

January 2016

# Varied Responses as a Means to the Richness of Discourse: Reading Tough Texts through Speaking and Writing

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## Recommended Citation

Thompson, Carol L. and Kleine, Michael W. (2016) "Varied Responses as a Means to the Richness of Discourse: Reading Tough Texts through Speaking and Writing," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 10: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2016.100105>

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## **Abstract**

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## **Keywords**

Reading, Discourse, Heuristic, Response styles, Deep Learning

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## Varied Responses as a Means to the Richness of Discourse: Reading Tough Texts through Speaking and Writing

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(Received 21 December 2014; accepted 23 November 2015)

New scholarship advocates that students should learn deeply and well. Little information exists on exactly how to get students deeply into material so that they understand it inside and out, backward and forward, and in a way that enables them to construct knowledge schemas. The authors have developed a heuristic list of communication response styles that enrich understanding of complex ideas and works and prompts students to use metacognition to reflect deeply about what they are learning.

### INTRODUCTION

We provide in this article a powerful heuristic list for reading and responding to difficult texts through writing and speaking. We have found that the heuristic list leads to both deeper reading and more robust writing and speaking while also encouraging students to construct knowledge schemas and promote reflection.

In an interdisciplinary scholar's course in the Donaghey Scholar's program that the two of us have taught together for a number of years, a course that promotes speaking through writing and

writing through speaking, we recently encountered an unexpected snag: our students confessed to us, during a discussion of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993), that they didn't enjoy reading extended and intellectually challenging texts—and even more disturbing, that they didn't know how to read such texts; without a basis for understanding extended difficult texts, discussion (or the sharing of ideas) was diminished. In the ensuing discussion, our students—who were internationally and culturally diverse, and who were in the program by virtue of their high ACT scores, but who had only recently graduated from high school—explained that their earlier school reading had consisted mostly of teacher-guided and interpreted encounters with literary texts and textbooks, and superficial experiences with electronic literacy, especially the Internet. They confided that they knew they had missed something in their prior educational experience, and that they wanted to develop the facility to deal with intellectually challenging (and extended) texts and ideas.

Reading extended texts and discussing them was critical to how our course was planned and essential to both oral and written components of communication. We work to cultivate dialog in the classroom, but without something about which to dialogue, the kind of co-creation of social worlds that we seek cannot occur on an academic level. An important reading for our class by Pearce and Cronen (1980), involving the “Coordinated Management of Meaning,” suddenly seemed to us nearly ironic when we were struggling to engender cooperative discussion of difficult texts.

Instructors in disciplines such as philosophy, political science, sociology and others, have wrestled with how to encourage students to read discipline-specific texts with intellectual understanding. David Concepción (2004), for example, argued that having knowledge schemas, i.e., knowledge of the history and context of the writing, and having an awareness of one's own thought processes, or meta-cognition, is vital for students as they pursue understanding of complex material. We agree that when students lack the knowledge schemas to understand a complex piece of writing

reading becomes, as Concepción suggests, “laborious and uncommunicative” (p. 352).

However, we wanted to create a list of response styles that would become a heuristic, that could provide students with not only a knowledge base to understand the material, but also would provide a way of actually constructing knowledge schemas while reflecting on what they construct in a metacognitive way. Finally, we wanted a response model that helps students deeply know that an academic paper is not just a regurgitation of facts, but also a thoughtful and well-argued response.

To encourage our students to read, write, and discuss with deeper understanding, we developed an enhanced reader-response pedagogy we call the heuristic list. The readings for the class are scaffolded and were constructed thematically. The theme concerned human problems of objectification and oppression. Doing this we hoped to see a richer discussion about the essential questions underlying our syllabus and curriculum—oppression and the problem of human objectification of others.

As we worked to plan the course, an irony struck us. Our pedagogical impulses were liberatory and open, but we risked superimposing a kind of academic doing with which we were familiar and that we did ourselves, but that was new to our students. Instead of a particular kind of response—affective, associative, interpretive, say—we decided to develop a broader heuristic list that would include additional ways of doing things with texts. Our list was drawn from response approaches and vocabulary used by literary and other communication theorists.

