*What's Attention Got To Do With It*: On Reading and Reflexivity

# Title: *What's Attention Got To Do With It*: On Reading and Reflexivity

**Abstract:** As researchers and writers, within the liberal arts context in the Global South, we are tasked with sense-making, of being attuned to difference and otherness in our teaching and practice. What we heed to, how we heed to, and why we heed to specific bits of the content determine how we comprehend the world around us. Taking cue from scholars like Gopal Guru, Stuart Hall, and David Scott, we will look at how reading and writing can be reflexive tools. The workshop will meander to the margins to understand how note-taking can be a radical act of attunement to difference. More broadly, the workshop attends to the ethos of receptive generosity, especially, as the world increasingly becomes polarised and violent, attempting to add to conversations on not why we should care about difference but how we may do this work recurrently. The intended audiences for the workshop are individuals who work across disciplinary and methodological boundaries and are interested in intersections of reading, reflexivity and modes of attunement. It will culminate in a proposal for a special issue on modes and vocabularies of reading and reflexivity.

# 2. Facilitator information:

**Vrinda Chopra (She/Her)** is a Senior Writing Fellow at Ashoka University. She has a PhD in Human Geography from the University of Cape Town, an MPhil in Development Studies from the University of Cambridge and an MSc in Social Psychology from the London School of Economics. Her current research focuses on reflexivity and the subject position of a Global South researcher working across postcolonial economies. This work builds on her doctoral work on entrepreneurship, social change and the informal economy in India and South Africa.

At Ashoka University, Vrinda works on academic writing pedagogies focussing on deepening the tenets of interdisciplinarity. She also teaches workshops on research methodology, academic integrity and ethics, and the intersections of storytelling, creative non-fiction and qualitative research. Before joining Ashoka University, she assisted in teaching at the University of Cape Town and led the learning and knowledge function for a micro-enterprise programme in semi-urban India. She has published academic pieces in Economic Geography, The Sociological Review, Doing Sociology and Africa@LSE, among others. The Wire and independent magazines have published her creative non-fiction pieces. Vrinda can be reached at vrinda.chopra@ashoka.edu.in

**Sonakshi Srivastava (She/Her)** is a writing pedagogue at Ashoka University. Her MPhil dissertation looked at the biopolitics of ability and debility in contemporary fiction. As a recipient of the South Asia Speaks programme, she is working with her mentor, Arunava Sinha on a translation project. She is also the recipient of the Tempus Public Foundation. Previously, she was an Oceanvale scholar for two consecutive terms at Kirori Mal College where she worked on the role of emotions in Kobo Abe’s works and on ecoprecarity and emotions in Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People.

At Ashoka, she teaches and tutors students on aspects of creative and academic writing, and critical thinking. She is also a part of the English Language Teaching (ELT) Team which works closely with students to enhance their communicative and cognitive English speaking and writing skills. She can be reached at sonakshi.srivastava@ashoka.edu.in

# 3. Primary Contact:

Dr. Vrinda Chopra - vrinda.chopra@ashoka.edu.in.

# 4. Description (please include a Works Cited):

It is a truth universally acknowledged that we inhabit an age of hyper-information and deeply complex issues. Grappling with a complex deluge of information and events, as researchers and writers, we are tasked with sense-making for ourselves and others. What we heed to, how we heed to, and why we heed to specific bits of the content determine how we comprehend the world around us. Taking from critics like Gopal Guru, Lauren Berlant, Stuart Hall, and David Scott, we will look at a corpus of literature on how reading and writing can be reflexive tools for authors and readers alike.

* From David Scott and Stuart Hall, we borrow the intellectual ethos of a “listening self”, one that “tempers the hubris of critique and honors the contingent, unpredictable instability of the world, and endeavors to cultivate an attuned ethos of self-revision and recurrent readjustment to it (the world) and its possibilities.” (Scott 26) In borrowing this ethos, we agree with Scott as he writes that the virtues of such an attunement, of a listening self, is in contrast with “the persistent deafness at work in contemporary critical practice preoccupied with the power of pronouncement and argument” (26). Our concern in the workshop is not mere sophisticated modes of critique but “a responsiveness to marginalization and exclusion… of being receptively present to others” (Scott 26).
* From Gopal Guru’s eclectic collection of essays on “humiliation”, we look at the ways how this affect concerns us as scholars in spaces where we are constantly prompted to think of our position(s) in terms of class, caste, race, and ethnicity and how paying closer attention to such positionality might offer us a new vocabulary to talk and think of ways that circumvent the violence of the everyday especially within academic structures.

In this workshop, we dovetail from our personal experiences of being reflexive readers, writers and pedagogues to understand our varied experiences of the act, the process of reading, and our relationship with attention. We ask - what enables us to pay attention and why? For instance, when we remember a text or a field interaction, what comes back to us or what we want to write about is rooted in our personal and societal locations and histories. We also ask how we draw attention to these locations and histories.

Through the workshop, we will explore the collaborative elements that may enrich our capacities for “care-full” attention by focusing on reading unfamiliar worldviews to shed disciplinary and professional boundaries. We will meander to the margins to understand how note-taking diverges and converges across individual experiences while being radical acts attunement, conversing, critique and creativity. In short, a simple exercise like taking notes can be understood as a radical means of understanding how we pay attention to the world and our material bodies.

