

# **Interdisciplinary Webinars on** **Writing as an Enabling Cognitive Activity**

Organized by:

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The American ambassador to India David J. Ranz while releasing the latest open doors report on higher education invited students from all over the world to the United States of America for what he considered an unparalleled undergraduate education offered in his country (Open Doors Report, 2019). A US education he asserted teaches students how to communicate clearly, succinctly and cross-culturally; think critically and work laterally across disciplines. The ability to be able to write is central to each of these three. It is not surprising that Liberal Arts institutions in American higher education system have established writing centres that address the diverse writing needs of undergraduate students aimed at explicit instruction in critical reading and writing. The existence of such specialized centres is the norm rather than the exception in their higher education landscape.

Writing enables communication with the reader obviating the pressures of a face to face interaction. In the context of undergraduate education in India, writing is the main 'metric' through which educational 'success' is assessed. The curriculum of undergraduate programmes involves written assignments/ term papers, note taking and written examination apart from other fora of writing. However what is sidestepped/neglected in this line of argument/assessment is the relationship between writing, learning and knowledge construction. This is a role that goes far deeper than mere/basic interpersonal communication. Theoreticians and practitioners across varied perspectives agree that writing supports students to think and learn. Human cognition and learning are a function of language, particularly of writing. This holds true across all curricular domains. This conference aims to examine the role of writing as an enabling cognitive activity.

The Soviet psychology of education has argued that writing is a symbolic mode of an internal mental activity (Vygotsky, 1978) that structures reality by involving multiple representations and processes of the mind leading to the formation, elaboration and deepening of knowledge. The role of writing is not just a perceived area of conceptual importance but something students substantively encounter, as an enabler of learning, in their everyday work during undergraduate education. Writing functions as a disciplining regime providing the basic vocabulary of a discipline to its students. It is the dominant symbol system (Kozulin, 2003) that enables access to a set of progressive skills that facilitate meaning making of various kinds providing for a significant body of knowledge to be stored in the coded form. This further facilitates understanding of the spoken word, decoding of written material, meaning making and a deeper appreciation of course work related texts and readings; culminating in the continuing formation of domain specific, conceptually organised

and coherent knowledge systems in various disciplinary fields. Writing also modifies and controls other psychological functions aiding the development of other more complex forms of symbolisation (Kozulin, 1998). Writing is acquired through different meaning-making contexts that consist of socially negotiated psychological activity. Writing educators have advocated the principles of deliberate practice, discipline specific cognitive strategy and cognitive apprenticeship; while research in writing education has emphasised the role of knowledge drawn from long-term memory including a large mental lexicon, grammatical fluency and varied discourse structures ( Kellogg, 2016; Perry & Boscolo, 2016). These are the processes of domain specific knowledge formation in various disciplinary fields.

Despite this widely researched and understood link established incontrovertibly between writing and cognitive empowerment, the mental actions associated with writing remain understudied in Indian tertiary education. This is a vital issue that causes a lack of understanding among teachers of how writing as an enabling cognitive activity has the potential to meet specific student needs. The relationship between writing, cognition, learning and knowledge formation has wide-ranging implications for curriculum policy in higher education particularly designing courses to meet student needs aimed at disciplinary knowledge formation in various undergraduate programmes.

As teachers of Gargi College we have experienced the necessity to design suitable courses/workshops that enable students to not only communicate clearly, succinctly and in detail; particularly in their coursework related assignments; but also those that will serve as a psychological tool of thinking, learning and knowledge construction. In recent policy-parlance the Subramaniam Committee report (2016) regarded the issue of language in higher education as largely settled yet recommended devising suitable courses for improved proficiency in Hindi and English. In the context of higher education a need has been articulated to frame policy at the level of not just UGC and the university but also individual departments (Kidwai, 2016: 42).

‘Writing’ pedagogy demands small tutorial student group sizes, specific disciplinary and interdisciplinary inputs and dedicated class time for additional instructional support system for teachers as well as students. A learner-centric writing pedagogy aims at not only enabling students to communicate thoroughly but teaching students how to write as academics of discipline(s) write. Writing thus becomes a method of knowing; a psychological tool mediating cognition, learning and knowledge construction in general as also domain specific areas.

This webinar series is proposed against the background above to deliberate on the following questions:

- How does writing mediate students’ learning in generic and specific domains? What are the specific cognitive processes underlying student writing and how do these mediate learning and the development of knowledge in undergraduate academics?
- What are the domain-specific conceptions of writing that facilitate learning, particularly in the disciplines of Philosophy, English Literature and Language, and Elementary Education? Does student writing arrive at interdisciplinary intersections?

How are these shaped by the nature of curricular writing tasks in the various programmes and courses of study in the three above mentioned disciplines?

- What are the elements of a learner centric classroom pedagogy that can serve as a foundation of writing to learn in the undergraduate classroom? How does this ‘writing to learn’ pedagogy vary across disciplinary domains?
- What are some of the innovative assessment strategies that can be used in the Indian undergraduate classroom to fulfill the indisputable academic potential of writing as an enabling and empowering cognitive activity? How do we ensure that students’ academic and professional aspirations are acknowledged and met? How do we take into account the ground realities of class sizes, diversity of learners and other curricular and extracurricular demands, while planning an optimum teaching learning interaction?

## References

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