

Transnational Telephone Games: Collaborations on Writing Education in South Asia

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This chapter reports and reflects on transnational collaborations between writing scholars in the US and scholars across the disciplines interested in writing education in South Asia. These collaborations began with the first author conducting a 9-month WAC-based training series virtually for faculty at Midwestern University in Nepal, which culminated in a half-week “education summit” workshop on site at Midwestern at which both authors took leading roles in the summer of 2016. Midwestern University faculty’s interest in integrating writing into their teaching led in turn to a number of monthly webinars, followed by summer retreats in subsequent years, focusing on student-centered teaching at Tribhuvan University, the central public university in Nepal, and at private colleges in Nepal, and then in Dhaka, Bangladesh. An emerging grassroots community of scholars in Nepal also gave rise to faculty research and publication workshops for a network of scholars from across Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. In all of these collaborations, even though the interest in writing instruction and writing education always remained high, this interest evolved over the years in unpredictable ways. This chapter illustrates how local institutions and social conditions, as well as curricular demands and professional incentives, shaped our transnational collaboration with respect to writing education. In doing so, it highlights how the affordances of emerging technology, as well as diasporic connections, helped collaborators both to exploit and to counter transnational hegemonies, thereby advancing mutually respectful and beneficial transnational exchange in relation to writing education broadly defined.

A “transnational” turn in U.S. writing studies in the past 15 years has ramped up scholars’ interest to internationalize writing education and research (Hesford, 2006; Horner, 2016; Martins, 2015; Ray & Theado, 2014; Rose & Weiser, 2018; Tardy, 2014). But transnational “exchanges” still consist largely of exporting (Donahue, 2009) to other countries, a persistent “provincialism” that “places unnecessary constraints on what can be thought, understood, observed, and taught as writing” (Sanchez, 2016, p. 78). Despite the critical voices of scholars like Donahue and Sanchez, mainstream discourse about internationalization has continued to reflect the US’s expansionist impulses, leading both to “intellectual tourism” and to “export” of our form of writing pedagogy and to scholarship rather than

to “collaboration or ‘hearing’ of work across borders” (Donahue, 2009, p. 214). While increasing collaborations, including some class-based (Shamsuzzaman, this volume), technology-mediated, and institution-serving ones have been documented (see Wu, 2018), sustained exchange of research, scholarship, and educational partnerships with colleagues in other countries remains limited, barring a few cases (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2012; You, 2016). Mutually beneficial collaborations among educators and scholars, and especially collaborative explorations of evolving opportunities, are yet to be reported in the scholarship. Attempts to document “writing programs” (Thaiss et al., 2012) in other countries are typically made in our own North American images, rather than in local terms on the ground. Mary Muchiri et al. described a quarter century ago in 1995 several challenges of trying to implement writing programs in Kenya, Tanzania, and Zaire; Mark Schaub (2003) has highlighted similar difficulties at the American University in Cairo; and Chris Anson and Christiane Donahue (2015) have shared challenges based on their visits and collaborations with institutions in Europe and Saudi Arabia. Anson and Donahue have indeed argued that it is unproductive to try to identify or promote “writing programs” and “WPAs” abroad and instead suggest that we should focus our international efforts on scholarly practice. To borrow the words of Rebecca Dingo et al. (2013), “the proliferation of the term ‘transnational’ has been a substitution for a thin understanding of globalization wherein nation state and neocolonial relationships are dissipated in the name of global exchange” (p. 517). The lack of progress in transnational exchange, or even of understanding of writing education across borders, we believe, comes from a collective unwillingness/inability to learn from collaboration and to commit to exchange beyond unilateral sharing and over time.

The lack of substance and progress in transnational exchange in writing education, as we foreground against the above backdrop in this chapter, is most strongly undergirded by geopolitics as a broader context and force. In spite of sharply critical scholarship by a small number of scholars whose work we overviewed above, there remains a prevalent assumption that the US is the only country in the world that teaches writing as an independent subject; furthermore, living in a country that assumes that “the world” would be better off with our version of writing pedagogy—as well as our capitalism, democracy, and education at large—American scholars are still tempted to go abroad and share what we do in our writing courses with missionary fervor. Too often, what we do on these visits is give a few talks, enjoy a few lunches and dinners, and promise to stay in touch. Then our interest dissipates as we take up, now that we have such work on our resume, a new project in another country. Good will and perhaps friendships have been fostered, but in fact little change has taken place, and even less learning has changed our own practice or perspectives back home. This is not only true for those of us who are cultural outsiders, don’t speak local languages, and don’t have social or professional

relationships with our counterparts on the ground; it can also happen to the globe-trotters among us who grew up and worked in the places we return to. And it happens in spite of our intentions to collaborate as equals, primarily because that is how hegemony functions and we often do not have the knowledge or willpower to counter it adequately. One-time attempts are easier made and with greater commitment; long-term and “unfolding” partnerships (see Theado et al., 2017) are less often or less clearly successful, especially because “visiting partners” seldom create room for adapting to lessons learned along the way. Thus, we built our collaborations on the premise that all knowledge is local (Canagarajah, 2002), and that the terms and processes of collaboration should be localized as well.

Based on our experiences in the past six years of transnational collaborations in South Asia as writing scholars based in the United States, we share in the rest of this chapter a number of lessons about transnational exchanges, including:

- how scholars can acknowledge and even exploit the geopolitics of inequality toward more equitable collaboration;
- what roles emerging technologies of communication and collaboration can play in sustaining and deepening transnational exchanges;
- how individuals and institutions involved in collaboration can create productive exchanges, even when they cannot create or sustain formal programs and structures; and
- what collaborators can gain when they value processes and experiences beyond plan-based outcomes and measurable impacts.

