Working with Multilingual Writers: Opportunities, Outcomes, and Strategies

Some talking points:

Multilingual student writers bring a lot of resources to the class. We should welcome such resources and encourage the play of multiple discourses in the class.

While encouraging pluralities, we should hold students accountable for communicating their idea to their intended readers, who could be coming from outside of as well as from within students’ language and discourse communities.

This embrace of difference and diversity does not imply different standards of evaluation for different students. It does, however, require us to find and implement maps sufficient for any student to navigate the territory both to and from the outcomes we delineate. Such an approach enhances the opportunities that the globalized world has to offer to them. One ideal outcome would be to prepare students who are capable of shuttling among multiple language and discourse communities and writing contexts.

No different assignments, no different grading criteria---it’s all about creating a new level of rigor for what students and teachers can learn and accomplish.

Strategies for engaging multiplicities in the class:

1. Weave language, culture, and discourse conventions into writing topics.
2. Draw course materials from multiple languages, media, and both discourse and cultural conventions.
3. Craft assignments that invite students to play with their pluralities (and specify limits appropriate to academic conventions and course outcomes).
4. Teach about the structures of sentences (and paragraphs) in ways that facilitate students’ ability to move across different language and discourse communities, as well as among the different writing purposes or goals we’re asking them to navigate.

[Editorial comment: you might need help from a linguist for strategy 4. –cs]