

# Enacting Care in Writing Pedagogy: Notes from a Collaborative Exercise

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## **Locations**

This paper revisits a collective exercise that I was part of last year, along with three colleagues at O.P. Jindal University, Sonipat. In an attempt to consolidate the contours of the writing pedagogy that was taking shape in the newly formed Centre for Writing Studies (CWS), where we all taught, we decided to document and arrive at thick descriptions of workshops on academic writing that we individually conducted for undergraduate students and faculty in the university during the semester. For every workshop conducted by one of us, another colleague volunteered to attend the workshop and write detailed field notes, in a style we deemed appropriate, which were later shared with the larger group. In this essay I reflect upon the collective field notes in order to think through the implications of this process of documenting classroom transactions

between the teacher and the students/ participants for turning a reflective eye on the methods of writing pedagogy.

The idea for doing thick descriptions of our writing workshops stemmed from the peculiar context of writing pedagogy in higher education in India at the present moment that we found ourselves in. We are a part of a relatively small group of teachers engaged in the teaching of writing in Delhi. None of us at the CWS arrived at the teaching of writing by design. My own trajectory was marked by a mild interest in thinking about writing and a heavy dose of pragmatism, as I first started teaching academic writing as an adjunct in another private university in the NCR, while simultaneously finishing my PhD in anthropology, four years ago. My colleague, Anannya Dasgupta, who was experimenting with adapting the north American expository writing course to the Indian undergraduate classroom, trained us in a method which she had been steeped in, in her own journey as a writing teacher in a north American university.

In the following three years, as a motley team of sociology, political science and literature scholars, we taught, tweaked, modified and played around with this original model of the writing course, bringing in our own disciplinary leanings to the practice of its teaching. We exchanged notes with each other, earlier in the corridors and over *chai-coffee*, and later in our semi-formal *parhai-likhai* meetings, even as we realized that we were generating a distinct conversation about the challenges, possibilities and the overwhelming need for the teaching of writing in our classrooms. Our social sciences training implied that our conversations were not devoid of the political questions of the gendered, classed and caste-d contours of and the politics of language that characterises the Indian university/ college classroom. Simultaneously a few of us were also conducting writing workshops in a host of public university settings, with a vastly different set of students and writing needs. We realized that our classroom teaching practices and our understanding of the institutional, pedagogic and political aspects of teaching writing had in fact been shaped fundamentally due to this informal sharing of experiences and teaching materials, within the specific context of a private university setting.

It was evident that the writing pedagogy that we were hoping to develop would need to go beyond the conventional technical aspect of writing and would address questions of critical thinking and assimilation while taking into account the social context of the Indian classroom. However, we struggled to find documented experiences which resonated with ours and scholarship which spoke to the ways in which we were attempting to imagine and practice writing pedagogy. On the other hand, our experience of conducting writing workshops pointed towards a tremendous need for a pedagogy of critical writing in higher education, as undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students struggled to read and articulate coherent arguments, experiencing a profound lack of control in varying degrees.

The idea to document our workshops then, found its impetus in two aspects: as social scientists, our attempt to think about the classroom as the field and conceptualise teaching-learning as a relational process; and as writing instructors, the conviction that a thick description of our classroom practices might provide insights into the possible pedagogies which could address the above challenges. Given that our experience of teaching practices were firmly rooted in an ethos of collective learning and sharing, it seemed fitting that we turn back to our known *modus operandi* to now consciously reflect upon our teaching. My insights in this essay are drawn from shared conversations and insights from my colleagues Anannya Dasgupta, Shivani Kapoor and Shubhasree Bhattacharyya at the CWS.

Apart from this process being relevant to the social scientist and the writing pedagogue in me, my disciplinary training in anthropology provided another vantage point to approach the act of observation, documentation and interpretation. What set this exercise of producing textual representations of the time and space of the classroom workshops apart from the ethnographic one, was the constant switching of the role of the observer and the observed, the accessibility of the field notes to the field, at least partially, and the status of note takers/ observers and the observed as peers and as insiders to the institutional context, again at least partially. All these served to democratise the process of documentation as compared to conventional settings of ethnographic research.

When we started this practice we were not quite sure what exactly the notes would bring about; this essay is the first attempt to revisit our field notes in order to grapple with the possibilities that such a practice of documentation presents for a critical writing pedagogy. In the following section, I focus on a crucial aspect which emerged from these field notes: the place of care in the teaching of writing.

### **“Writing makes us really vulnerable”: Enacting Care in Writing Pedagogy**

The ethic of care, introduced into the context of higher education via feminist theory in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been central in re-shaping the view of a teacher’s domain of responsibility, defining care in terms of social, emotional and political labour, “...through which we maintain and repair our world so that we can flourish.”[1] Care entails centering the students’ and teachers’ positionality and the students’ voice in the teaching-learning. A care-based ethic of teaching can animate critical writing pedagogy in important ways, given the fact that the latter seeks to enable the student-writer to find and nurture her voice.

