

Connected and significant learning through meaningful writing experiences

The case of a small Liberal Arts and Sciences university in Burma

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1. Introduction This text will present Parami University's vision of a Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) in a very particular context: present-day Burma. Parami offers education to distressed students through a model of connected and significant learning with writing-based pedagogies at its core. Parami initiated the undergraduate program in the academic year of 2021–2022, and at the time of writing the second cohort has just started.

Since the University's undergraduate program is so new, there are only small sets of data available to illustrate the significance of writing-based pedagogies in a connected and significant learning model. The data was obtained from evaluation surveys of the Language and Thinking program in the Fall of 2022 and Fall of 2023, and one questionnaire that was administered in the Social Psychology course provided by the author in the second semester of the first academic year.

2. Background of Parami University Parami University was founded in 2017 in Burma; it seeks to advocate for higher education policy reform in Burma, promote Liberal Arts and Sciences pedagogy and learning, link local and global expertise, and advocate for University autonomy and academic freedom. Its mission is to empower youth to become compassionate leaders and engaged citizens. Since its founding, there has been close collaboration with Bard College, the Central European University, and the Open Society Foundation. Prior to the introduction of its undergraduate program, Parami created the Parami Institute of Continuing Education (PICE) which offers non-formal, life-long learning opportunities to students from various backgrounds. Initially, this was done face-to-face, however due to the pandemic, from March 2020 all education moved online.

Initial planning for Parami's undergraduate program was disrupted when the Burmese military staged a coup on the first of February 2021 and overthrew the democratically elected government. The country descended into chaos as the military violently suppressed any public dissent, directly threatening academic freedom and the development of a modern higher education system.

While it has brought immense suffering to the population of the entire country, one demographic group has suffered the most: university students. Since 1962, suc-

cessive military regimes have denied quality education to three or four generations of Burmese youth (Tun, 2021). After the 1988 coup, schools and universities were closed not one, but *three* times. In the city of Yangon, this was for 10 out of 12 years (Htut, Lall, & Howson, 2022). Since the first week of the coup in 2021, students have taken part in the movement that resists the regime through peaceful protests. The military responded violently, students lost their lives and thousands faced and are still facing persecution and threats of torture and death.

Students across the country boycotted the military-controlled public universities. When the military regime attempted to reopen one hundred and eighty-five (185) public universities in June 2021, less than ten percent of the 1.2 million students that were enrolled in the system returned to University. Moreover, a significant proportion of academic staff have been suspended for participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement or for refusing to return to work (Metro, 2021).

There have been several initiatives to fill the educational gap and provide non-state, high quality and democratic education, including Spring University Burma and the Virtual Federal University (Metro, 2021). Parami University, whose Institute of Continuing Education was already operating online because of the pandemic, made the important decision to seek licensure for new online associates and bachelors degrees from the Higher Education Licensure Commission (HELC) in Washington DC. With a provisional licence in hand, in fall 2022 Parami enrolled its first class in the Parami Institute of Undergraduate Studies (PIUS). Parami's undergraduate program brings dual-degree programs to our target students via online synchronous modalities. The University has a dual degree partnership with Bard College and students who graduate from one of Parami's majors (currently Philosophy, Politics and Economy (PPE) or Statistics and Data Science (SDS)), will obtain a degree from Parami University and one from Bard College.

For its initial class, Parami University received over 180 applications; 57 students were admitted and enrolled in the program for academic year 2022/2023, with three in Kenya, four in Thailand, and 50 in Burma. For its second class, Parami's undergraduate program received 246 applicants; 89 students were admitted and enrolled, with

one student in Kenya, eight in Thailand, three in Bangladesh, and 77 in Burma.

The University aims to expand the student population further, creating unique pathways that will make higher education accessible to the most marginalized populations.

3. Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) at Parami While the English term “liberal arts” is derived from the Latin *artes liberales*, that does not imply that the origins of this educational philosophy, with its aspirations to create well-rounded and responsible citizens, lie there, or even with the Greeks (Tun, 2023). Ideas similar to those that underlie a Liberal Arts and Sciences education inform many ancient educational systems of the East. For instance, the ancient Chinese higher education system, beginning in the Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE–256 BCE), taught the “six arts” of “rites”, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and mathematics, aiming to create well-rounded and responsible citizens (Tun, 2023). Similarly, ancient education on the Indian subcontinent, where some of the oldest universities in the world are found, sought to develop “whole” individuals, with a special focus on civic duties, through a comprehensive curriculum (Tun, 2023).

As Bard College and Parami University have a dual degree partnership, the two institutions closely collaborate on programming and curriculum design. For instance, students at both institutions are required to take sixteen credits of seminar courses in great books, in addition to distributional requirements in various disciplines. Considered pivotal in both institutions is the importance of civic engagement and the applicability of learning, of which a mandatory program like Citizen Science is a good example. The objective of this program is to empower and equip students with the tools, perspectives, and attitudes to use science literacy in their daily lives. Another mandatory program offered at both institutions is the extensive Language and Thinking (L&T) program that is offered during Orientation before the start of the first academic year. The philosophy and quality of education are similar, but the specifics and mechanics are tailored to the needs of the two different groups of students. For instance, all education at Parami is online, requiring different approaches to teaching. The content of curricula is also contextualised, with a stronger focus on comparative studies, Eastern scholars, case studies and application of the learning to the local context.

As an online LAS institution, the Parami curriculum consists of three interconnected elements: technical, curricular and pedagogical.

3.1. Technical elements For each course students engage in 3 hours of synchronous learning, combined with 6–9 self-study hours per week. The instructors provide guided instruction understood as methods of presenting

content synchronously or asynchronously so that learners are actively engaged interacting with the content (Parami University philosophy of education, 2021). In this blended approach, synchronous and asynchronous modes of delivery of content complement each other in an interactive, meaningful learning environment. To do this, the University has purchased state of the art educational technologies such as the Learning Management System (LMS) Canvas, H5P interactive learning, Padlet, Perusall, Perlego and so on. Faculty receive onboarding and continuous training and support to teach the courses as interactively as possible with the goal of achieving better learning outcomes.

3.2. Curricular elements Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) education at Parami aims to develop students with the ability to think critically and independently, and it aspires to prepare students to be civically engaged individuals who can communicate effectively. This is reflected in Parami University's three elements of breadth of knowledge, student choice, and credit hours.

