

BRIDGING THE GREAT DIVIDE: UNDERSTANDING (CRITICAL) COMPOSITION FOR THE INDIAN IMMIGRANT STUDENT

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In *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?* David Seitz studies several multicultural, minority students, some of whom are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Seitz examines the inherent disconnect between these immigrant students' perceptions of the writing course and their real lives beyond the composition classroom. To me the title *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?* itself suggests the dichotomy between the inherent value of composition and its perceived value in the eyes of immigrant students. There is a disparity in the engagement such writing demands from the students and the price these students must pay to succeed in it. This price is the student's investment while the cost is the time such an engagement demands. The cost is high because this time comes from time allocated to subjects, particularly the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) courses that hold a higher value than composition studies in the eyes of these immigrant students and their families. In the case of several immigrant students, particularly South Asian and Chinese students, the value of one subject against another is defined by its place in a disciplinary hierarchy which is in turn determined by the cultural pedagogical ideology that immigrant students often bring into the composition classroom (Mervis; Suarez-Orozco, Bang and O'Connor; Hale). This is a price that the student has to pay despite the cost being much higher than what the student might be willing to or able to pay.

I examine this issue from the perspective of an Indian immigrant student, and arguments that I present are informed from my own

experiences as an Indian immigrant composition student, scholar and teacher. I further inform my observations through recommendations that are based on scholarship that examines this disconnect between the (Indian) immigrant student and the American college level composition class. It is important to note at this point that even though this is from and about Indian immigrant composition students, scholars, and teachers, several of the observations will resonate with other immigrant student groups, specifically the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis. My inquiry begins with Seitz's study on an Indian immigrant student and her Indian immigrant teacher and stays within reaching distance of the context established by Seitz. Yet, it is important to underscore that all the questions this paper asks and explores can extend to other immigrant composition students and teachers who are in similar situations.

Seitz presents Gita, a student in a composition class and her writing teacher, Rashmi. Gita is a first-generation Indian immigrant and business student who strongly identifies "with a dual frame of reference," specifically "her American-bred ideal for individual freedoms compared with the gender constraints of her Indian social networks" (76). Comparatively, there is little on Rashmi, except that she is Gita's writing teacher and is, to me by all indications, an Indian immigrant as well. Seitz introduces Gita as one of the first in his study who openly admitted to zoning out during class discussions because she viewed them as irrelevant to her life, especially her academic life. Gita's persistent, almost stubborn determination not to engage with these issues becomes the overarching theme of this particular case study and is also an example of what several Indian immigrant students in American writing classes experience.

Contextualizing Perspectives

Before I continue, it is important for me to establish my positionality in this study and contextualize my perspectives. I see myself as Gita as well as Rashmi because of the experiences that make me identify with both. I "am" Gita in that I too am an Indian immigrant student, with a "dual frame of reference" walking between two worlds of being American and Indian simultaneously. I "am" also Rashmi, a

writing teacher who finds herself very often standing across this great divide, unable to connect with a student's inability to overcome built-in, traditionally determined pedagogical constructs. I also place myself in a third role as a composition scholar attempting to examine this issue from my unique vantage point of Indian immigrant student, teacher and scholar.

These multiple positionalities illustrate the role that culturally defined career and professional goals play in the life of an Indian immigrant student like Gita. The importance that STEM fields hold for the Indian communities is evident in the annual "Open Doors" report from the Institute of International Education. The report states that 42% of the 886,000 international students enrolled in American universities in 2013-2014 were from India and China. Furthermore, an analysis of enrollment by discipline shows that STEM fields accounted for 45% of immigrant students enrolled at the undergrad level. This is significant because many of the immigrant students enrolled in first-year writing are from these STEM fields. Their academic choices embody this hierarchy of disciplines that is both overtly and covertly reinforced through the traditionally defined cultural environment from which students like them and Gita, come. "Gita," Seitz writes, "acted from two sets of seemingly conflicting convictions. [One was] her socioeconomic situation as part of a first-generation Indian immigrant family [that] shaped her practical views of labor and a free market economy" (97). The second was "her social concerns" (97), which in this case was centered around issues of gender within sociocultural contexts.

As the Indian immigrant teacher, I have seen this phenomenon repeatedly semester after semester in my own classes. One writing assignment always focuses on the student's journey that ends in my classroom. Thus far without exception I have seen that all my students from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are (1) always from the STEM fields and (2), have almost always faced family resistance if they chose writing in any form, as a career. As an immigrant child I understand the reasons, accuracy, and implications of this almost normalized narrative, yet as a writing teacher I find myself on the other side of this divide. As a teacher I articulate the guiding purpose

of education as inculcating intellectual authority in my students that will eventually lead to their intellectual autonomy. This, I believe, is essential to empowering them both as individuals and for the society at large. However, over the years it has become evident to me that as a teacher of composition, the effort is torn between what we as teachers see as the means to inculcating this intellectual authority and the reality of an immigrant student's lack of engagement in this process.