Our objective was not only to help students interpret texts, but also to use texts as a basis for enlarging and deepening the classroom discourse that would play out through conversation and in writing. We believed the educational experience should not simply involve digesting the instructor's ideas and mirroring them back toward the instructor, but should do something deeper and more meaningful: students should be coaxed into a condition of loving learning.

Dialogue, as we envisioned it, would enable social exchange that would incorporate the ideas of others in the community in developing, that “meeting of the minds” (Mead, 1970, p. 52), assisted by our collective investigations into the texts we had selected for our class. This, however, could only be accomplished through giving students tools to read the texts deeply and thoughtfully.

We hoped that the texts would provide us with the basis for what Porter in *An Audience and Rhetoric: An Archaeological Composi-*

tion of the Discourse community (1992), calls a “forum.” A forum, as opposed to a naturally occurring discourse community, fractured somewhat by its multiple overlaps with other discourse communities, is possible to establish by selecting an institutional “space” for a discursive agenda or theme, and then ensuring that everyone is engaged in the same discourse, usually facilitated by shared readings. As Porter explains, “A forum is a concrete, local manifestation of the operation of the discourse community. It is a physical location for discursive activity—such as a journal, a conference, a corporation, or a department within a corporation” (p.107).

In the past, our scholars students had seemed interested in the course theme (objectification/oppression), thanks mainly to an intertextual process of meaning-making that we had staged by carefully sequencing and scaffolding four texts—two of them literary, and two of them non-fictional—and by developing a course packet containing relevant readings. In addition, as we had discovered during years of co-teaching together, the combination of our disciplinary perspectives (communication and rhetoric/composition) served to motivate us and our students to combine speaking and writing continually in the service of community building, and the kind of “deep learning” that Ken Bain describes in *What the Best College Professors Do* (2004). Our teaching evaluations had been spectacular, so the reading difficulties of our students surprised us.

Out of this surprise, we decided to morph into teacher/researchers. We developed a completely different and experimental approach to response, which we would test more carefully with our next class in the following fall, 2015. Our broadened heuristic list of response types, as we will explain later, enabled us to supplement and enrich other texts. Too, it enabled us to establish a forum in which students were responsible to other students by playing rotating roles and exchanging clearly defined response types, a forum in which they could inductively absorb the attitudes of the group and then construct a universe of discourse collectively.

### Institutional and Programmatic Context

Our revised approach was generated in part because of the unique characteristics of the Donaghey Scholars Program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Scholars students are part of an interdisciplinary honors program on campus that is essentially its own college within the university.

In each of the program’s basic courses, instructors from two different disciplines are paired in the effort to bring richness to the course, and prompt students to think in new directions. In the course that we teach together, Rhetoric and Communication, one of us, Michael Kleine, is from the Department of Rhetoric and Writing and the other, Carol Thompson, is from The Department of Speech Communication. Other courses in the Scholars Program, such as The Individual and Society, may draw professors from economics, political science, psychology and sociology. In Science and Society professors may come from any of the sciences to foster a unique blend of scientific disciplines and methodologies.

When the two of us met many years ago, we were eager to synthesize our intellectual insights and teaching approaches designing our course for the Scholars Program. We both wanted our course--and the program--to succeed. The collaborative union of our two disciplines worked to create a third, “inter-discipline” that grew along the lines of several themes we mutually decided to pursue. With the goal of encouraging students to communicate effec-

tively both orally and in writing, and in enhancing their ability to think thoroughly and analytically, we asked students to read texts and participate in related oral and written exercises that showed how language itself powerfully shapes the individual within a social context.

We both believed that to function in a scholarly environment, opportunities to use language must be situated within a context of challenging readings. Too, we believed that the course itself needed to be grounded in a symbolically constructive and authentic experience with dialog. We decided to provide an overarching thematic base into which to insert the tough reading for students to experience. If the theme were real enough, compelling enough, grounded enough in their own experience, we reasoned, students would be motivated to explore the text to find answers to personal questions and solutions to important individual and social problems.

