Performance, Feedback, and Revision: Metacognitive Approaches to Undergraduate Essay Writing

Dr. Jessica Riddell
Bishop's University

This paper explores ways in which frequent feedback and clear assessment criteria can improve students' essay writing performance in a first-year English literature course. Students (n = 68) completed a series of three scaffolded exercises over the course of a semester, where they evaluated undergraduate essays using a predetermined assessment process. They were then asked to write their own essays and evaluate them using the same assessment criteria. The efficacy of the project was evaluated based upon student feedback, both quantitative and qualitative, and an analysis of their marks. The essay-writing project was informed by fundamental principles supported by research in teaching and learning: namely, that early intervention in first-year courses helps students improve their essay-writing skills, clear and transparent expectations are crucial for positive student perceptions of learning, carefully scaffolded assignments help students develop their writing skills over time, and increasing the frequency of writing opportunities and feedback leads to higher learning outcomes. Findings suggest that a metacognitive approach to essay writing can provide significant opportunities for students to improve their essay-writing skills. The essay-writing project has implications for those who plan, support, and deliver first-year university courses, particularly those courses involving academic writing assignments.

Essay writing is a skill that the majority of university students are expected to cultivate at some point in their undergraduate careers, whatever the major. It is rare for a student to complete their studies in higher education without encountering a significant piece of writing as a component of their coursework (Hounsell, 2005; Nimmo, 1977). Although the type of essay varies between disciplines (e.g., expository, persuasive, analytical, argumentative), essay assignments are designed to develop common core competencies such as written communication, critical thinking skills, inquiry and analysis, and information literacy (e.g., Court, 2014; Henderson, 1980; Hounsell, 1997; McCune, 2004).

Depending on the essay topic and the discipline, students may also be asked to develop a wide range of other competencies, including civic knowledge and engagement, intercultural knowledge, ethical reasoning and action, and creative and adaptive problem solving (Prosser & Webb, 1994). Ideally, an essay assignment enables the instructor to assess students' development of these various competencies while at the same time providing important opportunities for learning, which in part explains the ubiquity of the essay as an assessment tool in higher education (Campbell, Smith, & Brooker, 1998; Henderson, 1980; Hounsell, 2005; McCune, 2004; Nightingale, 1988).

There have been significant contributions to research on essay writing in the last two decades (e.g., Angelova & Riatzantseva, 1999; Beaufort, 2004; Casanave, 2002; Harwood, Austin, & Macaulay, 2012; Knudson, 2014; Leki, 2007; Lillis, 2001; Mahalski, 1992; Pecorari, 2008; Sternglass, 1997). Scholars from various disciplines have investigated topics as diverse as the discrepancies between instructor and student expectations for assessment, the different stylistic conventions of writing across disciplinary and institutional boundaries, student perceptions of the value of essay writing, problem-oriented collaborative writing projects in the humanities, the prevalence of plagiarism, the ethics and efficacy of third-party proof-reading, and the relative value of study skill manuals for improving writing skills and competencies. Although the essay occupies a central place in university assessment, a number of scholars have commented on the lack of attention devoted to essay writing in the scholarship of teaching and learning (e.g., Campbell et al., 1998; Court, 2014; Hounsell, 2005; Knudson, 2014; McCune, 2004; Norton, 1990). Hounsell (2005) exclaims, "as a learning activity, essay-writing remains virtually uncharted territory" (p. 109). McCune (2004) points to the lack of research between essay writing, student perceptions, and learning outcomes. Knudson (2014) notes that few studies have investigated how students conceptualize the process of essay writing and how they develop competencies over time. Court, (2014) asserts that the link between assessment and writing skills has not been widely studied (p. 327). Furthermore, the relationship between the coursework essay and undergraduate learning outcomes is a field that remains largely unexamined: this article seeks to address, in particular, the critical lacunae around metacognitive approaches to first-year undergraduate essay writing.

