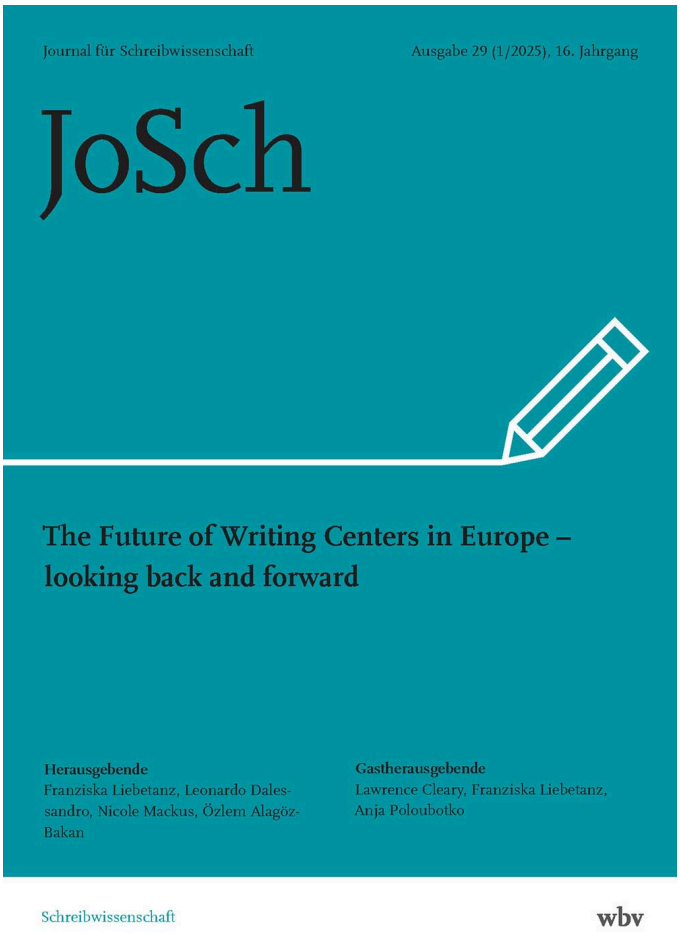
The Future of Writing Instruction at John Cabot University



John Cabot University, like many other institutions, has been adapting to the changes in writing and research brought on by the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) in academia. However, JCU's Writing Center also presents an interesting case study, as it grapples with additional hurdles in heterogeneous writing, language, reading and information literacy skills based on its diverse student body, and Italian labor laws that have led it to be solely run by faculty tutors. Through its collaborations with the Library and Center for Teaching and Learning in the form of information and AI literacy workshops, and a recently published Strengthening Guide, the Writing Center is ready for the future of harnessing AI in the writing process.
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The Future of Writing Instruction at John Cabot University: A Three-body Solution

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Abstract

John Cabot University (JCU), like many other institutions, has been adapting to the changes in writing and research brought on by the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) in academia. However, JCU's Writing Center also presents an interesting case study, as it grapples with additional hurdles in heterogeneous writing, language, reading and information literacy skills based on its diverse student body and with Italian labor laws that have led it to be solely run by faculty tutors. Through its collaborations with the JCU Frohring Library and Center for Teaching and Learning in the form of information and AI literacy workshops and a recently published Strengthening Guide, the Writing Center is ready for the future of harnessing AI in the writing process.

