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Critical Reading: Using Reading Prompts to Promote Active Engagement with Text

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The assignment of pre-class reading is a common practice in higher education. Typically, the purpose of this reading assignment is to expose students to background knowledge that will be useful in an upcoming class discussion or to introduce a topic that will be presented more directly by the instructor. However, numbers of undergraduates actually completing these assignments are very low (Ruscio, 2001). The purpose of this article is to describe a variety of reading/writing prompts that can be used to promote critical out-of-class reading by undergraduate students. Critical reading involves the art and science of analyzing and evaluating text while maintaining a view towards improving the nature of thought and one's subsequent actions (Paul & Elder, 2008). The prompts are organized into six categories: (1) identification of problem or issue, (2) making connections, (3) interpretation of evidence, (4) challenging assumptions, (5) making applications, and (6) taking a different point-of-view. The specific context of how to use and assign these reading/writing prompts and the subsequent benefits from their use will also be discussed.

Instructors ask students to read a variety of materials outside of the class session: textbooks, primary documents, newspapers, magazines, academic journals, or on-line materials. As I make weekly out-of-class reading assignments, I recall those many undergraduate classes that I took in college in which the professor assigned weekly readings, and for the most part, I barely skimmed the text. After all, I thought, the professor was going to deliver the most important course content during the next class lecture anyway. Reading the text was time consuming and often intellectually labor intensive, and besides, my professor was going to *tell* me what was on the next exam plus give me a study guide, so why bother with the reading? I figured, "Why not skip the reading and just take good notes during class?" Sometimes, instructors provoke this limited attention to out-of-class reading because they do not attend to or reference the reading during class time. Students may then be of the opinion that out-of-class reading assignments have no real connection to class activities. Now that I assign reading to students myself, I had to ask, what can I do to help my students see the value in carefully and critically reading out-of-class assignments? The purpose of this article is to highlight reading/writing prompts that I have used to promote out-of-class critical reading by my elementary education methods students. These reading/writing prompts will be significant across disciplinary boundaries.

Readers comprehend the printed text by retrieving from their memory prior experiences and concepts that are rooted in the reader's culture (Applegate, Quinn, & Applegate, 2002). Good readers connect their past experiences with the text: interpreting, evaluating, and considering alternative responses or interpretations. Critical reading is the art of analyzing and evaluating text and thinking with a view to improving the nature of thought (Paul & Elder, 2008). Students can critically read in a variety of ways:

- When they raise vital questions and problems from the text,
- When they gather and assess relevant information and then offer plausible interpretations of that information,
- When they test their interpretations against previous knowledge or experience and current experience,
- When they examine their assumptions and the implications of those assumptions, and
- When they use what they have read to communicate effectively with others or to develop potential solutions to complex problems.

McDonald (2004) defines critical reading as an alternative way of reading that goes beyond the "typical approaches to reading such as information processing or personal response" (p. 18). An example of an information processing approach to reading might be when students outline or summarize the main ideas in the text. An example of a personal response approach might be when students are asked to describe their feelings or impressions related to a selection of text.

Critical reading aligns with reader response learning theories. Based on this theoretical model, students do not try to figure out an author's meaning as they read. Instead, the reader negotiates or creates meaning that makes sense based on personal background knowledge (Tompkins, 2006). Rosenblatt (1991) suggests a continuum of stance or purpose for reading. On the one end is the aesthetic stance where reading is done for enjoyment or pleasure. On the other is the efferent stance in which the purpose of reading is

to locate and remember information. Reader response learning theories suggest that students often use a combination of the two stances when they read. For example, when undergraduate students read the memoir of Esme Raji Codell, *Educating Esme: Diary of a Teacher's First Year* (Codell, 1999), they may read efferently to locate information about specific teaching practices, and they may read aesthetically as they ponder the complex dynamics of the fifth grade classroom and the urban public school setting in general.

Students can apply reader response theory when they respond to literature by writing and participating in instructional conversations (Tompkins, 2006). To promote this type of critical reader response by undergraduate students, I have gathered a variety of reading/writing prompts to dovetail with out-of-class reading assignments. The purpose of these reading/writing prompts is to facilitate personal connection between the undergraduate student and the assigned text. The prompts are simply questions used to orient students with a critical reading stance and to guide their thinking as they read.