Key to the liberal arts and sciences philosophy is the development of a breadth of **knowledge**, achieved through exposure to different disciplines and fields and research. At Parami, this is done through distributional requirements that encourage students to examine issues through multiple disciplinary lenses.

Student choice: students are expected to learn how to shape their destiny through their studies. The ability to make decisions, whether related to the choice of major or courses, is seen as a part of the process of becoming independent, self-directed, and lifelong learners. Of course, in making such decisions, students can rely on the academic support of dedicated advisors, class fellows in each class, a student support service team, and their instructors.

The **credit-hour system** helps to measure the extent to which students are exposed to different fields of studies as well as to a particular chosen major/area of study. To accomplish the objective of breadth of knowledge through exposure to different fields of study, Parami assigns the number of credit hours to different disciplines, in what we call ‘requirement descriptors’, regardless of what the students end up majoring in. Of course, the University also has the objective of producing a certain depth of knowledge, achieved through courses from introductory level (100 level) to advanced levels (300–400 level) in a particular field.

3.3. Pedagogical elements An individual whose intellectual faculties have been well trained in a liberal arts and sciences approach is able to look at issues critically, applying different modes of thinking that are made possible through exposure to a wide variety of fields and disciplines. They understand when to draw upon tools of

natural science, social science, and/or humanities to look at a particular issue. Faculty and students are expected to develop and apply an *interdisciplinary mindset*.

At Parami, student-centered learning represents both a mind-set and a culture that incorporates methods of teaching and instruction which put the focus on the learner. Faculty and students together shape this culture in which *active learning*, for instance through peer to peer discussion and collaboration, plays a crucial role. In this way, Liberal Arts and Science education aligns with what are called the four C's of 21st Century skills: Critical Thinking, Collaboration, Communication, and Creativity (Parami University, 2021 Faculty guidebook).

Assessment practices at Parami University reflect elements of a Liberal Arts education in which a student is nurtured for his/her whole development. Assessment therefore does not happen only at the end of the course in the form of a final exam (summative assessment), but throughout the course through formative assessments that shape students' learning. Formative assessments can be formal, e.g., graded mid-term assignments, or informal such as quizzes or peer-reviews. The purpose of assessment, both formative and summative, is to foster and facilitate students' learning and skill development.

The student-centred learning approach, as well as the assessment approach, is only feasible through small class size. Therefore, Parami is committed to a class size of no more than 20 students so that a safe, inclusive and engaging learning environment can be created and the instructor has enough time to give personalised support and feedback to each student.

4. Specific challenges of an online LAS Institute in contemporary Burma

4.1. Technical Students in Burma face specific challenges imposed by the oppressions of the military regime. For example, in December 2021 the regime forced telecommunication providers to increase mobile data prices two-to-three-fold in order to isolate the population from access to information, as the majority of the people rely on mobile data to access and share digital information. This increased price hit students quite hard, especially since most students rely on mobile data for access to the internet.

In addition, starting from the first months of 2022, electricity outages became a regular occurrence. At the time of writing, the majority of the population in Yangon, with 7 million people, Burma's most populous city and its most important commercial centre, receives four hours of electricity a day. Those living elsewhere face even more drastically reduced electricity service.

With rising mobile data prices and intermittent electricity availability, students are confronted with serious challenges as they attempt to access and successfully engage with online University education.

Therefore, Parami University partners with local community schools across Burma to provide much-needed basic infrastructure such as internet, electricity, and computers, and sometimes accommodation since many of the students come from remote areas where there is unstable access to such basic infrastructure. Parami has set up learning hubs that provide both room, board, electricity and internet facilities, in addition to a few learning facilities that provide only electricity and internet facilities.

4.2. Educational Many students applying for Parami University have a non-traditional educational history that often falls short of preparing them for university education and life.

Parami University has instituted a flexible admission system to make its online degree programs accessible to aspiring students who are left out of education systems elsewhere. This flexible admissions process recognizes non-traditional education histories by accepting non-state high-school certificates and high-school equivalency certificates, such as the GED (General Education Development) test and other equivalencies. For those students who cannot submit these documents, Parami administers equivalent entrance and English exams in lieu of official documents for those students who are unable to take standardized tests due to lack of identification (many young people are reluctant to obtain forms of identification out of fear of reprisals by the military).

Parami's students have mainly experienced teacher-centered learning. The student-centred learning approach that comes with Parami's Liberal Arts and Science (LAS) education asks for a tremendous shift in a student's approach to learning, necessitating a reorientation to the role of the teacher, other students, and themselves as learners. Parami's partnerships with local community schools, learning hubs, and learning facilities enable the establishment of highly engaged student support service structures and processes, without which our programs would not be as effective. Faculty members at Parami are trained to support students who are undergoing the transitions described here.

The technical challenges and to a lesser extent even the educational challenges are of a practical nature; Parami University offers a broad support network for such challenges. At a deeper level, and more difficult to address, especially at an online university, are the social-emotional problems with which many of our students are struggling.

4.3. Emotional According to a systematic review conducted in 2021 of the prevalence of mental health issues in Burma, rates of depression (27.2%) and suicidal thoughts (9.4%) were higher in Burma than regional averages (Caroll et al., 2021). This review was conducted, it should be noted, *before* the military coup in 2021. A recent questionnaire that covered 929 participants found alarmingly high levels of depression in Burma, with a quarter of all respondents describing their symptoms as “severe” or “moderately severe” (Artingstoll, 2023). The twin crises of COVID-19 and the 2021 military coup have led to an increase in poverty and violence and it is not hard to imagine the effects on mental health of a nation where millions of people experienced and continue to experience displacement, violence, poverty and regular threats of arrest and persecution following the military coup. Moreover, living under a military dictatorship, the protective factors in the peer, family and community domain will have become less prevalent and/or powerful, while risk factors have increased accordingly. As an example, Caroll et al. (2021, p. 5) identified the strong protective factor of “prosocial involvement”, e.g., visiting the park or playing sports, which is less likely to be enjoyed in contemporary Burma as it can be stressful or downright dangerous. Strong risk factors such as substance abuse in the community domain or the loss of a parent in the family domain became more prevalent due to death, arrest, deportation, or parents in hiding.

