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## Rewriting Resistance: Negotiating Pedagogical and Curricular Change in a U.S./Kurdish Transnational Partnership

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In this chapter, the authors describe the benefits accruing to cross-institutional collaborations between U.S. and Kurdish university faculty engaged in curricular reform at a Kurdish institute of higher education (IHE) in Iraq. Discussion centers on resonant examples from the partnership's online forums where resistance not only played a positive role in negotiating pedagogical change but also resulted in richer understandings of how western pedagogies are perceived in a Kurdish cultural context. In examining contradictory points of discourse in our online disciplinary community, this chapter both complicates the idea of resistance in transnational partnerships and calls into question the presumed portability of western pedagogies for non-western university faculty and their students.

Keywords: transnational partnerships; higher education; English studies pedagogy; local knowledge; online discourse

Paradoxically, local knowledge can motivate conversations between different localities, answering questions that transcend one's own borders. It is when we acknowledge the localness of our own knowledge that we

have the proper humility to engage productively with other knowledge traditions. The assumption that one's knowledge is of sole universal relevance does not encourage conversation. It is possible to develop a pluralistic mode of thinking through which we celebrate different cultures and identities, and yet engage in projects common to our shared humanity.

—*Suresh Canagarajah (2002b), Reconstructing Local Knowledge*

## The Power of Example

In his June 3, 2014, editorial, “Iraq’s Best Hope,” American journalist Thomas L. Friedman dubbed Kurdistan the “unsung success story of the Iraq war,” citing the American University of Iraq—Sulaimani (AUIS) as an example of the progress being made in an otherwise militarily and politically troubled Iraq (para. 3). “It was the Kurds,” Friedman observes, “who used the window of freedom we opened for them to overcome internal divisions, start to reform their once Sopranos-like politics and create a vibrant economy that is now throwing up skyscrapers and colleges in major towns of Erbil and Sulaimani” (para. 4). More, he suggests, it is through the continued success of universities like AUIS to bring an “American-style” college experience to its students that Iraq will find its “best hope” for the future. “The power of example,” Friedman remarks, “is a funny thing. You never know how it can spread” (para. 11). Americans should still hope, he advises, “that our values will triumph where our power failed” (para. 5).

Friedman’s advocacy for more American universities in Iraq as a means of spreading western knowledges and “teaching the values of inclusiveness” (para. 5), which he views as absent from former Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki’s political agenda, is certainly a standpoint resonant with those who believe that the US must develop cross-national understandings with Iraq through humanitarian, rather than military, action. What Friedman’s U.S.-centric standpoint potentially undercuts, however, is precisely that which Suresh Canagarajah’s (2002b) epigraph calls our attention to: It is only when westerners fully recognize the localness of their own knowledge traditions that they can hope to engage colleagues working in other regions of the world in meaningful dialogues about “projects common to our shared humanity” (p. 257), like the ongoing development of higher education in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In this chapter, we describe the benefits accruing to cross-institutional collaborations between U.S. and Kurdish university faculty while challenging the U.S.-centric perspective Friedman advocates about the presumed por-

tability of western knowledges and pedagogies into Kurdish institutions of higher education. We take for our starting point two guiding premises: The first is that all knowledge is inherently “local” (Canagarajah, 2002b); that is, community-specific, value-laden, discursively constructed and, thus, necessarily collaborative in nature (see Canagarajah, 2002a, pp. 54-55). The second is that transnational partnerships established between U.S. and Middle East-North Africa (MENA)-region university faculty for the purposes of facilitating educational reform are best served by adopting practices that “envision not just changing the *content* of knowledge, but the *terms* of knowledge construction” (Canagarajah, 2002b, p. 251, emphasis in original). Taken together, these premises suggest that, while transnational partners can never merely shed their localness or the biases that attend any one person’s situated ways of knowing, we can nevertheless work toward the more “pluralistic mode of thinking” that Canagarajah envisions as both the cornerstone and the consequence of collaborative cross-cultural exchange (for discussion of other transnational partnerships, see Arnold, DeGenaro, Iskandarani, Willard-Traub, & Sinno; Austin; and Miller & Pessoa, this volume).

Our goals for this chapter are admittedly modest. For, despite recent advances in global communication networks that now enable interaction across geographic, cultural, and institutional boundaries in ways that weren’t possible before the Internet, university partnerships to increase transnational awareness and cross-cultural exchange between the US and Iraq have been left largely unexplored. As a result, little scholarship on the current state of the Iraqi higher educational system exists (Lawrence, 2008; Mazawi & Sultana, 2010; Ninnes & Hellsten, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, 2007), and research focused extensively on institutions of higher education in Iraqi Kurdistan is virtually non-existent. In pursuing the partnership activities described in this chapter and, later, in choosing to write collaboratively about them, we recognize our interpretations and articulations of these experiences as necessarily partial and bounded—which is to say, imperfect—keenly aware of the work that lies ahead.

Still, Friedman may well be right to suggest that the power of example is a “funny thing” in its ability to “spread.” With those words in mind, we offer these examples of our shared experiences negotiating curricular reform at one university in Erbil, Kurdistan, in hopes of provoking larger-scale and longer-term collaborations with international colleagues throughout the MENA region. Our chapter begins with a discussion of the context within which our university partnership originated, and then moves to three vignettes that illustrate our contention that the notion of resistance in transnational collaborations needs to be rewritten to include recursive periods of silence, contact,

and negotiation that are both contradictory and healthy; that is, a positive force necessary for educational reform. We follow these vignettes with a discussion of what we have learned from our experiences together and what new understandings might be possible in the future.