In the following pages, I will discuss a project designed to improve students' essay performance in a first-year English literature course. Through a series of interrelated and scaffolded exercises, students evaluated undergraduate essays using a predetermined assessment process. They were then asked to write their own essays and evaluate them using the same assessment criteria. The students were supported throughout the process with preparatory seminars, videos, and written resources delivered during class time or assigned for self-directed study outside of class hours. The impact and efficacy of the project was evaluated using student feedback, both quantitative and qualitative, and an analysis of their marks. In designing this project, I sought to create conditions to enhance learning outcomes based on evidence-based and capacity-building strategies drawn from the large body of research related to teaching and learning. Therefore, in the first section of this article, I will outline the scholarship that informed the fundamental principles of this project: namely, that early intervention in first-year courses around essay writing helps students transition into university and increases chances for student success, that clear and transparent expectations significantly influence student perceptions of learning, that carefully scaffolded assignments help students develop their writing skills over time, and that increasing the frequency of writing opportunities and feedback leads to higher learning outcomes. In the second section of this essay, I will outline the methodology of the essay-writing project and describe the scaffolded approach of a series of interrelated activities and assignments. Finally, in the third section, I will present the qualitative and quantitative results, analyze the impact of the project on student learning, and make recommendations for how the project can be adapted to different disciplinary contexts.

Section I: Links between Essay Writing and Student Learning

Managing expectations

Many students face tremendous challenges as they develop essay-writing competencies, especially when they encounter essays for the first time within a higher education context. The transition from high school or CEGEP [*Collège d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel*] to university is a difficult one socially, conceptually, intellectually, and affectively (e.g., Christie, 2009; McMillan, 2014; Nelson, Smith, &

Clarke, 2012; Scalon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007).[1] Students must navigate the often fraught space between their personal expectations and the expectations of the new institutional and departmental cultures within which they find themselves. Despite their experience with writing essays in high school or CEGEP, many students struggle to adjust to new expectations in a university context (Norton, 1990; Voigt, 2007). When I surveyed 68 first-year undergraduate English students in order to measure their perceptions around university expectations, 74% of the class was unsure what university professors expected in university-level essays.[2] Brooker and Smith (1996) have found significant discrepancies between lecturers' and students' perceptions concerning the clarity, accessibility, and transparency of assessment criteria (see also Branthwaite, Trueman, & Hartley, 1980; Campbell et al., 1998; Hounsell, 2005). While the reasons for these discrepancies are complex, research suggests that communicating clear expectations to first-year students enhances learning outcomes, develops academic literacies, increases academic and social engagement, and raises retention rates (Branthwaite, Trueman, & Hartley, 1980; 1980; Hounsell, 1997; Lea & Street, 1998; McCune, 2004; Nelson et al., 2012; Prosser & Webb, 1994).

In the light of these findings, it is imperative that we intervene early in the undergraduate writing process in order to support students in their earliest forays into academic essay writing. A clear, accessible, and transparent approach to essay writing in their first year, reinforced by a scaffolded program of writing development over the course of the three to four year program, significantly increases the conditions of student success (e.g., Knudson, 2014; Torrance, Thomas, & Robinson, 2000; Woodward-Kron, 2007).

Creating clear and accessible assessment criteria

When course expectations are clearly communicated from the outset, students have higher learning outcomes and increased gains in competencies such as critical thinking and writing skills (Arum & Roska, 2011; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Nelson et al., 2012). Furthermore, undergraduate writing improves when instructors provide clear assessment and frequent feedback (Campbell et al., 1998; Scouller, 1998; Torrance, Thomas, & Robinson, 1994). For the purposes of this study, I define feedback as an ongoing cycle with three discrete but interrelated stages: 1) performance (the entirety of the writing process ending with the submission of the essay for assessment), 2) feedback (formative and/or summative assessment from the instructor or through peer review, including qualitative comments and/or a quantitative mark), and 3) revision (the process in which the student has the opportunity to incorporate the received feedback and make adjustments in advance of the next performance). These three stages constitute a feedback loop: students can experience multiple feedback loops concurrently (in their many courses during one semester) as well as longitudinally (over the course of the term, year, and program). A growing body of research indicates that increasing the number of feedback loops raises students' metacognitive awareness, improves the quality of written work, encourages active learning, and develops capacities for life-long learning (Boud, 2000; Court, 2014; Dochy, Segers, & Sluismans, 1999; O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2008). However, an ongoing challenge in assessment is how to maximize the frequency of feedback loops without

