

The Disciplinary Identity of Second Language Writing

Abstract

Keywords

Second language writing; applied linguistics; composition; disciplinarity; interdisciplinarity; transdisciplinarity; translingual writing

Highlights

(3-5 bullet points)

Introduction

Paul Kei Matsuda (2003) labeled second language writing (SLW) “an interdisciplinary field” (p. 25). SLW was moving towards maturity, he argued, because of “the existence of metadisciplinary discourse—or self-conscious inquiries into its nature and history” (p. 27). Ten years later, Matsuda termed SLW “transdisciplinary,” in contrast to “the limitations of the modernist conception of disciplinarity” (2013a, p. 448). I contend that the characterization of second language writing as transdisciplinary is both inaccurate and dangerous—inaccurate because it ignores more than 30 years of discipline-building research and pedagogy, and dangerous because it fosters an intellectual climate in which other conceptualizations of L2 writing and L2 writers may be seen as attractive replacements for SLW. I conclude that to survive and prosper, SLW must draw attention to itself as a discipline through explicit theoretical and practical claims and through research, practice, journals, conferences, and graduate programs.

To support this argument, I first engage in a general discussion of disciplinarity. I then analyze texts produced by the SLW discourse community for various publics¹ to understand its disciplinary positioning. Texts include websites for the *Journal of Second Language Writing* and the Symposium on Second Language Writing; the “Disciplinary Dialogue” from the December 2013 issue of *JSLW* and the “Open Letter to Writing Studies Editors and Organization Leaders” (*College English*, March 2015); as well as more recent self-referent discussions of SLW in books, articles, and conference presentations.

Disciplinarity

Fields. In this paper, I distinguish between the term *field* and terms related to *discipline*. *Field*, I offer, is a neutral term. The term *field* permits agreement on certain historical realities: Much of the research labeled *SLW* has been empirical, employing qualitative and quantitative methods, and much of the teaching labeled *SLW* has been of English to second/additional language learners. These are generalizations, of course, but they are important facts to consider before launching into a discussion of *disciplinarity*, which are philosophical and institutional constructs related to *fields*. According to Jacobs (2017), “A field may be regarded as a discipline when professors with specified credentials are typically hired to conduct research and to teach students in a particular domain” (p. 35).

Disciplines. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the sense of *academic discipline* back to 1350 with a citation from Chaucer (1405), in which *discipline* is uttered in the same clause as “crafty science.” The word *disciplinarity* does not appear in the *OED*. The first instance of *disciplinary* is cited in the compound *inter-disciplinary* (1931), with *multidisciplinary* (1944), “combining or involving several separate disciplines” and *transdisciplinary* (1979), “of or pertaining to one or more discipline or branch of learning.”

The etymology of *discipline* harkens back to punishment (c. 1225), “mortifying the flesh by way of penance” (c. 1300), and “instruct[ion] in military discipline” (1590). This etymology (parallel with the French) undoubtedly influenced Foucault (1977/1995) to link the pejorative sense of *discipline* as punishment and *discipline* as academic field in his critique of disciplinarity.²

What defines a *discipline* are the phenomena that its practitioners investigate; the epistemologies or theories of knowledge its practitioners embrace; the assumptions of what is certain, which may include elements of ethics, metaphysics, and ideology; concepts, theories, and methods; and what counts as data (Repko, 2014). Disciplines are epistemic and social communities as well as organizational units. According to D’Agostino (2012), intellectual formations that support a discipline are (a) styles of subjectivity, including criteria for assessing the value of work and “rigor”; (b) an accepted narrative of the discipline’s development and legitimacy; (c) a body of accumulated knowledge and skills; and (d) a discursive community with a common language, including jargon and terminology, rhetorical devices for displaying competence, and citation styles (pp. 335-336). Some “social facts” that support a discipline are (a) recognition in a classificatory system; (b) professional association(s) with conferences, journals, and codes of ethics; (c) academic organizational unit(s); (d) undergraduate curricula; and (e) publishers that produce “canonical” texts including journals, reference works, and monographs (pp. 334-335).

Hyland (2004) wrote a compelling description of disciplinary cultures and the relationship of these cultures to discourses. Disciplines are collaboratively constructed by participants’ ways of interpreting experience and of sharing it, or their shared methods and values: “The idea of disciplinary cultures...implies a certain degree of interdisciplinary

diversity and a degree of intradisciplinary homogeneity” (p. 10). The “diverse experiences, expertise, commitments, and influence” of members of disciplinary communities persist despite “community-recognised ways of adopting a position and expressing a stance” (p. 11). Indeed, disciplines are “the contexts in which *disagreement* can be deliberated” (p. 11, italics mine).

To interact with those outside of the disciplinary community, community members claim autonomy, occupy turf, and defend themselves by creating boundaries (Cozzens & Gieryn, 1990). Shumway & Messer-Davidow (1991) showed that boundaries were, to an extent, flexible:

When the point is to establish or protect a discipline, boundaries mark it as a territory to be possessed by its owners, not appropriated by others, and they indicate the relations it may have with other disciplines. But these same boundaries may be redefined if the discipline is attempting to expand into new territory (p. 209).

In sum, disciplinary differences are not only philosophical and political; rather, they may serve an important purpose in conceptualizing phenomena, investigating them, and going beyond them.

Historian and philosopher of science Timothy Lenoir (1997) labeled academic disciplines “institutionalized formations for organizing schemes of perception, appreciation, and action, and for inculcating them as tools of cognition and communication.” Prior (1998) wrote that “disciplinarity can be seen as one domain of the general process by which people jointly constitute social worlds and identities in action” (p. 26). Disciplinary enculturation, he reasoned, involved “open and heterogenous processes rather than closed and homogenous structures” (p. 26) (c.f. Krohn, 2010). Disciplines are not stable monoliths, but rather living organisms in the process of change. Disciplinary thinking need not engage in binary logic and

exclude values (*contra* Nicolescu, 2008). Disciplines need not be authoritarian (Foucault, 1977/1995), linear, “hierarchical and homogenous” (Klein, 2010, p. 26), or “narrow, stifling, and oppressive” (Durst, 2015, p. 395).

