the text, these subtle practices—which may or may not have anything to do with plagiarism—reveal DeSena’s most provocative insights.

DeSena has taken on an unwieldy audience: high school teachers. With a foot presumably in both secondary and postsecondary camps, she has a unique vantage point and her perspective should be welcome. Unfortunately, her tone often suggests some condescension. When teachers talk to each other, most adopt a tone of collegiality, even employing self-deprecation and a “we’re all in this together” aura. DeSena’s tone, more often than not, is didactic, as if the reader is a student of sorts. She uses the imperative mood frequently to address her imagined audience of stagnant educators. She even breaks the formality of her prose to say, parenthetically, “I hope to convince you to stop assigning book reports.” Who is assigning this phantom book report, and by extension, whom does DeSena think she is convincing? In nearly a decade of teaching (and almost two decades of being a student), I have yet to see the kind of book report assignment vilified in this text. These lapses make DeSena feel removed from her audience, which is ironic since she is a practitioner.

Despite the chasm between the author and the reader, the book succeeds in presenting a good deal of information in a brisk, efficient manner. Instructors could easily glean some innovative ideas from the text in one reading. Those ideas, of course, are not as connected to plagiarism as one might hope given the title. Perhaps we should not be surprised at this. Academics have been wringing their hands about the plagiarism problem for the better part of a century yet the conversation remains largely unchanged. DeSena cleverly uses the current anti-plagiarism momentum to propose a particular philosophy of writing instruction. This connection is not misplaced; many of the classroom activities described would certainly curb academic dishonesty. To emphasize this connection, even at the expense of some of the book’s finer points, is misleading.

Atlanta, GA


Reviewed by Katherine Mack, University of California, Irvine

David Foster’s Writing with Authority: Students’ Roles as Writers in Cross-National Perspective speaks to two concerns that writing teachers and administrators share: first, how to foster autonomous, independent, and recursive thinking and writing practices in students, and, second, how to initiate them into a scholarly conversation based on the intersubjective, relational nature of knowledge-making. Foster offers the term “transformative writing” to describe this pedagogical process and goal, arguing that it “enable[s] students to write in the role of knowledge-
makers in specific knowledge contexts”(115). Using the insights that he gained from his comparative study of German and American university students and the systems within which they write, he offers specific suggestions about the ways in which instructors and writing administrators can promote transformative writing in the American context. The most compelling and actionable of these suggestions addresses the temporality of both students’ writing habits and of the curriculum, a suggestion encapsulated in the book’s concluding pedagogical appeal: “American teachers should expect more from their students as self-directed, long-term planners and writers and should construct tasks based on those expectations” (181).

Activity theory and the methods of the “New Literacy Studies” provide the theoretical framework for Foster’s comparative study, which seeks to situate the German and American student writers within their disciplinary, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts. Foster compares five pairs of German and American students whose discipline and level of study are roughly parallel, and whose universities, Rhineland and Midwestern, differ mainly in size. His data consists of students’ descriptions of their writing practices, which he gathered through multiple, semi-structured interviews and students’ writers’ memos. Foster also observed the students’ writing practices in and outside of the classroom, interviewed instructors about their pedagogical and writing goals for the class, and reviewed the two institutions’ planning documents and policies. Foster is careful to note that his case studies are suggestive, not representative, of the socio-cultural dynamics that shape students’ writing practices and identities. His multi-faceted approach results in richly-detailed case studies that respect the uniqueness of the students’ experiences, and yet also explore the ways in which they reflect the instructor’s pedagogy and the broader university system.

The “Introduction” and chapter 2, “Studying Student Writers in Cross-National Contexts,” explore the different roles that German and American student’s writing plays in their secondary schooling, their access to university, and their intellectual development while at the university. “Early selectivity and differentiated goal-orientation” (29) characterize the German education system in which students decide as early as age eleven whether they will pursue a vocational or university education. Switching tracks is possible, but not easy, as students on the university track (gymnasium) begin preparing for the arbiter, the major exit exam, several years before they take it. Successful completion of the arbiter gains them entrance to any German university that offers their field of specialization.

German students, unlike their American counterparts, begin their discipline-specific course of study and take seminar courses that require research papers in their first year. They also determine whether they will take a course for credit or audit, and whether they would like to retake a course for a new grade. Though German universities do publish expected time-to-degree-completion schedules, they do not enforce them rigorously. From the outset, then, German students enjoy a particular type of autonomy, which Foster describes as “self-direction and self-management in learning, signifying self-direction, freedom, and responsibility in knowledge-building” (26).
While Foster acknowledges problems with aspects of German pedagogy and curricular design, such as the lack of repeated feedback from professors on students’ writing throughout the course, he nevertheless values its fostering of students’ academic ethos: their sense of belonging to and participation within the knowledge-building community of their discipline and the academy at large.

