

Faculty Critical Thinking Workshop, September 16, 2008

“Critical Writing, Critical Reading, Critical Thinking”

The Connection between Language and Thought

As a practical matter, people find that expressing their beliefs in words helps them to *clarify* those beliefs, where “clarify” can perhaps encompass everything from “helping us to understand what our true beliefs are” to “helping us to think through beliefs that were previously inchoate” to “helping us form beliefs.”

Philosophically, linguistic relativists argue that our language actually affects how we experience and think about the world (the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”). At the very least, language is a mode through which we experience the world.

The Connection between Writing and Reading (and Critical Thinking)

Sometimes writing instructors require students to read a lot, thinking that seeing good examples of writing will help them learn to write this is true to a point, but sometimes the best preparation for writing is: writing. How does the analogy work with critical thinking?

Many people can improve their writing by reading well-written texts. This can be encouraged by having students model good writing in their own work and by focusing student attention on aspects of good style and structure.

Often the same exercise can target writing, reading, and critical thinking skills. Thus many of the teaching techniques developed by writing instructors or learning specialists are good techniques for teaching critical thinking.

But not always. Sometimes an exercise designed to target one skill will distract, or even subvert, the teaching of another. (See below.)

Simply modeling good writing (or reading, critical thinking) practices will not be enough for many students. This is why active learning methods are so important. Students need to practice the skills themselves.

- Modeling good practices, and having students reconstruct them, can contribute to student learning of skills, provided this is preliminary to having students engage in those practices themselves.

What is “Writing”?

It is important to distinguish between writing as a skill and the use of (a particular) language, disciplinary conventions, and the technology of writing.

- Normative grammar, spelling, word choice – these belong to language use.
- Citation conventions (MLA, APA, Chicago) and genres – these are conventional.
- Penmanship, letter forms – these are examples of the technology of writing

Writing per se is not language use but rather a means of expressing ideas within conventional forms. Often it means adapting or subverting forms for one’s own purpose. The study of grammar, genre conventions, etc. may help one learn about writing, but instruction in these is not sufficient to constitute instruction in writing.

In principle American colleges could teach writing courses in the medium of French or Chinese: the language and conventions would be different, but the skill of writing would be exactly the same. It would involve **formulating ideas and arguments, presenting them in linear order, structuring thought**, etc. (Boldface indicates that these are some of the key subskills of writing, i.e., this points towards a definition of “writing.”)

- In practice, writing instruction often includes some instruction in adjunct fields. Thus, writing instruction often includes instruction in language use and writing conventions, but (at the college level) almost never the technology of writing.
- The key is to know when we’re teaching writing per se, and when other things. (Ditto with critical thinking.) If students need help with language use, there’s no reason not to address it.

Research is a different beast. Research papers may teach writing skills or critical thinking skills, or they may not. Research papers might even discourage student improvement in writing or thinking skills.

- Papers that focus on data collection may actually subvert the teaching of higher-order skills.
- Papers that focus on the recitation of facts may subvert the teaching of higher-order skills.
- Papers that focus on the sorting and assessment of evidence arguments tend to support the acquisition of writing and critical thinking skills.
- Papers that focus on the assessment and development of arguments tend to support the acquisition of writing and critical thinking skills.

When Does Teaching Writing Constitute Teaching Critical Thinking?

When the focus is on the consideration, expression, and justification of thoughts (facts, opinions, claims). Not when the focus is on language or disciplinary conventions. Thus instruction in writing per se (not adjunct fields) is also critical thinking instruction.

Bringing attention to how that language reflects thought can contribute to critical thinking.

Low-Stakes writing assignments encourage student experimentation and creativity, and are an important part of education. They are particularly important for students with poor writing/CT skills, or students who feel marginalized in the academy. They are heuristic (allow students to work through ideas).

High-Stakes writing assignments require students to commit to formulation of ideas. Revision of drafts can require students to view their writing as external to their own ideas, and allow them to develop the skill of critically assessing their own ideas.

Reasons Why Students May Have Trouble Reading

Students often have trouble varying their speed of reading, and get bogged down before they figure out the main point of a reading. Speed isn't the key here: *variation* in speed is.

Students may not allot enough time to read (and reread) because they don't know how much time a reading assignment should take.

Students have trouble recognizing the structure of arguments.

Students generally don't recognize that most texts fit into a conversation with many other texts, and don't have the time to become experts in those conversations.

Students may have difficulty with complex syntax, or lack the patience to work through it.

