

Notes on Rhet/Comp, Ideology, and the Classroom in Delhi and Buffalo

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I like to think that appending the word “Notes” to any title automatically absolves me of the responsibility of supplying a precise thesis or claim in my articles, which is bad writing advice but convenient for me here. My experiences in, and knowledge of, the landscape of rhetoric and composition concern India and the U.S., but they are also only pinprick deep into the breadth of knowledge which has been generated about rhet/comp in both these large, diverse, ungeneralizable places. There are only a few claims I can comfortably make, like the fact that in India, our oldest extant remnants of English composition instruction in college, and to a large extent also in school, are British. Or that the young writing centres I know of in India are in the process of finding a perch for themselves amid the common belief that good writing skills are a gift, or that good reading translates into good writing. Or that for many English department graduate students in the U.S. who are known to me, and who have completed their earlier higher education in India, the teaching of rhet/comp is a doozy. Almost all of them are Indian public university graduates, and most of them have not had the privilege of teaching in or learning from one of the newer private universities which have critical thinking or composition as general education necessities in their curricula.

Delhi University too included an Academic Writing and Composition paper some time ago into the syllabus for its B.A. (Honours) English students, along with compulsory writing instruction for all other courses. However, running on the examination model rather than on a continuous assessment model, students at the end of the year are expected to answer questions like “Compare and contrast the skills of synthesis and analysis in academic writing and discuss how these critical thinking skills are essential for effective writing”: a question to be answered in

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200 words for 10 marks (*B.A. (Hons.-) English 1*). Needless to say, while the importance of critical thinking and composition skills has been recognized, there is more to be done and thought of.

My position as an academic who has taught composition at universities in India, and also as a graduate student in the U.S., is by no means peculiar—it is a career trajectory I share with many colleagues I know, and even more I do not know.¹ Yet, thinking of recent developments in Delhi University where I studied for seven years, my earlier experiences in teaching composition, and my ongoing teaching work at my university in the U.S., I feel compelled to take down these notes as observations on commonalities and differences, and on questions and quandaries which come up in the teaching of writing contingent on the different institutional make-ups of these different institutions.

My argument through these notes is not for an entirely homegrown model of writing pedagogy, nor is it meant to be in favour of a westward looking path forward. My hope is that in putting these experiences together, I will be able to get a better sense of what I need to do as I prepare to teach at least eight more semesters of rhet/comp through my graduate studies, and what I should do when I get back home and prepare to teach in whichever university would have me. The peculiar state of the humanities in India, the utilities of our models of higher education, our view of English-language instruction, and our motley classrooms together necessitate that I do this exercise in notetaking for myself. In no way exhaustive, these are my notes, if not a letter of concern.

(Not) Everybody Loves Writing

The U.S. college-scape has tussled with the question of English education for almost two centuries now, and the trenches which have been dug out in this time have never been on two

clearly demarcated sides of any one question. They resemble a foggy field with multiple conflicts, changing allegiances, and drawing fire from multiple directions, all of this happening simultaneously—current-traditional rhetoric leaves behind humanist reading trips up composition surpasses rhetoric trumps moral betterment defeats utility rubbishes literary study in this old Crimean battlefield, at the centre of which is the concept of a student, just the concept, who obviously does not know what they want. Today, the state is that of an uncertain compromise, part of which I saw when I first entered the U.S. university's English Department as a PhD scholar and a writing instructor. Owing to my few semester's worth of experience as a writing tutor and instructor at private universities in North India, I was not as flummoxed by the prospect of teaching writing as some of my Indian colleagues were when they first came to the U.S. What did surprise me was being greeted with the idea that rhet/comp had concretised itself as one of the most financially viable fields for a young humanities academic to aspire to, and as a fecund ground for pedagogical theorising and new media explorations—albeit my research proposal had nothing to do with the field. In the little experience I had of teaching writing, I had not been required to train myself in the histories of the discipline's development. In a way, I did not know that the discipline of rhet/comp existed beyond a small branch jutting out of literary studies.