We found that students rose to the challenge of working with difficult texts, but they did not necessarily know what to do with them. Having experimented with other themes in the past—including “power” and “education”—we discovered our theme involving human oppression enabled us and our students to examine and critique objectifying rhetorics and what Michel Foucault would call “discursive regimes” (1972).

In designing an action-research agenda, however, we decided to keep the texts we had used previously, but also to enhance our students’ reading experience by employing our new heuristic list and intensifying the connection among reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Below we explain and rationalize in more depth the sequence of texts; we present and rationalize our response heuristic list; and we lay out our plan for employing a whole-language approach in an effort to enhance student reading and theme-based classroom discourse.

### Thematization, Overall Selection of Readings, and Scaffolding

We chose *The True Believer* (Hoffer, 1951) as the text to which we experimentally would apply our reader-response heuristic list for two reasons. First, as was the case with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993), another required text, our students had difficulty reading and understanding its content. Second, because some of our students had been raised in fundamentalist households, they tended to resist the notion that someone who was a “true believer,” a believer incapable of questioning what was believed, in fact might become a member of a socially and personally destructive mass movement.

We believe that our reader/speaker-response approach to contending with *The True Believer* (1951)--along with the response roles assigned to individual students, classroom presentations and conversation, outside research, and journaling contributed greatly to the reading and writing successes of our students. Here, we will comment, especially, on the selection of readings, on the sequencing of readings, and on the way each reading scaffolded, or was built upon, the other readings.

Designing a theme for the course was key to the success our students experienced when they encountered our experimental reader-response heuristic list. Even though the two of us teaching the class superimposed a theme, we realized the students found that theme to be increasingly important, even urgent--at interpersonal, educational, and political levels. In brief, we were interested in exploring how processes of objectifying other humans can lead

to oppression of marginalized individuals, ethnicities, sexually different people, religious groups, the sick, the weak, students, etc.; and we wanted our students to understand how such objectification often has to do with rigid class lines, gender lines, religious lines, and racial lines. In an effort to scaffold the readings we chose, we arranged them historically, beginning with a work of fiction, continuing with two non-fiction works, and ending with another work of fiction.

Here are the works in the order in which we read them:

1. *The Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka (1992), an early twentieth-century novella, examines the literal and metaphorical transformation of Gregor Samsa into a cockroach. Samsa, objectified by his employers and also by his parents and sister, becomes a “thing.” Indeed, as the process of objectification unfolds, Samsa becomes more and more alienated and eventually dies. Our focus when working with this novella was on interpersonal forms of objectification.

2. *The True Believer*, by Eric Hoffer (1951), is a meditative exploration of the causes and effects of mass movements, which Hoffer suggests undermines the autonomy and dignity of the individual. It is the writing/reading/speaking/listening having to do with this book that is at the heart of the essay you are now reading and the experiment we report here. Writing in the early 1950’s, Hoffer was deeply disturbed by movements such as Nazism and Stalinism, and thus his focus is deeply political and ideological. Like interpersonal objectification, political objectification requires the othering, even the hatred, of a marginalized group.

3. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire (1993), is a philosophical book that blends existentialism, Marxism, and liberatory theology in a critique of objectifying pedagogical practices. Having conducted radical educational projects for illiterate (and oppressed) peasants in Brazil, Freire condemns what he calls “a banking approach” to teaching, in which students are treated as empty vessels to be filled with the static knowledge of the teacher and, instead, commends approaches that involve “problem-posing” among students, a deconstruction of the teacher/student binary, and literacies that enable people to confront and change oppressive practices. Although the book is pedagogical in its orientation, Freire’s work has ideological implications, and his glimpse of the possibility of inter-subjective, dialogical discourse is both revolutionary and uplifting.

4. *Fatelessness*, by Imre Kertesz (1975), a Hungarian writer, is a novel that portrays the horrific experiences of a young boy who, through unlucky circumstances not of his own making, is incarcerated in concentration camps during World War II. Told from the boy’s perspective, the novel shows how objectification of holocaust scale can be perpetrated. But, like Freire, Kertesz believes that there is transformative potential in human “love,” which both writers associate with selflessness, dialog, and transformation. Although the students are usually stunned by reading this novel, and by viewing the film that is based on it, they are challenged to imagine human approach-

es to, and confrontation of, objectifying discourses and practices.

