TIME TO WRITE

FEEDBACK MANAGER: SUPPORTING WRITING IN LARGE COURSES

Rebecca Lorimer, Writing Across the Curriculum

Anyone who has taught large courses knows how hard it is to give feedback on student writing. To ease the time and effort involved in the process, Professor Robert L. Jeanne (Entomology), Dr. Lillian Tong (Center for Biology Education), Amber Smith (Horticulture), and Bruce Barton (DoIT) have developed Feedback Manager—an efficient, effective way to give feedback on short writing assignments in large lecture courses in any discipline.

Feedback Manager is available for free to all UW-Madison instructors. In a class that is using Feedback Manager, students visit their course website to read a question written by their instructor and submit a short written answer online. The instructor reads students' responses and categorizes them according to patterns in the responses—a group of students, for example, might misunderstand the question in the same way, or another group may write similarly excellent answers. These are the patterns of responses that determine different categories of feedback. The instructor then writes brief feedback for each category and emails the comments back to students.

Feedback Manager is flexible: If necessary, instructors can assign multiple categories to a student's response. If none of the categories applies, or the response requires a unique comment, instructors can write individual feedback. Instructors also can choose how many students receive
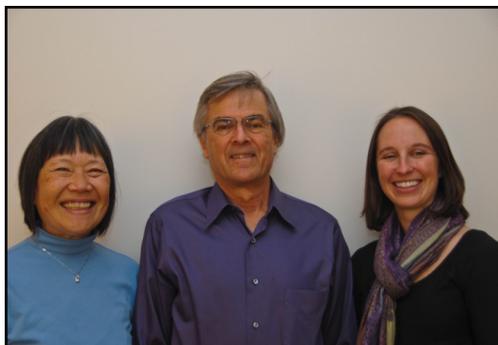
Dr. Lillian Tong, Center for Biology Education; Professor Robert L. Jeanne, Entomology; Amber Smith, Horticulture

feedback on a given exercise, making the feedback process manageable for large courses.

Jeanne and the development team created Feedback Manager hoping to find a way to check in with students, gauge their understanding of course material, and encourage writing in large classes. They also wanted to combine conventional multiple-choice quizzing with short pieces of writing so that students could grapple with class concepts before being tested on them. As Tong explains, "Writing helps students recognize what they know and don't know and how their thinking meets the expectations of the instructor." The short written responses, then, help students see the thinking behind their multiple-choice answers.

The development team was also guided by the belief that writing—even brief an-

Feedback Manager at a Glance:

| Instructor asks open-ended question online | → | Students answer | → | Instructor categorizes responses, writes relevant feedback | → | Students receive feedback |

swers—allows for more higher-order thinking. Tong explains that in biology education, as well as across all disciplines, instructors have been discussing how to move away from memorization-driven education toward "critical thinking and higher-order thinking." Tong says, "Writing is a good way for students to be aware of their ability to think....They need to know how all these little pieces fit, and that can best be done when you put [their thinking] into writing."

An assessment of Feedback Manager, conducted through student and faculty focus groups, surveys, and observations, shows that many of these goals were accomplished, in addition to some that were unexpected. Students reported appreciating the interaction with faculty and were grateful for the praise they received on their brief writing. Amber Smith, who led the assessment process, noted that students were "used to receiving feedback only when they [had] gotten something wrong." Students welcomed the encouraging communication with their instructors, even if brief.

The faculty focus groups also yielded unexpected benefits, creating opportunities for faculty to discuss how students express their ideas in writing. Instructors reported gaining a better understanding of student think-

ing after reading their written responses because the writing revealed the students' process for coming to an answer.

Feedback Manager is not designed only for the sciences. Any instructor of a large lecture course could take advantage of Feedback Manager to give feedback on shorter pieces of student writing like thesis statements, or quick summaries of theme, character, or concept. In many courses, Feedback Manager can help instructors assess students' progress so that they can adjust their teaching accordingly.

Jeanne and his development team are continuing to promote Feedback Manager on campus. Because many groups on campus already use Moodle the course platform in which it was developed, adding Feedback Manager is an easy process.