To understand the U.S. tradition of writing instruction, Sharon Crowley's 1998 book *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays* served for me as a slightly dated yet authoritative primer on the numerous conflicts in the history of rhet/comp in all their tangled messiness. I will paraphrase here, with some of the same messiness, part of what she says, in confluence with the messiness of English studies in India. It begins with my alternative uses of rhet/comp, writing instruction, and English studies to talk about a body of concerns shared by India and the U.S. in teaching and academic writing.

According to Crowley, the earliest debates around rhet/comp in the nineteenth century were a symptom of literary studies being imagined as a profession centred around the idea of specialised methods of reading and critiquing literary texts. This early debate was between two sides of rhet/comp's slash: while rhetoric with its penchant for persuasion and public discourse looked outward toward the world, composition, as a response to an experience of the world, had to look inward. Crowley's contention is that with the coming in of the new English departments, the study of rhetoric was all but abandoned in favour of the study of composition, because the latter was better suited for self-expression when faced with the aesthetic object, in this case, literature (82). Literature was to be seen as "a special sort of text that represented immediate experience better than any other sort of text" (80), and therefore, suitable to be a conduit in the study of composition. Rather than responding directly to the unruly lifeworld, a student could respond to their experience of the world organised as it was in the far more manageable literary text. We must note here that the object of this debate between rhetoric and composition is not necessarily over the need to read, but rather because of the implied supremacy of literary texts above other disciplinary forms of writing.

Debates on the need to read well, to be able to write well would follow very soon after, but for the moment I am reminded of middle-school in Delhi, where English teachers who taught me poetry and short fiction would vehemently ask us to read the newspaper every day after, sometimes even during, school; I did the same when I eventually began teaching English in a school. This double-act for the longest time has, in the Indian English schoolroom, blurred the line between engagement with the world and an experience of the world in a decidedly odd manner—but for the moment we are not concerned with school-level English instruction here.

The reading/writing conflict in the U.S. rhet/comp has persisted in all the material implications of an Arnoldian New Humanism, which Crowley rightly thinks of as his “intellectual romanticism” (84). Literature under the aegis of the supposed humanistic ends of English education was not only aggrandised as the most universal of cultural objects, it was also instrumental at the time in rendering reading more important than writing for a knowledge of good composition. Education meant cultivation, which meant that there was something to be gained with a lifetime of unselfishly savouring the right works of literature. That something to be gained was what in India we might colloquially call *class*. A quick year’s worth of instruction in composition was thought of as an insufficient shortcut to the same eminence of class and culture a more well-read scholar would have (Crowley 86). It is telling that many decades before this late nineteenth early twentieth century U.S. development, the British Indian curriculum already saw English as the study of culture, and not just the study of language (Viswanathan 3). The principals remain oddly similar in both the Indian and U.S. examples here. Literature was to be seen as a repository of morality, a veritable cultural dais, and everything nice.² For Crowley, the equation of educational and compositional cultivation with years of literary reading meant that there was a tacit, classist assumption underlying college English: that students had been brought up on good books thus they would want to continue to read them, and that they had the money and the time to spare (92). It almost seems as if English education became dependent more on the prior cultivation and the means of the student than on the quality of the literature, they were made to read. This is very much the reason why the colonial Indian subject was to be first educated in western aesthetic principals, because they were otherwise believed to lack the “prior mental and moral cultivation for literature—especially their own—to have any instructive value for them” (Viswanathan 5).

