

**Being Human:
A Reflection of an International Graduate Teaching Assistant (IGTA)**

Thir B. Budhathoki

The University of Arizona

When I came to the US in fall 2017 as an international graduate student and started teaching First-Year Writing (FYW) as an IGTA, I had to learn how to use the D2L learning management system, Google features, and online materials on the web and university library for instructional purposes. Although these technologies had posed significant challenges to me at first, the on-site classes had their own dynamics. For one, I did not have to solely rely on those technologies. Besides, the students always offered to help me sort out any tech issues we had in the class. It saved me from a lot of stress. In the next couple of years, I learned whatever I needed to teach an onsite class where I prioritized class discussions about the assignments and readings, group and peer work for invention and review, and opportunities for students to do some writings in the class. But then came the COVID pandemic, and we couldn't return to campus after the spring break of 2020. Overnight, I lost all the affordances of the physical classroom and had to totally rely on my laptop to complete the remainder of the course. It was quite a change. I had to reimagine the entire course content in an online context and make it manageable for me as well as my students. To me as a student of rhetoric and composition, it was a most practical challenge and opportunity to test how I would navigate the new rhetorical situation we all were forced into by the pandemic. Besides, I was taking my comprehensive exams.

As the days and weeks passed, the pandemic continued to shatter my naive hope for returning to normal sometime soon. Instead, I got addicted to doomscrolling and developed new obsessive habits of cleanliness. Living alone in a studio apartment 8000 miles away from home, I had to cope with a range of conflicting emotions every single day: frustration over the lost freedom, the cancelled trip home in the summer, and all the challenges and complexities of online instruction on one hand, and a sense of privilege and gratitude for being able to work safely from home, learn about new technologies, and focus on my academic work on the other. In retrospect, I feel that those days of agonizing uncertainty and discomfort helped me develop a more nuanced approach to and understanding of teaching and learning.

The faculty and staff of the Writing Program and Office of Instruction and Assessment did what they could to help instructors navigate the new mode of teaching. But no amount of support would suffice for me to turn my course to fully asynchronous online in less than two weeks. So I decided to do what I could. I realized that I hadn't used some of the D2L features like "Announcements" much. For the remainder of spring 2020, I relied on D2L announcements to share all course related information, emails and Zoom/phone conferences for more individualized communication with the students, and I expanded the role of Google Drive as a shared workspace for individual as well as collaborative work, including reviews and feedback.

These technologies became my savior at that moment because I didn't have to learn from the beginning.

In the following summer, I took a course on online teaching, and the Writing Program also prepared pre-designed courses for first-time online instructors. These courses allowed me to focus on the delivery without having to build the course from scratch. But a total lack of physical contact once again made me think about how I would deliver the content and how students would receive it in the way I had never done before. I reexamined the clarity and efficacy of my personal communication practices. Although I was used to talking about rhetorical situations where the audience is an integral part, now I had real issues like students totally lost about the assignment, others assuming a different deadline, and still some others unaware of where to turn in the assignment despite its clear mention on the assignment prompt. I couldn't miss the occasions to clarify such things in the classroom more so, instead, I tried to make do with online communication where walking a fine line between giving adequate information to the students and not overwhelming them became yet another challenge.

I continued to learn more about the technologies. I learned to make and edit videos and add captioning to make them more accessible. I learned more efficient ways to use Zoom for group and individual conferences and Google Drive for productive collaboration. These technologies worked well with some exceptions, and I will continue to use them to the extent they fit in the on-site classes. For example, I will continue to hold some of the office hour meetings and scheduled one-on-one conferences with the students on Zoom to make them convenient for both of us. Likewise, collaborative work on Google Drive will continue to be a part of my on-site pedagogy. But more importantly, this experience helped me identify some of my assumptions and blind spots. Coming from a developing country, I had an assumption that everyone in the US has access to computers and the internet, but I saw some of my students working on their cell phones or sharing the computer with other family members, or not having a strong internet connection to complete the assignments. There were others juggling family responsibilities, work, and health issues on top of their studies. I realized why it is important to hold our judgment for a while, look at each student's situation individually, and be a little more lenient and accommodating to their needs. In fact, I had quite a few students who would have dropped or 'failed' the class if I hadn't offered them additional time and support. I also learned to question a seemingly innocuous assumption like "these young kids are always better at technology" when some of my students constantly struggled to share the Google doc allowing comment or edit access to the readers. Before the pandemic I would rarely have questioned the technical acumen of my Gen Z students but now I will be more particular about such issues even at the risk of appearing redundant to some of my students and approach each situation on an individual basis.

With a dual role of a student and an instructor in a different country I was already in what Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) would call the borderlands where confusion and contradictions give intense pain but offer creative possibilities as well. On a personal level, the experience of switching back to student life after a long gap and leaving my family behind initially due to the fear of visa denial and lack of health insurance coverage and later due to the pandemic was a lot

to handle. On the professional front, my positionality as an IGTA who, as Tao Zhang argues, are “trapped by invisible forces in difficult pedagogical relationships and the subsequent emotional drain while working late nights to catch up with necessary work” (2020, p. 11) further complicated my already complex life in solitude. But nevertheless I tried my best to stay positive throughout those tumultuous days and months albeit not without failures. While Zhang’s representation of an IGTA’s professional and emotional upheavals best reflects my experiences so far, it is Anzaldua’s theorization of borderland and its potentials that give me hope and energy to navigate my path ahead. It encourages me to be more inclusive and accepting of the inconsistencies and ambiguities, and therefore more human. As much as my self-reflection as an IGTA navigating a new territory helped me relate to what the students felt as they had to move into the unfamiliar terrain of online learning, Anzaldua’s projection of the inevitability of contradiction through the figure of *Coatlique*, “the Earth Mother . . . the incarnation of cosmic processes” representing “duality in life, a synthesis, and a third perspective” (2012, p. 68) all at the same time created a new empathy in me for my students’ online struggles. In the final analysis, more than the lessons about technologies that are bound to change in less than a year, my realization that I must question my assumptions and try to be more humane without compromising my integrity as a teacher will stick to me forever regardless of where and who I teach in the future.

References

Anzaldua, G. (2012). *Borderlands/ La frontera: The new mestiza* (4th ed.). Aunt Lute Books.

Zhang, T. (2020). ‘Your English is accented!’: Surviving with otherness while approaching positive becoming. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940844720943510>