

Reflections on My Dilemmas with Writing

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Abstract

The field of Writing Studies is full of prescriptions and proscriptions. As a writing professional, I'm cognizant of these directives. While I treasure my extensive exposure to the knowledge-base of Writing Studies/Composition, I don't uncritically endorse and enact the theories that the discipline of Writing Studies upholds. It often dawns on me that the discipline of Writing Studies falls short in appreciating the complex composing process that I embody as a second language writer in English. I don't blame the field of Writing Studies for such a lacuna, as I know that the discipline emerged in North America to cater to the writing needs of the native speakers of English. I'm a non-native of the English language, already conditioned by a culture that is entrenched in different epistemology and philosophy of writing. Ours is a culture of so-called writer-based or creative writing, and writing is believed to be a natural endowment. Writing is not taught or learned. It's, instead, absorbed and acquired. Composition Studies predominantly deals with so-called reader-based or academic writing, and the discipline stubbornly maintains that writing is a learned skill. My cultural and linguistic backgrounds contradict with some of the fundamental assumptions of the discipline of Composition Studies. I don't have an absolute allegiance to the epistemology and philosophy of my ur-culture. Neither am I completely colonized by the discipline of Composition Studies. My default writing process spawns some dilemmas as such. I reveal and reflect on these dilemmas in this essay.

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My academic interest and expertise revolve around writing. I qualify to theorize the politics and poetics of writing in an informed fashion as such. But every time I attempt to write something, I discover to my dismay that my knowledge about writing hardly enhances my ability to write. I struggle to write. I can't tame the words to frame sentences, which will convey my ideas with utmost cohesion and clarity. Almost always, my writing appears soggy and stilted. I can't breathe life into words. I wonder and worry as to the origin of my difficulties with writing. I'm tempted to attribute my inability to the fact that I've opted to write not in my first language, Bengali, but in a second language, English. A writing professional would argue that this is a lame excuse to refrain from writing. Under normal circumstances, one acquires a language innately. Writing, however, is not an innate skill; it's, instead, a learned skill. If one doesn't learn how to write, she will fail to write. Proficiency in a language eases the process of writing, but this is not the fundamental prerequisite to writing. Writing is thoughts clarified. To learn to think is a cultivated skill, not an innate one. The deduction here is that I struggle to write given that I haven't learned to think through writing.

I, therefore, attempted to discover the methods of learning to write. Writing has been an area which has a hoary history of millennia. The field evolves and emerges anew till this day. Experts are too deeply polarized to propose a uniform theory of writing. Genre, audience, and context determine how a piece of writing will be conceived and constructed. These variables (i.e., genre, audience, and context) can't be approached with preconceived ideas, since they are amenable to spatial and temporal as well as institutional constraints and criteria. All writing theories, then, are contingent, controversial, and partial. Think, for example, of the two stalwarts of American writing: Ernest

Hemingway and Gore Vidal. Hemingway claims in his “Paris Review” interview that our best writing comes out when we are in love. Gore Vidal, however, claims in his “Paris Review” that he left love when he was sixteen. The process of writing seems so unique and inscrutable that no two writers seem to draw from the same repertoire. Naipaul (1986) seems revealing in this context, who claims that all literary forms are artificial and change constantly to match the new tone and mood of the culture. This perspective considered, writing is a cultural artefact, and because culture shifts, no writer can depend on a fixed set of theories. That leaves an aspiring writer in a bind.

Nonetheless, the consensus in the field is that learning to write presupposes two things: extensive reading and regular writing. Research in the area of writing confirms that all great writers have been voracious readers themselves. Extensive reading provides one with the ideas and information as well as the examples and explanations one may incorporate into her writing; it, as well, familiarizes one with the lexical, syntactic, and mechanical options and restrictions that writers generally avoid or adopt. Pinker (2014) claims that we become writers by spotting, savoring, and reverse-engineering examples from good prose. However, the connection between reading and writing is not as inevitable and automatic as it apparently seems. For example, how could Tennessee Williams write when he would not read and for whom ignorance was a blessing, as Gore Vidal confirms in the “Paris Review” interview? Toor (2011) cautions us further not to promote reading as an inevitable cognate to writing given that reading is like eating. If someone is on a diet of junk prose, that can destroy his writing minds and muscles. If reading has to complement writing, readers must stay away from bad prose. Unfortunately, bad prose is endemic and unavoidable. Reading is doubtless a non-negotiable requirement for writing only when readers choose their options of reading wisely.

