

Thinking and Writing at the University Level

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Gambell's survey presents much useful information on a topic that seems daily to grow in importance. Complaints about the quality of student writing have indeed begun to emerge outside the relatively insular environments of university professors, as the corporations and agencies that employ university graduates express publicly their misgivings about the expository skills of the newly graduated. Although the concern has grown substantially, the nature of the problem has yet to be fully understood. One crucial finding of Gambell's survey is that his respondents are not as troubled by lapses in diction, style, and orthography as the complaints about students' writing skills would indicate. What does seem to alarm them are the more integral, structural aspects of argumentative coherence.

Here Gambell has done us a real service. If a good deal of our concern is really at this deeper level of argumentative coherence, then remedies that look exclusively or even predominantly to the "writing process" may be misguided. In pursuit of a genuine remedy, I would suggest that we reconsider the virtues of that venerable subject, rhetoric, inasmuch as argumentative coherence finds in it its best development. It is hard to think of a serious university curriculum throughout the long history of the Western university that did not require mastery in this field as a necessary part of higher education – except, of course, so many of the reformed curricula of the past 20 years or so. One need only pick up one of the many excellent rhetoric texts to see vividly how much has been lost in our efforts to teach writing "across the curriculum." Basic, rigorous training in class and conditional reasoning, in the problems of definition, explanation, and justification, and in the analysis and construction of arguments distinguish these texts. Not only did rhetoric train the mind in the art of argument according to the ancient principles of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, it also focused on the expression of arguments in written form. Study in courses of this kind used, in many instances, to provide students with the intellectual scaffolding necessary for participation in dialogue

and advocacy at the university level. For this reason such courses were often obligatory in the first year of study.

With the wholesale abandonment of prescribed university curricula (rhetoric, alas, was not the only subject to go), other related problems have developed upon which Gambell's survey has also helped to focus attention. Students are increasingly unaware of the general intellectual tradition within which serious argument and analysis must proceed. In his discussion of this finding, Gambell is inclined to conclude:

... that students need to be encouraged to read widely and to develop a variety of perspectives from which they can draw when responding to an issue or problem. They need to be made aware that a soundly developed and well reasoned argument is crafted by a writer who considers as many facets and perspectives as possible or as exist but who also weighs the evidence or judges the validity of competing argument and derives a well-founded summary conclusion.

He is right, of course, but the tragic embarrassment here is that university students need to be encouraged to acquire in subjacent activities those qualities of mind it was once the university's mission to impart. Until we deal directly with the problems Gambell's study has begun to reveal, we will be reduced to such education by exhortation.

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