Something of Our Own to Say: Writing Pedagogy in India

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As writing pedagogy gains distinct footholds in university classrooms in India, it is worth retracing some of its steps to the shaping influence of composition pedagogies in the United States. To begin: we met American writing pedagogy in reverse. Gupta first trained to teach writing in India at Ashoka University at the Young India Fellowship program, which is closely associated with the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn), and is now pursuing that interest as a PhD student in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Arizona (UA). Dasgupta encountered writing pedagogy at the Rutgers Writing Program as a PhD student in literature and is now in India directing the Centre for Writing and Pedagogy at Krea University. Common to both our experiences is the usefulness of some framing concepts from American composition practice and their necessary adaptations in the Indian classrooms.

For example, conversation both as metaphor and literal aid to make academic writing easier to access is an enduring idea in American composition studies (Bruffee). In what follows, we recount our experiences of using the concept of conversation to enable academic writing in our classrooms. Each narrative details adaptations of what didn't automatically transfer to our particular contexts. These adaptations highlight a range of cross-cultural assumptions — from misaligned cultural references to the levels of prior reading and writing skills — that can be taken for granted. Overall, our work has required many more intermediate steps to make writing pedagogy workable in our socially and linguistically diverse classrooms. We learned that what seems matter-of-fact in American composition — the analogy of conversation as talk or strategy for analytic writing — has to be made accessible in our classrooms as something of our own.

Beauty of the Burkean Parlor: Anuj Gupta

While finishing my M.Phil in English literature, I stumbled upon a job opportunity that would change my life's course. I was hired to teach an academic writing course, which I would eventually manage and administer "Academic Writing at Ashoka" (Gupta), before heading to the US for a PhD in Rhetoric and Composition. For the course, I was eager to utilize exercises from the pedagogic resources shared with us. These resources had been compiled by several teachers trained in US writing pedagogy who preceded me at the program. I was particularly excited by Graff and Birkenstiens's *They Say/I*

Say: Moves that Matter in Academic Writing and its suggestion that written templates of rhetoric were modelled on oral conversations such as those in a "Burkean parlor" a metaphor drawn from the reception room of 18th-19th century Euro-American bourgeois households that hosted stimulating conversations (CriticalSkills).

Inspired, I explained in class that writing was like conversations in a parlor — only to find my students utterly confused. One hesitantly asked, "Sir, what do you mean that academic writing happens in a beauty parlour?" I was startled. In my enthusiasm, I had forgotten that in India, "parlours" and "saloons" refer to places that offer skincare and haircare services (something akin to the nail salons that are popular in the US) and not the high-brow bourgeois spaces that Burke had in mind. I decided to go out on a limb to save the situation. After all, even beauty parlours and salons are places of rich discursive exchanges that are intimate and political, even if in an informal context, as has been demonstrated wonderfully in a film called "Everybody says I'm Fine" (Bose). Instead of taking my students to Burke, I figured I'd bring Burke to my students.

I continued with the reference my students readily understood and asked, "Why do you think people go to beauty parlours and saloons?" and "What do you think they do there?" The response was "..umm, to look good?" I agreed: "Yes. They go there to look good, which brings them various emotional, social, and even professional benefits, right? That's why people go to college too, isn't it? Most people go to college to look good, to get a job, to climb the social ladder, etc. These are also reasons why people visit saloons and beauty parlours." After I said this, I realised how true this was. Most people I know, including myself, do not really go to college to participate in ancient disciplinary conversations like the Burkean metaphor implies. A beauty parlor might actually serve as a better metaphor for college than the Burkean parlor, in some ways! "Can you think of any other similarities?" I tried my luck, but my students remained silent. I changed tack. "No problem, let's speculate," I said. I pushed the metaphor — "Well the other thing that happens in parlours is that people talk. A lot! They talk to each other about all sorts of things — politics, cricket, shopping, romance, gossip! They analyze, criticize, and appreciate these topics and even laugh and cry about them. They have conversations. They listen to what others are saying. Then, they respond. After a while they leave. Some new people pop-in. And that's what Burke says happens in academic writing too!" From confusion and surprise to some degree of understanding, my students and I recreated the Burken parlor to make sense in our context. In adapting the Burkean analogy for joining conversations, we transformed and owned it.

