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Close Reading Responses: A Streamlined Approach to Teaching Critical-Thinking Writing in Honors

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Abstract: This study presents a scaffold approach to building critical academic writing skills among honors students. Faced with limited instructional time, a reading-intensive curriculum, and students in need of rigorous writing instruction, a scaffold model was developed to include a series of condensed writing assignments called "Close Reading Responses." Coupled with rubrics and guided peer review, these assignments allow for repetitive critical practice at various stages along a trajectory toward the final paper. Results indicate that this incremental, explicit form of writing instruction allows students to hone critical-thinking skills in a condensed manner without demanding that they produce (and instructors read) excessive volumes of writing. The author suggests that this method of writing instruction may prove useful for educators looking to empower and retain student writers (particularly those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds) while keeping pace with content-rich curricula.

Keywords: academic writing—study & teaching; scaffolded instruction; critical thinking; writing instruction; University of Maine (ME)—Honors College

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One of the joys of teaching first-year students in the University of Maine Honors College is the rich reading list set by the college as part of our four-semester-long, required "Civilizations" sequence. These great-books-style courses are structured as a quasi-chronological survey of classics with, on average, a new text being introduced each week. Titles on the list include *The Odyssey*, *American Indian Myths and Legends*, *The Torah*, and *The Analects.* Much as I delight in the concepts covered in this reading-intensive curriculum, as an educator with a background in teaching writing and composition, I am skeptical that these first-year courses, which are labeled with the university's "writing-intensive" distinction, provide time to teach writing well. This week, for instance, we are wrapping up our too-short discussion of *Tao Te Ching*, and by next week we need to be ready for the mandatory lecture on Plato's *Republic*.

I am not a stickler for course labels and could be content with assigning students the task of writing multiple papers over the course of a semester while offering little instructional time to support that writing, but given our student population, that formula does not seem fair. Approximately one quarter of University of Maine undergraduates are first-generation college students, and many hail from rural high schools with limited access to resources such as AP classes. The resultant disparity in students' educational backgrounds is apparent in my honors college students, perhaps most particularly in their competencies and comfort levels with writing. When I step back from our reading-intensive curriculum and think about the learning outcomes from which these students would most benefit, an explicit, skills-based education in writing is at the top of the list. I do not mean simply uniform instruction in grammar and syntax—for students who still need help with verb tenses or concision in prose, I offer office hours—but instead guided practice in the critical-thinking aspects of writing: the ability to write and rewrite a logically reasoned, well-structured, supported, and nuanced argument that causes a reader to sit up in her chair.

In 2016, an analysis of student and faculty perceptions of writing instruction and assignments within our honors college led researchers Caropreso, Haggerty and Ladenheim to a similar conclusion. Their study focused on what they called "critical-thinking writing," a term I will borrow below and which they defined as "the ability to construct a thesis, build an argument, support arguments with empirical data, acknowledge alternative positions, synthesize, analyze, and draw conclusions" (258). At the end of their paper, the researchers pointed to a study by Condon and Kelly-Riley stating that

"greater improvement in student critical-thinking writing would likely result from intentionally planning and implementing instruction, including assignments designed specifically to accomplish the critical thinking goals and objectives of the [course]" (267).

Over the course of the last year and a half, I have aimed to achieve that goal, developing a series of writing assignments for my honors students that are incremental, that are explicit in their instructions, and that revisit learning outcomes in a variety of forms. These assignments take a cue from writing instruction literature that the volume of writing does not necessarily equate with improved student learning. In other words, my students do not write (and I do not read) multiple ten-page papers. Instead, we focus our efforts on an assignment I have named the Close Reading Response, which allows students repeated, scaffolded, and condensed practice in crafting the critical-thinking bare bones of a longer paper. This assignment can be applied to the many texts we read over the course of the semester and allows us to keep pace with the larger curriculum. For other honors instructors who are bound by a content-driven curriculum, this assignment may prove useful for efficiently and effectively teaching critical-thinking writing.

