“Importing America: Theorizing Writing in the Middle East”

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Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline has emerged, and defined itself, within a U.S. context; as a result, the field remains generally focused on writers, writing, and the teaching of writing almost exclusively within this national context. Although, as Wendy Hesford points out in “Global Turns and Cautions in Rhetoric and Composition Studies,” scholarly “interest in global studies and transnational cultural studies is growing,” this interest is most often generated out of, and grounded within, an American framework of understanding. As a result, the discipline tends to approach its research and discourse from the problematic premise that practices and pedagogies of writing are inherently grounded in a relatively monolingual and socio-politically homogeneous context. This assumption thus produces blind spots within the discipline’s scholarship, begging the question: What happens when Rhetoric and Composition’s theories about writing are exported out of America and into an international context? What is lost and gained in the process of importation to new contexts of writing? Indeed, very little scholarship published in the discipline’s primary journals has considered whether, and how, the discipline’s scholarship “translates” in international contexts, and few scholars have asked what those located outside the U.S. might have to say in response to the discipline’s theories about writing and the teaching of writing. This presentation provides one answer to this call by considering how attendees of a graduate course in Composition Theory at the American University of Beirut responded to the discipline’s U.S.-based scholarship. While these concerns may appear to be discipline-specific, I use this case study to argue that their consideration can at the same time shed light on one of the central questions of Transnational American Studies: How can we better understand the workings and consequences of the multidirectional flow of ideas in a globalized world? What might it mean (and is it even possible) for a U.S.-based discipline such as Rhetoric and Composition to decenter itself in order to assume a truly “globalized” stance? Given the hegemonic tendencies of export-based models of globalization, what does the “globalization” of a discipline suggest about the challenges that lie ahead for teachers, scholars, and students?