

Diversifying Assessment

Reviews, reading dossiers, assessing
students in seminars

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Review writing

Description of initiative

A large, first year foundation module, 'Texts and issues', which has an intake of 150 students, invites students to reflect upon materials that are normally presented as 'Literature' and to consider how such material can be interpreted.

Previously, students handed in two essay assignments, one at the end of each semester. This led to a very large amount of marking and staff found it difficult to provide regular feedback to students.

Below is an extract from a typical student essay. The extract is taken from a response to the question, 'Explore the ways in which feminist criticism has explored the notion of identity.' The extract illustrates common problems in the discursive writing students were producing for this unit. These included a reluctance to identify and interpret key terms, letting quotations stand for analysis and a reluctance to give more than an overview of the theories they were discussing.

Feminist criticism developed as a discipline in the 1960s. After two hundred years of struggling for women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft was one of these women who battled for equality between the sexes. Wollstonecraft published her critique of society in *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Her work helped raise awareness of women and their social roles and she set the wheels of change in motion.

... There are many different types of feminist criticism, such as, radical, marxist, liberal, post-structuralist, deconstructive, essentialist. These different perspectives lead to debates between feminists, but they all share one common starting point, and that is that women are subordinate in a patriarchal society.

I am going to look at the different perspectives put forward by feminist criticism and how they help create a notion of identity. To do this successfully, a thorough analysis is needed of the different and contradictory viewpoints. Many feminist critics have explored this subject in an attempt to find answers to the subordination women have suffered. There are two main schools of thought that feminist critics ascribe to: Anglo-American and French feminism.

Anglo-American feminist critics were concerned with the idea that women writers had been excluded from literary history. They wanted to rediscover the lost work of women writers, whilst providing a context for female writers to explain their experiences of what it is to be a woman, experiences that have been silenced: the aim was to fit women into the male dominated tradition; they also wanted to write a tradition amongst themselves. Elaine Showalter refers to the female tradition as 'the lost continent ... (which) has risen like Atlantis from the sea of English Literature...'

We found it advantageous to replace one of the required essays with a formative review for the following reasons. The new practice helps students both to engage more actively with the criticism and theory they are reading, and also to question the authority of the views of published critics like Elaine Showalter and Jonathan Culler more readily. Students begin to identify unstated propositions and limitations in ideas. They develop an independent perspective.

Previously, students had not been assessed until Christmas. In the new assessment design, students complete a review in week three and at Christmas. Consequently, feedback and dialogue between student and tutor about the purpose and function of the unit and course has improved. Students see clear benefit from identifying and rehearsing skills which they are expected to use later for their summative assessment, an essay. At the same time, improving the timing and spacing of assessments counters the feelings of isolation and alienation from the tenets of the 'newer' curriculum units, feelings which had been frequently expressed in interviews with students.

Ways of using review writing

Because we wanted to foster the value of collaborative learning, we decided to ask our students to complete the preparatory work for the assessment in their seminar groups in addition to our allocating seminar time for the completion of the first review itself. This meant that everyone was familiar with the criteria for the review and aware of how other students interpreted and fulfilled these criteria.

Using an assessment formatively, like review writing, also provides opportunities for tutors to 'mark' work for feedback rather than grading purposes. This can open up a whole new channel of communication between tutor and student. This is particularly useful if, like many tutors, your programme of lectures and/or seminars is not supported by tutorial feedback.

Preparatory reading group

The preparatory reading group session we devised for week two enables students to practise marking up secondary texts for group discussion. We had quite distinct aims for the reading group which were as follows:

- To provide students with a means of evaluating theoretical approaches.
- To focus their insight into how critics shape their answers to critical questions.
- To improve collaborative learning.
- To provide the students with the confidence to write the review.

Exercise 1

Preparation: Read the second chapter of *Literary Theory: a very short introduction* (Culler: 1997). As you read, write down an issue, idea or concept which you:

- did understand as a result of reading it
- did not understand, or would like to know more about.

Exercise 2

Divide into small groups (of four or five). Start by discussing shared problems or particular interests arising from the chapter. To arrive at a detailed understanding of Culler and provide a focus for discussion:

- Highlight an area of the text where Culler uses summary. What do you think summary is being used for?
- Highlight an area of the text where Culler uses quotations from critics. Why do you think he quotes?
- Highlight the author's line of argument - his thesis in answer to the question 'what is literature? Do you think Culler thinks some of the arguments he refers to are stronger than others?