## The University Linkages Partnership

In 2010, the University of Cincinnati (UC) received a multi-year sub-contract award for a U.S.-Iraq University Linkages Partnership (ULP) granted through the U.S. Embassy-Iraq/U.S. State Department. The ULP project itself was unique in that it represented our two nations' commitment to sustained cross-cultural and cross-institutional exchanges on critical subjects, like literacy learning and English education pedagogies. Four U.S. universities partnered with four Iraqi universities and completed the first iteration of the project: Ball State University and Tikrit University; Oklahoma State University and Basrah University; the University of Kentucky and Kufa University; and the University of Cincinnati and Salahaddin University-Hawler (SUH), located in the northern Iraqi region of Kurdistan.

Founded in 1968, SUH is the oldest and largest university in Iraqi Kurdistan, housing 12 colleges that align similarly with university structures in the US. SUH's colleges include engineering, education, art, agriculture, fine arts, and Islamic Studies, and enroll roughly 26,000 undergraduates and over 900 graduate students. Degree plans, however, are quite different from the typical semester system employed in the US. For example, SUH undergraduate students follow a four-year curriculum set by the Ministry of Higher Education and many required courses are offered on a yearly basis. Students are assigned to colleges based on their performance on national tests, a policy that contributes to what SUH faculty perceive as their students' lack of engagement with their respective degrees. After university life, most students are assigned lifelong jobs that can likewise result in a mismatch between the graduates' interests and their allotted occupations. These differences, among others, were part of the landscape our faculty partnership navigated over the course of the project.

Each partnership was expected to address a set of goals that had been negotiated by the ULP leadership at their initial June 2010 meeting in Baghdad, a site selected by the funding agency for its presumably "neutral" location. Ironically, Baghdad was not a neutral location for either American or Kurdish citizens in the summer of 2010, a full six months prior to the final draw-down of U.S. troops in Iraq. Given just three days to build rapport and plan initiatives around the grant's expected goals, ULP leadership faculty from both

Iraq and the US began an enterprise that would last three years.

Holly,<sup>1</sup> a UC faculty member in the Literacy and Second Language Studies (LSLS) program who authored the grant proposal, traveled to Baghdad to dialogue with three SUH department heads from the Colleges of Basic Education, English, and (Business) Administration and six SUH faculty representatives about activities designed to meet the broader ULP objectives, including curriculum development and the inclusion of more student-centered teaching practices in Iraqi institutions of higher education. After the Baghdad meeting, Holly flew to Erbil to discuss the proposed partnership activities with faculty in the SUH English Language and Literature departments who would be directly involved in the grant. It was at this Erbil meeting that Saman, a professor of English literature who later became Chair of the SUH English department, joined the project as the fourth SUH department head representing the College of Languages. Upon her return to Cincinnati, Holly invited Connie—a faculty colleague in LSLS—and Tom—a new LSLS doctoral student—to join the UC team as facilitators for the English-education piece of the partnership.

In August 2010, our UC-SUH partnership began working on the goals negotiated in Baghdad. Among other general aims, like the development of a career center in Erbil and curricular reform in SUH's departments of finance and economics, UC and SUH English-education faculty identified specific objectives for our collaboration, including the revision of SUH English literature curricula to include classroom opportunities for project- and problem-based learning, writing-to-learn activities, formative assessment practices, and e-learning teaching techniques, as well as the establishment of exchange opportunities between SUH and UC students and faculty. To address these shared goals, partnership faculty identified two main activities: (1) the creation of a Blackboard learning community as a means of facilitating monthly online meetings, promoting focused discussion of theoretical and pedagogical scholarship, and exchanging teaching resources and materials with one another; and (2) a series of workshops, held both at UC and SUH, to demonstrate and practice instructional approaches, co-create and revise course syllabi, classroom materials, and assessment instruments, and further promote the cross-cultural exchange of pedagogical knowledge and disciplinary perspectives on English Studies education.

In addition to thirty online meetings held monthly across three consecutive academic years (2010-2013)—the first year of which serves as the main focus for this chapter—nine extended site visits lasting one to two weeks per trip were also completed over the course of our partnership: Seven visits to SUH by a total of seventeen UC faculty members and graduate students, and

two visits to UC by a total of twenty-three SUH faculty members, graduate students, and university administrators. These visits variously centered on any number of professional activities, including the redesign of six English literature courses (e.g., syllabi, teaching materials, and rubrics), co-teaching classes together in person and via digital video conferencing, providing peer teaching observations, practicing classroom-based technologies, and drafting conference proposals, to name just a few. There was also time allotted for sight-seeing and side-trips, shared meals on campus, at restaurants, and in each other's homes, informal hallway conversations with students and their teachers, pick-up soccer games, singing, story-telling, movie-going, and photo-taking. A jointly organized conference was held at SUH at the end of the project period, where partnership faculty and graduate students shared research via poster sessions and presentations. Several UC-SUH faculty partners have continued to present together at international conferences, and to seek publication opportunities for the work we accomplished (see Beckett & Muhammad, 2014)

These accomplishments as they evolved over time notwithstanding, it is important to acknowledge that, from the outset, our collaboration met with a kind of passive resistance from SUH faculty perhaps best described as polite disinterest in the UC team's initial attempts to organize the Blackboard site and settle on topics for our online discussions. As Saman would later disclose, SUH administrators had a long history of signing multiple memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with different international academic institutions. Moreover, the majority of these MOUs did not thrive and collaboration never occurred, often because the faculty members who were expected to collaborate had not been involved in the writing of those agreements or because of monetary issues connected to unwieldy centralized funding systems and bureaucracy. Given this history, the idea of another partnership, this time with an American university, was understandably greeted with a less-than-enthusiastic response by SUH faculty.