Introduction

University faculty around the world have been struggling to respond to the challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence (AI). Many increasingly desperate instructors are adopting a "hair of the dog" solution: use AI to find AI. Others say that students should be at university to discuss big ideas, not engage in a game of cat and mouse with robots; instructors should simply ignore AI. Both positions are folly. The ethical use of AI can offer students and faculty a unique opportunity to develop critical analysis in reading and writing. Dexterity and agility with AI will also be crucial for new graduates seeking to enter the job market, as companies are increasingly favouring new hires with these skills (Hollenbeck 2024). John Cabot University (JCU) provides an interesting case study on how universities with significant populations of linguistic and skills-related variations can leverage programs and pedagogy to prioritize a more skills- and literacies-based approach to student assessment that is less focused on the product and more focused on the process. This entails the use of AI tools in the prewriting, drafting and research stages of the writing process, complemented by an applied critical reading approach in assessment. Current research demonstrates that when employed thoughtfully to guide students, AI tools can offer fertile ground for the development of critical analysis in reading and writing among students (Ward et al. 2024) and even have a levelling effect for non-native English-speaking students (Usdan et al. 2024). The three instructional bodies at JCU most suited to lead the effort to address diverse linguistic

and skills abilities using AI tools are the Writing Center, the Frohring Library, and the Elisabetta Morani Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL).

JCU, an independent, four-year American university in the heart of Rome, Italy, catering to both degree-seeking and study abroad students (57 % and 43 %, respectively), is facing this challenge while continuing to offer strong liberal arts-focused international undergraduate and graduate degrees. As of Fall 2024, the total enrolment stood at 1,830 students, with approximately 47 % of the undergraduates hailing from Italy, 28 % from the United States of America (USA), and the remaining 25 % from 73 other countries. Faculty attempting to educate this international student body with its linguistic and cultural diversity have much to overcome as unchecked use of generative AI-based large language models (LLMs) increasingly requires a re-examination of tried-and-true methods of academic engagement and assessment. Far from being a doomsday scenario though, this moment presents an opportunity for faculty to embrace a process-oriented approach to help students from all backgrounds and at all levels develop a critical voice rooted in a comprehensive understanding of the material.

Major challenges to writing instruction and use of AI tools

Writing Center Staffing

JCU's Writing Center maintains a staff of 8–10 tutors under a composition coordinator and offers individual and group writing tutorials and workshops. Unlike many writing centres, the JCU Writing Center is staffed solely by composition faculty (lecturers and assistant professors) instead of a mix of students and faculty or, as is the case at some universities, all students. The 2014 Jobs Act in Italy increased the costs and bureaucracy associated with employing student workers at JCU (Cirillo/Fana/Guarascio 2016: 85), and by 2017, it was no longer sustainable to employ students. The change in the legislation carried unfortunate results, as student tutors were a formidable strength to the Writing Center; they were able to connect with student visitors as peers and empathized with their writing concerns in a way faculty members sometimes could not. Student tutors can also be more agile with new digital technologies than their professors, so their absence from the ranks of the tutorial staff is particularly felt by the rest of the tutors.

Heterogeneous ability level on reading, writing, language and information literacies

JCU's composition faculty report significant discrepancies in the reading and writing levels of students. Italian students appear to have stronger knowledge of literature and cultural topics, while US students have better reading scores (U. S. Department of Education 2020) and read more (Anderson 2024) than their Italian and international counterparts. All dem-

onstrate weaknesses in their level of preparedness for critical reading and writing, a trend that is reflective of prevailing research on the topic (Center for Reinventing Public Education 2023: 15). In addition, non-native English-speaking students can find themselves perplexed at the English-language argumentative writing style, with its emphasis on brevity, tightly woven arguments, up-front theses and Modern Language Association formatting (Bennett/Muresan 2016). Hastening the decline in critical thinking and analytical reasoning and widening the gaps in the student population is student overreliance on generative AI tools too early on in their academic careers, before they have acquired the skills to produce the work on their own (Zhai/Wibowo/Li 2024), which would allow them to be more critical of AI-generated results. Premature or indiscriminate use of LLMs can interrupt progress in addressing uneven academic preparedness among this heterogeneous cohort of students at JCU.