My third standpoint is that of the Indian immigrant composition scholar who believes in a multicultural approach in all aspects of the discipline. Brice Horner, Samantha NeCamp, and Christiane Donahue argue for a "multilingual approach in not only their teaching but also their scholarship" (269) and I borrow this idea and extend it to include an acknowledgement of multiculturalism in composition teaching and scholarship. In much the same way that Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue acknowledge the shift within composition studies that challenges the hegemony of English monolingualism and everything that goes with it (271), I propose that a similar understanding and sensitivity to acknowledging multicultural forces that act upon the Indian immigrant students in the writing classroom could redefine the dominance of any one culture in a multicultural writing classroom.

As a scholar when I step back and look at Gita and Rashmi's situation, I notice clearly the disconnect between what Gita sees as irrelevant versus course work that Rashmi sees as important. If we are to effectively address this, we need to first identify the problem. The next step is then to identify some of the key factors that play into this problem, and finally we need to find ways in which we can address this problem in the reality of the classroom. These steps will at best eventually lead to the building of bridges across this great divide, or at the very least it will better explain the challenges that immigrant, specifically Indian immigrant, students face in a composition class. In this way, we as teachers can begin to address them.

The problem of this divide between Gita's lack of engagement in a process that will eventually lead to inculcating intellectual authority and Rashmi's inability to engage Gita requires an examination of both

perspectives. However, I place the onus of bridging this divide more on the composition teacher and in their acknowledging and incorporating the multiple sociocultural contexts that come into the writing classrooms. This, I believe, is critical if we, as teachers of composition, strive to motivate and inspire intellectual authority in our students. Despite my multiple positionalities, I do not claim singular credit for identifying or naming this divide. Scholars like Seitz, Ira Shor, and Lisa Delpit, to name a few, have examined this divide, albeit under other names and from varying perspectives. I will come back to these names as I define the problem, and I will conclude by proposing some suggestions that will lessen the divide in the day-to-day reality of the composition course.

Understanding Gita

As I approach Gita and Rashmi from my perspective as an Indian immigrant, I am hardly surprised at Gita's inability to fully engage in the composition class. Sabrina Eveland analyzed South Asian immigrant students in American universities and found that "the stable career path" prevalent among second generation South Asians who "feel pressure from society to assimilate, while being dually pressured by their parents to attain success" (34) was common. She sees the value of her work for educators as well as administrators, so they can "understand why there are so many South Asian students oriented towards the math, science, engineering, and medical fields of study" (34). More importantly, she gives "more insight into both the influences behind academic success among South Asian students and the internal and inter-familial stress that can occur when South Asian students (must) pursue courses of study their parents do not support" (34). This insight is the key to understanding this problem and to getting the students to successfully engage with any course. This success can be defined in Freirean terms.

In light of scholarship like Eveland's and my own cultural exposure to the disciplinary hierarchy that is built into the Indian family, Gita's zoning out in her writing class is not unusual or surprising. However, I am fascinated by Rashmi's inability to pick up on what

might be happening to Gita behind the scenes considering Rashmi seems to be an Indian immigrant as well.

Outlining the reality of being an immigrant student and a teacher in the place and space that is the American composition classroom is deceptively simple. Here “place” and “space” are distinct, in that “place” is the physical classroom, while “space” in this context means the internal connotations of what it means to belong to this world of critical writing, as a student and as a teacher. This is because it involves breaking up this experience into two identities – one of Rashmi and another of Gita and everything that they must stand for. These identities must then be examined from a highly specific context of the Indian immigrant student and the culturally defined pedagogical perspectives that become “baggage” they bring into the writing classroom. It is this perspective that prevents them from engaging with the composition process that, when all is said and done, is being forced on them. Molded by a certain socio-cultural ideology that defines how they view education in terms of its function and purpose, these students resist composition as a subject not because they want to, but because they are culturally conditioned to.

Gita’s disinterest, its reasons, and the implications when teachers fail to see these cultural forces that shape student motivation are of central importance. In order to explain the situation of the Indian immigrant student in an American writing class and the student-teacher dynamic, Paulo Freire is immensely useful. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire makes a case for why education is the salvation of the oppressed. Freire goes on to state that it is education that will give humanity freedom, which in this context is intellectual authority. It is what I, as a teacher of writing, want for my students and know must come from the students themselves. According to Freire, this freedom comes in two ways: first, drawing a distinction between thought and action as shaped by genuine love as opposed to the thought that has been conditioned by the oppressors’ model of humanity, and second, freeing the oppressed by getting them to reject this adherence to the oppressor that has by now become central to the identity of the oppressed, at least in the minds of the

oppressed. To be sure, Freire is significant because Gita's situation is directly translatable in Freirean terms. Gita would be representative of Freire's oppressed, or the student who needs this awakening to gain her freedom from an oppressive socio-cultural reality embodied in the cultural mandates that surround her. The irony becomes evident as Gita seeks her freedom through another oppressive pedagogical system that she is unable to identify with but promises to relieve her of the more oppressive of her two prisons. The reason that the pedagogical system in this case is oppressive is that Gita is not a part of it in the Freirean sense. She is disconnected, uninvolved, and fails to find the validity of her experiences and what it means to "be" Gita in the context of this pedagogy. This is a system that is forcing liberation on her, and does not allow her to win her own liberation.