Our students usually discover, about halfway through the semester that our plan is to promote inter-subjective communication and to avoid the pitfalls of a banking pedagogy. We both believe that it is the course theme, and the historical scaffolding of books, that help supply the kinds of “inter-textual resonances,” to borrow a term from Julia Kristeva (Kristeva, 1969), that both deepen and transform the meaning of the individual works that we read. In terms of *The True Believer* (1951), our students, having observed in *The Metamorphosis*, (1992) what interpersonal objectification can do to a single human being, are better able to understand and contend with how such objectification is required by totalizing and reductive mass movements.

### A Heuristic List for “Doing Things” with Texts and Communicating Ideas

Our Scholar’s course in Rhetoric and Communication provides a delicate blend of speaking and writing. While students ultimately produce an oral presentation and a formal essay at the close of a unit, we provide multiple speaking and writing opportunities each day. For example, one way students can make sense of the text is through “free” or “rush-writing.” We ask students to look for repeated ideas, areas of particular dissonance or clarity, or the gravitational center of the piece, what the piece actually means. The free writing becomes the basis for an in-depth, sometimes personal and sometimes scholarly, discussion. When we assign this type of writing, we generally set a time limit of ten minutes or so, and ask the students to write as quickly as possible. At this point, we don’t expect students to stop for editing or phrasing or organization; we want students to feel comfortable as the ideas flow across the page; the ideas are paramount, the sense-making critically important.

In the initial free-writing assignment for *The True Believer*, we asked students for their first impressions after they had read nearly half of the book. (We wrote and shared our own impressions with the students.) At this point, most of our students experienced considerable angst about what they considered a complex and demanding text. They found *The True Believer* “confusing,” and complained that the “sentences were massive and rambled on with words that were also massive.” Another student exclaimed, “I am utterly confused!” Other students remarked that Hoffer’s book “Reads like a history book, dry, bland and boring.” At least one student allowed, though, the following: “I believe this book will present valid points based on progress. However, I think that in current times some of his examples are lost.” The discussion that ensued was predictably volatile and students strenuously argued their cases that the text was “outdated,” “irrelevant,” and “repetitive.”

During the next discussion we asked students to list their core beliefs and then to speculate on how deeply they held each of these beliefs, which ones were provisional and which ones they would be willing to change. Here we encountered the most resistance. Many of our students are devout Bible-oriented Christians or Koran-oriented Muslims. In the past students had trouble discerning the difference between their own personal beliefs and the mass movements described by Hoffer. Hoffer’s analysis of the characteristics of the true believer, and his assertion that these characteristics can be found in true believers in every belief system, was met with resistance, to put it mildly. One student insisted, after reading Hof-

fer, “I don’t think I have any core beliefs after reading this book!” Others tried to show how their own beliefs did *not* match the characteristics outlined in Hoffer’s text: “I don’t think I am a true believer, as in someone ready to fight in a revolution, but if my loved ones lives were on the line, and they would be harmed I would no doubt be fighting for my cause.” The discussions involved students trying to affirm that their own beliefs did not qualify for scrutiny in Hoffer’s terms and that they would never become a true believer in the sense described by Hoffer.

After a few rounds of writing and discussion similar to the ones described above, we developed the heuristic list described below where we provide the reader-response heuristic list we developed for experimental use with *The True Believer* (1951). The list is drawn, largely, from words and concepts used by literary theorists, pedagogical philosophers, and teachers of writing and speech communication. We shared this heuristic with our students through a handout after they had started reading the book.

- We can **SUMMARIZE** an idea or a text, attempting to put whatever we are reading into our own words.

- After we have demonstrated to our audience that we have read the text and have provided our own reading of the text through a careful summary as defined above, we can go on to **RESPOND** to the idea or text in any or several of the following ways:

- We can **RHETORICIZE** the text or idea by attempting to explain who the audience/s for the concept or text might be, what its purpose was/is, and what impact it had on its original readers or what impact it has on us today. We can also consider, using Aristotelian terms, the rhetorical strategies the author uses to get his/her point across. Or we may wish to view the concept or text through a more powerful lens, such as Kenneth Burke’s dramatic pentad, to understand the writer’s ideas more fully.

