Critical Inquiry: Using Text to Connect to the Academy

TRACY DARAVIRAS
THE NEW COMMUNITY COLLEGE AT CUNY

When evaluating the effectiveness of their program, members of the Brooklyn College SEEK Department, a higher education opportunity program, decided to make their pedagogy more student-centered. They created a method of reading instruction, which they named critical inquiry. Its goals are to build community through teaching students to annotate, question, and reflect on text. The use of student-generated questions as the basis for classroom activity not only makes for livelier classroom discussions, it welcomes students to academic discourse, validates their experiences, and fosters confidence in their learning. The elements of critical inquiry are transportable and can be used in varied disciplines and skill levels.

More than half of first-year college students are deemed unprepared (Tritelli, 2003). In other words, their writing, reading, or mathematics skills fail to meet university standards (Miller & Murray, 2005), and as a result they are at risk for attrition within the first year (King, 2004). In an effort to address students' underpreparedness, as well as other issues related to student retention, many colleges and universities have established first-year programs that offer academic advising and orientation seminars that introduce students to the college campus and its resources, coupled with academic boot camps to introduce students to the types of reading and writing assignments they will encounter as undergraduates (Carter & Daraviras, 2010). "Critical thinking" skills have been at the forefront of many of these workshops (Hermida, 2009; Lovoy, 2004) in which students are

asked to take responsibility for their own learning, thus putting an end to the passivity that has become commonplace in their pre-college academic careers. It is of particular importance to equip those students who come from overcrowded, poorly funded schools, which did not have the means to adequately prepare them for college, with the skills to become active learners, and to see themselves as part of the academy.

Program Background

The SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) Department at Brooklyn College, City University of New York (CUNY) addressed the issues surrounding student underpreparedness and passivity by creating the critical inquiry method of reading instruction. SEEK is CUNY's legislatively mandated higher education access program. Founded in 1968, its goals include providing access to higher education to traditionally underrepresented groups, and assimilating those students to the culture of academia. Students not only receive financial aid packages, but they are also each assigned a counselor who will oversee their advisement for the duration of their academic careers, and they have access to a SEEK learning and study center. SEEK students admitted to CUNY's senior colleges are allowed one year of compensatory instruction (Maloney, 2003).

In teaching such students, SEEK faculty realized that in order to be successful in college, students needed to break the patterns that they began in primary school (rote skill and drill approaches to text) and become active participants in their learning. Instead of working with a deficiency model, faculty decided to build upon students' strengths and to use their experiences to create connections to text, hence to make academia accessible. Faculty looked beyond the basic skills assessment tests to the college's core curriculum as the basis for choosing themes and texts (Bell et al, 1993). Their work in creating the critical inquiry method of reading instruction was supported by three consecutive United States Department of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), grants, beginning in 1995 with DEP I: Making the Core a Reality for Disadvantaged Students (Bell et al, 1993).

Fostering Connections to the Academy

In reflecting on their program, Brooklyn College SEEK faculty "determined that other academic demands must take precedence over test preparation in creating a model for compensatory reading courses" (Maloney, 2003, p 665). They realized the value of having students making connections to text, and to the academy, and looked to the college's rigorous core curriculum when they decided to revise the department's basic skills curriculum to meet the demands of the college and the university's mission (Bell, 1993). They decided that it was of utmost importance to train students to become academically literate, i.e., critical thinkers. Academic literacy, learning how to read, write, and communicate in the language and conventions of the academy is difficult for most first-year students, particularly those who may lack the reading and writing skills necessary to meet the demands of a college classroom.

"At-risk students have even less connection to the academic community and neither the experience nor the confidence to attempt to mimic its conventions. Academic literacy, requiring analysis and synthesis of sophisticated texts, is not well taught by practice on discrete skills in a workbook" (Maloney, 2003, p 665).

Much of the reading students have completed prior to college has used a "surface approach . . . a tacit acceptance of information contained in the text" (Hermida, 2009, p 21). These patterns are often continued when students enter the university. Reading is completed for the fulfillment of an assignment. Text is often viewed as something to "get through" so that the questions at the end of the chapter can be answered quickly and correctly. Little thought is given to the elements beyond the summative identifiers of plot. Students approach text for the purpose of accumulating facts to prove to the teacher that they have "done the reading." It's a hunter/gatherer approach to text. Students hunt for the answers to summative questions, and once they feel they have gathered enough information, they move on. Hunt (2004) argues that reading for information becomes ingrained; students use that

same approach when reading for leisure as well; "this blindness to the functions of text beyond transferring information is an artifact of school, it's learned" (p 2). His conversations with teachers mirror this sentiment; there is pressure to "cover" curriculum in preparation for testing, and assignments reflect that stress. Instead of "covering" material, SEEK faculty wished for students to "uncover" material; an approach that involved making meaning from texts through questioning, as opposed to retaining facts for examinations.

Elements of Critical Inquiry

Choosing Texts

There are several elements that comprise critical inquiry. The first refers to texts. Texts are chosen thematically, with varying genres included, so that students will have ample opportunity to make comparisons and synthesize materials in their writing; particular attention is paid to subject matter relevant to the college's core curriculum. Themes are chosen to reflect the varying disciplines of the core. A sample theme is "Freedom and Responsibility." Readings in this theme have included, *Antigone, The Things They Carried; Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself;* "The Declaration of Independence," "Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address," "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and "Theme for English B." Each spring, faculty and staff revise the reading list for the department's summer bridge program. It is here that students are first introduced to critical inquiry, and this mode of instruction is carried over into their freshman seminars.