As well as that, writing begets writing, which simply means that one becomes a writer by being a writer. Writing never emerges from any secret, sacred source. Writing demands uncommon patience, practice, and perseverance so that a writer remains involved in the process of writing despite being constrained and confused. Gabriel Marquez in his “Paris Review” interview likens writing to carpentry, because writing is as difficult and developmental as carpentry. The assumption that writing is an aristocratic endowment available only to a chosen few is ungrounded as Smith (1984) claims. Writing, instead, is an egalitarian attribute that is available to anyone diligent and determined. Claiming that I’m not a voracious reader, and that I don’t write regularly stands as strong excuses of my inability to write. Because I love writing, I attempt to write anyway.

And this is exactly what professional writers do. Both *The New York Times* and the *Newsweek* publish columns by professional writers, where they talk about their writing process. All together, they’ve debunked the myth of a gifted writer. They’ve demonstrated that writing is not produced under the influence of any drug or deity. It’s physical and menial labor, which favors none. There are no handy tricks and tips of the trade. A professional or a so-called expert writer struggles through the process of writing as much as a beginner does. But a professional writer limps to writing until the “shitty first draft” (Lamott, 1985) is accomplished. Despite that unyielding commitment to writing, there are days when they fail to put a single word down on paper. Writer’s block overcomes them. Krashen (2001), however, claims that good writing cannot be rushed. Feeling blank or blocked is

essential to the process of writing what Krashen (2001) claims as incubation. Writing has never been a continuous and spontaneous overflow of emotion and erudition, both for so called novice and expert writers.

Besides, professional writers are notorious editors of their writing. For example, Hemmingway claims in his “Paris Review” interview that he changed the last page of one of his novels thirty-seven times. Ideally in a sentence, a writer is telling his audience who is doing what to whom in a way which is easy to follow and difficult to misunderstand (Pinker, 2014). Unless a writer alters his semantic, syntactic, and mechanical options several times, it is never graceful and transparent. A beginner, however, believes that the first draft is always the final draft, and that a professional writer can write whenever and whatever she wants to write. I’m already purged of all these myths about writing because of my exposure to the scholarship in composition studies, but I yet don’t write with the grace of a professional writer. My writing inevitably shows shortcomings, and the process seems daunting and discouraging. As such, I sometimes wonder about what bogs me down as a writer.

I am persuaded to think that I’ve been a victim of atavistic influences because of my upbringing or academic background. Canagarajah (2002), a writing theorist from Sri Lanka who teaches at a university in the US, claims that in some parts of the world, including the Indian subcontinent, knowledge is orally constructed. Speaking is considered superior to writing, which implies that writing is subservient to speaking. I was perhaps culturally pushed or even primed to speak more than to write. Speaking irreducibly differs from writing. Writing is not an orthographic transcription of speech per se. Writing is an off-line activity, which undergoes various steps and stages, when the ideas and information are conceived and incubated, and finally skewered linguistically. Those steps and stages conflate into one another given that writing is recursive. One can come back to a piece of writing as many times as he wants. Conversely, speaking is an on-line activity. Essentially, it’s ad-lib all along. Something once said can’t be un-said or revised. Because of these essential differences between speaking and writing, shifting from a speaking-dominant culture to a writing-dominant culture is consequential. It demands an instantaneous mental, intellectual, and even emotional transformation, which most writers can’t or don’t undergo. Their writing appears vapid as such. So does my writing, unfortunately.