Interdisciplines. Yet some academics and even entire academic disciplines consider disciplinarity negative, the consequence of “entrenched social interests” (Moore, 2013, p. 88). In this vein, Repko (2014) listed six limitations of disciplinary specialization: It (a) “blinds one to the broader context; (b) “tends to produce tunnel vision;” (c) “tends to discount or ignore other perspectives;” (d) “can hinder creative breakthroughs;” (e) “fails to address complex problems comprehensively;” and “imposes the past approach on the present” (p. 81). One reaction to disciplinarity, therefore, has been to advocate for *interdisciplinarity*. For example, Bazerman (2011) argued for interdisciplinarity in writing studies by pointing out the deficiencies of disciplinarity:

The strengths of the disciplines lie in the boundaries they have set around their knowledge-seeking tasks and the focusing of the tools to investigate the worlds within those boundaries. But those same boundaries have made it difficult to remember what they have set aside and to remake connections across boundaries (p. 10).

Interdisciplinarity, in Bazerman’s view, would open scholars to “the value and benefits of work from other fields” (p. 16); to “get caught in the interesting questions of other fields” (p. 12); and to “remember and focus fundamental commitments” (p. 14).

Interdisciplinary thinking interrogates disciplinary perspectives, insights, and connections. It focuses on the solution of particular community problems (Repko, 2014). Critical interdisciplinarity should endeavor “to take the effort involved in mastering or going deep into any one discipline and spread it over a number of disciplines, going just as deep in a discipline as is necessary or appropriate to grasp the essentials” (p. 513).

Transdisciplines. In contrast to disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, *transdisciplinarity* is “a common system of axioms that transcends the narrow scope of disciplinary worldviews through an overarching synthesis, such as anthropology construed as the science of humans” (Klein, 2010, p. 24). Klein characterizes transdisciplinary fields by (a) the “historical quest for systematic integration of knowledge;” (b) transcendence and transgressivity; and (c) “overarching synthetic paradigms that reorganize the structure of knowledge, metaphorically encompassing the parts of materials and fields that disciplines handle separately” (p. 26). In other words, *transdisciplinary* is the term of choice when “there has been such a degree of integration of disciplines that tracing distinct disciplinary traits is difficult” (Strober, 2006).

Problem-solving is the overall goal of transdisciplinarity (Nicolescu, 2008). Since community problems are increasingly complex, researchers must resort to more than one mode of inquiry. Its drivers are: (a) the inherent complexity of nature and society; (b) the desire to explore problems and questions that are not confined to a single discipline; (c) the need to solve societal problems; and (d) the power of new technologies (p. 26). Above all, transdisciplinarity is an intentional, cooperative project involving practitioners from a multiplicity of disciplines (Network for Transdisciplinary Research, 2013). One example of such a project is the Mountain research project described by Messerli and Messerli (20), which involved studies of “water, mining, forestry and agriculture, biological and cultural diversity, recreation and tourism” (p. 43).

In addition, transdisciplinary efforts must be assessed for quality. In a review of the literature on inter- and transdisciplinary studies, Klein (2008) deduced “seven generic principles” by which they should be evaluated. When researchers come together, *variability of goals, criteria, and indicators* create a trend towards common methods and metrics.

Leveraging of integration means that participants should agree on “a unifying principle, theory, or set of questions that provides coherence, unity, or both” (p. 119) while paying attention to the needs of stakeholders. *Interaction of social and cognitive factors in collaboration* requires that “individuals first address questions by themselves, and then arrive at a common plan together” (p. 119). *Management and coaching* must be provided by transdisciplinary project leadership, which sets up cognitive, structural, and process tasks for team members. *Iteration* ensures “collaborative input, transparency, and common stakeholding” (p. 120) at every stage in transdisciplinary work, while *effectiveness and impact* are measured by short- and long-term goals. Klein admitted that “unquestioned assumptions” about the terms *discipline*, *peer*, and *measurement* continue to dog inter- and transdisciplinary work, since these must be reexamined and negotiated in every project (p. 121).

Problems with inter- and transdisciplinarity. Despite lofty aims, inter- and transdisciplinary efforts have often failed. Chandler (2009) noted that interdisciplinary thinking “hypostatizes disciplines as such in order to sustain the sense that all dynamism in academic intellectual life must *necessarily* occur in the spaces between” (p. 739). Giri (2002) found that movements towards both interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity had been “sterile”:

Our rhetorics and practice of interdisciplinary studies is still within the predominant model of a bounded ontology and epistemology which while open for occasional negotiation of one’s boundaries, is reluctant and even resistant for a transmutation of one’s initial disciplinary identity and for participation in a relational field of transdisciplinarity” (p. 105).

The practice of transdisciplinary, Giri remarked, required “cultivating the art of abandonment.” It involves pain and suffering as well as the acknowledgment of dependence (pp. 111-112).

Boundary work is as much a part of interdisciplinarity as disciplinarity, Friman (2010) argued, since “boundary crossing itself creates new boundaries” (p. 5) (see also Klein, 2015). And in her case study of interdisciplinary efforts at three research universities, Strober (2011) came to the conclusion that “interdisciplinarity is a complement to disciplinarity, not a substitute” (p. 20). Above all, critiques of inter- and transdisciplinarity confirm that such enterprises necessitate clear problem delineations; concentrated, sustained, collaborative effort; and attainable, concrete assessment methods and goals.

The problems posed by interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity may also motivate movements back to disciplinarity. For example, in the *Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, Jacobs (2017) noted that disciplines often arise from interdisciplinary efforts, not the other way round. He argued that the facile association of interdisciplinarity with all things positive obscures the absolute necessity for disciplines in the modern research university. Without disciplines, scholars work in isolation and knowledge stagnates. And perhaps counterintuitively, without disciplines, universities become ever more a collection of interdisciplinary “balkanized” silos (p. 37).

