

An International Graduate Teaching Student's First Year as a First-year Writing Instructor

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My Abusive Past

When I was growing up in Bangladesh, I received beatings off and on from my schoolteachers for not being able to keep myself up to the task. We had to do lots of rote-memorization (Freire 72). In my primary school, we had a teacher who appointed two of his class student-representatives to ask us subject-related questions. He would sit on his chair and would do nothing. For example, the class representatives would pick up every student and then ask each of us questions; let us say, about geography. Their question would be something like, "What is the capital city of the USA?" If we had failed to give them the accurate answer, they would have reported it to our geography teacher; followingly he would beat us mercilessly. As a 10-year-old, it was too much for me to fathom. In many cases, my teachers were what Paulo Freire would call "depositors," promoting the "banking concept" of education (72). His pedagogic approach was brutal. It took me many years to come out of trauma.

My Relationship with Race

As an International Graduate Teaching Assistant (IGTA), I believe it is important to broach uncomfortable discussions about race. By discussing it in writing classrooms, graduate instructors, if they are people of color like me, will be able to personalize their own experience with race. By opening themselves up, students of color will also be able to share their past and concurrent experiences with racism. Moreover, the white students who may or may not have racist feelings will also know what constitutes racial offense. For that reason, in *Teaching Racial Literacy*, Mara Lee Grayson argues that talking back to racism does help us question our prior knowledge and understand our past conceptions of racial literacy (84). Grayson suggests students use writing as a tool to share their experiences with racism. Using personal narratives or memoir will allow individual students to reflect on their experience with racism and talk back to it as part of the healing process for creating an equitable world (95-101).

That is why Asao B. Inoue urges educators to give materials that raise awareness of racism and create an engaging classroom atmosphere which makes students thought-provoking and gives them a new platform to raise their voice against white oppression in writing. Grayson opines that students may not view themselves as racists but their views on race are largely dependent on their

living conditions and sociohistorical-cultural contexts (Grayson 81). Exploring an individual's position with "race, racism and racialism" is important for questioning any biases that the individual has towards other individuals (Grayson 81-2). She develops an intersectional understanding to stress the point that everyone's experience of race is not the same. But she finds it important for privileged white students to position themselves and investigate/question their own perceptions about racial matters (82). Without empathy for people of color, Grayson does not think that the white students will be able to "understand their own racialized identities" (82).

While teaching first-year writing courses, college teachers are not encouraged to set up a syllabus delving into the issue of race and racism in the USA. I laud my first-year writing director for including articles on racism. When I began teaching as a GTA in my first semester, I was shocked at seeing the reluctance of my first-year students to talk about racism. As discussion of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is banned in my state's public schools, my students tended to move with caution when the issue was involving race and racism. Even my students of color were not eager to talk about racism. Some of my intellectual cohort did not feel comfortable talking about topics related to race and racial discrimination. Like me, they did not want to make their students uncomfortable.

As a graduate teaching student, I teach to survive. I aim to improve my students' writing, but do not intend to force them to talk about something that they do not want to, although it should be beneficial to them. I am on an F-1 visa. I have a young family. I do not want to receive any complaints because of raising a sensitive topic. My fellow graduate cohort members who are on F-1 visas try to stay on the safe side when it comes to discussions about racism. Our fears could be illogical, but they are genuine. By remaining nonchalant about the history of racism, and not encouraging my students to openly address racism, I indirectly contributed to white supremacy. I agree with Inoue that when the classroom environment does not address racism, students of all races and color are deprived of developing critical lenses in which they might have/could have written about issues that challenge the preordained structure of society where "the dominant discourse of the classroom is a white discourse and informed by a white racial habitus" (79). Therefore, I failed as a teacher.

Victor Villanueva Jr.'s *Boostraps: An American Academic of Color* speaks of marginalized graduate students' struggles in academia (100). Although graduate studies are tough for all, the pressure of completing graduate studies multiplicities because of external factors, such as academic racism, white supremacist thoughts, and cultural and linguistic segregation (117). Villanueva requests scholars to get rid of the mindset of white supremacy. It can be only done from dismantling the discourse of white supremacist language. On this note, we might want to appreciate the plurality of tongues and diversity of thoughts that the IGTA's bring with their discursive formations. In my university, first-year writing students can choose a topic on their own. In first-year writing

classrooms, students are required to choose their topic for writing their full paper. I tend to discourage them from choosing a topic such as abortion; it is a discussion topic that often feels off limits in my state. Personally, I think students should be encouraged to choose any topic that they feel passionate about. Although it is important to discuss sensitive topics in writing classrooms, the reality is most international graduate students prefer to sit in their comfort zone. In fear of students' reprisals and to keep their jobs safe, most international graduate students do not encourage students to write about sensitive topics, such as abortion and gun violence. For example, in my first year, I told my first-year students that they would not be allowed to choose any sensitive topics such as "Abortion." Later in the day, one of my students sent me an angry email (justifiably so!) about reducing their choice of options. Since my former first-year writing director had discouraged us from initiating conversations around those topics on their assignments, I just wrote a sincere apology to that embittered student for curbing their freedom. But I still feel guilty about not giving them the full freedom to explore topics for their assignments. If my students had a more courageous teacher in my place, they would have found more opportunities to develop their critical thinking abilities. Without academic freedom, it is not easy to improve cognitive thoughts as a writer. In retrospect, I wish I would not have been such a limiting factor in my students' writing choices.