While the perspectives we share focus on writing education, they carry broader implications for educational exchanges at large. This broader contextualization is essential because it is within that context that exchanges over writing across the curriculum work can take place, especially across national borders.

Serendipity, Positionality, and Diasporic Connections

Traveling through Myanmar in 2017 a few days after teaching workshops in Nepal and Bangladesh, this article’s second author stopped in for breakfast in a family-owned streetfront shop in Yangon. A few minutes after he sat down, a young local man, roughly 25, dressed impeccably, with a string tie, a fashionable cowboy hat, narrow pants, pointed shoes, and a ruffled shirt, took the second seat at a very small table that they now shared. A few minutes into the small talk that ensued, the gentleman interrupted himself to ask the tourist where he was from. “The United States,” the latter responded. The young man leaned back and responded, slowly and significantly, with high drama and seemingly without irony, “Superpower!” Clearly we don’t control what people in other countries think of us.

Transnational exchange is inevitably influenced by complex dynamics of power and hegemony and is also shaped by often-magnified dynamics of understanding and interests, patience and tolerance of uncertainty, ego and ambition, rewards and incentives, expectations and abilities, connections and trust, and, quite significantly, chance and serendipity—dynamics we can appreciate but usually cannot control. So in the past six years, we tried to plan our collaboration with cultural and political realities very much in mind. First of all, we and our in-country collaborators pursue the exchange as an extension of our academic service, placing our collaborations on strong footings, even as the projects greatly and often unpredictably evolve. The usual logistical arrangement has been for universities to cover just our local accommodation wherever we don't have family in town to stay with; we bear all other costs including airfare ourselves. As we have sought to foster transnational grassroots communities, we have found informal and evolving collaborations to be much more sustainable and socially impactful than formal programs or partnerships. The first author's knowledge of cultural and academic contexts and the ability to converse in different local languages have contributed to the collaborations, allowing the second author to contribute to months-long and years-long virtual programs, in addition to one-off events that we have led together; the major projects have involved collaborative planning with different local coordinators, locally appropriate application and selection processes, extensive documentation, and reporting of progress to participants and institutional leaders supporting the initiatives.

We will discuss the role of virtual connection and networking later, but we want to first highlight that connections made during our travels have been far more lasting and consequential. The first author had been involved in numerous scholarly collaborations online since leaving Nepal in 2006, but had been seldom able to connect well with influential academic scholars and leaders: when we started visiting Nepal and the South Asian region during summer breaks, in 2016, the dynamics drastically changed. Physical meetings prepared the ground and provided follow-up opportunities online. Especially onsite, many chance meetings played an unusually important role. Among the most significant cases, in the summer of 2016, a serendipitous meeting and discussions with Tribhuvan University's then provost, in the last two days of a forty-day visit to Nepal, led to the creation at that university of an extremely productive platform where we could go on to facilitate many training programs, online and onsite, during subsequent summer visits, involving hundreds of professors from across the national network of 64 colleges within Nepal's oldest and largest public institution that educates nearly 80% of total tertiary education students in the country.

Similarly, our willingness to contribute our expertise as writing scholars/teachers, however that expertise fits local needs, has also played an important role. Our initial focus on writing instruction across the curriculum has evolved: into faculty

development projects with a focus on writing integration, then student-centered pedagogy, then research-based writing and publication for emerging scholars; into training and discussion for establishing academic support, including writing center support, for students; and into the explorations of institutional faculty development frameworks. The unpredictable but productive evolutions of collaborative opportunities, for us and later for other U.S.-based writing scholars, undergird the stories, reflections, and perspectives that we share in this chapter.

Our positionalities are also critical factors in our collaborations in South Asia. While the first author was able to work alternately as an outsider (U.S.-based) and insider (born and raised in Nepal and India), the second author's positionality is very different. The latter didn't do any teaching abroad until he was 50, when, in 1996, he was invited to go to Djibouti by a former student who had become the information officer in the Djiboutian embassy. Then in 2007, his experience in Djibouti helped him get accepted to teach in a program called Semester at Sea, a study-abroad alternative during which 1,000 students, mostly from the US, sail around the world while taking a full semester schedule of classes, stopping in twelve ports for four days each with the full opportunity to explore. And in turn his experience in Asia during 2007 led him to be invited by the first author in 2016 to Nepal for a series of academic events across the country, and the experiences discussed in this chapter ensued.

Given our positionalities and connections, we have tried to avoid or transcend hegemonic terms of engagement (see Alvarez, 2016) and instead sought to pursue collaboration without seeking to use or promote our terms, program models, and writing practices (see Horner, 2015). Most significantly, we have sought out what LuMing Mao (2003) calls "reflective encounters," or the act of using new experience of other places and practices for self-reflection and self-education, especially by understanding others "on their own terms" and creating "an ongoing dialogue" (p. 418). The approach we took also demanded awareness of the limitations of what Burke (1966) has called the "terministic screen," or the lenses of familiar terminology as analytical and methodological tools (also see Donahue & Moon, 2007). We have found more value in the processes and experiences of exploring mutually beneficial collaborations on academic writing across national and other borders than we had found in our earlier attempts to help establish specific programs or foster specific models based on our American experiences.