Who Owns SLW?³

Discussions about disciplinarity and boundary moves in composition studies (e.g. Mailloux, 2006; Selfe, Villanueva, & Parks, 2017; Stevens, 2012) and in applied linguistics (e.g., Davies, 2007; DeBot, 2015; Grabe, 2010; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) are nothing new. Because SLW is much younger than composition or applied linguistics, its

status has not often been contested (contrast the content and tone, for example, of Casanave's *Controversies in Second Language Writing* (2004) with Seidlhofer's *Controversies in Applied Linguistics*, published a year earlier)⁴. Because of SLW's youth, "Who owns SLW?" is a crucial question. Is it a discipline unto itself? Is it a subdiscipline of applied linguistics? Of composition? Of writing studies? Above all, does SLW even merit consideration as a discipline?

In the U.S., while second language studies *programs* offered in linguistics and applied linguistics departments or through interdepartmental entities are likely to hire SLW specialists, *departments* of second language studies are less likely to do so. What one can say is that in most (U.S.) applied linguistics curricula at the graduate level, SLW merits a course or two but rarely the status of a specialty. In the past five years, however, studies specifically labeled "second language writing" have appeared in second language studies journals: *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* (Ferris, 2010); *Modern Language Journal* (Vyatkina, 2012); *Language Learning* (Suzuki, 2012); *Language Teaching* (Crossley, 2013); *Applied Linguistics* (Littlemore, Krennmayr, J. Turner, & S. Turner, 2013); and *Foreign Language Annals* (Godfrey, Treacy, & Tarone, 2014). Among the authors, only Ferris might claim SLW as her "specialty;" nonetheless, "second language writing" in these article titles suggests authors' intention that their research interact with that published in the speciality journal *JSLW*.

SLW researchers have not fared quite so well in composition publications. The only SLW scholars to have been published in *College English* in the past 20 years are Matsuda (2006) and Ferris (2014). In *College Composition and Communication*, the only article ever published with "second language writing" in its title was "CCCC Statement on Second-

Language Writing and Writers (2001/2014). Certainly, Matsuda (1999), Ortmeier-Hooper (2008), and Lyon (2009) have been published in CCCs, with “ESL” as the substitute for “second language”³. And a 2011 supplement to *Across the Disciplines* (Cox & Zawicki) focused on second language writing and writers. Overall, however, the number of articles about second language writing and writers has actually decreased in these and related publications (e.g., *Computers and Composition*, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *Written Communication*) in the past 10 years. SLW is better represented in international (i.e., non-U.S.) publications such as *Assessing Writing* and *International Journal of English Studies*.

In overviews of composition and rhetoric, SLW has rarely been claimed “one of us.” As late as 2006, Janice Lauer in her chapter “Rhetoric and Composition” in McComiskey’s *English Studies: An Introduction to the Discipline(s)* lists WAC, WID, WPA, and other subspecialties of rhetoric and composition, but not SLW. Some argue that SLW is part of a larger field, “writing studies,” which is defined this way in the University of California Santa Barbara program description:

Writing Studies is a research-based field broadly focused on analyzing the production, consumption, and circulation of writing in specific contexts. The field incorporates subspecialties such as composition and rhetoric, computers and writing, *second language writing*, genre studies, and textual analysis (italics mine).

The website *Writing Studies Tree* explores “the academic genealogy of writing studies” with lists of people, programs, and institutions. Colored lines trace relationships among “ancestors,” “descendants,” and “siblings” through a network of people who mentored or worked alongside certain people at certain universities. In the tag cloud, “second language writing” and “translingual composition” are in the very smallest font (4th level or lowest of four levels), in contrast to TESOL and to composition (2nd level). In this particular scheme,

SLW belongs to neither second language studies nor composition, although possibly it can be claimed by writing studies. Is this a viable positioning for the field? What does being “a type of writing studies” say about SLW’s status as a discipline?

What is SLW?

Paul Kei Matsuda is a historiographer and historian of SLW and its most well-known exponent. Matsuda often positions himself as speaking *for* SLW in conversations with composition (e.g., Matsuda & Skinnell, 2013). It is therefore valuable to trace the evolution of his thought on the disciplinarity of SLW through his publications. In his first history of SLW, Matsuda (1999) traced its roots to the 1940s-1950s, when U.S. ESL was focused on oral skills while university English departments were struggling to teach international students written English. Eventually, both composition and ESL got in on the act, creating “the disciplinary division of labor” that led to the 1966 founding of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), a breakaway from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). According to Matsuda, SLW theorists and practitioners borrowed from both composition and from second-language studies (applied linguistics), importing various theories and methods from both fields. Despite this cross-fertilization, Matsuda argued that the fields “should not be merged:”

Rather, second-language writing should be seen as an integral part of both composition studies and second-language studies, and specialists in both professions should try to transform their institutional practices in ways that reflect the needs and characteristics of second-language writers in their own institutional contexts (1999, p. 715).

By 2003, Matsuda termed SLW an “academic specialty,” a “field” and a “discipline” (p. 15). He warned against “severing ties” with “other fields that are also concerned with language and writing” (p. 28). It was, he said, “a symbiotic field”⁵ (p. 28). In 2012, Matsuda wrote: “Like many fields that emerged in the last half of the 20th century, L2 writing is an issue-oriented interdisciplinary field, not a modernist discipline that sees the world as a neat and orderly place that can be observed without any biases” (2012a, p. 300). In 2013, he described SLW as “an interdisciplinary field,” a venture between second language studies and composition studies.