To mitigate the effects of uneven and often inadequate literacy preparation in pre-university schooling, JCU first- and second-year composition faculty emphasize the importance of critical reading of academic texts, but over the past decade, JCU faculty have noticed that most students have been struggling to complete and comprehend the material, an observation that is broadly reflective of international trends (Myers 2023). Simply put, students the world over are not clocking as much deep reading time as they once did. The findings are grim: only 20–30 % of university students do the reading (Deale/Lee 2021: 52; St Clair-Thompson/Graham/Marsham 2017). In a composition class of 12, that means as few as three students have prepared for any given session. Those students who do the reading report significant challenges to staying focused (King's College London News Centre 2022). Now that LLMs can approximate doing the reading for the students and provide seemingly accurate summaries in seconds, instructors find themselves at a loss.

Student use of AI without guidance on ethics and responsibilities

Widespread student use of LLMs confirms faculty cannot pretend these tools do not exist. A Tyton Partners report from October 2023 makes the point that while 75 % of US students surveyed indicated that they use LLMs to complete their assignments, even when such use is banned in the assignment instructions, only 22 % of faculty surveyed are exploring AI in their pedagogical approach (Shaw et al. 2023: 4). Most students recognize this contradiction, predict that their use of LLMs will only increase over the next few years, and feel university work is not adequately preparing them to efficiently and effectively use the AI tools they will be expected to know in the job market.

Lack of training on AI is one reason faculty and university administrators have been sluggish in integrating the technology into coursework despite faculty's belief that familiarity with AI-related tools and ethical concerns will be vital to their students' future employment prospects (McGrath et al. 2023: 7 f.). The mismatch seems most acute in English-speaking universities, where concerns about plagiarism, security and ethics have led to a

more pronounced lag in administrative support of planning curricula around AI (Anthology Inc. 2023: 3).

University writing centres and composition programs are uniquely affected by this imbalance between technological advancement and slow uptake rates among faculty. While this misalignment of priorities makes for stilted and patchy top-down planning at the university level, we must make it an opportunity to adopt initiatives that could lead to a blossoming of innovation in our pedagogy.

How JCU has begun to reposition writing instruction: A Liberal Arts Strengthening Guide

In 2024, JCU's Writing and Pedagogy Working Group in partnership with Parami University, received a grant from the Open Society University Network to fund a teaching strengthening guide. This guide prompted a revision of our curricular approaches to teaching academic writing and tutoring in the Writing Center, while holding onto our Liberal Arts approach even as LLMs necessitate a change in writing instruction the world over. The strengthening guide, A Liberal Arts Guide to Academic Writing in the Age of AI: Crafting Meaning, Empowering Students (Campbell et al. 2024), sets forth an ambitious program of integrating AI into our advanced composition courses.

The Guide includes modular lesson plans that focus on the teaching of critical reading and writing as well as information literacy. It provides practical lessons that address AI and its interactions with liberal arts approaches to teaching and learning, LLMs to use and suggestions about when to use them in class, and assignments and assessment rubrics. The Guide argues that the appropriate response to advancements in these technologies lies in the foregrounding of the liberal arts approach and the direct use and exploration of these new tools to enhance that perspective. The Guide was presented at the European Writing Center Association's Conference in June 2024.

Applied critical reading and research initiatives

Another solution for JCU is to reimagine its composition program as the home of a mandatory one-credit strategic reading course for students. Another is to form a joint, ongoing Writing Center/Center for Teaching and Learning workshop series to help faculty develop their skills in teaching reading strategies to students and in developing assessment tools for their courses.

While these curriculum revisions would represent a welcome large-scale approach, there are more modest pedagogical choices faculty can make to start a move toward "making academic reading matter" as Gorzycki et al. (2020) urge. First, instructors throughout the university should be teaching students how to effectively read a text in their discipline.

Courses should be shifting from product (the research paper) to process (the building blocks and skills necessary to write a research paper). The product-oriented focus invites students to generate papers using LLMs, and research shows that despite what instructors believe about their capacity to spot a fake, most cannot, and indeed they award higher marks on average to the fully AI-generated papers (Scarfe et al. 2024). In case there were any doubt that a temptation as great as this could be resisted or redirected with an academic honesty statement in a syllabus, a global study of university students shows that most students are using Gen AI in their studies and approximately half use it weekly (Digital Education Council 2024).

