

Chapter 37. A Tale of Two Democracies: Writing Studies Between the US and India

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The Ghosts of Papers Past

There are rewards to being a hoarder. You can revisit exactly what you wrote in your First Semester English Exam in the Fall of 1997, in your home city of Delhi, when you were in 11th grade. You can mourn the loss of your neat and precise cursive and see that the longest answer you ever wrote was about a page-and-a-half long. You can see that you had correctly answered the question of what the eagle symbolized in Tennyson's *The Eagle* (correct answer: power and majesty).

You can see that questions involved testing how effectively you could use the words “grace and dignity” and “to my surprise” in a sentence; your answer to the second “I had thought the English paper would be two hours long, but later, *to my surprise* I found out that its duration was 3 hours.”

Time, ah yes, *time*.

You can remember that almost everything that you wrote in school up to that point was produced under timed-writing conditions: anxiety-provoking, stress-inducing timed writing. You can remember that you had never, not once, written a take-home essay on which you received feedback, based on which you then made revisions. You had never drafted. This game was one-shot and on-the-spot.

And because you are a hoarder you can see exactly what you wrote to your friends back home in Delhi about an English paper that you wrote in the Spring of 1998, in the Second Semester of 11th grade. By January of that year, you had moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, with your parents, and without half your heart. A reluctant relocation that felt to your self-indulgent teenage self like moving to the moon.

To your friends you wrote a good deal that is unmentionable, as well as the following, “In English I’m doing a researched essay on ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’—its (sic) come pretty good and took tonnes of work—I had to write 6 drafts for it and read 5 critical books and essays. I have to read too many books! Gosh! ... I have two English classes, so I have to read about four books a week, while the kids who have 1 class only have to read 2!)”

Doubtless, you were exaggerating, about the six drafts and the four books, but you know that it is in this moment, and in this movement—overnight, from

Delhi to Raleigh, from a one-shot system to a many-draft system, from rote-based learning to reasoning-based learning—that the writing pedagogue in you was born. The shock of switching schools, educational systems, and of course countries so swiftly created a unique positionality and pedagogy, crafted between two worlds, and it is this positionality that informs so much of what you do today.

Just as to being a hoarder, there are rewards to being an anthropologist. You can look back on the products of your hoarding and call them data. You can then analyze your data reflexively to attempt to understand how they inform your commitments to and insights regarding Writing Studies today, between India and the USA.

Before I enumerate some of my positionality-derived, or positionality-influenced positions on teaching writing at the university level, I provide a bit more of the conventional professional-biographical narrative of what I did after that foundational, fateful, high-school era move.

The Making of Positionalities in the Present

This is my story in the field of Writing Studies: In 2010 I completed a PhD in Anthropology, and failing to secure tenure-track employment in my discipline, found my way into Writing Studies. My first teaching job post-PhD was at UPenn's outstanding Critical Writing Program, where I taught first-year writing seminars in the disciplines over the course of 5 mostly happy and productive years. I first fell, quite incidentally, into Writing Studies, but then slowly I began to fall in love with the field. This was both unexpected and delightful.

I realized I was a generalist over a specialist, a process-oriented teacher over a product oriented-teacher, and that I genuinely enjoyed teaching first-year students from across the disciplines how to think, rather than what to think. I also realized that Writing Studies and Anthropology were closely connected, so I felt few schisms between my life as a teacher of writing and a teacher of anthropology. Both fields of practice and inquiry enhanced each other and challenged each other in the productive and exasperating ways that keep the mind hungry and engaged.

In 2015, home called. A brand-new university was being built in New Delhi—Ashoka University—and that university needed both Writing Pedagogues, as well as Anthropologists.

Luckily, I could fill both slots, and I arrived at Ashoka as the university's first Director of Writing, as well as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology. Once there, I played a central role in setting up Ashoka's undergraduate and postgraduate Writing Programs; in training a cohort of Writing Instructors (whose work in the field now, happily, exceeds my own); and in crafting new curricula and teaching methods uniquely adapted to India's particular educational contexts.

These contexts involved taking a new set of steps towards moving Indian education ever further away from lingering colonial legacies of mimicry rather than creativity, particularly in humanities and social sciences education at high school

and undergraduate levels, as well as moving away from primarily exam-based assessment to more open-ended and qualitative forms.