My academic background may have compounded my crisis with writing as well. When I started to pursue Bachelors in English literature at one of the public universities in Bangladesh in 1994, I felt overwhelmed and edgy. It was a different world altogether, and I hardly had any prior orientation to stay afloat there. I had to study some of the canonical texts, which were written in refined and rhapsodic language. Critics stalked to help me appreciate those texts. In hindsight, I yet believe that neither a canonical writer nor a critic offers any authentic model for a beginner to emulate and so learn the craft of writing. They represent ultimate linguistic sophistication, which is not amenable to replication. Nonetheless, they are too irresistible to sidestep for a beginner who wants to write the way they do. When a beginner with inadequate linguistic and conceptual wherewithal begins to emulate those sophisticates, her writing creates a lexical and syntactic quagmire, where the meaning is partially or completely lost. I may have shown this problem in my writing as well.

Illustration: one of my teachers in 2007 told me at one of the State universities in California that my writing is on the word side, not on the idea side. I knew what she meant. I was not word-wise; I was, instead, being wordy.

I still am. But because of my exposure to the scholarship in the area of writing, I'm somewhat informed about the basics of writing. Writing scholars contend that a good piece of writing embodies brevity, clarity, and cohesion. To combine all these attributes in a piece of writing, no writing scholar is more germane than William Zinsser. Zinsser (1976) claims that any piece of writing can be truncated around 50% without sacrificing substance. Verbosity distracts readers from a piece of writing, so sentences should be short with simple words. He suggests a solution. He contends that we perhaps don't need an adverb in a sentence given that an adverb adds to a verb; therefore, if a verb is already strong, it needs no addition. Likewise, an adjective modifies a noun, so if the noun is already strong, it needs no further modification. He further speculates that in a natural world, almost every word is monosyllabic or Anglo-Saxon (e.g., air, water); however, in a man-made world, almost all the words are multi-syllabic or Latinate (e.g., computer, building). This is a controversial stipulation, because exceptions abound. But his import is clear here: our sentences must be short and simple.

I believe and practice that. Why don't I write like a Zinsser, then? A convenient answer to this question is that I perhaps haven't read and written as much as Zinsser did. I stress a reading-writing synergy to learn the craft of writing, again. I yet aver that the quantity of my reading and writing will never enable me to write like a Zinsser. Writing is perceptions personified. Two people hardly perceive the world alike. They, then, can't express their perceptions in identical ways. When someone is perceptive and has the urge to write, she will discover the appropriate semantic, syntactic, and mechanical combination to transcribe her perceptions. I believe that and strive to discover and master that golden combination every single day. What else can I do to foil the frustration stemming from my inability to write?

I must write regularly, because writing generates writing. Writing has never been natural. It has always been habitual. We must develop the habit to write. Learning to write presupposes a constant engagement with writing. I fall short on that front. I opt to write occasionally and selectively. My advanced knowledge on the theories of writing is not a necessary precondition to producing writing automatically unless I actually write. Nor can I attribute my inability to write to the fact that I don't write in my interior language, which is Bangla. Writing across languages is essentially alike, as some composition scholars claim. Neither is the argument plausible that I shifted from so-called creative writing to so-called critical writing. Pinker (2014) argues that good writing cannot be strictly demarcated to lean toward a specific genre. Good writing equally embodies creative abandon and rational control. Genre is just a popular label. These excuses that hinder the process and output of my writing are more psychological than practical. I struggle to write because every writer does.

It might sound self-deprecating, but I occasionally experience that I am a paralyzed writer. I feel blank and blocked as I get down to writing something. My hybrid linguistic and cultural orientations form a continuum of empowerment and inability. I have accesses to more linguistic and cultural resources than a mono-cultural, and mono-lingual writer. When, however, each of my cultural

and linguistic origination vies for attention and space in my writing, I feel lost in deciding which version of me should be left out or retained. I juggle conflicting forces as I navigate the process of writing. I struggle but carry on. Nothing delights me more than a well-crafted sentence. One of the reasons for Orwell (1946) to write was aesthetic enthusiasm. Words, when properly arranged, embody lyric and logic, rhyme and rhythm, concrete knowledge and fraught abstraction as well as observation and intuitions. Writing is crafting art. And no artist – in this case, a writer – has ever claimed that she has created art without experiencing creative tension. My dilemmas in writing are perhaps misnomers for creative tension. The more I live those dilemmas, the better I write.

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