Emerging Technology and Evolving Collaboration

Transnational scholarly collaboration and exchange are increasingly mediated by (and dependent on) digital/network technologies. Zhiwei Wu (2018) has documented a variety of transnational collaborations among writing educators, showing

a general shift from traditional scholar exchanges onsite toward class-to-class collaborations online. In our case, the majority of collaboration has taken place virtually, with technology facilitating what we did and how we did it. In the course of the nearly six years of our collaborations in South Asia, the digital tools and networking platforms we used (such as Google Drive and Doc, Facebook Group and Messenger, and Skype and Zoom) improved vastly in their affordances. Internet bandwidth improved as well, boosting technology adoption that had started accelerating before the pandemic. From the constantly interrupted Skype calls with scholars at Midwestern (such as a complete failure on a day when Professor Charles Bazerman was invited to run a webinar) to the triumphant end of a multi-year power shortage in Kathmandu in 2017, and from the internet “traffic jam” during evenings in Dhaka to the “breakout rooms” of Zoom meeting tool in 2020, technological advancements have recently felt as smooth transnationally as they do within the US. However, the most important aspect of our use of technology has not been the advancements and affordances of the collaborative platforms and tools themselves. It has been the commitment to find shared interest among collaborators that has driven the uses and benefits of technology for us and our collaborators. Over the past six years, local groups involved in transnational collaborations had been well ahead of their peers in the application of emerging technologies for achieving significant goals; so they had significant leverage and interest to respond to a variety of new academic challenges when the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted teaching, learning, and scholarship, involving us in those responses. Their professional skills for organizing pedagogical, research, and publication support projects garnered greater respect than their technological savvy itself, as they went on to organize local support groups, gradually without our support.

Generally put, as technologies advance—and often serve as alternatives to long-distance travels that are either prohibitively expensive or simply unavailable for scholars across borders—some amount of transnational scholarly collaboration can and should shift to online platforms. Our online collaborations have been more effective when they are complemented with onsite work, and vice versa: when technologies were used for fostering relationships, creating and sharing resources, continuing initiatives and following up on completed projects, we could build much stronger communities and achieve impactful outcomes with our local collaborators. Reviewing technology-mediated research and practice, especially focusing on classroom teaching beyond national borders, Wu (2018) found that the practice (which started in the mid-1990s, probably at MIT) has not only been “international” (because participants come from different countries) but also “cross-national” (because they transcend national borders) and “transnational” (because their identities and the elements of communication emerged from process and interaction); but Wu also pointed out that virtual spaces are “vested in power differentials,” adding that current practices perpetuate the hegemony of English language, of written text,

and of institutional structures. Our work in South Asia has sought to overcome these pitfalls Wu points out by keeping our exchanges translingual, multimodal, and community-driven. Our collaborations have greatly benefited from the use of technology, but we have remained cautious about over-reliance on technology; substitution of virtual networking for physical co-presence; and issues of access and equity, inclusivity, and power differentials that technology can raise or even magnify in our use of technology for collaboration. This mindfulness, we think, has helped the collaborations empower members of the community, pursuing the collaboration with a sense of fairness and respect. Most importantly, we have exploited emerging technologies to let our collaborations change and evolve along the way, creating diverse possibilities and alternative routes, facilitating the creation and sharing of resources, and sustaining conversations during and beyond the completion of specific projects. Above all, we have used technology to respond to the needs and interests of local collaborators.

Midwestern University and the Pull of Educational Transformation

The first institution we worked with, Midwestern University, is a small public university in remote western Nepal. The origin of the Midwestern program was also characterized by serendipity. In 2015, we developed an online WAC training program through informal conversations during a visit to the US by the university's president and provost, followed by collaborations with a group of faculty members in Nepal. To the usual "writing across the curriculum" (WAC) framework, we added "and in the professions" (WACAP) not only because the university leaders wanted an equal focus on academic writing skills and on professional communication skills but also because the acronym "WAC" sounds exactly like the Nepalese word for "vomit" especially in the western variety (a cross-cultural and translingual issue that serves to highlight the need for localized terminology as well as collaboration). In fact, even our core phrase "writing instruction" has rarely resonated well with our diverse South Asian partners in the many different collaborative projects so far. Continued, technologically mediated, conversations and follow-up webinars for a year helped strengthen relationships and understand what both sides could give and receive at Midwestern.

While technology facilitated collaboration, social and political conditions shaped and reshaped it. Because in 2014 Nepal had just promulgated a new constitution as a federal democracy and Midwestern University had just been situated at the center of an independent state, being often asked to lead policy formulation in education and society at large, the webinar training found itself in the middle of broader discussions about transforming higher education. Responding to the

ambitions of Midwestern, a small but rapidly growing institution, we proposed to help establish a writing center and generally promote writing skills among students and faculty toward creating an environment (similar to what Violeta Molina-Natera (2017) describes about Colombia) with improved writing curricula and support in the university. We did not succeed in that goal, or at least not directly and explicitly, because, as we later realized, we didn't understand how susceptible to political and leadership change the institution was—as well as how hard and perhaps unproductive it is to try to graft a foreign concept and institution like the “writing center” into a very different academic setting.