In many ways, I arrived in India at a moment where many past orthodoxies with regard to education were being dismantled and questioned, and so this was a deeply exciting moment—one that brought home for me, most decisively, the importance and purpose of the humanities and social sciences, not only for the creation of new knowledge but also for engaged and critical democratic citizenship. And within humanities and social sciences education, I realized increasingly the absolutely critical role played by writing studies and pedagogy. I arrived in India at a moment of the creation of a relatively new field of study—that of writing studies and pedagogy in the country—and was deeply fortunate to get to play a role in crafting that field..

In this, I was accompanied, aided, helped, guided, and often lead by the extraordinary generosity and collaborative spirit of colleagues who played a leading role in establishing the nascent field of Writing Studies in India—Anannya Dasgupta then at Jindal (and now at Krea), Madhura Lohokare at Jindal, Ashwin Kumar at Ahmedabad University, Subhasree Chakravarty, Anuj Gupta, Aruni Kashyap and Aditi Sriram at Ashoka, and many others. Most continue to work in India, taking the field forward, and when my daughter turns 18, I hope to join them in the important work of deepening formal engagements with writing, reasoning, and critical thinking in Indian classrooms, even as a continual informal tradition of conversation, deliberation, and debate that I grew up with in the country—and that is now under considerable threat—remains one of my largest sources of inspiration as a writing pedagogue. A future dream-positionality is as someone who is able to travel across the country conducting informal flash-Writing-Seminars in multiple contexts, with multiple types of learners, and in multiple languages, for, as many genealogies of our field have it, a training in rhetoric, and in oratory, is a training for democratic citizenship itself.

Speaking of democracy, I would be remiss not to mention Val Ross, generous and brilliant mentor whose own positionality and journey might well have played a role in prompting her to craft an exceptionally inclusive Writing Program at Penn. When I started teaching writing in 2010, I was deeply inspired by Val's informal mantra, 'everyone should have an Ivy league education,' as well as the many steps she took to attempt to achieve this end. Accordingly, our training at Penn shaped us to teach a diverse range of learners in as inclusive a manner as possible, both inside the formal classroom, and without. Val's approach was to continually expand the walls of the ivory tower, both locally and globally, and under her leadership, Penn formally partnered with us at Ashoka for an unprecedented free transfer of all of Penn's instructional materials in Writing Studies. These continue to be used, adapted, and circulated among learners across India. Over my years in India from 2015-2021, here I saw Writing Studies being crafted and re-crafted, transferred and adapted, between the world's two largest democracies. And I got to play a key part in that process, all before the age of 40. Now that was a ride.

When I think back to my eight years in Delhi building Ashoka, a very large range of emotions crop up. Those were years of deep personal loss and professional joy, though even that joy came with a generous side of difficulty, as most new and large endeavors do. Those were also years—according to many expert commentators—of the stifling of critique and dissent in the country, and of significant democratic backsliding. But it was the larger political and social context that made the work itself so vital, so purposeful, and so joyful. Far from being undervalued areas of study, teaching writing and critical thinking made enormous sense in that context.

I had moved from one country where the humanities and social sciences were being systematically undermined, and where, to be honest, the situation was quite gloomy for most social science and humanities PhDs, to one where—admittedly, though only in very few elite university contexts,—they were embraced, enhanced, celebrated and supported. The latter situation gave me much hope, and a very clear sense of purpose.

Post-pandemic, for family reasons, I had to move back to the USA. Once again, reluctantly, and once again, with half of my heart, as well as much uncompleted work, left behind. In the US, I found myself in a work environment that seemed to me as closed and elitist, on a new and uncertain stage in my journey, but with some insights collected along the way that I will take the rest of this meandering essay to share:

The first, that the still-raging STEM versus Humanities debate that I found myself inserted into upon my return to the US, when viewed from the vantage point of India, looks as ridiculous as a fun-house mirror version of itself.