As already mentioned, our cumulative teaching experience at the CWS spanning public and private universities/ colleges where we had taught had made it clear to us that for students, writing is a frustrating struggle at best and a profoundly disempowering experience at worst, complicated by the dynamics of language, caste, gender, class and region. How is an ethic of care enacted in the space of a classroom, was a question that we did not have clear answers to, as we struggled with our own inability to address varying degrees of English language comprehension, little practice of critical reading and students habituated to formulaic answer-writing in our respective classes. In this section, I highlight moments embedded in the notes of two workshops, which might point towards the shape of care-based pedagogical practice in the classroom.

The first instance is drawn from the notes of a workshop conducted by my colleague *T*, documented by me. The workshop was conducted for second year undergraduate students at the school of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JSLH) at JGU[2] and was based upon a draft that the students had submitted in response to a question related to globalisation and identity.

Here, I focus on the documentation of the few minutes before the workshop began:

T greets students as they file into class one by one. “Hi” she goes in a cheery tone, “what’s your name?” she is smiling as she asks this. She asks this to at least four students as they walk into the classroom; she asks some if they got the Pink Floyd reference in her PPT, which then turns into a very brief chat/ banter “does no one listen to Pink Floyd anymore?” She asks a student if her sweatshirt has “Haryana” printed on it, to which the student responds in the negative. We notice that it was in fact, “Harvard”! There is an easy air about T as she chats and banter with the students, quite unselfconsciously.[3]

After explaining how and why we might use students’ writing samples as teaching material, T begins the workshop, as documented in this description:

T also specifies that she has pulled out some students’ samples in her own presentation. But she stresses (and here she speaks slowly and enunciates every word) that “...these samples are representative of how most students have written in this course. Your paragraph is not there to put you down. It’s there because there is a potential idea that can be reworked. What works, and what could we do to make it better?” She follows this up with, “Writing makes us really vulnerable”.

It was instructive to see how the interactions in the first fifteen minutes of the workshop, a mixture of humour, banter, casual chatting played a role in setting the stage for a certain ease that then carried through the initial hour of this workshop. Importantly, in explaining to students why paragraphs written by them might have been selected as a sample, why we need their written material for our research, the instructor conveyed a sense of mutual respect; also, in saying that writing makes *us* vulnerable, the instructor shifted from “you” to “us” thus tying for a brief moment the instructors and the students in a shared affective space. Importantly, in fronting our misgivings about writing as “vulnerability,” she cast, without hesitation, vulnerability as acceptable, ordinary, *okay*. While one hardly has access to how learners negotiate with varying degrees of vulnerability in the classroom, the articulation of this response as acceptable and even

commonplace by the instructor, serves in a big way to open up the possibility for the learner to revisit her reservations or fears, rather than deny them.

The verbal/ embodied process of creating a sense of ease and accessibility in the classroom however, should not be misconstrued as being “spontaneous” in the classroom or as merely adopting a “friendly” demeanor. Should these gestures be seen as carefully choreographed and rehearsed by the instructor? Not quite. The answer lies in the constant endeavor of the instructor to be mindful and self-reflexive about her embodied presence and the discourse that she might re/produce through her verbal/ non-verbal cues. The reference to Pink Floyd in the initial conversation (and in T’s presentation) can be a good illustration. T’s presentation revolved around the use of paragraphs. In an imaginative gesture of understanding the role of the paragraph in the larger essay, she had named her presentation “Another Brick in the Wall”, the title of a famous song performed by Pink Floyd, an iconic British rock band during the 1960s and 70s. The use of specific cultural references in casual conversation with students need to be considered with special care. Pink Floyd as a class, language, region and caste based pop cultural reference, used casually, indicating that one assumes it to be “natural” for everyone to know it, can easily slide into a moment of alienation or inadequacy for a student who might not know who/ what Pink Floyd refers to, especially if other students express their familiarity with the same. If care in critical pedagogy is, “...is more than an intuitive and untrained response; it requires competence and reflective practice,” [4] then these are precisely the moments when the instructor needs to reflexively locate herself in her context and gauge the responses that a reference specific to her context might elicit.

The next instance comes from the notes of a workshop conducted (also by TS) for faculty of JSLH in JGU, on giving constructive feedback to the students on their writing. To begin this workshop, T had chosen a student response which, instead of deriving evidence from the required text, relied heavily on personal anecdotes, not shying away from a discussion on sexuality and identity. At first glance then, this student response did not seem to be answering the question at hand.