If I am looking to show that these U.S. debates hold little relevance for contemporary Indian conversations on the teaching of writing and composition, then I am off to a poor start. The classist hue of literature entering English studies transformed with the structural changes brought about in the modern U.S. university which had to expand its role in society beyond being a purveyor of classical learning. As more and more diverse bodies of students with varied linguistic backgrounds began to enter university, and new professional roles began to emerge in the world outside, universities had to focus on providing training and research which was serviceable to practical societal ends (Russell 47). This need was answered partly by bringing in required writing courses across disciplines in at least some universities like Amherst, Chicago, and Harvard (Crowley 82). It is worth noting that this rise of training in writing and rhetoric was concomitant with calls from other academics to abolish these courses to maintain the humanistic ideals of English studies, as these compulsory “service” courses were equated with the “corruption and enslavement” to “technology and business” (Russell 178). Writing therefore was, and continues to be, at the centre of the conflict between higher education being usable and utilisable, and it being useful for critical thinking and intellectual betterment in general. Is the college classroom a place for the *consumption* of knowledge or for fostering the generative possibilities of knowledge? Is writing to be seen as a skill or as a far more nebulous mode of critical thinking? There are no easy answers here which are not materially rooted, and which do not make assumptions about our conceptual student and their reasons for attending college, be they assumptions about a student’s desire for knowledge for the sake of knowledge, or about their hopes for a high-paying job.

The students I have been allocated to teach so far in the U.S. have been from majors oriented toward the so-called “service” sphere, including engineering, hard sciences, and

management. The compulsory writing instruction offered to students is divided into two components under Communication Literacy. The first of these components is a course offered by graduate students and faculty from the English Department and the Comparative Literature Department. The second component, overseen by a centre for Writing Across Curriculum, includes several discipline-centric courses offered by a number of departments facilitated by training, workshops, and consultation for faculty not specialising in rhet/comp. The understanding is that “these faculty have little familiarity with teaching writing,” and, “The reality is that very few faculty outside certain specializations in Education, English, and a few other departments receive much formal training in writing pedagogy” (“Writing Across the Curriculum”). These courses can go toward fulfilling a humanities requirement for the student only “if a program in the humanities offers it,” which further secures the fact that communication literacy taught within certain disciplines need not be embedded in the tenor of the humanities.

Similar questions about the role of writing in the university can be asked of the undergraduate syllabi of the university in India where I spent most of my years of higher education. The Delhi University syllabus seems to be somewhat undecided when “Academic Writing and Composition” is made a Generic Elective course for the undergraduate English program, and when “Language-MIL/English” is made Ability Enhancement (Compulsory) Course, or AECC for short, for many of the other departments. The former is more research-based with familiar names like Graff and Birkenstein in the list of readings, while the latter, compulsory for all, is a little more clouded with elements of both technical training and a humanities crash-course in giving students a “composite view of multiculturalism” (*Syllabus* 42). In both cases, these courses are taught by English Departments. These courses were introduced as part of a Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) implemented in 2015, which replaced the

percentage and marks system under which I completed my Bachelor's degree.³ The system has undergone further changes since then, wherein the latest iteration of the compulsory "Language-MIL/English" course has been renamed to "AECC English," retaining most of the same elements while giving faculty more freedom in their methods of instruction (*Structure* 53). This iteration focuses on more generally, and, one might say, loosely defined keywords for communication, including critical reading, translation, social communication, literary knowledge, and letter writing, among others, with a clear push toward the technical ends of the pedagogical process. The assessment mode remains similar as well, combining assignments with tests and exams. In essence, English faculty can introduce material they deem fit into the classroom. It is as if there is a tacit understanding that while the teaching of writing and communication, as specialised areas of study, does not require making students adept in literary studies, literary experts are still the ones most suited to teach writing. This uneasy compromise extends to ideas of good writing, research skills, and critical thinking jostling against each other in the same composition syllabi.

As per Crowley's analysis, this can be attributed to the idea of literature being thought of as a "pedagogical jack-of-all-trades" (109). This fear would feel familiar for many higher educators in India, or rather it does feel familiar to part of me, which feels that if students are not given a fundamental, albeit rudimentary, introduction to the humanities in whatever course of study they may choose to pursue, if their discipline is a non-humanities discipline, they will never read another book, and will never become good, conscious citizens sensitive to the fraught and complex nature of the Indian polity. They will learn only tangible, serviceable skills in their respective disciplines and have financial opportunities without a sense of higher purpose in life!