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[1] CEGEP (*Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel*) is a publicly funded college program in the province of Quebec, Canada. This pre-university program, usually 2 years in duration, is the equivalent in other Canadian provinces of Grade 12 and Grade 13, and is similar to the junior college experience in the American system where students fulfill 1-2 years in a junior college. Upon graduation, CEGEP students are awarded a Diploma of College Studies or DEC (*Diplôme d'études collégiales*): Canadian university entrance requirements stipulate all Quebec students must successfully complete the DEC.
[2] The survey question asked, "Before the in-class essay exercises, I was never really sure what professors were looking for in university essays."14 strongly agreed; 32 agreed; 11 were neutral. The survey was administered on the last day of class in the fall semester, so students had at least one term of university experience.

overburdening instructors with unmanageable marking loads. Although the balance between feedback and marking loads is always being negotiated, the project I outline in section two attempts to increase the frequency of feedback loops while at the same time creating a manageable marking workload for the instructor.

Section II: The Essay-Writing Project

Institutional/departmental context

A number of scholars have advocated for the need to provide students with more help with their essay writing "that goes beyond standard written feedback and handouts" (McCune, 2004, p. 279; see also, Court, 2014; Mowl & Pain, 1995; Oldfield & MacAlpine, 1995). Therefore, I introduced a rigorous approach to essay writing in a first-year, introductory English literature survey course. I designed the project in the context of a small, bilingual, primarily undergraduate, liberal-education focused Canadian institution that values exemplary teaching and research, small class sizes, and strong faculty-student interactions. Every incoming English major is automatically enrolled in the survey course. The class size is 65 – 75 students, and there is a mix of out-of-province students who have gone through the high school system and Quebec students who have graduated from the CEGEP system. The majority of students are in their first year; for approximately 30% of students, English is a second language and the majority of those are French first-language students. I have taught the class 9 times in 7 years at two institutions in Quebec.[3]

Objectives

The essay-writing project was designed as an early intervention in students' development in order to improve the quality of essays. Specifically, my objectives were to increase the frequency of feedback loops without creating unmanageable marking expectations; provide students with clear, accessible, and transparent understanding of the assessment process for university-level essays; encourage students to take a metacognitive approach to essay writing; instill in students the perception that the revision process substantially improves the quality of writing; and, finally, promote an integrative approach where students feel confident applying these skills to other courses and writing projects within and outside the English department.

Assignments

Every three weeks, students completed an in-class assignment (1.5 hours in length) where they marked a student's paper (anonymous, from a bank of essays from previous years) on the topic we spent the previous 2-3 weeks analyzing. For example, we covered *Beowulf* in the first two weeks of term, and in the third week students analyzed an undergraduate essay on "Controlled versus Uncontrolled Violence in *Beowulf*." After 3 weeks of class time devoted to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, students evaluated an in-class essay assignment on a topic related to Chaucer in Week 6, and repeated the exercise again in Week 9 with an essay on a Shakespearean text. Finally, students were asked to write an original essay for the course, due in the final week of term: as a component of their assignment, they had to evaluate their essay with the rubric they used to assess the three

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[3] First at a large, research-intensive, urban university with 45,000 students and then at a small, residential, primarily undergraduate, liberal education university with 2,500 students. Syllabus, course times, and class size for the introductory survey class remained constant across these two institutional contexts.

in-class essays. In all three in-class assignments, students were given the same essay and encountered it for the first time at the start of the class; these sessions were open-book and students were encouraged to consult any resources they found helpful, including primary texts, secondary sources, assessment paradigms, writing resources, dictionaries, and notes. Essays were chosen from a bank of essays submitted by students in the course from previous years. Former students granted permission to use their essays and I erased any identifying features from the essays. I scaffolded the quality of the essays given to students: the first assignment featured an essay that had clear problems in content, structure, and form, and the quality of the essays increased in each subsequent iteration. Therefore, as students became more experienced in evaluation, the essays required more nuanced analyses.