Even before the WACAP webinar series completed its one-year timeline, the participants wished to update it into a faculty development initiative for “modernized” teaching. Ironically, we increasingly realized that the more “modern” (in our colleagues' sense of “American”) the focus of a program, the more likely that it would not meet local demands and would therefore have to keep evolving (see Allen, 2014). We first responded by trying to share our writing pedagogies with instructors of writing-intensive courses and to help instructors from content-heavy courses to adapt those pedagogies (see Hodges, this volume). However, as the local coordinator of the webinar initiative wrote in a report for the university a year after completion, some of his fellow trainees wanted “theoretical backup,” others “practical writing instruction tips,” and yet others wanted to shift away from writing altogether. In one case, an engineering instructor conducted an analysis of an alarming student failure rate and found out that whereas students in his department had been writing exam answers in bullet points (using notes provided by instructors), the examiners gave little or no credit for such writing because they wanted answers in paragraph form, in full sentences. This finding didn't create a demand for teaching writing; it instead led to strategies for better aligning instruction, assignments, and assessment. For instance, if the teachers accepted bullet-point responses, the focus on disciplinary content would allow writing skills to develop gradually. Writing skills among students were a problem but the faculty participants in the training saw causes and solutions in different places. Even those interested in writing instruction wanted more to improve the teaching of content due to the local content-dominated assessment practices.

At the peak of our collaboration with faculty in Midwestern University, we visited Surkhet, the university town 14 hours of mountain roads away from the country's capital Kathmandu, in the summer of 2016. Along with another Stony Brook University colleague (Nobi Nagasawa from the Fine Arts department), we were accompanied by two other colleagues, Krishna Bista of the University of Louisiana at Monroe and Santosh Khadka of the California State University at Northridge. Our three-day onsite program at Surkhet, ambitiously called the “Summer Summit” on “Educational Transformation,” was organized by the webinar participants, including a series of highly effective workshops and keynotes. Our second author

facilitated a workshop helping a group of administrators and faculty members explore ways to institutionalize the changes envisioned by the “summit”; our first author organized training for writing center director and staff; and the other experts explored the use of art, class-to-class exchange, and academic technology for enhancing higher education.

Energized by this program, we assumed that local scholars would implement a multi-dimensional faculty development initiative and launch a new writing center, as they planned. We also agreed to contribute our expertise as writing scholars to the faculty training, knowing that “writing” instruction would be a key but small component. In the year that followed, though, interest in writing instruction itself faded. So, we further adapted the plan based on discussion with our collaborators. “In order to shift from traditional lecture-and-exam dominated practices to student-centered education,” said the description of a broadened program, “we need a constructivist approach to teacher development in which teachers come together to learn, share, and develop increasingly productive and effective ways to teach.” Called “The Teaching Excellence Project,” the plan was to implement a “three-dimensional initiative launched after a two-day workshop in May 2018” and it was, on paper, a part of a more formal collaboration that would begin between Midwestern University and our home institution, Stony Brook. Unfortunately, due to a leadership change at Midwestern, local scholars were unable to launch or even informally rekindle any collaboration. Instead, we were invited to visit Surkhet during our next visit to Nepal in the summer of 2018, where we facilitated a workshop on faculty publication. The interest was now on faculty writing rather than on writing support for students. Participants of the WACAP program do still report using what they learned from the 2015–2016 webinar series, but no formal curricular integration of writing skills took place. Nor did the writing center come into operation, other than a banner outside a room that was filled with dust-covered, iron-framed, four-seater wooden desks attached to their benches, one pair turned upside down to stack upon another. When we saw this space, after insisting to visit the “writing center,” we did not ask whether the furniture was brought there for an unborn academic unit or just for storage, for surplus. This image reminded us of what a scholar in Kathmandu called “the fossils of tourist scholars’ dreams to establish academic programs per their model.”

At Midwestern, we had to change our expectations and adjust. When initiatives fizzled out, or merged or evolved into something new, online or during our visits, it was at first hard to see beyond the disruption, to be patient, or to see new possibilities. It took time and effort to better understand the context, needs, interests, and especially the push and pull of the broad changes taking place in Nepalese society and education. Programs were difficult to launch, but initiatives far easier to take; goals were harder to achieve than it was simply to make progress. Technology added flexibility and facilitated follow ups, fostered deeper engagements, and kept

the community connected. Much more importantly, in retrospect, our flexibility made our expertise most useful for our local partners. We too did more and learned more due to our responsiveness to local demands.

Tribhuvan University and a Shift Toward the Semester-Based System

When we started in 2016 collaborating with scholars at Tribhuvan University, the most prestigious public university in Nepal, our collaborations rapidly increased in scope, productivity, and interest. However, the focus on writing instruction became even less clear and predictable than it had been at Midwestern. The online faculty training program that TU's provost launched evolved into a multifaceted faculty development initiative, showing potential for broadly influencing instructional practice. We held monthly online workshops in 2017–2018 and 2018–2019, followed by onsite retreats in Nepal called summer summits in 2018 and 2019. Once again, technology facilitated continuity of collaboration and community building where physical visits alone had traditionally been aligned with one-way-traffic support/consultation; but it was the physical visits that established recognition and trust, friendship and inspiration.

Year-long participants in the online webinar series were now prepared as trainers and, using a handbook created by compiling resources from the webinar program, went on trips to train hundreds of their colleagues across the country. They also served as facilitators for the summer retreats and organized training programs at their respective institutions and in nearby towns. Onsite programs increasingly balanced the number of male and female participants, also becoming inclusive in terms of disciplines, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicity, and culture. At the end of 2019, the participants submitted an official proposal to the university's executive body, urging it to institutionalize the faculty development (online and onsite) initiatives by providing specific plans and operational guidelines for establishing a Center for Excellence in Research and Teaching.