T projects the first student sample response and begins by asking, “What do you say to this student?” K’s response is, “It does not relate to the question very well.” L says, “Lots of unnecessary elaboration.” K responds again, “I would say that he has focused so much on the individual but not so much on the collectivities.” T points out that this sample is representative of several papers we get, in terms of students tending to write personal anecdotes. She also says, “There is a lot of spirit in this student and a lot of confidence.”[5]

Both the faculty respond quickly to T’s question, enumerating what they think is not working in the student sample. In contrast to this, T’s first response to the student sample is *not* in terms of what the student has not been able to do. It also indicated to me, as a writing instructor, how instinctively we are geared to look for what is not happening at the first glimpse, rather than what is happening in students’ writing. Following up on this, T takes us through the paragraph of the student, trying to plot the gestures that the student makes in his writing. For instance, the student did not unpack the quote, but moved straight to abstraction, applying in parts certain ideas from the readings. She emphasises that the writing is, “...very personal, private, vulnerable-making. If I was doing this in a students’ workshop, I would not pick this paragraph.” Two moments here seem relevant: T’s understanding of writing as vulnerable-making comes to bear directly upon her classroom teaching practices, in this case, the choice of not projecting a student sample to the class, which might make the student feel exposed, at worst. Second, T chooses to focus on the gestures that the student makes in his writing: which actually enables her and the faculty participants to identify the precise moment when the student engages with the concept in the text via narrating his personal experience.

T points out that as writing instructors we need to be able separate *content* from *gestures of method* in students’ writing; thus one might think the student has struggled to articulate well, but one needs to acknowledge that gesturally the student has attempted to do what was required, e.g. begin a paragraph with a claim, try to explain a quote etc. To begin assessment of a student’s writing not from a point of *whether it is doing its job*, but from a point of *what is happening in this paper*, seems to be the first step then to approach students’ writing from a point of

empathy. Focusing on the gestures, T contends, helps us, "...understand where the student wanted to go." "If you are not thinking with her...", she adds, "then it (the writing) seems off." This reflected to me uncomfortably the fact that I don't think *with* my students most of the times, rather, I tend to think in terms of what *I* know about the text, on the basis of which I then evaluate their writing. I find these phrases illuminating, because they signal towards the attentiveness and responsibility that an ethic of care in teaching entails; in which we do not have the luxury of telling the students simply that they have not gotten it. Our task is to *recover* and enable them to see some of the insights that are creeping/ present into their writing. This set of preliminary observations reveals that enacting care within the classroom is a combination of reflective practice and concrete pedagogical methods, enabling us to frame an ethic of care in writing pedagogy not as an essentialised, gendered or a sentimental response to the classroom, but in fact as a practice based upon political, emotional and intellectual labour of the educators. Careful feedback to the learners, a reflective eye on the verbal and embodied presence of the instructor in the spacetime of the classroom, are crucial sites of extending care. If a critical writing pedagogy aims fundamentally to democratise the process of knowledge production by making accessible to learners this process's most valued and most political method, writing/ critical thought, it is perhaps fitting that this pedagogy draws its initial insights and learning moments from a collaborative practice, as we attempted.

*(I wish to thank Anannya Dasgupta for her meticulous comments on this draft and also for her enthusiasm about this paper, in its initial stages, when I was unable to muster much)*

[1] Zembylas, Michalinos, Bozalek, Vivienne and Shefer, Tammy. (2014). "Tronto's notion of privileged irresponsibility and the reconceptualisation of care: implications for critical pedagogies of emotion in higher education," *Gender and Education*, 26 (3): 200-214

[2] In all the workshops that we conducted and documented, we obtained students' written consent for the documentation of these workshops to be used for our research.

- [3] Field notes, Society, Space and Culture, Revision Workshop with TS, documented by Madhura Lohokare, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018, JGU
- [4] Engelmann, D. (2009). “Another Look at a Feminist Ethics of Teaching.” *Atlantis*, 33 (2): 63.
- [5] Field notes, Society, Space and Culture, Constructive Feedback with TS, documented by Madhura Lohokare, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018, JGU  
*“Field’s Notes” Image Credit Madhura Lohokare*

**Bio:**

**Madhura Lohokare** is an anthropologist transitioning to be a writing pedagogue. She is invested in thinking about the classroom as a relational, political field of learning and knowledge-production, while simultaneously exploring ways in which her ethnographic training can be brought to bear upon the teaching of writing. Her research interests revolve around developing an inclusive writing pedagogy, urban modernity and upper-caste self-making and exploring methodologies to create a more publicly engaged academic practice. She teaches at the Centre for Writing Studies, O. P. Jindal University, Sonapat.