

### Institutionalizing L2 Writing: The Donut Hole Revisited

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*In this short coda to the special issue, Paul Kei Matsuda connects some of his previous work on the disciplinarity of second language writing to issues raised in this issue about the place of L2 writing in Canada and beyond.*

*Dans cette courte coda du numéro spécial, Paul Kei Matsuda relie certains de ses travaux antérieurs sur la disciplinarité de l'écriture en langue seconde aux questions soulevées dans ce numéro sur la place de l'écriture en langue seconde dans le contexte canadien et au-delà.*

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Among second language (L2) writing researchers around the world, there seems to be a widespread perception that L2 writing is not a *thing* in their countries. In 2013, when the Symposium on Second Language Writing (SSLW) was held at Shandong University, Jinan, China, the theme was “L2 Writing in the Global Context: Represented, Underrepresented, and Unrepresented Voices,” highlighting the all-too-common sentiment about the underrepresentation of L2 writing researchers and their work from various parts of the world. In one of the plenary talks, Diane Pecorari (2013), who was working in Sweden at the time, compared L2 writing in the country to a donut hole, implying that this area of research existed in other countries but not in Sweden. She attributed the “absence of a sense of an L2 writing community” in Sweden to two possible factors: (1) the small number of researchers working on this topic, and (2) the fact that they do not identify themselves as part of the research community (Pecorari, 2016, pp. 235–236).

The local organizers of SSLW2013 later reiterated this sentiment in their report of the International Conference on Teaching and Researching EFL Writing in China (CEFLW), which they characterized as an “underrepresented sibling” of SSLW (Zhang et al., 2019, p. 117). The same sentiment is echoed by the editors of this special issue of *TESL Canada Journal*. In their introductory editorial, Heng Hartse, Corcoran, and Fazel describe the L2 writing community in Canada as a “disparate community of research, teaching, and practice,” claiming that, “while L2 writing is more or less a discernible field of study in the US, theory, research, and practice about L2 writing in Canada is less clearly defined” (p. 000). Yet Canada does not strike me as one of the underrepresented contexts. As Canada’s own Alister Cumming made it clear in his 2013 plenary talk (a version of which is included in this special issue), this country has a robust tradition of research on writing, including L2 writing, comprising at least three identifiable generations.

Since the 1980s, Canada has been producing a growing number of well-established L2 writing specialists making significant and ongoing contributions to the community of L2 writing that goes beyond the national boundary of Canada (Cumming, 2013, 2016, also this volume). Canada is also home to one of the former *JSLW* editors, Guillaume Gentil (Tardy et al., 2022). There has even been an effort to develop a consortium on L2 writing (Heng Hartse et al., this volume), and *TESL Canada Journal*, which has published many articles on L2 writing over the years, is now featuring this special issue. If nothing else, the range and

calibre of papers included here is a testament to the status of L2 writing in Canada. Without doubt, L2 writing in Canada is one of the brightest constellations in the galaxy of intellectual activities related to L2 writing. Why, then, does it feel to some Canadian L2 writing researchers as if L2 writing is not a recognized field in Canada? It probably has to do with the lack of L2 writing-specific disciplinary infrastructure in Canada.

In a recent article about the disciplinary status of L2 writing (Matsuda, 2021), I articulated the distinction between the form of disciplinarity and the level of disciplinarity. The form of disciplinarity has to do with the ways in which an intellectual formation interacts with other related intellectual formations—e.g., autonomous, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary. What is more relevant in this discussion is the level of disciplinarity—e.g., topic, topic area, subfield, field, subdiscipline, and discipline—which reflects the degree of institutionalization. I further suggested that the institutionalization of an intellectual formation can be facilitated through contributions to three different types of institutional practices: Disciplinary discourse, metadisciplinary discourse, and disciplinary infrastructure. To put it simply, disciplinary discourse is the research and scholarship on L2 writing (the *raison d'être* of the intellectual formation), metadisciplinary discourse is the research and scholarship about the field of L2 writing (including the discussion of the nature, development, and status of the intellectual formation as well as its methodology), and the disciplinary infrastructure is the material conditions and practices that help sustain disciplinary and metadisciplinary discourses (e.g., conferences, journals, organizations, academic programs and units, and the mechanism for recognition and funding).

