



**Writing Integration:
Showcasing the Progress of the gtPathways Initiative**

It has been five years since gtPathways writing was first integrated into the AUCC curriculum in Fall 2007. While GTAs and faculty have been busy enacting the mission of the program, students have been experiencing it, too. We think it is important to receive updates on the beliefs of the students who are directly affected.

In order to determine how beneficial students believe writing integration is to their education, undergraduate students in an ART100 course (n=96) were polled. Two thirds said they believed their education thus far has helped better their written competency under the areas outlined by the gtPathways program.

These consist of the ability to convey a theme or argument clearly and coherently; critically analyze and synthesize the work of others; acquire and apply information from outside sources and reference those sources appropriately; and display competence in standard written English.

In addition to the polled responses, students were also asked to give more detail about their rea-

soning in response to the question: Without eliminating writing entirely, what would you change about the writing you're doing in your courses? A first-year student stated that she was not feeling challenged enough in her courses that involve written work. She said, "All that is available seems to be entry level. We are always going back to the basics." In contrast to this statement, a junior said he would keep the curriculum the same. In his eyes, "300 level classes, with papers and no tests, have allowed improvement." When queried, he explained that introductory courses with writing had helped him be successful as a junior.

Other students in the ART100 class recommended elimination of group projects where writing is involved, especially group papers. 13 students in the course said they were currently in the process of writing collaboratively. The general complaint among the students on this point dealt with the assignments being "more of a headache than they are worth."

While 40 (or nearly half) the students said they felt they were receiving sufficient feedback on assignments,

there were some critiques. One student recommended implementing enhanced paper assignment guidelines since "papers are being given without being told what is expected."

To provide a balance of student response, seniors in an E465 capstone course, Workplace Literacies, (n=25) were asked the same set of questions.

Most of the seniors believed that their freshman and sophomore years were essential in preparation for writing in their college career, as well as improving comprehension of course content. In opposition, one senior stated that she felt that she didn't come into her own as a writer until her junior year with the help of a journalism course.

About half of the ART100 students and all of the seniors who were interviewed believe it is important for written competency to be addressed in courses that do not focus on writing practices; however, they also offered areas for improvement.

For example, one student said that less outlining would be beneficial. Another mentioned that trying to alter a student's entire way of writing is difficult

**Art100 Poll Results
Students were polled on
October 19, 2011.**



Is it important to expect written competency to be addressed in courses that do not focus on writing practices—that is, non-English or non-journalism courses?



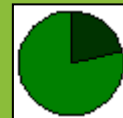
Do you think it is important for students to learn how to write well along with how to listen and observe?



Do you think you will need to write in your professional career?



Will the writing skills you are learning help you in your future profession?



Have you been asked to do any take home essays?



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ART100 Poll Results Continued



Do you prefer papers over in-class essay exams?



Do any of your courses ask you to write during class for the purpose of understanding course content better?



Do you like doing in-class writing that's content oriented? Do you think writing helps you understand concepts better?



So far, do you feel your education has bettered your written competency in the areas outlined by gtPathways?



Are you getting sufficient feedback on assignments?



and often unsuccessful. Still another student offered this insight: "I would prefer to have more free-writes within classes to be able to analyze and work through personal worries, thoughts, and opinions about courses and the content within them. I feel when students are allowed to exercise their personal voice in academia, it gives them space to feel validated as an individual with a voice within their course."

When asked about applying the writing they have done in college to their future, capstone students uniformly agreed that they will benefit as new employees with their knowledge of written competency and the ability to listen and observe the writing practices they will encounter in the professional workplace.

Prevalence of In-Class Writing—A (Perhaps) Surprising Poll Result

Nearly unanimously, students in ART100 indicate that they are being asked to write during class for the purpose of understanding course content better. Of course, this finding should come as no surprise since the poll was done in a class where in-class writing is routinely assigned!

Natalie Barnes*, Instructor of ART100, integrates writing into the ART100 class through a variety of means. Barnes asks students to do increasingly complex tasks, some of which are done individually and some of which are done collaboratively. Among the tasks students undertake is the Venn diagram assignment done in pairs. Students use the Venn diagram to identify elements in Renaissance and Baroque art. The outer parts of the circles are used for elements specific to each movement, the intersecting portion to identify common elements.

*We would like to thank Natalie Barnes for allowing us to poll her students for purposes of this newsletter!

Writing is also being integrated into the daily fabric of instruction in PSY100, Introduction to Psychology. Course Director Dr. Karla Gingerich explains that writing has only been a significant component of the course since 2007. Since then, both formal papers and in-class writing have been integrated, and now a study is being conducted in cooperation with researchers from Washington University of St. Louis to examine whether in-class writing has an effect on test performance and long-term retention of course material. In this controlled study, students in fall 2011 sections of PSY 100 are doing some two dozen in-class writing prompts and then are taking content exams (multiple-choice) that test their degree of understanding of key concepts. In contrast, control questions simply ask students to do what is normally done—take notes and copy information from slides presented alongside the course lecture. The study asks, "Do students learn more when asked to write about a topic?"