One can see in Matsuda’s intellectual progression over time a movement away from SLW *in* composition and second-language studies to SLW *between* composition and second-language studies. This positioning has proven particularly useful in arguing the importance of SLW to both audiences. One of Matsuda’s earliest publications, “Composition Studies and ESL Writing: A Disciplinary Division of Labor” (1999) appeared in *College Composition and Communication*. In a themed volume of *Writing Program Administration* (termed “the ESL issue” by its editors), Matsuda, Fruit, and Burton (2006) addressed a composition studies audience by decrying the monolingual preparation of writing teachers and writing program administrators. In the introduction to *Exploring Composition Studies* (2012), editors Ritter and Matsuda labeled SLW a “contested site within the field” (p. 8) and a “symbiotic field” (p. 37).⁵ In contrast, when addressing a TESOL/English education audience, Jeffery, Kieffer, and Matsuda (2013) compared articles from *TESOL Quarterly* and *Research in the Teaching of English*, calling for cross-disciplinary communication: In 2013, 2014, and 2015, Matsuda branded SLW “transdisciplinary” in publications that I will examine below. By labeling SLW interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, doubtless Matsuda intended to raise the prestige and visibility of the field. However, the analyses and arguments that follow suggest that returning

to the characterization of SLW as a discipline may do more to consolidate its achievements and advance its endeavors.

Textual Analyses

The Journal of Second Language Writing

JSLW is recognized as the flagship journal of the field and has been published continuously since 1992 (Tardy, 2017). According to the Elsevier website, the journal is “devoted to publishing theoretically grounded reports of research and discussions that represent a contribution to current understandings of central issues in second and foreign language writing and writing instruction.” *JSLW* has published a number of special issues over the years that have engaged concepts, problems, and methodologies in SLW that can be elucidated by those of other fields. One might expect, therefore, that articles in these issues include direct and oblique references to disciplinarity, including explicit references to origins, disciplines, boundary work, overlap, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity. In other words, these issues should illuminate whether SLW is considered “a type of X,” where X = teacher education, foreign language writing, genre, TESOL, second language acquisition (SLA), or some other discipline.

In the earliest special issue (2001), Atkinson sought to distinguish “L1-oriented English composition instruction” (p. 107) from “the U.S. L2 writing classroom” (p. 109). Articles mention “ESL,” “L2,” “L2 writers,” and “L2 writing teachers/researchers;” “teaching of L2 writing” and “L2 literacy,” and “second-language” in various compounds with “writing,” “research,” “instruction,” and “issues” (Matsuda); both “EFL” and “L2 writing pedagogy” (Ivanič & Camps); “NNS” and “multilingual writers” (Hirvela & Belcher); and “second language writing pedagogies” (Prior). To summarize, the authors used applied linguistics

terminology to engage in boundary work with composition. In *JSLW* 26(1), 2014, which published multiple analyses of the Michigan State University Corpus of Second Language Writing, Crossley and McNamara as well as Friginal and Weigle referred numerous times to “L2 writing;” Polio and Shea referred to “second language (L2) writing research” and “the second language (L2) writing literature;” Bestgen and Granger discussed “neglected aspects of second language writing” (p. 39) and “a key aspect of the study of second-language writing (p. 40);” and the text of Bulté and Housen’s article contained 42 collocations of nouns with the compound adjective “L2 writing” (e.g., “complexity,” “development,” “performance,” “proficiency,” and “quality,” “research,” and “studies”). Many of these terms are specific to SLW. This comparison between the first and a more recent special issue of *JSLW* show the development of a large and expanding discipline-specific vocabulary.

What I could not find in any of the *JSLW* special issues were specific category assertions of the form “SLW is a type of X” or “X is a type of SLW.” This is particularly clear in the special issue on SLW-SLA interfaces (2012), in which no author asserted that SLW was a type of SLA. In fact, nowhere did Ortega acknowledge that applied linguistics, or at the very least SLA, contribute to SLW. Instead, she traced the ontological and epistemological differences between SLW and SLA, noting that both fields are interested in instruction and assessment but it remained for SLW to demonstrate the language learning potential of SLW. In sum, special issue authors consistently referred to SLW as one would a distinct discipline, particularly in introductions, literature reviews, and conclusions.

A *JSLW* “Disciplinary Dialogue” (2013)

The December 2013 issue of *JSLW*’s “Disciplinary Dialogues” began with its moderator, Dwight Atkinson, quoting Kubota: SLW is “nice field...risk-averse when it comes

to disagreement and debate” (p. 425). In this “Dialogue,” perhaps for the first time in print, one sees a clear but nevertheless polite argument developing. Because Matsuda responded to the entire forum in terms of disciplinarity, I have taken the liberty of interpreting each contribution through that lens: First, SLW *is not* a discipline. Second, SLW *might be* a discipline. And third, SLW *is* a discipline.

Canagarajah and Hyland argued SLW *is not* a discipline for two very different reasons. Canagarajah stated that the concept “SLW” had outlived its usefulness. His statement might allow for the interpretation that “SLW” might, at some point in the past, have been a useful moniker. For his part, Hyland argued that SLW is (and, I interpret) always has been a “manufactured” social construct, and therefore not a discipline at all (although by definition disciplines are social constructs). Instead, SLW is an “area of study—the study of writing in another language” (p. 426). Two contributions to the “Dialogues” essentially argued that SLW is not *its own* discipline. Roca de Larios stated that SLW is SLA, a “psycholinguistic locus for L2 production and learning.” Kobayashi and Rinnert opined that SLW is *writing*, period, and should not be considered a separate discipline: “We believe that L2 writing is closely interrelated with writing in other languages, and as such is not a separate entity but part of a comprehensive multilingual writing competence” (p. 442). Four authors in the forum appeared to allow that SLW *might be* a discipline. Zhang considered SLW a discipline and a practice with a focus on teachers and students, a stance contrasting with Kobayashi and Rinnert’s yet argued from the same perspective, that of teachers and writers. Lee and Ferris shared a similar opinion. In Ferris’ words, SLW “is about people who write and people who teach writing” as social practice. According to Lee, the gap between theory and practice in SLW should be filled by allowing for “inquiry” to include ethnographic and longitudinal qualitative research. It embraces texts, writers, and contexts. SLW should answer pedagogical

“hows.” One senses that these authors see themselves connected with SLW as a discipline but want to be certain that the writing classroom is the locus of theoretical and pedagogical discussions. And then there are the four who argued that SLW *is* a discipline. Tony Silva wrote that because SLW has a history, theories, scholars, scholarship, journals, pedagogies, and graduate students, it must be considered an academic discipline. Both Kubota and Belcher claimed (in Kubota’s words) that SLW is “a well-established *field* of inquiry...a well-recognized *academic niche* in larger fields like composition studies and teaching English to speakers of other languages” (p. 430, italics mine).

