Santa Clara University
Scholar Commons

English | College of Arts & Sciences

2024

Revision as Protecting What is Important

Cruz Medina

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl

Copyright © 2024 University Press of Colorado / Utah State University Press. Reprinted with permission.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.

10

REVISION AS PROTECTING WHAT IS IMPORTANT

Cruz Medina

This is a story about drafting and revising an article manuscript for an ill-fitting "top-tier" journal while trying to protect the important student writing at the heart of the piece. In 2015, I began researching the translingual practices of multilingual students in a first-year composition (FYC) course at my Bay Area university. When I submitted the manuscript to an National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) journal, I revised the format of the manuscript for a more empirical model in line with the journal's guidelines, and the manuscript was ultimately rejected after revision and resubmission. Even though I had envisioned this piece as addressing the decolonial potential of multilingual students performing translingual practices, I made needless revisions to sound more empirical, because I was drawn to the allure of the "top-tier" journal. This chapter is about finding my way back to the correct methodology and how generous *Composition Studies* journal editors helped to restore my confidence in an article that would ultimately be published and selected for the *Best of the Journals of Rhetoric and Composition 2020* (Medina 2021).

When I first started writing what would become "Decolonial Potential in a Multilingual FYC" (Medina 2019), I was motivated by the negative experiences that my multilingual students had written about in their literacy narratives in the bilingual first-year writing course I taught. The internalized inferiority or isolation that my students had experienced because of their multilingual abilities felt important for me to share; for example, one student wrote: "Throughout my education, I always viewed English as a superior language to my native Spanish language due to the constant separation of students into classrooms of different English levels" (as cited in Medina 2019, 81). Many of my multilingual students had concluded, after having discussed their feelings of isolation, that they would adapt their English to meet the linguistic expectations in the

https://doi.org/10.7330/9781646425501.c010

area, to improve their job prospects. Having written about decoloniality in terms of Latinx pop culture (Medina 2015), digital archives (Medina 2016), and student writing (Medina 2013), I felt that the students' experiences and their conclusions came from internalized standards of the dominant monolingual ideological and economic forces. Simply put: the whiteness of settler colonialism in Silicon Valley made my students feel that they would be measured against an impossible standard that framed their multilingual abilities as deficient.

However, when it came to writing about these literacy narratives, I targeted selective NCTE journals and found myself similarly feeling as though I had to write with rigid expectations on behalf of my imagined audience. First, I felt unsure whether the audiences would be receptive to scholarship on translingualism, so I felt an additional concern about applying a decolonial approach, because Indigenous forms of knowledge-making like storytelling are not always accepted in NCTE journals, which can skew towards more "objective" approaches. The students' writing, their translingual experiences, and the decolonial approach were the most important aspects for the article; however, due to allowing myself to contort my writing to something it wasn't and omitting this method in the initial drafts, the revision process took much longer (*years!*) than it should have.

The initial draft I began writing in 2016 included a lot of material about my university's context of the Bay Area, some mention of California English-only politics, and the influence of Silicon Valley. Keeping the field of writing studies in mind, I framed the analysis around David Bartholomae's (1985) "Inventing the University" because I imagined my writing studies audience firmly identifying with canonical references, which would then ideally help to make the material on translingualism more situated in relation to familiar academic discussions. The original abstract was:

> This article is about the practical application of translingualism in a first-year writing course, examining the responses of students in this course through the data collected in literacy narratives that speak to linguistic difference, the myth of linguistic homogeneity, and translingualism; however, I begin with a contemporary exhibit that satirizes the context for where this research comes from because of the dominant role that the technology industry plays in the U.S. economy, not to mention the affordances technology provides for those of us in writing studies.

Although I can clearly see how the central focus on market forces of the tech industry was my desire to address capitalism's role in colonialism, the "satirizing" aspect stood in place of the decolonial critique and

detracted from the focus of my analysis of translingual practices. In the introduction, I included quotes from the HBO television show *Silicon Valley*, where different app developers all say that they "want to make a better world" whereas the central focus of everyone in the show is to make the most money. The critique of *Silicon Valley* was rooted in capitalism's impact on how language difference is viewed, but the mention of the show detracted from my original motivation: the students' writing.