The purpose of the prompt is not to help students to acquire information for course assessment purposes or to simply complete a class assignment. For example, some traditional reading tasks might be taking two-column notes, summarizing the text, outlining the key points of the text, or taking comprehension quizzes. The overarching goal of the prompts presented in this article is to help undergraduate students to be able to synthesize and respond to the big ideas from the reading selection as opposed to mining facts or details. That is not to say that there are times when mining important facts is not important; however, I find that undergraduate students have some success with identifying facts from reading and less success with focusing on the big ideas or thinking about the content with a critical or personal mindset.

Choosing a significant and realistic purpose for the reading assignment is vital to presenting prompts that will promote critical reading. The value in realistic responses is that students have the opportunity to do something with what they are learning through their reading (Meyers & Jones, 1993). Realistic responses to questions are more like the way students will think and act in the world outside of the academic classroom. For example, instead of identifying the vital components of differentiated instruction, students may be asked to write a description of differentiated instruction for parents of children in their future classroom.

Instructional choices are guided by an instructors' values and assumptions related to teaching and learning. The assumptions behind the development of these reading/writing prompts is that learning is an active process and the learners must take up knowledge and make it their own. Active learning, as described by Meyers and Jones (1993), involves providing opportunities for students to "meaningfully talk and listen, write, read and reflect on the content, ideas, issues and concerns of an academic subject"(p. 6). The instructors' role is to guide the active learning process in a variety of ways, one way being the use of reading/writing prompts to promote critical reading. Through class discussions or peer responses, students additionally have the opportunity to engage in meaningful listening and talk. Use of these reading/writing prompts creates a more active and dynamic learning experience for undergraduate students.

Critical Reading/Writing Prompts

The nature of each reading/writing prompt targets a specific critical thinking skill. The variety of prompts suggested in this article requires a range of critical thinking responses from students. Although the prompts are categorized, they do not reflect a linear or hierarchical view of the upper levels of cognitive taxonomy (application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation). Therefore, there is no suggested linear fashion with which to introduce the prompts. The variety of critical responses called for by these prompts suggests an interactive approach to the development of critical thinking instead of a hierarchal approach (Orlich, 1991).

The critical reading/writing prompts elicit a reader response that promotes the alignment of readers with the literary text in a variety of different ways. Most of the following prompts are written in the first person to promote active and personal learning. The prompts are organized into six categories: (1) identification of problem or issue, (2) making connections, (3) interpretation of evidence, (4) challenging assumptions, (5) making applications, and (6) taking a different point-of-view. Students are expected to read with the cognitive framework implied in the question and respond in a written format. The task of responding to these prompts in a written format helps students explore their own thinking about concepts or issues in a manner that helps them to expand, clarify, or modify their existing mental structures (Meyers & Jones, 1993).

Identification of Problem or Issue

Students are asked to identify and describe the potential purpose for why the reading selection was written. This lens may create a 'need to know' viewpoint for students as they read.

- What problem is the author identifying? Who does the problem relate to?
- What are the complexities of this issue?
- For whom is this topic important and why?

Making Connections

Students have the opportunity to think critically about course topics when instructors help them to make connections between what they are reading and their existing cultural knowledge. The subjectivity of the reader can be examined, clarified, and melded with the text when the personal experiences of the reader are integrated with the experiences or circumstances in the text (McDonald, 2004).

- What do I already know about this topic? Where and how have I acquired this knowledge? What might be the limitations of my thinking related to this topic?
- How is what I am reading different from what I already know? Why might this difference exist?
- What new ideas are here for me to consider? Why am I willing to consider them? Why am I not willing to consider them?
- What experiences have I had in my internship that support, confound, or refute the information presented from this reading assignment?
- What information from this reading selection resonates with, and contributes to, my interest in teaching and learning?
- How do the principles from this reading selection compare to what I am learning in my other courses?
- What connections can I make between this reading selection and something else that we have discussed in this course?
- Make a list of presented ideas that are similar to your own and a separate list of ideas you have not thought about before.

Interpretation of Evidence

This type of prompt is most often used when reading case studies, viewing video clips, or reviewing student work samples. When students come to the next class session, inferences are checked for consistency with other students, identifying biases and assumptions that may have affected and shaped differing inferences.

- What inferences can I make from the evidence given in the reading selection?
- What patterns of student activity do I notice? What inferences can I draw related to student engagement and student learning?
- What patterns of teacher activity do I notice? How are students responding to these patterns of activities?
- What learning strategies do I see teachers promoting or the children using?
- What relevant evidence or examples does the author give to support his or her justification of a particular teaching technique? Am I convinced this teaching approach will be successful in my internship classroom? Why or why not?
- How does this author acknowledge the complexities of the classroom?

