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Academic Writing and *They Say, I Say*

By Lori Robison

The Composition Program at UND has recently adopted, for all of its Composition I sections and many of its Comp II sections, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (Norton, 2006). We have found that this small, accessible, and easy-to-use volume can have a big impact on student writing. Based on the knowledge that academic writers make particular rhetorical "moves" in their writing, this text works to explicitly name and teach those moves to college students. Graff and Birkenstein convincingly make the case that experienced academic writers rely on a sophisticated array of writing strategies, and that readers of academic prose have come to expect these strategies. The difficulty for students is that these strategies have become so ingrained in the habits and practices of their college teachers, that teachers forget to teach them; we forget, that is, that we once learned them and imagine that they are simply what writers naturally do. As teachers of writing, we complain that students do

not produce "good writing," but we are not able to fully explain what we mean by this phrase or we do not know how to help students identify and practice the writing strategies that we expect.

By using this text in Comp I, we believe that the Composition program is finding ways to communicate more effectively with students about our expectations, about what academic writing is and why it is important, and about how students can become more effective writers in an academic context. While we recognize that very few of our students will go on to academic careers, UND's Composition Program has long realized that learning the principles of academic discourse should be one of the cornerstones of a liberal arts education. Academic discourse assumes that one speaks and writes in conversation with others—with other texts, with what has been thought and written before, and with other people, including those who come from different backgrounds

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Writing as Conversation

By Shane Winterhalter

The writing advice in *They Say, I Say* is predicated on the idea that good writing does not happen in a vacuum, but instead takes place in conversation. While this dialogic approach is often second nature to experienced writers, it can be new territory for first year college students. In fact, many students assume that their writing assignments work like tests—another form to demonstrate mastery of a course's content. In the Writing Center, we often meet with student writers who have invested so heavily in answering each question posed in an assignment that they have neglected the self-reflective processes that would allow them to carefully communicate their information

and ideas in interesting and effective ways.

The writing-as-conversation metaphor employed by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein in *They Say, I Say* has several distinct advantages for instructors and students. One benefit in asking students to think of writing in dialogue with something or someone else is that students often begin their college courses with verbal skills that are more developed than their writing skills. Asking students to understand writing as a responsive process can be an excellent opportunity for students to bring these skills

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"Every writer I know has trouble writing."

-Joseph Heller

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and perspectives. As Graff and Birkenstein so effectively explain to students,

This ability to enter complex, multi-sided conversations has taken on a special urgency in today's diverse, post-9/11 world, where the future for all of us may depend on our ability to put ourselves in the shoes of those who think very differently from us. The central piece of advice in this book—that we listen carefully to others, including those who disagree with us, and that we engage with them thoughtfully and respectfully—can help us see beyond our own pet beliefs, which may not be shared by everyone. (13)

The writing strategies taught in this text have the potential to help students become clearer writers, but, as these authors remind us here, being a "good" academic writer also means being someone who can think critically, who can engage with new ideas—even those that challenge our preconceived ideas and our personal experiences—and someone who can imagine and respect the perspectives of others.

We would like to ask that others who teach writing across campus take a look at this book; even if you choose not to adopt it for your classes, we believe that general familiarity with this text and the strategies it teaches could dramatically improve student writing at UND. If students hear again and again, throughout their undergraduate careers, the terms that were introduced to them in Comp I, they will have a greater chance of really learning them through continued practice. Reinforcing these strategies throughout the curriculum will also help students understand that there are common expectations in academic writing—despite many disciplinary differences. Students, we know, can sometimes believe that what teachers expect from their writing is idiosyncratic and arbitrary; "just tell me what you want so I can get an A," they say to us, and this attitude is undoubtedly fueled by the many different terms we all use when we talk about writing. And while it is important for stu-

dents to understand that there are different conventions—of tone, of citation, of organization—associated with papers, for example, in the social sciences and the humanities, they should also be taught that there is a stable set of academic writing skills that they can work on building as they move throughout the undergraduate curriculum. Across the curriculum we are all interested in, to use Graff and Birkenstein's phrases, seeing students "distinguish what you say from what they say," and include "voice markers" and "metacommentary" in their work.

For those who teach writing—no matter what the discipline—this text and its approach to writing instruction can remind us of some very sound pedagogical principles. If we remember that good academic writing is not the result of natural talent but rather is produced through a learned set of strategies, we will remember that our classroom practices need to help students actually practice those strategies. Class time should be given over not only to naming our expectations, but also to

“good academic writing is not the result of natural talent but rather is produced through a learned set of strategies”

helping students see those expectations enacted in other texts—perhaps in academic work that has been published in our discipline or in sample student papers. Giving students opportunities to draft and revise—and offering peer and teacher feedback on the drafts—creates the conditions under which students can more effectively experiment as writers.

We want students to become very conscious about incorporating such strategies in their writing, and this will take practice and time. It is also important to remember that writing skills mastered in one context can fall apart in another. In other words, a student who can, in Graff and Birkenstein's terms, "say why it matters" and can "plant a naysayer in the text" by the end of Comp I, may not immediately be able to use these strategies when confronted with the new challenges of writing like a sociologist or when asked to work with the new ideas presented in a philosophy course. Each new writing situation and writing task presents challenges for writers, and therefore those of us who ask for writing in our classes have a responsibility not simply to assign writing, but also to teach it. *They Say, I Say* may provide a set of terms and strategies that can help us, as a campus, more actively teach writing.

