

A Brief and Uneven Guide to Writing Pedagogy in Higher Education in India

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By **Madhura Lohokare** and **Anannya Dasgupta**

As we open up a conversation about writing pedagogy in higher education in India, it seems quite impossible to talk about this aspect without firmly locating it in the context of institutions of higher education. As a small, but a growing group of writing teachers, our conversations have consistently convinced us that academic writing pedagogy has to be nurtured to grow within institutions, for it to be as transformative as we are convinced it can be. A transformative writing pedagogy, emergent or otherwise, cannot exist in a vacuum; without being located within an institutional framework, writing pedagogy runs the risk of being available only to a select few in the better endowed universities. In the editorial we highlighted the stark want of resources that characterises the terrain of institutions of higher education in India, thus making the introduction of a dedicated department/centre of writing pedagogy within the ecology of the university a near impossibility; it is crucial then, to examine closely the handful institutions who have attempted to create these spaces in order that we may derive possible lessons for not just the teachers who are involved in academic writing, but also administrators who might have to anticipate new challenges in the setting up of such courses or centres.

At another level, apart from the instructors who teach writing and students who imbibe it, we need to recognise that both these sets of actors operate in the institutional setting of a university/ college, which is a material as well as a social space. How do institutions enable or hinder the emergence and consolidation of a writing pedagogy? The resources that the institutions can make available for writing courses, their readiness to hire separate faculty or to provide space for teaching, institutional responsiveness to ideas of criticality and practices of writing are all crucial ways in which institutions make possible the conditions of production and strengthening of a writing pedagogy.

Our own current locations at JGU-CWS (Jindal Global University's Centre for Writing Studies) and Krea-CWP (Krea University's Centre for Writing Pedagogy) were preceded by our experience of coming together as writing teachers at Shiv Nadar University (SNU) between the years 2014-2018 to offer, in addition to two postgraduate writing courses, a very successful first year writing course. As successful as the teaching, tutoring, the training of teachers, and the growth of research interest around it was in those years, it exceeded the scale of what the institution was prepared to sustain at that point. It was perhaps this shared experience, and our continued negotiation for the space to build the teaching of writing in other university systems since then that makes us, as editors of this special issue, see the importance of documenting the work of writing pedagogy in India not just in terms of ideas and experiences but also its evolving institutional histories. This we realize is only a modest start to the more granular case studies that we hope will be conducted in future.

This essay is a collation of email interviews that we requested from a few newly established institutional spaces where academic writing is being taught formally. The primary aim of requesting this set of interviews was to obtain a big picture view of academic writing pedagogy in institutions of higher education, as visible to us from our specific location in private universities in metropolitan cities. The higher education institutions where these spaces are located (Ambedkar University (AUD), Ashoka University, Shiv Nadar University (SNU), all in the NCR and Azim Premji University (APU), Bengaluru, are all at different stages of consolidating

the teaching of writing in their respective settings. However, even though we all were talking about overlapping issues and challenges, our institutional contexts and student populations were diverse; in that sense the practices of teaching writing were being shaped in a distinct way in each university. The collation of these responses attempts to present the institutional story of writing pedagogy in all its unevenness and dilemmas. In that, it makes no claim to represent *The Story of Writing Pedagogy*, as it is probably shaping up (or not) in other regional/ institutional contexts in India. But this bird's eye view is a vital indicator of the possible trajectories that the teaching of writing will take in the near future in the terrain of higher education in India.

I

A quick look at the terminology of these centres and their course offerings is instructive: “Centre for English Language Education,” (AUD) “Centre for Writing and Communication,” (CWC, Ashoka University) or “Critical Writing Programme” (Ashoka University) and “The Writing Centre” (APU) offer courses variously titled, “Academic Writing,” “Critical Reading,” “Introduction to Critical Thinking,” “Public Reasoning” and “English for Academic Purposes”. This diverse nomenclature signals the state of productive confusion that instructors and administrators of writing pedagogy find themselves in currently: our identities slide along the realms of communication, English language education and critical writing. In our teaching, we straddle reading, thinking and writing and then mix it up some more. Most interviewees, however, were unanimous about the centrality of the idea of critical thinking and writing that forms the foundation of their courses. That these courses are intimately tied with developing an ability to engage with texts, assimilate and argue via writing in a way which is radically different from school-based model of reading and writing, was a refrain common to all the interviewees.