The “Disciplinary Dialogue” also included perspectives on the positive contributions of SLW: It had undermined “the myth of a single, monolithic ‘academic English’” (Hyland, p. 427); argued that writing is a context for SLA (Roca de Larios); created a common context for native, second, and foreign language learning in academic settings (Belcher; Kobayashi & Rinnert; Kubota; Silva); raised the status of both writing instructors and writing in the academy (Hyland); and seamlessly connected research, pedagogy, and advocacy (Ferris). For all intents and purposes, this group of SLW scholars identified disciplinary characteristics of SLW, characteristics that distinguish it from composition studies and second-language studies.

In his response to contributors, Matsuda (2013a) termed SLW “transdisciplinary” in contrast to “the limitations of the modernist conception of disciplinarity” (p. 448). Because of its origins, complexity, and multiple identity positions and interactions with other fields, it transcends disciplines and should be labeled “transdisciplinary...The intellectual work in the field transcends various disciplinary and institutional structures in addressing issues surrounding second language writing and writers” (p. 448). However, the multiple contexts in

which SLW is practiced and researched do not qualify it as “transdisciplinary,” at least in the sense the rest of the academic world understands the term.

The 2015 Symposium on Second Language Writing (SSLW)

The SSLW website description introducing the 2015 conference in Auckland, New Zealand described SLW this way:

An interdisciplinary field of specialization that draws from and contributes to various related fields, including applied linguistics, composition studies, education, foreign language studies, literacy studies, rhetoric, and TESOL.

SSLW’s conferences, like *JSLW* special issues, have demonstrated SLW’s outreach to other fields. For example, the 2008 Symposium focused on “Principles and Practices in Foreign Language Writing Instruction” (Cimasko, Reichelt, Im, & Arik, 2009). Yet over the years SSLW has provided glimmers of hope that the field can claim and support its own distinctiveness. In a report on SSLW 2014 published in *JSLW* in 2015, the word “discipline” is never mentioned. Nonetheless, notice how Canagarajah’s claim that SLW “has outlived its usefulness” (2013) is quoted and refuted:

On the last day of the Symposium, Paul Kei Matsuda led an open discussion session, “L2 Writing Apocalypse and the Future of the Profession.” Prompted by the claim that “second language writing will end,” a room full of L2 writing *professionals* from around the world representing various levels of *professionalization* discussed the future of the field. The overwhelming consensus among the participants was that L2 writing is now a well-established *profession*, and L2 writing specialists from around the world expect the profession to grow further, continuing to provide intellectual and moral support for their work. The group concluded that the field of second language

writing *has not outlived its usefulness* and that the Symposium on Second Language Writing will continue for the foreseeable future (O'Meara, Snyder, & Matsuda, 2015, p. 37, italics mine).

The introduction of the term *profession* into the disciplinary debate is interesting. It first surfaced in the title of SSLW 2014, "Professionalizing Second Language Writing" and has since appeared as the title of ...

In spite of the rhetorical retreat from discipline to profession, the triumphant assertion that the Symposium would continue to meet was a bold disciplinary move. It underscores that SLW is a community of scholars in the (continued) process of investigation and application of research findings. No mention of transdisciplinarity here.

The *College English* Letter (Atkinson et al., 2015)

Before analyzing this letter, I investigate two articles by Matsuda (2013c, 2014) that provide its argumentative foundation. In his chapter in *Literacy as Translingual Practice*, "It's the Wild West Out There," Matsuda (2013c) praised the recent resurgence of interest in language-related topics in composition, which had been ignored in the past by compositionists' dismissal of language issues as "too mundane and too technical at the same time" (p. 129), and their relative ignorance of (among other fields) linguistics and applied linguistics, communication, and education. Nevertheless, Matsuda found "translingual practice" (a.k.a. translingual writing, TW) worrisome, particularly as the new interest in language "seemed to be engaging the entire field" (p. 131).

Matsuda then engaged in diplomatic and restrained boundary work between "the current linguistic turn in composition" and SLW without ever mentioning the two by name. Matsuda critiqued TW on three grounds: (a) Its "tendency to despise the old and valorize the

new” (p. 132), creating a climate in which “scholars are inhibited from critiquing these ideas lest they appear old fashioned or ideologically suspect”; (b) its lack of critical evaluation of “new” terms and concepts; and (c) its destigmatization of language differences to the point that “the real need for some language learners to learn a new language...or the need for non-dominant languages to be validated or left alone” fall by the wayside (p. 132). In addition, Matsuda argued that without a legitimate community of scholars, “Delving into a new intellectual territory as we develop new ways of understanding and discussing language issues can, at least initially, create confusion because the availability of ‘knowledgeable’ peers is limited, and the disciplinary dialectic—the process of peer evaluation that provides checks and balances—may not function properly.” (p. 133). In a fascinating turn of his own, Matsuda chided TW for its faulty approach to interdisciplinarity:

In interdisciplinary scholarly activities, where prospectors from various disciplinary backgrounds come together to explore what a new territory has to offer, it is important to define terms carefully, reflecting an awareness of the origin and history of the term as well as its variations. In coining new terms or proposing a new concept, it is important to survey the new territory to make sure that the land has not been previously inhabited by other peoples (p. 135).

The implication of this scolding is that SLW has been successful at interdisciplinarity, while TW has not.