Although I did not initially incorporate a decolonial methodology, I drew on Suresh Canagarajah's (2012) discussion of autoethnography as a way to frame the value of lived experiences. I explained how Canagarajah draws attention to emotions experienced when language differences are central to an experience. I paraphrased his work when I described the literacy narrative assignment where "I ask students to think about experiences that connect to an emotion because these emotions connect to how we think about people's response to our use of language." When I submitted this early draft, it was desk-rejected by the editor at an NCTE journal with minimal feedback, noting that the journal had recently published something on translingualism (which I knew, encouraged that the journal published scholarship in that area.) To be fair, the editor's feedback got at my omission of decoloniality in relation to translingualism when the editor wrote that my submission needed to "thicken the conversation about it in some substantive way." In wanting to remain somewhat central to the conversation, I had not pushed the academic conversation much further because of my hesitancy to include a decolonial approach.

It wasn't much later that I attended a roundtable of journal editors at the College Composition and Communication Conference (CCCC) and heard the incoming editor of a different NCTE journal announce a new section about pedagogical innovation to which I decided to submit my article. Though pedagogically oriented, the description for this new section emphasized empiricism; the section "showcases primary classroom documents and empirically documented practices that translate disciplinary expertise into the instructional practice" ("*College English* Submission Guidelines"). To fit this focus, I cut some of the Silicon Valley context and moved up references to the journal's recent special issue on translingualism. The revised abstract read:

> Based on the data collected from student writing, I posit that translingualism taught alongside critique of monolingual ideology to critically raise student awareness of how they can begin to understand their place in inventing the university (*à la* Bartholomae); additionally, translingualism, as a concept, reframes linguistic diversity, which has traditionally been

> portrayed as a deficit (e.g., "broken English"), as an additional literacy resource and rhetorical mode available to them.

Rereading this abstract is painful, in no small part because of my attempt to sound extra empirical, but also because I was putting the form of the article before the content, which provoked an entirely different format. The reviewers offered thorough feedback that called for a more empirical methodology than what they considered to be a more interpretive lens of translingualism. With the emphasis on empiricism, I talked myself out of incorporating a decolonial methodology. The journal's section seemed in many ways antithetical to decolonial knowledge and practices that seek to redress the colonial paradigm that relies on the collection of data. But I couldn't break from the internalized expectations I put on myself to align with the journal.

Writing this is hard, perhaps in part because revision can be hard work, but more so because returning to the reviewers' comments is also painful. Reading reviewer feedback can often be nerve-wracking, but looking at reviewer suggestions from a journal that was not meant for work like mine feels more like peeling off a bandage that covered a scar from unnecessary surgery. Reading the list of "comments" and the "changes" or "rebuttals" that the editor asked me to include with my resubmission, I found comments that seemed to suggest that a reviewer at times might not have been reading too closely. Their comments seemed to support their assessment more than to offer revision guidance:

> Comment: "It promises to develop a shared vocabulary, again something that the article really can't fulfill."
>
> Rebuttal: The "shared vocabulary" refers to the introduction of terms such as monolingual ideology, myth of linguistic homogeneity, translingualism, multilingualism in the articles that precede the literacy narrative assignment. ("Revision Suggestions for Your Article" 2017)

In the next draft, I still added longer definitions for some of these terms. However, the tone of the reviewer's recommendations suggested that no amount of revision would meet expectations, like a failing grade that the feedback had to defend.

In other instances, the phrasing of the feedback continued to discourage revision. Both reviewers seemed to make suggestions in relation to journal criteria, although this did not stop one reviewer from slipping in negative commentary that they then backpedaled from as they seemed to be thinking through their explanation. The reviewer commented, "The article itself is truly disorganized; I didn't see an underlying structure that would help a reader follow everything coherently.

Maybe 'disorganized' isn't quite the right word—it's just very narrative, not structured." And to their credit, the initial draft that I submitted began with more narrative that was meant to situate the research:

> After having taught first year writing at the University of Arizona, a large land-grant state university in the Southwest, I witnessed how conservative state legislatures dismantle the Mexican American Studies program at the Tucson High School, despite the fact that it contributed to increased state test scores and graduation rates (Cabrera et al.; Medina). . . . So, when I returned to my native state of California to begin my first tenure-track job teaching at a private liberal arts university in the Bay Area of Northern California, I kept in mind that my home state had also been affected by policy such as Proposition 63, which made English the "official" language in 1986.