Here in the United States, in the present-day, from some quarters there is a push away from a Liberal Arts education, towards STEM education, purportedly to prepare young people for future job markets. As US Universities, faced with multiple crises, begin to strip themselves of supposedly ‘disposable’ Humanities and Social Science disciplines, you see previously-STEM-focused universities in India expand themselves into the Humanities and the Social Sciences. While they didn’t start out this way, all of India’s previously-solely-tech-focused IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology) have now become full universities, with recently-created departments across the Humanities and Social Sciences.

In India, the push is in the opposite direction, towards the Liberal Arts. Sixty years of STEM-focused education has not sufficiently prepared Indian students for an increasingly dynamic job market, or for the many challenges of citizenship in the era of social media. In addition to the expansion of the Liberal Arts into previously-STEM-focused institutions, India is creating new Liberal Arts Universities at breakneck speed to make up for the lag, and I was involved in the creation and founding of one of these universities. In this case the U.S. might need to learn from India’s experience to appreciate what it already has, rather than acting to decimate it. In terms of positionality, educators and administrators who are making these harmful decisions should spend significant time and

analysis considering the reverse-direction being charted by India, and indeed China, before committing to their program-cutting ends.

Another insight that arises from my positionality between both countries is how central and indispensable Writing Pedagogy is for developing analytical and critical thinking abilities within formal systems of education. I mean, I know that y'all in the US already know this, but I still don't think the scale of significance is fully visible. A core insight of anthropology is that humans within a particular culture may not be able to fully comprehend aspects of its significance while being immersed within it. A fuller picture of significance emerges through thinking with difference. Let us then apply what I call a "Difference Filter" from outside the US to a very specific area of Writing Studies scholarship within the US—the "5-paragraph essay."

Forgive me now for moving from the very broad focus of the above sections to a very specific case of a particular writing genre, and how very differently this genre is viewed in two distinct educational contexts. This close zooming in might be helpful though, because it helps to crystallize some of the very broad-ranging insights arrived at through my bi-continental experiences in one concrete case.

Several recent studies have raised significant alarm bells around this genre of writing, particularly at the University level, with titles that call for "killing" and "challenging the tyranny" of the 5-paragraph essay. My 17-year-old self, coming from a no-paragraph-essay situation would have found all this alarm to be rather baffling.

I'm not saying that the 5-paragraph model cannot be improved upon, of course not, but rather that employing such violent language towards the 5-para essay (one that I hear repeatedly in my current environment) actually inhibits students from improving upon it. A "killing"-approach is similar to the 'Banking model of education' that groundbreaking educator Paulo Freire so strongly critiques. This is a model that views students as empty accounts that are to be filled with knowledge by the authoritative figure of the teacher, rather than as learners who come in with significant amounts of pre-existing knowledge that is to be both built upon and learnt from. Rather than seeing the 5-para genre as an enemy that must be "killed," a Difference Filter applied from India suggests that it is a sapling, from which better and more-complex writing and thinking can be carefully cultivated. This is but one example of the ways in which cross-cultural conversations around writing studies can possibly lead to greater understanding of both self, as well as other.

My high school self, experiencing for the first time the process of drafting, revision, structuring, and the great amount that can be iteratively learnt from this process, would agree. And while said high school self was incredibly proud of her first 5-para essay on *A Streetcar Named Desire* as product, this later self can see that essay as the beginning of a valuable, situated process that continues to unfold to this day.

Positionality though, consists not only of our professional self. Each of us are many, and after my most-recent, pandemic-and-personal-life necessitated move

back to the US, I find myself in many ways at sea. Immigration has not been easy, either then, or now. What I'm hoping for is to be part of something in this country as overwhelmingly purposeful and joyful as what I had found in India—and specifically found in the art of university-building. Through the looking glass of university-building in another country, I am able to perceive the strengths that universities already possess in the US, as well as understand how important it is to hold on to these strengths and nurture and bolster them. It is folly to decimate that which already exists and holds such promise. I see purpose in a joyful reclamation of the essential role of the social sciences and the humanities within the US academy, in conversation with, and in concert with, STEM. Always putting the two in opposition, as the case of India shows us, is a classic false dilemma, one that doesn't hold up. We need the humanities and social sciences because the teaching of writing, reasoning, and critical thinking remains as urgent now in the US as it ever has. Perhaps at this particular moment, more.