A year later, in "The Lure of Translingual Writing," Matsuda (2014) attacked TW's "rhetorical excess" (p. 478), which consisted of constructing "a caricature of the 'traditional' approach and contrast[ing] it to the new one" (p. 480). Matsuda ascribed scholars' and teachers' interest in TW to intellectual curiosity and acknowledged that its scholars had produced "visible examples with due diligence" (e.g., codemeshing) (p. 481). Matsuda

asserted that TW's assumptions were "hardly new" (a possible reference to Horner et al., 2011): (a) English monolingualism is prevalent and problematic; (b) the presence of language differences is normal and desirable; (c) languages are neither discrete nor stable but rather dynamic and negotiated; (d) practicing TW involves the negotiation of language differences (p. 479). He equated scholars', teachers', and students' fascination with language differences to "linguistic tourism," and argued that "writing teachers need to know a lot more about the use of multiple languages than what can be learned from tour guides" (p. 483). His solution? "Learn more about language" (p. 483), an obvious reference to applied linguistics.

Matsuda has not been alone in drawing boundaries with TW. Wible (2013), for example, urged reciprocity between TW and foreign language teaching and learning: "The movement in interdisciplinary language pedagogy must be two-way. Rhetoric and composition scholars should look to foreign language scholarship as they continue to explore ways of teaching students how to negotiate written and oral communication in a globalizing, multilingual world" (p. 156). And some mainstream compositionists have also critiqued TW. Tracing a direct line from the CCCC position statement *Students Right to Their Own Language* to TW, Anthony (2013) argued that Matsuda's claims that composition had largely ignored L2 writers were false. Composition had been, over time, moving away from viewing multilingual writers and their writing as problems towards viewing them as teaching and learning resources. Nonetheless, Anthony concluded that "Translingualism, as a developing theory, still calls for more research that emphasizes pedagogical techniques that use a translingual approach to language" (p. ii).

These works underpin the arguments in the *College English* letter (2015). Authored by Dwight Atkinson and six colleagues and endorsed by 17 others, the communication from SLW

specialists attempted to “clarify the relationship between L2 writing and translingual writing” (p. 383). They began by claiming that TW was encroaching upon SLW:

There seems to be a tendency to conflate L2 writing and translingual writing, and view the latter as a replacement for or improved version of L2 writing...Some proponents of translingual writing have suggested that translingualism is an encompassing term for a variety of fields, including L2 writing (p. 384).

To quote Brown and Levinson (1987), this is “bald-on-record” boundary work.

The structure of the letter’s main argument is deductive and its conclusion a polite call to action: “We wish to emphasize the importance of encouraging the development of L2 writing and translingual writing as related yet distinct areas of research and teaching” (p. 383). The writers appealed to the “mission” of SLW and the assertion that TW has not concerned itself with this mission:

With growing language diversity in writing classes across the U.S., members of the L2 writing community have long advocated for the need of all writing professionals to be aware of the linguistic diversity of their student populations and how to best serve them... Translingual writing has not widely taken up the task of helping L2 writers increase their proficiency in what might still be emerging L2s and develop and use their multiple language resources to serve their own purposes.

The authors claimed that SLW has been doing this *as well as* “addressing the ideological concerns highlighted in translingual writing” (p. 384).

Having drawn boundaries and asserted the mission of SLW, Atkinson and colleagues acknowledged the value of TW in these diplomatic gestures:

Translingual writing is valuable in that it highlights issues that fall between traditional conceptions of L1 and L2 writing... We understand that translingual approaches are

useful in challenging dominant language ideologies... This broad agenda [TW] addresses some aspects of communicate strategies and language awareness that are important...Our aim in this letter is to not to diminish the value of translingual approaches (p. 384).

Such conciliatory moves served to mitigate its main premise and call to action: TW and SLW *do not* share the same theoretical, research, and practical orientations, so the audience should (a) recognize that SLW is “its own field” and that TW is not a replacement; (b) understand that SLW researchers will not situate their work within TW, so select manuscript and conference referees familiar with SLW; and (d) hire job candidates with expertise in SLW because “candidates professing translingual writing expertise” lack expertise in “training writing teachers and developing writing curricula” (p. 385).

This last item is a parting shot at TW’s main deficiency, which is that it touts an “agenda” with no practical application. This oblique claim occurs in the second paragraph of the letter: “L2 writing scholars at CCCC have been working for decades to develop resources and strategies for supporting writing teachers and program administrators in *working more effectively with L2 writers*” (p. 383, emphasis mine). “At CCCC” labels SLW’s conference territory, whereas “for decades” implies that TW is a recent interloper.

In several places in the letter, SLW and TW are characterized as “overlapping” (p. 384) with “common foci” (p. 385). This assertion that SLW and TW share some territory is conciliatory but portends an interdisciplinary, not transdisciplinary future. Although the writers label SLW as “an international and transdisciplinary field of study” as if the two were related, none of the writers or endorsers list institutional affiliations outside the U.S. Atkinson and colleagues failed to mention an important selling point for SLW: It is an

international community of scholars, research, and pedagogy rather than a movement situated only in the context of U.S. composition.

If anything is transdisciplinary in this letter, it is the term “writing studies.” The letter is addressed to “Writing Studies Editors and Organization Leaders,” and expresses gratitude to “the field of writing studies” thanking it/them for “continued service to the field” and for “supporting a strong future for L2 writers, teachers, and scholars” (p. 385). The conciliatory closing is followed by a list of 17 “second language writing specialists.”

Discussion

Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962/2010) is often invoked in discussions of disciplinary change. According to Kuhn, a field becomes a science (a discipline) when it adopts a certain paradigm. A scientific revolution is a noncumulative developmental episode in which an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by an incompatible new one (p. 92). Paradigms change through awareness of anomalies (counterinstances), which call into question generalizations produced by the paradigm, and the resulting crisis yields new facts and theories. When a transition from former to alternate paradigm is complete, the profession changes its view of the field, its methods, and its goals. Since theory-testing through falsification is no longer an option in postmodern inquiry, new paradigms cannot be critiqued through the results and interpretations of inquiry. Instead, they are affected through techniques of persuasive argumentation demonstrating that the two paradigms are logically incompatible: They no longer share the same universe of discourse.