While teaching in my U.S. university, the textbook I am required to use for classes includes some forty essays and articles on race, liberal culture, technology in society, gender, and food. This is the textbook for the first component of Communication Literacy which all students, unless they have scored highly enough in pre-college standardised testing, are required to enrol for. The same textbook also contains a slurry of technical readings on writing, including almost the entirety of *They Say / I Say*. I was required to begin the course by teaching students how to understand and analyse documentary cinema. My experience has been of teaching a compulsory writing course with a few grains of the humanities hidden in the syllabus, even as I see my students be somewhat more interested in the ideas and contents of the readings themselves than in sentence structure, paragraphing, and editing. Bringing the need for endless utility from classes and the desire for generative knowledge and learning together, the compromise takes shape as a skill-based model of humanistic learning, both in my university in the U.S. and in the developing writing course at Delhi University.

To its credit, the Delhi University English syllabi do recognise the different needs of students based on the kind of English instruction they received in school for certain academic programs like B.A. (Prog.) and B.Com (Prog.), and offer courses categorised as English A, B, and C. In the latest iteration of the CBCS, these names (A, B, and C) have been changed to “remove any discriminatory, hierarchical attributes in the existing nomenclature” (*Structure* 59). These new names, arranged in order of a student’s pre-existing training in English, are “English Language Through Literature,” “English Fluency,” and “English Proficiency.” Here, as in AECC English, these lopsided suspensions between rhetoric and composition, or between reading and writing, between technique and ethics, or between utility and self-betterment are precarious. The interplay between having a utilitarian or generative outlook toward higher education is a

quandary based on the flawed premise that this outlook by itself is capable of changing the role higher education plays in a student's life. Instead, the professionalisation of all academic disciplines, including those belonging to the humanities, is merely a symptom (which is not quite the case in the private humanities university where, as Crowley would say, scholars have both the time and the money to spend on self-betterment through the unselfish absorption of knowledge). A theory of writing instruction based on a lopsided compromise can only exacerbate it, as teachers continue to be faced with the choice of, let's say, sprinkling readings from humanities disciplines on their writing courses, or letting them be entirely about making presentations, taking notes, and crafting resumes among other communication skills. A question we might rather be asking ourselves, is that even if we seek to teach a utilisable, skill-based model of humanistic writing to our students, is there a place in their life-world where they will ever be asked for a different sense of values from their higher education? If we tell them that there are certain things they *need* to know and think about, where does this *need* come from, and what is that kind of reading which answers the uncertain roots of this very real *need*? Humanistic writing instruction as I see it emerging in Delhi, as long as it recognises its necessity but fails to justify it, might remain in the same limbo as it expands further and further out.

Whose Politics Is It Anyway?

Let us remain with the same question of utility and humanistic learning for a few moments more, and let us also consider the relationship between writing instruction and humanities to be indelible for a while, largely because that is what I have done for the few semesters I have been teaching writing in India and the U.S. For instance, a few years ago, I was for a semester given the charge of teaching writing and research skills to a group of students who had been recruited by a private university in North India as part of a program which gave full scholarships to

students categorised as coming from Economically Weaker Sections of society. The course was meant to work alongside their studies in other science and humanities courses which required them to submit regular assignments and take tests and examinations, all involving a significant amount of reading, research, and familiarity with the norms of academic writing.

Within the first few minutes of my first day in class, it was clear that although the students were at varying levels of knowledge of the English language, they were all more or less in the earlier stages of learning its grammar and building a vocabulary. And yet the course had to somehow balance learning about syntax, tenses, and subject-verb agreement with training in critical thinking, argumentation, and reading academically. I will not go into the details of discussions I had with my senior colleagues about how to navigate the semester, nor will I mention here how we tried to work out a seemingly fair method of assessment which would be able to let the students benefit from the knowledge and experience they brought to the classroom in their respective first-languages—neither the discussions nor the assessment methodology were successful enough to be considered for any kind of formalisation. However, as we collectively moved toward “competency” in English, I will recall here a class which made it clear that my notions of what aspirations one might have from higher education were parochial at best, and entirely misplaced at worst. And it is important to remember here that the writing class, which also doubled as a space where the students’ concerns with other courses they were taking were shared, became an instance of what their experience in the university might be at large.

