Curriculum from the Margins: Experience of Building a Dalit-Feminist Business English Programme as an Untrained Facilitator

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Abstract

In September 2024, while working as a part-time Business English facilitator at a grassroots NGO in India, I was entrusted with a unique but revolutionary task- to design an English curriculum for Business and Job-readiness from a Dalit-Feminist standpoint. As a post-graduate student of Cultural Studies with no formal training in teaching, language education, or material development, I undertook the project with equal measure of self-doubt and ambition, and a need for steady income- a perfect specimen of a GTA. This paper offers a critical reflective account of my journey as a GTA over the course of two years of working with the NGO. Unlike a conventional academic setting, the NGO foregrounded socio-political sensitivity and learner autonomy. It forced me to draw upon and question my own past experiences as a student, which I unconsciously began to replicate as a facilitator. Working with young Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi women learners (ages 18-40), I found myself developing creative ways to translate critical theories like intersectional theory, critical pedagogy, and Dalit and feminist scholarship into accessible and context-sensitive content. These experiences highlighted how significant the role of a GTA can be, precisely because of our liminal positionality as both in and out of the rigid frameworks of academia. GTAs occupy a space of possibility and probabilities, not weighed down by institutionalised teacher training, where pedagogic methodologies can be reimagined in real time. This in-betweenness allows for experimentation that is messy, imperfect, but also deeply generative, and holds the power to lead us to a social justice-oriented pedagogy in praxis.

Keywords: Liminality, Language Education, Dalit-Feminist standpoint, Material Development, Socially-engaged pedagogy

Introduction

In 2023, during the first year of my PhD, I was looking for a flexible online job that I could manage alongside my research to ensure a steady income. After applying to several posts, I began working as a part-time Business English facilitator with a grassroots NGO in India. The learners were young Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi (DBA) women, between the ages of 18 to 40, who aspired to start their own businesses. After working with the NGO for more than a year and facilitating two such cohorts, I was entrusted with a task that was both daunting and exciting: to design an English curriculum for business and job readiness from a Dalit-Feminist standpoint.

At first, I felt entirely unqualified. I was a PhD scholar in Cultural Studies, had a background in Literature. I had no formal training in pedagogy, curriculum design, or language education. While I had some experience teaching adults (through tuition classes) and hoped to become a professor one day, designing a Business English curriculum that was also critical of caste, class, and gender seemed too complex for someone like me. But the NGO saw me differently. They valued my two years of experience with the learners and my lived experience as a Bahujan woman trained in critical caste and gender studies. They argued that these insights are more valuable than those of a professionally trained curriculum developer. So, with a mixture of self-doubt, ambition, and the pragmatic need for a steady income, I accepted the challenging task. In that sense, I am a perfect specimen of a GTA- undertrained and part-time, as they are always in need of money!

This paper offers a critical reflective account of my journey as a GTA over the course of these two years. The NGO is an important location here because, unlike a conventional academic setting, it foregrounds socio-political sensitivity, flexibility, and learner autonomy. The paper begins by situating the NGO and the learners to establish the pedagogical context. I then recount two pivotal early experiences that shaped my role as a facilitator and illustrate the beginning of my journey as a GTA. I then turn to the need of building the new curriculum and my learnings on this journey, which make me realise the possibilities of Graduate Teacher Assistantship.

Context and Learners

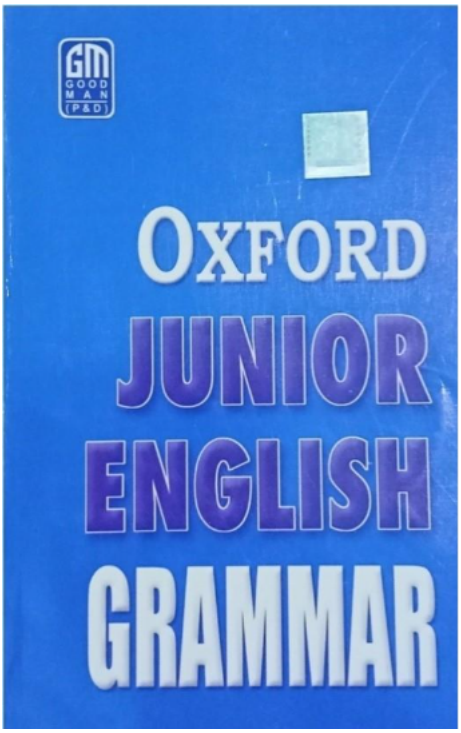
The NGO where I worked is based in New Delhi. One of its flagship initiatives is an incubator programme designed to create sustainable livelihood opportunities and spaces of social affirmation for DBA women and non-binary people. It trains participants who aspire to start businesses in entrepreneurial skills, financial literacy, digital literacy, personality development, and business communications in English. These learners come from diverse age groups and life stages. A few were enrolled in colleges, often distance-learning programmes, completing diplomas or undergraduate degrees, but most came from non-rigorous academic backgrounds