In the reviewer's initial comment, they called the manuscript "disorganized" before revising their description in the comment to call it "very narrative." Unfortunately, comments like this confirmed my original reluctance to include a decolonial methodology, because decolonial practices include storytelling, or narrative, as a legitimate form of knowledge-building (King, Gubele, and Rain Anderson 2015). Again, it was my own mistake not to include decoloniality in this draft, although it can be difficult to get past reviewer comments that read more like punitive intrusive thoughts rather than constructive feedback.

Even though the motivation for writing this article was to criticize the colonial force of monolingual ideology impacting my multilingual students, I begrudgingly added critical discourse analysis as the method in an attempt to appease the journal and remain critical of social power dynamics. I very much felt what Joseph Harris articulates in this collection when he writes that "we often revise to meet the demands of others" (Harris, 27). My revision choices were somewhat ironic, because I was responding to social forces similar to those I was critiquing in my article, as exemplified by revisions to the first line of the introduction that made it read more like an abstract: "Scholars across composition studies (Baca; Banks; Canagarajah; Cushman; Haas; Selfe; Shipka) have widened the scope from the monolingual perspective about writing in English to arguing for valuing and teaching multilingualism, non-alphabetic modes and composing with multiple modes." I addressed the organization suggestion by framing the article in a traditional IMRaD format (Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion). I continued to go against what was important by second-guessing the decolonial argument and pushing the student voices into the analysis or discussion section of the IMRaD format. All of this ran in opposition to the original

motivation of showcasing multilingual voices that are negatively framed by English-only rhetoric. This revised manuscript was ultimately rejected.

Fortunately, during this submission and revision process, I had a short piece published in *Composition Studies* (Medina 2017) as a part of the "Where We Are" section on Latinx Compositions and Rhetorics. It was that short piece and the inclusive leadership of Laura Micciche that inspired global revisions and reworking the translingual piece with a decolonial methodology. Still under the influence of the most recent NCTE journal's reviewer feedback, I revised and submitted a manuscript that followed something similar to an IMRaD format. The first line had the grand summative statement about Englishes: "Within rhetoric and composition, African American, American Indian, and Latinx scholars have questioned the extent to which the field can, across university contexts, operate within higher education and against colonial paradigms undergirded by racism, sexism, classism, and other systems of oppression that impact whose voices or English(es) are valued." Though the line contains fewer references than the previous version, the next few lines remained somewhat dense as I introduced important ideas about decolonialism.

One of the biggest turning points in my revision came after I submitted my revised manuscript based on the editorial and reviewer feedback. Micciche asked if I would be interested in working with Bob Mayberry, a former editor of the journal. Micciche explained that doing so could make the manuscript that much stronger before the reviewers reread it. I was somewhat exhausted by the thought of another go-round with more feedback, but I knew Micciche's recommendation came from a place of genuinely wanting to help, especially when compared with my previous editorial and reviewer experiences. Mayberry was such a good reader for this article that he even read an earlier article of mine, "Nuestros Refranes" in *Reflections* (Medina 2013); Mayberry said that reading my earlier article helped him see connections between both pieces. He helped me declutter my prose from some of the theoretical jargon that I was still hiding behind in the same way that the IMRaD format depersonalizes the writer and subject for supposed empirical neutrality.

One of the major revisions that I made was forefronting the student voices, which provided the exigency that helped the reader to see why the decolonial potential of this program should be considered. Mayberry offered me the same advice that Cristina Kirklighter, then editor of *Reflections*, had also given me, about beginning with students' voices. My article "Nuestros Refranes" begins: "In the words of a high

school student in Tucson, 'Words of wisdom, from those who survived their grimmest days, speak in proverbs, or dichos, to live by' " (Medina 2013, 53). Kirklighter explained that with articles about students' writing, it only made sense to begin with the students' voices. Mayberry's editorial advice led to beginning with a student whom I coded as "Selena":

> A multilingual student, Selena, describes in her literacy narrative the feeling of vulnerability she experienced in elementary school when she moved from Mexico City, Mexico, to Toronto, Canada: "I would rather be in a tank full of hungry sharks than once again be vulnerable to a language barrier that had barely been trespassed months before." (Medina 2019, 74)

Beginning with student voices set the right tone to humanize the experiences in the students' writing, more so than in my previous, more empirical-sounding drafts. It was unfortunate that, in previous versions of my article, I had lost sight of what had originally motivated me: the student voices and experiences.

