

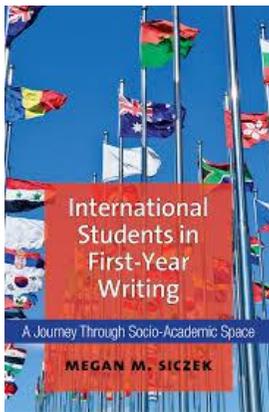
© *Journal of International Students*  
Volume 9, Issue 3 (2019), pp. 929-932  
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)  
Doi: 10.32674/jis.v0i0.907  
ojed.org/jis

## **International Students in First-Year Writing: A Journey Through Socio-Academic Space**

Megan M. Siczek, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018. 224pp.  
Paperback: \$25. ISBN 978-0-472-12447-3

Reviewed by Anthony Schmidt, University of Tennessee-Knoxville

---



Many in international education are well aware of increased international student mobility trends and internationalization efforts around the world. The United States in particular has been home to over one million international students for the last few years. The push for internationalization has become a buzzword on American campuses. It is within this context that Megan Siczek seeks to put a face to what is often only discussed in numbers. In her dissertation-turned-book, *International Students in First-Year Writing: A Journey through Socio-Academic Space* (2018), Siczek describes the lived experiences of 10 international students enrolled in a first-year writing (FYW) course at an American university.

Chapter 1 points out that the overall goal of Siczek's book is to look beyond traditional conceptualizations of international students. Instead of focusing on numbers, language issues, adjustment challenges, assimilation, or even broader themes of culture, Siczek takes a more individualized approach in order to inform policy and praxis through reality—the lived experiences of students. She follows students as they are “projected” into an FYW course, considered to be the most highly enrolled course in American higher education. In particular, the FYW course at the research site included theme-based courses meant to intellectually engage students while helping develop their writing skills.

Chapter 2 gives background on the 10 participants, who come from China, Mongolia, Korea, Lebanon, Ecuador, and Colombia. Chapter 3 continues exploring

their backgrounds, focusing on their motivations for studying in the United States. Some commonalities include the fact that they have chosen to pursue higher education abroad because of perceived limitations of education in their home countries, awareness of opportunities study abroad can afford them, and a strong desire for self-actualization through independent living in a foreign culture.

Chapter 4 explains the hermeneutic phenomenological approach that Siczek utilized. This approach focuses on the interpretation of participants' experiences as they move through an "arc of projection," from beginning to end of their semester. The research is situated within the "socio-academic space" of the physical FYW classroom. This space is where a number of forces come together to create a socially mediated experience: students' individual educational histories, formal academic learning tasks, social interactions between students, and the implicit hand of enculturation.

While the students' voices and experiences were introduced in earlier chapters, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 offer their voices more breadth, allowing the reader to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. These correspond to the beginning, midpoint, and end of the semester, respectively. Following from the book's methodology, the students' responses are analyzed and interpreted based on emerging themes. These themes include the students' evolving understanding of the FYW course (e.g., its difficulty, its purpose), their self-perception, and their role in the socio-academic space of the classroom. One takeaway is the students' constant comparisons to their domestic classmates in terms of language skills, background knowledge, and even ability to fully participate in the classroom. A related theme is the challenge that this type of course posed to the students. Besides lower self-perception at the beginning of the semester, students often lacked background knowledge on the course themes, had a lack of formal writing training, and were overwhelmed by the quantity of difficult readings. By mid-semester, students had become more knowledgeable about the topics, learned to handle the workload, and had a growing awareness of expectations. By the end of the semester, in addition to a feeling of writing growth, all shared a sense of accomplishment and happiness, even relief, with having completed the course with a satisfactory grade. Students left their FYW course with this advice for future international students: Choose a topic you like, be open, be talkative, and think from an "American perspective."

Chapter 8 focuses on three of the 10 participants during their final semester at the university. Highlights from this chapter include looking at how each participant's self-view evolved over their university experience. Students felt more confident because of their accomplishments. They also felt more "American," being able to speak and think from an American perspective. This chapter also contains students' understandings about what was important to their psychological, social, and academic success. Students spoke on the importance of having same-language peers for times when they needed to be fully themselves. They also spoke on the need for finding a community to be a part of, whether that is with international or American students. Finally, this chapter details the transformative power of studying abroad, with all concluding that studying in the US was "worth every penny" and feeling as though they grew in a way that they could not have in their own countries.

Chapter 9 offers a final interpretation of the entire arc of projection in the theme-based FYW classroom. It iterates the book's main point that international students are not statistics but rather individuals. Contrary to stereotypes of international students, they are a diverse group of students who arrive with varying educational backgrounds and transnational experiences, and they find studying abroad important not only for perceived economic or educational opportunities but also as a quest for self-actualization. In addition to interpretation of student experiences, Siczek also sees the important role the socio-academic space played in socializing students in an academic discourse community through the interaction of writing and content. Siczek also recognizes the contradiction of a university that pushes for internalization while having theme-based FYW courses that have very few topics with global connections.

Chapter 10 looks at the broad implications of this study. One implication is to offer themes with a more global perspective, bringing the "global to the local." Recognizing the importance of background knowledge, Siczek also calls for more ethical placement of students in their FYW courses to avoid sink-or-swim situations. At the same time, she suggests not segregating international students from domestic students, as this often puts more pressure on language specialists for academic development while allowing stereotypes of international students to remain unchallenged.

Several pedagogical implications are also discussed, including the continued use of peer- and professor- feedback in writing. Additionally, Siczek recommends faculty realize the implications of the classroom as a socio-academic space: It is not simply a place of knowledge transmission but rather a site in which a number of social, cultural, and academic phenomenon collide and in turn have profound effects on student development. Finally, a methodological implication is the continued use of the phenomenological approach, which Siczek argues was a valid method to gain insight into the lived experience of the students.

Despite the validity of Siczek's method, with a limited sample size of 10 students during their first semester of university, and even fewer during their final semester, the generalizability of her findings are limited. As the author points out, international students are a very diverse population, and a singular account of their experience during their first semester at an American university cannot be applied to all other international students. Furthermore, Siczek's focus on a singular socio-academic space belies a more holistic experience in which students must also contend with the academic pressures from other courses, suggesting either multiple arcs of projection or one in which all courses are intertwined.

Nonetheless, Siczek accomplished her important goal of giving voice to international student experiences. The book does an excellent job in removing these students from a deficit discourse by showing them as purposeful, strategic, and self-aware individuals—much akin to their domestic counterparts. The book clearly conveys the transformative power of education. Therefore, this book has an important role to play in the continued support of international education.

This book would be very useful for helping FYW instructors gain insight into how international students experience such courses. For English as second language teachers, this book may suggest some ways in which to better prepare students for the socio-academic space. For others who work with international students on American

campuses, this book would give valuable insight into international student motivation and development.

---

**ANTHONY SCHMIDT** is a teaching associate at the University of Tennessee's English Language Institute. He has over 10 years of English language teaching experience. In addition, he is also a PhD student in Evaluation, Statistics, and Measurement at the University of Tennessee. His research interests include various aspects of higher education, especially areas that intersect with international students. E-mail: [aschmi11@utk.edu](mailto:aschmi11@utk.edu)

---