This was a class where we were listening to a recorded lecture of P. Sainath’s where he was speaking about rural Maharashtra and farmer suicides. The intention was to then practice participating in classroom discussions, which the students had been having problems within their other courses. Stopping and starting through the lecture to make sure we were all following, we

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then moved on to news reports coming from the same general period which P. Sainath was addressing. These news reports were about Mukesh Ambani having climbed up another several ranks in the list of the world's wealthiest individuals.

I will admit that my intention was to try and get them to speak on whether they thought that these two pieces of information, which I had brought up in quick succession, were somehow connected, and to lead to one of those free-flowing classroom discussions about, let's say, how does one become this wealthy? Or what does this concentration of wealth mean? I also admit that a particular set of opinions and answers would have satisfied me to some extent about the students' training in the tenor of classroom discussions which I considered usual in the university. Instead, the discussion here quickly moved toward the aspiration for success and became about emerging from the kind of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage we had been looking at earlier into wealth and prosperity akin to that of the Ambanis. Further, the students began to discuss what their university education and eventual fluency in the English language would enable them to do in their careers to study in the best universities in the world and get to that kind of success. It was a good, free-flowing discussion, entirely in English because it was by then the one language they had in common. The classroom session had achieved its learning outcome, yet I do not recall being too happy about it at the time. My "hidden" learning outcome for the session had been drowned out, and I came away with the sense that I had somehow aided the commodification of their higher education.

Another day brought another discussion about the difference between literacy and education, literacy in this context meaning the ability to read and write in English, and the students largely agreeing with each other that illiteracy was at the root of every evil in society. What I thought was to be gained from a class on composition and research in English was

entirely different from what my students needed the class to do for them – and I was caught unprepared.

I should not have been, considering that one of the main objectives of CBCS which brought in writing courses into the Delhi University undergraduate syllabus was to facilitate mobility for students across universities in India and outside of it, which would bring the higher-education structure closer to that of internationally renowned universities. Similarly, wide, albeit directive, statements are found in the recently released *National Education Policy 2020*, one of whose long-term goals is “internationalization at home” and the opening up for the best of foreign institutions to operate in India, specifically “those from among the top 100 universities in the world” (39). While I would not say that instruction in English writing and composition is at the centre of any of these changes, it is brought in and often swept along with them, as part of what might be called an increasingly acute lean toward serviceable-learning, and the hurry to “make students job-ready, and make the education system the hub of the next industrial revolution” (Priya). And with this, we once again find ourselves framing this discussion on writing instruction by pitting a skill-based learning model diametrically opposite and against the obviously more noble and worthy pursuit of humanistic, even contemplative, learning.

But I will try to reframe it without these binaries which I usually like to think in. In this reframing, we could see “service-learning” pedagogy in writing as one of the ways in which a writing classroom based on practical, usable skills can be run. Thinking about service-learning by itself, its meaning tends closer to ideas of service to the local community and the redressal of society’s problems. This is one way to consider practical expectations and aspirations from the writing classroom, aspirations which I would have otherwise misjudged as being a clear-cut

commodification of the act of learning how to write well. Andrea Greenbaum, in her discussion of writing instruction in the U.S. classroom, argues that “service-learning offers exciting possibilities within the confines of the rhetoric and composition classroom, allowing students to see themselves as active members in their own community, and helping them to broaden their understanding of the connection between the personal and the political” (99). Her argument follows a description of her writing syllabus which combined service-learning with ethnographic research techniques, allowing students to engage with local communities while also reflecting upon race, class, and gender and themes tied to their forays into these communities. Her decision to design this course came from the realisation that her training in rhetoric and composition made her see the teaching of writing as a political act, and that the influence of postcolonial studies, feminism, and culture studies had created a writing classroom which “undeniably promulgates a leftist political agenda” (83). The liberatory politics of this writing classroom, however, is underlined for Greenbaum with the question: “[*W*]hom are we liberating, and from what” (84)? She sees the idea of individual agency in success and failure as ingrained in the U.S. American students, “including those who are traditionally marginalized,” to such an extent that it is important to consider first whether students even need, or want emancipatory preaching from their teachers (86).