Tong says, "We have only scratched the surface" of "possible uses people could come up with. We really have a lot of faith in the creativity of the faculty and staff here." Even though the team would be happy to see FM expand, they stress that they aren't attempting to push or sell the tool. Says Tong, "What we're actually trying to push is using…writing, quizzing, feedback, interaction. This tool just makes those things possible." ◆

EXAMPLE: QUESTION, RESPONSE, FEEDBACK

Instructor Question: Self-pollination and cross pollination have different effects on genetic diversity. Do you think that self-pollinating populations would have more or less phenotypic diversity? Why?

Student Response:	**Instructor Feedback:**
I think self-pollinating populations would have less phenotypic diversity. In general, phenotype is the direct physical expression of genotype. If the plant is self-pollinating, that means less genetic variation, which in turn means less phenotypic variation.	Grade: 3 (out of 3) Great answer! It is good that you could connect the effect of genetic diversity on genotype and phenotype.
I think that self-pollinating populations would have more phenotypic diversity because it allows plants to spread beyond the range of suitable pollinators or produce offspring in areas where pollinator populations have been greatly reduced or are naturally variable.	Grade: 0 (out of 3) You have confused self- and cross-pollination. During self-pollination the pollen from a plant is used to fertilize the ova or eggs from the same plant. There is less genetic diversity because there is only one set of genes that can recombine. In contrast, during cross-pollination there are different mothers and fathers so to speak. A single female plant may be pollinated by several male plants. Cross-pollination allows for recombination of the genetic material of many plants.
From an introductory survey of Horticulture taught by TA Amber Smith and Professor Sara Patterson, University of Wisconsin-Madison	

For more information about Feedback Manager: http://cals.wisc.edu/moodle/feedbackmanager/.

By Beth Godbee, English

In almost every discipline, faculty want students to incorporate information and arguments from sources into their papers. It's one thing for students to find theories, arguments, or pieces of evidence. It's another for students to integrate that source material into their own papers and to situate their views or findings alongside those from published sources.

By explaining and modeling rhetorical moves needed to make academic arguments, the supplementary text *They Say / I Say* helps students situate their arguments in academic conversations. Authors Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein aim to "demystify academic writing" and do so, in part, by providing students with templates they can follow to develop their own arguments.

The book moves from an emphasis on "they say"—summarizing, explicating, and quoting what others say—to "I say"—responding to others, distinguishing one's own ideas from others', and explaining the significance of those ideas. The book concludes by bringing these two moves together and introducing meta-commentary as an important move to guide readers through a paper.

Of course, no supplementary text can possibly do it all. If I were teaching with this book, I'd want to think critically with students about the values behind the suggested templates and whose authority is privileged in the rhetorical moves students are encouraged to make.

That said, *They Say / I Say* could be used effectively in a variety of ways. While conferencing with students about papers in progress, you might use the templates to give concrete structures students can follow when revising. In courses with an extensive research project, the book could be discussed occasionally in class when

Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009. 245 pages.

They Say / I Say sells for $16 to $24 new in 2nd edition paperback. The Kindle edition is roughly $10.
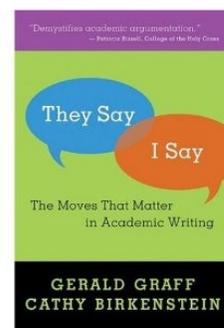
you're explaining the assignment, reviewing a sample paper, or preparing for peer review.

Professor Sarah Thal in the UW-Madison History Department has successfully used the book in writing-intensive courses. She's found this text valuable in helping students analyze complex readings:

> We used the book's focus on templates to help us make sense of some dense, argumentative writing. In one particularly difficult article, students identified phrases or writing strategies that they found helpful, compelling, or confusing; we then discussed how the author used several such phrases throughout the article to build the structure of the argument as a whole. This seemed to help students both read other texts for argument and clarify the logical connections within their own written papers.

