



## Foreword

Rula Diab

LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY (LEBANON)

Developing students' English writing skills in the MENA region has been a long-standing endeavor, in view of the region's various American-style universities, some of which are well established and date back to the 1800s and early 1900s, such as the American University of Beirut (AUB) and Lebanese American University (LAU) in Lebanon and the American University of Cairo (AUC) in Egypt. More recently, there has also been a steady proliferation of English-medium universities and international branch campuses (IBCs) in the area, especially in the Gulf, as demonstrated by the Education City in Qatar, which houses international branches of six American universities. Together, these universities provide a headquarters for research related to writing pedagogy in the MENA region, research which is beginning to make a name for itself in writing scholarship, as exemplified in this volume. Indeed, this timely volume presents a much-needed exploration of the various approaches to the teaching and learning of writing taking place at universities in this region, in addition to a discussion of the many challenges faced by writing program administrators and writing faculty in this linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse area.

We can better understand the exegesis for this volume by considering how conversations about writing programs and pedagogy have evolved in the region, particularly in the last decade. In October 2007, a symposium on MENA writing centers was held in Doha, Qatar, led by Dr. Michele Eodice and attended by more than fifty writing program administrators, writing center professionals, and writing faculty from the MENA region. As director of the AUB Writing Center at the time, I was fortunate to participate in this symposium and meet a large number of scholars and practitioners in the region interested in the learning and teaching of writing. The symposium provided a unique opportunity to network, discuss the importance of developing students' writing skills, and explore writing programs and centers at other universities. Participants discussed various topics related to second language writing in general and, in particular, issues that continue to confront those of us who are teaching in and managing writing programs in the MENA region. These issues—many of which are addressed in this volume—include the complex socio-cultural and sociopolitical dimensions of writing

in this multilingual region, the various challenges related to implementing Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID) programs, as well as administrator, faculty, and student attitudes towards and misconceptions about teaching writing, writing programs, and writing centers.

One major and immediately tangible result of the Doha 2007 symposium was the establishment of a regional branch of the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA)—the Middle East North Africa Writing Centers Alliance (MENAWCA), which has since become an influential organization that encourages writing research and professional networking in the MENA region. Although this volume is not affiliated with MENAWCA, it can be seen as a response to the growing professionalization of writing pedagogy and research in the region, which has been encouraged in part by the series of biennial conferences sponsored by the organization since 2007. These conferences have provided space for regular conversations across national and institutional borders about the specific challenges and opportunities of writing pedagogy and program development in the region. The MENAWCA conferences in 2009 (UAE University, Al Ain), 2011 (American University of Sharjah), 2012 (College of the North Atlantic, Doha, Qatar), 2014 (Canadian University of Dubai), and 2016 (Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman) have explored a variety of themes, including the development of writing centers in the MENA region; situating and sustaining writing centers and serving the academic community by supporting student writing; creating a “writing culture;” and investigating the relationships between theoretical ideals and writing program, writing center, and writing classroom realities in the MENA region. These conferences were meaningful for me especially because I joined LAU and became the founding director of its writing center, which started operating in 2010. I had the opportunity to share my experience proposing and establishing the LAU Writing Center, and I outlined the challenges faced (Diab, 2009, February).

The main theme of the 2012 conference—about establishing a “writing culture”—stands out as a crucial one in the MENA region, which is addressed in this volume as well as in my own work: How do students and faculty view writing? How much writing are students doing outside the required writing classes? How dominant is plagiarism? How can students and faculty become more involved in WAC approaches? At the time of the MENAWCA conference, I was heavily involved in exploring such questions about how a “writing culture” could be fostered at LAU with the help of the new writing center and the English program. At the 2012 conference, I shared the proposed plans: offering services to the LAU community, name-

ly individualized tutorials and group workshops on specific writing topics that help improve students' writing and emphasize the importance of WAC/WID; planning to establish a formal WAC initiative, which would outline specific WAC policies and implement them in the curriculum as needed; and finally, proposing to expand writing center services by establishing another branch of the writing center in the second LAU campus in Byblos. We also planned to offer community outreach, such as conducting workshops for other universities and high schools in Lebanon to help them establish their own writing centers and train some of their teachers to run them (Diab, 2012, November). There were, of course, the usual obstacles to the above initiatives, such as funding and concerns of some disciplinary faculty regarding their responsibility in teaching writing in their disciplines, as well as the role of the writing center (Diab, 2012).

