Project: Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences
Title: Oral History Interview with Shyam Sharma - Transcript
Narrator: Shyam Sharma (SS)
Interviewer: Chris Kretz (CK)
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Summary: Dr. Shyam Sharma is an Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric. In this interview he describes his experiences in preparing for and moving to online teaching during the pandemic. He recounts his interactions with students and his collaborations within his department as well as with other Stony Brook faculty and with instructors in South Asia. He also discusses his routines during home isolation.
Session 1 of 1.

00:00:03

CK: Okay, so we are taping. Today is Thursday, October 15, 2020. This is Chris Kretz of the Stony Brook University Libraries, interviewing Shyam Sharma from his home over Zencastr for the COVID-19: Documenting Stony Brook University Experiences project.

Dr. Sharma, first of all, thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

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SS: Thank you for the opportunity, Chris.

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CK: Can we start off—can you tell us your position at Stony Brook and how long you have been here?

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SS: This is my ninth year in Stony Brook and my position is associate professor and graduate program director in the Writing Program, or Program in Writing and Rhetoric.

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CK: And just in that context, what are some of your usual activities?

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SS: So, as a professor, I teach all kinds of writing courses. All the way from Writing 102, the first-year college writing course, to upper-division courses, to graduate-level courses. And as a graduate program director, I also oversee the Graduate Writing Certificate.

And recently, I've taken on the sort of voluntary role of providing writing support for graduate students and faculty members, especially during the pandemic. That has grown and I have started taking it more seriously and organized it better.

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CK; In terms of the pandemic, can you think back—when do you remember first starting to hear about it?

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SS: Toward the end of 2019, we started hearing—reading in the news, rather—about the situation in China. Some predictions said that this is probably becoming a global pandemic. Others were saying, No, they'll probably contain it in China.

And soon enough, in January, I started paying attention to the news. January, February, it was a matter of when—not if—it was going to come here and life will be disrupted. And when the semester started and we were midway through, I was more than prepared to, you know, adjust.

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CK: And so what did those adjustments look like? What did you have to do to prepare?

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SS: The week before the spring break, when the university was almost certain that it would go online after the spring break, I actually ran my class on Zoom, just for a dry run, from my office. So my students were taking my class virtually and we tested out the technology. One student even came to my office, I think because he couldn't join online or something. But we tested. And some students were in class, others were in [the] dorm.

And then during the spring break, I was able to survey my students and find out where they were, how their connection was, whether or not they'd be able to meet at the same time, if they needed additional office hours, all kinds of things. And that survey data served as a guideline for me to create a list of netiquettes for how to be effective during this disruption. I wouldn't—I didn't even call it a transition. It was a “disrupted distance learning.” DDL, as I call it.

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CK: And what were the discussions within the department as you were gearing up?

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SS: I was involved in helping other faculty to adapt, because I was one of the people in the department who had been going online for a few years. In fact, I had been either training myself to teach online, or beginning to study and teach online, all the way back since 2009.

And 2014-ish was the first time I taught online. And so, along with a few other colleagues in the department, I was one of those people involved in supporting faculty who had not been teaching online. Which was the majority.

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CK: And so what kind of conversations did you have with your students to prepare them?

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SS: The conversation was more like: well, how do you take a minimalist approach to doing the basic number of things that you would like to do to complete the semester?

There was this conversation about synchronous versus asynchronous, and we were trying to convey the simple idea that these are different tools and two options that could be combined as the faculty felt comfortable—instead of looking at them as mutually exclusive options.

That was the kind of conversation.

And I also remember talking a lot about student well-being and [being] able to reach out to them and [being] able to give them the kind of support that now the disruption made necessary.

So those were the conversations about the pandemic in my department. And I think, frankly, my department's probably ahead of the curve in terms of mutual support, in terms of pedagogical adjustment, technological use. Ours is a very pedagogy-centered, very student-centered program.

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CK: Once you got settled into the online version of the course, what were some of the major challenges or issues that you saw happening?