Gita openly admitted that she "zoned out during class discussions that she felt did not directly affect her life or academic progress through the course" (89), and this demonstrates the contradictions and the divide that reinforce the oppression that Freire associates with the internally divided oppressed individual. Gita's conflicting convictions are her socioeconomic situation as part of a first-generation Indian immigrant family and her views of labor and a free market economy, both consequences of her socioeconomic situation. Gita's "oppressors" are defined by "this single-minded goal held by many parents in her extended family . . . and their lack of higher education [that] may prevent them from seeing valuable opportunities aside from the high-status medical professions" (97). Gita is "trapped between two cultures and time periods" and the freedom that she seeks is embodied in the dream of moving to Australia, far away from her socio-cultural oppressors who are personified collectively in her family and relatives, to whom she remains chained. That is why Gita *will* embrace this oppressive pedagogical system—because of the freedom it promises her. However, I argue that without intellectual authority, Gita does not stand much of a chance of any kind of freedom simply because the belief of her oppressors will otherwise remain embedded within her as part of her identity. Unless she tries to redefine herself in terms

of her identity as a human being, she will remain chained irrespective of where she tries to go.

At some level she is well aware of this, but seems unwilling, perhaps unable to grapple with the meaning of what remains evident yet unsaid, so she pulls back from being rebellious. She says “But I can’t do that. See, I put my parents and my brother first, my relatives next, and then myself . . .” (qtd. in Seitz101). The “But” signals her perception of no way out and the paradox is that until she sees the relevance of critical education in the process of (re)constructing the self, until she can bridge that perceived chasm that lies between what she wants and what she is being offered, she will never begin her self-liberating move towards intellectual authority and freedom as a human being.

Eveland’s study clearly demonstrates “the traditional South Asian attitude towards following a well charted recipe for success” that pushes the student towards “choosing a career that is high paying” (36). This pressure is passed down from one generation to the next and the Indian immigrant student finds themselves in the narrow space between “pleasing one’s parents and pursuing one’s own interests; of following the tried and true versus walking down the road less traveled; and of retaining cultural values or assimilating the dominant culture in a new country” (Eveland 36). This is the position that Gita and several others like her find themselves in and is what we must acknowledge if we want to reach across this divide.

I have previously expressed my confusion at what manifests as Rashmi’s inability to understand the influences that are acting on Gita and that are influencing her attitude towards the course. First-year writing classes are, for the most part, taught by graduate student instructors in the role of TAs (Connors). These graduate students are an important part of this equation, yet there is a “dearth of research in writing studies on this population” while “the field itself diversifies” (Ruecker, Frazier and Tseptsura 613). To understand the contrary forces that divide the Indian immigrant student’s perspective of what is being provided and how a writing class is of value, I look to understanding the immigrant teacher.

Michael Hale writes “a nation of immigrants is holding another nation of immigrants in bondage” (18) and Rashmi and Gita’s situation is an illustration of this reality in the writing classroom. Hale uses the larger immigration debate to get his students to reflect on the problem of misinformation and the role of critical writing. In this process he states that his primary concern is to get his students engaged in the debate in the here and now and to help them develop a sense of agency that makes them active participants in the debate both within and without the writing classroom. Diana Belcher outlines the forces that define an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) writing classroom – they are “*need based, pragmatic, cost-efficient and functional*” and of these the more critically oriented classroom would be “accommodationist,” “assimilationist,” “market driven,” and “colonizing” (134). I would argue that several of these descriptive terms would be ones that define our own composition pedagogies. As teachers work towards these ends, Belcher uses past scholarship to point out “that teacher intuition and knowledge of language systems (are) insufficient, and that understanding of language use in specific contexts (is) essential” (136). Much the same way as I extended Horner’s argument on acknowledging multilingualism to composition scholarship to include multiculturalism in composition classrooms, I extend Belcher’s observations into the critical writing classroom. Just as Belcher argues for encouraging a complex view of context and to consider social perspective, I argue that it is essential for the teacher of critical pedagogy to consider the “discourse domain.” Belcher defines *discourse domain* as the continually changing and dynamic context constructed by those engaged in communication (136).

Understanding the Disconnect

Ira Shor presents the student-teacher disconnect through the seating pattern of the students in his writing classes. Shor observed and found that several students moved in passive, silent protest, and chose to stay beyond the physical and intellectual reach of the teacher by choosing to sit in the remote “Siberia” of the classroom. This “Siberian Syndrome,” Shor noted, negatively impacted the effectiveness, even the legitimacy of his authority as a teacher. Shor

felt that this “studenthood is hardly passive” because this passivity is being actively constructed by the students as a manifestation of what Henry Giroux (1983 and 1988) called students’ resistance to schooling. Contrary to what is understood to be the proper, learned, and expected “routine professional behavior” of what “teacherhood” and “studenthood” imply, Shor writes, “Students are constructing the subordinate self at the same time that are resisting and undermining it, while believing that their ‘real selves,’ and ‘real lives,’ are somewhere else, not contaminated or controlled by this dominating process” (17).