Evaluation exercise

During each of the three in-class assignments, students were asked to fill out a three-part evaluation of the assigned essay: in the first section (worth 10 points), students identified the structure of the thesis paragraph (exordium, narration, division, and proposition) and evaluated the clarity of the essay's argument.[4] The second section (worth 20 points) developed students' qualitative analysis abilities: students were expected to provide a page of written feedback commenting on the strengths and weaknesses of the argument. In this section, students evaluated the content of the essay, including the use of evidence, logic and argumentation, and the quality of analysis. In addition to the page of comments, students were also encouraged to engage with the essay in the margins of the paper in order to create

verisimilitude with the experience of marking an essay. In the third section (worth 15 points), students evaluated the mechanics of the essay and filled out a style checklist that identified strengths and weaknesses in punctuation, grammar, and syntax. In the final section (worth 5 points), students were asked to assign the essay a numerical grade. The evaluation exercise was designed to draw attention to the three fundamental ways essays are assessed (structure, content, and form) and provide both qualitative and quantitative feedback (comments and a numerical grade).

In an attempt to reduce the amount of cognitive dissonance students experience as they attempt to master a new concept, I tried to equip them with a number of resources to support them in their first forays into university-level writing and analysis. I used the class website (Moodle) as a repository for multi-media resources: I created videos and posted them on YouTube, developed documents about writing essays, designed a rubric for assessing essays, and provided them with essays I assessed (with qualitative comments in the margins, summative comments at the end of the paper, and a grade). These resources were available to the students – along with lecture notes, power point slides, essay topics, and exam rubrics – from the first day of class.

Assessment

After each assignment, students received feedback in many different forms. Each in-class assignment was completed by the instructor and the essay evaluation was posted on the course website immediately following each of the assignments. After every in-class assignment, the first 20 – 30 minutes of the following class were devoted to discussing the essay and

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[4] The questions in the first section were: 1) Identify the topic of this paper; 2) What (if any) terms are defined in the thesis paragraph? What terms need to be defined more thoroughly?; 3) Does the author provide an outline of how s/he will prove the argument? If so, provide the outline here. If not, suggest an outline that should've appeared in the thesis paragraph; 4) What is the thesis statement? (replicate word for word from the essay); 5) Is the thesis statement clear, original, and persuasive? A simple yes or no is not sufficient. Do you agree with the argument? Why or why not?

collaboratively evaluating its strengths and weaknesses. Essay evaluations were promptly marked and returned to students, who had been given clear marking paradigms for each of the sections in advance of the in-class assignments. In section 1, they were marked according to their correct identification of the parts of the essay structure; in section 2, they were evaluated on the depth of their analysis. Students were urged to be collaborative and constructive in their feedback.

The marginalia and summative comments were treated as a whole, and students received higher marks for demonstrating their engagement with the logic and argumentation of the essay rather than only focusing on mechanics or style. In section 3, they were graded on how well they could identify various stylistic features. In the final section, they were marked on how closely they came to the grade the instructor assigned the essay.

The assignments were weighted so the first performance was worth considerably less (5%) than subsequent performances (10% & 15%, respectively), an assessment strategy designed to reward their evolution and draw attention to the process of development as writers and assessors. Finally, the original essay they submitted at the end of term was worth 25% of their final grade and the evaluation of their own essay was worth 5%. 60% of the students' final grades were thus devoted to developing essay-writing skills; the other 40% was divided between a final examination (30%) and attendance and participation (10%).

Methodology

Sixty-eight undergraduate students, enrolled in the Introductory English literature survey class, participated on a volunteer basis in this project. Out of the 68 students, 60 were English majors, 62 were in their first year, and 31 had graduated from the CEGEP system. Participating students completed a survey at the end of the term that asked them to answer 12 questions measuring their perceptions of the learning experience as well as write a reflective qualitative assessment of the essay assignments (see appendix). The survey and qualitative responses were administered during class time on the final day of class once all the assignments were completed and submitted but before they received their final grades in the course. There was a 91% response rate. Students were asked to sign their responses in order to correlate their perceptions to their marks; however, the instructor did not review any of the results until after the final grades were submitted.

Section III: Results, Impact, and Recommendations

The results of this project indicate that students improved the quality of their essay-writing skills over the course of the term. As I mentioned above, I have taught the course 9 times in 7 years at 2 institutions for approximately 675 students. When I compared essay marks across the years, students' essay marks improved between 6-8% after the essay-writing project. Students' perceptions of the essay-writing project were very positive.

Despite the unusual approach to writing, the class embraced the essay experiment with enthusiasm, as evidenced by the qualitative and quantitative responses analyzed below. Both the qualitative and quantitative results indicate that students felt more confident and better equipped to tackle future writing projects.