Unaware of this history, the UC team pursued the goals of the partnership as planned and, as a result, the Kurdish faculty gradually began to view this project as different from previous MOUs; that is, as not only possible but also worthwhile for a number of reasons. For instance, Saman explained that the dream of travelling abroad had long seemed out of reach for many Kurdish faculty, as, for decades under Baathist rule, the country had been cut off from the international community. Since the agreement included not only online discussions but also faculty exchanges, SUH faculty were intrigued by the chance to gain first-hand experience in an American university setting. Also appealing was the fact that UC faculty would travel to Erbil and work with

SUH faculty and students for extended periods of time, as this demonstrated the Americans' commitment to reciprocal learning and growth. Additionally, Kurdistan's Ministry of Higher Education had been working for several years to redevelop existing college-level curricula, so the idea of curricular revision was already a topic familiar to SUH faculty. Academic benefits aside, the potential for establishing strong personal relationships with each other was also a key motivator for SUH and UC faculty members alike.

## Points of Contradictory Discourse

During the first year of the grant, American and Kurdish faculty members met exclusively online in preparation for a two-week series of workshops to be held at UC the following summer. The U.S. instructors had not met their online partners, and the Kurdish partners had only met Holly, UC's project leader. Brought together in an online environment unknown to the Kurdish faculty but familiar to the Americans, the initial balance of power weighed heavily on the UC side in terms of structuring online interactions using Blackboard technology. Less well understood by either side, however, was the looming presence of local knowledge (Canagarajah, 2002b) and the role those knowledges would play in our discussions, especially in terms of conditioning our responses to one another.

The contradictory nature of our partnership became apparent in our attempt to become a discourse community through this online environment that first year. John Swales (1990) has argued that discourse communities vary in degree, but that all should meet criteria that include: (1) a common public goal worked toward together; (2) a discursive forum accessible to all participants; (3) a forum that provides information and feedback while working toward the goal; (4) a developed expectation/genre/convention for how informational exchanges should proceed; (5) a discourse that tends to become increasingly specialized through shared and specialized terminology; and (6) a critical mass of experts in the group as novices enter. Many of these criteria were met through the online discussion board structure developed by the American partners, but issues of accessibility, the use and meaning of specialized language, and the types of feedback expected became noticeable challenges for the new partnership, especially in light of the wide range of diverse expertise and local knowledges expressed by all of the participants.

While Swales' (1990) criteria for defining the characteristics of effective discourse communities provide a useful model, these standards leave little room for contending with acts of resistance on the part of the discourse community's members. To help us better understand how resistance can function

productively within discourse communities, we turned to Roz Ivanič's (1998) arguments for re-envisioning acts of resistance as "alignment with—or even 'accommodation to'—less privileged discourses" rather than being viewed as oppositional in nature (p. 93). Drawing on the work of theorists who take a critical stance on the social nature of any discourse community (Bizzell, 1992; Chase, 1988; Harris, 1989), Ivanič writes:

The point is that resistance is not resistance for its own sake. It is motivated by a commitment to represent the world in a way which accords with the writer's values, by a refusal to be colonized by the privileged world views and discourses of privileged others, and by a desire to open up membership of the academic discourse community. (Ivanič, 1998, p. 93)

Further informing our interpretation of resistance as it played out across our online interactions is Canagarajah's (2002a) assertion that discourse communities "live always with indeterminacy, heterogeneity, and conflict" (p. 68). This particular mix of indeterminacy, heterogeneity, and conflict, Canagarajah suggests, is especially evident in discourse communities comprised of specific disciplinary groups, like the English-education learning community our partnership was working to establish: "Rather than focusing on shared common characteristics like language, values, knowledge, or genres of literacy for the constitution of the discourse community," he explains, "we should focus on an open-ended and dynamically changing circle of scholars who have to respond constantly to the conflicts shaping their activity from within and without their circle" (2002a, p. 68). A critical understanding, then, for recognizing the positive role resistance played within our disciplinary discourse community has been Canagarajah's notion of "perpetual tension"—between "established discourses being challenged and new discourses struggling for dominance," as well as between "privileged subjects and resisting/aspiring subjects with competing claims of knowledge" (2002a, p. 69). Such conflicts, or what we observed as points of contradictory discourse happening in our online exchanges, are not only to be expected, but are best viewed as the "engines of new knowledge/discourse creation" (Canagarajah, 2002a, p. 70).

What follows are three vignettes that illustrate critical junctures in our online discussions during the first year of the partnership. While resistance presents differently and in varying degrees in each vignette—silence in the first scenario, skepticism and competing assumptions about student learning and institutional realities in the second, and the clashing of instructional paradigms and the role of teachers in the third—what appears as a kind of linear progression over time is as much the result of our drafting this chapter



together as it is the result of chronology. In truth, our recognition of and appreciation for the role resistance played in our partnership was much more episodic in nature, not unlike the progression of all learning and professional growth.

Nonetheless, our understanding of transnational partnerships has changed on account of these online interactions, as has our collective understanding of resistance and the generative role it can play in them. Periodic and recursive instances of silence, contact, and negotiation within the process of partnership development are necessary and healthy for strong cross-cultural affiliations to emerge and survive, and may be especially needed in transnational endeavors where cultures are vastly different. By learning to accommodate these contradictory points of discourse within our extended online dialogues, our theoretical perspectives have likewise been changed, inviting us to reconsider the collaborative practice of transnational educational research, where so often the local participants are considered the “other.” And while the various acts of resistance highlighted here could be read as merely oppositional in nature, evidencing only difficulty in collaborating across cultural borders, for us, these vignettes represent instead earnest attempts on the part of the Kurds and the Americans alike at “opening up our understanding of what is happening elsewhere to adapt, resituate, [and] perhaps decenter our contexts” (Donahue, 2009, p. 215) toward productive ends. As our partnership developed, we could not help but notice the positive effect resistance within our collaborative efforts produced. Our co-authoring process, in its ability to foster reflection, encourage conversation, address (mis)perceptions, and clarify meaning, has also shaped our understanding of these cross-institutional and cross-cultural dynamics, as well.