While most of the students at Parami are not known to be depressed or suicidal, it is true that all of them in one way or another have experienced displacement, violence, poverty and/or regular threats of arrest and persecution. From a learning perspective, persistent stress and negative emotional well-being negatively impact students’ attendance, participation and engagement (Nelson et al., 2020). According to a questionnaire answered by nine of thirteen faculty of courses offered through the Parami Institute of Continuing Education (PICE) in Spring 2022 (internal questionnaire, distributed and answered in April 2022), students indeed displayed several signs of disengagement. Signals that were mentioned included showing up unprepared and/or late for class sessions, missing class sessions, dropping out, submitting assignments late, sloppiness, and low performance. Regarding in-class engagement, faculty reported that students were struggling to focus, that they were easily distracted, appeared to be fatigued, and/or struggling to answer questions of which the faculty would know that under normal circumstances, these would be easy to answer questions.

5. Teaching and learning at Parami Parami University came to the realization that providing education in an online context while holding the core pedagogies of LAS close to heart, presented unique challenges. As Parami students are often distressed, living under conditions that are not conducive to learning, the University was forced to design a learning environment and community

that would counterbalance the adverse backgrounds and living circumstances of students. Internally this was called personalized education, which aligns with two learning models: significant learning and connected learning. We will first deal with personalized education before turning to the next sub-paragraph of connected and significant learning through meaningful writing.

5.1. Personalized education: an institutional choice

All faculty are prepared and kept informed of foreseeable challenges in a virtual learning environment characterized by unusual circumstances. Different teams at Parami (faculty, advisors, student support) join institution-wide meetings to help inform each other as to how best to support our students.

At faculty meeting topics could entail how to ensure student attendance and how to deal with plagiarism, but what is specific for Parami are security issues, planning for class sessions when there is an anticipated internet blackout, and dealing with students who are unable to turn on their videos due to security and connectivity concerns. If a student misses two consecutive classes without being in touch with the respective instructor, a Student Affairs officer personally checks-in with the student. Faculty meetings serve as communities of practice where faculty share the practice of their teaching, such as experiences on what they have done to address a particular issue with students. This opens up a conversation about the issue at stake, the response and solution, and informs an institution-wide response. Faculty during Spring Semester 2022 were asked in faculty meetings and through an internal questionnaire what they did to deal with student disengagement. Their responses showed the kind of personalized and empathized engagement our students needed to be effectively supported in their learning. Faculty are aware of the extraordinary circumstances in which our students find themselves, they don’t “jump the gun” but check-in with relevant Parami teams and engage with students individually before making decisions. As was summarized by one faculty answering the question what to do to help students who seem to be struggling:

- 1) suggest one-on-one meeting
- 2) if struggles can be resolved by Parami staff support, I refer them to IT or academic team
- 3) pair the student with his or her classmate or friend who can help the student outside of the class (Parami internal questionnaire, April 2022).

Onboarding, faculty meetings and platforms for faculty engagement such as private faculty groups on Google Workplace are important for faculty interaction with students. It helps faculty to offer the personalized and empathized engagement our students need. However, even though they understand, faculty might sometimes feel they are teaching into the void. Faculty are trying to

engage with their students whom they know are facing adversity, and this has become more difficult for them too. As one faculty wrote:

I am fine with the online environment, as I have done it many times already. The in-class experience is generally good, although having students that don't turn on video makes it harder to feel connected (Parami internal questionnaire, April 2022).

Generally, it seems the level of support students in higher education need today is unprecedented (Supiano, 2022), and distressed students need even more support. This creates a risk for faculty to feel overburdened. For example, one of Parami's students joined an Open Society Network (OSUN) course, and during a class session almost casually mentioned that they needed to put the microphone on mute "because of the bombing". The faculty member, who was not familiar with the situation of Parami's students, was shocked and concerned. For Parami faculty this has become more normal, but the circumstances under which our students do their studies are not something to easily put aside.

In a context where students and faculty, and faculty with other faculty or staff, never meet in person, it is extremely important to keep people connected. For Parami, the phrase personalized engagement applies to how we engage with everyone in the online learning environment, students, faculty and staff alike. In the words of one faculty:

I think Parami is doing a wonderful job trying to keep students—and teachers!—engaged online. I appreciate all the experiments with different kinds of technology. I think it's important to put time into trying out different tools. Online learning is an opportunity but needs to be done thoughtfully to be effective. I'm really impressed with how PU is working to find the right set of tools to keep everyone motivated and learning. (Parami University internal questionnaire, April 2022).

5.2. Connected and significant learning through meaningful writing Just as there is a distinction between teacher- and student-centered *learning*, there is a difference to be made between a content-centered and a learning-centered approach to *teaching*. Student-centred learning and learning-centred approaches overlap in what at Parami we call personalized, active learning. At our partner institution, Bard College, connected learning is described as: "[...] learning in which students, instructors, and advisors actively engage with one another to connect courses and resources. Connected learning is meant to create personalized learning pathways for students. This type of learning connects academics to personal interests, students to mentors, and educational goals to higher-order learning skills. In this sense, connected

learning is a kind of engaged learning in that it focuses on the links between learning, personal interests, academic achievement, career success, and societal engagement." (OSUN Connected and Blended Learning Toolkit).

At Bard College and at Parami University, writing-based pedagogies are seen as a powerful strategy to enable this way of learning. Meaningful writing supports student learning, as writing is a developmental process connected to overall cognitive and social development, student engagement with learning, and success in a wide variety of disciplines and professions (Eodice, Geller & Lerner, 2017). Engagement can be understood in a number of ways: time spent on the course; the intellectual challenge the course presents; or students' level of personal interest in the course (Light, 2017). Each of these potential measures of engagement have been found to be correlated to the time spent on writing in a course, and this correlation is stronger than the correlation between engagement and any other characteristic of the course (Light, 2004). The more time students spend writing in a course, the more time they invest, the more intellectually challenging they find the course, and the higher the level of personal interest. Students from Parami are different from students from Bard though. Many Parami students are distressed, studying online from adverse situations, they are unfamiliar with LAS and student-centred approaches. Just as important, English is at best their second language as there are more than a hundred different languages spoken in Burma, a country with 135 distinct ethnic groups. Their experience with writing is often troubled because of language issues and prior educational experiences where writing was a non-creative, formal formative assessment that many learned to dread. This is where personalized education and connected significant learning can make a difference.