In the following pages I will examine each of the objectives of the essay-writing project and measure them against the qualitative and quantitative data.

Feedback

As I mentioned in Section I, increasing the frequency of feedback loops helps improve the quality of assignments students submit. However, there are several factors that influence the value and efficacy of feedback (Vardi, 2009, 2012). Although students express a desire for high-quality feedback (Spinks, 1998), students often fail to incorporate constructive

criticism into subsequent writing performances (Beason, 1993; Court, 2014; Plum, 1998; Spinks, 1998; Vardi, 2012). However, when student perceptions of the feedback are high, they are more likely to integrate suggestions into their future performances. Vardi (2012) argues that students improve their writing when they are given an opportunity to respond to and engage with feedback, while a large body of research supports the idea that the more specific and detailed the feedback is, the more likely students are to improve their writing performance (Ashwell 2000; Beason 1993; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris 1997; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Olson & Raffeld 1987; Sitko, 1993; Wingat,e 2010; Yorke, 2003). Ideally, students in this essay exercise internalize the assessment process in order to provide careful and specific feedback to an anonymous student author through their experiences during the essay-writing project. The participants in the study found that the repetition of the evaluative exercises over the course of the term helped improve their writing. One student commented, "I found that the more I read the essays, the better I understood the structure and how it should be assembled." When asked whether providing feedback on someone else's essay encouraged them to think about their own approach to writing, 29 strongly agreed, 28 agreed, and 5 were neutral. 95% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that receiving feedback on how to assess essays helped them to prepare for writing and revising their own essays.

Clear expectations & transparent assessment

According to a number of studies on essay writing and deep approaches to learning, one of the best ways to enhance student learning outcomes is to provide students with clear, transparent, accessible modes of assessment (Campbell et al., 1998; Dart & Clarke 1991; Entwistle, 1995; Prosser & Webb, 1994). 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the in-class exercises gave them a better understanding of the assessment process for

university-level essays and 98% of respondents believed that the in-class exercises made them better writers. One student commented, "Allowing students to see how you mark versus how they would mark is extremely important for maintaining high academic standards for your course. Good stuff. This type of assessment is a definite keeper." Another student remarked that, "These class exercises really helped me because it was hard to make the transition from high school papers to university essays. The repetition of these essay assignments strongly made me a better writer. It will grandly help me for my future works!"

Metacognitive approaches

A metacognitive approach to essay writing encourages students to be aware of their own cognitive and affective processes, and develop the ability to monitor and regulate their strategic approaches to learning (Flavell, 1979; Hacker, Dunlosky, & Graesser, 1998). This approach urges students to be self-reflective and aware of the processes of writing and argumentation, and encourages students to be creative problem solvers as they systematically approach the task of developing, writing, and revising an essay. Research suggests that a metacognitive approach to learning can lead to higher rates of information retention, foster critical thinking and deeper understandings of content, and lead to higher gains in learning (Cannady & Gallo, 2014; Pintrich, 2002; Smith, Rook, & Smith, 2007; Vaidya, 1999).

This essay-writing project was designed to demystify the evaluative process and encourage students to imaginatively occupy an unfamiliar knowledge position in order to gain experience in assessing arguments. As students embarked on the writing process themselves, ideally they would reach a point where they thought about writing from the position of teacher *and* learner, knowledge creator and knowledge evaluator. One student commented,

> I really find that these in-class assignments helped me to understand and know what a good essay would look like. I also realized that there were a lot of mistakes that I was doing that were

also present in some of the essays we practiced on. The feedback was also useful, because it always awares [sic] me about the things to avoid in my own final essay. And seriously, the marking our own essay step was the most useful part because it encouraged me to revise my essay before giving it [in].

By encouraging students to take a self-reflective approach to evaluating essays, many remarked that they became aware of mistakes they made as they read other students' papers. Another student exclaimed, "I think that this kind of in-class exam helps you to identify your weaknesses and own tendencies because in most of the cases we all do the same mistakes (not focusing on the argument, not proving your arguments, etcetera.) It also gives a good idea of what the teacher expects and wants. I really love this way of testing your students!" The process of analyzing an essay – typically encountered for the first time in graduate school – creates opportunities for first-year students to deploy a critical, evaluative lens usually reserved for the instructor.