Extended WAC Workshop

June 16, 17, 18, 19, 22, & 23 from 1:00-4:30

A six-session afternoon workshop on Writing Across the Curriculum will be offered for faculty in June. This workshop is designed to enable faculty to focus intensively, and in collaboration with colleagues from across campus, on developing or redeveloping the writing component of a particular course or course sequence. Up to 10 faculty can be accommodated in this workshop, and participating faculty will receive stipends of \$600 (subject to standard deductions).

On Teaching Lunch Seminar Series

Thurs., April 9 (12:30-1:30)
Swanson Hall Room 10/12

Practical Strategies for Improving Student Writing at UND

Wed., April 22 (12-1)
Red River Valley Room

The fourth in our Teaching with Technology Faculty Seminar Series: Using Video Projects to Promote Student Learning

Join us for these informal lunch-time discussion on teaching-related topics of interest to faculty in all disciplines. To register and reserve a lunch, call Jana Hollands (7-4998 or email: jana_hollands@und.nodak.edu) by noon two days prior to event.

Continued from Writing as Conversation

together. In the Writing Center, tutors often encounter something in a piece of writing that seems arbitrary or haphazard—a rote introduction or conclusion, an abrupt shift in focus, a dropped-in quote with little interpretation. Since tutors have the advantage of working exclusively in a one-on-one setting—already a conversation—they are often able to use these examples as teaching moments. If an essay jumps from point to point without justifying each shift, a tutor might ask the student writer his or her reasons for switching topics. If a student is unable to explain his or her strategy, a tutor can point out that this is a problem. Frequently, a student has reasons for shifting focus but is not yet aware that this should be incorporated into the essay. Tutors can then explain how these reasons would add natural transitions into the text, as well as provide a layer of metacommentary—guiding the reader’s interpretation.

Tutoring is always, by nature, a conversation. *They Say, I Say* aims to help student writers anticipate and employ rhetorical moves that effectively respond to something or somebody else, even when students only imagine the conversations they participate in. For example, instructors sometimes note that students will drop quotes into their text with minimal context. This dreaded “quote bomb” tends to undercut a writer’s control of the writing assignment. It also minimizes a writer’s ability to demonstrate a real understanding of his or her source. Graff and Birkenstein explain how quotations should be framed. They refer to the need to supply a quote with context as a “quotation sandwich.” Instructors have been explaining to students for years that something must come before and after a quote. What is useful, then, about *They Say, I Say* is that by asking students to think of writing as an intelligent conversation, students begin to reflect on their reasons for using quotes and how to best integrate them into their writing. Framing becomes more than just another task; it becomes a vital part of the writing process.

Beginning academic writers sometimes have a sense of how to engage in conversation without realizing these same moves should be applied to their writing. When we teach writing as a process of dialogues, we are able to show our students how to understand the challenges and conventions of academic writing. While this “demystification” of academic writing begins in the composition classroom, it must be developed across the curriculum so that students fully understand how to participate in their chosen fields. The end result, hopefully, is engaged learners who understand writing as a dialogic process and are able to, in their writing, enter into important conversations both in and outside of academics.

We will be discussing *They Say, I Say* and its usage in an *On Teaching* Seminar titled “Practical Strategies for Improving Student Writing at UND” on Thursday, April 9th from 12:30-1:30 pm in Swanson Hall Room 10/12* (signup by April 7th by calling Jana Hollands at 777-4998 or emailing jana_hollands@und.nodak.edu). Also, there is a summer WAC workshop for instructors interested in designing and redesigning writing projects based both on ideas from *They Say, I Say* as well as *Engaging Ideas* by John Bean. This workshop takes place June 16, 17, 18, 19, 22, & 23 from 1:00-4:30 (see page 2 for details). Please visit www.und.edu/dept/oid/summer_workshops.html if you would like more information.

*please note the room change

Additional Summer Workshops

Teaching with Technology Workshop (May 18, 19, 20, 21, 26 & 27 from 8:30 -12:00).

This 6 day seminar/workshop sponsored by OID and facilitated by CILT is designed for faculty interested in using technology to enhance traditional classroom teaching. This includes those who are just getting started using technology, those who are thinking about using it, and those who have used it in limited ways but want to reconsider how they are using it. In this context, “technology” includes such things as course web sites (Blackboard), web research projects, tutorials and animations, social software (wikis, blogs, and journals), “clickers” (audience response system), SecondLife, podcasting and other audio and video enhancements. Registration is limited to 10 faculty, and a \$500 stipend (subject to standard deductions) is offered. The application deadline is April 8, 2009 (note extended deadline) and applications information is available at <http://www.und.edu/dept/cilt/workshops/twt.html>

Assignments and Assessments for Significant Learning (Follow up Workshop on Significant Course Design) May 19, 20 & 21 from 1-4.

This three afternoon workshop facilitated by Anne Kelsch and Joan Hawthorne is intended to help faculty articulate student learning outcomes, and design assignments that advance those outcomes and assessments that gauge them. Registration is open to everyone and faculty who participated in the Creating Significant Learning Through Integrated Course Design Workshop in February are particularly urged to sign up and continue the work they began there.

Participants will receive complimentary copies of books on classroom assessment techniques and rubric design. The registration deadline is May 1, 2009. Register for the workshop by emailing oid@und.edu.

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Please note extended deadlines:

April 8	Teaching with Technology Workshop applications due
April 15	Summer Mini-Project Grant Proposals due (noon)
April 25	POGIL Workshop (see http://new.pogil.org/events/UND1.php)
May 1	Assignments and Assessments for Significant Learning (Follow up Workshop on Significant Course Design) applications due FIDC Travel and Materials Grant Deadline (noon)*

*Should include all travel and materials requests through Aug. 31 (the next FIDC deadline is Sept. 1)

On Teaching is published six times a year as a service to UND faculty.

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