The in-class writing prompts that are being tested in PSY100 vary in complexity but generally take less than 10 minutes. For purposes of the course and the study, writing is being defined broadly and includes such things as developing a concept map, designing a table of information, or writing an "imagined dialogue" between two theorists. At the end of each unit, students take the normal exam. Performance on these exams will be analyzed to determine whether writing had an effect on learning as demonstrated through exam performance.

The second part of the study will retest students in January to see how much of the information has been retained. The finding from this part of the study will help researchers understand the strength of the effect of writing on content comprehension and retention of ideas.

Tip: For in-class writing ideas, read John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996 and 2011

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A Review of Graff, Birkenstein & Durst's *They Say, I Say* Julian Nolen—GTA Psychology

In many ways, the concepts expressed in Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst (2009) describe an effective method for engaging in the processes of representing and responding to ideas in an academic setting. Perhaps the most important idea driven home by Graff et al. (2009) is that writing is neither a monologue (words merely “spoken” on a page) nor a dialogue (language exchanged only with the reader). Instead, the process of writing is a form of communication that responds to—and resonates through—an evolving community of academics, professionals, and laypeople alike. As a result, much of the discussion in Graff et al. (2009) is guided by an assumption that writing most effectively moves new ideas through a community when it first engages in a concerted reflection upon the preexisting ideas within that community.

Thus, whether one is responding to defenders of the fast-food industry (Banzhaf, 2009)*, remarking upon the intellectual merits of *Family Guy* (Peacocke, 2009), or refuting popular criticisms about the use of technology among America’s youth (Goldwasser, 2009), it is crucial for a writer to first acknowledge the existing paradigms that surround the chosen topic. Once these ideological antecedents have been thoroughly engaged with and reported to the audience, the writer can then move on to either agree with or challenge those ideas. Additionally, Graff et al. (2009) remind us of our responsibility to report those ideas accurately and with some measure of respect for the intellectual ecosystem that brings them to life.

Still, Graff et al. (2009) may not capture the entire enterprise. Straub (1996), for instance, looks beyond the

community of *ideas* and reminds us to consider the people behind the writing. According to Straub (1996), it is not only the concepts expressed upon the page that should inform our understanding, but also the relationships that give them context and meaning. Straub (1996) suggests that we go beyond the analysis of what “they say” to address not only the ideas written on paper but the human beings behind the page.

Ultimately, the most central question addressed by *They Say, I Say* is this: How can we take advantage of the preexisting ecology of thought (what *they say*) to inform, develop, and strengthen what *we say*?

Yet an even more important point (and an idea that Straub (1996) makes clear) is that the process of writing opens up a powerful dialogue not only among diverse ideas but across communities of people. As a result, it becomes crucial not only to write in a way that represents the dichotomy of “they say/I say,” but also to address the implications of “*they are/I am.*” In doing so, we inscribe our humanity upon the page and become deeply invested in the “social community” (Graff et al., 2009, p. vii) of writing for a specific time, topic, audience, and purpose. Effective writing challenges the distance between both ideas and people, thus setting the foundation for a bridge that transcends social gaps.

**All sources are drawn from Graff et al. (2009), which is one of the texts used in E608.*

References

- Graff, G., Birkenstein, C. & Durst, R. (2009). *They say, I say: The moves that matter in academic writing*. New York: Norton.
- Straub, R. (1996). The concept of control in teacher response: Defining the varieties of “directive” and “facilitative” commentary. *College Composition and Communication* 47 (2). 223-251.

gtPathways and the GTA professional dossier

GTAs working with gtPathways are building their resumes/CVs while they help undergraduates with their writing. These skill sets are transferable to both industry and academic settings. Among the skills GTAs build through the professional development associated with gtPathways, which includes the pre-service orientation, E608, grading reviews, and follow-on workshops, are the following:

- Calibration/norming techniques for obtaining reliability in assessment
- Best practices when responding to writing
- Theoretical foundations for understanding undergraduate learners and their development as writers
- Low-stakes and high-stakes writing assignments that enhance learning and new-knowledge retention
- Plagiarism prevention and detection
- Error (mechanics/grammar) pattern analysis
- Working with ESL writers
- Designing and implementing peer reviews

gtPathways GTAs also develop a repertoire of response strategies, including reader-response comments, questioning comments that probe student understanding, and prioritized comments that help students focus their improvement efforts in their next paper. gtPathways GTAs see students as their readers and GTA comments as their own writing performed for a very real audience. GTAs ask themselves whether the student will understand and be able to work from their feedback. As a result, GTAs become increasingly aware of the rhetorical challenges of writing for varied audiences and develop their own range of writing abilities in the process.

gtPathways GTAs are well positioned to become leaders in disciplinary writing within their departments and in their future professional settings.