Revision

The revision process can be valuable and improve the quality of essays under certain conditions. Mahalski (1992) suggests a direct link between the number of drafts in the revision process and enhanced learning outcomes, deeper learning approaches, and higher essay marks. However, Torrance et al. (1994) argue that the number of drafts is more an indication of students' writing strategies than the quality of the essays produced. Nevertheless, Knudson (2014) asserts that, "Students' conceptions of learning, activity and writing seem to be highly influential in learning outcomes in higher education" (p. 1842; see also Otting, Zwaal, Tempelaar, & Gijselaers, 2010; Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Campbell et al., 1998.

The students who participated in this essay-writing project experienced an increase in their perceptions of value of the revision process, and particularly revision through careful and critical feedback. In their assessment of essays, students were encouraged to think about how the papers could be revised to strengthen various aspects of the essays under evaluation. Class discussions after each essay exercise focused on how the anonymous author could re-work the ideas or elements to build a clearer, more persuasive argument. One student said, "That careful combing through critique helped me as I reviewed my essay, but it also was extremely beneficial as I write papers. Now it is constantly on my mind, which really does cut my revision time in half."

Connecting assessment and the revision process drew students' attention to the evolutionary approach to essay writing. Not only were students provided the opportunity to evaluate essays before writing their own, they were also able to see how the instructor evaluated essays in advance of their writing performance. 95% of students strongly agreed or agreed, "the examples [the instructor] provided on [the course website] before each assignment were useful to practice how to assess undergraduate essays." Furthermore, 90% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that "marking and evaluating my own essay made me aware of the process of revising my essay."

Metacognitive assessment

When students submitted evaluation sheets for their own essays at the end of the term, they were more critical – and gave themselves lower marks – than the instructor's evaluation. With only a few exceptions, students gave themselves an average of 5-10% lower mark than the instructor assigned. This demonstrated a significant shift from the beginning of the term when students awarded inflated grades (upwards of 20% higher than the assigned grade) to the essay

during the first in-class assignment. More research is necessary to explore the shift in expectations students experienced over the course of one term; however, these initial findings suggest that students recalibrated their expectations about numerical evaluation and grades during their transition from high school or CEGEP into a university context during their first semester.

Integrative approaches

Integrative learning is an approach that encourages students to connect skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences and have the ability to apply a theoretical framework to various projects, settings, and disciplinary contexts (Palmer & Zajonc, 2011, p. 8). The aim of an integrative learning approach in higher education is to "produce students that are able to make connections across learning experiences and achieve learning at the highest cognitive level" (Durrant & Hartman, 2014, p. 1; see also Huber & Hutchings 2005; Huber, Hutchings, Gale, Miller, & Breen, 2007; Trowler, 2010). Ideally, students approach essay writing as an opportunity for integrative learning and have the knowledge and confidence to apply their essay-writing skills to their other courses and future writing projects.

One student remarked, "I loved the in-class essay assignments! They were a great way to learn how to properly write a University essay. I feel it will help me with the rest of my essays throughout my schooling. I am more aware of what I need to put in my essays and what to avoid. Great!" 94% of students strongly agreed or agreed that the in-class essay exercises will help them write essays in their other courses, while 90% felt they had a clearer sense of expectations and assessment as they write and revise future essays.

When students master the fundamentals of essay writing and develop the corresponding competencies – which include critical thinking, creative and adaptive problem solving, and logical argumentation – they have the potential to become confident, creative, and effective writers, regardless of

the disciplinary context or genre of the written performance.

Conclusion

If instructors and departments are investigating ways to develop their students' academic essay-writing skills through frequent feedback and clear assessment at the first-year programmatic level, this essay-writing project provides a learning model that can be adapted to various disciplinary contexts. This research, although limited in both size and scope, has illustrated that a metacognitive approach to undergraduate assessment has the potential to heighten students' awareness of the process of assessment and make it clear and accessible, which in turn improves learning outcomes. Furthermore, the results of the project suggest that the in-class exercises help students internalize evaluative criteria, which improves their writing and has the potential to provide them with a more nuanced and richer understanding of essay writing as a process that develops over time and can be improved through high-quality feedback and attentive revisions.

