Professor Gamze Yasar, Assistant Professor of Political Science

Creative integration can occur in a variety ways; for some it happens by coincidence. Professor Yasar was pregnant, preparing for maternity leave, and trying to come up with a second paper assignment for her political science class. She says, “For the second paper, I just couldn’t be creative. I thought: Let them revise the first one!” However, after the positive responses from her Graduate Teaching Assistants and the marked improvement she saw in her students as a whole, Professor Yasar realized that she had inadvertently stumbled upon a valuable teaching method.

Her integration of the assignment even now contains an element of surprise, but this time it is the students who are caught off guard. The first paper assignment involves a topic that has not been covered in class. The topic allows for two or more theories which the student can pick from and then apply to the concrete topic. It is a typical political science paper revolving around the description and analysis of a theory with respect to a particular case, for instance, the social democracy theory as applied to the healthcare debate.

Professor Yasar then norms the paper grading based on five randomly selected papers, allowing both herself and the GTAs extensive time to grade and give comprehensive feedback. Also, in working with the GTAs, she makes an effort to educate them on the rubric and requirements before having the students meet with them for individual tutoring, so that the GTAs are more prepared.

Then comes the second paper assignment, and the surprise for the students: it is the exact same prompt. The students, she says, are not initially thrilled with this idea. However, she explains her rationale. Usually, students do not read the feedback they receive on their papers. She recalls even seeing a few students throw their papers in the trash on their way out the door. This assignment offers them the chance to revise the first paper, practically incorporating the suggestions and comments received only a week earlier. Also, there are higher standards for this paper, and the students are required to integrate new outside sources. Also, they must write a postscript describing their process of re-writing.

The results, according to Prof. Yasar, are overwhelming. “They improve significantly!” she says of the difference between this paper and the first. When asked whether this improvement was seen when she previously assigned two different topics, she said this. “We got almost the same quality in both papers with almost no improvement, because they kept repeating the same mistakes.”

To revise, some students utilize the written comments only, others visit during office hours or attend one of the GTA workshops. Prof. Yasar may not have initially intended to come up with a creative way to improve student writing, but with this method, she certainly has.

Scholarship and Research*

In this, the fourth year of the gtPathways writing integration, it is a pleasure to report on some of the research and scholarship in writing integration that has emerged from this initiative.

Gamze Yasar, Political Science, is studying the instructional experiment she describes in this issue. Her study “Learning through Writing: Teaching Critical Thinking Skills in Writing Assignments” was accepted for presentation at the Feb 2011 American Political Science Association Teaching and Learning Conference.

Karla Gingerich, Psychology, has been engaged for two years in ongoing writing research related to gtPathways and has received two grants for this work. Her first study looked at the effects of various forms of direct instruction on student writing performance. The second, ongoing now, looks at the development of GTA grading and commenting skills.

Natalie Barnes, Art, is studying the value of low-stakes writing integration in the large introductory art classroom and its effect on learning and engagement. She hopes to publish her findings in the journal Art Education.

*Contact Sue Doe for assistance with research and publication opportunities related to writing integration. Sue can be reached at sue.doe@colostate.edu.
Making the Most of a Requirement:  
Three Interviews on Writing Integration in the Disciplines

Professor Karla Gingerich,  
Course Director  
Psychology 100

For Professor Gingerich, writing integration in PSY100 is about meeting the primary goals of an introductory psychology course and making the class a better learning environment for the students. There are two kinds of writing in general psychology classes, in-class mini-writings and out-of-class papers, which occur in a series of stages. Dr. Gingerich explains that mini-writings are low-stakes assignments worth three out of eight hundred points. They ask the students to immediately apply what has just been taught, and offer pre-writing practice for essays that will later incorporate the particular concept. These provide Professor Gingerich a chance to check student understanding and make sure her teaching methods are effective. Staged assignments are also used to develop student skills related to critical research evaluation so that students are better able to write the formal paper.

The out-of-class papers are enrichment essays that ask students to both apply class concepts and draw on abilities they are developing and in some cases already have. For instance, in teaching the skill of evaluating research, a central goal of Psychology 100, Professor Gingerich asks students to draw upon their everyday use of evaluation: “When you evaluate something, what do you do...you use some criteria to determine whether something is valuable. This could be something you want to buy, even someone you want to date.” This work leads to Stage 1 of the six-part assignment in which students are asked to use their incoming ability to evaluate a popular article dealing with a claim about behavior.

Over the course of the rest of the semester, students are then assisted with developing strategies for writing this paper more effectively, which includes developing criteria for research evaluation and writing an essay based on that evaluation. Dr. Gingerich says, “After students write their initial essay, they are better able to identify their difficulties with the assignment and their need for skills associated with evaluating a claim about research-derived findings.”