BACKGROUND ON THE ASSIGNMENT

Below I provide guidelines for the Close Reading Response, but first some background on its development. In my more than ten years of teaching writing before arriving at the University of Maine, I encountered many pedagogical philosophies and approaches to composition instruction. One stood out as exceptionally effective: a credit-bearing writing lab designed by the Chair of English at Berkeley City College, Jenny Lowood, which I had the privilege of co-teaching. Whenever I think about exemplary writing instruction, I find myself coming back to this course, which was set in a computer lab staffed by trained upper-class writing tutors. Students brought in papers they were working on for other classes and signed up for short conferences with me or one of my tutors. Guided by a progressive rubric, we dedicated each conference to offering a writer feedback on one aspect of his paper. The writer then worked independently on revisions before signing up for another conference focused on the next stage. Our rubric was a general set of guidelines that we adapted according to the genre and sophistication of the student's writing, but in its standard form writers moved through conferences focused on the following stages: control of thesis; essay organization, including progression of logic and provision of discrete supporting arguments; paragraph

development, including the use of evidence and analysis of that evidence; sentence control; sentence structure; and proofreading. Students frequently engaged in as many as six one-on-one conferences and cycles of revision before completing this process with a single paper.

Inevitably, a couple weeks into the term, some students new to the course would complain about the painstakingly slow revision process. "It's been two weeks and I'm still reworking my thesis for my first paper," they groaned. But the student veterans in the class—there were always many—reassured these students that they would, in fact, make progress and that the process was worth the effort. By the end of the term, many of the once-frustrated students were among the cheerleaders for the course, touting it as the "best writing class" they had ever taken. I quickly joined them. In my tour of teaching at a liberal arts college, a community college, and a research university, never have I participated in a more effective writing instruction model in terms of student engagement and learning.

Reflecting on that model in my current context, I have found myself repeatedly wondering what made the lab so effective for teaching and learning writing, and how some of those pedagogical lessons can be transferred to a content-driven course that allows for only two hours of face time with students each week.

Many of the strengths of the lab course overlap with findings from Anderson et al., whose multi-institutional study provides analysis of data from more than 70,000 undergraduate learners and focuses on the characteristics of writing assignments that increase student learning. According to the researchers, three pedagogical approaches to writing most likely predict student learning: "interactive writing processes," "meaning-making writing tasks," and "clear writing expectations" (Anderson, et al. 5). Notably, these findings are applicable to any disciplinary context and, according to the authors, "the quality of assignments is more powerful in advancing learning than the amount of writing assigned" (5).

In the Berkeley City College lab-based course, the mode of instruction more than met Anderson et al.'s criteria for being "interactive." Students were repeatedly in conversation with their audience and exposed to how their intended meaning might differ from their reader's perception. In terms of "meaning-making writing tasks," though we dealt with grammar and syntax toward the end of guiding students' rewriting, the bulk of our instructional time was focused on content and the student's ability to demonstrate strong analysis, synthesis, and critical thought.

Finally, in terms of "clear writing expectations," writing goals were defined explicitly and revisited frequently with the reference point of a shared rubric and notes recorded by tutors after each session. At no point were students told to write "a paper" or "a synthesis" or "a critical response" and then left to their own devices to infer exactly what was involved or expected in that genre. Instead, in a conference with me, a student might investigate her thesis as we repeatedly looked to the first criterion on the lab's standard rubric. We might discuss whether her topic was sufficiently narrow to allow for depth in the writing that followed, or we might consider how she could add nuance to her argument by probing its significance, asking questions like "So what? So why does this argument matter?" After emerging with a strong thesis, the student might work with another tutor on the second portion of the rubric—essay organization. Together they would consider her use of supporting sub-points: how they were organized and whether they were discrete, allowing for a progression of logic.

Though in summary this approach sounds heavily didactic, the impression I received from students was that this explicit instruction was empowering, allowing them to develop a vocabulary for the many skills—most of them based in critical thought—involved in crafting strong writing. In their conversations with tutors and in their involved rewriting processes, these students were practicing skills critical to metacognitive regulation, including planning, monitoring, and evaluating their work, or to borrow a term from educational psychology, developing their "habits of mind" (Costa and Kallick 1).