The project sought to address some of the challenges instructors face as they design their courses, which include limited class time, little or no marking support, and heavy marking loads. In this project, students received 5 feedback loops instead of the average 1-2, and the marking hours were estimated to be approximately 20% higher than the original survey course (that assigned 2 essays over the course of the term).

This model could be adapted to an upper-year English class in order to introduce students to research papers, and could also be adapted to other departmental and institutional cultures with a recalibration of assessment criteria for the specific discipline. There are also future research projects that could track student success longitudinally over several years, and examine rates of retention, student perceptions, and other factors that influence students' learning outcomes.

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Acknowledgements

Biography

Dr. Jessica Riddell is an Associate Professor of Medieval and Early Modern Literature in the English Department at Bishop's University. She is a 3M National Teaching Fellow (2015) and the Chair of the Teaching and Learning Centre at Bishop's.

Appendix A
Student Survey of the Essay-Writing Project

NB. Students were asked to provide their answers on a 5 level Likert scale (1 = strongly disagrees, 5 = strongly agrees).

Question 1: The in-class essay exercises gave me a better understanding of the assessment process for university-level essays

Question 2: Before the in-class essay exercises, I was never really sure what professors were looking for in university essays

Question 3: Marking someone else's essay gave me a better understanding of what is required for my own final essay

Question 4: Providing feedback on someone else's essays was beneficial in helping me think about what was required for my own essay

Question 5: The process of receiving feedback on how to assess the three in-class essays helped me prepare for writing and revising my own essay

Question 6: I read the professor's assessment of the three essays carefully and tried to understand how I might improve my essay-writing skills

Question 7: The examples Dr. Riddell provided on moodle before each assignment were useful to practice how to assess undergraduate essays

Question 8: I now have a clearer sense of expectations and assessment as I write and revise future essays

Question 9: The in-class essay exercises will help me write essays in my other courses

Question 10: I believe these in-class essay exercises have made me a better essay writer

Question 11: Marking and evaluating my own essay made me aware of the process of revising my essay

Question 12: I believe that marking and evaluating my own essay substantially improved the quality of my essay

Appendix B
Essay Evaluation Sheet

Name: _____

Section I. Thesis (marked out of 10)
There are four major components to a thesis paragraph: announcing your topic (exordium), defining your terms (narratio), outlining what you will examine to prove your argument (division) and your thesis statement (proposition).

1) Identify the topic of this paper:

2) What (if any) terms are defined in the thesis paragraph? What terms need to be defined more thoroughly?

3) Does the author provide an outline of how s/he will prove the argument? If so, provide the outline here. If not, suggest an outline that should've appeared in the thesis paragraph.

4) What is the thesis statement? (replicate word for word from the essay)

5) Is the thesis statement clear, original, and persuasive? A simple yes or no is not sufficient. Do you agree with the argument? Why or why not?

Section II. Essay Comments (marked out of 20)
Please provide comments directed at the author of this paper providing an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper.

Section III. Style (marked out of 15)

Agree = 10 Disagree = 0	Checklist
	Every sentence has a clear subject, verb, and object
	All verbs are in the active voice and the present tense (i.e. there are no verbs ending with "ing" or uses of "being")
	There are no ambiguous uses of the word "it"
	The paper has correct margins (1 inch/2.5cm), with 12pt Times New Roman font
	There are no contractions (don't, shouldn't, couldn't) in the paper
	The language is in a formal, academic tone with no colloquial (slang) expressions
	Punctuation is used correctly throughout the paper (i.e. no comma splices, no incorrect uses of the dash, proper use of the colon and the semi colon, etc.)

	The writing is clear and concise with no wordiness or "fluff"
	The introduction of quotations fits smoothly into the syntax of the essay and provides the appropriate context to understand the evidence presented
	The essay follows MLA format with correct quotation format, bibliography, page numbers, etc.
	There is no wasted space on plot summary or description; all sentences propel the argument forward
	The author makes arguments that are logical and follow one another
	The author avoids historical generalizations and does not make flawed assumptions
	The conclusion restates the thesis and then move outwards to the wider implications
	The reader understand the "big picture" of the argument, i.e. why this argument adds to our understanding of the text

Section IV. Total Grade you Assign the Essay (marked out of 5)

*note: the total grade should be out of 100.