The development of an intellectual formation must centre on the disciplinary inquiry—individual researchers recognizing L2 writing as a possible topic for inquiry and producing research outputs, usually in the form of conference presentations and publications. In the early developmental stages, when neither the metadisciplinary inquiry nor the disciplinary infrastructure is available, knowledge is dispersed through existing disciplinary infrastructure. Before the creation of the *JSLW* in 1992, US-based researchers published in *Language Learning*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Journal of Basic Writing*, and *Written Communication*. For Canadian researchers, the venues for dissemination included domestic journals with a broader scope such as *TESL Canada Journal* and *Canadian Modern Language Review*, and international journals such as *Language Learning*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and *Written Communication*.

Disseminating insights through broader, non-L2-writing-specific disciplinary infrastructure is not only appropriate but also desirable for a transdisciplinary field like L2 writing that seeks to understand individual and institutional practices that take place under the control of various other intellectual formations—such as English for academic purposes programs, college writing programs, intensive language programs, writing centres, and high-school language programs (Matsuda, 2021). If we did not continue engaging in conversations with colleagues from other spheres of knowledge and institutional practice, we would not be able to make a difference effectively in the lives of L2 writers in various contexts. This is why I have always argued that L2 writing is a symbiotic field (Matsuda, 1998) and that it should be a field rather than a discipline, transdisciplinary rather than autonomous (Matsuda, 2021).

At the same time, it is important to develop an identity and infrastructure for L2 writing so we can continue to advance knowledge on L2 topics semi-autonomously instead of focusing only on solving problems for other people on an *ad hoc* basis. When the disciplinary discourse reaches a critical mass, the researchers working on a particular topic area start to talk about the nature and the status of their work as well as how they do what they do. In other words, sustained disciplinary discourse gives rise to metadisciplinary discourse. In the United States, the metadisciplinary discourse began to develop in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the supply of L2 writing research exceeded the demand—the available slots for journal publications was not sufficient to sustain the growing body of research on L2 writing. Some of the researchers working on this topic at that time felt that “L2 journals were not so interested in writing, and writing journals were not so interested in L2 writing” (Silva, 2012, p. 187). The conversation between Ilona Leki and Tony Silva about the lack of sufficient outlets for advanced research on L2 writing (an

example of metadisciplinary discourse, albeit an informal one) led to the establishment of one of the most important pieces of disciplinary infrastructure in 1992: *The Journal of Second Language Writing*. SSLW developed similarly as a result of an informal conversation between Silva and Matsuda about the need to bring people together to have a civil conversation about advanced topics related to L2 writing that may not be immediately relevant to broader audiences at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) or Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The Parlor Press Series on Second Language Writing also provides an outlet for edited collections and monographs that is too specialized for general writing or language specialists.

The disciplinary infrastructure, however, does not develop in the same way that disciplinary and metadisciplinary discourses do. In most of the countries around the world, including the United States, the disciplinary infrastructure for L2 writing continues to be provided by other intellectual formations (e.g., applied linguistics, education, writing studies, TESOL). Almost all of the L2 writing-specific infrastructure is international in nature. Although the *JSLW* was started by two US-based L2 writing researchers (Ilona Leki and Tony Silva) and initially published by a US-based publisher, it has always been an international journal; in fact, its inaugural issue included an article by a Canadian author (Cumming, 1992). Although SSLW was started in the United States by two US-based researchers (Tony Silva and Paul Kei Matsuda), it has always been an international conference, and its inaugural meeting started with an opening keynote by a Canadian researcher (Cumming, 1998). The only “national” disciplinary infrastructure for L2 writing I am aware of is the *Chinese Journal of Second Language Writing*, but its parent organization, the International Conference on Teaching and Researching EFL Writing in China (CEFLW), purports to be an international conference. The national designation, then, may have less to do with the actual purpose or needs of the intellectual formation than with ideological nationalism and the funding structure within the nation.