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SS: So let me broaden this conversation a little bit, within the teaching and also beyond the teaching and research and especially the service. Because again, as a teaching-oriented department that also is big on service, my first response about a few weeks after the break, and the two weeks of the extended spring semester, was that I was doing well. [That] my students are doing well. My students were encouraged to tell me if something goes on in the family or community and then [if] they cannot continue.

But at the same time, I became extremely conscious, on a personal level, of the privileges that I have: a home, a big backyard—we could literally play soccer in the backyard—and a secure job, [being] tenured faculty.

And [my] kids had gone online. My wife also teaches in the same department. In fact, she became a permanent, or rather full-time, faculty during the pandemic. And all of these things brought to the fore as to how much more privilege that we enjoyed over the rest of the country, the rest of the world.

And that was a survivor's guilt experience that we have—I have gone through—in the past seven months. That was one big adjustment. And what do you do with the privilege, right? Because the guilt—the privilege is sort of the factor in the guilt.

And adjusting to this was not so much, How do I adjust? but how do I use my privilege to help others around me adjust? How do I become a different teacher that is adapted to this global crisis?

I'll say more in a moment if that's relevant, but I started becoming actively involved in supporting others here in the department, at the SUNY level where I am the vice president of the SUNY Council on Writing, [and] in a large network of faculty members in South Asia where I originally came from.

And giving workshops, and faculty training, and lectures in other countries. So that was my adjustment, as I can remember. The most significant part of that adjustment is from guilt, to a consciousness of privilege, to adjusting and contributing in giving back. And dealing with the stress—not so much in taking care of oneself, but taking care of oneself and others.

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CK: And if we talk about your experience in self-quarantine or isolation, how did you deal with the stress?

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SS: I actually didn't feel stressed out about quarantine. I felt that the quarantine was simply making a comfortable person even more comfortable in terms of how they could continue their work, continue to get a paycheck, continue to educate these children.

I never felt that I was angry, anxious, uncomfortable. You know, thinking that I'm losing my freedom. I don't get that. I come from a background of humility—humbleness, not humility.

A humble background. And I also study this subject of how you make your teaching humane, how you make your work and profession and world a better place.

I read. I think. I talk about it. And so, that whole conversation—about how we adjust to the pandemic—for me, it does not resonate very well because I'm like, Jeez, I'm just

realizing how privileged I am, how much has been given to me. And I should be the last person to complain.

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CK: So what was your routine like during the isolation?

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SS: On that front, the routine front: it was easier to wake up late, study, and write and conduct interviews for my research project, my book project, until late—because I am doing a study in South Asia.

And people wake up there [in Asia] when it's time for people to go to bed here. So I basically became very active in the middle of the night when I was interviewing people, collecting data, analyzing, reading, writing—over summer. And then when fall began, I had to adjust a little back to North America again so that I could wake up earlier for meetings and what-not. And still it is a routine where everything revolves around whatever I want to do, other than the two courses that I teach. And then, serving in a bunch of service committees.

Like the University Curriculum Committee, the University Senate, the University Planning Task Force, liaison from the Senate, [and] a few departmental task forces or committees. It was flexible. It was comfortable. It was a lot of choice.

And then, personally, it was—healthwise, I think my health has become much better. I sleep better. I play more. I don't go to the gym, but I do get more calories burned than I used to.

Slight change, I understand. But other than not having to go away more than, like, two miles [on the] periphery—or even nothing, on certain weeks—nothing has really changed. [It has] only become better on a personal level, on a health level, on a personal routine level.

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CK: Did you have—or what type of interactions did you have—with the local community or your neighbors or—

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SS: Neighbors—[we talk] when the wind blows [and] the trees are down, or when we want to talk about something, [or] occasionally when they come out and [we're] just saying hello over the fence.

You know, good neighbors here. But that is basically, I realize, what we used to do before the pandemic. It's the occasional chance meetings, and there's not a lot of community engagement. I guess it is the time in my career as an academic that I really don't get the time or maybe the priority to go out and [get] involved in the community. I think after the pandemic, I'll think about that as something missing, even before the pandemic.

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CK: So in that time, what gave you the most comfort? Or was there something that you found yourself doing as a way to pass the time or make it more bearable?