- Examine how Culler clarifies difficult points to himself and to those he is writing for.
- Examine how Culler uses evidence to support his claims.

Write a brief summary of Culler's article and select one quotation from the essay which you think best represents his argument (no more than fifty words).

The session has three distinct, but related activities. First the students are asked to be honest about their experience of reading theory. This generates discussion in small groups. The second exercise moves them away from personal experience back towards a central learning outcome of the course and their ability to 'evaluate' theoretical approaches. They are asked to 'handle' the theoretical text. This enables the students to be more informed readers. Thirdly, they are asked to represent an argument in writing, by selecting something positive from their reading. This practice of putting an 'authority' into their own words gives them confidence.

Writing a review

The review writing assessment which follows in week four builds on the learning promoted by the preparatory reading group. Our version of review writing provides students with a model for taking notes and evaluating the quality and usefulness of secondary sources. Because we decided to make the review a formative rather than summative exercise, the focus of the new practice is on:

- actively involving students in practising analytical and evaluative skills which were integral to the learning promoted by the subject division
- helping staff provide timely feedback
- emphasising the point that summative assessments are the result of progressive and active learning processes
- strengthening the links between the learning going on in seminars and the skills required to do well in assessment.

Exercise 1

Preparation: Read *Literary Theory: a very short introduction* (Culler: 1997) and the guidelines for writing a review.

In groups discuss the following:

- what the book is about
- who the book is for and how well it addresses its audience
- what you liked/disliked about it
- what the key features of a good review are.

Exercise 2

In groups, compile a 500 word review based on all the first drafts of the group. The group needs to decide on:

- an introductory opening paragraph
- a major issue or two
- supporting evidence
- any references to particular parts of the book
- a suitable summary.

Exercise 3

Read the guidelines on writing a review and write your own review of Jonathan Culler's book.

Guidelines and advice for writing a review

A reviewer normally assumes that the reader is not familiar with the book. Thus, the first paragraph usually provides a helpful introduction. Inevitably, some retelling of the book is necessary, but the review will chiefly be concerned with describing (what the book is about), analysing (thinking about the arguments and debates which the book addresses in order to understand what the book is about) and especially with evaluating (deciding whether the book does what it sets out to do and how well it does so).

Draft your review as soon as possible, while the book is still fresh in your mind. If you cannot do this, at least jot down some notes about your responses as a student to an introduction for students: the things you liked or thought he explained well; the layout of the book; things you do not understand; things you do understand.

If possible read the book again.

In your first draft, do not worry about limitations of space. Write as long a review as you can, putting down everything that comes to mind. You can cut it to the required length – retaining only the chief points and the necessary supporting details – later. In your first draft, try to produce a fairly full account of the book and your response to it, so that later you will not have to trust a fading memory for details.

NB. Reviewing books is also a good way of keeping a concise record of books you have read and your opinions of them. You could keep a file of such reviews of books (fictional and critical) which you have read on other courses. You could refer to these later when you come to write an essay. The advantage of this is that you already have an argument in embryo.

The review requires the student to collaborate, reflect, describe, analyse, evaluate and form an independent opinion. It is this which makes our version of review writing an example of active learning. Equally, it makes explicit for the student the diversity of approaches to literature available and their role in evaluating these approaches. The match between one of the 'newer' unit's major learning outcomes – 'you will be able to evaluate in your own terms' – group work and the assessment practice used is made more explicit.

Writing a review for the second time

To encourage wider reading of theoretical approaches to literature we asked our students to complete a second review for this unit. This review was completed independently, without the collaboration of peers, although time was set aside in one seminar for preparation and discussion with the tutors. Reading for the course had gradually increased in length and difficulty as the unit progressed. Students are encouraged to review theoretical approaches to texts they are studying elsewhere in the first year, in order to make connections across courses of study. A popular choice has been 'Jane Austen and the Gentry: A Study in Literature and Ideology' (Lovell, 1978).

Impact on students

Students reported on the changes we made to our assessment practices in the following terms.

Preparatory reading group

Whilst last year's students had felt lost in seminars...

'A lot of the terminology is above my head. Subject matter did not grip me in any way.'