### Vignette One: Breaking Silences, Making Common Ground

Like many new relationships, our partnership began in fits and starts throughout the Fall of 2010. Blackboard technology created confusions for first-time SUH faculty users—how to log in, how to navigate the site, how to post and respond to discussion board threads—and these confusions were compounded by bureaucratic “red tape” on the UC side—how to establish guest Blackboard accounts for non-UC faculty and how to enable SUH faculty full access to UC library systems and electronic databases, again without benefit of UC faculty status. Spotty Internet connectivity and the lack of an IP address for SUH further complicated our efforts.

Aiming to alleviate confusions and answer questions in a more personal, face-to-face virtual environment, the UC team invited the SUH team, 15

literature faculty, to attend an “Orientation to Blackboard” meeting in September, using Adobe Connect technology. Possibly due to the Kurds’ skepticism about the viability of the ULP MOU that had been struck in June, or perhaps, and more simply, due to the UC faculty’s misunderstanding of SUH’s academic calendar (first-year and returning students have different start dates), the orientation attracted just two SUH faculty members. Thirty minutes into the meeting, we lost connectivity and thus, we were forced to abandon the call.

October brought renewed hope, as most of the technological and bureaucratic issues had been resolved by that time and all of the SUH literature faculty had returned to campus. To facilitate the asynchronous discussions on the Blackboard site, the UC team created a schedule of monthly meetings across the first year, October 2010 through June 2011, and posted it to the site. Each meeting was scheduled to last three consecutive days, beginning on a Monday morning (Erbil time) and concluding on a Wednesday evening (Erbil time), with all participants posting as their time allowed within the three-day window. Pre-selected readings and an accompanying audio PowerPoint slide show to guide online conversations were posted by the UC faculty two weeks prior to the start of each monthly meeting. The readings included both theoretically- and pedagogically-oriented pieces, authored by North American theorists, with topics ranging widely (e.g., reading process theory, reader response theory, strategies for struggling readers and writers, responding to and evaluating student writing, teaching with technology).

While October’s meeting only drew the participation of the same two SUH faculty members who had attended the Adobe Connect meeting the month before, the conversation was congenial and focused, with 20 total postings exchanged between the two SUH faculty, and the two UC participants charged with leading these exchanges, Connie and Tom. November’s online meeting showed a slight increase in both total posts (28) and in the number of SUH participants (from two to three). By December, total postings had grown to 51, and the number of SUH faculty participants had doubled (from three to six). Additionally and importantly, December’s discussion threads were noticeably more interactive, with SUH faculty responding to each other’s posts with increasing frequency instead of mainly replying to UC faculty posts, as had been the case before.

Given the steady increase in participation and Blackboard postings, which the UC faculty regarded as burgeoning SUH faculty buy-in, our partnership’s prospects looked promising. Ten days after the close of December’s meeting, however, we received the first real push-back from an SUH faculty member—our co-author, Saman, Chair of the English department and leader of the

SUH English literature team—who had not participated in the Blackboard conversations until that point in time.

“Dear colleagues,” he began, “as you know, a few people from my team have been participating in the discussion forums. However, some members of the team, including myself, have not taken part in the discussion so far due to some reasons.” The first reason, Saman explained, was rooted in their perception that they were being treated differently than their SUH colleagues who were participating in another Blackboard learning community focused on English-language education. “It seems that our colleagues from the language team,” he observed, “have sent you an email in which they have provided a list of the topics they find as priorities for the discussions, and that the discussions are made on such basis as we were told.” Continuing on, he wrote, “We, from the literature team, would also like to do the same,” following up this comment with a list of five “challenging issues facing our teachers,” including: (a) large class sizes; (b) how to play the role of a “guide” instead of “lecturer;” (c) teaching techniques for college literature teachers, specifically; (d) strategies for motivating underprepared students; and (e) ways to counter institutional bureaucracy that can negatively affect faculty efforts.

The second reason Saman shared was related to the first, although more pointedly aimed at the readings UC faculty had pre-selected for discussion. “We think that the articles you posted online,” he remarked, “are more of arid theoretical issues than being directly related to the observations we have about our teaching as far as our system is concerned.” To mitigate the force of his complaint, Saman continued, “This of course does not mean that our teachers have not benefitted from them as we all agree that teaching and learning are universal and they involve both theory and practice.” “However,” he concluded, “I and other members from my team who have seen the announcements posted online, apart from the teachers who have had reflections on them, believe it will be more fruitful and more practical to deal with the issues we have suggested above.”

This event, Saman’s explanation of his own and the majority of his colleagues’ silence, represented a critical juncture in our nascent partnership. For all of the UC team’s planning, the perception from the SUH faculty was that we had created exactly that which we were consciously trying to avoid: A UC-centered Blackboard space used mainly for “exporting” western texts (Donahue, 2009) and arguably aimed at changing the “content” of SUH faculty knowledge, to borrow Canagarajah’s (2002b) language, instead of working to change the “terms” of knowledge construction within our discourse community. In turn, many Kurdish faculty members felt silenced by the structure the UC faculty had imposed on them. The pre-selected readings, “arid”

theoretical texts as opposed to practical ones that spoke to the contexts of SUH English literature classrooms and students, evidenced a presumed lack of interest on the UC faculty's part for the real-world challenges the Kurdish faculty faced. More, the central promise undergirding our partnership had been unwittingly broken; namely, that SUH faculty priorities would constitute the basis of our online conversations. Saman's tone was as gracious as it was firm: "We are very grateful for your cooperation," his closing line read, adding that "we look forward to having a rich, fruitful, and long-lasting partnership." A future-oriented comment, to be sure, but a future that would unfold along a different path than the one we were currently traveling.

