrast to traditional methods?
- Raise awareness with other departments on campus about writing practices/increase culture of writing (testing vs writing as assessment)
- Redefine writing as rhetoric not only grammar

- Student voices on writing, what are they? From various universities
- Assessment of the writing program – are we doing what we think we’re doing?

Group two:

- Request for organizers (minutes to be sent to entire community of the symposium)
- Building on last year’s thoughts – need to address lack of resources/support
- Why are writing courses not taken seriously?
- “Blame” towards writing teachers – why?
- Need to know more about our diverse context across Lebanon
- What are the attitudes across the region or inter-lebanon (city vs peripheries of the country)
- Why negative attitude (who is the audience, economic and cultural differences)
- What is the relevance of what we teach to their careers – how to bring this across to students?
- Possibilities: create a larger symposium to include highschool teachers
- Wider discussion (maybe social events)
- Limitations: teachers are overwhelmed with too much work, little pay J
- Encourage culture of research (how does learning take place, why should I as a student even bother?)
- We lack confidence in the value of what we have to say in this part of the world

Group three:

- Difference in proficiency levels
- Need motivation and inspiration in the student body
- Giving students enough freedom in terms of writing topics
- Teachers need to explain purpose and context of what is being taught
- Teachers can discuss pros and cons of norming sessions (assessment techniques)
- Grading, topic for teacher discussion (subjectivity vs objectivity)
- Experience in the classroom, how it affects grading and method transparency
- Good to have feedback by other teachers at other institutions
- Internal conversations at our own institutions (with students too)
- English writing brought into the curriculum at institutions that are introducing writing practices
- Evaluation as a topic to share and discuss

Group four:

- Teaching of writing needs more PR
- Establish an understanding of the relevancy of writing to other teachers across the discipline

- Importance of understanding learning practices in schools vs university
- Importance of different student backgrounds in French, English or Arabic schools and learning styles
- How does Arabic contribute to the learning of English as a 'positive' thing?
- Need to incorporate more reading exposure
- Are we being more lenient as teachers to accommodate students?
- What are the knowledge gaps?
- How to enlist social media in our courses?
- Show relevancy of the practice of writing in life
- Can pursue these questions in symposiums, research, publications

Group five:

- Is writing thinking, or thinking through writing?
- Create more context driven assignments beyond academia into 'real life'
- Provide a real audience for student writing
- How to transfer knowledge from one course to another by students
- Perception of language as a commodity
- Ethical practices in writing (ex: sourcing)

Group six:

- Learning goals, are they transparent amongst teachers?
- What we mean by teaching writing, what are the different scenarios?
- Create forums in order to expose ourselves to scholarship plus our own experiences that are unique
- Real political situations that prevent us to talk to each other in our different institutions

Whole Group Discussion

Discussion is based on individual teachers, institutions and across institutions

What do teachers need to know about their classroom (and larger) setting?

Individual teachers:

- Physical classroom setting not inductive to writing workshops
- Classical seating that are upsetting
- More incentive for individual teachers are good websites such as "the teaching professor" newsletter
- We need extra ideas about our teaching

- Instead of looking at information outside, we ought to conduct our own research, and blend with existing knowledge
- Observation and sharing between teachers
- Role model via experience and innovative methodology
- Attend to the psychological aspect of teaching (what do students want to learn, really?)
- Student-input in teaching methods ought to be welcome by teachers
- Teachers ought to study the classroom setting via research in a continuous manner
- Teacher-research needs major recognition as incentive
- Need space to share our expertise/research such as linked-in or list serves
- Example: AUB has support group/action research group (sig) that discusses things like using humor in the classroom, discuss papers, invite speakers
- Do teachers have time to do this research?
- Is there institutional funding to support this research?
- Is there a possibility for cross-institutional research?

Institutions (role of/benefit from our work)

- Teachers persuade the institution through evidence, good results, credibility
- Not considered as 'primary researchers' by the institution, a challenge to address
- We are experts at what we do, but we tend to be too pragmatic by not looking at our own development as experts in writing
- Case-studies by teachers of writing not regarded as 'scientific research' by institutions
- Build awareness amongst administrators about these points
- Do we need to convince institutions? Support comes through money or coaching or resources
- Or we need to strongly publish, and produce case studies to convince the administration – we need to get there in the qualitative research/culture of recognition
- Connect our (teaching) values to those of the administrators and the university
- Some students move to another institution because it's "easier" – therefore, institutions benefit from just numbers of enrollment
- Start good research on Lebanon and the practice of writing – to achieve more recognition for our field
- Is this a world-wide concern? Not only in Lebanon?

Support and methods across the institution

- Invest in a space in the public to raise awareness about the practice of writing
- Create a research product/paper at the end of this conference as tangible result
- Need for collegiality

- Why is there non-constructive competition between institutions and between colleagues?
- Should there be more security and support for teachers so they don't feel threatened about their job position?

Next Steps/Practical Measures

- Online forum for sharing knowledge
- Funding across universities – fellowships
- Regular meetings for updates on work
- Include high school instructors
- Re-think our writing curricula
- Collaborative research projects (start things up electronically to brainstorm topics)
- Ex: collecting data from courses/students regarding curricula/learning outcomes
- Follow-up on practical projects for us as a community of teachers
- Link up to library for resourcing
- Calendar of events open to the public

Task teams are generated during the discussion. List of names and team leaders to follow (see Lisa for details)

End of Symposium

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