Greenbaum’s example is a well-balanced one, cutting across writing curricula I would otherwise bracket as being mostly on one side or the other. She also discusses critiques of this approach, namely that it runs the risk of the value of such a writing course being measured by the amount of value it is able to generate for society. Or the research and writing generated itself becomes commodified as a currency, both cultural and monetary, within the economy of academia. These critiques, however, are still a far cry from the dismissal of skill-based, practical

writing courses as corrupt and enslaved to the will of big business, as mentioned in the previous section. And Greenbaum explicitly recognised the need for teachers to acknowledge the privilege of their pulpit, so to speak, from which an emancipatory writing classroom is designed and conducted. A different incident from many years before this presents a fascinating if disparate picture.

This account comes from an old piece by Linda Brodkey in her book *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only* and concerns her harrowing experience with a writing syllabus she had co-designed titled “Writing about Difference.” The Dean of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas where Brodkey chaired the English Department committee to redesign the syllabus took the decision to postpone its implementation barely a month before the start of the new academic term, leaving her and the department’s composition instructor in a pickle (181). The dean eventually resigned, and the president of the university upheld his decision, citing the syllabus’ agenda of multiculturalism as a reason (182). More than a “leftist political agenda,” (to borrow Greenbaum’s term), he termed it the “ideology” of multiculturalism which needlessly sought to politicise a skill-based syllabus (cited in Brodkey 183). Brodkey’s arguments against this move, as she writes, were concerned with the institutional nature of the problem rather than the politics of the syllabus itself. She recounts the long process of creating the syllabus, and of choosing one reading over the other for reasons of its suitability in teaching analysis and argumentation—we might even say that part of her defence involves telling the reader that even as the syllabus is concerned with multiculturalism, its roots are in a form of current-traditional rhetoric and that the readings were selected on the basis of their argumentative rigor and pedagogic potential (186). The other part of her vehemence, again, was not about defending multiculturalism per se, but rather about the administrative take-over of a decision which should have been within the ambit

of the English Department. She rightly argues that the university administration effectively “colonized (*sic*) the intellectual life along with the administrative autonomy of the department” (191).

The faculty-administration strife remains an ever-persistent theme in an academic’s life. So is the kerfuffle between more traditional humanities practitioners and the more so-called newer academic strains which, as some say, try to realise political objectives concerned with race, gender, class, caste, and sexuality in every syllabus. Since 1990 at the very least, English departments have been *accused* of teaching more politics than literature (Brodkey 183). Unlike Greenbaum, however, Brodkey did not even get the chance to bring her syllabus to her class, and to contemplate on whether her students wanted or needed it or were even receptive to it. The administration made the decision for her. But the weight of the term “multiculturalism” in the institutional criticism of Brodkey’s syllabus gives us a chance to consider critiques of emancipatory politics in writing curricula, not dissimilar from those which Greenbaum identifies for herself.

I would like to focus on the weight of the term “multiculturalism.” It might be hard for some to believe—but hopefully not surprising—that the president of the university was not mistaken in considering “multiculturalism” an ideology. It is an ideology in the same way that a “neutrally” run classroom focusing entirely on techniques and utilities of writing is an ideological space. Tariq Jazeel, in one of his many articles investigating cosmopolitanism, traces the roots of this “propensity to look, reach and feel beyond the local” (76), a difficult task considering that multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and values of tolerance are together the thick walls of defence at which the ideological right is slowly chipping away. That tolerance is good is not a questionable matter, and that our students, no matter the discipline and the walk of

life they have chosen to follow, must be instructed in cosmopolitan values is something which is still a part of the university-assigned writing textbook from which I teach.⁴ Jazeel is however suspicious, not of the objectives of the concept but rather of its origins, which he traces back to early Stoic philosophy and later to Kantian enlightenment (76). What he is looking for is a model which embraces difference without dissolving it into notions of sameness, which would require “stepping out of cosmopolitanism’s long conceptual shadow” and investigating its “unthinking Eurocentrism” (77). Most importantly, he cautions:

