# Guest-Editorial – Building the Boat While Sailing it: Writing Pedagogy in India

*by Café Dissensus on June 24, 2019*

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Courses at the university that are dedicated to teach academic writing at the undergraduate or postgraduate level are a nascent phenomenon in India. Typically, universities in India have some form of language support centres that aim to help students whose writing is diagnosed to suffer from poor English as is evident from the grammatical errors, unclear syntax and inadequate vocabulary in their writing. Needless to say that even if these usually understaffed and overburdened centres are able to fulfill their mandate, it does not make a huge dent on the overall quality of academic writing that students produce even if the writing is grammatically improved. In this context, to have dedicated writing courses taught not by language experts but discipline experts is an announcement of a paradigm shift from how Indian higher education has and largely continues to imagine the work of supporting writing. A handful of private universities are setting up writing centres and making writing courses a part of the curriculum, and some of the public universities, albeit only the more

prominent ones, are beginning to engage visiting faculty to teach full semester writing courses. For most others, the model that is becoming popular is one of organizing short-term workshops on different aspects of academic writing that could be a day or week long depending on the resources that the university can spare.

What is academic writing? What seems to be the general consensus on the experience of being an academic writer? Who is a writing teacher? What does one teach in a writing course if grammar and language are not its stated goals of instruction? What is the experience of being in a writing class? From where does the teaching of writing draw its methods? What do writing teachers learn from teaching writing? Who does the teaching of writing sit next to at the table of traditional departments and disciplines? Is writing pedagogy invited to sit there at all? What motivates this pedagogy, apart from the crying need for it, for teachers who could be teaching other things instead? These are the likely questions that our readers will have if they are unfamiliar with the work of writing pedagogy, but also these are the questions that we, those of us who teach writing, constantly ask ourselves. These are also the questions that motivated us to put this anthology together. We wanted to think together and gather our small but growing tribe; collect a toolkit of skills, inspirations and insights, and sound out what resonates in our deepest hearts as we present ourselves to universities as a reminder that higher education in India has been missing an important first step. The first step of paying attention to teaching students how to read, write and think in the ways that qualify as academic.

Unlike, say, the United States, where the flagship writing course sailed about half-a-century ago at Harvard, and has by now weathered enough storms and undergone many forms to stay its course in the troubled waters that seem to be the lot of universities even there; in India, the boat, so to speak, is barely out of the boatyard but already at sea. Before we navigate the challenges and joys of this pedagogy in the classroom, it is important to address an experience that many of us share. To several of us, the biggest challenge for writing pedagogy is at the entry door of the universities itself where even those that acknowledge the urgency of the need to include the

teaching of writing in the curriculum are not able to spare adequate resources for it. While it is tempting to heap the blame on the malice of the universe, we are settling instead on asking why; it is a part of our ongoing work to make concerted efforts to understand what makes it challenging for universities to be willing to house the teaching of writing; or in letting it grow to its full capacity.

The future of writing pedagogy depends on us finding ways to adapt the teaching of writing to what universities need, even as we convince universities to take a closer look at its value to make more room for it. Writing pedagogy, following from the North American model, is human resource intensive. Done right, it needs small classes not exceeding fifteen students; it needs trained teachers who are ideally researchers themselves; and it needs additional tutoring support. To those familiar with the terrain of Indian higher education, this list probably sounds like handing over exactly the reasons that universities will give to not afford its teaching. As more of us gain experience in teaching and adapting writing pedagogy for classes and situations that do not meet the ideal criteria, as we become better at juggling resources and figuring the exact nooks in which to fit the teaching of writing, the chances of coming up with a writing pedagogy tailored to Indian universities become better. To this effect, a small and nebulous group of writing teachers have started talking to each other and are joining hands to share resources and training. As much as this special issue is a snapshot of stocktaking and consolidation, it is also an exercise in reaching out to a wider community of readers and writers; to academic writers who are thinking seriously about academic writing; and to teachers of academic writing spread across institutions, working in a sense of relative isolation. This special issue of *Café Dissensus* is a first step towards articulating a common ground of interest that we hope is the beginning of many more conversations, collaborations and future research.