In this volume, several chapters connect with my own experience of negotiating institutional realities with the larger goal of developing a "writing culture." For example, Samer Annous, Maureen Nicolas, and Martha Townsend highlight a situation similar to ones I have encountered firsthand at more than one university in the region: they describe the challenges involved in teaching writing at multilingual English-medium universities where this teaching is not maintained or even valued across the curriculum. Their findings, reported in "Territorial Borders and the Teaching of Writing in English," suggest that disciplinary faculty do not believe that English skills such as writing can or should be reinforced in the disciplines, a common phenomenon at universities in Lebanon and the region. Annous, Nicolas, and Townsend's investigation of students' attitudes also reveals a similar apathy and misconception related to English writing across the curriculum. My own experience supports their conclusion that "territorial knowledge boundaries" can be extremely harmful to students' learning of English writing, especially in an EFL context. Similarly, but reporting from an IBC in Qatar, Ryan Miller and Silvia Pessoa explore faculty attitudes and expectations about writing. While acknowledging the need for adaptation to the particular local context, Miller and Pessoa argue that institutions such as theirs need a focus on writing and reading across the curriculum.

Several chapters in this book also address the socio-cultural and socio-political dimensions of writing and the teaching of writing in the MENA region, including student identity and multilingualism in the MENA-based writing classroom and faculty attitudes and expectations. For example, Lisa Arnold, William DeGenaro, Rima Iskandarani, Malakeh Khoury, Zane Sino, and Margaret Willard-Traub argue that transnational exchanges can help to not only motivate students but also to suggest curricular and institution-

al change, a claim I wholeheartedly agree with and support. Their project, which involved students at AUB and the University of Michigan-Dearborn, opens up exciting avenues for transnational and international exploration and collaboration in writing scholarship. My own experience in Lebanon suggests that such exchanges are valuable for their exploration of students' linguistic identities in more than one context and culture. In Lebanon, for instance, there could be several factors contributing to students' perceptions of their linguistic, ethnic, and national identity (Diab, 2009); transnational exchanges can help students to not only explore others' identities but to also become more aware of their own. Aneta Hayes and Nasser Mansour, based on their qualitative study of teachers' perceptions of the influence of societal factors on the success of English-medium education in Bahrain, suggest that making certain modifications to the curriculum to make it better fit students' own socio-cultural context may sometimes be necessary. Amy Hodges and Brenda Kent interview faculty in the disciplines, namely engineering faculty, at an IBC, to examine the challenges they faced regarding the teaching and learning of writing. They argue that a professional tutor with teaching experience may be an appropriate support for WID courses in the MENA region. Such studies emphasizing the importance of recognizing and, when necessary, adapting to the particular local context when integrating or adopting foreign curricula should be taken into consideration, particularly in an EFL context.

I cannot think of anyone more suitable for undertaking the collection and editing of this timely volume than Drs. Lisa Arnold, Anne Nebel, and Lynne Ronesi. Their collective, rich, and varied experiences with writing instruction and writing program administration in Lebanon, Qatar, and the UAE, respectively, have enabled them to put together an insightful and thought-provoking collection of articles that will be of interest to both professionals in the region as well as globally. The above mentioned socio-cultural and sociopolitical dimensions of writing in the MENA region, transnational and international collaborations, World Englishes and translingual approaches to writing pedagogy, and faculty attitudes and expectations are only some of the many important issues explored in this volume that will be of interest to researchers and practitioners worldwide.

Almost a decade after the 2007 symposium in Doha that resulted in the establishment of the MENAWCA, writing research in the MENA region has started to carve its place in writing scholarship, as exemplified in this volume. May this collection of articles be the first of many that will help to familiarize the rest of the world with writing research and practice in this richly diverse and complex area.

## References

- Diab, Rula L. (2009). Lebanese university students' perceptions of ethnic, national, and linguistic identity and their preferences for foreign language learning in Lebanon. *The Linguistics Journal, Special Edition, September 2009*, 101-120. Retrieved from <http://www.linguistics-journal.com/2014/01/07/lebanese-university-students-perceptions-of-ethnic-national-and-linguistic-identity-and-their-preferences-of-foreign-language-learning-in-lebanon/>
- Diab, Rula L. (2009, February). *Starting from scratch: Establishing a writing center at the Lebanese American University*. Paper presented at the Middle East North Africa Writing Centers Alliance (MENAWCA) Conference, Al-Ain, UAE.
- Diab, Rula L. (2012). Faculty perceptions of a new writing center. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 16(4), 85-90.
- Diab, Rula L. (2012, November). *Fostering a "writing culture" at the Lebanese American University: The role of the writing center*. Paper presented at the Middle East North Africa Writing Centers Alliance (MENAWCA) Conference, Doha, Qatar.