Once again, in the highly productive collaborations involving Tribhuvan University and especially its local offshoots created by our Nepalese partners, local scholars and their institutions have incorporated our expertise and experience as educators in an academic culture (the U.S. culture) that is more student-centered and skills-focused, what the Nepalese understand as “semester-based” education. Since the second author had the experience of witnessing a similar transition from lecture-based to student-based education at Oxford University in Britain in the early 1970s, and as the first author has in his transition to graduate education from Nepal to the US, we contribute our expertise in an area where we do not see ourselves as experts, and yet our experiences have been greatly valued. Instead

of helping develop writing programs or even writing-focused initiatives, we have once again let local faculty and administrators put our expertise as writing scholars to its broader purposes. “Institutionalization,” if any, has only taken place in the form of better response and more direct participation from academic leaders, as well as broader involvement of the faculty. But no program is likely to be formally implemented, at least not with our continued involvement, even if we wanted such involvement.

When we started our collaboration with scholars at Tribhuvan, the institution had just implemented, with little or no preparation (Khaniya, 2014), the semester-based system in its graduate programs across the country; that implementation had created huge demands for faculty training toward making major shifts in curriculum design, instruction, and assessment (Tripathi et al., 2019). Much like at Midwestern, Tribhuvan University faculty also wanted to fold the teaching and learning of writing skills into a broader framework of “major shifts” in higher education. Writing skills were once again viewed from an “instrumentalist” perspective, rather than disciplinary (fostering identity), epistemological (creating awareness), or political/civic (empowering the individual) perspectives. Writing was a focus of various training programs, as part of assignment design and instruction, teaching research papers and other assignments, and for class activities and diversification of assessment; yet, it was rarely an exclusive focus of instruction or of the faculty training initiatives.

Accordingly, we no longer proposed establishing a writing center (we saw posters advertising defunct writing centers during our visits and heard about other failed attempts). And we either avoided or explained our terminologies from the US (such as “composition” or “rhetoric,” “writing center” or “writing course,” writing “program” or “pedagogy”). Having better understood how writing education takes up different spaces and shapes in different contexts, we didn’t propose a WAC program of any kind. Faculty development initiatives adopted writing as a focus of several webinar workshops, but the position of writing instruction reflected an intriguing ambivalence, which notably came from an improved understanding of and response to local interests and needs. The topics of webinar sessions now included: reforming the classroom (making it more student-centered and interactive), effective instruction (foregrounding writing and communication skills), alignment of teaching with assessment (by creating explicit assignment instructions and providing rubrics), handling academic dishonesty (by teaching research and writing skills), mastering professional development skills (including skills for writing and communication, technology use, and job search), and developing teaching materials (so the group could produce resources to multiply the effects of the initiative). As these topics indicate, writing was simultaneously a high-demand area (it kept appearing in the program) and a marginalized one (it was usually part of or the means of achieving another objective).

Going Regional in South Asia: More Shifts and/in Common Grounds

As our collaboration at Nepal's universities grew, we were invited to contribute to faculty development programs at North South University, a high-ranking private institution in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Here, our local coordinator, Mohammad Shamsuzzaman (Zaman), was a composition scholar with writing and TESOL backgrounds in the United States and New Zealand. While our personal connection with Zaman was virtual yet robust, it was physical visits in 2018 and 2019 by several faculty members from our university to his, then visits by him and his colleague to our university during the latter year, that created strong professional relationships across faculty in our respective departments and institutions. But relationship-building, technologically mediated or not, however, is only one step toward productive cross-border collaboration; it is the creation of shared interest and mutual benefits that makes collaboration productive. In Bangladesh, too, the interests of both the institution (North South) and of the scholars who participated in the early online and onsite programs broadened and diverged due to a unique set of contextual factors. We learned from Zaman immediately (see Shamsuzzaman, 2017) that writing studies has struggled to be recognized as a discipline or even a respectable specialization within English studies in Bangladesh. As Tasildhar (1996) highlights, citing arguments by Viswanathan, English studies scholars in India and the South Asian region in general have been resisting the emerging focus on language and communication as reflecting a "mindless enslavement" to market forces. English literature scholars tend to associate writing instruction with deficits among students and a lower-status task for faculty, and private universities there didn't want to acknowledge any such deficits by starting a writing center, for instance. Yet, even though many instructors who joined the first series of webinars discontinued their attendance, an enthusiastic group completed three different webinar series, focusing on classroom instruction of writing, faculty scholarship, and academic support for students beyond class. By summarizing the achievements made by those webinar initiatives in relation to an MOU that had envisioned them the previous year, faculty webinar groups that emerged at North South developed a proposal for establishing a formal space for writing, research, and communication (WRC) support for students and faculty. Here, too, a change in department leadership disrupted the formal collaboration after our second summer visit to Dhaka in the summer of 2019, which included two other Stony Brook scholars, Cynthia Davidson and MaryAnn Duffy. We have continued to invite colleagues from North South University and beyond in Bangladesh to join webinars, as well as to visit us in the US. And we continue to return to Bangladesh, as well as Nepal, every year.