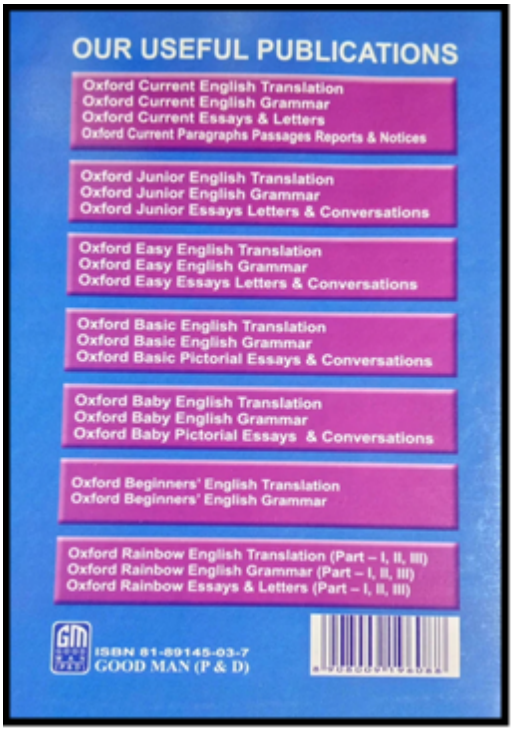
and had taken long breaks from formal education. Some were married and were responsible for domestic work and caregiving for children and elders.

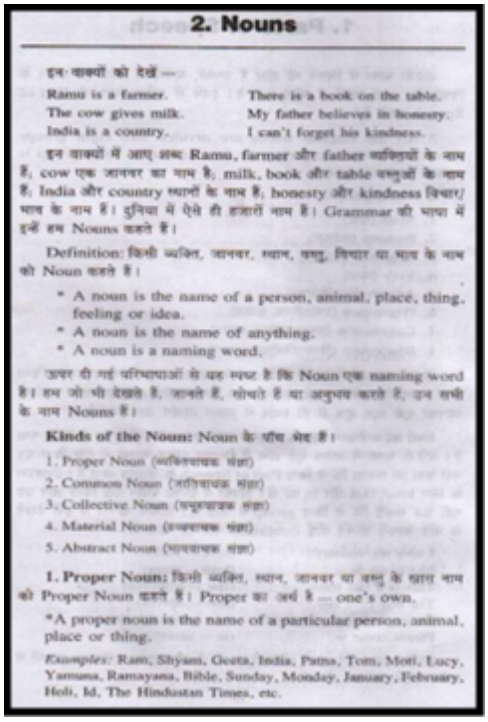
Early Experiences- Beginning as a GTA

Within the first week of joining the NGO, I had two significant learnings. The first came from the job description itself. I was to be a facilitator, not a teacher. The role of a facilitator is a clear shift away from an instructor or an educator who transmits knowledge; a facilitator is in the process *with* the learners. They might be subject-experts, but they walk alongside the learners, co-create conditions for their voices to emerge, and enable them to reach their potential. This role felt less hierarchical and offered greater freedom to experiment with class structures and more learner-centred pedagogies.

The second lesson came during my initiation into the NGO. The very next day of my job interview, I was asked to teach tenses in English as a demo-class for the current cohort of women, with the selection board present. This was a task I was confident that I would do well. I was all set- I knew all the rules to the T. Like most Indians, my introduction to English had been in translation from my first language, Hindi. The textbook I grew up with, *Oxford Junior English Grammar* (which was not an Oxford publication- it was only named that), and another for translation, by R.K. Singh, trained us to convert Hindi sentences into English, memorising rigid grammar rules.







2. Nouns

इन वाक्यों को देखें —

Ramu is a farmer. There is a book on the table.
The cow gives milk. My father believes in honesty.
India is a country. I can't forget his kindness.