In “The End of Second Language Writing?” Canagarajah (2013) invoked *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to point out SLW falling and translingual writing (TW)⁴ rising:

When certain concepts have outlived their usefulness, they are abandoned and new concepts constructed to reflect our new realizations and pedagogies. That is after all the logic behind the rise and fall of intellectual paradigms, as described by Thomas Kuhn (p. 441).

If TW emerges as a disciplinary substitute for SLW, TW can purport (as it already has) to have revolutionized the entire field of writing studies. It is understandable, therefore, that Atkinson, Matsuda, and colleagues have claimed that SLW is at least *interdisciplinary* if not *transdisciplinary*. In other words, removing SLW from disciplinary paradigms may appear to be a good way to sidestep the TW argument altogether. But before avoiding this “revolutionary” challenge, I propose that SLW respond in it on Canagarajah’s own Kuhnian terms.

Kuhn argues that a scientific revolution involves “a noncumulative developmental episode” in a particular discipline; the new paradigm bursts upon the scene with little connection to the past. SLW scholars’ critiques of TW suggest this may be the case. But as a new paradigm, is TW “incompatible” with SLW? SLW scholars would argue that it is not, in that TW rehashes insights already claimed by SLW. TW scholars, however, are more likely to argue that SLW’s “concepts” are outdated. Did the new TW paradigm emerge from a recognition of anomalies in phenomena (second language writers and writing) and methodologies (how they/it are studied)? Yes, say TW scholars, since the role of language in writing and the contexts of writing have changed. Since SLW’s “we got here first” contention is unacceptable in this argument, we might ask: Are there any research studies that support TW’s claims? Have “new facts and theories” been generated through inquiry? And even if theory-testing through falsification no longer convinces, can the “new paradigm” of TW prevail based solely on the force of its arguments? Not unless it can demonstrate that SLW

and TW are “logically incompatible,” a claim that has not yet been supported. Therefore, a Kuhnian argument is insufficient to dismiss SLW as a has-been.

It is far too early for SLW to exit the disciplinary stage. Without a strong disciplinary identity, SLW opens itself to attack and to substitution. It has much to gain by constructing itself as a discipline-in-formation. Its travails are similar to those of “wanna-be-a-discipline” World Englishes (Kubota, 2013). Seargeant (2012) labeled it “a distinct and substantial academic discipline within the field of applied and socially-oriented linguistics” (p. 114). However, since consensus has not yet developed about the phenomena under investigation and research methodologies and objectives, Seargeant asked whether

The development of an orthodoxy in its methodological approach...would have the effect of constraining enquiry and inhibiting innovate thought... structural coherence for the discipline appears to stem from shared concerns rather than a shared theoretical apparatus, the validity of findings does not rest on a single theoretical model to which all research need orient itself (p. 124).

Although Seargeant’s suggestion that disciplines need to develop “orthodoxy” does not convince, what I derive from this quote is that from an insider’s perspective of a field, “shared concerns” may be just as or even more important than “a shared theoretical apparatus,” data sources, and methodologies in establishing a field as a discipline.

In the *College English* letter (2015), the authors constructed SLW as transdisciplinary, with *trans-*, I interpret, connoting bigger and better. The argument can be paraphrased thus: Transdisciplinarity creates an openness to expansion and growth that is better than the narrow constraints of disciplinarity. And of course SLW wants to expand and grow!

Here, I argue that SLW can expand and grow within disciplinary boundaries. I cite three reasons why SLW should *not* characterize itself as transdisciplinary and would do better

to characterize itself as a discipline. My arguments are philosophical, epistemological, and sociopolitical.

According to theorists of transdisciplinarity (e.g., Klein, 2010), SLW possesses neither the complexity nor the breadth to be labeled as such. First, as a humanities-social science field as opposed to a scientific one, SLW is unlikely to participate in cross-disciplinarity, which is usually the province of the natural sciences (Strober, 2006). Second, consistent with Klein's "anthropology construed as science of humans" analogy, SLW is not yet "based on validated expertise from various disciplines." Being valued or validated by one's own and others' disciplines is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for disciplinarity. Nonetheless, it is a necessary condition for *transdisciplinarity*. A transdisciplinary label for SLW makes even less sense as one of writing studies' constituent disciplines, composition studies, continues to struggle for its own disciplinary recognition (Fleming, 2002; Johnson, 2010; Phelps & Ackerman, 2010; Rosner, Boehm, & Journet, 1999; Tucker, 2014). Finally, SLW meets none of the requirements set out by Klein (2008) to be evaluated as a transdisciplinary field, since by definition the transdisciplinary project is intentional, collaborative, and iterative.

A second reason why SLW should not be considered transdisciplinary, at least in the sense suggested by TW, is its largely empirical research tradition and international sites of inquiry. Qualitative and quantitative research studies of L2 writers in multiple teaching and learning contexts have grounded SLW (although Atkinson et al.'s 2012 *JSLW* "Disciplinary Dialogue" on replication challenged this going forward). Although empiricism is often conflated with modernity, and modernity with disciplinarity, which per Foucault (1977/1995) and successors in the postmodern, critical tradition (e.g., Peters, 1999), is inherently rigid, controlling, and doomed to failure (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Turner, 2006), inter- and

transdisciplinarity cannot exist without “the critical edge of disciplinary rigor” (Rowland, 2006, p. 13). As Finkenthal (2001) argued, “We do not have to relativize everything... Disciplinarian thinking is not bad because it perpetuates some obsolete ways of thinking which must be replaced with newer and more progressive ones” (p. 9). While SLW must expand its repertoire of research approaches and research sites, it makes little sense to jettison its epistemological foundation.