My First Major Mistake as a Writing Instructor

Writing is a process. After coming here, my initial thought as an IGTA was, writing would be treated as a product. Hence, I bent on checking students' grammar. Unfortunately, I remember giving my first feedback on one student's assignment. Although I wrote my comments in a rewarding language, I made plenty of grammatical corrections in that student's first draft. I should have overlooked them. Instead, I should have encouraged them to keep writing and follow the assignment instructions. After studying here, I now realize the mistakes I had made by always commenting on my Bangladeshi students' grammatical constructions. Instead, my focus should have been on encouraging them to write with the Genre, Audience, Purpose, and Situation (GAPS) in mind. Whether it is in the USA or Bangladesh, every writer must know who the target audience is. They should use words and phrases that keep the audience in mind. Also, the knowledge of the genre convention, the rhetorical style, and the rhetorical situation play important parts in the development of a writer. Now, I am a different instructor. I always encourage students to chime in without tension.

How I settled down as an International Graduate Instructor

Many of my students did help me to settle down in my first year. It took me more than one semester to understand my teaching philosophy and develop my threshold concepts as a writing instructor in the USA. The academic rapport

between graduate teaching assistants and first-year writers is needed to bridge the communication gap. The more I share my struggles and strategies of writing with my students, the more they relate their experience with me. I remain humble. I tell them that I do learn a lot from my students. That is true. I read my first English book when I was 19. I had to work very hard to improve my English. I still struggle to explicate my thoughts in English. I tell my students that they do not have to be perfect. I want them to forget that I am here to judge them as writers. To me, writing is an activity that requires a lifetime investment of rigorous training. I inform them that I fail regularly. I request them not to overwhelm themselves with study pressure. There is life outside my university. I encourage my students to enjoy writing. Their sense of comfort with me dissipates their fear of writing. I do use my experience and expertise to guide them through. Because of developing a strong academic bond with my learners, we know what we expect from each other.

Life now

My teaching life has been a rollercoaster affair in the USA. It was not always easy in Bangladesh either. Although I had many struggles initially, I feel more comfortable with my pedagogical inventions in the first year of teaching away from Bangladesh. My teachers, colleagues, and family inspire me to dip my toe in the water. In our small department, we have more international students than domestic ones in the graduate program. It shows our inclusive approach. All our excellent professors do their best to encourage us to feel welcomed. They give us constructive feedback. Thanks to them for appreciating me regardless of my race, color, and ethnicity. As someone whose English is not the first language, and as an international graduate instructor of color, I feel grateful when I receive words of appreciation and constructive criticism from my folks. However, my writing director's feedback of not taking every form of feedback seriously has changed my perspective of dealing with the mental anxiety that comes after an evaluator's negative criticism. In the case of feedback now, I take the ones which I really think will improve my rhetorical condition seriously but ignore the others that I think will do me no favor. I have my own right to a language. That change in mindset has given me more confidence and assurance about myself. In fear of losing their job, status, prestige, reputation, income, and grades, IGTA's of color hesitate to formally write about their academic concerns as first-year writing instructors. Still, I have some recommendations for first-year writing directors. I aim to help them develop their understanding of international graduate teaching assistants of first-year writing.

My Recommendations

- 1) In a graduate teaching practicum, it is important for the writing director to understand that many of the IGTA's have little experience with the US educational system and are shy of speaking about their hesitation when they begin studying at their chosen graduate program. Many of them do

- not feel comfortable with their own standard of English. They look upon their course instructors as more like teachers and less like colleagues, whereas for American graduate students, their course instructors are more like their colleagues/friends. If first-year writing directors develop friendships with international graduate students, the rhetorical tension between them will dissipate. IGTAAs do not mind talking about their home cultures and answering personal questions. The trainer of IGTAAs could conduct individual conferences and sit with each of their international graduate students to forge a rapport. When IGTAAs and their course instructor/program director develop a healthy academic relationship, it reduces both parties' pedagogical concerns and reduces chances of glaring errors in writing studies. Whether it is Germany or the USA, we like to praise our teachers :) It is our culture. Please do not misunderstand us.
- 2) It will be better if future first-year writing directors discuss the learning outcomes of first-year courses and clarify the confusion of each assigned task with their international graduate students first. I request the future first-year writing directors not to assume that we are supposed to have a clear understanding of the primary text without our director's guidance. For that reason, it is important to discuss the assigned text before IGTAAs begin their teaching journeys as first-year writing instructors.
 - 3) At least one month before their entry into the program, IGTAAs should be told what they would have to teach in their first-year teaching course. That is why the first-year writing director should ensure that IGTAAs teaching entry-level English courses know the nuances of that text before beginning their training program. If the first-year writing director creates some discussion prompts about that primary text, IGTAAs will be confident going forward about their teaching responsibilities. For IGTAAs, the learning situation gets tougher because they struggle to adjust. Almost immediately upon hiring, they are expected to perform well. It becomes mentally draining for IGTAAs to start performing well from scratch. To bridge the gap between expectations and reality, I suggest the first-year writing directors stay in constant dialogue with their IGTAAs to understand each other's needs, expectations, rhetorical needs, and concerns.

Conclusion

One of the participants named Karen from Brewer's *Conceptions of Literacy* does not want to make academic writing "dull and boring" (55). She is not happy with the way some professors make writing dull and boring. Similarly, as an international graduate teaching assistant, I urge my fellow first-year writing instructors to be themselves in writing and teaching. I urge them to use their personal voice and claim their own space. It is in auto-ethnography that the *eastwestnorthsouth* will be able to understand one another's pedagogical

concerns as writing instructors. I request that U.S. rhetoric and composition scholars give international graduate teaching assistants of color from the global south an opportunity to narrate their struggles in established journals. Please do not laugh at us because we cannot write and speak English like you. Appreciate our efforts. Do not expect us to appreciate yours without you appreciating ours. If IGTAs find a bigger platform to raise their pedagogical and rhetorical concerns, mainstream U.S. rhetoric and composition professors will be able to understand what they might want to do to make graduate schools of nonSTEM fields a place of diversity, inclusivity, and equity.

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