- We can **HISTORICIZE** by placing the text or idea we are discussing into a historical and/or biographical context and explaining what historical context has to do with the text’s production, and how it was probably read by its original readers as opposed to how we would read it now.

- We can **PROBLEMATIZE** a concept or text by questioning its major tenets and investigating complications/problems of the concepts it contains.

- We can **EXPLICATE (ANALYZE)** the text or idea by carefully examining its parts, its form, or its language in an effort to explain its overall meaning. We can ask two important questions: “What does this concept mean?” and “HOW does this text mean what it means?”

- We can **SUPPLEMENT** a text or our discussion by noticing what seems to be missing from it and providing additional information that would lead to greater audience appreciation or understanding.

- We can **CRITICIZE** a text in writing or in discussion by explaining from our own points of view what is well done/not well done, what is satisfying to us/what is not satisfying to us, how the concept surpasses/fails to surpass similar ideas, and endeavoring to explain WHY?

- With non-fiction, especially, we can **ARGUE** with a

text or concept by disagreeing with the author’s position and arguing for our own positions or points of view.

- We can **APPLY** the text to various current and historical situations to help us understand both the text and the applications more thoroughly. We can do this through writing or in general discussion

- We can **DECONSTRUCT** (interrogate) a text. When a writer or discussant deconstructs a text, he or she examines it critically to discover the discursive contradictions, the embedded cultural assumptions, and issues having to do with power and language.

- We can **CLOSE READ** the basic text by paying close attention to what is on the printed page. Such a reading involves not only understanding the meaning of the printed words, but it also involves becoming sensitive to the nuances and connotations of the language. It can mean looking at vocabulary, sentence construction, imagery, how the writer shapes the themes. It can mean everything from the smallest linguistic device to larger issues of content and form.

- We can **MEDITATE ON A TEXT** by ruminating on it in an associative and relatively free-flowing way. This process can lead to active discussion and a deep learning of the implications of a text or idea.

- We can **PERSONALLY RESPOND** to the concept when we answer questions such as the following: “How do I feel about this concept or this text and why?” “Do I agree or disagree with its basic ideas and why?” Further, responding suggests that we justify our answer by addressing the question “Why do I feel this way?”

- We can **DEMYSTIFY** a text when we put the major ideas into our own words and use our own experiential knowledge to help us understand it.

- Finally, after summarizing the text and explaining what it means to us, we can **REFLECT** on a text by explaining how it connects with our personal lives, values, experiences, beliefs, and feelings and use what emerges through reflection to participate in in-depth discussions about the implications of its ideas.

## Grading Rubric

In conversations with colleagues across the curriculum, we hear complaints that student classroom discussion and writing are devoid of original claims that are also supported by solid argumentation or data. The “summarize everything” approach leads students to simply rehash what they are reading or to put together research collages devoid of original claims. For us, student ability to paraphrase, quote, and summarize what they read is important, but in addition we want our students to respond more originally and robustly than they often do. We believe that our heuristic list might help them develop responses that are characteristic of academic discourse. Thus, the qualitative rubrics we give to our students emphasize shorter summaries and longer responses. Here is an example of such a rubric, having to do with our students’ reading and writing about *The True Believer* (Hoffer).

We compared our students’ writing using this rubric for two years. The first year, we did not use the heuristic list. The second year we embraced the heuristic list and used it to develop a series