इन वाक्यों में आए शब्द Ramu, farmer और father व्यक्तियों के नाम हैं, cow एक जानवर का नाम है, milk, book और table वस्तुओं के नाम हैं, India और country स्थानों के नाम हैं, honesty और kindness विचार/भाव के नाम हैं। दुनिया में ऐसे ही हजारों नाम हैं। Grammar की भाषा में इन्हें हम Nouns कहते हैं।

Definition: किसी व्यक्ति, जानवर, स्थान, वस्तु, विचार या भाव के नाम को Noun कहते हैं।

* A noun is the name of a person, animal, place, thing, feeling or idea.
* A noun is the name of anything.
* A noun is a naming word.

ऊपर दी गई परिभाषाओं से यह स्पष्ट है कि Noun एक naming word है। हम जो भी देखते हैं, जानते हैं, सोचते हैं या अनुभव करते हैं, उन सभी के नाम Nouns हैं।

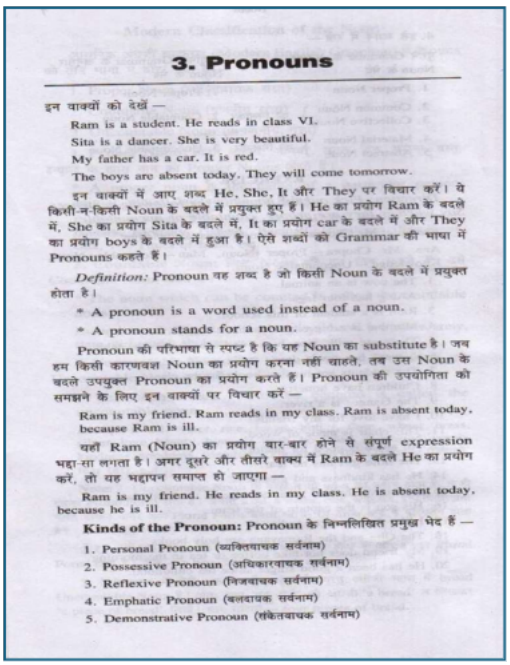
Kinds of the Noun: Noun के पाँच भेद हैं।

1. Proper Noun (व्यक्तिवाचक संज्ञा)
2. Common Noun (जातिवाचक संज्ञा)
3. Collective Noun (समूहवाचक संज्ञा)
4. Material Noun (द्रव्यवाचक संज्ञा)
5. Abstract Noun (भाववाचक संज्ञा)

1. Proper Noun: किसी व्यक्ति, स्थान, जानवर या वस्तु के खास नाम को Proper Noun कहते हैं। Proper का अर्थ है — one's own.

*A proper noun is the name of a particular person, animal, place or thing.

Examples: Ram, Shyam, Geeta, India, Patna, Tom, Moti, Lucy, Yamuna, Ramayana, Bible, Sunday, Monday, January, February, Holi, Id, The Hindustan Times, etc.



3. Pronouns

इन वाक्यों को देखें —

Ram is a student. He reads in class VI.
Sita is a dancer. She is very beautiful.
My father has a car. It is red.
The boys are absent today. They will come tomorrow.

इन वाक्यों में आए शब्द He, She, It और They पर विचार करें। ये किसी-न-किसी Noun के बदले में प्रयुक्त हुए हैं। He का प्रयोग Ram के बदले में, She का प्रयोग Sita के बदले में, It का प्रयोग car के बदले में और They का प्रयोग boys के बदले में हुआ है। ऐसे शब्दों को Grammar की भाषा में Pronouns कहते हैं।

Definition: Pronoun वह शब्द है जो किसी Noun के बदले में प्रयुक्त होता है।

* A pronoun is a word used instead of a noun.
* A pronoun stands for a noun.

Pronoun की परिभाषा से स्पष्ट है कि यह Noun का substitute है। जब हम किसी कारणवश Noun का प्रयोग करना नहीं चाहते, तब उस Noun के बदले उपयुक्त Pronoun का प्रयोग करते हैं। Pronoun की उपयोगिता को समझने के लिए इन वाक्यों पर विचार करें —

Ram is my friend. Ram reads in my class. Ram is absent today, because Ram is ill.

यहाँ Ram (Noun) का प्रयोग बार-बार होने से संपूर्ण expression भद्दा-सा लगता है। अगर दूसरे और तीसरे वाक्य में Ram के बदले He का प्रयोग करें, तो यह भद्दापन समाप्त हो जाएगा —

Ram is my friend. He reads in my class. He is absent today, because he is ill.