Our collaborations back in Nepal have not only expanded in scope but have also been adapted locally. For example, Surendra Subedi, a scholar representing

the private college network founded by the gentleman who connected us to the Tribhuvan University provost, has created a faculty development framework for Kathmandu Model College (an institution that he is principal of), drawing on the contribution and leadership he provides to the public-private partnership with Tribhuvan. With the first author, he has written several pieces of scholarship and op eds in national dailies on the topics of faculty development and higher education (Sharma & Subedi, 2020). Similarly, in late 2019, the first author piloted a new model of publication-focused webinar series at King's College, a private institution affiliated with an American college; during this webinar, nine out of 12 scholars from King's completed journal article manuscripts based on empirical data, taking them through a month-long process of research, another month of drafting, and a final month of open peer review. In 2019, this research-focused faculty development webinar series gave rise to a more robust program that the first author facilitated along with the former head of the English education department at TU, Prem Phyak. The program supported a selected group of scholars from across the disciplines and across the country in Nepal, half of them women. The two-webinar series have ultimately given rise to a South Asia-wide online collaboration where two dozen scholars from as many institutions and from across the disciplines completed a 3-month long writing support program to produce and publish research-based articles in international journals. Academic leaders of the home institutions of most of these scholars enthusiastically supported this highly successful program, as they did a number of online teaching trainings for hundreds of scholars from across the country while responding to the pandemic's disruption and other professional development training programs organized by the local network of scholars in the next few years.

However, no matter how robust and rigorous the collaborations are, universities have so far been unable to mobilize our service as foreign scholars and of their own faculty by creating any formal institutional structures or programs. While their leaders welcome, support, and greatly admire the collaboration, they seem to understand what many scholars from the West miss: while informal and/or virtual transnational networks among scholars offer a new currency in internationalization, structural changes based on them are too tenuous to match the robust and evolving potentials of communities of practice. While we as outsiders may wish to see events and initiatives involving us becoming a part of the system on the ground, or of change that we help effect, institutions and societies in places like South Asia are changing too rapidly for systems to absorb and consolidate the initiatives of transnational collaborations, not just when they are ad hoc but also when they are formally organized. The grassroots communities of scholars have deployed writing instruction and writing in their own careers in a variety of meaningful ways beyond what we could have imagined six years ago—other than by establishing a formal writing program.

The virtualization of relationships built onsite and the onsite embodiment of virtually thriving networks have both contributed to a collaborative ecosystem that feeds on shared, evolving, and mutually beneficial energies and interests. The semi-virtual and fluid exchanges that this ecosystem facilitates uniquely transcends not only national borders but also norms of institutional and formal exchanges of the past. Both the technological mediation and the social dynamics of this hybrid phenomenon deserve further exploration in future scholarship.

Avenues of Transnational Collaborations

Returning to the questions with which we began, our experiences of collaborating and contributing to higher education in parts of South Asia have taught us some important lessons, some of which we shared through a panel along with Zaman at the 2019 CCCC meeting in Pittsburgh. Here we expand some of the lessons within this chapter's thematic context.

Counter-Hegemonic Strategies

How can we pursue transnational collaborations on writing education and scholarship while acknowledging and perhaps even using geopolitical hegemonies to the advantage of the collaboration? The scholarship on transnational writing has addressed issues of power and inequality to some extent (e.g., Dingo et al., 2013; Donahue, 2009; Hum & Lyon, 2008); transnational collaborations could also draw upon a rich body of scholarship with a focus on postcolonialism (e.g., Alvarez, 2016; Baca, 2009; Sánchez, 2016); and collaborators can find some amount of local scholarship to draw on. In practice, however, most of us seem to assume that “writing programs” can be identified or promoted “worldwide” as they develop, typically following the North American model—even though, in reality, even within the State University of New York system, it is hard to find distinct writing programs. The less we know about another culture or context, the less nuanced our assumptions and understandings. In the course of our collaborations, we have come to realize that whether we like it or not, we “perform” roles that are extant in the colonial/hegemonic order of relations and are shaped by our power relative to that of our collaborators. Even when we try to actively resist them, geopolitical power structures continue to powerfully frame us. Hegemony almost automatically accords the more powerful party more space, voice, and respect; it regards the knowledge from colonial powers with higher esteem or takes it for granted, it doesn't encourage the asking of questions, and it tries despite our best intentions only to help the less dominant societies to learn.

So, we have tried to counter geopolitical hegemony, for instance, by encouraging our collaborators to speak in the language they find most comfortable, not

switching to English for our convenience. We “threw the respect back” when we sensed undue regard for us or for our ideas. To mobilize rather than passively work within the hegemonic impulses of our society and profession, we paid attention to colonial roots or dynamics on the ground, sought support and advocacy for our collaborators, leveraged their collaboration with us in their institutions, avoided adding unproductive workload on them, invited them to collaboratively produce scholarship or pursue professional development opportunities, refused to simply respond to institutional pressure for them to publish or perish, recognized and promoted different kinds of “scholarship” that are of value to them and their society, promoted their agency and voice in their institutions, and used ethics and advocacy as impetus for collaboration.

“Fossils of Tourist Scholars’ Dreams”

How can individuals and institutions involved create productive exchanges even when they cannot create or sustain formal programs and structures? Our various projects involving Tribhuvan University scholars taught us that transnational collaborations can rarely produce “outcomes” in the same way as administrative or even service efforts may do within our own institutions. We certainly helped our collaborators build a few “structural pieces” such as a faculty training handbook and a report and proposal for a faculty development center at Tribhuvan. The *Handbook for Trainers and Teachers* was developed to provide practical training and teaching guidelines for university educators to shift the focus of higher education:

1. from teaching to learning (demanded by a more student-centered academic culture embodied by semester-based education),
2. from knowing to doing (reflecting the society’s demand for more academic skills and professional growth during college/university),
3. from exams to diversified assessment (especially given that the instructors would assign nearly half of the course credit and not just external examinations),
4. from degree to disciplinary identity (or the demand for fostering such identity in an educational culture where exams and grades undermined learning), and
5. from classroom to culture (indicating the need for educators to engage different stakeholders so they could make the other major shifts).