It is not my purpose here to deny the existence or value of either of these impetuses for the “national” designation. Yet, at its core, the ultimate goal of an intellectual formation is to understand an aspect of reality (ontology) based on the perceived reality (epistemology), by using resources for accessing that reality (methodology)—regardless of the context in which they take place. L2 writing as a phenomenon is not inextricably tied to a national context. Instead, it exists along a continuum between a particular instance (e.g., the experience of a single student receiving unclear written corrective feedback in a classroom somewhere in the world) to a common occurrence (the shared experience of students being frustrated by unclear written corrective feedback given by teachers around the world). (Exceptions do help us understand the limits of our current understanding about the common occurrence.) The national boundary in this case is but an arbitrary line some people draw—perhaps to make sense of the world or to serve local purposes. In other words, L2 writing as a research field is transnational as well as transdisciplinary.

I do not mean to suggest that a national, regional, or local infrastructure is unnecessary. There are issues that are related to local institutional arrangements—especially issues affected by national, provincial, institutional, and programmatic regulations that affect what we do. Those issues lend themselves to conversations among researchers who come from the same geographic area. In the United States, many of the journals and conferences on US writing studies, despite ongoing calls for internationalization, provide a forum for conversations about issues that affect US college writing (an issue that is closely tied to a national context), and journals and conferences on applied linguistics and language teaching provided venues for international engagement. A number of years ago, I was asked by editors of writing and language journals—both of which started in the United States—to explain the relevance of US-based data or issues to their international audience. I was happy about their commitment to internationalizing the journal, but at the same time, I felt the need for highly visible journals that were designed to address local issues.

Distinguishing local, regional, and national conversations from international ones is important. Many novice (and some experienced) scholars often express the frustration that the international

conferences and journals do not show interest in their local issues. This frustration seems to stem from the lack of awareness about the distinction between (a) studies that make theoretical contributions to an understanding of L2 writing that *happens to take place* in a particular country (making it relevant to an international audience) versus (b) studies that make practical contributions to an understanding of L2 writing that is particular to the local context (making it appropriate for a local audience). This distinction is not necessarily mutually exclusive—in many cases, the same study can be pitched for a local or international audience. In some cases, a unique local situation can allow us to see what cannot be seen elsewhere. In any case, I believe it is highly appropriate that *TESL Canada Journal* chose to publish this special issue on L2 writing in Canada so that local conversations about L2 writing in Canada can continue to flourish, and I applaud the special issue editors and contributors for their ongoing effort to build local, regional, and national communities of L2 writing in addition to participating in the transnational conversations in the transdisciplinary field of L2 writing.

In my concluding remarks at SSLW2013 (Matsuda, 2013), I responded to Pecorari's (2013) donut hole metaphor by saying that the hole is what makes a donut a donut; without a hole, it would just be a fried dough, overcooked on the outside or undercooked on the inside. It's the hole that gives a donut a distinct identity. L2 writing is a donut hole not just in Sweden or China or Canada. L2 writing in the United States is also a donut hole—a big one at that. But all of us have access to transnational venues for L2 writing-specific conversations that connect all of us, such as the *JSLW* and *SSLW*. As the theme song for the US TV sit-com series *Cheers* goes:

Sometimes you wanna go  
Where everybody knows your name  
And they're always glad you came  
You wanna be where you can see  
Our troubles are all the same  
You wanna be where everybody knows your name

(Portnoy & Hart-Angelo, 1982)

The Symposium on Second Language Writing strives to be the kind of place where everybody knows your name, and where we can exchange our local experiences and insights to identify common grounds as well as truly unique perspectives. And we can see we are not alone in feeling alone.

Welcome to the donut hole!

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