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Pedagogical Sandhi

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Abstract: In both composition courses and writing center tutorage, concepts like organization and structure are frequently stressed. Despite this emphasis, students continue to have difficulty in understanding what organization entails. In this piece, I use the Sanskrit language and my experiences as both a teacher and writing center peer tutor, in order to argue that learning to draw connections in writing equips students to transform their papers from distinct sections and evidences to a radically-new whole. I propose several methods that instructors and tutors can implement to equip students with connection-making skills.

Keywords: Pedagogy; connections; Sanskrit; sandhi; tutor; instructor.

My background is strangely well-suited for looking at connections. As an undergraduate student at Utah State University, I was presented with the unique opportunity to take a Sanskrit class. This was the first time that such a class was offered at Utah State, and very few students chose to take the course. It was taught by two professors of Religious Studies and two graduate students. My peers were two Classics professors, an English professor, and several students of Latin and Japanese. Of course, I was the only one without a background in a relevant language.

Learning Sanskrit was quite the struggle for me. While I had trouble memorizing the vocabulary, some of the grammatical rules resonated with me. Among these was *sandhi*. Because Sanskrit is an inflected language, word order isn't necessarily the most important part of a sentence. To make the language more phonetically and aesthetically pleasing, words are often combined, and the two words change forms. The beginning, middle, and end of each word literally changes form, and the new word can sometimes be unrecognizable compared to its original forms. This is what I mean by *sandhi*; it is how connections are formed within Sanskrit. Likewise, writing center tutors often have the task of teaching students the ability to draw connections between complex ideas, in order to create a radically new product.

As a peer tutor at my university's writing center, I have noticed that connections are something that students tend to have difficulty with. Often students have an idea of which components they will cover in their papers, but do not know how to articulate connections between them. Nearly every student I've worked with at my school's writing center comes with "organization" as one of the problems they want to work through. The frequency of this issue is not confined to the writing center walls, however; problems with organization are common in the classroom as well.

This year I began teaching at Utah State University. I run one section of a beginning composition class. My students came into the class from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some are from local areas, while others are from the other side of the United States. Many of my students had urban or suburban upbringings, while others came from rural agricultural areas. Students bring all factors of their background into their writing, and it shows. Some of my students came into the course with terrific grammatical skills and an extensive knowledge of English conventions, but others had trouble formulating sentences and paragraphs. One of the initial ways I tried to get everyone up to the same skill-level was to have my students talk out their papers. Typically when my students talk about an issue, they are actually well organized in the points they introduce. There seems to be a disconnect in organization between speaking and writing, though. Despite this disconnect, I find that getting my students to formulate connections in my class is not drastically different from how I approach the issue in the writing center.

My duty as a writing center tutor is not to form connections for students so they don't have to work. Rather, it is to help them create these connections themselves. When students come in with problems like "my organization is bad," what they really mean is "I wasn't sure how to link these concepts together." From my experience, students are fantastic at articulating why their arguments are important, and they are also great at providing evidence that supports their arguments. However, they tend to struggle with articulating this into a fluid discussion or conversation. Their papers are typically more like distinct steps, rather than a complete staircase. Getting students to consider that all of their points are interrelated, and allowing them to reason through these connections, allows them to feel better about their writing, and understand the full breadth of their papers. As a tutor, I like to ask prodding questions to my students. These questions can range from "what is this paragraph about?" to "how do you feel like each of these

points come together?" Getting students to talk about the decisions they made in organizing their papers often allows them to realize that they didn't think through their paper's structure as well as they originally believed they did. Another tactic I use is asking students about their transitions. If I ask a student, "do you like how this sections flows into this next section?" they will often reply with something like "it sounds a little awkward." Getting students to articulate why their transitions seem awkward gets them to think about how well their ideas flow together. Often if a student cannot articulate an effective transition, then it means that they might be discussing too different of topics. Asking my students about how their points connect often gets them to consider the scope of their papers, and how they might be tackling too many issues, or issues with too many moving parts. Helping students refine their papers to smaller and more manageable topics often makes it easier for them to draw connections between their points, rather than getting hung up on the specifics of complex issues. I try to use similar methods when I teach as well.

     As a teacher I try to get my students to form connections within their writing by utilizing writing workshops during our class time. This begins with the introduction of a new assignment. Often I have students free-write about topics that are on their mind, their interests, or their experiences. Afterwards I find it worthwhile to have my students partner up with a classmate to discuss what they wrote. When they talk about the issue, versus writing about it, I find that my students have an easier time articulating how their points all factor together. Once we've done enough preparatory work as a class, I ask my students to create a draft of their papers. These drafts are then used for one of my favorite activities as a teacher, reverse-outlining. In my reverse-outlining workshops, I have my students read through each other's papers aloud. Once they have read through, I ask them to give each paragraph a short summary (usually only a few

words long). From here, I ask students if they understand their partner's organization; I like to ask "Can you tell why they moved from one point to the next?" I find that asking questions like this keep my students focused on how the small elements of their paper combine to form a completely new product.

In the Sanskrit language, the word Sanskrit literally means "constructed" or "put together." It is one of the most grammatically complex languages in human history, and has an extensive history of commentary. The language was the *lingua franca* of India, especially in the context of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Within these religions, typically only the most elite figures would learn Sanskrit, as they would lead religious ceremonies with the language. The commentaries of these figures frequently allude to Sanskrit as being a transformative language; religious authorities recognized that learning Sanskrit could change a person's entire worldview. In other words, recognizing the connections or togetherness of something can lead to radical change, something I believe extends to composition students. By keeping this concept of connections in mind, educators and writing center tutors can focus their work on ways that meaningfully change students' skills and knowledge of writing. In the writing center, keeping connections in mind might be asking students to articulate their organization, or asking why they arranged the paper how they did. In the classroom, this could take the form of brainstorming for a paper and designing constructive workshops, such as reverse-outlining an early draft of a paper. Learning to create connections is an essential skill that students learn in their composition courses, and we as writing center tutors and instructors would be wise to look to Sanskrit in order to understand the profundity of putting connections together.