As reflected in the chapter titles of the *Handbook*, the push and pull between our specialty as writing scholars and teachers and the need to utilize that expertise in TU’s interest in making broader shifts in higher education remained striking. Once again, we were drawn into the contexts of our collaborators, our skills applied to different purposes than we had foreseen. Even our identities shifted from being

writing scholars who believed they could offer more valuable skills as writing scholars into becoming “faculty development experts”; we accepted the invitation and used writing pedagogy as a starting point and catalyst for much broader collaborations as fellow educators.

Our most significant achievement in Nepal has been to develop a community of scholars we have become part of. Departments and disciplinary units have been quick to gather surprising amounts of resources to cover the costs of summer retreats for participants from around the country, to develop and print resources, and to send trainers to constituent campuses around the country. Such responses, however, rarely came from administrators—including those who were personally and informally involved in the projects—who instead helped to create an environment. It is easy for outsiders and even cultural insiders on brief visits to misinterpret hospitality, enthusiasm, and engagement of scholars and their institutions as signs of sustainability. It is easy to miss how local scholars and institutions treat the collaborations with those who jet in and jet out, as one local scholar put it, as ad hoc and one-off events. So, we too shifted our focus and helped to take the collaboration online, to connect with more scholars across the South Asian region, to promote the grassroots movement in our writing and program promotion, and to share resources and expertise more and more openly. We did help local scholars “lobby” administrators and hold the latter accountable for recognition and reward of the former’s time and efforts. Everyone involved, however, was keenly aware of many “international” projects that only lasted as long as the individual visitors remained on site, and if their institutions’ leaderships or priorities remained steady. At the capital in particular, we were told about course syllabi shelved away for years (which were called “fossils”) after exciting and expensive visits by American scholars. Our experiences taught us to interpret initiatives and collaborations in ecological terms, rather than institutional and structural ones; this lesson helped us appreciate opportunities to both share and explore how academic and professional writing skills could be a meaningful impetus for broader changes. We now recognize that the faculty training initiatives at and involving a network of hundreds of scholars across Tribhuvan University—an institution educating more than 400 thousand students across the country—have contributed to an educational “culture” more meaningfully than a formal academic unit within a department would.

Learning from Hosts

On whose terms or combination of terms should we seek to enframe, if at all, our contributions and the collaborations with our counterparts in other countries? We have sought to make our visits and connections a two-way traffic not out of idealism, but because delivery of expertise fails if pursued un-reflexively. Whenever we as visitors work from the premise that writing pedagogy is more advanced on our

side, we may share knowledge substantively but ironically prompt little change, create little value—in spite of appearances and surprisingly often in spite of demand. We realized that we must also learn from our hosts in order to be effective; to do so, we must account for vastly unequal geopolitical and economic statuses in the world, especially if we are to overcome intellectual and moral failures of knowledge delivery, for the advancement both of understanding and of global good.

Our scholarly motivation behind the collaboration was to better understand how our counterparts in other parts of the world taught or used writing in their academic work. The key lesson we have learned in this regard, which helps us significantly with our teaching and scholarship back in the US, is that scholars and students anywhere share certain purposes of writing with us and they put it to purposes that we don't. We have found that some common uses to which writing is put are: to communicate ideas (tell the truth), to say what we mean (express ourselves), to use details, to draw inferences, to explore ideas, to organize ideas deliberately, to frame paragraphs, to consciously appeal to our readers, to present thought-through theses, to join academic conversations, to respond to and to challenge existing knowledge, and so on. While writing, our counterparts and their students did many of the above and also tried to be concise, to engage in deeper reflection, to revise for greater clarity, to edit for correctness, and so on. But such interests did not translate into daily teaching and learning tasks, and they didn't find the same priority as they do with us in the educators' scholarly lives. And yet, in all societies, writing is at the heart of active learning, and even though our colleagues teach writing more incidentally than we do, writing serves us in overlapping ways. For example, if faculty members found writing for their own scholarship and publication a more urgent need, the teaching of writing became the focus of one or more publication webinars for the faculty group.

In addition to finding our evolving collaborations abroad productive on the ground, we have found a considerable payoff at home. We return from each experience abroad better informed, more flexible educators and individuals. That payoff is most pronounced in our freshman writing course. Since the second author started teaching abroad, he uses only texts set internationally, currently *West with the Night* by Beryl Markham, set in Kenya, and *This Earth of Mankind* by Pramoedya Toer, set in Indonesia, as key texts to generate analysis in his freshman writing course, which now focuses on global citizenship. Teaching at Stony Brook University classes with students coming from as many as ten different countries some semesters, he is better able to help students write the required research paper by requiring evidence from at least three countries, and asking students to interview transnational peers in class and beyond. When he brings in occasional examples from his outside-Stony Brook life, those examples are more and more likely now to come from other countries, and so they help normalize the people in other countries for his students. The first author has not only found deep satisfaction in the opportunity to give back

to the South Asian region where he had the advantage of public education, but also aligns the collaborations with his research agenda and scholarship here in the US. From new assignments and class activities to new approaches to teaching and mentoring students, lessons learned about writing education from South Asia help him think more creatively and work more productively; those lessons enhance his work with graduate students and faculty colleagues across campus by enabling him to understand different perspectives on writing and to find common grounds.