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This is a collection of different voices that come from different contexts and merit being read for the distinctness of what they are saying. But read together several critical threads emerge to bind different contributions in shared concerns. One such thread is an unblinking gaze on the

disenchantment of academic writers with academic writing. The disenchantment is both affective and political. Savita Suresh Babu, whose essay opens this collection, lays out academia as a field of graded exclusion based on the kind of writing one has been exposed to as possible models for one's writing. Something that J. Devika's essay puts in context of the largely thwarted transformative potential of the social sciences academic writing in India. Nandini Dhar draws attention to the expert driven financialized forms of producing knowledge in the North American academia, and now increasingly in India too, that makes survival in the profession the primary drive for academic writing. Perhaps not coincidentally both Dhar and Shantam Goyal prefer poesis as the vehicle of meaning while formulaic academic writing squeezes "utilitarian meaning" out of texts. Vasudha Katju notes the paradox of writing a PhD thesis in isolation although the work of academic writing is, in principal, profoundly social. Collectively these charges represent a response to the evaluation of knowledge production, via narrow requirements of a certain kind of writing which in turn feeds a super-specialised publishing complex, globally as well as nationally.

If we add to this the particular place occupied by English in India's postcolonial university and college classrooms and the bone-deep divides along caste, region, class, language and gendered lines, what we encounter in terms of failures in the education system cannot be characterised as a crisis, with its connotations of the temporariness of a problem, but as a systemic problem that does not nurture younger communities to generate and own knowledge, thus keeping the boundaries of exclusion unbroken. Again, J. Devika's essay speaks powerfully to this as she creatively undermines the boundaries of exclusion with her Bridge-Books in Malayalam.

In some senses, even this special issue does not avoid the trap of exclusion. As editors, we mobilised our respective networks to solicit contributions on writing in academia. It is not a surprise that our contributors are, like us, located in metropolitan centres, based in privileged institutions of higher education within and outside India, and have a command over the use of the English language in a register recognisable to us. We are aware

that all these markers are intimately tied to caste and class privilege. Even though we have garnered voices that speak to different concerns and bring out different contexts in the teaching-learning of writing, the overall access to privilege is largely similar. What would this special issue have looked like if its class, caste, region and language locations were different? It is important to acknowledge this dissonance and reflect upon it so that the discomfort can work its way into how we reimagine academic writing. Collaborating and engaging with and learning from the various 'communities of academic practice,' as Babu puts it, in different locations, in different registers and in languages other than English is a responsibility that we cannot shirk, even as we open up this much needed conversation on the pedagogies of writing in higher education in India. This is a direction we hope the work of developing writing pedagogy will take.

Given our locations, and our dedicated work over the last few years to build the pedagogy of writing, the cynical disengagement from its value and disenchantment with its current unworkable states, however, only mark our starting point, as it does with many of our contributors. What made this issue thrilling for us to put together was the wide varieties of ways in which the teaching, learning and practice of academic writing is becoming a mode of transformative knowledge making. Katju, for instance, counters writing in isolation by writing together in informal groups and considers the dynamics of writing groups. In fact, several of our contributors strategically reutilize what would otherwise seem to weigh down academic writing and keep the conversation to its inabilities. Kumud Bhansali takes on creative writing and Swathi Shivanand takes on interdisciplinarity as entry points that enrich the discourse of academic writing and its pedagogy.

As teachers of writing, we are particularly interested in looking closely at writing classrooms and workshops to document the ways in which writing pedagogy is developing, and to keep a tab on what is being flagged as concerns, and ways, if there might be any, to address them. Between Payal Singh, Rajashree Gandhi, Nupur Samuel, Anuj Gupta, Suchismita Chattopadhyay, Kumud Bhansali and Madhura Lohokare we have a sampling of school, college and university level classes and workshops for

students, research scholars and faculty. The common thread that knits these experiences together is the practice of pedagogic care that emerges in responses to student needs in the classroom. Often these are methods to work around typical diagnosis of problems in writing. Gandhi, Samuel, Gupta and Lohokare's essays are remarkable also for the insight that the process of giving feedback to a class or an individual student is an important point at which the details of writing pedagogy emerge. Gupta finds that the process of feedback to a student is far from a one-way street of learning. To quote from his essay: '[…] we need to start paying a lot more attention to how students like Dheeraj are shaping writing pedagogy in India. […] he has taught me a lot of what I know about writing pedagogy. As I realized while writing this paper, it is primarily by closely reading his words, as well as those of my other students, that I am beginning to find the critical vocabulary to think about writing and its teaching in a whole new way.' It is important for us to emphasise that the impetus and models of writing pedagogy are already available in our classrooms; like Gupta we have to learn to flesh them out. Samuel too finds that involving students in forming the assessment rubrics enables the mutually constitutive functions of teaching and assessment. How students can influence deep pedagogic shifts can be seen in Payal Singh's thoughtful, self-reflexive essay on how a writing class at the university led her to re-think the relationship between reading and writing but also why she feels that that connection needs to be kindled way earlier in the school curricula. It might be useful to add that voices of students, like Singh, are one of the reasons why several universities and institutes are now looking into the formal inclusion of writing courses in the curriculum.