Connected learning is related to what Fink (2013) calls significant learning, learning that *results in something that is significant in terms of the students' lives*. Figure 1 displays Fink's taxonomy of learning with six interacting kinds of significant learning. The word "interacting" refers to the idea that each kind of learning is related to other kinds of learning. Connected and significant learning is what Parami University believes is necessary for students whose lives are complicated with many external stressors. The way Parami education is organised, strong protective factors against mental health issues, namely opportunities to talk to teachers, prosocial involvement, and positive peer interactions (Caroll et. al., 2021, p.5) are offered through trained faculty and staff, learning hubs, learning facilities, student clubs and service learning experiences. These conditions provide opportunities for prosocial involvement and positive peer and teacher interactions, but it is through connected and significant learning that Parami University really makes a difference to students' learning, development and ultimately, lives. The ways of significant learning of Foundational knowledge; Applica-

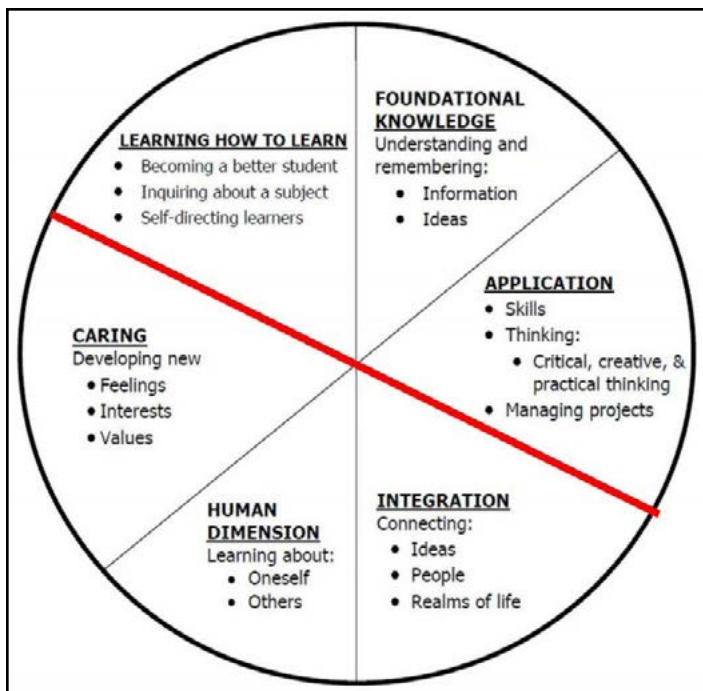


Figure 1. Fink's Taxonomy of significant learning (2013)

tion; Integration; Human dimension; Caring; and Learning how to learn, are meant to be experienced through Parami's student-centred and connected learning approach. The Language and Learning program has a crucial role as it provides the foundation of writing-based teaching that offers opportunities for meaningful writing, which in turn is a way to create significant learning experiences.

5.3. Language and learning at Parami The intensive Language and Thinking Program (L&T), two weeks during Orientation, is designed to provide an inclusive learning space, where students become part of a learning community with student-centered approaches, and where they take their first steps in finding and expressing their voices, reconnecting with the joy of reading and writing, and where they experience language and writing as a way of learning. The program is based on the Bard model, but with an anthology and approach that is adjusted to our context of learning online with a student group with different needs. There is a strong focus on helping students to find their place at university, to feel connected, and make a start with learning how to learn at an online university with a student-centered approach. All students are required to participate in this program, with 16-18 of their peers and one instructor per group.

Educators from the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) facilitated intensive training sessions to Parami instructors in the summers of 2021, 2022 and 2023 to create a pool of well-prepared in-house L&T instructors to facilitate L&T during Orientation for the undergraduate program.

In August 2022 the first cohort of undergraduates engaged in the 10 day L&T program, provided by four in-house instructors of Parami. Instructors were Social Science faculty, Humanities faculty, and two English composition faculty. All instructors had received two weeks of training (20-24 hours) by Bard instructors prior to facilitating the L&T program in August 2022.

Of the five intended facilitators of the L&T program to students in the Fall of 2023, two were Social Science faculty, and three English Composition faculty. Four had received between 22 and 34 hours of L&T training, two (one English Composition and one Social Science faculty) had facilitated L&T in 2022, and two were CLASP Fellows. Due to unforeseen circumstances, just before the start of the program the fifth instructor was replaced by a Social Science faculty who had no prior experience teaching L&T but who did receive 15 hours of training in the summer of 2023.

To evaluate the L&T program and instructors, an online questionnaire was administered at the end of the L&T program. The evaluation in 2022 had three closed ended questions, two about the learning materials and the facilitation, and one about how useful students thought the L&T techniques were for their learning. There were two open ended questions at the end of the questionnaire: one requesting overall feedback, and one question asking which insights respondents gained from the program. Of the 56 students of the Class of 2026 who were asked to answer the Fall 2022 L&T evaluation, 48 responded (response rate 87%). On a five-point Likert scale, 58.3% answered that the L&T techniques were "very useful" to their learning, 33.3% answered "useful" and the remaining 8.3% answered "somewhat useful". To the question what insights students gained from the program, in light of connected and significant learning, two responses are worthwhile to share:

I like to listen to other people's opinions and thoughts and also realize I am not alone. I am in the same shoes with my friends. This workshop will be an unforgettable moment in my life. Thank you for giving me chances to share my writing and listening to my ideas.

The inspiration and motivation on life, how to look at things from different perspectives, the country systems and the power that books hold as well as how the political is connected to each of the incidents that happened, is happening and will happen. Most importantly, how to build up my beliefs and move forward to reach them with positivity.

For the class of 2027 the evaluation form was adjusted to be more specific and better aligned with the end of year questionnaire of the Class of 2026. As a result, the Fall 2023 L&T form consisted of four closed ended ques-