They Say / I Say is a good resource to have on hand—to share with students or to assign in your course. ◆

They Say / I Say—Sample Templates

Templates for Making Concessions while Still Standing Your Ground (page 85)

● Although I grant that _____, I still maintain that _____.

● Proponents of X are right to argue that _____. But they exaggerate when they claim that _____.

● While it is true that _____, it does not necessarily follow that _____.

Templates for Adding Metacommentary (pages 129-30)

● My point is not that we should _____, but that we should _____.

● To put it another way, _____.

● Although some readers may object that _____, I would answer that _____.

By Harry Brighouse,
Philosophy and Educational Policy Studies

In fall 2009 I decided to do something different: I gave students permission to write papers in pairs. It was an un- usual class. I had taught a freshman seminar (FIG) in fall 2007, and a group of students from that class asked me to teach another class just for them. So I created a small class that was unusual in several ways. I was seeing a substantial group of students (14 of the original 20) after two years of academic development. They already knew all their classmates. And I knew that all the students wanted to be there.

This last fact was intimidating—I felt that I really had to make the class good. But I also felt some freedom to experiment; so I thought I would experiment with co-authoring.

Why? Mainly I was inspired, as I have been in much of my recent pedagogical practice, by Derek Bok's *Our Underachieving Colleges*. Bok describes the ex- perience of Uri Treisman, a calculus instructor at Berkeley, who noticed that his black students were performing much less well than Asian students. After he established that the gap remained even controlling for how well prepared students were, he looked at their study habits. The difference between the black and Asian students was that whereas Asian students worked in groups, thus enabling them to learn from one another, the black students all worked solo. When they encountered problems, they could not get help, did not turn in their homework, and fell further behind. So he started encouraging black students to work in designated groups outside of class. "The re- sults were dramatic. The grades of black students improved; their drop-out rate fell substantially; and many more than usual went on to major in science and math" (Bok 131-2). There's no suggestion here that innovative pedagogy can close the achievement gap by itself. But every little bit helps.

The Hunch
The hunch is just this: that we learn more and better when working together than when working alone. This has been my own experience. In the first part of my career I wrote exclusively alone, producing the default humanities product of the single-author, lone- scholar paper or book. When I started collaborating with others about a decade ago, I discovered that I learned more and wrote better than when I wrote

alone. My most frequent collaborator and I have written better work together than either of us has written alone, because we bring complementary traits to the process.

Because the unit of real learning in humanities classes is not the homework problem but the paper, I wondered whether encouraging students to collaborate on papers would prompt more learning. Like most academics in the humanities, I am well practiced at holding intrapersonal conversations about the problems I am confronting. One part of me proposes a solution, and another part of me picks holes in it—a back and forth continues until both parts are satisfied with the upshot. Voices in my head (my dissertation supervisor and other influences) contrib- ute to the discussion. Co-authoring, for me, geometrically expands a complex dialogue that is already continuing. But most students are *not* practiced at such intrapersonal conversation—they have not been trained or expected to do it in high school, and we do not expect them to do it in the early years of college. We rarely even tell them that this is how our *own* process works. And they do not have the experience needed to accumulate assorted, and reliably critical,

> "The papers bore the mark of co-authorship...because the detailed exploration of the conceptual space was more comprehensive than most students can manage alone."

voices in their heads. The process of co-authorship builds in an interpersonal conversation that, if the students are diligent, enables them to develop the skills needed to produce intrapersonal dialogue.

Would students learn more writing together than writing apart? My hunch was that they would. So, feeling entitled to experiment, I decided to see what would happen. I required that the students write some papers alone. But they were also permitted to choose a later paper to co- author. I gave them the choice both whether to do it and whom to do it with, simply because of common student aversion to collaboration. Many students resent being put into groups in which, frequently, one person slacks off but gets the grade earned by the work of their col- leagues. And many also wish that they had more work that they could feel true ownership of, which they rarely feel for work in an assigned group. Allowing students to choose their partner, or work alone if they wished, seemed like a way of avoiding both those worries.

