Moving Forward: Responses to Writing Integration

As many departments this fall faced the difficult task of integrating a 25% writing requirement into their curricula, Dr. Karla Gingerich, Course Coordinator of PSY100 (formerly PY100), could sympathize. Last year, the Psychology Department piloted the Writing Integration Program and began a tentative revision of their core class, PSY100. They were unfamiliar with many of the better practices associated with assigning and responding to student writing, and they were confronted by the additional challenge of incorporating it into one of the University’s most highly attended courses. While Psychology understood and supported the basic tenets of the Writing Integration Initiative, they struggled with its implementation. “We were asking ourselves to do things that, it turns out, we didn’t need to be doing,” says Dr. Gingerich. For instance, they developed overly complex grading sheets (rubrics) and tried to provide detailed editing advice on every student paper.

This year, thanks to additional University funding, more resources are available to help departments meet the new writing integration requirements. Sue Doe, Coordinator of the GTPathways Writing Integration Program, provides training sessions on writing integration issues, offers a one-credit course for Writing GTAs, provides individual assistance to faculty and GTAs, and maintains a new web site to support the GTPathways writing initiative. These efforts are aimed at providing instructors and Writing GTAs with the basic tools they need to create meaningful writing assignments, grade and respond to student writing, and integrate writing into classroom delivery of course material in order to enhance learning.

George Stetson, a Writing GTA in Political Science, says the erroneous assumption that these techniques develop intuitively can be one of the largest handicaps instructors now face. “Just because you can write and just because you’re a scholar doesn’t mean you can teach this,” says Stetson, “I think just recognizing that is a huge first step.”

Will Shoshin, a doctoral candidate and Teaching Fel-

Tuning in to Turnitin.com

Greg Dickinson and his colleagues in Speech Communications had become discouraged by the effort involved in sniffing out the original sources of student papers that were suspected of plagiarism. So this year they invested as a department in a subscription to Turnitin.com. With Turnitin subscribing parties pay an initial subscription fee and then a per-paper fee. The Speech Communications Department reports that their subscription costs little more than giving up the purchase of a single new computer.

And the benefits, they believe, have made the price worthwhile. Dickinson says that the subscription mostly serves as deterrence to students who know up front that their papers are being screened. Yet Turnitin also provides another way of teaching appropriate use of sources. Dickinson says, “We’re reinforcing source use in multiple places.”

With Turnitin students submit their papers to the software, and the software produces an “originality” report, comparing each paper to the thousands of papers in the expanding database, using a word matching process that nearly instanta-

About GTPathways:
GTPathways general education courses are courses that the state of Colorado guarantees to transfer within public institutions of higher education statewide. Approved courses in GTPathways work to build competency in five areas, among them written communication. CSU’s AUCC codified the goal of written competency by establishing a 25% writing requirement for certain core courses. To read CCHE’s expectations for Written Competency go to: www.state.co.us/cche/academic/transfer/criteria/competency/writtencomm.pdf
neously compares a student’s words to the thousands of words stored in its database. As a paper is submitted, it becomes part of the database, so even local papers that are submitted during a semester can be compared instantaneously to others, and these are maintained in the database for comparisons done next semester and next year. Such an approach serves notice to “paper-recyclers.” At the same time, Turnitin reports that student privacy is guarded since the database records the paper with a document number.

One option the software offers is the opportunity for students to submit their papers early and then go back and revise to bring their “originality levels” within a desirable range. This range can vary, Dickinson explains, since some papers will be more reliant on outside sources than others. Turnitin does not recognize citations, so any quoted material, even if it’s cited, will be flagged on the originality report. It is then up to the instructor to check the areas that are highlighted as having word matches with another source. If these words are properly cited, then a benign use of sources has occurred. Dickinson says that this process reinforces appropriate source citation.

Dickinson also reports that in the Speech Department students submit their papers both in electronic form

Responses Continued...

low in Psychology, has redesigned aspects of his course to make better use of the writing integration. “What’s actually in the curriculum or what gets covered hasn’t really changed or been affected. How it gets covered has changed,” he says. “With writing involved, the way I’m covering [the material] is geared a little bit differently. I think students understand it better. I see on their tests . . . they’re averaging 7, 8 points higher than they did last year. I can only attribute this to the fact that they’re learning the material better by writing about it.”