More than a mere act of resistance, Saman's posting served as an invitation to revisit the ostensibly shared objectives for our partnership to ensure they more accurately represented the "common public goal worked toward together," which Swales (1990) suggests is characteristic of effective discourse communities. Saman's posting also pointed toward the unexamined privileging of western theoretical knowledges conveyed by the pre-selected readings, which implicitly worked to position the UC faculty as "experts" and consequently—although unintentionally—foreclosed the relationship of SUH faculty participants to the UC faculty. Instead of derailing efforts, Saman's post provoked a collective re-examination of the ways in which local knowledges, western and non-western, were influencing the shape and trajectory of our emerging partnership—it was the critical first step, we discovered, in establishing actual, viable common ground.

## Vignette Two: Building Critical Self-Consciousness, Negotiating Community Membership

According to Ivanič (1998), resistance can be read as reflecting an individual's "desire to open up membership" of a discourse community (p. 93). Working to increase opportunities for meaningful contact within our online discussions, this "opening up" dynamic translated into periodic instances of negotiation, especially with regard to the partnership's growing awareness of our local ways of knowing as university professors with expertise in English-education pedagogy and reading theory. The following vignette highlights how both Kurdish and American views on instructional practices and institutional contexts were introduced to each other through negotiating meaning around the reading and discussion of Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) scholarship on transactional theory. In this article, Rosenblatt posits readers and texts in a mutually reciprocal relationship to advance her argument that readers transact directly with texts, instead of authors, and thus call into question traditional theories

about authorial intention and the locus of textual meaning.

While Rosenblatt's (1978) article provided the ostensive frame for our discussion of reading process theory, what we discovered in this particular online discussion was the mismatch in our working conditions and the nuanced differences in our culturally specific uses of language, which ultimately helped us expand our discourse community's membership by allowing us to address the "context bound, community specific, and nonsystematic" (Canagarajah, 2002b, p. 244) knowledges that each side of the partnership brought to the conversation. By explicitly attending to our own meaning-making processes, the group became more critically self-conscious of the local cultural knowledges—academic and geographic—we had previously assumed were more globally understood. In addition, the participants' increasing self-consciousness allowed us to more fully embrace Patricia Bizzell's (1992) notion of the power discourse communities possess to "shape world views" (p. 226), including the world views of those whose varied local knowledges reflect differing assumptions about pedagogy, student learning, and the role of English education in U.S. and Kurdish college contexts.

Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory resonated with the Kurdish professors' background as highly trained English literary scholars. Nevertheless, this article was still, as one SUH participant, Mr. Karwan, remarked, "A challenging paper to read . . . I had difficulty understanding it." He then went on to explain the meaning he was able to make of the text, while also pointing out the places where his understanding was less clear. Mr. Karwan's response was not necessarily surprising or even overtly resistant in and of itself, as Rosenblatt's discussion of efferent and aesthetic stances toward a text, coupled with abstract theories and concepts like semiotics and the "linguistic-experiential reservoir," is difficult for many who first encounter her theory. However, Karwan's willingness to state his confusion about these new concepts despite his attempts to reconcile them with his own deep knowledge of reading theory and pedagogy initiated a shift in the SUH faculty's online interactions—from mostly trading "academic" interpretations of the texts we were reading to demonstrate their understanding to questioning the texts' meanings and, by extension, their relative value for or applicability to SUH English literature classrooms. Just as importantly, this shift opened up space for dialogue in which each participant could draw upon his/her own teaching experiences to reconsider the usefulness of Rosenblatt's theory for Kurdish students.

Karwan was the first SUH faculty member to post to this thread and, as a well-regarded teacher and scholar, the timing of his post was undoubtedly consequential as well. Another SUH participant, Ms. Kani, joined the dis-

cussion by not only sharing her understanding of reading process theory and how it connected to Rosenblatt's (1978) work, but also by bluntly questioning its practical application in Kurdish classroom contexts that rely heavily on a teacher-centered instructional model of lecturing. In response, the UC faculty shifted the conversation to address reading strategy use within a more student-centered instructional approach, and connected these strategies contextually to explain the expectations U.S. university teachers have for teaching academic reading. Ms. Kani replied that Iraqi university faculty members also expect students to read in particular ways, too, and these ways of reading were modeled by SUH faculty through lecturing and recitation. "Keep in mind," she wrote, "the great challenges we face. Not only that students have to deal with the complexity of content and style of literary texts, they are also confronted with linguistic and aesthetic ambiguities in the second language context." Despite these real challenges, Ms. Kani was open to exploring new strategies that allowed for greater student connections to the required canonical texts, stating, "I hope that it will be useful. I'll try using it in my classes."

Another reminder of the context-specific challenges SUH literature faculty confront occurred in dialogue with Mamosta (the Kurdish word for "teacher") Sherko. Aiming to better understand how SUH literature classrooms functioned, Connie asked about the amount of time the Kurdish professors typically use for teaching a given text, noting that "we normally schedule 2-3 weeks—or 6-9 classroom hours—to complete a book, sometimes less." Mamosta Sherko was skeptical of that timetable, and explained that his students need 50 classroom hours to complete a short literary work like Miller's (1976) *Death of a Salesman* owing to several time-based obstacles he faced, including hours of his own personal time spent translating English into Kurdish for his students. In the course of this exchange, Sherko also explained a decidedly local phenomenon the SUH faculty call "casual holidays," where SUH classes are arbitrarily and unexpectedly canceled for varying lengths of time. "Casual holidays (a chronic disease) in Iraq creates obstacles in our syllabi," Mamosta Sherko wrote. "No one knows an exact time-table of holidays," he explained, "for example we hadn't expected that the 14th and 15th of this month to be holidays; we are informed just six hours before." Sherko's mention of SUH's casual holidays revealed an institutional reality and curricular planning constraint previously unknown to the UC partners. As a result, the group was able to negotiate alternate ways of structuring course syllabi, like the creation of a series of recursive and moveable learning modules rather than SUH's more typical linear curricular model, to better account for these periodic and unanticipated disruptions of the academic calendar.