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SS: I would say—I would connect back to the notion of survivor guilt, consciousness of privilege, adjusting as a community, as a world. By specifically, by actively being involved in supporting others and oneself. I would say the one big thing was to tackle that guilt and that feeling of privilege relative to so many others.

Even among the networks of people that I knew—is to use the skills and experience and knowledge and trust in society and learning and teaching, better. To greater effect. To use a different kind of agency, an agency that expands rather than focuses in oneself. To work with and in support of students and colleagues.

To offer support. It turns out, all of the commute time that I had could be allocated for this kind of service work. I started a faculty writing group a little before the pandemic, but then it grew tremendously.

And I had started a graduate student writing group because I had realized, while doing the book project a few years ago, [that] grad students don't have a lot of support around their reading, writing, research, communication skills—especially international graduate students. And based on that book, I came home and I started a writing bootcamp series, a writing group, a weekly meeting series, and a writing workshop series.

And these faculty writing programs and student writing support programs became much stronger, done more deliberately, over Zoom, technologically adapted. And I felt like I got this opportunity, a unique opportunity to serve the community here and abroad.

The pandemic literally opened up new avenues of work and service where I had been involved in the past. And now I have a lot more time, a lot more people, a lot more attention, and a lot more need. And I felt privileged to be able to be there and offer support, resource[s], time, expertise—in order to help other people tackle their challenges of jobs and, oftentimes, life.

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CK: You mentioned you had been working with South Asia and your connections there. During this time, what insight did that give you—or what did you learn about how they were dealing with the pandemic?

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SS: Honestly, I thought that in North America, when we are in positions of authority, I think—especially over the last decade or so—we have become conscious of that authority. We have become conscious of that privilege, right?

But in South Asia, the academic culture uses authority in ways that doesn't really question itself. And so what I really found was, colleagues that were trying to do their best in South Asia were also colleagues who were trying to use authority and power in ways that didn't reflect on mindfulness or thoughtfulness [or] a consciousness about the pandemic crisis.

For example, they would say things like, I started taking attendance twice on Zoom so that students don't sign in and leave.

Or, you know, somebody proposed using seven cameras around the room for their engineering exams.

And I'm like, That's a little oddly traditional, authority-abusing South Asian culture in education. I think we do that here, too, in many disciplines, but it seemed that in South Asia it was a little more.

So what I started doing was to deliberately foreground these issues and write in op eds.

There's a *New York Times* sister publication in South Asia called the *Republica* and I started writing there articles like “On Teaching Tyranny.” Or “How We Can Humanize Education.” [And] giving keynote speeches and that kind of thing.

In other words, how do we use our authority humanely, empathetically, consciously, mindfully—[that] was a mission that I was involved [with] in South Asia. Not just regular teacher training that we used to do in the past, but with a different frame and with a different focus, with a different vision now.

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CK: So as you were getting ready for the fall semester, how did any of this experience change your approach to how you teach?

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SS: That's a very good question. In fact, what I was doing in South Asia always had a washback effect on what I do here. So I couldn't be just the guy giving lectures or even making other people do things in South Asia about mindfulness and humanity and consciousness, right? But I also had to reflect on my own practice here.

So my teaching became different. I don't use the word "deadline" anymore. It kind of sounds weird during a pandemic when 211,000 people have died so far in our own country.

To that extent. I'm not trying to be overreacting to every word, but even that kind of thing begins to—makes no sense. Why is it that, during a pandemic when students are unable to manage their time as they used to—even if nothing is going on with their health—there's a lot more stress, there's a lot more inability to manage time, there's a lot less connection, and a lot less vibe of feeling strongly about assignments and papers and timelines?

So I started taking that approach of making flexible paper deadlines or—I call them timelines. Students were able to write at the top of their paper, Please don't grade mine until Friday.

Students are able to ask for extra meetings, personalized meetings. Students are able to come to optional group discussions. Students had three options instead of one for a class time.

And I found so many creative ways in which class can be conducted around students, rather than a bureaucracy that is a syllabus and policy and attendance and what-not.

So I brought it back. In fact, there was recently a story on the front line—I think there still is on our homepage—a story called “Making Connections.” It's about how Stony Brook writing faculty, Stony Brook faculty members, and Stony Brook graduate students, have come together during the pandemic to support each other. And I'm the person that’s featured in that story who is the organizer, facilitator—the clerical work person who wanted to bring together people and invest a lot of time.

