“Rethinking History: Composition Studies as an International Discipline”

Lisa Arnold, Ph.D.
American University of Beirut, Lebanon
lisa.r.arnold@gmail.com

Only recently has the U.S.-based discipline of composition studies begun to acknowledge the existence and viability of research on writing processes and pedagogy outside the United States – research often labeled under other names, including: academic literacies, comparative rhetoric, discourse studies, language education, and linguistics. Christiane Donahue challenges composition scholars’ U.S.-centric bias in a 2009 article, arguing that the discipline’s ignorance of international scholarship and teaching about writing “[has] had the effect of simultaneously presenting the United States to the world as a homogeneous nation-state ... while ‘othering’ countries that have different, complex, but well-established traditions in both writing research and writing instruction” (213-14). Indeed, this bias becomes especially visible in disciplinary historiography, in that most published accounts of the discipline’s history present its development as a uniquely American pursuit and locate its origins at nineteenth-century Harvard.

In this presentation, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of composition historiography to demonstrate how its assumptions of American primacy carry problematic consequences for scholars, students, and teachers of writing around the world: First, the U.S.-centric premise underlying composition historiography promotes a lack of dialogue about composition research and history across disciplinary, national, and linguistic borders; and second, this bias encourages scholars to define “writing” as an English-only, monolingual, and often monocultural pursuit. Drawing upon my own position as a U.S.-trained composition scholar teaching and working at the American University of Beirut – one of the oldest and most linguistically and culturally diverse institutions of higher education in the Middle East with its own unique history of writing instruction – I argue that composition scholars can begin dislodging this problematic assumption by reframing composition’s history as international in scope.