Although the exchange of local knowledges was becoming more robust

throughout this discussion thread, membership in the online discourse community itself still evidenced a dialectic resembling a “teacher-student” relationship rather than a “colleague-colleague” relationship, a tension that was exacerbated by the use of salutations. For example, most of the Kurdish participants used the title of “professor” when addressing the UC participants, which positioned the Americans as “experts,” and they often responded to each other with evaluative comments like, “From all that you have written here, [Sherko], I would say you understood the paper’s main arguments very well.” These kinds of comments further positioned the Kurds as “students.” The use of salutations may seem a minor aspect of the partners’ interactions; however, it was a critical piece of locating and accommodating power within the online exchanges.

While the UC faculty’s use of first names when responding to comments ostensibly aimed at opening up membership, they eventually recognized the Kurdish expectation of using more formal salutations. This accommodation was apparent, for example, in a posting in which Connie wrote, “Dear Karwan (or do you prefer Mr. Karwan?).” Such acts of critical self-consciousness about the power connected to the use of first names by the UC faculty or the use of positioning titles by the SUH faculty became an ongoing feature of our online conversations. For instance, Ms. Kani, once addressed by her first name, adopted the more casual U.S. salutation style in her future postings, phrasing that was also taken up by other Kurdish faculty members as the partnership progressed. Connie and Tom also took up the use of “Dr.” and “Mr.” or “Mrs.” in their postings addressing the SUH faculty. As dialogue continued, we noticed that all of the participants’ postings became less formal and specific cultural patterns in conjunction with salutations likewise became more sporadic.

The more informal use of salutations and growing partnership did not mean that participants did not continue to hold to other cultural and academic values. What the blending of cultural norms in respect to naming or identifying ourselves to one another allowed was movement away from polite correspondence among strangers to increased engagement about the topics and values that mattered to all participants, which included clashes over what was and was not yet possible in respect to student-centered pedagogy.

### Vignette Three: Attending to Context, Negotiating Pedagogical Perspectives

While collectively, our growing recognition of the contradictions and overlaps between local knowledges across the partnership enabled us to ne-

gotiate new understandings that would count as relevant knowledge within our discourse community, the Kurdish faculty's resistance to wholesale adoption of western perspectives on literary analysis produced both increasingly synthesized and culturally relevant pedagogies best suited to SUH students and faculty. This next vignette centers on a thread surrounding a discussion of a chapter from Robert Scholes' (1985) book, *Textual Power*, where the SUH faculty's resistance to Scholes' critique of New Criticism was both noticeably strong and ultimately productive. This thread was particularly lively, with 51 total exchanges among eight participants. As a result of these exchanges, previously entrenched standpoints began to merge into new and discourse-community-specific understandings about what kinds of pedagogies might, or might not, be relevant for the study of western literary texts within the context of a Kurdish college classroom.

Scholes' (1985) acknowledgment of the role a reader's cultural knowledge plays in making textual meaning was received as incompatible with the New Criticism approach (Richards, 1930) embraced by the majority of the Kurdish professors. In short, they considered the role of the reader in meaning-making to be largely irrelevant, asserting instead that meaning resides in the text and that, as a result, teaching students the skill of "close reading" in literary analysis should remain the primary objective of literary study. For example, in his response to Scholes' theory, Dr. Ahmed wrote, "True that every reader, more or less, responds to a text with several natural reactions the moment they perceive a familiar situation or attitude. Yet, in my opinion, students should be sparing in their very subjective reflections at large." Saman agreed with Ahmed in his post to this thread, noting that while moving away from strictly teaching close reading skills was "absolutely essential," objectivity is critical for competent literary analysis, remarking that: "I agree with T. S. Eliot's view that poetry, for instance, is impersonal. It is the text that writes the author, not the other way round." Although both Dr. Ahmed and Saman acknowledged the reader's presence in the act of reading, the production of textual meaning was understood as inevitably outside of any individual reader's control.

The discussion of instructor roles and responsibilities also resulted in a clash between teaching paradigms favored by the SUH and UC faculty. Scholes' (1985, p. 30) suggestion that an instructor should facilitate rather than prescribe student interpretations of textual meaning was a particularly thorny assertion that met with resistance from a number of SUH faculty. All of the SUH faculty participants remarked that the complexity of English literature was a central challenge for their Kurdish students' comprehension of textual meaning, particularly with regard to "deciphering" the cultural codes embed-



ded in western canonical texts. In turn, they reasoned that teacher-centered instructional approaches, where the professor is positioned as the “expert” literary critic, were essential to student learning. For example, Saman observed that “students can produce readings if the way is paved for them by the teacher . . . , beginning learners of English literature should not start with a text which has such a level of complexity that requires senior students to understand it.” Other Kurdish professors supported the necessity of teacher-centered classrooms, with Dr. Ahmed noting that “the teacher . . . can hint at several clues and triggering remarks that enable the students [to] uncover and unlock certain implied and covert thematic motifs, symbols and inferences.” Ahmed’s remarks also underscore his affinity with New Criticism.