Foster helpfully reminds readers of the ways in which the American system contrasts with the German. The first and second years of an American university typically consist of general education and some introduction-to-the-disciplines courses. American students are expected to take courses for credit; in most instances, the university frowns on extensions and incompletes. The majority of courses require frequent, varied, and shorter writings, similar to those assigned in high school, rather than extended research projects that require students to structure their writing schedules. Foster implicitly critiques this lack of differentiation, arguing that the transition to university should challenge students to think and write differently, as it does for German students.

Chapter 3, “The Work of Writing: Student Authorship Roles in Cross-National Perspective,” examines the “zoning of institutional time in relation to students’ practices as writers” (61). Though the semester durations of Rhineland and Midwestern universities are similar, American students experience writing as a series of deadline-driven assignments embedded within the evaluative structure of the quarter or semester system. German universities, in contrast, offer “a systemic tolerance for students’ variable learning time frames” (62). As long as students can afford to do so, they can take as many semesters as they need to finish their coursework. Moreover, whereas American students tend to conceive of the winter and summer breaks between semesters as vacation time, German students do not perceive a rigid distinction between the lecture and non-lecture periods of the academic year. Their personal writing patterns, not the institutional demands of the university, shape their schedules. Foster argues that professors’ flexibility with deadlines reinforces students’ independence as writers and their sense of membership within the knowledge field.

Chapters 4 to 6 elaborate respectively on the shaping, teaching, and institutionalization of transformative pedagogies and writing practices. Chapter 4 acknowledges American’s students’ familiarity with, and yet underutilization, of recursive writing strategies. Frequent, instructor-imposed deadlines encourage short-burst writing rather than cumulative rethinking and revision. In addition, American students tend not to acknowledge or engage competing interpretations, favoring instead analyses based on their own perspective or opinion. To address these obstacles to the development of transformative writing, Foster establishes three priorities for teachers: first, to assign extended writing projects in which students are responsible for establishing research and writing goals, and that provide multiple opportunities for teacher feedback; second, to incorporate the expectation that students’ writings will engage the perspectives and arguments of other members of the knowledge community; and, third, to use the time afforded by the long-term assignment to promote
students’ reflection, rethinking, and reformulation of their writing. In chapter 5, Foster provides pedagogical strategies and suggestions for course designs derived from two project-based courses that he taught. His description of the two course syllabi, and balanced analysis of several examples of student writings in them, effectively concretizes the abstract pedagogical principles and goals that he posited in the previous chapter. Chapter 6 addresses institutional and program-level administrators who seek to promote the teaching of transformative writing at the institutional level. Foster recommends the institution of variable credit seminar courses that are writing-intensive at all levels of study. He further suggests incorporating extended, cumulative writing projects into already existing courses across the curriculum. Finally, he advises educating faculty about the value of long-term writing assignments so that they consider revising their course schedule and assignments accordingly.

Foster’s study invites further research. Scholars might investigate the effect of the differences in secondary preparation, and of the cultural value of intellectualism, on German and American students’ writing practices. The fact that Germans decide at a much younger age to pursue the university preparatory track; that their gymnasium degree is more equivalent to an associate’s degree than a high school diploma; and, that they are slightly older than their American counterparts, might make them better prepared to engage in transformative writing. Foster’s study might thus provoke a rethinking of writing pedagogy in American secondary schools as well as universities. Future researchers might also interview students about the value they place on their university education, and what they hope to get—either materially or intellectually—from it. If, as I suspect, intellectualism and scholarship occupy the same hallowed status in Germany that rugged individualism and economic success do in the United States, these cultural priorities must affect students’ approaches to their university education.

That his comparative analysis could go deeper does not diminish the importance of *Writing With Authority*. Foster’s study and resulting recommendations reinforce the best practices advocated by WAC and WID researchers in our field. I recently collaborated on a multi-phase, qualitative research study of undergraduate student writers at my public, research-one university. Our primary interest was the transferability of writing knowledge, a topic that Foster’s study does not explicitly address. Notwithstanding these different foci, our findings are similar. Like Foster, we concluded that students are more likely to develop and maintain a rhetorical understanding of writing as situated and specific, rather than as a set of generic and universalizable norms of academic discourse, when instructors at all levels teach disciplinary specific norms, genres, and vocabulary, and require that students’ writings reflect that knowledge. Foster’s reflections on the ways in which long-term, multi-phased, and research-driven projects can enable the development of this kind of disciplinary-specific writing knowledge take us one step closer to enacting this important shift in writing pedagogy.

Irvine, CA

128 Composition Studies