Challenging Assumptions

Students are to clearly identify and critique their potentially seldom-tested assumptions, determine the source of their assumptions, and evaluate their validity based on the evidence given. Students are also asked to consider the assumptions made by the author. As students take up different stances, they learn to recognize how perspective might mask or expose the assumptions that influence reading (Pace, 2006).

- This chapter/article is about assertive discipline (insert any topic here). What assumptions do I have about assertive discipline? How have my assumptions shaped my initial point-of-view? What information from the reading opposes my assumptions? What information from the reading supports my assumption?
- What do I still not know or understand about this topic? (Post-reading prompt)
- In what areas has this reading helped me to discover a potential need for change in my approach to teaching?
- What kind of assumptions is the author making? Do I share these same assumptions?
- What does the author appear to value? Have I been convinced to value these same things? Why or why not?
- What information builds my confidence in the authors' expertise?
- If the opportunity arose, what questions would I pose to the author?
- How does my frame-of-reference affect my understanding and interpretation of this information?
- Write your mathematics learning autobiography (or any other subject). What

emotions, feelings, and/or assumptions related to learning are you bring to this discussion?

Making Application

These reading prompts help students to use what they have learned through their reading in very practical ways. These realistic response opportunities may help students to see more value in the reading assignment.

- What advice could I add to this reading selection? On what basis do I give this advice?
- 3-2-1 reading application. What are three of the most important concepts from this reading? What two pieces of information would I share with a colleague (a colleague would be someone you might work with during your first year of employment)? What is one way I will alter my current teaching practice based on what I have read?
- How did this reading help me to build my professional knowledge (or skill)?
- In what ways did this reading selection prompt me to pay attention to something different in the teaching and learning environment than what I have noticed before?
- In what ways has this reading selection helped me to understand myself better as a developing teacher professional?
- Looking back over my internship teaching experiences thus far, what suggestions from the reading make the most sense to me?
- Looking towards where I want to be in two years, what suggestions from the reading make the most sense to me?

Taking a Different Point of View

Informally writing for someone who presumably knows little about a topic typically allows student to think in a less formal, conversational manner that may be more effective in helping them to make meaning of the text (Meyers & Jones, 1993). Providing opportunities for students to consider diverse ideas supports critical reading (Fecho, 2001).

- Write an explanation of a topic for a parent. [For example, if the topic was differentiated instruction the reading/writing prompt might be, "Using only three sentences, how would I describe differentiated instruction to a parent? The explanation should include the key concepts of differentiation but be in a language that a non-educator could understand."]
- Meeting opposition. What would I point out as important about this topic to others who either question or disagree with my point of view? [For example, if the topic was differentiated instruction the reading/writing prompt might be, "Differentiated instruction is just a sneaky method for tracking students. Defend your position that this statement is false, OR defend your position that this statement is true. Use evidence from your readings."]

Assigning the Reading/Writing Prompts

The reading/writing prompt is assigned at the same time that a reading assignment is given (usually at the end of the class period). There is only one prompt per reading assignment. Students are to complete the reading and answer the prompt before the next class period. Student responses are typically one or two paragraphs. Depending on the length of the reading assignment and the class schedule, students may have one night or one week to respond to the reading.

Students are asked to respond to the prompts in a variety of ways depending on the type or length of the response. They might post their reading response on a Blackboard discussion board (usually for shorter responses). Students may be required to read the responses made by other members of the class and, sometimes, make comments on peer responses before coming to class. Typically, I do not intervene in these Blackboard discussions. At other times, I collect the responses on Blackboard to shape my introduction to the next class session. The student responses give me an indication of how students are processing their reading and what confusions or misconceptions might be emerging.

On occasion, I ask a student to email his or her response to another student in the class. The student pair is required to respond to each other's response simply by asking clarifying questions. Upon arriving to class, I begin by having two student pairs (4 students) engage in an initial discussion of the topic under review for that class period. Creating a situation where an exchange of ideas is student-to-student instead of student-to-teacher usually results in thinking that is clearer and less pretentious (Fulwiler, 1987). In other words, students are less interested in impressing the instructor with their knowledge and more interested in communicating understanding.

For some reading prompts, I have students simply word-process their response and bring them to the next class session. The emphasis for method of response needs to be on variety. Give students many different ways to respond and to talk about or share their

responses with peers and with the instructor. This variety helps to keep the reading/writing responses from becoming stale and routine.