Shor acknowledges his authority and begins to recount in graphic and minute detail the “disturbing and hilarious moments” he spent in the “Siberia” of his classroom. Shor tries to “establish the learning process as a cultural forum . . . for the negotiation of meanings, it helps to get students’ thoughts and feelings into the open as soon as possible” (34). To me this is a prerequisite to understanding the internal forces that compel students, perhaps like Gita, to move into the “Siberias” of the writing class, either emotionally/mentally, physically or both. Another important tool that Shor employs is the democratic composition pedagogical model. Shor argues that when the students are treated as “reflective constituents who are consulted in the making of their education” (35) it makes them intellectually involved. I believe that students’ agency and investment in their composition courses will eventually inculcate the intellectual authority that I see as a highly desirable aim of a composition course.

Ideal as this sounds, Shor points to moments when the students resist even these attempts at bridging the teacher-student divide by presenting this as the “classroom-corporate boardroom” divide. It is important to establish that “corporate boardroom” is not the florescent-light filled boardrooms of the corporate world, but is used as a stand-in for everything that students perceive as their real-life as divorced from the writing classroom. Shor defines this disconnect in the students’ expectations of the teacher as one who will “do most of the talking, because that’s the way education *has been done to them so far*” (67) (my emphasis). His choice of words is important to me because they point to the students’ passive, receptacle-like role where they are “being talked at” and where “the teacher is firmly in command” (67-

68). Shor returns to this “contradiction [that exists] between the actual and the apparent functions of schooling,” which make school a “warehouse instead of a learning center” and which takes a toll on the student who is “pulled in opposite directions” (9). This disillusionment is heightened as “the social prestige of college” coupled with the centrality of a college degree and getting a job “makes this a high-stakes situation for these Indian immigrant students and their families. These stakes are further heightened because a failure to comply has some very serious ramifications; unemployment, welfare, crime, the Army, struggling with self-employment or marrying money” (Shor, 16).

Education, in Freirean terms, is a reinforcement of the oppression because it is not in tandem with the oppressed and is therefore doomed to failure. It is toxic to the realization of being human, and the system is not accountable for its failure. “Cooling off” is how this often plays out, as the disconnect between the students’ goals and the methods in which they previously and truly believed, fail to get them to their dreams of self-actualization, intellectual authority, and freedom (Shor). Shor sums up by saying “All conflicts of American life converge in school, turning education into . . . battlefields for the conflicting interests of the state and the people” (40). What is lost in this process is the students’ ability to critically reflect which in turn keeps them from becoming agents of social change. A greater loss is the awareness of this contradiction between a flawed system and broken aspirations that makes the students increasingly more disenchanting with the entire process of education. A teacher’s helplessness when faced with students defined by such a reality is hard enough. Add to this the parental and societal pressures that reinforce this belief in an education system that transfers its failures on the students. Now, also add the costs of what most Indian immigrant families must pay in various ways so their children can get an American education and the stakes become unimaginably high. These students must make the choices that are determined by their elders who are culturally revered to a point where questioning their authority is not an option. This comes back to the original problem that I see for Gita and Rashmi. Gita is the Indian immigrant

student who must realize her dreams with her American degree in Business, while Rashmi is left trying to break through a wall made up of traditionally defined norms, parental and socially dictated choices, and a student's burning desire for freedom. All that Rashmi has is her own belief in the value of what she is teaching and its role in Gita's process of self-realization.

I see this situation as unintentional, but common and damaging nonetheless. I would argue that its real danger comes from its unintentionality. Lisa Delpit enters this conversation from the standpoint of a teacher who is looking at the educational system as something that is being *done* to other people's children. Delpit recalls observing white conservatives and liberals "battling each other over what was good for these 'other people's children' while excluding from the conversation those with the most to gain or lose by its outcome" (6). To Delpit, the disconnect is between the establishment and the students who are affected by its policies. Delpit draws on her personal experience to address this disconnect—the memories of herself as a graduate student and what she considered valuable moments in learning. She writes, "I also learned in graduate school that people learn to write not by being taught 'skills' and grammar, but by 'writing in meaningful contexts'" (12). Her assignments are nontraditional in that she has her students write books, weave baskets, play games, and redecorate the interiors of their learning spaces. She admits that her methods worked, "Well, at least it worked for some of the children" (13). Interestingly, the group of students for whom these nontraditional methods worked best were her minority (black) students who were not progressing by traditional methods. Delpit is admittedly not talking about immigrant students, let alone Indian immigrant students, but I would venture to say that the problems that several immigrant minority groups face in the first-year writing classroom are not entirely dissimilar from what Gita and others like her experience.