Pushing back on the SUH faculty’s claims for teacher-centered pedagogies, the UC participants suggested that students could be afforded more responsibility for scaffolding their own learning, as opposed to relying on the teacher’s interpretive processes for the discovery of meaning. For example, in her response to complaints about minimizing teacher control over explicating textual meaning, Connie wrote: “It’s not so much that U.S. teachers don’t focus on ‘close readings’ of texts—they still do, of course—but that they also often embed these close readings within larger classroom discussions of the historical, social, and political contexts within which a text is both ‘produced’ by a particular writer and ‘consumed’ by various groups of readers, as a way to emphasize any text’s potential for being interpreted in multiple—even competing—ways.” When Dr. Ahmed questioned the amount of class time allowing students to compose their own interpretations would take, Tom suggested using small discussion groups to facilitate conversations and Connie suggested using short in-class writing assignments. Ahmed’s response was both polite and resistant: “I read your ideas thoroughly . . . and will try to apply them in my classes. What I am worried about is again, TIME. I am afraid I am not convinced by your 5-minute activities” (emphasis in original). Connie’s reply was equally polite and equally resistant: “Yes, absolutely, time is indeed always an issue. Fair enough, too, that you’re not completely convinced that an in-class writing exercise might only take 5 minutes to do. Hmm . . . I see that I’ll have to work harder to persuade you.” She then offered to post examples of this kind of writing assignment to the Blackboard site so they might continue the conversation later.

A little later in this thread, Tom suggested that one way to encourage multiple interpretations and increase student control over the production of textual meaning might be to pair the canonical western texts SUH faculty were required to teach with local Kurdish texts as a means of discovering how cultural codes operate in all literary texts. Several SUH faculty participants

agreed with this idea in principle but rejected it in practice. For example, Saman remarked that “one problem we face as teachers of English literature is the problem of culture.” However, he continued, “We are supposed to do *pure* (emphasis in original) English literature . . . at our departments of English. Thus, there is no room for local literature.” In a separate post to one of his SUH colleagues, Saman further warned, “I think too much focusing on local literature is dangerous . . . if it causes us to divert from the main topic which is about teaching our students English literature.”

This series of exchanges between SUH and UC faculty highlights the kind of “perpetual tension” that Canagarajah (2002b) suggests exists in all disciplinary discourse communities. As this thread demonstrates, both groups alternately resisted the claims expressed by the other. These acts of resistance, however, were not merely oppositional in nature or effect; rather, they served productively as a means of negotiating alternate and context-specific pedagogies that could account for Scholes’ (1985) theory without usurping SUH faculty knowledge or control of their classrooms.

With regard to guiding student interpretations of western literary texts, the group went on to negotiate approaches that both acknowledged the SUH faculty’s preference for New Critical pedagogies while incorporating in-class writing activities that fostered student connections with local knowledge. For example, Cross and Angelo’s (1988) “one minute paper,” a short writing assignment that invites students to respond to two text-based questions at the end of class, was adopted by SUH faculty as a means of encouraging students to “talk back to” and connect with literary texts while still using close reading skills to provide specific support for their interpretations and critiques. Similarly, pre-reading writing activities, like Elbow’s (1995) “entering the text” strategy, which invites students to speculate about the thematic elements of a literary work in connection with personal experiences before reading the assigned text itself, appealed to the SUH faculty’s interest and formal training in literary aesthetics.

The negotiation of instructor roles and responsibilities also resulted in alternate and more context-appropriate pedagogical approaches. While the SUH faculty held fast to “paving the way” for student interpretation through structured, teacher-led questioning strategies, they were open to integrating periodic small-group exercises in the form of literature circles (Peterson & Eeds, 2007) as a means of modeling academic reading and comprehension practices through peer collaboration. Even the relatively heated discussion about whether to use local Kurdish texts in SUH English literature classrooms brought about a blended approach that cautiously acknowledged the importance of teaching local texts while honoring the SUH’s institutional ex-

pectations for teaching “pure” English literature. Here, SUH faculty decided that English literary works were only to be paired with English translations of local texts and used only sparingly with more advanced students whose grasp of basic literary analysis was already in evidence.

Merging pedagogical preferences and practices produced new instructional approaches that better suited SUH’s teaching contexts. The SUH faculty’s reluctance to submit wholesale to western pedagogical knowledges prompted a re-examination of Scholes’ theory within our online discourse community, deconstructing and then reconstructing (Canagarajah, 2002b, p. 252) Scholes’ perspectives to more fully address the Kurdish teaching and learning context.

## Rewriting Resistance in Transnational Partnerships: An Invitation to Praxis

We return to Ivanič’s (1998) understanding of resistance, which itself suggests somewhat conflicting notions of retaining one’s values and refusing to be colonized while evincing a desire to open up membership in a discourse community. Throughout the first year of our partnership, we found ourselves increasingly called upon to “accustom ourselves” to these kinds of contradictions emerging in our online discussions rather than pursue a “theory that seeks to abrogate them” (Bizzell, 1992, p. 235). While not all contradictions can be “attended to at every moment,” as Bizzell suggests, their presence ultimately “helps ensure the community’s viability in the face of changing demands from other discourse communities and changing conditions in the material world” (1992, p. 235). The contradictory points of discourse we encountered in our online disciplinary community thus should not only be expected but welcomed as invitations to reexamine our purposes and goals as transnational partners.

In essence, the partnership invited both Americans and Kurds to confront the “global turn” in educational research and to examine how the internationalizing of English Studies curricula and pedagogy has become—and continues to be—a highly contested arena of research (Canagarajah, 2013; Horner & Kopelson, 2014; Horner, Lu, & Matsuda, 2010). Cut off from the international research community for three decades under Saddam Hussein’s regime, SUH faculty are rightly invested in marshaling educational change, an investment that benefited our partnership immeasurably. However, and as we learned, the very question of curricular and pedagogical revision in any university context always becomes: In what ways, and for whose reasons?

As the partnership unfolded into subsequent years, many SUH literature faculty found that, when employed over time, the strategies discussed in our

online forums were beneficial for student learning and for expanding their own pedagogical repertoire. Still, instances of resistance persisted, especially with a small group of SUH faculty who considered student-centered strategies largely ineffective given the Kurds' institutional and cultural constraints, including large class sizes, meager budgets for new materials, and concern about how changing instructional practices would affect student preparation for required annual examinations. This particular group of SUH faculty also voiced concern that their local strategies might not be viewed as "correct" in the eyes of the UC partners, despite assurances to the contrary. In preparing this chapter, Saman speculated that such feelings of inferiority, as Canagarajah (2002b, p. 247) points out, may have been due to an abiding assumption that "the local [SUH] finds representation only according to the purposes and forms permitted by the powerful [UC]," an assumption that proved particularly difficult to dislodge.