Building Community

Community is another element inherent to the success of critical inquiry. Students are placed in learning communities, and collaborative work is a staple for this methodology. Increasing student-to-student interaction is a proven factor for raising student retention and attrition rates (Barefoot 2000). Students need to know that they are part of a community, that their insight is valued, and that they possess a wealth of knowledge to be shared with their peers. Instruction is student-centered and the students themselves are responsible for the execution of the lesson. Therefore, it is vital that they come to class prepared and that everyone is involved; collaboration is key. Class size is limited to between twenty-five and thirty students, thus facilitating the learning of everyone's names. Forcing varied collaboration through the constant movement and shifting of seats so that everyone has the chance to work with different partners is necessary in this model as well.

Annotating Texts

Making sure that students are well-versed in the methodology is another critical element. Critical inquiry begins with the process of multiple reads. This is often a foreign concept to students, as is the notion of composing multiple drafts when writing. Students are asked to initially skim a text, to become familiar with it on a surface level. Next, they are asked to carefully read; to have a conversation with the text. Students are instructed to view this reading as an interaction with the authors.

Annotation is the means for carrying out conversations with text. Students are asked to annotate as early as their first read, noting elements of plot, tone, and style. The second read involves looking for language patterns, symbols, and vocabulary. Students are asked to note any words/phrases that they may not understand. They are taught to look for context clues to aid in developing understanding and to note words/phrases that they think are critical to the meaning of the texts and to identify a thesis and supplementary points. "By giving students the authority of choice and ownership of vocabulary, the power of the text shifts from the instructor to the students themselves" (Maloney, 2003, p 668). In addition, students are instructed to take notes on the text, in the margins or on post-it notes, commenting on anything that they may find interesting, important, or confusing. Highlighters are banned as students often get carried away in a meaningless coloring in of their texts. Instead, instructors ask students to contemplate what would provoke them to highlight a portion of text and to write the answer to that question in the margin. This technique, coupled with writing summaries, curtails unnecessary anxiety at final exam time and serves to generate a deeper understanding of the text.

Creating Questions

These notes that students make in their margins serve as springboards for teaching them to develop questions. Students are asked to re-read their annotations, along with portions of the text, and to use those notes to formulate questions that will serve as the basis for class discussion, written assignments, and assessment. As Maloney (2006) has noted, "When the emphasis on questioning shifts from the instructor to them, the students begin to use questions as guidelines for thinking about text. Students' investment in their questions demands that conversations begin with and are sustained by continuing references back to the texts under discussion" (p. 668).

Questions vary from literal-level, to interpretive, to evaluative, as students are encouraged to pose varied types of questions; literal-level questions are fact-based, interpretive questions are issues-based, and evaluative questions are based on general themes. A sample class activity involves having students work collaboratively to answer each other's questions, followed by selecting two or three questions to pose to the class as a whole, with the students leading the discussion and eliciting responses. Students may also be asked to prepare questions for sections of the text, followed by a piecing together or "jigsaw-ing" of the varied sections.

Writing for Greater Understanding

In addition to multiple reads, annotating, and creating questions, students are asked to write summaries and responses to texts. Summaries require students to pinpoint what they feel are key elements of the text, and in doing so, students gain a greater understanding of the text as a whole. Because they often find it difficult to reduce multiple pages into a few sentences, students are asked to write down key elements and then to see if those elements can be grouped into larger "bins" or topics. For each bin, the students are asked to write one or two sentences. Those sentences are then revised and organized into a coherent paragraph, one that could easily be understood by someone who has not read the initial text, thus forcing students to pinpoint and select critical elements of the text. In addition to summaries,

students are asked to write responses to texts, encouraging them to grapple with themes or issues that they found either confusing, interesting, or particularly compelling. Writing is an essential component in generating meaning and understanding of text, and students are expected to make connections to and among texts, enabling them to see that no one reading occurs in a vacuum.

Conclusion

Allowing students to make connections and to move freely within and among texts is essential; it not only makes for livelier classroom discussions, it welcomes students to academic discourse, validates their experiences, and fosters confidence in their learning. Instructors have learned to relinquish control and to allow students to command their reading, thus giving them ownership and a greater connection to the university classroom. Since SEEK implemented the critical inquiry method, faculty have seen an increase in student engagement and retention, higher pass rates on university wide proficiency exams, and a decrease in the number of students on academic probation.

References

Barefoot, B. (2000). The first-year experience-are we making it any better? *About Campus, 4*(6), 12.

Bell, M. J, Francis, K. C., & Kelly, R. J. (1993). Success in school: A research agenda on student attrition and retention in the SEEK Program. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 15*(4), 437 – 441.

Carter, J.C., & Daraviras,T (2010). Cultivating college success among underprepared college students. *NADE Digest, 5*(1), 1-7.

Hermida, J. (2009). The importance of teaching academic reading skills in first-year university courses. *The International Journal of Research and Review 3*, September, 20-30.

Hunt, R.A. (2004). Reading and writing for real: Why it matters for learning. Teaching Showcase Proceedings, Association of Atlantic Universities.

Lovoy, T. (2004). Rediscovering the kernels of truth in the urban legends of the freshman composition classroom. *College Teaching,*

52(1), 11-13.

Maloney, W. H. (2003). Connecting the texts of their lives to academic literacy: Creating success for at-risk first-year college students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 46*(8), 664-673.

Miller, M.A. & Murray, C. (2005). Advising academically underprepared students. Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources.

Tritelli, D. (2003). From the editor. Association of American Colleges and Universities Peer Review.

Dr. Tracy Daraviras is an assistant professor The New Community College at CUNY in Brooklyn, New York.