Kinds of the Pronoun: Pronoun के निम्नलिखित प्रमुख भेद हैं —

1. Personal Pronoun (व्यक्तिवाचक सर्वनाम)
2. Possessive Pronoun (अधिकारवाचक सर्वनाम)
3. Reflexive Pronoun (निजवाचक सर्वनाम)
4. Emphatic Pronoun (बलदायक सर्वनाम)
5. Demonstrative Pronoun (संकेतवाचक सर्वनाम)

Figure 1: R K Singh's *Oxford Junior English Grammar* (pp 2 & 8; 2000)

A few examples of the Hindi sentences would be –

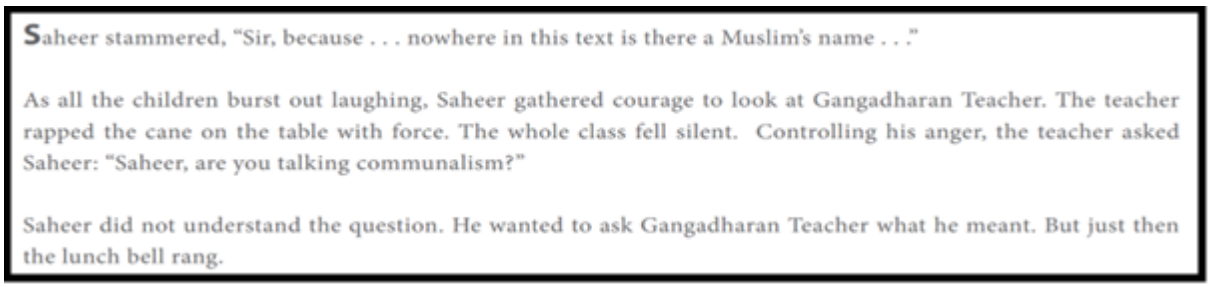
Ramu is a farmer.

Ram goes to school.

Sita is a dancer.

Shyam plays cricket. (Sinha, 2000)

Our vocabulary and sentence structures were limited to these Hindi sentences. So, in my demo class on the Simple Present Tense, I unconsciously reproduced similar examples. After class, the founder of the NGO asked me not to use these names, pointing out that they were drawn from Hindu mythology. By using these names in my examples, I was inadvertently participating in the politics of exclusion rampant in the majoritarian communalism in India currently. This affected me quite strongly. The lesson was reinforced when, later that week, I read a children's story titled “Textbook” by Nuaiman, translated as part of the *Different Tales* project by Anveshi Research Centre for Women’s Studies, India.



Saheer stammered, “Sir, because . . . nowhere in this text is there a Muslim’s name . . .”

As all the children burst out laughing, Saheer gathered courage to look at Gangadharan Teacher. The teacher rapped the cane on the table with force. The whole class fell silent. Controlling his anger, the teacher asked Saheer: “Saheer, are you talking communalism?”

Saheer did not understand the question. He wanted to ask Gangadharan Teacher what he meant. But just then the lunch bell rang.

Figure 2: “Textbook” by Nuaiman

The story follows Saheer, an 11-year-old Muslim boy searching for a Muslim name in his school textbook to feel a sense of belonging in the school and to relate his lived experiences with the stories in his textbook (Nuaiman, 2008). But he finds none. When he asks his teacher about this, he is accused of being communal- a term he does not even understand. This story sharpened my awareness of the world-making capabilities of the examples and stories we tell in classrooms. It also made me realise that learning flows better when the content is relatable. I also realised that despite the neutralizing language of ‘facilitation’, I was still in a position of power, and my unconscious biases carried real weight. I needed to be accountable for these biases.

Both these early experiences shifted how I thought about education. My role was not only to teach English but also to hold space. This is surprising to me, especially since I came from a Cultural Studies background where critical thinking and social justice are central. I should have known better. I myself belong to a backward caste and am trained in anti-caste politics. Yet, these issues had never felt urgent in practice, because they had been normalised. These experiences also made me reflect on the huge gap that exists between theoretical training and praxis. But once I saw them and recognised my biases, I could no longer unsee them.

Know Your Learner and What They Need

As I spent more time with the NGO, my scepticism grew. Despite our efforts and flexibility, I did not see much measurable progress in the learners’ English proficiency, at least by conventional evaluation standards. I also began to doubt the

usefulness of ‘Business English’ for their lives and businesses. Most learners came from rural and semi-urban socio-economic locations with little to no exposure to English in daily life. Running their local businesses would not require them to speak English regularly. What use, then, were the rules of converting active to passive voice?