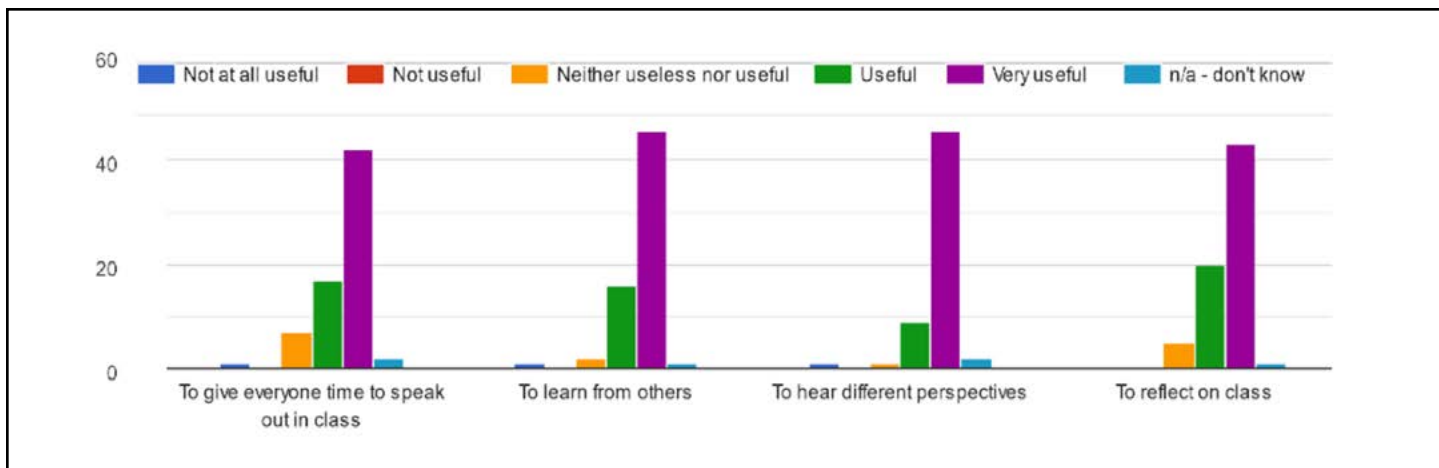


Figure 2. Usefulness of L&T techniques for specific aspects of learning Part 1 (n=69)

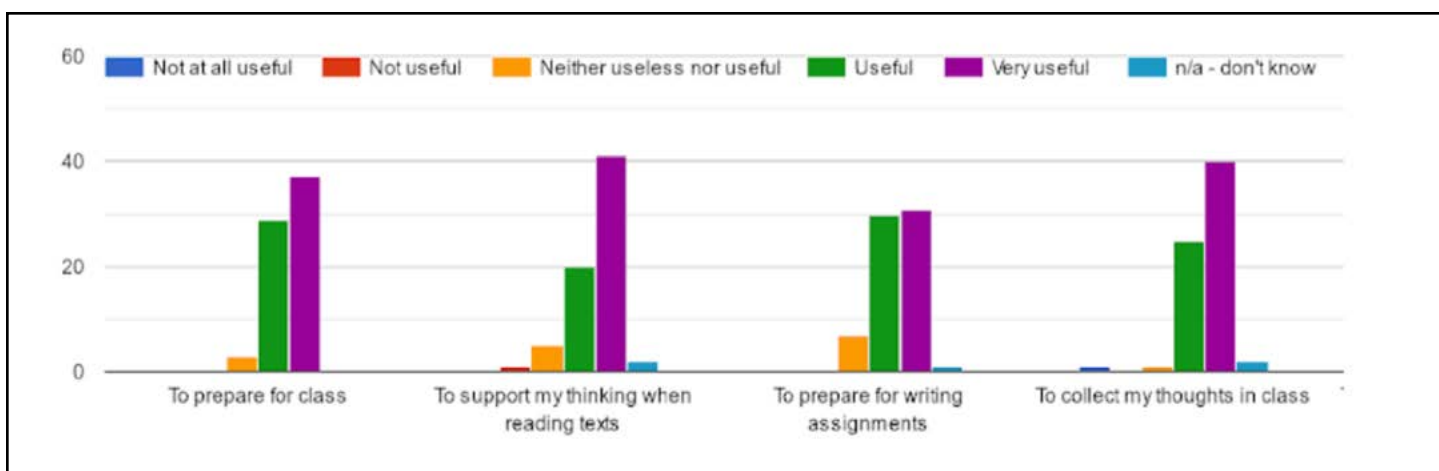


Figure 3. Usefulness of L&T techniques for specific aspects of learning Part 2 (n=69)

tions to evaluate the learning materials, the facilitation, the usefulness of L&T techniques for specific aspects of learning, and which L&T techniques students thought to keep using throughout their studies. 69 of the 88 of the Class of 2027 responded (response rate 78%).

Students were asked to rate how useful they've found the L&T techniques in relation to different aspects of learning, see Figures 2 and 3. L&T techniques were reported to be "very useful" to learn from others and hear different perspectives (mentioned 49 and 56 times respectively), and it was reported by 42 respondents that L&T techniques are very useful to give everyone time to speak out in class. These could be seen as aspects of active learning and peer learning in class.

Outside of class and for individual learning L&T techniques were also considered to be useful. For instance to reflect on class, L&T techniques were useful according to 20 respondents and very useful according to 43 respondents. To prepare for class, 29 said it is useful, 37 said it is very useful, and to support thinking when reading texts 20 find L&T techniques useful, and 41 very useful.

The agreement on the usefulness of L&T techniques for writing assignments seems less strong: seven students answered it is neither useful nor useless, 30 answered it is useful, 31 answered it is very useful, one answered "don't know". Perhaps the lower agreement on usefulness is also because there hadn't been much practice with (formal) writing assignments yet. Only one student answered don't know, which could mean the other 68 students were anticipating how useful it *could* be.

Students were asked how they thought they might use the techniques in their further studies at Parami, see Figure 4. They could tick more than one option. The percentages next to each bar are calculated at the total numbers of mentions, divided by the maximum number of mentions (69).

Focused Free Write (75.4%) and Private Free Write (72.5%) were mentioned most, followed by Process Write (68.1%). Focused Free Writes and Process Writes can be done independently with relative ease. Focused Free Writes could be a bit harder as one would have to direct one's own thoughts, which is normally done by the instructors giving the students prompts. Designing prompts and