That local knowledges are too often dismissed as inferior in comparison with knowledges from the west is a phenomenon well understood by the Kurdish faculty. At issue is the way western perspectives have been ideologically equated with the "global," as opposed to being understood as necessarily context-bound and thus unavoidably interested, as all local knowledges inevitably are. Our partnership was not immune to the effects of this persistent and troubling ideological bias, where "western" is regarded as interchangeable with "global." On this point, Mr. Karwan's observation is telling:

Globalization, welcomed or unwelcomed, has posed many challenges to us in our communities and our classrooms. The traditional issues of power and control, the "voices" of teachers and students, the curriculum, [and the] school structure itself has dramatically changed. New trends [are] not only changing teacher-student relationships but the entire education system in this country.

Karwan was not alone in his concern about the effects of globalization for Kurdistan or the effects our partnership would have for SUH classrooms, and this question served as an important contextualizing feature for our collaborations. In fact, as Saman reported, many SUH faculty simultaneously admired the U.S. educational system yet also ignored the reality that, despite challenges in the Kurdish educational system, Kurdistan claims a strong academic and intellectual history that already validated their own and their students' potential. In Saman's words, SUH student potential needs only to be "triggered to get them more involved in classroom activities."

For those of us who acknowledged that resistance can be written into

the process of negotiation, the partnership allowed for “cultural synthesis,” a process Paulo Freire (1970/2001) asserts does not deny differences between opposing world views as, by its very nature, synthesis requires interaction between competing standpoints. Cultural synthesis, however, does deny the imposition of one world view over and above any other, demanding instead that competing knowledges are held in a dialectic relationship with one another to make space for transformative action. Through our sharing of local knowledges, the online community we created became this kind of “third space” (Gutiérrez, 1999) for critically examining our learning, a unique social and discursive arena that provided an avenue for praxis (Freire, 1970/2001), which in turn moved us beyond dialogue toward critical reflection about current realities and possible futures.

## Current Realities, Possible Futures: Where our “Best Hope” Resides

In her 2009 article, “‘Internationalization’ and Composition Studies: Reorienting the Discourse,” Christiane Donahue cautions that the U.S. perspective on educational change in other regions of the world is “highly partial . . . and largely export-based” (p. 214). More, she argues that laying claim to “unique knowledge, expertise, and ownership” of educational practices not only “present[s] the United States to the world as a homogenous nation-state with universal courses” but also results in “‘othering’ countries that have different, complex, and well-established traditions . . . as somehow lacking or behind the times” (2009, pp. 213–14). The challenge for U.S. researchers, Donahue explains, lies in resisting the “us-them” paradigm the current discourse on internationalizing higher education advances by “thinking about where our work fits into the world rather than where the world’s work fits into ours” (2009, p. 214).

While the SUH-UC partnership provides just one example among many transnational collaborations in the MENA region, we believe our partnership contributes meaningfully to the larger paradigmatic shift Donahue (2009) envisions as necessary for reorienting the discourse on internationalizing higher education toward more pluralistic and egalitarian ends. Rewriting resistance into the process of negotiating curricular and pedagogical change at SUH not only served as the critical first step toward building authentic partnership relations but also became the enabling belief supporting our efforts across the three years. The challenge Donahue issues—to think more completely and less proprietarily about where western knowledges might “fit”

into the world—engenders the “proper humility” that Canagarajah (2002b) reminds us is central to “answering questions that transcend one’s own borders” (p. 257). Both stances are rooted in the kind of productive resistance our partnership learned to recognize, accommodate, and welcome.

It is easy to fall prey to the “us-them” binary Donahue (2009) describes. As one SUH faculty partner remarked over tea the morning Connie and Tom arrived at Salahaddin in Fall 2012, “it’s not just ocean and land that stand between us.” Indeed, there is plenty—the media, the war, world politics—we agreed, to keep us apart. These external “realities” notwithstanding, we also agreed there was much to support our collaboration: The relative stability of the Iraqi Kurdistan region that, at the time, allowed easy travel to and from Erbil; our shared commitment to extended visits on each other’s campuses to work in classrooms together; our dedication to our professional growth; and our burgeoning friendships with one another. Like others who work in transnational partnerships, these realities were the ones that mattered most.

In reflecting on our work and in writing this chapter together, we are persuaded by Friedman’s (2014) claim that academic success in Kurdistan is largely unsung. Our experiences bear witness to that perspective. But his claim that the values that will “triumph” in Iraq are somehow values America owns and so can export to other lands is deeply flawed. For, what our “discovery of difference” scholarship, as Donahue (2009, p. 214) might call it, affirms is that the values toward which America aspires—freedom, equality, safety, peace—are Kurdish values as well. Concern for the effects of globalization and for what internationalizing higher education means in the MENA region are shared concerns, if only for the simple but often overlooked reason that we live in one world. We are all staked in these transformations. In these future possibilities as well as our current realities, we are, as we have always been, each other’s “best hope.”

## Note

1. We have chosen to use first names in the text, both ours as authors and our SUH colleagues as participants; using last names felt counter to the work we accomplished in the transnational partnership, in that the use of first names is deeply tied to the broader arguments we make about engaging productively across cultural borders. Kurdish forms of academic address regularly use titles, like Dr. or Mrs., in front of first names instead of last names (the more common form of academic address in the US); we see this Kurdish practice as critical for building trust and community in the partnership—which was also an important lesson for the U.S. participants about decentering our own contexts by attending to acts of resistance.

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