So it helped. The South Asia program helped to build programs here, as others to reflect on and update my own pedagogy.

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CK: And did you see any change in students’ writing or work during the pandemic—an effect that you didn't expect in the actual—

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SS: Yes, a few things. Let me give you a quick, kind of silly example but [it] makes me think deeply about it. When the pandemic happened, I asked my students to turn on their video, if possible, and turn off their audio whenever not speaking.

That was based on students' initial response in the piloting classes. And then one day, I found that everybody has turned off their video but maybe one or two.

And I asked them, I asked you to turn on your video whenever you can, whenever you feel comfortable. So at least I get to see a few faces when I speak or you get to see other people, too.

And they were like, Professor, do you realize that you guys—you professors—are used to going to the front of the class and look at twenty-five faces, or maybe even 200, and speak? We [students] don't do that. We don't go to the front of the class to talk. We're still looking at you and maybe one or two people, if you're sitting in a room. Right?

And I was like, How did I never learn to look at the class from a student's perspective?

It's like when a baby is scared of a dog, you don't realize how big the dog is relative to the baby, right? Even a chihuahua would scare them.

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CK: Right. Different perspective, definitely.

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SS: Different perspective. And so I thought, Wow, that was so unthoughtful of me that I didn't even realize that's what a class looks like versus what a Zoom looks like, right?

So I had to come up with a new technique on Zoom. And I started making students feel more comfortable with the green screen and different moods. I even show some magic by using green screen on a piece of paper, a green color on a piece of paper. And I do all kinds of silly things so that the students relax and forget about having to look at twenty-four people when they turn on their camera.

And these days, they're quiet. Another thing that I realized was that if they're not going to talk, then I'll have to design the class activities—in small groups, they talk a lot more. And then, if there is a situation where they need to listen to me and respond to me or do something together as a full class, I found that if you just link a Google Doc and allow them to just write, they write twenty times more. Maybe 100 times more than they would speak. Everybody writes. There's not an exception. And everybody contributes substantively.

And you see—it's not about, Oh, kids these days are so texty-texty. They're all texting all the time.

It's not that. It's about the human dynamic of what happens when an eighteen-year-old has to face a class, versus a human dynamic of a person who was that eighteen-year-old who could barely speak in front of two people, twenty years ago, [who] now speaks all the time, non-stop, because that's what they do for a living.

So all of these things are coming to this questioning. It's like, you reshuffle your things and you lost control at first. And then you start putting the pieces together. You come up with something even better.

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CK: What would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you experienced during it?

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SS: I would say, one: don't become superficial. Even on positive terms.

Think of binaries. Do I do synchronous or asynchronous? That's not even a question. It's a real horrible premise. I would say, How could you remobilize your agency and foster other's agency? How would you extend your work? How would you reallocate some of the time that you now have that you would use to commute?

But at the same time, I don't envision a new world entirely. People are taking this opportunity to say—like someone, a New York State-level leader who said, "We don't need all of these buildings anymore because [now] we're doing [education] virtually."

And I'm like, Jeez, what's wrong with you? How do we trust you about education when you don't even seem to realize that there are labs and national laboratories and music and art and history—all of that happening. Only a portion, a fragment of education can happen on Zoom effectively, right? And it's bizarre how people seem to take this idea that, I could do some things better on Zoom.

Some things better on Zoom. Don't lie. Don't be confused. Don't be deluded; not everything [can be done online]. Right? And [they say], Oh, this is going to make us completely question the landscape of—no. It took millennia to build some things. Don't give up on the things that need to be built upon or kept the same way because some things can be reinvented.

So that's my message. And I'm thinking—I guess I'll go back to the initial point about privilege. If anything, let us become more conscious about our privilege and let us give more of us to the community, because we only grow by giving. Thank you.

00:00:24:38

CK: Yes. And thank you again, Dr. Sharma. We appreciate you taking part in the Stony Brook University Experiences project.

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SS: Thank you. Thank you.

[end of interview]