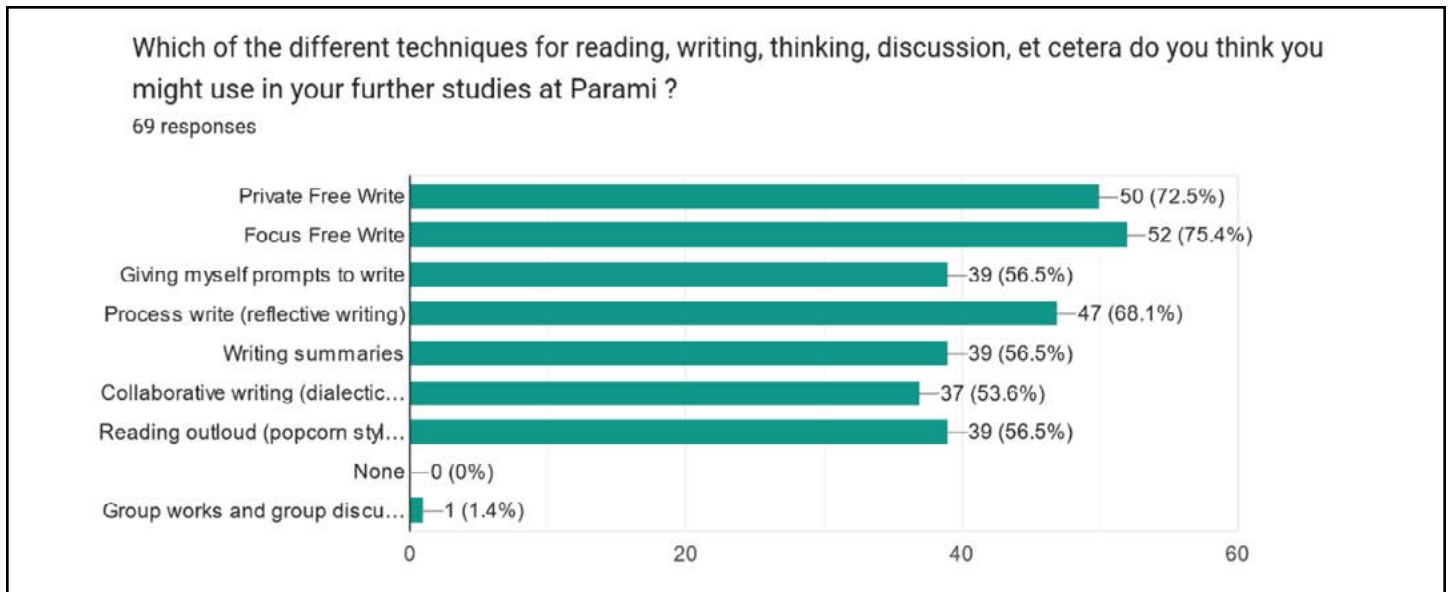


Figure 4. Use of L&T techniques in further studies (n=69)

practicing this has been part of this year's L&T, and the technique was selected by 56.5% of students. Of course, these are all self-assessments of what students think they will keep doing in the upcoming year(s). For these intentions to be sustainably applied, support from faculty of all departments of the University will be welcome, if not required.

To answer the question which techniques and practices were still remembered and/or practiced at the end of the first year of the undergraduate program, the author asked students of her Social Psychology course to answer a questionnaire in class about L&T (n=19, response rate 100%). This was of course a small and biased group: the author received three weeks of L&T training and is a CLASP Fellow, so this group of students, for better or worse, have had their share of L&T techniques in class.

When asked to think back of the L&T program in the Fall of 2022 at the start of the academic year, 18 out of 19 mentioned they remember Private Freewrite (PFW), followed by Focused Freewrite (FFW, 12 out of 19) and Popcorn reading (12 out of 19). Perhaps not surprisingly, the same techniques are mentioned in the same order for what were their favourite techniques: PFW 10/19, FFW 4/19, popcorn 3/19. Provided students would remember enough techniques, one would expect to see different techniques in the list of least favourite techniques. The only newcomer on the list is "writing poems" (mentioned by 3 of 19 students). Popcorn reading was lowest on the list of favourite techniques, and highest on the list of least favourite techniques (8/19), and the reverse goes for PFW (highest on the list of favourite techniques, lowest on the list of least favourite (3/19). Asked which of the techniques respondents still use, again PFW (10/19) and FFW (7/19) were mentioned. Four out of nineteen students answered to not use any of the techniques. The use of

these techniques seems to be dependent on the instructor: when asked if students use the techniques outside of the Social Psychology class, about 25% answered to never use it and 50% sometimes, see Figure 5.

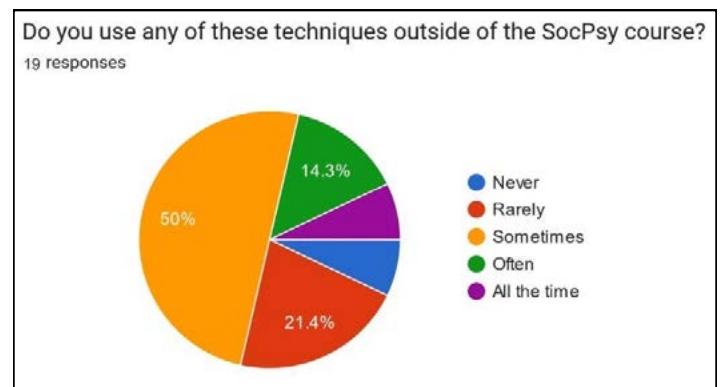


Figure 5. Use of L&T techniques outside of class (n=19)

One student explained:

I rarely use private free writing in other class, before the class will start. I would include how do I feel today or what will I learn today. So that I could be more prepared and ready before the class start.

Another student wrote:

It is unfortunate that I have to say I "merely use" these techniques outside of the class. But, I will try to use these techniques more and more in the future!

These quotes, and the following quantitative data show students do acknowledge the merits of the L&T techniques, in particular to collect thoughts in class, to give everyone time to speak out in class, to support thinking