And yet, I knew what English meant to people like us in the DBA community. English carries deep emotional and political weight. It offers us a sense of dignity and of self-worth. Learning and speaking English is a form of political and cultural assertion for Dalit selfhood- a symbolic protest against generations of systemic erasure. In 2010, a temple of Angrezi Devi (English Goddess) was erected by Chandra Bhan Prasad, a self-taught Dalit social psychologist and writer, who called the goddess “the symbol of Dalit Renaissance”.

However, I knew there had to be a better way of working with English language education. The NGO’s curriculum, though trauma-informed, was still built around grammar. The modules and chapters were titled after grammar topics. This reflected our collective training in English through a rigid grammar-first approach: memorise rules, convert sentences, avoid mistakes. My focus was on my learners who wanted to learn English, not necessarily for flawless grammar, but because the act of speaking even a few sentences made them feel visible, heard, and respected.

One class brought this home. That day, the learners were not paying attention and seemed tired. So, I stopped the formal class and initiated a visualisation activity with some deep breathing exercises. I asked them to vividly imagine themselves as businesswomen running their businesses: entering their store, engaging with their teams, and interacting with clients. Then, I asked them to write down their future dreams- their dream sentences. Afterwards, I used these sentences to explain the future tense. But rather than treating them merely as grammar exercises, I reminded the learners that their sentences were important in themselves, and in passing, I said- Look, they also happened to be in future tense.

This moment pushed me to rethink English language education altogether. I sat down with the people at the NGO to think about a different way of language literacy that centred around nurture, affirmation, and collective self-making, rather than grammar. What if English could be taught from a Dalit-Feminist standpoint as a means of care and agency, rather than correctness? To my surprise, the NGO encouraged me to turn this vision into a new curriculum book that spoke more directly to the lives and aspirations of our learners. When I hesitated, citing my lack of training, they reassured me that my deep understanding of the learner’s positionalities was enough, and perhaps even more valuable than formal expertise.

When I began researching, I was taken aback by the complete absence of any substantial critical reflection of English language education in India. There was no template to follow, as there was no English language textbook, certainly not for Business English, that adopted a critical, justice-oriented lens. Language, especially English in today’s context, is a very powerful tool through which we build our sense of self and make meaning of the world around us. And yet, no one seemed to be interrogating the politics of language education in this way. I began to see how revolutionary a marginalised perspective on curriculum-making could be. This raised

the central question for me- *What would it mean to build a Business English curriculum from a Dalit-feminist perspective? And what role could I play in it?* I knew it had to be about *Choice, Agency, Dignity, Care and Kindness, and Critical thinking.* And my role was to put it into practice through creative problem-solving and experimentation.

Towards an Ethical Pedagogy- Putting Theory in Praxis

To incorporate care, choice, and critical thinking into the curriculum meant reimagining the very structure of a conventional textbook. A linear book that starts from one chapter to another offers little freedom for diverse learning styles and needs. I wanted the textbook to be purpose-driven, organised around functions of communication and situations of use. Further, the book should enable greater movement across topics based on the needs, interests, and motivation of the learners. Thus, I designed the book around thematic modules: *Meeting someone, Describing your day, Responding to others, Visiting a city,* and *Presenting your ideas*. The modules were, in turn, divided into sections that were internally hyperlinked, so a learner could move laterally across sections that resonated with them based on similarity or associations.

The content of the modules was colour-coded into four learning modes: *Discover*, *Understand*, *Reflect*, and *Practice.* Colour-coding immediately signals the kind of engagement expected from the learner. *Discover* introduces the topics with stories, dialogues, reading comprehensions, and short activities. *Understand* explains the grammar and structure, presented as just-in-time notes rather than full chapters. For example, as learners discover phrases for describing their day, a short note takes them through the rules of the simple past tense in English. In the *Reflect* section, learners interact with larger questions of caste, gender, and everyday realities, both in the politics of language and life. So, as we learn about genders in English grammar, we also reflect on the politics of pronouns in our lives. While learning phrases on navigating a city, we talk about the need for women to reclaim public spaces and political movements that ask women to walk through the night to make nights safe for women. Finally, the *Practice* section provides activities and exercises- roleplays, readings, writing tasks, and group discussions- to master these learnings.