'At school you're all in a class, and you're not lectured at, so you're used to sharing your opinions and that about a book. But here you've only really got about one hour seminar and you're covering so much, it's hard to get your own opinion.'

...this year's felt much more confident. Particularly effective were the changes we had made to the purpose and function of group work:

'It was best when we went over things in seminars.'

'The group discussion before class discussion was very effective: we tried to solve problems for ourselves.'

'I enjoyed the seminars most. I read over the articles and then asked about anything I didn't understand in the seminar.'

'Group discussions were very good, helping me to understand the more difficult points [in my reading]. Because everyone can get involved and listen to other people's opinions.'

'The group discussions helped increase my understanding.'

'[It was useful when we were] asked to present our interpretations of an essay giving examples from personal reading. Although I don't enjoy talking to a large group it made me understand the essay [theoretical reading set] very well.'

'As this was the first time I had ever studied theory I thought it was a good idea to have group discussion every seminar.'

This year's students appeared more assured readers, equipped with strategies to engage with the material. When asked what advice they would give a first year student about to take the module, they were ready with suggested approaches and methodologies:

'Read articles several times and look up difficult terms first.'

'[You should] read texts before seminars, discuss them and ask questions, then read again.'

Read all the essays and Culler. Try to ask questions or write down points you don't understand.'

The review

We found evidence that the review helped students to develop an early understanding of the processes of selection, focus, summary and recognition of argument which students last year had not had. Last year's students had wanted more guidance:

'Questions given alongside reading material would enable us to have some idea of what to look for.'

This year the students have tackled the difficult reading with confidence and they saw the value of the review in helping them to focus on key issues and identify an argument:

'You've got to find them [arguments] to do a review.'

'The review was better than an essay ... It was asking you about how [far] you understood the terms.'

'Doing a review was really useful, because it means I have to study the text fully and understand all the issues to write the review.'

They also appreciated the review's role in helping them to create a concise written record of an argument and relevant points:

'We had to summarize succinctly ... it's very difficult getting all your arguments into such a short space.'

'It shows how far you have understood your reading of the article. It shows whether you can spot relevant points.'

'A review helps you to summarize and make sure you understand what has been discussed. Much better than writing an essay.'

'The reviews helped me to use the critical ideas. I tried to show my understanding and to recap on what was discussed. It helped me to summarize and make sure you knew what had been discussed. They were much better than writing an essay.'

Impact on staff

Before we started using reviews to assess this unit the tutors involved used Essays. There was a real worry amongst tutors that a focus on developing assessment-related teaching materials would produce dull students who were over-dependent on staff for guidance. Our experience has been that structuring teaching does not lead to dependency. When asked this question, the tutor who piloted the materials replied:

'Setting up more formal structures of teaching has not made the students more dependent ... if anything it's made them less so. The students are not as shy of criticising the reading we ask them to do and they ask more questions.'

Having used this assessment at level one, the tutor concerned felt that it could be usefully adapted for other levels. He felt that the experience had given him the confidence to experiment, and that the students had benefited from seeing tutors doing this. They themselves could see courses changing and being reviewed and this culture of experiment and variety was a positive thing. One tutor felt that the practice could be usefully repeated at third level. Following a visit to a production of the Royal Shakespeare Company, students would be required to write an independent critical review for a unit on Renaissance Literature.

Tutors elected to mark the reviews by pass/fail because the course was first level and they wanted to stress the importance of development rather than the arithmetical mark. Of course, one of the risks of using pass/fail is that students may not take assessment seriously. However, this has not been our experience. Tutors have found that the students follow the review guidelines carefully and take the review writing seriously. We found that providing clear instructions for students was a very productive way of communicating key criteria and learning outcomes.

Although it takes time to develop and embed this assessment design, tutors substituting two 500-word reviews for an essay have found their marking load significantly reduced. Marking is also more focused.

Examples of student work

English Studies - Texts and Issues

Book Review - Literary Theory, A Very Short Introduction by Jonathan Culler

As the title suggests Literary Theory - A Very Short Introduction aims to give the reader a short, accessible awakening to the World of literary theory. The book by Jonathan Culler appears to be aimed at a target audience of students, who like myself have not previously encountered the theory aspect of literature in great depths prior to obtaining this book. As a member of the target audience I felt it would be interesting to see what effect the book had on me and how far Jonathan Culler can be deemed to have achieved his aims.