Though I no longer teach in a lab, I find that many of the lessons I learned from teaching composition at Berkeley City College are transferable and apply to teaching writing in an honors program. I still aim to provide students with clear expectations for writing assignments and to empower them by building a shared writers' vocabulary to evaluate their work and that of others in a variety of contexts. I also limit the number of long papers my students write in their first-year honors classes; instead, we concentrate our efforts on writing Close Reading Responses. This assignment complements a scaffolded approach to teaching writing and provides students frequent and repeated practice of critical-thinking writing skills in reference to the many and diverse readings we encounter each semester.

THE CLOSE READING RESPONSE ASSIGNMENT

During the initial weeks of my first-year, reading-intensive honors course, students and I write and rewrite thesis statements. We define what we are

looking for in sophisticated, college-level theses: usually a specific and narrow topic, a unique argument, and some statement of significance in which students take their claim a step further by stating its implications. I find that this time dedicated to co-investigating students' theses at the beginning of the term helps previously less-advantaged students push their thinking a step further and make every word in their central argument count. More privileged students often need the invitation to step away from formulas they were taught in high school, designed more to appeal to fatigued examiners evaluating AP or IB exams than to promote nuanced and sophisticated thought.

Once students are well practiced in their thesis statements, we move on to writing Close Reading Responses (CRRs). In labeled, compartmentalized subsections, students compose:

- a thesis,
- a few bits of relevant evidence (I typically ask for three quotations from the given week's text but emphasize that this evidence could just as easily be scientific data or other content relevant to their primary field of study),
- a brief discussion of each of those bits of evidence and of their relevance to the thesis, and
- a final significance paragraph in which the student digs into the implications of her argument.

Absent is the hook or lead-in one generally finds before reading a thesis, and body paragraphs are not framed with topic or concluding sentences. Instead, we are focusing exclusively on the critical-thinking components of what might later become a longer paper.

Some students are initially perplexed by this assignment. The overachievers, perhaps convinced that longer is better, sometimes ask, "Can't I just write a whole paper?" Within one or two weeks, though, they seem to be sold. Brevity and concision, it turns out, are not easily achieved. Here the goal is not a page or word count, but the practice of staying on point, advancing the claim with each distinct piece of evidence, and achieving depth of thought.

The final section of the CRR, what I call the significance paragraph, is often a head-scratcher for students, particularly those who have been conditioned by five-paragraph or other essay formulas. "So what?" I ask them. "Why should your reader care about this claim? How is this argument relevant or novel?" I explain to them that this sort of critical thinking is often

what makes standout writing in any discipline. As an activist or community organizer, the writer needs to explain to the audience why they should care about the issue at hand. As a scientist writing a grant proposal for the National Science Foundation (NSF), the writer needs to explain more than what the study is or how it will be conducted, but why. To borrow terms from the NSF, what are the "broader impacts" of the work? What is its "intellectual merit"? How will this research advance the discipline itself?

To ensure that the experience of writing is interactive, we spend time in and out of class discussing peers' CRRs: the ideas, the particular strengths in logic or critical thought, and the ways their responses could be improved. By the time students have written three or four CRRs, I guide them through the process of writing a full paper. They come to paper writing much more ready than they were at the beginning of the term, armed with a critical-thinking writer's vocabulary that allows them to consider the significance of their claim, for example, or the need to analyze evidence thoroughly so that its relevance to the thesis is clear to the reader. I do not grade their first draft. As Morris states, "Students profit from having their writing read and responded to before it's graded, whether it's by the teacher, a writing tutor, or a well-prepared peer" (12). Instead, we study and discuss the rubric I will use to grade their papers relative to their work. I also guide them through a detailed peer review process, which they apply to a peer's draft and then to their own. Having practiced critical-thinking writing in their CRRs and then revisited these concepts in the rubric and peer review guidelines, I find them offering one another sophisticated feedback about elements such as essay cohesion, the significance of their arguments, provision of contextual information before quotations, and concision.