The manner in which an instructor will build on the pre-class reading prompts depends on the nature of the text and the type of reading prompt used. However, in most cases, the reading prompts described in this article prompt students to make personal connections with the text. These personal connections help students to find more meaning and relevance with the text. Initial class discussions begin with these personal connection points. Important content from the reading is always explicitly identified, as is application of the content in new situations. Because students have thought more deeply about the pre-class reading, I anecdotally have found they are more engaged and thoughtful during in-class discussions and can apply their new learning in different contexts more successfully. Sometimes the discussions are brief and only serve to focus the subsequent lesson. At other times the conversations are much longer and become a framework for presenting the content for the day's lesson.

Students are instructed to not worry about grammar, punctuation, or paragraph structure in their written responses. This is not a writing assignment, but the emphasis is made on uncovering meaning, application, or perspective of the text. Responses are not formally graded, but the syllabus makes it clear that the instructor keeps track of the extent to which the responses indicate that the student has done the readings and thought about them. Depending on class size, the amount of time to read and respond to these papers may be problematic. In most cases I indicate that I have read the response with a checkmark. My feedback is usually short and positive with comments such as "interesting idea" or "great connection." Sometimes I will notate that a comment is particularly profound and ask that the student share his or her written response during our class discussion. However, when students have particular difficulties, ask specific questions, or offer unusually insightful observations, I do offer more specific and extensive feedback.

Benefits of Using Prompts

A serendipitous by-product of using these reading/writing prompts has been richer class discussions. I have found that more personal responses are shared, more connections are made between internship experiences and course content, more active interchanges are made among students, and students are generally more engaged in the class discussions by asking clarifying questions. August (2000) suggests that writing associated with out-of-class reading improves student preparation.

An additional benefit was that reading the responses before the class session helped me to be better prepared to more purposefully shape and guide the discussion, activity, or content delivery portion of the subsequent class. The responses were frequently collected from the Blackboard site and used as a springboard for the next class discussion. Common ideas, emerging thoughts, or possible misconceptions represented in the responses were typically the focus of these early class discussions. Reading these responses before class helped me to focus the beginning of class discussion and make important connections between the out-of-class reading and the topic of the current class session. For example, reading response postings before class helped me to identify single viewpoints that are often characteristic of undergraduate students. This allowed me to help students recognize their own biases and to begin to consider alternative perspectives on a subject. A future area of research may be an attempt to contextually describe this type of richer student engagement during class discussions.

Additionally, this type of reading prompt/writing response ensures that all students will have the opportunity to engage in a type of intellectual discussion. Depending on the size of the class, it may be difficult to engage all of the students in an in-class discussion. A written response to these prompts assures that everyone's voice can be heard. Finally, these reading/writing responses model the types of critical analysis of text that is needed outside of the classroom. Whether it is reading the newspaper, a professional journal, or a political blog, people need to be able to identify problems or issues and interpret evidence. In a complex global society, people need to be able to challenge assumptions and take different points-of-view. To meaningfully understand new information people need to make connections to what they already know and make application of that knowledge to solve problems.

Andrew August (2000) suggests the use of a "Reader's Journal" in which students write informal responses to reading assignments. The entries are described as informal writing that is designed to improve students' reading and encourage their thinking. Students are asked to summarize the main points of the assigned reading and express their responses to it. August's research found that ninety percent of students agreed that the journal entry assignment made them more likely to do the out-of-class reading (August, 2000). A similar approach might be taken with these reading prompts by asking students to collate their responses throughout the semester.

Conclusion

The selection of good reading assignments has not been discussed in this article. However, it is implied that promoting critical reading with the use of questions requires that the reading selections are of value and interest to the reader. The reading materials that are offered to students should be those of the highest quality that will ignite their thinking and stimulate their intellectual curiosity.

Asking students to prepare for class by doing out-of-class reading is central to teaching and learning in the undergraduate classroom. Completing this pre-class work helps students to be more engaged in the in-class learning process (Ripley, 2007). As instructors, we can promote critical reading habits in our students by giving them significant and realistic purposes for their out-of-class reading. This is one way to facilitate a richer learning experience for students outside the classroom. The list of reading/writing prompts offered here is by no means exhaustive; in fact, they should only be used as a starting point to broaden the critical reading skills of other individual instructors' undergraduate students. Students *can* read and think at the same time: instructors just need to guide student critical reading with purposeful writing prompts.

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