After reading the first chapter of the book entitled What is theory? I was impressed by the way the author attempted to use everyday situations that you or I may encounter to introduce the reader to literary theory

e.g. "Why did Laura and Michael split up?"

"Well my theory is that...." (page 2)

Occasionally throughout the book Culler uses this technique of familiar situations to explain the basics without the use of complex literary terms as well as comic strip style cartoons. All in all this creates a very informal atmosphere when reading the book, which ~~for me personally~~ is important when encountering subjects such as literary theory as it grasps and holds my attention longer than formal continuous prose would. Another commendable point arising from the first chapter was Jonathan Culler's use of bulletpoints. Again like the comic strips and conversation style examples this lightened the topics addressed in the book and allowed me to take in the essential elements in an easier to absorb manner.

Occasionally within this book I felt that the author tended to engage in very difficult questions such as what is literature? then embark on a longwinded explanation and never really answers the question. Culler instead gives us a number of theories to look at and then asks us to decide for ourselves as in Chapter 2 "What is literature and does it matter?". This is not necessarily a bad thing because I think that with areas such as literary theory and other matters of philosophy there aren't always answers there are merely better questions. *is this his point? Examples?*

In conclusion as a result of reading this book I did feel that I had a basic understanding of literary theory. I must admit that I began to read the book with a pre-formed view of literary theory. My preconceived perception was that literary theory would be dire and take the imagination out of books and instead substitute it for a more scientific, reasoned form. However after reading Culler's "Literary Theory - A Very Short Introduction" my view was not so negative. I cannot dispute the fact that in comparison to other books and authors from different genres that I may and have come across on the course this book does not rate highly, not as a result of the author but more of subject, nevertheless I feel that this book did achieve some of its aims as it did introduce me to new aspects of theory I had never encountered. *A bit cryptic*

useful? with a strong sense of evaluation. The last sentence is over long + somewhat tangled as a conclusion. Still, there was a good sense here of the book's intentions + its strengths.

REVIEW OF JONATHAN CULLER'S "LITERARY THEORY".

This book is targeted at the student approaching literary theory for the first time. Culler demonstrates and explains the various functions of language in literature, from the obvious such as poetry and narrative, to the more complex such as the performative.

Culler does not follow the usual pattern of theory literature, which progress through the various schools of criticism, appearing more straightforward yet are a little intimidating when there is not a ground knowledge of literary techniques. By *Awkward sentence!* first exploring the various techniques, Culler puts the horse before the cart. He *quite right!* introduces the various theories after the concepts behind them have been explained. For example, in chapter 7 he discusses performative language. He then goes on to discuss "Queer theory", which in turn reinforces the comprehension of performative language. He also discusses what the reader brings to the text, and makes the distinction between common sense and historical construction, which paves the way for many theories such as Psychoanalysis and Marxism.

Culler draws the reader in by titling the initial chapters with simple questions such as "What is theory" to demonstrate the accessibility of the book. The language is fairly informal and some familiar and simple examples are used to make his point. For example, he demonstrates the subjective definition of literature by comparing it to a weed. This comical approach is repeated to illustrate potentially difficult concepts throughout the text; "Nuke a whale for

Jesus" (pg. 35) for example, to demonstrate intertextuality, while simultaneously showing how it is not exclusive to literature.

He also takes one example and uses it in many different ways throughout the book. "The secret sits" is such an example, which becomes familiar with the reader. Consequently, the concept applied to this example is more 'reader friendly'.

Culler is objective in his writing as he presents us with various arguments and leaves us to form our own opinions. In chapter 3 he poses the question "Is cultural studies a capacious project within which literary studies gain new power and insight? Or will cultural studies swallow up literary studies and destroy literature?" (pg. 44). He goes on to give background, but rather than providing us with an answer, he raises more questions. By answering questions with questions and analyzing texts from various angles, he trains the reader to look for interpretations of texts by asking their own questions and drawing their own conclusions.

As the title suggests, it is a short introduction. It opens the door to literary theory and instructs the reader in how to approach it. He confirms that theory is endless and will never be mastered. It is "A resource for constant upstagings" (pg. 15) "Theory is a bunch of (mostly foreign) names" (pg. 2).

Rather than be intimidated by the vastness of the subject, we should see it as a "prospect of further thought." (Pg. 122)

Very good. Clear, concise + to the point. A very useful summary + evaluation.

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