Delpit, along with others like Shor and Seitz, echoes the contradiction that is the focal point here when she sums up the situation of the "skilled" individual incapable of critical analysis who "becomes the trainable, low-level functionary of the dominant

society” (19). Such trained individuals serve only to reinforce the existing oppressive systems in opposition to “a critical thinker who lacks the ‘skills’ demanded by employers and institutions of higher learning” who can only “aspire to financial and social status within the disenfranchised underworld” (19). For the minority to rise, “skills” and critical thought must work in tandem. This comes back to the whole point of contextualizing their realities that can “only be devised in consultation with the adults who share their culture” (45). Though she is referring to students, teachers and parents of color that include those that are not financially as advantaged as others are, I extend this idea to include Gita and others like her. Gita points out that to her family, higher education is the only way to avoiding a financially insecure future and therefore is a financially defined commodity, the most valuable being the medical profession. Most Indian immigrant families prioritize the STEM fields. That is why Gita’s choice of a higher education in business studies was a hard sell.

Delpit cites John Dewey to underscore the importance of the students’ context and experience, “the greatest asset in the student’s possession—the greatest, moreover that will be in his possession—[is] his own direct and personal experience” (124). Coming in from a teacher’s perspective, Delpit concludes that a “failure to allow students to explore their past experiences in light of the theoretical constructs will only produce a mindless imitation of others’ practice rather than a reflection on teaching as an interactive process” (125). It is no wonder then that Gita is unable to connect with the class topic, even though she *does* care about the issues being discussed. The class assignment focused on issues of exploitation of women’s labor and the natural environment in Third World countries, and one might imagine that this topic would naturally lend itself to an Indian immigrant student. Yet, her inability to engage with this topic underscores the importance of contextualization in the process of bridging this gap. Gita says that she *does* care about the environment, but cannot relate it to the class she is in. She provides her own contextualization when she specifies “environment” as being “the environment in which women are working, like the factories or

whatever. That environment I do care about, but planting trees or something like that, that had no interest to me” (90). She further specifies the one-person audience to whom she is writing—Rashmi, the writing teacher and what the word “environment” means to her. Gita is unclear with what Rashmi wants and is therefore disconnected.

Delpit widens the scope of resolving this pedagogical and intellectual disconnect because this issue is more relevant today in the multicultural reality that is the American writing classroom. Only by acknowledging and incorporating these multicultural experiences through contextualization can we create a self-sustaining critical framework that will achieve self-realization. It is this self-realization in the Indian immigrant students that will open windows, maybe even make a door in the walls that they are surrounded by.

Recommendations

It would be erroneous on my part to extend these reflections to include *all* immigrant teachers and students, even Indian immigrant students, but it is becoming evident to me that this disconnect is seldom confined to any one group of students. It is often a larger problem of contextualizing the students’ mindset with the delivery mechanisms in the writing classroom. It is when we, as teachers of writing, understand the contexts that accompany the (Indian) immigrant student that we can begin to make some headway in getting these students invested in the process of developing intellectual authority and seeing its inherent value. The *gurushishya parambara*, or the teacher-taught tradition, and the *guru-kula sambradaya*, where the student lived with the teacher during the entire duration of their education, is an example of learning that was spontaneous and went beyond the traditional model of institutionalized Western education. This model saw the guru take care of every aspect of the discipline’s well-being, while the disciple “respects the guru as his father and never disobeys him whatever be the provocation” (Kaladharan 209). It may be worth noticing that the relationships are reverential and involve an intimate parent-teacher and child-teacher dynamic within a home-school environment. While replicating such a model as it is in today’s context is neither practical nor desirable, the idea

of an “education rooted in and supported by the natural environment” (Kaladharan 2009) that included an understanding of the world of the teacher and student is one that we can take inspiration from.

To create a similar environment where the multiple perspectives can intermingle freely, I recommend a process that involves two phases: the first is understanding difference and differences, particularly the factors that define difference for the Indian immigrant student; the second is exploring the value of some nontraditional pedagogical methods that will address these differences and eventually bridge the divide. These are macro perspectives that are presented at a conceptual level so that each instructor can review the situations at hand and modify these ideas to suit their own classroom circumstances.

Helping Rashmi Understand “Difference” and Differences

Scholars are increasingly confirming through research that parents play an important role in a child’s educational and career decisions and to acknowledge and understand their perspectives is essential if we are to understand the motivations, or lack thereof, in our students. The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training Report no. 92, shows a direct connection between the kinds of school and career choices a student makes and the opinions of what their parents saw as favorable versus unfavorable choices. As Seitz has demonstrated through the examples of Gita and Rashmi, many Indian immigrant students could come into the writing class with conflicting dual frames of reference. As for Gita, the central voices that create this duality are those of her parents. Parents of Indian immigrant students, much like their Japanese counterparts, are the physical manifestations of the pressures that shape the framework for most Indian immigrant students, and central to understanding this duality is understanding the parents. This is why I believe that any teacher of writing will effectively engage a student only when they begin to try to understand where the student comes from; recognizing and acknowledging the cultural and traditional differences therein; and developing an understanding of difference per se. However, as we understand them

as embodiments of this cultural reality, we must be careful not to fetishize these differences making them fixed, immovable categories.

