



New Chalk Talk

The Center for Learning and Teaching Newsletter
Teaching News

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Writing to Learn?

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A week ago Thursday, I participated in an open forum for AUC faculty where Dr Duane Gruen (Director, Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence and Prof. of English, Arizona State University) and Dr Christine Hult (Associate Dean and Prof. of English, Utah State University) answered questions about “writing in the disciplines”. Dr Gruen and Dr Hult were visiting AUC on an invitation from Dean Hopkins (School of HUSS).

Two issues dominated the discussion, namely a) **how to address the question of faculty (and TAs) teaching in Arabic**, and b) **how to build on the writing skills that students acquire** through AUC’s ELI, Writing Program etc, which apparently worsen with time. The former topic took up the larger share of the discussion, and although we will not address this issue here, a separate body should be seriously looking into the matter if it is as significant as the anecdotal evidence indicates.

The decrease in writing ability from freshman to senior year is not unique to AUC. Similar problems in American colleges resulted in the “Writing Across the Curriculum” (WAC) movement in the 80’s.

WAC programs typically view writing as an active learning strategy which promotes thinking, and they encourage instructors in all disciplines to include writing assignments in their class presentations. The aim is to have students become not only better writers, but also better thinkers and learners in their disciplines. Cognitive psychologists who have examined the relationship between writing and thinking support this claim (Lindemann, 1989). The approach emphasizes what is called “writing to learn” exercises rather than highly polished papers.

“I sometimes get calls from faculty members who are absolutely irate 'I've got this student in my class who can't write. What happened? What did you teach these people in English 1?' Well, writing skills atrophy very quickly. Students may have done very well in English 1 or 2, but if they write very little between their freshman and senior years, they're back in the tenth grade by the time they graduate. Writing skills have to be practiced and reinforced if they're to get better.”

(Lindemann, 1989)

Some AUC faculty members present at the forum suggested that a WAC program be considered for our university in the future.

But the question is what can be done now? What special support services are there for faculty in the disciplines who want to do more with writing in their courses? What types of short "writing to learn" exercises might be useful in the disciplines? What support do students (graduates and undergraduates) have when they need to write a research paper?

The answer can be found at AUC's **Writing Center** (which is part of, but different from, the Writing Program). The Writing Center mainly offers individual tutoring for students, and consultations (or workshops upon request) for faculty. Writing Program instructors or other trained tutors can help students with any writing project at any phase of the process:

- brainstorming topics
- locating and evaluating sources
- organizing and outlining essays
- revising etc, etc.

They can also provide faculty with guidelines that can be helpful to students. "If students are simply asked to write a research paper without guidelines and assignment requirements, then no matter how much training they've had, the majority will be lost", says Jasmine Maklad, Director of the Writing Center.

The Writing Center is located at 5, Youssef el Guindy st, above the AUC clinic.

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Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to aellozy@aucegypt.edu