Dr. Alexandra Bernasek, Associate Dean, College of Liberal Arts, and Professor of Economics, believes the feedback students receive on assignments aids in their development as academic writers. “I think they will have many more opportunities to write,” says Dr. Bernasek, “as well as to get feedback on that writing and to make improvements so that once they get through the core their writing skills should be a lot better. By the time they get into their upper-division courses, where they are expected to write more, they should be starting, from a higher level.” That’s good news for Jake Benfield, another doctoral candidate in the Psychology Department and a Teaching Fellow. “I used to teach the upper-division labs and they have to write an APA-style paper, this big research report, 15 to 18 pages, and the writing was horrible,” Benfield says. “The biggest value [of this writing integration effort] we might not see for three years. The goal would be that my freshmen now, taking my 100-level class, are developing writing skills.”

Professor Sandy Davis, Political Science, is optimistic about the potential for student writing: “I hope the writing does give students an opportunity to think about a more general question,” she says. “If you’re using multiple choice, you’re dealing with much smaller bits of information, and whether it be a research paper or an essay, they’re going to have to think about more global kinds of questions.”

Shoshin advises, “If you do this right, it’s not necessarily more work. You can get the students to communicate effectively, to write well.”

AN IN-CLASS WRITING TIP

“To summarize an in-class video, we use a template of blank ‘idea boxes,’ encouraging students to find main ideas instead of merely listing events. One box is for a personal supporting example. Students then trade papers and must attach the appropriate course terminology to their peer’s example.”

Marc V. Richard
Teaching Fellow PSY100,
Classroom of 400+ students
Katy Stephen … A Student Writer’s Perspective

Katy Stephen is in Marc Richardson’s PSY100 class where she writes academic papers and regularly does in-class writing. The in-class events are moments that Richardson calls WTF’s, short for “Where’s the Fun?”—a novel customization of the generic concept of Write To Learn or WTL.

For Katy’s first writing assignment in PSY100, she was assigned to design an experiment, to dream up data, and then report the findings while using the essential vocabulary of the course, specifically the notions of dependent and independent variables. Katy says she was expected to explain why the scientific method is needed and how it works, applying the scientific method to a real case, she wondered whether listening to music affects a person’s performance on homework.

Katy says the goal of the assignment was to help students become more aware of the scientific method’s usefulness for inquiring into any question they might have. “We really can’t do without it,” she says.

When asked if doing this writing assignment required any special effort from her, Katy replied that the assignment reinforced what was going on in the course, motivating her to return to the textbook and the lecture notes as well as to review essential vocabulary. She says that this approach is different from your average test because with the test you only need to recognize the key words, while with writing you have to use the terms accurately for the circumstances you’ve described. Further, Katy says that she learned what’s involved in applying the scientific method, explaining its principles all the way through from start to finish of the experiment’s description.

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Turnitin.com Continued...

Turnitin as well as in traditional hard copy. Instructors then engage in two separate processes, one having to do with the originality report via Turnitin and the other a traditional grading exercise, including marginal and end commenting. “It’s an additional step and, in many ways, involves more work,” Dickenson acknowledges, “but where it saves time is when the Google search is avoided, the one where you’re trying to track down the original source for a paper that appears to be plagiarized.”

Dickinson also points out that using Turnitin amounts to more work for students, too. Yet such work, Dickenson argues, marks the program’s true value. Students who might otherwise avoid doing the work—and the learning—that’s involved with an honest effort, are now absolutely required to engage in this effort.

What do YOU think about plagiarism detection software? Drop Sue Doe a line at Sue.Doe@Colostate.Edu and we’ll report the results in the next newsletter.

Writing Tip:

“Write-to-Learn exercises can be used to gauge students’ understanding of a topic covered in class. In my Physiological Psychology lab course, asking students to detail what belongs in the Methods section of a paper or to differentiate between two similar physiological measures, we’ve discussed are both good ways for the students as well as the teacher to assess understanding of a concept without a graded quiz.”

