

Thinking reading and writing: the role of critical thinking in developing student literacy

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Rationale for workshop

Research indicates that we have not been very effective in teaching critical thinking, even when we explicitly set out to do so (Willingham, 2007). While most academics would agree that critical thinking is an essential component of university education, they are less clear about how it is incorporated in their own teaching practice. Rather than something that should be explained and purposefully taught, critical thinking is often implied and left for students to intuit. Identifying the concept by including the term 'critical thinking' in a course guide or assignment sheet does not guarantee that students will have the skills or be able to apply them (Abrami et al, 2015).

Recognising the link between critical thinking and in-depth, analytical reading and writing can provide a space for pedagogy that enables the development of critical thought and practice without displacing content learning. There is a direct and constitutive relationship between critical thinking and skilled reading and writing practices (Bean, 2011). The process of thinking is informed by the reading and enacted by writing and vice versa. Deploying critical reading and writing tasks related to course content allows content learning and skill building to occur in unison. Paul (2004) summarises this relationship well:

Learning how to read closely and write substantively are complex critical thinking abilities. When I can read closely, I can take ownership of important ideas in a text. When I can write substantively, I am able to say something worth saying about something worth saying something about.

This workshop is premised on the belief that critical thinking is fundamental to academic practice across all disciplines and central to the development of university level reading and writing practices that students must acquire in order to be successful in their studies and beyond (Ennis, 1987; Moore, 2011). Many students do not begin university demonstrating an adequate capacity for critical thinking and the links between critical thinking, reading, and writing are not immediately apparent or transparent to students. Many academics also struggle to incorporate critical thinking exercises into their teaching and to effectively assess and evaluate critical thinking outcomes.

Aims: In this workshop, participants will explore and elaborate how the link between critical thinking, reading, and writing can be made explicit to students. Through discussion and interactive exercises, we hope to clarify the concept of Critical Thinking, explore how it applies to university reading and writing, and develop methods for better integration of critical thinking practices into our curriculum and pedagogy, enriching course content rather than sacrificing it.

Audience: This workshop is particularly intended for discipline academics teaching First Year students and Academic Language and Learning specialists, and other teaching staff may find it useful.

Outcomes: Participants will reflect on and hone their understanding of critical thinking and its relationship to reading and writing by engaging in shared reflective discussions and critical thinking, reading and writing exercises. Critical Reading guides will be provided and classroom activities related to ‘writing to learn’ (WTL) and peer-writing workshops will be discussed. Participants will practice developing questions that drive critical thinking for tutorial discussions, written assignments, and exams. The workshop results will be summarised and forwarded to all participants following the conference.

Workshop Run-down:

Opening Presentation (10 mins) - The workshop will open with a short presentation to outline why we need to put critical thinking back on the agenda. Addressing the literature, workshop facilitators will clarify the link between critical thinking, reading and communication of thought (writing & speaking).

Interactive Activity (15-20 mins) – Participants will introduce themselves and share which subjects they teach, how they define Critical Thinking (CT), how, or if, CT and WTL methods are incorporated in their subject teaching, what training they have undertaken to develop these practices, and what they would like to take away from the workshop. It is anticipated that participants will have multiple understandings of critical thinking that may differ from those of the presenters and this will provide a rich field for discussion.

Small Group Discussions (15 mins) – In small groups, participants will discuss and note 1) How do you teach CT and what WTL practices do you engage your students in? Or 2) how would you approach and incorporate CT into your pedagogy? Small groups will report back in last 5 mins. *Outcome:* it is anticipated that this discussion will generate a pedagogical framework of CT teaching practices and/or highlight any areas of difference.

Critical Thinking Activity (15 mins) – Small groups will undertake short CT exercises. Participants will be given two CT exercises reflective of the type typically given to students in a generic CT course – one will be to identify examples of inductive and deductive arguments; the other will be to re-arrange a short piece of writing into a logical argument. *Outcome:* this exercise is to draw comparisons between generic CT practice and discipline-specific CT practice. (Govier 2009; Halpern 1997)

Exemplar Activity Linking Reading (10 mins) – Critical Reading Guide

Participants will be guided through an active reading exercise designed to help learners increase their awareness of rhetorical markers and moves within non-fiction texts while acquiring a vocabulary to describe the metacognitive activities of reading for meaning. Workshop participants will be put in the role of learner as we work together through the process. (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015)

Exemplar Activity Linking Writing (10 mins) – Writing to Learn activities for class.

Alongside active reading, writing to learn activities help learners integrate and embed new information, concepts, and knowledge. Low stakes and medium stakes writing to learn

activities will be discussed and participants will develop their own examples with the text selection from the previous reading activity.

Bringing it all together (10 mins) – Wrapping up and feeding back

Presenters will verbally summarise the information and ideas presented in the workshop and forward a text version to participants, along with copies of all documents and handouts used in the workshop.

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