[C]laims to “tolerance” in contemporary multiculturalism should be regarded with suspicion, for behind the spectre of tolerance is always a tolerating (usually liberal, rational, western) “I”, always-already at liberty to suffer the difference of others. (85)

With this in mind, Brodkey’s contention that the English department was “colonized” by administrative authoritarianism and by the university’s right-leaning disdain for even the mention of “Difference” in the title of the syllabus is an interesting conceptual quandary. Jazeel calls for us to “decolonize our knowledge of the world” and step out of cosmopolitanism, a term which will never be able to shake-off its rootedness in the same Enlightenment thought which shaped the logic of colonialism. He wants us to move toward “planetarity,” a concept which would embrace the uncertainty of difference and the need for non-universalising manners of living with and within difference (88). This critique of multiculturalism as a concept harkens back to Greenbaum’s question: ““[*W*]hom are we liberating, and from what?”

Another call, though not explicitly in favour of service-learning, comes from a more recent work by Derek R. Ford. Jovially referring to what he terms zombie intellectualism, Ford says, “If only our students could understand that it is really capitalism that is at fault, then the revolution will come! If only our political analysis were finally correct and known, the system would surely collapse! If only we told teachers that they have to be dangerous, then we can have a real public sphere!” (4-5). For him, democratic communicative capitalism produces a system where we are meant to speak and create noise endlessly, because our political expression is the currency of exchange (6). Who is to say that the kind of writing created in more humanities-focused writing classrooms is also not part of this currency? That is, if the early rise of training in writing and rhetoric across disciplines invites criticisms of corruption and enslavement to capital, today the same charge could be made for writing courses which are focused on emancipatory ideals. Ford further suggests that this rock and a hard place at large is a quandary for the left, because the right has already broken out of this cycle of more and more communication, and has already “embraced politics” (10), even in the classroom.

The idea here is not to look for a model of writing pedagogy which is beyond censure or criticism; that would be inimical to the evolution of writing syllabi today. It is this evolution which has led to concepts like multimodality entering the writing classroom, and which has enabled revolutionary forms of reflection on our teaching practices, like Asao B. Inoue drawing attention to the racism inherent in our assessment of student writing. In fact, the only way to avoid any censure of one’s writing pedagogy would be to eschew any notion of “productivity” altogether. Ford suggests something like this in talking about a *sinthomosexual* model of “study” as opposed to education. His idea of study pushes pedagogy beyond the need for productivity within democratic communicative capitalism, a system whose biggest enemy is silence (21).

Study in that sense would be learning with no end in sight, “end” here used in both of its meanings. Appreciable as it is, this would run counter to what students often want from their writing classrooms, and as instructors we might fall prey to a misjudgement of the aspirations which collectively form a classroom. Where Ford and Greenbaum come together, however, is in thinking about the open embrace of politics in the classroom, and more importantly the open admission of politics and the privilege inherent in that politics.

I will admit that my experiences in an English literature classroom in Delhi University have spoiled me in this regard. I was trained in being used to most of our professors and instructors openly professing their political affiliations in the classroom, rendering the use of the term “apolitical” quite meaningless quite early on in my higher education. And it was never a question as to whether the classroom is an ideologically contested space, albeit at times with predictable results. In my first semester in Delhi University, back in 2011, our professors openly expressed their displeasure in class over the university’s decision to remove A.K. Ramanujan’s “Three Hundred Ramayanas” from the History syllabus (“Discussion”). Just last year, an article titled “No ‘Controversial’ Content” published in *The Quint* shows that readings on the Naxalite movement were removed from the Political Science syllabus, while stories deemed “anti-RSS” were dropped from the English syllabus, among other changes. Another article titled “Footage Appears to Show Police Attack on Jamia Students” published in *Al Jazeera* provided details on how Left-oriented student outfits protested the move, as they also protested later in the same year when public universities in Delhi became the de-facto centres in the city for agitations against the Citizenship Amendment Act, with students at the frontlines against police violence in solidarity with protests erupting all over the country. These are but a few examples from the many one could cite, be they of professors and students injured side-by-side during agitations in

the university, or of faculty detained and arrested for their espousal of a politics which is an indelible part of their academic practice. The point is that the political mediation of the classroom has never been insulated from the politics of outside-the-classroom in this university space, and it is hard for me to imagine—coloured as my mind is by what I know—how a writing course taught by humanities faculty in Delhi University would be able to hide its politics from its students.