To support this effort, the instructors of PSY100 work with the GTAs who offer feedback on paper drafts and hold workshops to help students with these challenges. Among the other stages of the assignment are the writing of a thesis paragraph, the construction of an argumentative brief, and the application of evaluation skills to a professional journal article that reports on research. All of this then leads to the Stage 5 assignment, when students get another opportunity to write an evaluation of a psychological claim made in the popular press, incorporating what they have learned through feedback on their earlier papers, the staged assignments, workshops, and additional class sessions on research evaluation. For the final Stage, Stage 6, students are asked to write a postscript describing the development of their ability to evaluate and to think critically about behavior claims they encounter in popular media sources.

Before gtPathways, Professor Gingerich says that there was little to no writing included in general psychology courses at CSU. Now, with 25% of the grade associated with writing, Dr. Gingerich believes that the effort has improved the students’ overall comprehension of course material. She also says that she can see from student papers that one of the primary goals of the course, that students become critical evaluators of psychological claims, is being met. They are applying their knowledge, which pushes them to new levels of understanding. In addition, when the students write a good paper, she sees a kind of pride and involvement with the material that she doesn’t find when using multiple choice tests. Also, by combining the use of tests and papers to assess the students’ comprehension, students are able to demonstrate their learning in different ways.

Dr. Gingerich says that PSY100 is now “lightyears ahead” of where they were at the beginning of the writing integration. In particular, she cites that the GTAs are much better equipped, the grading rubric is instructive, and feedback is directed at improving student writing as a whole, instead of simply justifying the grade.

Integrating writing into the psychology program has not been an easy task, but today the program runs smoothly and students benefit from the individualized approach. Because writing helps further the goal of introductory psychology students becoming more critical thinkers, Professor Gingerich feels this has been a worthwhile effort.
Making the Most of a Requirement: Three Interviews on Writing Integration in the Disciplines

Professor Natalie Barnes, Instructor of Art

For Professor Natalie Barnes, integrating writing into her Art History class is all about variety, about learning, and about deepening student engagement with course content. Some assignments are very simple, while others help students learn how to construct a formal essay. The simplest assignment asks students to write two sentences: one, a statement of something they learned from class that they are certain of, and two, something they have learned in class that they are not sure of. This approach allows Professor Barnes to see what the students are understanding, what they are mistaken about, and what they can identify they are unsure about. This approach identifies patterns that help her to strengthen her teaching.

A particular low-stakes assignment that Professor Barnes likes to use involves asking students to write a short piece in class about the most significant piece of art they have studied thus far. Here, students are able to personalize what they have learned. Interestingly, Professor Barnes has found that the students overwhelmingly internalize those pieces of art that she has introduced and described with a story, something she has adapted her teaching to do often.

Another low-stakes, in-class assignment, that Professor Barnes uses is the Venn Diagram Activity. Here students are asked, in groups of two or three, to differentiate between the Renaissance and Baroque periods, thinking critically and using their notes to create the diagram, which graphically shows how different artists overlap in their manipulation of design elements, building upon the ideas of their predecessors.

An additional group writing assignment asks the students to go to a local art exhibit and find one piece that represents art and another that represents craft. The groups then define what is meant by the notions of “art” and “craft” and defend their definitions to the class, using their chosen pieces as illustration and evidence of their arguments.

Professor Barnes also teaches the essay form, asking students to “construct an essay without actually writing one.” What this means is that she divides the class into groups and gives each a pad of sticky notes. Students are then sent out to a particular art piece to make statements about it on the notes. They are allowed to say something as simple as “this piece has a lot of red.” However, there is a catch; more than one group is assigned to each piece, and each statement that matches another group’s must be discarded. Students then come back to the classroom where Professor Barnes walks them through the different parts of an essay—introduction, thesis statement, body and support, and conclusion. The students are then asked to arrange their sticky notes inside these various parts. In this way the daunting task of formulating an essay is made accessible, and students gain a good sense of what kinds of writing go into each portion of a formal art history paper.

Taken together, these approaches enable students to think critically about art, working outside of the traditional use of slides in art classrooms. These approaches also teach students some of the basics of writing arguments, including how to defend a position with evidence and examples.

Professor Barnes also integrates some creative writing and the writing of field notes into her class. Students might be asked to explore a particular period of art history in more depth through use of personal writing. One student made a journal as though he were traveling with Lewis and Clark, while another wrote a diary as if she were living during the Rococo period. Field writings have asked students to locate an example of Doric Columns on campus and then to reflect on whether the building’s uses match this architectural feature and larger design.

It all comes down to this for Professor Barnes: a variety of writing assignments enhance her understanding of the students and enable her to modify the way she teaches. Also, her particular approach to integrating writing makes the student work easy to grade, an important feature since Art courses do not have the advantage of funded GTA graders.

Most important for Professor Barnes, the writing means that her assessments do not rely entirely on multiple choice exams. Instead, the varied writing assignments engage her students in critical thinking about art in both personal and formal ways, yet are also simpler and more profitable for the students in many ways than are formally assigned essays. Along this line, Professor Barnes is considering examining, whether performance on tests goes up as result of informal writing efforts like the ones described here.

An additional benefit to Professor Barnes’ approach is that given the variety of low-stakes writing approaches she is using, it is unlikely that either Professor Barnes or her students will ever get bored!