The role of a behind-the-scenes GTA can include not only providing feedback to students but also active instruction. In order to accomplish this goal, one must utilize effective methods in order to encourage students to engage with the commenting and feedback that is provided on papers. Based on the well established psychological phenomenon of the generation effect (e.g., Jacoby, 1978) and the notion of elaborative rehearsal (Craik and Lockhart, 1972), well crafted feedback not only provides students with evaluative information, but actively aids in learning. Within the psychological literature, a robust effect on increased retention occurs when people are required to actively generate, or create, information. This “generation effect,” when compared to simply passively viewing presented information, allows information to be retained over longer intervals of time.

Despite the seemingly simple nature of the generation effect, much room exists for application of the idea to the context of writing feedback. Foremost, in order to reap the benefits of the generation effect on paper commenting, we must be sure to correctly craft our comments. By posing a question in response to something a student writer has written, not only will the student be encouraged to address the question, but he or she will also generate a response (whether mentally or in written form) that has increased cognitive durability. This enhanced durability allows for the student to more easily make connections between different thoughts, or to synthesize seemingly unrelated portions of their paper.

In addition to posing questions to probe a student’s knowledge of a topic (and encourage more thinking and engagement with the subject matter), comments can benefit from forming relations between pieces of information.

(continued … p.3.)
Wedding Technology and the Classroom: A gtPathways Profile of Professor Mike Palmquist

If you are unfamiliar with the name Mike Palmquist, that’s probably because most of his recent work at Colorado State University has not been in front of the classroom, but in administration where he works to improve education at CSU for faculty and students alike. As Associate Vice Provost and the Director of Colorado State’s Institute for Learning and Teaching, or TILT program, Palmquist today continues a long career of helping instructors better adapt to new and changing ideas and technologies.

Palmquist is no stranger to teaching. He arrived at Colorado State in 1990 and was later named professor of English and a University Distinguished Teaching Scholar. A rhetoric and composition scholar, Palmquist has developed the WAC Clearinghouse located at (http://wac.colostate.edu), an online compendium dedicated to providing access to WAC resources and pedagogical publications, digital books, and related resources (See accompanying story.) The WAC Clearinghouse is only one example of what Palmquist sees as strong university interest in the marriage of pedagogy and technology.

Palmquist says that in the early 1980s, administration and faculty began to look at technology seriously. Still, there was the fear that faculty might allow technology to drive pedagogy.

As an example, he recalls the way new chat technologies were initially integrated. “Chat was exciting,” Palmquist says, “because it challenged traditional notions of text.” However, some instructors allowed the technology to drive their lesson planning, conducting their entire classes using chat technologies, and losing sight of their overall goals for the course.

He says that given such potential for abuse, the advice not to allow technology to drive pedagogy makes sense. Today, faculty have become adept at using many new technologies, and understand the ways technologies have influenced our understanding of what it means, for instance, to write. One example, Palmquist says, is how instructors today approach source-based research. Students used to find it difficult to locate enough sources for their research projects. Now, there is more than enough material readily available, but students must become better at evaluating sources for relevance and reliability.

Palmquist offers that while technology can change course goals in the classroom, the most basic goals remain unchanged. For instance, there’s still a need to conduct and synthesize research into a document. But how to arrive at that end has changed. In writing, for example, one must still develop an understanding of audience and rhetorical structures, but instructors have now had to shift their emphasis to contending with new technologies, such as wikis and blogs and writing for the Internet. In this way, the marriage of technology and pedagogy is inescapable. The advice familiar to instructors in the 1980s to not allow technology to dominate the classroom has been slightly modified to a need to find a balance between technology and course goals.

Finding this balance may begin with having a firm understanding of where students are situated in regards to their use of technology. Palmquist believes that there is a common misconception that students are technologically adept. In general, he argues, this is not the case. He says that students are familiar with writing tools and are “pretty competent in that area.” He further recognizes that students enter the classroom with a firm knowledge of using social networking sites, but students often “don’t think outside those boundaries.” In many ways, he argues, students are adept at being users, but not creators. When it comes to using more complex technologies, where creation is a component, most students are just as uninformed as students were ten years ago.

Having a better understanding of students’ capability of using technology, as well as having an understanding of the rhetorical context of many new technologies, might assist instructors in creating a balance of technologies and course goals in the classroom. Five years ago, Palmquist says, there was a general resistance to the use of
When applying comments to a paper, active instruction can encourage students to form new associations and deeper understanding of the issues they are writing about. This idea connects to the notion of elaboration, which is well understood as an optimal way to encode information into a long-term store. In essence, one can “elaborate” by attaching new or novel information to older, already established information in long-term memory.

Commenting can achieve this goal in multiple ways. At the most basic level, comments should suggest how pieces of information within a paper can be linked. For example, a responder writes, “It seems to me that your statement X contradicts statement Y. Could you explain more about why you find them compatible?” A writer then considers the questions and deepens his or her understanding of the issues of interest (X and Y), while at the same time generating an answer or augmenting his or her explanation of the connection. Thus, a student not only receives instruction but acts upon it directly based on the feedback. This learning cycle constitutes instruction that augments the traditional instruction in the course.

Further, this approach establishes a dialogue chain between the student and the responder, allowing for the instructional process to proceed beyond the bounds of the specific written feedback alone.

References

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The Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT)

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*E608 & gtPath workshops count toward your certificate!
If your teaching involves the integration of writing and you sometimes feel at a loss for resources, here is a valuable website. Go to the homepage of Writing@CSU, (http://writing.colostate.edu) where you can see the WAC Clearinghouse link on the lower right side of the screen. Just click the link and you will face the figure to the right. Now enjoy surfing the various links on the screen which lead you to a great deal of useful information about writing across the curriculum or WAC.

Although there are countless writing websites on the internet, not all of them are of equal quality. The WAC Clearinghouse, contained within the larger resource, Writing@CSU, offers vast resources for anyone interested in writing in the disciplines and across the campus.

You can see several linked icons on the home page, taking you to complete online journals and books on writing in the disciplines as well as various other resources for the faculty member seeking theories and ideas for writing integration. You may be particularly interested in scanning recent issues of the online journal Across the Disciplines or perhaps you will download one of the digital books related to writing across the curriculum.

What information or tips do you need regarding writing in your discipline? Assigning writing? Fair grading? Just type the words in the search box. For example, you could search the site for information about WAC initiatives such as Writing Fellows programs. These programs may link graduate students who have obtained advanced instruction in writing with other graduate students and/or with undergraduates in their departments. Connecting to the link about Writing Fellows would provide program and contact information about this interesting writing mentorship idea, which is used in many locations.

The WAC Clearinghouse was created to support teachers of writing across the disciplines and is considered the definitive online resource for writing across the curriculum programs. It was designed, developed, and continues to be maintained here at CSU.

We encourage you to visit this site and plunge into the ocean of useful information it showcases. Here you will find a community where professional writing resources are shared and developed. When it comes to integrating writing, there is no single strategy, only constant updating through resources like the WAC Clearinghouse. Bookmark it today!