Figure 1. Rubric Example

GRADING RUBRIC	POSSIBLE POINTS				
Write a brief summary (no longer than two paragraphs or so) of <i>The True Believer</i> , one that uses several key quotes from the text and that establishes the basis for a longer response of your own.	1	2	3	4	5
Using one of the response types, develop a three or four page response.	1	2	3	4	5
In the response, first explain the response type you will be using and why you will be using it. (What, exactly, do you hope the response type will help you show or understand about <i>The True Believer</i> ?)	1	2	3	4	5
Make an original claim regarding what your response will add to the collective reading and responding of other students in the class.	1	2	3	4	5
Find several sources outside of the text that will help you develop your response. Use appropriate internal attribution to introduce these sources.	1	2	3	4	5
Write a reflective conclusion in which you examine how your response influenced your understanding of mass movements and, especially, Hoffer's theory of mass movements. Feel free to contend with <i>The True Believer</i> in light of your own experience and your response to the book.	1	2	3	4	5

of oral and written assignments. The point of such a rubric is not to establish a quantitative basis for paper assessment, but to nudge students toward making original response-based claims; to encourage responses that are longer than summaries; and to invite students not to blindly accept what they are reading, but to contextualize, personalize, and contend with their reading.

### Benefits of Using Oral Presentation and Discussion With a Response-Based Taxonomy

We stress here that a response-based approach to reading difficult texts must not only be used in relationship to themes created and how they are scaffolded, but also in conjunction with oral presentation and discussion. In our own case, teams of students were assigned to different types of response and charged with presenting their particular perspectives (and responses) to the class as a whole. In addition, frequent journaling and oral discussion enabled students to expand, significantly, their private readings of *The True Believer* (1951). Below we list the synergistic benefits of the approach with which we experimented:

1. Builds a discourse and learning community based on the text.
2. Creates intersubjective understandings of textual themes based on the contributions of others and through the sharing multiple points of view.
3. Modifies personal, internal schemas through connecting ideas with those of others.
4. Stimulates new ideas.
5. Clarifies confusing points in the text.
6. Generates additional questions.
7. Locates examples from the text to illustrate textual ideas and readings.
8. Uses response strategies based on the reader-response

heuristic list.

9. Encourages the use of strategies to develop comprehension and understanding, including inferring, predicting, questioning, theorizing, and evaluating.
10. Stimulates a reasoned point of view, or claim, based on evidence from the text.
12. Enables evaluation of the text based on students' own experiences, reasoning, and imagination.
13. Synthesizes the text with other readings and other discussions.

Above all, our experimental agenda for the Scholars class involved reflective writing and active discussion of one of our primary texts, *The True Believer* (1951). As illustrated by the list above, class discussion generates multiple benefits. Some of the benefits (such as generating additional questions or clarifying confusing portions of the text) seem intuitive and unremarkable. Others actually forge new thinking.

Our research highlights the generative nature of discussion to stimulate new ideas, but more importantly, through the multiple discussions and reflective writing we see internal schemas, or internal structural frameworks, shifting to accommodate the multiple viewpoints that emerge in discussions. The combined process of reflection and discussion becomes, then, the nexus for intellectual and personal growth. As one of our students writes in his reflective journal, "By discussing the text in a community I learned about different beliefs from the other students. I could also compare my own beliefs to those of others. More importantly, I could adjust my original ideas based on my interpretation and reflection of what others were saying." Another expressed her learning this way, "In discussion, I saw things I would not have seen before. Other people's comments showed me different viewpoints and helped me to be more open than close-minded about certain topics."

So how do we get to that point? How do we get to the point where students not only tolerate other perspectives, but actually see value in them? How do we create a climate for acceptance and learning, a climate where a comfortable learning community in fact promotes the willing reshaping of old schemas and the reshaping of new ways of being? Part of this comes, of course, from the attitudes of instructors who create an atmosphere of acceptance in discussion, but part of it comes from students actually having something to say based on a focused reading of the text that goes beyond the superficial to a deeper and richer level of meaning.

Our early discussions in the course were fairly mundane and students made fairly obvious observations, although they earnestly shared their thinking. Only when we prompted students to explore the text using the various heuristic approaches described in this article that a more in-depth discussion occurred. For example, one student in an in-class reflective piece discussed how she did not understand Hoffer's ideas initially, didn't understand his writing choices and examples, but after reviewing the text by setting it in an historical context, or "historicizing" it, she began to see more. She writes, "It was only after historicizing the text myself that I understood why Hoffer wrote it the way he did. It was written in a time after World War II when people were frustrated, horrified by what had happened in the world. Hoffer was trying to figure out what made people join mass movements." Another student initially calls the writing "bland, boring, like an historical text." Then she continues to say, "After hearing everyone theorize about it, I began to see how it related to me

personally, I reread the book. It was like an entirely new book. The boring, pointless historical examples became meaningful and supportive of Hoffer's theories and I started to enjoy the book more."