Beyond Outcomes

What do collaborators gain when they value processes and experiences above outcomes and measurable impacts? Through our collaborations abroad, we have come to realize that there are many more applications of writing education, many more opportunities for cross-campus collaborations, than within our disciplinary silos and programmatic frameworks. Our experiences highlight the importance of understanding local contexts and traditions, sharing common ground, and cultivating mutual respect instead of trying to convert or change others. In his book *After Pedagogy: The Experience of Teaching*, Paul Lynch (2013) argues that writing teachers “need a better question about how we think and talk about the work of teaching in the wake of postpedagogy. How do we untrain our capacity for system and paradigm?” (p. 6). In this chapter, we have reflected on our experience of pursuing educational collaborations beyond the hegemony of the “global” West. What form could transnational academic exchanges take beyond or without American hegemony at play, among scholars across borders, including within the currently hegemonic geopolitical conditions?

The more we worked with scholars in different contexts, the more shared (and broader) interests we found in writing across academic cultures. Because we were open to new opportunities and did not go in with an objective of “producing” anything like this chapter, we learned about writing in the contexts of faculty scholarship, student learning, institutional and curricular change, and social and economic demands. We learned to find common grounds by trying to understand the terms that our colleagues used for describing writing; for instance, they may describe it as an assessment tool, a professional skill, a literacy ability, a means of research and publication for faculty, or a catalyst for educational transformation such as with a shift to semester-based education (Sharma & Subedi, 2018).

More generally put, we learned that writing plays unique sets of roles and serves unique sets of needs in different contexts; writing, we learned, is a means that can be put to much larger purposes than just teaching it as a subject or putting it within a discipline (see Hall, “Transing Disciplines,” this volume). If the similarity of purposes that writing served in different academic cultures and societies created common grounds, distinct purposes provided opportunities to learn from one another. We

found that writing was used as a skill to teach and an ability to foster among students, an assessment tool and a professional skill for students, reading materials for trainees, documentation and reports that became resources for institutionalization of faculty development (within which writing education would continue to be an objective). These diverse values of writing demanded that we stay open-minded about possibilities beyond specific outcomes of initiatives created along the way. Similarly, while we have continued to try to foster the teaching of writing, the more aware of power dynamics we became about the collaboration between local scholars and their foreign and diaspora counterparts the more uses we saw of our expertise. It must be seen as larger than curricular outcomes or the domain of a specific discipline.

Conclusion

We were sometimes a little disoriented when our collaborations in Nepal and South Asia turned into telephone games, where the message evolves in the process of transmission from team leader to collaborator to administrator to other collaborators. But in retrospect, we are glad that they did. Instead of focusing on writing as a discipline, we have learned to view it more as an education. Instead of looking for writing pedagogy, we learned to look for practices and opportunities, resources and environments in which students learned to write and instructors taught or fostered it. We also learned that, somewhat paradoxically, writing education has advanced more easily without labels like “composition” or “rhetoric” than with them, as we generally observed in both Nepal and Bangladesh.

We have become keenly aware that different societies take different paths to their writing education and that understanding those paths without imposing one group’s terms and perspectives can help both/all groups create and join broader conversations across borders, whether the borders are created by disciplines, specializations, academic cultures, or economic conditions and political systems. We can think of such flexible collaborations as happening in layers, with writing as a discipline being the innermost/bottom layer, then writing education that is defined more broadly, then its applications in the disciplines, then its place in the larger society. We have learned to be agonistic about global hegemony of Western education; we question it to generate new perspectives and find new possibilities. We want to advance small narratives in our modes of exchange, rather than just embracing critical views or using broad brushes. We do not want to build our conversations on notions of East and West either; globalization has made things extremely complex. We want to participate in practical exchange that addresses inequalities, rather than just write about them theoretically. Inequality affects lives and professions and societies every day, and we want to use our professional experience and affordances to help counter it, to create more equitable advancement and

exchange of knowledge. We have learned that writing-based exchange can become a variety of things, from objective/focus to context to catalyst to side note; it may create more room for engagement for some of us than others, depending on how and how much time, resource, and incentives we can find in it.

The greatest takeaway of our collaborations in Nepal and beyond in South Asia in the past six years is self-reflection. When a collaboration doesn't go as we planned or expected or wished, we ask whether we are being as naive as the gentleman in Yangon about the world. To what extent does our being from a "super power" society boost the demand for our expertise and ascribe ethos to our experience in transnational exchange of educational ideas and practices? What should be mindful about when sharing one kind of expertise from one context (e.g., for teaching writing in the US) toward a different application in a new place (e.g., to assist the training of writing instructors in another country)? How can we avoid matching our inevitable naivete and ignorance about complex realities on the ground with inadvertent condescension about other writing educations around the world? How can we learn as much from unplanned outcomes and serendipitous opportunities for exchange of ideas as we want to move collaborations toward more solid grounds of our expertise as well? From our transnational exchange and knowledge-sharing that extended from a WAC initiative to various applications of our expertise in writing instruction, we have become more eager to learn from our fellow educators across borders, refusing to just jet in and jet out, instead learning as much as we share knowledge through continued collaboration.

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