We believe that working collaboratively towards building a vocabulary of receptiveness and a listening self, of being attuned to difference and otherness, is a central concern today. How do we cultivate an attuned practice of listening and receptivity, particularly in the context of a liberal arts education in the Global South, where critical thinking or modes of critiquing often take precedence over understanding? Being attentive depends upon heedful understanding (Scott 44-45), which is a hearkening (Heidegger 158) or a “receptiveness to otherness, or at least being open to unlearning the conceits that disable our capacity to *let otherness be* in relation to ourselves” (Scott 45). As writing pedagogues within the liberal arts context in the Global South, the relationship between writing, critical thinking and learning would benefit from working towards expanding our perspectives on modes of reading and attunement, and its intersections with reflexivity. More broadly, the workshop attends to the ethos of receptive generosity as the world increasingly becomes polarised and violent, attempting to add to conversations on not why we should care about difference but *how* we may do this work recurrently.

The intended audiences for the workshop are individuals who work across disciplinary and methodological boundaries and are interested in reflexivity, reading and modes of attunement, not as self-indulgent exercises but as a way to deepen their engagement with the world around them. The workshop will culminate in a proposal for a special issue on modes and vocabularies of reading and reflexivity.

**Works Cited**

Berlant, Lauren. *On the Inconvenience of Other People.* Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2022

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein and Zeit.* Translated by Joan Stambaugh. State University of New York Press, 1996

Scott, David. *Stuart Hall’s Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity.* Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2017.

Guru, Gopal., editor. *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

# 5. Annotated schedule:

## Day 1: Wednesday, February 28, 2023

12:00 noon-12:30 p.m. EST: Conference welcome

12:30 p.m.-2:00 p.m. EST: Keynote/workshop on a theme related to collaboration

3:00 p.m.-6:00 p.m. EST: Work session (includes breaks)

3:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m. EST: Ice-breaker (introduction)

Break for 15 minutes, but we ask the participants to reflect on the introductions and think of common grounds or words that they want to begin a conversation around

4:15 p.m.-5:30 p.m.EST: Writing Col/laboratory - a mind-mapping and drawing connection exercise which will be interactive and will draw from the participants’ own experiences within their fields, or how they think of themselves within their creative/academic endeavours

5:30 p.m.-6:00 p.m. EST: Making Connections: prompting participants to think what words like care, pedagogy, reflexivity, etc. mean to them and how these may or may not be universalised

8:00 p.m EST: Optional online social activity

## Day 2: Thursday, February 29, 2023

(participants have access to readings well in advance)

12:00 noon-5:00 p.m. EST (includes breaks)

12:00 p.m.-2:00 p.m. EST: Reading session that allows for a diverse dialogue on what the pre-circulated readings mean to the participants

Break for 30 minutes

2:30 p.m.-3:30 p.m EST: Reading session will continue to build from the previous conversation around reading, specifically trying to understand terms like positionality, reflexivity, and consequently, attention as a form - who pays attention to what and why?

Break for 10-15 minutes, reconvene by 3:50

3:50 p.m.-4:30 p.m. EST: Warm-up/Revisitation of ideas, and comments on the same. This discussion would attempt to discuss complexities that emerge through our readings and discussions

4:30 p.m.-5:00 p.m. EST: Breakout room discussions to allow the participants to think what/how they want to work on their deliverable.

8:00 p.m. EST: Optional online social activity

## Day 3: Friday, March 1, 2023

12:00 noon-3:00 p.m. EST: Work session (includes breaks)

12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m. EST: Brainstorming and piecing together ideas and themes discussed over the course of the workshop for final presentation

Break for 30 minutes

1:00 p.m.-3:00 p.m. EST: dry-run of the deliverable (group overview that leads into individual/group presentations). We envisage the final output as a special issue proposal that we will pitch to journals.

3:30 p.m.-6:30 p.m. EST: Showcase of deliverables; debriefing on the collaborative process and conference.

[Special Issue as the final outcome; reading sessions/discussion forums post the conference; a blogging site where we may keep the dialogue alive at our own pace]

# 6. Modality:

Zoom (Feb 28-Mar 1)

# 7. Number of participants:

We expect a participation pool of a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 10 people.

# 8. Participant background:

The project is open to all. However, preference will be given to scholars, readers, and writers from the Global South, and people who identify as BIPOC.

# 9. Preparation:

The project is envisaged as an interactive space. The participants will be given two to three readings (scholarly essays on reading and reflexivity) that will eventually form the basis of our collaboration and from which conversations around reflexivity, positionality, and attention-paying will emerge.

# 10. Final-day deliverable:

The final day deliverable is envisaged as a presentation - group and individual. We will begin by tracking our progress through the Miro Board from Day 1, and with that as our launchpad, look at how ideas get a germinal space to flourish in a collaborative and creative space finally culminating in a proposal for a special issue on reading and reflexivity in the context of liberal arts education the Global South.

# 11. How will participants get credit?

The participants get presentation credit and will be prioritised in their contribution to the special issue.

# 12. What happens after the conference?

The project does not end after the conference. Instead, it inaugurates an ongoing discussion as study/reading sessions and collaborative virtual projects (like setting up a blog space, etc.). Primarily, as facilitators, we will work with the participants to develop commentary articles for our proposed special issue.

# 13. Working and learning environment:

Our working and learning environment will be based on the principles of receptive generosity - focussing more on clarification than interpretation - that helps us better understand each other. We will begin with the idea that we each come with our perspectives, and these perspectives can be initiating points to engage in a collaborative process of understanding modes of reading and being reflexive. As facilitators, we will ensure that guiding principles are shared beforehand for asking questions and sharing concerns. Finally, our view of collaboration here is not task-based, but how we can come together to learn and share our learnings with others in the future. The workshop is not a troubleshooting or a methodological space but a space for sharing and storytelling - enabling participants to tap into their visceral experiences while critically reflecting and pushing the boundaries of their thinking and that of others.