Walking the Talk: Anannya Dasgupta

Two decades ago, at the Rutgers University Writing Program, I learned for the first time that there was a systematic pedagogy for academic writing. As evident in videos made available on the RU website that offer snapshots of my TA training, Kurt Spellmeyer talks about setting up assignment questions as conversations between authors (Spellmeyer). As described in the video, I trained to ask students questions such as: "How might the solution to the problem with globalized markets that Chua has identified be found in Bacevich's analysis of the US role in current global unrest?" This kind of essay prompt assumes that students understand enough of each author's ideas to examine the implications of what one author has to say in the expanded context of the other's topic. But, as the peer review exercise in the video demonstrates, the struggle of the writing class is that students start by writing extended summaries of the assigned readings. The writing teacher helps students, through the process of revision, learn how to join the ongoing conversation that authors like Chua and Bacevich have started and, in that process, learn to have an argument of their own.

Over the last decade in India, I have been establishing the teaching of writing at the university level; most of the students have not taken any prior classes in formal academic essay writing. Most of the faculty I hire to teach them have never taken or taught such courses either. I quickly learned that my changed context required me to go back to the drawing board and revisit the assumptions of my pedagogic training. I did not, for instance, have the luxury of assuming that all my students could write many pages of serviceable summary. As I have come to learn, the ability to summarize is necessary to follow an ongoing conversation; but to add to the conversation one has to do the work of analysis — to have something of one's own to say. To be able to teach students the work of accurate summary as the basis of convincing analysis, I had to rethink the logic of setting essay prompts from what I had learned to do at the Rutgers Writing Program.

Among videos available at the Krea-CWP youtube channel, there is one of a faculty support workshop that I conducted for the writing teachers, where we reviewed writing assignment questions (Center). As is evident from the discussion, we refocused the assignment questions from the model of direct conversation between authors to a language of connecting ideas in different readings. We are not asking students to see one author's ideas as the topic of conversation in the context or implication of another author's ideas; instead, we have made the essay prompts a different topic of conversation where the assigned readings are sources for evidence. For example, in reading Emily Martin's "Egg and the Sperm" alongside Aparna Vaidik's "From *Satyagrahi* to

Krantikari" in *Waiting for Swaraj: Inner Lives of Indian Revolutionaries Hardcover,* my pedagogical training might suggest a question like: How can Martin's idea of waking sleeping metaphors help us understand the self-formation of revolutionaries in Vaidik's narrative? Within this context for teaching writing, however, we are better served by asking: "How does a political awareness of language-use change culture?" or "What is power?" These two questions ask for a greater degree of extrapolation from the assigned readings and encourage students to use ideas and instances from Martin and Vaidik. They build on the practice of summarizing arguments from previous class worksheets, which help students avoid slipping into undirected summaries in their essay drafts. Instead of asking about the conversations in which Martin and Vaidik are engaged, we are asking students to start and direct the conversation in their essays. Along the way, students connect ideas sourced in different readings by using their own voice as they make explicit the otherwise implicit connections between the texts.

Conclusion

Making the metaphor of conversation our own in our writing classrooms helps us see the significance of adaptation as a pedagogical tool. When we adapt pedagogies, the process of adaptation itself contours theories of teaching towards practices of greater effectiveness in learning. It makes us pay careful attention to differences in context and to the particularities of our locations and classrooms. Afterall, classrooms are not homogeneous - socially, linguistically or in skill levels - either in America or in India. Adaptation empowers teachers and students to start with a known template not with the intention to replicate meaning, but to creatively expand and ultimately transform the template. A good analogy here is the way in which the English language is growing roots, and as Kothari and Snell's anthology demonstrates, becoming a "chutnified" Indian language that is distinct from the colonial notions of a standardized Queen's English. The writing pedagogy we have been developing for our classrooms is beginning to travel to the teaching of writing composition in other Indian languages as well.

What is really needed at this stage is a lot more ethnographic documentation of academic writing as it is being taught across the country. Gupta's classroom anecdote and Dasgupta's revisions of assignment questions from an actual faculty training session made available in video is our effort to give granular, experiential grounding to the discussion of pedagogical approaches that ethnographies usually make possible. The experiences that we have shared represent a miniscule sample size of teachers and classrooms that are similarly resourced and located in the complex and complicated scenario of Indian higher education. While some attempts at documenting and anthologizing

more narratives of classroom experiences of teaching writing has begun (Dasgupta and Lohokare; Padwad; Roy et al.), these also serve to show the ambit of experiences that remain to be written about.

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