Faculty university-wide should adopt a mixed approach using online tools like Perusall for textbook reading that employs social annotation and pen and paper annotation for in-class graded assignments. Explicitly teaching article annotation techniques, requiring annotations along with in-class assessment, providing graded feedback on those annotations, and discussing them in class, would go a long way to ensuring that students are actively engaging with what they see as increasingly challenging assigned readings. Adding chatbot tools such as Riffbot, which prompts students with dynamic, personalized questions that lead them to reflect on the processes they use to complete their work, and LLMs like Llama or Perplexity, which excel in research on specialized topics, is another opportunity for instructors to help students learn key critical thinking and research skills in a more efficient and autonomous way.

The three body solution to complement these initiatives

The Frohring Library

Teaching information literacy also falls to the Composition program, as it is the main course sequence all degree seekers must attend. Consequently, the JCU Composition Program and the Writing Center collaborate closely with the university's library to address this need.

The Frohring Library at John Cabot University is considered one of Italy's largest English-language academic collections. Three reference and instruction librarians focus on user services with a dedicated emphasis on instruction—both formally in class and informally via the answers provided to all patrons.

The two aspects of reference and instruction library work that most intersect with the Composition Program and the Writing Center are the instruction sessions and the research interactions. Librarians meet with students for help either by appointment or as walk-ins, regarding citation and formatting as well as source retrieval, including its use in shaping the students' research topics.

For instruction, the librarians are often contacted to teach research tools and strategies, source evaluation, approaching the annotated bibliography and the literature review, learning citation rules and software such as Zotero, all grounded within meta literacy as it pertains to information, data, media, visual, and other related literacies. Recently, the library

has added or augmented sessions on information and AI literacy, including sections on defining, prompting, and citing AI. From 1 July 2023, through 30 June 2024, the Frohring Library registered a total of 128 in-class sessions of which 51 requests came from the English Department across diverse levels, mostly concentrated around the composition sequence. While this statistic reflects an impressive collaboration between the two university programs, there is still room for improvement as requests are not uniformly distributed among all instructors; a more systematic integration of library instruction in the classroom is currently being written into Composition course learning outcomes.

The Elisabetta Morani Center for Teaching and Learning

As a complement to the instruction provided by the Frohring Library, the CTL offers a website of resources, and in 2024/25, it offered a series of roundtables and workshops – all aimed at familiarizing faculty with the various AI tools available to them and their students. The CTL AI-related events are helping instructors learn to ethically navigate, interact with, and incorporate LLMs into their classroom activities and assessments, as well as provide faculty with a space to compare notes, strategies, and opinions on existing and emerging LLMs, especially in the absence of official guidelines from the university.

The Writing Center

As composition courses change, so must the support the Writing Center provides to students. Similar to the "process over product" approach in coursework, Writing Center tutors must emphasize research, reading and annotation skills alongside the writing and revision work they have always undertaken. So, JCU's Writing Center will be expanding its repertoire to tutor students in critical reading and annotation skills, how to make use of AI reflection tools like Riffbot for brainstorming, and how to use other AI-based tools to create grammar or writing-based self quizzes. They will also be showing students ways to use LLMs to sort vast quantities of research. This new direction has already required further training and will continue to do so. Yet, nearly all tutors agree that we cannot shrink from this challenge.

Training in an AI-enabled world

John Cabot University can only benefit from repositioning its CTL as a pivotal resource centre in a brave new AI-enabled world. Therefore, it would be of substantial benefit for JCU to invest more resources into this program. The Writing Center and CTL could offer faculty strategic workshops on integrating LLMs into writing-intensive courses each semester. The objective should be sparking discussions on how JCU faculty could ethically adapt all writing assignments and assessments in an AI-enabled world, positioning the Writing Center, the Frohring Library, and the CTL as a coordinated, solution-oriented hub for pedagogical innovation at the university.

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