Thus, a learner could start from Module 0, the introductory module, which lays down some fundamental concepts in the English language, like a launchpad, and could jump across sections based on their motivation. A fellow might begin with “Introducing Yourself” and then leap to “Writing Emails” to understand how to introduce themselves over email, without worrying about whether she had completed “Daily Routines.” This non-linear structure, resembling a game of snakes and ladders, gave learners both **agency** and **flexibility**- crucial for the women of diverse age groups and social locations, balancing multiple roles at home and work. This also works for learners who struggle with long periods of attention. In addition, the book is full of digital resources- audio clips, videos, articles, games, and exercises, that the learner can access to help with their personal learning styles. It also

suggests collaboration with other subject-facilitators- Digital Literacy, Personality Development, and the Entrepreneurship Training, so that learners can experience holistic growth.

Moreover, the book also provided room for storytelling, self-reflection, and emotional processing. Reading comprehensions drew excerpts from Dalit and feminist writings, allowing learned to engage with lived experiences of marginalisation. At the same time, I recognised that such texts can be triggering. Drawing from my own experience of instantly skipping any materials with “trigger warning”, I embedded choice differently. Instead of warnings, the book includes notes for facilitators and learners. The facilitator's note seeks the facilitator to come in, create a safe environment, and explain the intention of the comprehension. They are needed to explain to the learners why the comprehension is placed there and seek their consent to engage with the comprehension at the moment, or if not, give them a choice about what they would like to do instead. This gives learners genuine choice in deciding how and when to approach difficult material. These choices and deep engagements with the needs of the learner embody my commitment to caring, nurturing, and ethical pedagogic methods.

Recognizing that the position of the facilitator is nevertheless more powerful than the learner, I felt the need to train the facilitator as well. Therefore, I added short notes throughout the book to guide the facilitator, who, like me, may not come from teaching backgrounds, and who may or may not share the social and caste location of their learners. The book thus doubles as a small intervention into teacher education itself, highlighting the lack of inclusive, critical training in India as teachers are often unprepared for the emotional and structural labour this work demands.

The Broader Perspective- Reflections on GTA Positionality

My experience with the NGO led me to reflect on the possibilities that GTAship offers. The NGO definitely helped further because of its flexibility and commitment towards social change and equity. However, these reflections offer broader pedagogical implications for GTAs in diverse contexts.

Initially, without any formal training in language education and curriculum development, I felt like an imposter in a space that is ideally reserved for an expert. But as the work unfolded, I began to see my ‘untrained’ position as less of a weakness. I was free from conventional models that might have weighed me down, and I would have to unlearn them first to allow for my imagination and creativity towards developing a socially-engaged pedagogy. Similarly, positioned somewhere between students and formal faculty, GTAs occupy a liminal space, again, with no formal training. This ‘inbetweenness’ carries greater freedom as it takes one away from the authoritative posture of a ‘teacher’, and by being one step closer to a student, it allows a GTA to learn with the learner, rather than instructing over them. A GTA is also closer to the experiences and struggles of a learner and can thus engage with them better. Further, for a GTA, recognising this closeness of

experience and stature by not projecting the conventional posture of a teacher can enable them to respond directly to the learner's needs in real time with empathy and add nuance to classroom education, making it more inclusive. However, this recognition is not automatic. It requires constant introspection and self-checking, especially when our own unconscious biases surface and seep into our pedagogic practices. Self-reflection is key to breaking patterns that we unconsciously repeat as the authority of a 'teacher' creeps in subtly. GTAship carries the scope for rethinking and rewiring the fixed pedagogical models that institutions have traditionally been following, by not just transferring content but by questioning who education is for, whose voices it includes, and whose it excludes.

All of this can be very messy, time-consuming, and emotionally laborious for both parties- the GTA and the learners. Yet, it is necessary. These are very difficult, messy questions, but questions nonetheless. Answering them or trying to reach an answer takes a lot of courage and work from both the facilitator and the learner. Translating critical theories into accessible and context-sensitive practice is never seamless, but it forces us to confront uncomfortable truths. My central realisation is that curricula are always political documents. And the only way they can be justice-oriented is when we build our curricula from the margins, not for the margins. This requires someone willing to experiment and take risks, rather than someone weighed down by conventional pedagogical training. GTAs can be these risk-takers, and if they later move into formal academic positions, they will carry the spirit forward.

Ethical Claim

There is no conflict of interest. The NGO consents to the paper.

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