Tips for Teaching Writing

Don't comment on everything in a paper. Target one or two things per paper, and have your comments focus just on those things. Tell your students ahead of time what you'll be looking at, so they can target those when they write. If you want to target other things, make another assignment.

Teaching (or commenting on, or grading for) grammar and spelling only can contribute to critical thinking instruction when grammar or spelling are the subject matter of instruction. This can be a liberation for faculty who aren't grammar geeks.

You don't need to read everything you have your students write.

You don't need to grade all the student work you read.

Less can be more. With shorter papers, you can expect students to tighten their argument and think more carefully about what they want to say; long papers encourage filler/fluff.

Allowing or requiring revision can be very helpful, as long as students take the lead in deciding what and how to revise.

Be aware: students tend to revise just at the sentence level. They may need help attending to the level of argument or overall structure.

Be thoughtful when forcing a particular writing process on your students. Some students will benefit from being shown a systematic process for writing, but others may rely too much on following your process, and this can sap their own agency as writers and thinkers.

Peer review can be great, but it can also blow up on you. Always train students how to review each other's work if you want to use peer review. I can talk to you about strategies.

Tips for Teaching Reading

Reading should be an active process, not a passive one. Think of reading as a part of thinking: the book is a tool that the reader uses to think through a problem in conversation with the author.

Reading need not be linear: students should know it's alright to skip, to reread, to read part of a text. It all depends on what the occasion demands.

Encourage both skimming and close reading.

Read potential assignments from the student's perspective before assigning them.

Less can be more: if students need to read two pages of an article, assign those two pages, etc.

If you have to explain a text to students, maybe it's worth reassessing the value of assigning it.

When possible, have students explain texts to you, or to each other.

Tell students how you read. Show them examples of your notes and marginalia. Give them advice for approaching particular texts.

Design reading guides for students, which may include: important definitions of terms, social/historical/rhetorical/scholarly context. These may be written out and distributed to students, or presented in class.

Devise prereading exercises, such as interest-arousing pretests, exploratory writing, or group exercises. These can take the place of reading guides, or supplement them.

Carefully design reading questions for students to answer as homework. This need not be graded, or may be graded on completeness only. These questions may become quiz or exam questions.

Ask students to summarize texts. This can be done in many formats: journals, homework, quizzes, in class, in small groups. It can be graded or ungraded.

Make students responsible for material not covered in class. This saves you from falling into the trap of explaining everything. Just be very careful about the texts you assign, ensuring students *can* understand the text on their own. Reading guides or study questions may be particularly helpful here.

Parting Thoughts

Sometimes students fail to perform adequately not because their skills are deficient, but because they do not understand the culture and discourse of academia. It's hard to get beneath performance problems to locate actual skill deficiencies, but it's important to try. Taking the time to explain the culture and discourse conventions of our fields can go a long way to helping students exhibit the skills they do have.

I think colleges need to do a much better job of teaching students to read. Reading is undertheorized, and nearly all scholarship focuses on primary or (occasionally) secondary education, or on remedial reading. Since the reading of challenging tasks necessarily engages critical thinking abilities, this is very relevant to our QEP. (In fact the MAPP, a multiple-choice test, merges the assessment of reading and critical thinking.) Bean, Ch. 8, is one of the best resources I've seen on teaching students to read.

Note my use of handouts that contain short portions of texts, and then ask students to do something with the text. This approach can be used to target reading, writing, and critical thinking skills simultaneously. It solves the problem of what to do with students who didn't do assigned reading, and it helps students who may get lost in longer reading assignments of complex material. Sometimes it's possible to skip assigning a reading assignment for homework and just give the students a page in class that targets the key takeaway. Other times it's possible to have students work carefully through a paragraph or page in class either before or after they read a longer passage for homework.

Recommended Resources

Barkley, Elizabeth, Patricia Cross, and Clair Howell Major, *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for Faculty*, Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Bean, John, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Gottschalk, Katherine and Keith Hjortshoj, *The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines*, Bedford/St. Martins, 2004.

If you assign a lot of writing in your course, you might wish to recommend the following to students (or, perhaps, require it and add it to your syllabus):

Hjortshoj, Keith, *The Transition to College Writing*, Bedford/St. Martins, 2001. (2nd ed. 2009)
(list at \$18.95, Amazon sells at \$17.77)

Reminder

Presentations, handout, and other materials from these lectures are being posted to:
<http://seaquist.us/ct/handouts.htm> (note: htm, not html)