However, understandings of the “critical” in critical thinking and writing across these diverse contexts needs more unpacking. Anuj Gupta, director of the Young India Fellowship Critical Writing Programme at Ashoka University, attempts this unpacking when he elaborates upon criticality via the “epistemic” and the “ethical” dimensions of ideas. For Gupta, “The

epistemic dimension involves thinking through the validity of the reasoning and evidence that one gathers in order to support one's ideas or claims, while the ethical dimension involves thinking through the legitimacy of the processes that one follows while doing this, as well as of the implications that come from making any claims in the public sphere." This gives us a clue then about how this notion of criticality might bring together processes of reading/ thinking/ writing in the structure and pedagogy of courses, the texts used and disciplinary connections drawn. It would be imperative for each institution to define and discuss "critical thinking" which informs their writing pedagogies; without this exercise, these emergent pedagogies can run the risk of being limited to technical or grammatical aspect of writing.

The fact that these initiatives are located mostly in private institutions of higher education cannot be missed. Factors such as availability of resources, smaller student populations and relatively bureaucracy-free processes for introducing newer pedagogies might be the most evident answer to explain this.[1] Whether the enthusiasm to build such centres continues to be matched with the engagement and resources required to consolidate them, remains to be seen. Some of the responses clearly indicate the specific challenges that institutions might come up against in this regard. How to train and sustain faculty for academic writing, is one such challenge. Kanika Singh, director of the CWC, Ashoka University, points out how despite generous institutional support for their activities, "... the contracts of the CWC team members are extremely short-term (9 months) which has proved to be a deterrent in knowledge-building and working with experienced professionals." Sonali Barua, in charge of building up the Writing Centre at APU, also highlights the issue of finding interested faculty, due to the dominant belief that, "...an academic career requires being part of one or other traditional university-style disciplinary department." Also the fact that "...writing pedagogy is not perceived as having too much potential for those interested in pursuing research" might imply that there will be major challenges in getting scholars to consider teaching and researching writing as a legitimate academic choice, according to Barua. Anirban Ghosh (SNU) informed us that at the present moment he is the only faculty teaching academic writing for the social

sciences and humanities students in the institution, even though there are plans to hire more in the near future. The institutional unwillingness to convert these teaching positions into permanent faculty positions, the lack of training in writing pedagogy and consequently the non-availability of faculty willing to consider writing pedagogy as a career option, thus combine to create one of the bigger challenges facing this realm.

Against this backdrop, Gupta's elaboration upon some of their institutional strategies to counter this lack of official training is notable, wherein they work towards the creation of "...a culture of formally sharing pedagogic experiences, notes, as well as resources with each other." This resonates strongly with the editors' own practices of collaborative learning via what came to be termed as "*parhai-likhai*" workshops in which we presented the micro-details of our lesson plans and student responses, indicative of both, failures and successes of our methods. The writing on the wall in this case then is clear: writing pedagogy in its incipient phase in India has to rely heavily on collective, collaborative efforts, sharing of insights, experiences and reflections within and between institutions, public and private, which will form the foundation upon which we can evolve a pedagogical practice which can address the needs of the Indian classroom/s.