— Amanda E. Sensenig, Instructor, Physiological Psychology Laboratory

Opinions vary on the use of plagiarism detection software. Sample challenges include:

- Graduate writing tutors at Indiana University of Pennsylvania report that they could, with little effort, utilize options within Turnitin to pull up whole documents with student authors’ identifying information still intact and visible on the documents. *
- Some students argue that they have little choice but to relinquish both control and ownership of their texts, or else risk failing the course. A student at McGill University in Montreal successfully sued his university on this point in 2004.
- Once a program subscribes to Turnitin, that program must continue to subscribe in order to maintain the ability to check any paper, even those authored locally. Once submitted, papers become the property of Turnitin.
- The Writing Program Administrators official policy on plagiarism detection advises faculty and universities to “use plagiarism detection services cautiously . . . [as] their availability should never be used to justify the avoidance of responsible teaching methods.” WPA advises: 1) have clear policies and examples that are discussed in class, 2) make assignment designs that sequence expectations to discourage last-minute writing, 3) avoid generic topic assignments, 4) provide direct instruction in disciplinary conventions for citation.

—For more information, go to http://writing.colostate.edu/ GTPathways/plagiarism.cfm
TILT and Teaching Certificates

The Graduate Teaching Certificates program, offered through the Institute for Learning and Teaching (http://tilt.colostate.edu), provides graduate students an opportunity to learn about, reflect on, and practice teaching at the post-secondary level. The program is flexible, allowing graduate students to focus on areas of teaching that most interest them and best meet their professional needs. In collaboration with the Graduate School and Computer Training and Support Services, the Institute offers four Teaching Certificates:

- The Certificate in College Teaching*
- The Certificate in Service-Learning
- The Certificate in Teaching With Technology
- The Certificate in Learning Management Systems

Visit the Teaching Certificates Web page at http://tilt.colostate.edu/grad/certificates/.

*E680 GTPathways Writing Integration and GTPathways Writing Workshops can contribute toward The Certificate in College Teaching.

The Writing Center

The CSU Writing Center offers the following services, including half-hour walk-in sessions at the following times and locations:

- Eddy 6: M-Th, 10:00-4:00
- Morgan Library, Su, 6:00-9:00
- Corbett Hall, T, Th, 6:00-8:00
- Braident Hall, W, 6:00-8:00

—Online Consultations: Submit drafts to the Writing Center through the link at writing@colostate.edu.
—Writing Center Tutorials: Students seeking additional help with academic writing can enroll in a WCT, a weekly, one-hour consultation.
—Writing Workshops: In association with the Writing Across the Curriculum Program, we offer a number of workshops that address topics as various as “Writing the Essay Exam” to “Writing the Dissertation Abstract.” Visit our Website for details.

Writing@CSU

The Writing@CSU Web site and its Writing Studio are designed to help writers by providing access to writing guides, activities, tools, and links to other resources available on the Web. The site offers an experience similar to a well-run workshop - - timely advice from teachers, feedback from other writers, helpful examples, and access to tools (such as the To-Do List, Ideas, Outline, Bibliography, Draft, Blog, and ePortfolio tools). These tools can help any writer write effectively for varied audiences and occasions.

The work a writer creates in Writing@CSU’s Writing Studio is stored in a database so that it can be revised, shared with other writers, or submitted to other writers for comment. A writer’s work is kept in a confidential, password-protected account so that the only people who can view the work are the writer and others the writer invites to review it. To get a Writing Studio account, simply go to http://writing.colostate.edu and create one.

Writing Studio Instructors can create and manage class pages -- and any teacher can request to become a Writing Studio Instructor by simply sending an email message to Mike Palmquist at Mike.Palmquist@ColoState.edu or to Jill Salahub at Jill.Salahub@Colostate.edu.

Dedicated Tutoring

at the CSU Writing Center:

Collaborating with faculty in writing-intensive courses, the Writing Center “dedicates” a consultant, who has comprehensive knowledge of the discipline-specific writing conventions, to work with students in those courses.

If you are interested in working with the Writing Center to develop a Dedicated Tutoring program for your class or classes, please contact:

Lisa Langstraat, Writing Center Director, at lisa.langstraat@colostate.edu.

TO:

Sue Doe, Coordinator
Office Location: Eddy 314
Phone Number: 491-6839
Email: Sue.Doe@colostate.edu
Web Address: http://writing.colostate.edu/GTPathways/index.cfm

GTPathways Writing Integration Contact Information

Sarah Sloane (Director of WAC) at Sarah.Sloane@ColoState.Edu or Associate Director of WAC, Laura Thomas at Laura.Tomass@ColoState.edu

WAC