MOUNT ROYAL UNIVERSITY

KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

CRITICAL READING IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

Academic goals and social engagement

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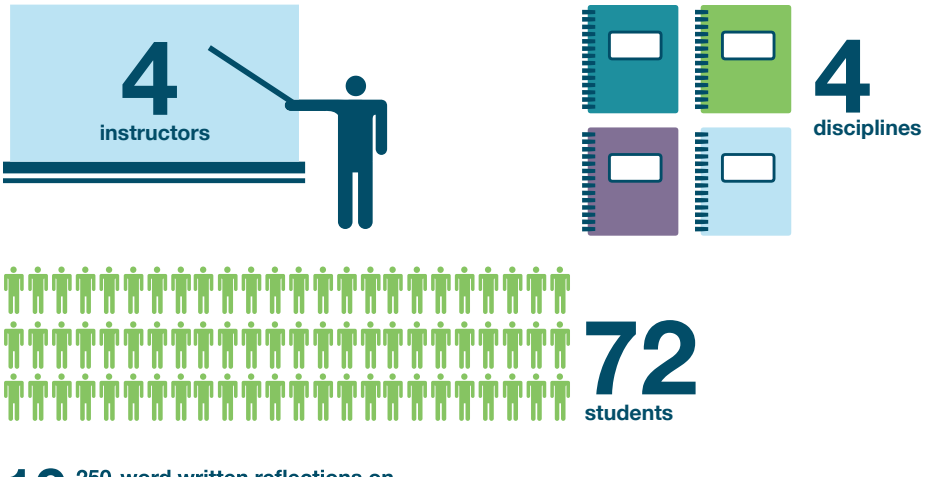
Critical reading is a foundational skill for success in academic and professional endeavours. By defining critical reading as having two aspects, reading for academic purposes and reading for social engagement, our work opens the door to more intentional teaching of critical reading and its assessment in our students' work.

Instructors within any discipline can cultivate critical reading in their students. Our book, *Critical Reading in Higher Education: Academic Goals and Social Engagement* (Indiana University Press, 2015), provides not only the results from our cross-course study in foundation General Education courses, but ideas for cultivating critical reading across the curriculum as well as considerations for success in collaborative Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) studies.

Methodology



Four instructors from different disciplines, all teaching in General Education at Mount Royal University, were curious about students' reading abilities across the curriculum. We shared the same research question, research protocol, data gathering methods and methodology for analyzing the data. We collected ten written reflections on assigned readings using the prompts *what? so what? now what?* along with other other research and reflective papers from 72 consenting students across four foundation GNED courses. We scored students' written reflections in response to assigned readings, as well as their reflective and research papers, according to hybridized Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) VALUE rubrics.

Implications

To cultivate critical reading, instructors have to acknowledge that it encompasses both academic purposes and social engagement, and can choose to engage critical reading on both fronts. Good citizens can do more than produce acceptable academic research papers, they are also engaged with the world and contribute to it.

Lessons Learned

- Students can comprehend nonfictional text with at least benchmark proficiency; what many faculty members call a lack of comprehension may be students struggling with evaluation of assumptions. However, we can create assignment requirements that prompt students to display particular traits in writing about their reading.
- If reading development requires epistemological shifts, we need to take a longer and more coordinated approach to critical reading.
- Just because students can read doesn't mean that they will; it may be more efficient to not read.
- Critical reading for academic purposes can be impeded by students' assumptions about assignments and our assessment practices.
- Traditional research paper assignments emphasize how to find and use information rather than how to read text and understand ideas; we need to create research assignments that require a summary of the readings.
- Emphasizing the intellectual processes of reading, rather than the technical details of the final product, can facilitate critical reading for academic purposes.
- Exposure to and discussion of provocative issues is not enough to generate critical reading for social engagement.
- Student responses to readings suggest a taxonomy of absence whereby students have to complete a series of actions in order to read critically for social engagement: compliance, comprehension, identification, and generalization. Students could get stuck at any one of these stages. Sometimes this inability to move forward is linked to epistemological development.
- For successful critical reading for social engagement to occur, students had to read and understand, be willing and able to identify an issue, and oscillate between generalization and specificity.
- Paying attention to the scope of an issue, modeling reading behaviors, and providing explicit opportunities for students to make connections in less academic forms can facilitate critical reading for social engagement.

Where From Here?

We presented our research results at a variety of conferences locally and internationally (MRU's GNED Colloquium Series, MRU's Faculty of Teaching and Learning Scholarly Exchange, MRU's Symposium for SoTL, SoTL Commons, and ISSoTL) and have published a book on the work through Indiana University Press (Critical Reading in Higher Education: Academic Purposes and Social Engagement; 2015). We have all modified our teaching practices as a result of participating in this collaborative SoTL project. Karen Manarin and Miriam Carey have gone on to a further collaborative project on scaffolding original undergraduate research with April McGrath. Melanie Rathburn has also continued with other collaborative research projects. She has recently completed an interdisciplinary collaborative project with seven other faculty members on faculty perceptions of reciprocity in community-service learning courses and is currently engaged in a multi-institutional research project investigating students' intercultural competency in international field schools. Glen Ryland has continued his scholarship with projects in student academic writing, and he is currently engaged in developing collaborative multi-disciplinary learning communities for undergraduate students in liberal education."

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

This was the first collaborative project designed under the auspices of the newly created Institute for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Its success demonstrated not only the dedication of the research associates, but the possibilities of cross-course or cross-disciplinary research in SoTL, and the benefits of being able to apply results in various teaching and learning contexts.

FUNDER RECOGNITION

Each instructor used personal PD funds and other faculty-allocated development or research funding to participate in this project.

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