The United States has “the largest number of immigrants in the world,” and the population of immigrant children has rapidly grown. Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Carola Suarez-Orozco outline the growth of the immigrant population in the US, “In 1970, the population of immigrant origin stood at 6% of the total population of children. It reached 20% by 2000 and is projected to be 33% by 2015” (9). All of these children, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco further point out, are born from foreign-born parents (9). This is consequently “an era of hyper diversity” and is evident in, for example, their levels of education. On the one hand these immigrant parents are among the most educated people “comprising 47% of scientists with doctorates, a quarter of all physicians, and 24% of engineers . . . 41% of newly arrived immigrants had at least a bachelor’s degree” (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 10). On the other hand, they make up the lower levels of education and must find jobs as low-skilled workers in agriculture, service industries, and construction (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 10). Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco claim that in 2013, 28% of all recent arrivals “lived in poverty,” and this percentage had grown from 18% in 1970 (10). I propose that understanding the immigrant parents of these students from a realistic and non-prejudiced perspective will explain the motivations of the students more holistically. This is my intent in the methods I outline further on.

Yan Guo points out that “transcultural knowledge construction” whereby these immigrants change themselves by integrating into the new system of their newly adopted homeland can manifest in two ways: “opposition and discrimination, or to cultural creativity and the integration of new knowledge within academic and societal positionings” (123). The inability to understand immigrant parents in turn is attributed to either misconceptions of difference or a lack of knowledge about their culture (Guo 123). Guo demonstrates through interviews that this transcultural knowledge construction is the blend of what the immigrant parents bring with them and what they experience here. This is the dual frames of reference that

they knowingly and unknowingly pass onto their children (126). Guo urges all teachers to acknowledge this “rapidly changing social context” and “better address the needs of students from a multicultural, multilingual population.” Guo and Mohan (2008) suggest that educators and administrators need to recognize that educational tasks may be given culturally divergent interpretations” (134). Guo concludes by arguing that teachers and schools in general “need to learn immigrant parents’ views on education and cultural differences on home-school communities” (137) to begin understanding the students in their classrooms and schools.

Acknowledging differences is part of what a teacher must do, particularly when looking at students who fall outside of the mainstream. Yet it is important to realize that differences that are rooted in tradition and culture are often seen as “unchanging” while they are “systems that blend and shift in response to pressures from the environment” and the ingenuity of those who belong to such groups (Kerschbaum, 617). The challenges are immense as they are real, as Stephanie Kerschbaum notes that “using discourses about difference to attend simultaneously to broad groups characteristics and to instability within (traditionally defined) categories” makes writing teachers, particularly the new ones, anxious (617). To address this Kerschbaum suggests that this scholarship on difference can be approached in primarily two ways: “by becoming more aware of differences that have received little attention and by developing new insights on familiar differences” (618). This *fixing difference* as Kerschbaum terms it, is “the process of treating difference as a stable thing that can be identified and fixed in place,” what I call “Difference,” as well as the “attempts to fix, that is improve, the way difference is understood” (619). This can happen when the teacher enters the world of the student and the student’s world enters the writing classroom. In *Course X*, Leonard Greenbaum and Rudolf Schmerl focus on the “ecology” of the university system and the first-year writing classroom addressing both student and teachers often indistinguishably. At the core of that analysis, however, are the economic and intellectual expenses that such dictated choices mean when imposed on the students, a conflict I referred to previously.

Greenbaum and Schmerl also manage to bring teacher and student into the world of the other and thereby address some real-time problems that define the world of the first-year writing classes.

Using Non-Traditional Assignments to Reconnect Gita and Rashmi

Bringing each into the world of the other is a phenomenon that Eileen Lagman examines as part of a larger study on the loss in transnational literacies and brain drain in the narratives of her research informants. She points towards a trend in recent scholarship that has begun to look increasingly at immigrant and migrant communities and the effects of globalization on literacy practices (27). According to Lagman, such scholarship highlights the varied and multiple literacies that are a part of the transnational experience, specifically the new literacies they bring. She writes, the “multiple literacies, whether it is through acquiring digital skills, speaking across languages, or mixing languages, they have multiple social and cognitive positions, because of the transnational ties they maintain, from which they can make meaning” (27). However, she is quick to also point out that this focus of scholarship on these “new and multiple literacies is an effort to counter the narrative that immigrants are lacking, particularly English language skills or official school-based literacies” (28). These unconventional, multimodal methods become a means to bridge this divide because first, as they are a part of a larger transnational experience through which universal meaning may be made; and second, these multimodal methods transcend problems that those who are not from the mainstream (like the Indian immigrant students) may otherwise face. The reason for this, says Lagman, is that educators see immigrant students as either unwilling to participate or unable to assimilate. The way to consider all these multiple literacies, Lagman suggests, is through the “virtual nationhood,” which is “the transnational connections made possible by computers and mobile phones to simulate a nation across borders” (46).