Where I teach now, however, I do not see in the writing classroom an open embrace of the politics which already shapes the writing syllabi. Instead, cosmopolitan values are part of the syllabus almost as a norm, while there is a very vague undercurrent of left-political values, and a less vague undercurrent of liberal values running through the writing textbook and suggested syllabi. If then, I were to walk into (or log on to) a class that I teach, and profess that what I teach is going to lean to the left because I do too, what would happen? Or if I were to teach professional writing by telling my students that the modern workplace is an Orwellian nightmare, and that the best of professional communication is emptied of all sincerity and humanity, and that I say this because my agenda is anti-capital, what would happen? In all likelihood, nothing would happen, though I do not see myself risking my stipend to find out if anything would indeed happen. This does not take away from the fact that it would be the right thing to do.

And most writing instructors know that the classroom is a political and ideological space—that is no longer something which needs to be proved or even demonstrated. Writing in 2002, Greenbaum said that part of the problem was that the U.S. American politics had become “de-radicalized” (xvi), leaving only the classroom as a space for critical leadership training for students. Things are different now, leaving a clear path for the politics of the classroom to be tubed directly into politics and radical social movements outside. The question, then, is: am I

prepared to *confess* to my ideology as a necessary part of teaching my students English composition? And am I prepared to admit to the historical and contemporary crevices involved in any study of writing based on humanistic models of cosmopolitanism and tolerance? Am I prepared to look in the eye the uncertainty of a pedagogy rooted in western ideological models reconfigured for homegrown political needs? Looking around ourselves, we know that an academic space built on argumentation is now an unfettered political space of confrontation, and the most we can hope for is our politics to not shy away from its own ideological weight. There are writing classrooms both in the U.S. and in India which are already reflexive and open about their ideological ecosystems and have even gone beyond. The Delhi University writing syllabus seems to be moving in the opposite direction, at least from the institutional description of it. But who is to say what goes on inside the classroom? And sometimes emancipation does begin from inside a classroom.

I write this as I am in the middle of designing a syllabus for professional writing for the Fall semester, wondering whether my students would find a discussion on the culturally loaded meaning of the term “professional” useful. I am also thinking about the writing *I* do professionally. One of the first pieces of feedback I received for one of my first papers in my university in the U.S. suggested that I replace every instance of “towards” in my writing with “toward.” This was just to give it a little edge if I were to think about sending it to a U.S. journal for publication. It was good professional advice, which I would remember when I get to teach in India again, depending of course on whether my students are planning to send their work to journals in the U.S. or elsewhere. Or, if they are planning to find journals which admit many other spellings beyond the two.

Notes

1. In the past, I have been a Writing Tutor for a year at Ashoka University, Haryana. I eventually taught two sections of a course titled "Introduction to Critical Thinking" for a semester there, and then taught a "Critical Thinking Seminar" for another semester. Simultaneously with this, I also taught a writing course at the Jindal School of Journalism and Communication, Haryana, for a semester. All of these appointments were between August 2017 and May 2019.
2. See Viswanathan for an elaborate history of the beginnings of English language studies in India (43), and the opposition put up by missionary groups against the East India Company's secular approach to this education (25). According to her, this opposition is what led to English education assuming a more prominent cultural function in India.
3. I entered Delhi University in 2011 to study under the then newly-adopted semester system, which replaced the earlier annual system of assessment, and was itself a move to further the understanding of higher education as being in the service of "commerce and profit" (Bhattacharya 23).
4. See *Views*, chapters 16 to 20, for the readings in the university-textbook informed by this perspective.

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