Yet another student expressed the value of discussion more forcefully: "I think reading the book by myself I didn't know where to focus; I was lost with no direction. The comments from others in the discussion gave me a point of view, a direction."

One student paper began historicizing by describing the historical context in which Hoffer's book was written: When analyzing the text from a historical point of view, we see that *The True Believer* was first released not long after the onset of the Cold War. The horrors of the Third Reich, especially the Holocaust, remained fresh in people's minds. People also wondered what would compel humans to commit acts as terrible and unspeakable as the Holocaust. The answers (such as "Adolph Hitler was purely evil") were insufficient. Eric Hoffer provided the missing link; he blamed the frustration people had in them at that point in time. Looking at Germany in the 1930's, the nation was both in disgrace and culturally and psychologically lacking stability.

While historicizing the text opened intellectual doors for some, applying the text to various situations helped other students to see Hoffer's ideas more deeply. One student put it this way: "I didn't realize that there were so many different points of view about Hoffer's book. Then someone brought up 9/11 and I was able to see things I had totally missed." Another, referring to world terrorist activity, wrote, "With discussion, through applying the text to today, I realized that Hoffer's ideas could be applied to everything happening around us."

Supplementing was another approach some students used to explore the text more deeply. One of our students indicated that "Having a specific viewpoint, in my case supplementing, allowed me to delve into specific aspects of the text and thus become more informed. Also, having several different viewpoints (when students shared their thoughts from the point of view of their taxonomical approach) from extremely varied backgrounds really shaped my opinion in a unique form. Moreover, I believe that our oral discourse of the text was perfect for further developing our understanding of Hoffer's meaning."

Some students supplemented the text in their writing by providing multiple examples as this one does: The book [Hoffer] also explained those movements which had freedom as their ultimate goal were more likely than others to arrive at their destination. For this reason, the French Revolution doesn't actually belong in this category. It was less about liberty and more about equality, or at least it placed equal emphasis on the two; but history has shown these can be incompatible goals and that equality doesn't occur naturally. It is usually necessary for it to be imposed by government force. For this reason, the French Revolution was fated to end in terror, while the American Revolution and the independence movement led by Gandhi ended in more of a libertarian democracy. Perhaps other forces can be at play. For example, Martin Luther King sparked a huge movement that led to more equality for African Americans.

Another student chose to criticize Hoffer, yet does it by first recognizing areas of admiration reminiscent of a more reasoned and sophisticated approach, than by confronting the text outright. The example below demonstrates this: "Before I begin to criticize Hoffer, my judgments first must be put in perspective. I have a great

admiration for Hoffer's work and I agree with ninety-five percent of what he has to say. Hoffer also makes a high mark for humility in quoting Montaigne: 'All I say is by way of discourse, and nothing by way of advice. I should not speak so boldly if it were my due to be believed.' It must be understood that Hoffer is not saying that he does not want to be listened to; he simply does not want to speak with 'pontifical authority.' Rather he would hope to be 'a passionately dispassionate observer of man and his world.'"

Students' reflective writing demonstrated a host of other positive benefits. One student maintained that discussion using the heuristic list "opened up new ways of thinking for me. I saw things in new perspectives." Another said, "Furthermore, without these discussions I would have gotten a very shallow understanding of the book. Community reading has allowed me to think outside the box, to think without limitations and restrictions." Still another felt that saying her ideas aloud enabled her to "understand my own thoughts."

### Formal Writing as Evidence of Learning

Although it would be impossible to analyze all of the formal papers our students wrote about *The True Believer* (1951), we believe that the written products received following our experiment with the comprehensive heuristic list we had developed in fact represented the best writing we had encountered during our many years of teaching the course together. By "best writing," we mean writing that was not only purposeful, focused, nuanced, coherent, well developed, and effective, but also writing that evinced significant learning and growth among our students, and the numbers in our rubric reflect this. Before using the heuristic list during two years of the course, the point values for each of the 6 dimensions on the rubric averaged between 2.0 and 2.5 on a 5-point scale. After integrating the heuristic and applying it in discussion, papers, and performances during the third year, we found the numbers averaged around 4.5, a considerable improvement.