Integrating computers and digital technologies into the process of composition can bring the worlds of the Indian immigrant student into the world of the classroom, and vice versa. The use of already

popular digital technologies in the composition class work has great potential in engaging students irrespective of their differences. Daniel Anderson advocates the use of basic computer technologies that are both accessible and affordable in the composition classroom, so that the environment can be reconfigured as construction sites or studio spaces (42). Anderson believes that this in turn will “serve as a catalyst for instructors wishing to reconceptualize pedagogies” that will “jump start innovation,” innovations that instructors have found to “yield pedagogical insights and theorizing that can be layered over practice through reflection”; such pedagogy in turn facilitates creativity, motivation, and engagement (44). Of the many advantages that Anderson presents, I would point to the “hands-on time in class for students to work together as they develop technical skills and multiple literacies” (58). Collaboration between teacher, student, and the space of critical thinking present a very viable and sustainable pedagogical tool to *fix difference*, which Kerschbaum suggests is the first step to understanding and gaining from (multiple) cultural differences (619).

Joyojeet Pal, et al. looked at the value of computer-aided learning in the minds of the Indian parents in India. They found that a computer (based) literacy held immense value because the parents believed that computer-based literacies positively impacted their child’s interest in school as well as the status of the school in the eyes of the community at large (2). Their research was not on an immigrant population, but their findings hold value here because their final take-away argued for including parents in the planning and implementation of educational projects and saw this practice as indispensable (8). Traditionally and culturally, the importance and presence of the Indian parent in the lives of their children is tantamount to devotional reverence. For the Indian immigrant student walking the path between Indian roots and an American life and reality, this parental presence is unaltered by the fact of their physical location.

The inclusion of digital technology looks at the shifting interests of the students as a means of engagement, but it does not address the question of content that would enable *fixing difference*. To look at content, I propose that the teacher take the class and classroom

outside of the purview of the conventions of the traditional writing class and into the realm of multimodal composition assignments.

Multimodality in composition is both a recent concept as well as an old one (Palmeri). In *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing*, Jason Palmeri repeatedly stresses the need to acknowledge and incorporate multimodality in composition studies if teachers are to stay relevant and engage their students in a meaningful way. Selfe calls for an acknowledgement of non-alphabetic composition across digital and print formats; Lunsford sees writing today as having moved from print conventions to writing that goes beyond the “black marks on white paper”; and Yancy holds the writing teacher responsible for fulfilling the students’ need for multiple literacies (qtd. In Palmeri 4-5). Palmeri sums up this common “refrain” succinctly when he writes, “alphabetic literacy is our past; multimodal composing is our future” (5). By looking at multimodality as a guiding idea on how to conceptualize a writing course and looking at multimedia, which includes all the multiple forms of technologies that enable such expression, *fixing differences* might be successfully accomplished in the writing classroom.

To this end I recommend two models of assignments that can be easily incorporated in all kinds of writing classes and in varying degrees depending upon the discretion of the teacher: the incorporation of multimodal assignments, and the development of assignments that ethnographically engage the community. These assignment models will address the problems of connection and motivation, as well as contextualize the two worlds of the student. These models will consider the families from which these students come; they will look at difference (or lack thereof) as a stable thing as well as something that must be understood within a larger context. The students will see that in several ways their cultural differences fade away in the glare of a new technological reality that defines all students uniformly. They will also be able to understand and explain the two contrasting worlds they inhabit to themselves, their parents, their peers, and their teachers.

The effectiveness of moving outside of convention in engaging the students is not something new (Palmeri). Authors of composition

studies' first multimodal composition textbooks like Helen Hutchinson (*Mixed Bag*, 1970), William Sparke and Clark Mckowen (*Montage*, 1970), Kytly (*Comp Box*, 1972), James Miller (*Rhetoric of the Imagination*, 1972), to name a few, all argue that the composing process can only happen when the student is motivated, their imagination excited, and the course contextualized to their world beyond the writing classrooms. Hutchinson states the underlying assumption is that involvement precedes thought, and thought precedes writing. This to me is the underlying assumption of all writing, and it is nowhere more critical than in the first-year writing classroom, which is the beginning of the path where writing and critical thought are indistinguishably intertwined. The first model I present is adapted from the multimodal assignments outlined by Palmeri in *Remixing Composition*, and the second comes from Shirley Brice Heath's integration of ethnography into the writing classroom as seen in *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Community Classrooms*. Both of these can be used in isolation, but they can be used as effectively when combined.

In *Remixing Composition*, Palmeri makes a case for the use of non-textual modes of first-year writing pedagogy that are both interdisciplinary as well as multimodal and employ a host of mediums—digital as well as sensory. Of his take-aways, the most significant in this context is the connections between the composing process across disciplines and mediums, which he demonstrates as having some inherently underlying, almost universal similarities. Palmeri uses studies that range from Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi who draw similarities between successful artists and “expert” writers, to Shipka who “offer[s] students more open-ended assignments in which they must actively choose which multimodality . . . they will employ to convey an argument” (qtd. In Palmeri 47).