Over the course of the semester, students only write two full-length critical essays and one longer creative writing piece for my class. Otherwise, nearly all their writing comes in the form of Close Reading Responses. Beyond helping students to regularly practice and hone their ability to think critically, the CRRs have other advantages. They have the potential to reduce faculty time spent grading. I am not wading through entire papers padded with wordy prose; instead, after the first few weeks and once students are familiar with my expectations for CRRs, I have the pleasure of reading and responding to concise, carefully reasoned responses that cut straight to the heart of the students' arguments. Second, plagiarism with CRRs is very uncommon. The form does not lend itself well to copying and forces students to engage thoroughly with their own thinking and with the week's reading assignment. Finally, with this

model, students and I quickly share a vocabulary for critical-thinking goals within their writing. My feedback can be directed, and students are self-directed, confident in their ability to evaluate their own and peers' work and fully aware that much of writing and revision come at the level of ideas, not grammar.

In their course evaluations, students comment on the benefits of writing CRRs, as in the following statements from the spring of 2020:

- "The writing assignments that we did were organized like miniature essay outlines, which were extremely valuable and helped me strengthen the basis of my essays, overall producing higher quality writing."
- "The close reading responses were a great way to get feedback on essay writing without having to write tons of essays."
- "I was fairly confident in my writing before I took this class, but Katie helped redefine what 'strong' writing is. She taught me how to create a robust thesis based off of my knowledge and beliefs, then support that thesis with clear evidence and reason."
- "I would say that my largest area of growth was in my ability to write succinctly. The CRRs were the biggest challenge of the course because they made me think deeply about the text but required a really condensed version of what I could've written about. I have the tendency to write more than required and to over explain, so the CRRs were so helpful in getting me to find the main points and get my message across quickly."
- "My critical thinking and formation of thesis statements was dramatically improved as a result of the CRRs, as well as my ability to connect ideas and concepts from the past to current events through the significance section of the CRR."

SUPPORTING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH CRITICAL-THINKING WRITING PEDAGOGY IN HONORS

In his *JNCHC* article "What Is an Honors Student?," Jay Freyman argues that "aptitude for honors depends at least as much on attitude as on accomplishment" (24). Given my students' disparate educational backgrounds and

writing abilities, I hold this distinction true. What defines strong first-year honors students upon their arrival in my classroom is their curiosity and their willingness to work hard and to be challenged. Their ability to write critically is not something I initially expect from all students although I owe them the opportunity to learn this set of skills by the end of their first year in college.

I am proud of the fact that approximately a quarter of the undergraduates at the University of Maine are first-generation college students, yet I am aware that by no means is my university an outlier. In 2015, first-generation college students accounted for 28.6% of honors college and program enrollments, according to the National Collegiate Honor Council's Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey (Mead 25). As Patrick Bahls states, "honors programs and colleges are critical sites for development of equity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education" (73). Sound composition pedagogy is central to this mission. In her summary of more than a decade of research in honors composition, Annmarie Guzy highlights the "vital role that honors composition plays within honors programs and colleges by aiding students with the transition from high school writing to college-level research, which in turn increases program retention rates, particularly with the expanding CUR-based emphasis on honors theses and capstone projects" (10).

In order to capitalize on less educationally privileged honors students' attitudes and to equalize their access to accomplishment on the playing field, we owe it to them to break down complex tasks and expectations into their component parts; this is one of my goals with the Close Reading Response assignment. When coupled with frequent, guided peer review, assignments like these allow students to enhance their metacognitive regulation and procedural knowledge, empowering them with the tools to determine "how you start, how you decide what to do first and then next, how you check your work, how you know when you are done" (Tanner 118). These are skills that they can apply to any domain or discipline and that, as Heather Camp argues, encourage "self-sufficient learning" (62).

Toward the end of each fall semester in the University of Maine's Civilizations sequence, we read "Pericles' Funeral Oration" (Thucydides). This year when week fourteen of the semester arrived and with it the Athenian speech, I did not ask students to write a Close Reading Response. They needed a break. Nevertheless, I heard the influence of the CRR assignment in class discussion as they referenced Pericles' "thesis," his "core argument," and his "claim." Several students commented on Pericles's extended focus on Athenian exceptionalism before addressing the central, though delayed, purpose

of his speech: to remember the war dead. They pointed out areas where his nationalist rhetoric was unsubstantiated with evidence. I realized during that class that my students were reading the speech as writers. After a semester of creating the component parts of critical-thinking writing and identifying them through peer review, they were empowered not only as writers but also as readers, applying these concepts across disciplines and genres.

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