More reasons for SLW to eschew transdisciplinarity are sociopolitical and have to do with the academic realities of research universities, graduate education, and professional associations. In looking at how well SLW matches the intellectual formations typical of disciplinarity (D’Agostino, 2012), we can say that SLW has developed a narrative of its development and legitimacy, a body of accumulated knowledge and skills, and a discursive and rhetorical discourse community. I would argue that SLW has yet to establish “styles of subjectivity, including criteria for assessing the value of work and ‘rigor’,” at least not explicitly. In terms of the “social facts” of disciplinarity, SLW has been recognized (albeit in different ways) in classificatory systems; and it boasts its own conferences and journals (though not a distinct professional association), and even publishers interested in disseminating edited volumes and monographs. What SLW still lacks (in D’Agostino’s typology) are academic organizational unit(s) and undergraduate curricula. I argue that eventually (if there is a will) these will transpire; it is only a matter of time.

Regarding faculty specialization and status, Strober (2006) argued that circumventing disciplinarity and jumping ahead to transdisciplinarity lead to academic suicide. Employing Stephen Jay Gould’s fox-hedgehog analogy, in which academic hedgehogs “stick to a single effective strategy throughout their academic careers” and academic foxes “devise many strategies,” Strober argued that foxes must start out as hedgehogs because “all candidates for

faculty promotion and tenure at research universities, even those who show fox-like tendencies early on, must gain their reputations in a relatively narrow specialty” (p. 324). Strober argued that foxes are the ones who engage in multidisciplinary work, but they must always “retain a deep connection to their specialty... [or] it is unlikely that they will be sought out as collaborators” (p. 324). Since departments of second language writing do not yet exist, SLW specialists must, of needs, be appointed to (applied) linguistics, composition, English, rhetoric, foreign language, language education and other such academic units. From these perches, they then can speak *to* and sometimes *with* other academic colleagues while holding themselves apart from departmental colleagues. The history of SLW has been rife with these positionings: Note, for example, Silva, Leki, & Carson (1997) as applied linguists arraying themselves at “the disciplinary margins” of composition, or Leki and Silva as compositionists writing a synthesis of SLW research with Cumming (2008), published as part of Routledge’s educational research catalog.

While well-published SLW specialists as faculty can “afford to live without the term second language writing or the collective sense of the field it refers to” (a.k.a. disciplinarity) (Matsuda, 2013a, p. 450), this is not the case for graduate students. To his credit, Matsuda acknowledged this distinction, noting that “being able to identify with a socially-recognized intellectual formation [SLW] is going to be useful as they [graduate students] try to establish themselves in their respective institutional and disciplinary contexts” (p. 450). Interestingly, the word “discipline” in these “disciplinary contexts” does not refer to SLW. This omission begs the question: As educators, are SLW specialists creating a generation of “novice scholars” who must take on marginalized identities within established “disciplinary contexts”? SLW as transdiscipline does not bode well for job-seekers, despite Atkinson and

colleagues' intercession on their behalf with "writing studies editors and organizational leaders" (2015).

Conclusion

The way out is to conceive of and build SLW as a discipline. With Zhang, Lee, and Ferris (2013), we can argue that second language writing instruction in a multiplicity of global contexts is the foundation of the discipline. Despite Atkinson et al.'s (2015) claim that SLW and TW are "overlapping" with "common foci," the problems they focus on are different. With Matsuda, we can trace the development of SLW from its roots in applied linguistics, TESOL, and composition, and, while respecting these disciplines and their contributions to SLW, stand as separate. With Roca de Larios, Kobayshi, and Rinnert (2013), we can celebrate SLW's achievements and agree with Hyland that SLW as "social fact" has accomplished a great deal for multilingual writers and writing. It is not yet time to throw in the towel. As SLW develops its disciplinary identity, we can engage in *interdisciplinarity* on our own terms, on our own schedule, without disappearing into the morass of TW and "writing studies." As Derrida (1997) noted, a field's argument for its interdisciplinarity confirms its (own view of its) disciplinarity, a disciplinarity SLW has yet to admit. In *Disciplinary Identities* (2012), Hyland suggests that "communicative performances" solidify academic identities and the relationship between these and academic communities and disciplines. That is, arguments about disciplinarity are the communicative performances that construct disciplines. Perhaps, then, even Canagarajah's and Hyland's dismissals of SLW from the halls of academe can play a role in moving it towards an actual and accepted disciplinarity.

Notes

1. In his classic essay “Publics and Counterpublics,” Michael Warner defines a *public* as “a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed” (p. 50). He continues: “A public is a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse” (p. 62).
2. In Chinese, for example, *academic discipline* (学科, xué kē) and *school discipline* (学风, xué fēng) rely on a common radical, but the etymologies for *religious (monastic) discipline* (修行, xiū xíng) and for *discipline as reprimand (惩戒, chéng jiè) or punishment (处罚, chǔ fá; 处分, chǔ fèn)* are distinct from that and from one another (*Bab.la Chinese-English Dictionary*).
3. The heading for this section is a calque on a section heading from the first chapter of Sharon Crowley’s *Composition in the University* (1998), “Who Owns Composition?”
4. *Controversies in Applied Linguistics* contains arguments about “linguistic imperialism, the validity of critical discourse analysis, the pedagogic relevance of corpus descriptions of language, the theoretical bases of second language acquisition research, the nature of applied linguistics itself” (Google Books entry). On the other hand, *Controversies in Second Language Writing* helps “L2 writing teachers to make good decisions...[giving] teachers cause for reflecting on their own teaching strategies and criteria” (book jacket).
5. This conflation of SLW with “ESL” perpetuates the English-centric monolingual bias of U.S. composition.

6. While Matsuda is no doubt referring to the earliest and primary sense of *symbiosis* as “living together” (*OED*, 1622), the biological definition, “any intimate association of two or more different organisms, *whether mutually beneficial or not*,” may better fit the historical realities (italics mine). Indeed, symbiosis may involve parasitism (*Oxford Dictionary of Biology*, 6th ed.).
7. “Translingual writing” also appears in the literature as “translingualism” and “translingual composition.”

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