One of the main differences between the early reviewer feedback and what Micciche and Mayberry offered was the sustained editorial back-and-forth that helped me regain my focus. While this is not standard across journals, peer reviewers and editors could make their feedback more effective by building relationships with authors. Mayberry and Micciche worked with me to reorganize, offering generative ideas about shifting the student writing to earlier in the piece and moving the theoretical discussion to later, as opposed to the earlier feedback about being disorganized without offering any suggestion for revision. Their editorial work embodied what Raúl Sánchez envisions as a noncompetitive peer review that is "constructive, affirming, and focused on improvement and cooperation" (Sánchez, this collection, 118).

I should clarify that I assume all blame for not following my initial impulse to incorporate decolonialism. As a Chicano scholar, my thinking and writing is rooted in the genealogy of Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) work, which offers criticism of colonialism while focusing on Indigeneity and the struggle for land. Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq and Breeanne Matheson deftly articulate my desire for transparency in the revision process with decolonial work when they write, "We believe that by talking about and modeling transparency regarding the complexities we've faced as scholars attempting to do decolonial work, we provide space for other scholars to acknowledge and . . . rectify the messiness involved in their own work" (2021, 21). If anything, I think this piece reveals some of the messiness of continually working to resist what we have been inculcated to believe that we desire from our work.

Perhaps because there is something of a happy ending, I feel more comfortable sharing my numerous (and repeated) mistakes during the revision process of this article that was ultimately published in *Composition Studies*. I am additionally honored that "Decolonial Potential in a Multilingual FYC" was also included in the *Best of 2020 Rhetoric and Composition Journals* collection (Medina 2021). Quoting the materials generated during the editorial process, I tried my best to acknowledge the editorial work that, as I explained, "restored my faith in my writing" (Medina 2021, 82). Though the audiences we imagine might change and shift for good reasons, protecting what motivates us to write can be the most important aspect of writing, because it is what keeps us writing.

REFERENCES

Anzaldúa, Gloria. (1987) 1999. *Borderlands / La frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute.

Bartholomae, David. 1985. "Inventing the University." *When A Writer Can't Write*, edited by Mike Rose, 134–65. New York: Guilford.

Cabrera, Nolan L., Jeffrey F. Milem, Ozan Jaquette, and Ronald W. Marx. 2014. "Missing the (Student Achievement) Forest for All the (Political) Trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American Studies Controversy in Tucson." *American Educational Research Journal* 51 (6): 1084–118.

Canagarajah, A. Suresh. 2012. "Autoethnography in the Study of Multilingual Writers." In *Writing Studies Research in Practice: Methods and Methodologies*, edited by Lee Nickoson and Mary P. Sheridan, 113–24. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

"*College English* Submission Guidelines." National Council of Teachers of English. Accessed October 25, 2021. https://ncte.org/resources/journals/college-english/write-for-us/.

Dyste, Connie. 1989. "Proposition 63: The California English Language Amendment." *Applied Linguistics* 10 (3): 313–30.

Itchuaqiyaq, Cana Uluak, and Breeanne Matheson. 2021. "Decolonizing Decoloniality: Considering the (Mis)use of Decolonial Frameworks in TPC Scholarship." *Communication Design Quarterly* 9 (1): 20–31.

King, Lisa, Rose Gubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson. 2015. *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story: Teaching American Indian Rhetorics*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Medina, Cruz. 2013. "Nuestros Refranes: Culturally Relevant Writing in Tucson High Schools." *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning* 12 (3): 52–79.

Medina, Cruz. 2015. *Reclaiming Poch@ Pop: Examining Rhetoric of Cultural Deficiency*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Medina, Cruz. 2016. "Poch@: Latin@ Blogs in the Decolonial Archives." In *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy*, edited by Iris Ruiz and Raúl Sánchez, 93–107. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Medina, Cruz. 2017. "Identity, Decolonialism, and Digital Archives." *Composition Studies* 45 (2): 222–25.

Medina, Cruz. 2019. "Decolonial Potential in a Multilingual FYC." *Composition Studies* 47 (1): 74–95.

Medina, Cruz. 2021. "Composition Studies: Decolonial Potential in a Multilingual FYC." In *Best of the Journals of Rhetoric and Composition 2020*, edited by Jessica Pauszek, Kristi Girdharry, Charles Lesh, David Blakesley, and Steve Parks, 58–84. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press.