It is instructive to note that the faculty in charge of administering and teaching the writing courses in the above instances are not drawn exclusively from English literature, the disciplinary allegiance assumed for the teaching of writing. Kanika Singh (Ashoka U) and Anirban Ghosh (SNU) are historians, Nupur Samuel (AUD) holds a doctorate in ESL and language assessment. The natural affinity of social sciences with the discourse and practice of writing has already been flagged in our editorial comments. It hardly comes as a surprise when Kanika Singh lists the disciplinary affiliations of her team of writing instructors in Ashoka U, "...a historian with expertise in dealing with visual, oral, written material; anthropologists working on music, food, humour; a lawyer; a journalist and a couple of translators; a writer who creates books for children." The willingness of institutional administrators to hire faculty from a spectrum of social sciences and humanities would thus play a central role in shaping

pedagogical interventions which can productively address the writing needs of a university or college.

The argument for consolidating writing pedagogy as a realm in its own right however, brings forth its own dilemmas: wherein once following this argument full-time faculty is hired and training is arranged for, it is easy for institutions and faculty to fall into the comforting belief that the students' writing difficulties can be "fixed" once you refer them to the writing centre. The institutional responsibility does not end with making space available for a "writing centre"; Samuel (AUD) articulates this unequivocally when she says, "One of the reasons why we fail to develop our students' critical thinking skills is that we see writing as distinct from disciplinary knowledge. Writing is an integral part of all academic endeavours not a stand-alone activity or a distinct course – if we understand this we may be able to address many complexities and anxieties that plague our everyday in the classroom." This underlines the fact that merely providing an institutional space for thinking about writing/teaching writing might not be the panacea for our classrooms. It is *only when* these writing/ thinking/ reading practices are reinforced for the students in other courses and across disciplines, that their articulation of and engagement with texts/ ideas will move in the direction of criticality. A necessary part of developing writing pedagogies in institutions then, would also be to initiate dialogues within faculty about the ways in which they can incorporate writing practices in their respective teaching.

Physical infrastructure is the other crucial link in consolidating an ecology of academic writing within institutional spaces. For a pedagogy which hinges crucially on the quality and depth of instructors' feedback on students' writing, the availability of a physically demarcated space for writing-related help within the institution where instructors and students can give and receive feedback respectively on a one-on-one basis, cannot be overemphasized. "None" was Nupur Samuel's (AUD) no-frills response to the question of infrastructure available for writing at her institution. "AUD is perpetually short of space and a couple of semesters ago a room was allotted but soon taken over" she adds. This state of affairs is a far cry from Samuel's own imagined space for writing within the university which is, "...warm, open and semi-formal []...where people

can walk-in to read, write and talk about reading and writing open for all during a part of the day.” The daunting challenges within public institutions of higher education as regards resources is clearly articulated in the above instance. This was in stark contrast to other universities like SNU and Ashoka who had allotted separate office space for instructors to meet with students, made available library funds and funds to arrange workshops and guest lectures. This juxtaposition is not intended to compare public and private institutions’ performance on academic-writing-friendliness, but to signal how institutions fundamentally mould the shape of pedagogies that materialize in their spaces.[2]

II

“What about English?” is probably the most knotted question that institutionalised spaces of writing pedagogy will need to tackle head on. Most of the spaces included in these interviews have a student population that can be located on a spectrum of heterogeneity (of class/ region/ language/ caste) and need intervention in English language teaching in varying degrees. The place of English language teaching in writing pedagogy is fraught: ESL and critical writing being two distinct realms, current instructors’ experience shows that one cannot substitute for the other, thus making it necessary to include ESL faculty within these spaces in a central way. All the responses pointed towards the existence of ESL support in their respective institutions, experimenting with innovative strategies including discussion groups, theatre activities, choir singing and films, summer bridge courses (APU) and use of games, audio-visual tools, using varying assessment strategies, running bridge programmes in summer and grammar workshops (Ashoka). Interestingly, Samuel (AUD) contended that in the teaching of English as a second language in their context, grammar is highlighted as part of the whole, overtly addressed only when some basic errors are made on assignments.