As Palmeri examines these various ideas on how a composition class can become multimodal *yet* remain true to composition studies in concept, he finds that “students really enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to move beyond the alphabetic” (2). In terms of how these assignments can be employed towards *fixing difference*, each of his ideas lends themselves naturally to understanding difference

at several levels. For instance, Palmeri looks at the role of voice and how its various manifestations can be employed in creating a critical and creative awareness in the student. Through examining how voice, Rhetoric, dialogue, and dialect work in the composing process, Palmeri does two things: he demonstrates how the creation and transference of the written and the spoken language are both deeply interconnected social activities; and he gives us a means through which we can begin to understand the multiple voices in our classroom. By getting the students to record their voices and use these dialogues to fine tune their writing, we can understand the differences therein as well as understand difference from a whole new perspective outside of just their writing. Another idea is the use of audio-visual electronic media in the classroom to begin the process of composing outside of the alphabetic text. While this is a blend of Anderson and Palmeri, Palmeri spells out many ideas in his monograph on how such assignments can be designed and the technologies needed to do this. Technology has redefined categories in ways that have significantly challenged older categorizations, particularly for the students. By resorting to communicating in a language, albeit a digital one that is non-alphabetic, a teacher of composition can begin to connect with students on their own turf as it were.

Heath's study looked at various factors that defined and determined the language learning abilities in young children from the two communities of Roadville and Trackton. Heath defines the project as being primarily focusing on the "face-to-face network in which each child learns the ways of acting, believing, and valuing of those about him. For the children of Roadville and Trackton, their primary community is geographically and socially their immediate neighborhood" (6). In the course of her book, what is most significant in this context is not just the direct connection that she makes with language learning abilities and the role of immediate social context surrounding the child, but in the way in which she redefines the role of the teacher and the student in the assignment section of *Ways with Words*. As she defines a possible ethnographic project that has the students go out into the community and base their research outside of traditional classroom and textbooks, she labels the roles of the

teacher and the students differently. She calls the teachers “learners,” and she labels the students “ethnographers.” By calling the teachers “learners,” Heath is *fixing difference* as the teachers approach understanding difference from multiple perspectives. By calling the students “ethnographers,” she is giving students agency as well as a reason to invest in the assignment. In this way, Heath demonstrates how ethnography, or at the very least, ethnographically inspired assignments can take the entire class through *fixing difference* with the final aim being connection between writing student and critical composition.

Taking inspiration from the ethnographic projects that Shirley Brice Heath outlines in *Ways with Words* is the basis for the second model I put forward. One of the main ways in which we can understand and connect with immigrant students is to acknowledge and understand the worlds from which they come. A big part of this world is one that has their parents and the society that surrounds every individual household within that cultural universe, irrespective of its geographic location. This world is often far more real for an immigrant student than the writing classroom, grades and all. Ethnographic assignments as inspired by Heath’s work will have students going out into their own worlds to critically analyze the realities from which they come and must return. This could find them engaged in the course material because it connects to their real life outside of the classroom in a meaningful way, but it could also result in their reviewing their multiple frames of reference with an intellectual authority that benefits them and their communities at large. They will begin to see that their worlds are not disconnected either in content or aim and can articulate this reflection to themselves and those around them. In the context of student experiences in the American high school, Jennifer McCloud argues that in order to understand their experiences in the ESL classrooms, she began to take all of their experiences and values into consideration, which in turn “presented new paradigms for understanding human experiences” (263).

Conclusion

The observations in this study are informed by firsthand experiences as an Indian immigrant composition student (Gita), teacher (Rashmi) and scholar (myself), and the recommendations I present also come from those multiple positionalities. The problem of getting the Gitas and Rashmis to connect across this intellectual divide must involve understanding the world from which such students come and understanding their parents who embody their larger realities. The recommendations aim to fulfill both these requirements: they aim to understand the different forces that define the educational experience for Indian immigrant students in the composition classroom through the students themselves. These multimodal, nontraditional methods that I present are conceptually outlined because designing writing assignments is, in my opinion, the privilege of the writing teacher and the students. I would argue that there is no one-plan-fits-all course plan in composition studies. In my own experience, each semester and each class is as unique as a thumb-print and each semester is customized to suit the students there. True, the course plans are based on a wide framework that contains the goals and routes forward, but the specifics shift based on where the class is and what the class needs. The uniqueness of each composition class negates any attempt to establish and present detailed course designs because specific context must be the main guide in crafting the day-to-day plans. Finally, we must remember that this classroom includes students other than the Indian immigrant students and their interests are as important as any other groups' interests. At the end of it all, it is the teachers and students in a writing class who will know what works best for them.

In closing, I urge all the Rashmis out there to acknowledge that this disconnect is a problem that is real but fixable; I urge all the Gitas to give themselves a chance to enhance their individual and their professional value by inculcating individual authority that can only come from engaging in a critically oriented writing class; and finally I urge all scholars and practitioners to think about this problem and share their observations, experiences and ideas. It is only by

collective recognition of this disconnect and collaboration to resolve it that we can eventually bridge this great divide.

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