

Basil room
1.35-2.00pm

Critical reading and analysis with text annotations in a blended learning environment

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Supporting the current climate of advocating 'evidence-based pedagogy' (Nystrand, 2006), this action research study aims to examine the challenges of developing critical reading and analysis skills amongst undergraduate engineering students in a critical thinking and writing module while leveraging on the affordances of a blended learning environment. It also aims to extrapolate interesting observations found across the eight sectional groups (171 students), taught by two tutors, and reflect on the effectiveness of the critical reading strategy proposed and applied (with a focus on text annotation) so as to recommend strategies for tutors' implementation in future iterations of this module.

Having realised the importance of providing explicit and student-centred instruction, educators have been designing reading instruction to develop strategies which assist learners in the active process of comprehension (Pressley, 2002; Block & Duffy, 2008). The recognised need for deliberate and explicit reading instruction has also renewed the focus on providing needs-based differentiated instruction, and designing reading instruction that brings together all components of reading (Sahadi & Ghaleb, 2012; McKenzie, 2011). As such, in higher education, an approach through which the faculty can deliver a student-centred critical reading instruction that is metacognitive in nature is much needed (Hammadou, 1991). Embedded within van de Pol, Volman, and Beishuizen's (2010) dialogic scaffolding model, this study involves faculty and student modelling, guided practice, collaborative and eventually, the independent use of strategies. In this study, the development of these metacognitive strategies allowed students to monitor their reading for meaning, use and create schema, pose inquiring questions, make inferences and synthesise information for a deeper understanding of their critical reading. This justifies the relevance and legitimacy of this study's research question on how students' understanding can be enhanced at a deeper (metacognitive) level in a blended learning environment.

In this critical thinking and writing module, I was keen to explore the challenges of helping students achieve one of its intended learning objectives:

To use critical reasoning to identify arguments, retrieve and identify relevant and reliable information from readings and use it to form an argument.

Student feedback was gathered through focus group discussions during the mid-semester break in Semester 1 of AY2017/18, and the findings point to the fact that many seem to struggle with it. Students shared that they had difficulty understanding the author's intended messages and identifying author's arguments. Many claimed that they did not even understand the text, much less dissect or deconstruct it. At the same time, students encountered a similar problem when it came to retrieving and identifying relevant and reliable information from the readings. This resulted in students not being able to form an argument from their critical reading of the texts. Students' qualitative feedback on this problem was also confirmed in a survey administered at the end of Semester 1 of AY2017/18, where 66.3% found it challenging to deconstruct an article. Many cited lack of knowledge regarding effective critical reading strategies. Moreover, student feedback from past semesters also indicated that many tend to experience persistent difficulties in perceiving the intended meanings and author's intended arguments in reading texts. A key finding in the study supports Prain and Waldrip's (2006) argument that such difficulties arise especially given the absence of students' use of reading strategies designed to extend and deepen understanding, and opportunities to demonstrate such understanding in a multimodal format (Patel, 2018).

In the context of providing reading instruction, there is evidence of the teacher acting as a mediator to help learners "construct events in terms that they understand (Webster, Beveridge, & Reed, 1996) by means of using their personal experiences to make sense of a broader phenomena" (Gibbons, 2002, p.174). An important feature of this approach is that it involves not simply helping to do but helping to know how to do (Mercer, 1994; Wells, 1999). Thus, the importance of the metacognitive aspect of the instruction in this study. Students were not simply guided to read a text critically but also guided to know how to read a text critically. The self-awareness of the use of the critical reading strategy is of paramount importance. Students were taught to use their prior knowledge, search for contextual clues, ask critical questions about assumptions and potential fallacies, form opinions or arguments of their own, note or identify claims and premises, and make inferences. The adopted critical reading strategy works within the scaffolding framework where there are three key stages: contingency, fading, and transfer of responsibility. These three elements work interdependently and are necessary for scaffolding to be faithfully implemented in the classroom (Many, Dewberry, Taylor, & Coady, 2009).

At the end of Semester 2 AY2017/18, a feedback survey was administered and sent to the eight sectional groups to examine students' experiences in developing their critical reading and analysis skills, as well as elicit their reflections on the usefulness of the intervention taught in the semester. Many commented that it has been very helpful and they felt the skills learnt from the intervention we developed could be highly transferable to other modules. This unique approach is found to potentially provide students with the motivation to read for understanding as they develop metacognitive skills and gain deeper understanding of the module content.

Keywords

Critical reading, metacognitive strategies, scaffolding, blended learning

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