Technical issues apart, most interviewees were cued in to the symbolic power of proficiency in English or the lack of it, within students’ aspirational worlds and the need for this knowledge to inform the teaching of English. Gupta (Ashoka U) astutely points out how, “...most writing teachers feel under-equipped to teach grammar to students who come from vernacular-medium schools, and write in ways that have prominent

syntactical differences from standard English grammar” foregrounding the issue of class and caste differences between teachers and students. Samuel points out a similar fault line within AUD where majority students’ native language is Hindi, but not necessarily so for the faculty who teach there. Recognising the vulnerability to feelings of shame and inadequacy of those who struggle to articulate in English, Samuel contends that the objective of the Basic English language course run by the university is to facilitate a basic familiarity with the language and encouraging comfort with it, allowing the students space to feel confidence with the language.

Notwithstanding the insight that institutions of higher education, “...need to prepare students for the workforce that appreciates and rewards English...”,^[3] the place of students’ native languages and other regional languages in the process of learning is being increasingly discussed as part of writing interventions. Ghosh (SNU), for instance, encourages students struggling with negotiating readings in English, to look at newspapers in regional languages and see how they can be incorporated in a research paper. This attempt to introduce, “...the importance of vernacular primary sources in students’ research papers,” according to Ghosh, “...opens up several avenues of thought and world-making within students who are not familiar about multiple dimensions of other languages apart from their own.” Resonating with this approach Kanika Singh outlined the larger goals of the CWC in Ashoka U in terms of engaging, “...more closely with Indian languages, and writing in different disciplines. We are also working towards creating an open-access, multi-lingual knowledge bank of pedagogical tools.”

While the question of language represents a daunting challenge for most institutional spaces attempting to consolidate a writing pedagogy, this precisely could also be an opportunity for the writing community to experiment going beyond English language, and to explore incorporating reading and writing in regional languages as a pedagogical intervention vis-à-vis critical thinking/ learning. Strengthening the support for English language training whilst also exploring pedagogical possibilities of a bi-lingual or multi-lingual format while designing critical thinking courses might stretch the already meagre resources available within the

institutional writing community presently; but there is little doubt that these aspects need to be central to our imagination of the writing pedagogies that we hope to develop in our institutions in the near future. At the heart of the idea of a critical writing pedagogy is also the possibility of transforming the way knowledge is produced and who gets access and opportunity to produce it. A sustained engagement with the question of language and its politics vis-à-vis critical thinking/ writing is a way in which the writing community can make a significant contribution to democratizing the process of knowledge production within institutions of higher education in India.

Irrespective of language proficiency however, the list of challenges of reading-writing was formidable, in most institutional contexts. Struggle to ideate, argue and frame questions, inability to read closely or low reading stamina, poor writing in terms of grammar, structure, effective use of vocabulary and coherence, inability to synthesize multiple sources to make an argument were some of the difficulties that interviewees listed in response to a question on challenges that their students faced in terms of writing. This then, is the core stuff of writing pedagogy: to enable learners to engage with a text closely, assimilate multiple texts in order to articulate a coherent, complex argument or question, which is not merely a summary of the texts but in fact a creative suturing of concepts contained within them. The agenda for the community of writing instructors is not merely a checklist of skills to be injected in the learners: it, in fact, calls for finding ways in which learners *own* their process of reading and writing, and articulate in their own voice (*not* merely their own words), ideas and concepts that aspire to be complex (even if they might not always be grammatically correct). To aim for this against the backdrop of the institutional, infrastructural and historical lacks within which students and writing teachers operate, is daunting, demanding. But not without its rewards and moments of fulfillment.

We would like to end this collage with a few responses from our fellow writing teachers to our request to share with us an anecdote of joy that they have encountered in their journey of teaching writing, despite all the challenges. These are also powerful testimonies to our students' hunger to learn and their willingness to engage with their instructors' methods and

experiments. They are as much the architects of our writing pedagogies as we are.