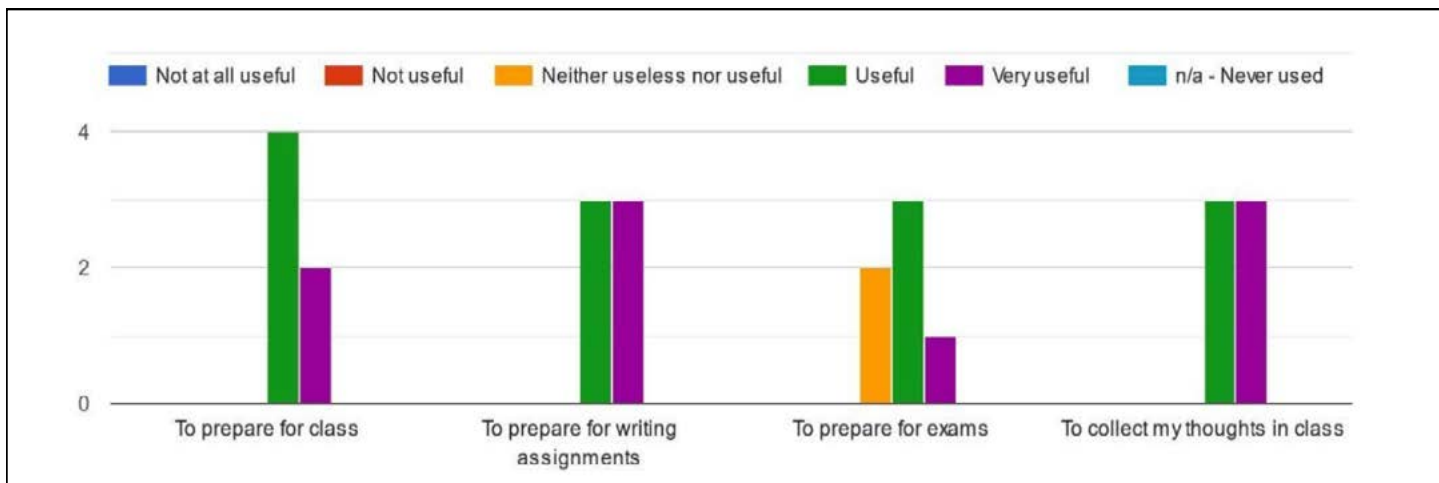


Figure 6. Usefulness of L&T techniques for specific aspects of learning Part 1 (n=19)

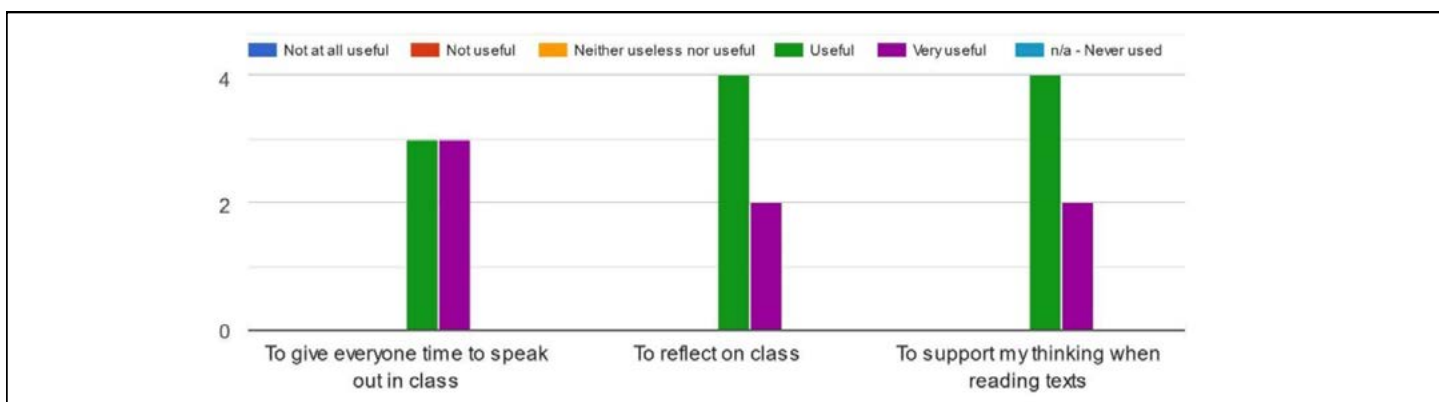


Figure 7. Usefulness of L&T techniques for specific aspects of learning Part 2 (n=19)

when reading, and, contrary to what students expected at the start of the year, to prepare for writing assignments, see Figures 6 and 7.

We can derive learnings from the quantitative data in relation to how well the L&T techniques support Fink's significant learning experiences. For instance, "to give everyone time to speak out in class" likely offers opportunities for significant learning experiences through connecting ideas, people and realms of life (**integration**), learning about oneself and others (**human dimension**) and developing new feelings and values (**caring**). These are all kinds of significant learning on the bottom left of Fink's taxonomy of learning experiences, under the red line in Figure 1. Students were asked to comment on the answers they gave about the usefulness of L&T techniques and what they gained from the L&T program, and this qualitative data gives us a deeper insight into how the learning experience was significant to the students.¹

As the different ways of Fink's significant learning are all connected, it is hard to disentangle, and actually Fink

¹ At the time of writing the author only had the qualitative analysis available of the Class of 2026 (Fall 2022 data set).

(2013) would recommend to not separate these and respect the interactive nature of significant learning, see Figure 8.

While we agree that the interrelation matters when teaching, for the purposes of this study, we tried to find quotes to illustrate each of the different kinds of learning. Quotes are retrieved from the Fall 2022 and the Fall 2023 survey. The following illustrative student quotes of **integration** overlap with the human dimension, but the students do add how learning and developing skills matters to aspects of him/herself and the future.

I have learnt how to carefully pay attention to our fellow classmates idea to deeply understand the context and absorb new perspectives that I have never thought about before. This is so essential in the future. (ID#14, Fall 2022 L&T)

The two precious things I've learned is critical thinking skill and how to express your thoughts through writing and speaking. I believe these two things will be useful not only at the university but also throughout my life. Thinking and expressing those thoughts are dependent each other. If you do not have one,

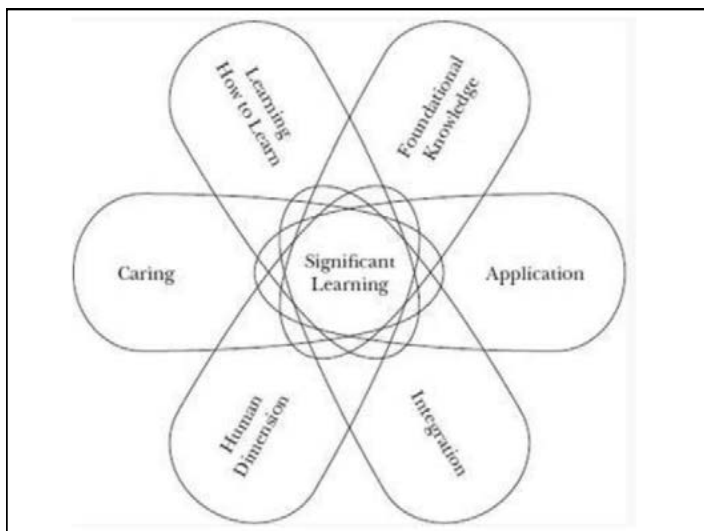


Figure 8. The interactive nature of significant learning (Fink, 2013)

it will be incomplete body of your soul of becoming scholar. I will cultivate these two skills on the my way to becoming renowned political scientist. (ID#3, Fall 2022 L&T)