The quality of writing and discussion we observed in these papers continued throughout the rest of the semester as the students encountered other difficult texts. The continuing quality in class discussions and writing convinced us that our students had "deeply learned" (using the terminology of Ken Bain, 2004) how to read better, engage in scholarly conversation better, research better, write better, and think better.

Our usual grading process includes splitting the papers in half, individually responding to the papers in our respective piles, and then trading the papers. This process results in a kind of dialogical response process, with each of us often commenting not only on the student writing, but also on the responses of the other teacher. We then agree upon a tentative grade, and students receive the option of further revising and editing papers, following a review of our global and marginal comments, for a higher grade. With the set of papers following our use of the heuristic list, however, we were immediately impressed even before students set about revising and editing. Below we list what we agreed—in excited conversation—was SO GOOD about the writing, and then we gesture at specific text features that seemed to confirm our initial subjective expressions of our delight, confirmed by the averages using our grading rubric, noted previously.

We could focus on many features of the speaking and writing assignments, but here are the ones that we thought were key as



we investigated the numbers of the rubric:

1. The papers included a brief summary, were focused and well developed, each one advancing a claim and supporting that claim with convincing arguments and counter-arguments.

2. The papers evinced a movement from lifeless summaries of the book at hand to interested (and interesting) efforts to contextualize the book, to contend with it, to apply it, to reflect personally on the experience of having read it, even to disagree with it and to argue with it.

3. We found evidence of what we want to call “movements of mind” and “reflective developments.” The “movements of mind,” as we will show, might be quantified through frequency of complex sentences and dynamic (rather than static) cohesive ties, but this is outside of the scope of our writing here. “Reflective developments” suggest our students’ openness to other points of view, their willingness of change or qualify their own points of view, and their ability to incorporate the reading into their personal growth and their overall world views.

4. The students often went beyond the limits of the assignment, searching for and including additional texts beyond the one at hand. This outward scholarly movement, in our opinion, enabled students to explore the intertextual status of *The True Believer* and to find deeper meaning “outside of the lines” of the text.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The communication generated during our experimentation with Rhetoric and Communication included some of the most penetrating, wide-ranging, honest, and intellectual communication we have yet experienced as instructors. We found that exploring the texts through the heuristic list described in this paper led to profound insights as well as richly suggestive and provocative ideas. Discussions became thought provoking and insightful. Visceral reactions to the text became well argued and developed intellectual comments. Moreover, students demonstrated a heightened recognition of who they were as communicators and who they were as human beings. Students wrestled with ideas that could shake their worldviews and could prompt a reevaluation of themselves within their own private universes. As readers and listeners, we watched the sometimes painful, but always productive, toil of personal growth--that struggle to know oneself, evinced by our students’ honest and open communication, both in discussion and in journals and papers.

But the heuristic list prompted more than a sense of affective personal growth. Students’ communication also demonstrated a rigorous and systematic examination of historical, ethical, metaphysical, and epistemological issues embedded in *The True Believer*. The heuristic list provided a route for continuously deepening exploration and thinking. Indeed, the heuristic list became a prism through which students could see the text reflected in multiple ways, one of the characteristics of deep learning. Students often expressed how our discussions, flowing from the differing response stances suggested by the heuristic list, helped them experience a richness in the text they had not seen before and insights into the nature and problems of belief they had never considered.

For us, this experimental use of the heuristic list of response styles was imminently successful. We came closer to generating a

community of discourse in a learning community of scholars evidenced through our collective co-construction of meaning. If our goal was to create an environment where students could freely express ideas, our experiment was successful. If our goal was to promote learning and critical thinking in multiple variations, it was successful; and if our goal was to provide an avenue for self-growth and reflection, the heuristic list and the discussion and writing exercises we developed, based on different response styles, led to a deeper connection to the text itself, and ultimately a deeper connection among our students and ourselves as members of a vibrant learning community.

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