It is not an exaggeration to say that my work as a writing teacher gives me daily joy. Every new word I teach a young person is a small step forward, a small way in which she begins to better understand a world that is complex, opaque, challenging. Every sentence perfected through three iterations of correction is a milestone. I know no better way to use my core strengths, to mentor and encourage students, to make a real difference. In a recent learning journal entry, one of my tutorial group students, a very smart Physics major who struggles to articulate what are often quite original ideas, wrote: “Sonali is the resistor in the circuit of my hopeless thoughts.” Both in style and content, I found this remark very inspiring.

– *Sonali Barua (APU)*

As a teacher, I think I feel most satisfied every year when I call students from the previous year to speak to the current cohort about their processes of writing when they took the Critical Writing course. It is extremely fulfilling to hear students provide deep insights on writing processes with just under a year of formal learning in writing. A large chunk of my own learning has been made possible through all the things that my students have taught me, for which I am immensely grateful.

– *Anuj Gupta (YIF)*

[In] the English for Academic Purposes course we did a lot of reading and writing in class and I was pleasantly surprised to note that students brought writing tasks to class. The feedback I got at the end of the semester was that though they wrote a lot for my class, they valued it and would not change anything. They are now in Semester 6 and I still get stopped in the corridors with requests to float another course. In fact, I met them informally for what they called ‘The Writing Thing’ in WS 2018 where we met to simply write – a communal space for writing – mostly quietly and before leaving some of us would share what we had written but this was optional.

– *Nupur Samuel (AUD)*

‘I am from CBSE and I don’t know big words.’ A student of mine told me this immediately after the first class of the session ended. I and my peer

tutors engaged with this student for the entire semester in terms of teaching him that the power of words lay in their utterance and location and not on their lengths. Through constant revisions of drafts (he was very hardworking and that helped) of his drafts and answering hundreds of questions, he emerged as the top scorer in that course. After the course I received a mail from him saying that ‘words don’t scare him anymore’. I have not received a bigger thank you till date.

– *Anirban (SNU)*

We are grateful to our friends and colleagues from the writing community who agreed to this email interview and shared their valuable experience with us: Anirban Ghosh, Anuj Gupta, Kanika Singh, Nupur Samuel and Sonali Barua.

[1] However, one cannot entirely discount the possibility of contemporary private educational institutions’ need to project a certain image in keeping with the imagined “global” or “world class” standards, which might also drive the enthusiasm behind establishing “Writing Centres” in their respective spaces. A quick Google search reveals that the phrase “Writing Centre” led inevitably to such centres based in North American universities, showing how clearly this vocabulary has been borrowed from the “global” (i.e. U.S. based) universe of higher education.

[2] In one of the editor’s experience of teaching in O.P. Jindal University, the perpetual lack of space has decisively affected the tutoring and feedback activities that faculty can undertake. As a result, we developed a pedagogy which relies heavily on class work, where the feedback can be given only via email or collective workshops. We find ourselves struggling to recalibrate the place of feedback in our pedagogy, which, hitherto, has been driven heavily by the same.

[3] Nupur Samuel from AUD pointed out that the decision to impart higher education in English was a conscious choice for the university, precisely for the symbolic capital that English represents and the access to contemporary workforce that it enables.

Photo-credit: [Here](#)

Bios:

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.

Anannya Dasgupta Directs the Centre for Writing and Pedagogy at Krea University. She trained to be a writing teacher at the Writing Program at Rutgers University while she was a doctoral student in the English Department. Back in India she organized the teaching of writing at Shiv Nadar University and set up the Centre for Writing Studies at OP Jindal Global University. In 2015 she received a two year collaboration grant to partner with the Thompson Writing Program at Duke University to develop writing pedagogy and global writing transfers. She is grateful to Suchismita Chattopadhyay and Madhura Lohokare for their revision feedback on the early drafts of this essay and to Anusha Hariharan for long conversations that have shaped some of the thoughts in this essay and also in the introduction to this collection.