As an illustration of **human dimension**, students would comment things that would demonstrate how they have learnt more about others and themselves:

I find private free writing makes me think of myself, a kind of reflection, which is really effective for me because sometimes, I forget to think about myself. This has the capability to track my improvement. The second one, writing an essay with classmates conveys teamwork where we have to share and listen to each one's perspectives, and I can't still believe that we could make an essay in good quality within a tiny amount of time. These two activities are really effective for me. I must use the first method for my whole life. (ID#49, Fall 2023 L&T)

Writing tactics are crucial important to be well-expressed and articulated. Private free writing reminds me of what is happening to me and reflect myself more clearer. Looking at my classmates great ideas reminds me of collecting knowledge is important. (ID#14, Fall 2022, L&T)

The human dimension as a kind of significant learning is closely related to **caring**. An exemplary quote of developing new feelings and values for each other is expressed in the first quote. The second quote illustrates the development of new feelings, interests and values towards oneself. The third quote demonstrates a new caring for a particular student group of Parai, namely refugees. There were also quotes that illustrated how integration and caring occur together. This is expressed in the 4th quote,

which, like the 3rd quote, also gives us an insight as to from where these students are thinking and learning, i.e., a country in political and economic turmoil.

I have learnt more about my classmates backgrounds. I feel like we are family and we are willing to help each others. (ID#40, Fall 2022 L&T)

My thoughts are getting wider and different rather than usual. I believe that I am in love with writing at the present. (ID#13, Fall 2022 L&T)

Active listening skills, Appreciation for different ideas, Awareness of emotions and daily life and the empathy for others especially the refugees. (ID#63, Fall 2023, L&T)

The inspiration and motivation on the life, how to look at things on different perspectives, the country systems and the power that books hold as well as how the political is connected to each of the incidents that happened, is happening and will happen. Most importantly, how to build up my beliefs and move forward to reach them with positivity. (ID# 26, Fall 2022 L&T)

That L&T techniques were found to be useful to “collect thoughts in class”, “reflect on class”, “support thinking when reading texts”, and to “prepare for written assignments” would be supportive of creating significant learning experiences for **learning how to learn**, understanding and remembering ideas (**foundational knowledge**) and **application** of skills and creative, critical and practical thinking. These are all kinds of learning on the top right of Fink's taxonomy of learning, above the red line in [Figure 1](#). These kinds of significant learning experiences received many comments from students, giving us some insights into how significant the learning through L&T techniques has been for them.

Foundational knowledge has been a significant learning experience not so much because it helped students to better remember information or ideas in a given field, although one student mentioned to have gained “*Knowledge about poets particularly both in Burmese and English.*” (ID#94, Fall 2023 L&T). The importance of writing, and of language and thinking is something that students seem to have understood all too well.

Writing - letting my hand and fingers communicate with my thoughts and letting them speak to one another thereby gaining momentum in the process. (ID #21, Fall 2022 L&T)

writing, thinking and discussion, I find that they are connected and help us to think different insights and points of views. (ID# 7, Fall 2022 L&T)

I will use the technique of reading and thinking at the same time because it helps me to remember the important things and help my critical thinking skills. (ID #46, Fall 2022 L&T)

Again, many quotes would fit with more than one kind of significant learning, as these kinds of learning are in fact all interacting. Some of the quotes above are related to **application**, while the first quote below is an example of application and the human dimension, i.e., learning about oneself.

I found out that I can think more than I thought I can. Writing down the ideas or thoughts first is better than letting them out of you instantly. (ID#62, Fall 2023 L&T)

I am weak in writing and Focus free writing strategy makes me not afraid of writing. Also Process Free writing can enhance our critical thinking skills and creative writing skills to express our thoughts. (ID#3, Fall 2022 L&T)

I gained knowledge and I learned how to listen to other people's opinions, my writing and thinking skills are absolutely improved. (ID#67, Fall 2023 L&T)

There were many comments that showed the L&T program created significant learning in *Learning how to learn*. The selected quotes show students became conscious and more self-directing in their learning, or becoming a better student with the experiences they had in L&T.

Loop Writing. I'm gonna ask myself question in the class and after the class, I am going to loop write to explore and think deeply of the respective contents. (ID# 39, Fall 2022 L&T)

First of all, it is private free writing which can help to release stress and grab the general idea depending on my thoughts before I start my focus free writing on my assignments. Then, reading poems and finding the essence of them by thinking thoroughly myself or listening other ideas so that I can look at the texts with multiple aspects. I will try to read more and think more to improve my vocabulary range and creative thinking process. (ID#26, Fall 2022 L&T)

All of the above techniques are the most essential in learning platforms. I am going to use this techniques with critical thinking, academic writing and will combine of learning to get the best result. (ID#17, Fall 2022 L&T)

Dialectical note book, (i.e, it is used in Political Philosophy to respond different philosophers by different members) Focus Free Writing, is made us stronger to think in different realms through the mighty of

the pen. Prompt Writing, is really helpful to pick up the major essence of the concept. Summary making, to be broadened the storage of my mind putting a technique to collect the dilemma of from the whole story. Reflective Writing, to capture the thoughts and ideology of the others by the critical eyes. (ID#51, Fall 2023 L&T)

6. Final words Parami University is a mission-driven higher education institute. We work with students who have suboptimal educational backgrounds, who live under challenging circumstances, and are often distressed. They learn online, in a language that is not their native language, through a learning approach and teaching strategies that are unfamiliar to most of them. In this paper, we have explained Parami's philosophy of education and the model of education we propose for this group of students, based on literature and our experience working with these students. The author hopes to have shown that writing-based pedagogies are the key to success in creating connected and significant learning experiences for these students. The quotes that were shared were all from the surveys of the Fall 2022 and 2023 L&T evaluation, and we do not have sufficient empirical data to support our claims in a statistically sound way. It does not take statistics to understand meaningful writing though, so it is with a student quote this writing comes to a close.

This program really warms up my brain, which has been academically in hiatus for 3 years, before diving into the University. I learnt that my thoughts and my opinions are free-spirited so that I can express them in writing. I learn how to notice of even a small thing from reading texts, songs or poems. Everything is meaningful. Thus, I should enjoy my life while taking care of things surrounding me. [ID#19, Fall 2022 L&T]

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