Curricular reading and writing form another spool for the essays in this collection. Payal Singh, Bhoomika Joshi, Anusha Hariharan, Kumud Bhansali and Sameer Thomas challenge themselves to read close to the bone, and read even curricular texts creatively beyond their expected functions in the curriculum. Joshi and Thomas playfully and meaningfully think through bilingualism and monolingual-translation from English to English as ways to shake off some of the intimidating formality that halo academic reading and constrain writing. There is one tradition, in India and elsewhere, in which the work of teaching reading and writing continues to

be in the purview of English literature departments. When it comes to locating writing centers or finding anchors to direct them, there is an unsaid assumption that it will be a person with a disciplinary background in English literature. However, as even a cursory glance though our list of contributors will show, the majority of our contributors are from the social sciences, and among them most are sociologists or anthropologists.

This natural affinity between anthropology and literature in their shared attention to reading and writing is not surprising. The method of fieldwork that Geertz inaugurated in close collaboration with the New Historicists – Greenblatt, Gallagher, renaissance scholars who shook up English departments back in the day – is a method in close attention to how the field is written. Anthropology has seen its heyday of work dedicated to the idea that worlds become real in the words that are used to write them down and narrate them. As an aside, narrative is in fact the unacknowledged hero of academic writing that ties together every field of academic work, even those that are inclined to use more figures than words, and yet, finds itself displaced by the emphasis on argument that forgets to involve it. The point being that as we are beginning to look into how to expand the teaching of writing in India, and are faced with the task of staffing writing centres with those that will find the work of writing pedagogy attractive, sociologists and anthropologists are presenting themselves as a natural choice that does not have to be limited to English departments.

In this anthology, Chattopadhyay, Joshi, and Hariharan, doctoral candidates in anthropology, write evocatively about how processes of writing, especially fieldnotes, are an important part of doing their work, but as Chattopadhyay notes, there is no actual training to be had in writing them. Chattopadhyay, who had occasion to be trained as a writing teacher, puts her training to use to think about the pedagogy that could be developed for the writing and reading of fieldnotes. Writing fieldnotes as a process that can yield meaningful narratives of knowledge informed a collective exercise among a group of writing teachers exploring the details of what entails teaching writing that Lohokare, also an anthropologist, writes about. As we reflect on the granularity that emerges from the various essays on what it takes to write or to take on the care of teaching writing,

all the essays implicitly or explicitly find the centre of their gravity in the idea of care.

At the simplest level, it barely merits stating that for writing to be meaningful one has to care about the subject of one's study in a way that it matters, matters personally. At another level, care is not that simple, especially if one is inclined to see its formation and work beyond the easy expression of a sentiment. While the investment in care is visible in pretty much every essay in this anthology, Hariharan, Lohokare, Durba Chattaraj and Anannya Dasgupta explicitly think through what care is; what it takes to care; and why care is fundamental to the teaching of writing. Hariharan and Lohokare see care not simply as an accompanying affect in fieldwork but locate it in the network and work of the communities that each study and are simultaneously a part of. Lohokare's work is an important contribution to understand care in terms of concrete pedagogic practices. To reach into the depths of what is truly at stake when we speak about meaningful academic work, both Chattaraj and Dasgupta come to see it in the intimations of mortality that academia mostly manages not to heed. Chattaraj writes about what consolation and value the teaching of writing holds at the barest essential evaluation of what is meaningful work in the university. For Dasgupta the acknowledgement of grieving selves is the basis for an inclusive pedagogy of care in classrooms where students are expected to think for themselves.

Writing pedagogy may be new in the Indian higher education scene, but if this issue of *Café Dissensus* is any evidence, the kind of work that is already being done and the number of people it is attracting to join-in, indicates that it may be time to graduate its presence as not mere figment of our imagination, and draw encouragement from the beginning of its visible presence in some universities. As for those of us who do find ourselves anchoring the work of new writing centres, the image that best describes our experience we borrow from Heidi Stalla, a fellow writing teacher, who said once that we are building the boat while sailing it. The way we see it, as long as there is a boat to build and sail, it is hope enough for now.

*"A Boat to Build and Sail" / Image Credit: Anannya Dasgupta*

**Guest-Editors:**

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