Co-authoring is not *less work* than solo-authoring, and it is worth reminding students of this. The idea is that you will learn more, not that you will do less. I reckon each

CO-AUTHORED STUDENT PAPERS

paper I write with my most frequent collaborator takes more work from each of us than any paper we write separately does.

Some Tentative Results
What were the results like? From the 14 students, six chose to co-author. The co-authors were, on average, more confident students. The quality of papers was pretty high overall. Were the co-authored papers better on average? I can't be sure. But I think each of them was better than the individual student produced when writing alone. One particular assignment, which asked authors to explain what principles they would use to guide their allocation of limited educational resources among students with varying needs, and why, triggered much better papers from the co-authors than I think they could have managed alone, because the co-authoring process forced them into long dialogues in which they explored and challenged one another's intuitions about the right way to approach the issue. The papers bore the mark of co-authorship, not because the voice was inconsistent, but because the detailed exploration of the conceptual space was more comprehensive than most students can manage alone.

I told them beforehand that I would give the same grade to both co-authors, and would expect the papers to be better than single-authored papers. Otherwise, my grading process was the same as usual—detailed comments and a bit of editing, supplied to both co-authors. I probably missed a trick in not requiring them to discuss and respond to the comments.

I've subsequently allowed students in a large lecture course to co-author, with similar results—relatively low uptake, from students who are confident both in their own ability and in their choice of partner, and, as might be expected from such students, papers which reveal deeper and more comprehensive thinking than each would have done alone.

I've decided to experiment this semester in a reiteration of the 2007 FIG, requiring that one paper be co-authored, and assigning students to one another for the task. I require a short paragraph, honestly assessing the contribution each made to the process, so that they are pressed to discuss how the intellectual labor is divided, and I ask each to write a paragraph on how the writing process was different from the process they experience when writing alone. I'm looking forward to turning this into a regular part of my teaching—and to finding other ways of breaking free of the idea that producing mini-versions of our standard products is the best way of getting students to learn to think better. ◆

INTRODUCING THE NEW WAC ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Rebecca Lorimer joined the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum in August of this year. In her position as Assistant Director, she has enjoyed meeting faculty, instructional staff, and teaching assistants across campus and learning about Comm-B and writing intensive courses in a range of disciplines. Rebecca continues the fine work of her predecessors, most recently Beth Godbee and Kate Vieira.

Rebecca Lorimer, WAC Assistant Director

Rebecca is a PhD candidate in the English Department specializing in composition and rhetoric, and she has taught both Comm-A and Comm-B courses in addition to teaching in the ESL program, the Writing Center, and the Community Writing Assistance program. Rebecca previously taught developmental and ESL writing courses at San Francisco State University and English as a foreign language at the Universidad Técnica de Machala in Ecuador.

Here at UW-Madison, Rebecca has received the English Department's Early Excellence in Teaching Award and a Humanities Exposed grant for teaching with service learning. In her dissertation, Rebecca is studying how multilingual writers use their languages and literacy practices to write in their everyday lives. Her wider research interests include second language writing, comparative and intercultural rhetoric, service learning, and issues of access in higher education.

This fall Rebecca has been working closely with instructors and TAs in Biocore and the First Year Experience program and co-teaching with faculty in plant pathology and political science. Rebecca has also been consulting with faculty and TAs in a number of departments and programs, including Journalism, Curriculum and Instruction, Communication Arts, History, Urban and Regional Planning and Human Development and Family Studies.

Rebecca is happy to talk with you about designing writing and speaking assignments, responding to student writing, supporting multilingual writers, and conferencing with writers. If you would like to discuss teaching with writing, feel free to contact Rebecca by emailing her at rlorimer@wisc.edu. ◆

Thanks to Comm-B TA Fellows!

Honored for their outstanding teaching in Comm-B courses, these four TAs helped plan and lead the August 2010 Writing-Across-the-Curriculum training for 70 new Comm-B TAs from across campus.

From left to right:

Keith Zukas, Journalism

Julie Keller, Sociology

Andrea McMillen, Zoology

Beatrice Ng'uono Okelo, African Languages and Literature

L&S