Transforming Knowledge into Wisdom

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Reading readings: How students learn to (dis)engage with critical reading

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Abstract: One of the central skills in learning to 'turn knowledge into wisdom' is critical reading: the ability to learn from text, to think analytically and critically and to develop an ethical and reasoned position as a result. However, it is often assumed that students will acquire the ability to read critically without active intervention from their teachers. This paper reports on a study of students' acquisition of critical reading skills across the first three semesters of a Bachelor of Education course. We defined critical reading as engaging in dialogue with texts—both listening to the voices of the text and responding to them, and used Luke's four reader resources as a framework: code-breaker, text user, text participant and text analyst. Our data revealed that certain scaffolding strategies fostered students' disposition towards critical reading, for example: embedding the reading into the assessment, classroom discussion and lectures; careful selection of reading materials of different genres; focusing on metacognitive reading strategies; and linking the reading to the students' personal identities as future teachers. However, when these supportive teaching practices were discontinued, students abandoned the critical reading practices which they had acquired. We argue, then, that critical literacy practices have to be developed on a longitudinal basis by integration across a course structure.

Keywords: Critical reading; academic literacy; scaffolding.

Turning knowledge into wisdom through critical reading

The ability to read critically is widely regarded as one of the essential generic skills that should be gained through university education. It is often assumed that students will acquire the ability to read critically simply by virtue of studying at University without active intervention from their teachers. We aspire for our students to read with a critical eye in order to develop their own reasoned and ethical position. However, the reality is that students often read as passive consumers of information (Wilson, 1999).

This paper is based on a research project that tracked a group of Bachelor of Education students across three semesters. The project arose from lecturers' concerns that students were

graduating without adequate literacy skills. We held in-depth interviews with students about their experience of reading academic texts and found that their disposition for critical reading did not develop automatically. When they were supported with scaffolding as part of the teaching practice in a particular subject, students began to engage critically with texts. However, without this support, students tended to disengage from critical reading.

Critical Reading: A dialogical partnership

A dialogic interpretation of reading uses Bakhtin's (1994) metaphor of voice. Critical readers both *listen* to the heterogeneous voices of the text and *respond* in their own voice. This is a highly active process, which entails struggling to see the world through the author's eyes. A perfect match between the reader's interpretation and the author's position may not be achievable, as the reader filters the texts through the lens of their own individual experience. However, for learning-through-reading to take place, the reader has to be prepared to listen intently, and to shift and grow through exposure to the voices of others.

In addition to listening, critical readers also respond in their own voice. They ask questions; they relate the text to other sources; they think of examples to corroborate or challenge the text; they play with the ideas, extending or elaborating on them; they relate the text to their own purposes or experience. Furthermore, they "criticise" the text in the more traditional sense of the word; looking for bias, for poorly developed logic, for hidden assumptions (Wallace, 1995). They locate the author's position through active "listening", relate this to their own ideas or experience, and reshape their own understandings in the light of the text.

Luke (2000) casts reading as a set of practices dependent on four reader resources: code-breaking; participating in text; using the text for one's own purposes; and analysing or critiquing the text. Luke's view of reading reflects the dialogic metaphor of readers as both listeners and responders. In code-breaking, readers-as-listeners are trying to understand the content of the text through decoding textual symbols, and using textual features such as discourse markers, paragraphing and generic text structures. It is essentially an "operational" skill (Lankshear, Snyder & Green, 2000).

Luke (2000) suggests that for students to truly engage with reading, they need to participate in co-constructing meaning from the texts. Readers as text participants engage with text from their own experience and with their own agendas. While code-breaking is principally a "listening" activity, becoming a text participant means responding as well as listening; the voices of the text and the reader intersecting and sparking new meanings.

Students also need to become text-users. In composing academic essays, for example, students are expected to harness the texts to serve their own purpose. This is no easy task. Many students, rather than using the texts to support their writing, will let the voices of their sources dominate their writing, often "plagiphrasing" (Wilson, 1997) the texts so that the essay is not so much a presentation of the student's view, but a "ventriloquation" (Bakhtin, 1994) of the various, and sometimes ill-assorted, voices of the texts.

Finally, Luke (2000) claims that readers should also be text analysts. For Wallace (1995) this means "reading with a suspicious eye". In other words, readers should be aware of how writers manipulate their readers by using, for example, didactic, feminist, poorly reasoned or emotive language. Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) suggest that readers need to become "text-resistant". By learning to stand back from texts and question the voices within

them—and the biases, intentions and pressures of those voices—, readers can decide whether and how far to align themselves with these voices.

University students need to become proficient in all four of Luke's reading resources, becoming both active listeners and active respondents in constructing meaning.

Our study of literacy development

In our study of students' literacy development across the first three semesters of the Bachelor of Education course, we gathered data from eleven students' written assignments and self-report interviews. We also used participant observation, as the four researchers in our team were all involved in some way with the course, as lecturers, tutors or learning advisers. Finally, we interviewed subject lecturers.

The data suggested that many of the students were not accustomed to engaging with academic texts and that this was a challenging, rather foreign, aspect of tertiary work. One student commented that she was *dumbfounded at first* and most were shocked by the quantity and complexity of the readings in their first semester. However, in their first semester particularly, students were given extensive scaffolding in academic reading which enabled them to develop their reading skills and become more critical, as evidenced in their writing tasks.

However, by the end of their third semester at university, many of the students had apparently abandoned these new skills. They had either essentially given up reading, or had reverted to using code-breaker behaviour. This regression was sadly redolent of the reversion to surface learning described by Biggs (1993).

Why had this regression occurred? It appeared that in part it was due to "second year blues"—a general loss of the enthusiasm of their first year. However, the data also suggested that certain teaching practices encouraged students to practice critical reading, while others (which may have led to excellent learning outcomes in other areas) did not foster students' engagement with texts.

Engaging pedagogies

Scaffolding
Effective teaching practices in developing critical reading can be gathered under the rubric of scaffolding. Hammond and Gibbons (2001) define scaffolding as "high challenge, high support" which means demanding work of a much higher standard than students are currently capable of, but providing a supportive learning environment which will enable them to achieve.

The leap from high school texts to university reading was extremely challenging for students. For example, in one first semester subject, students were expected to read a collection of texts contained in a reading brick presenting a variety of competing voices and positions. They had to be able to distinguish the author's position from that of the other voices in other texts; to identify the presented arguments and to evaluate them; to see how ideas have developed over time; and to situate theories in sociohistorical contexts. They also had to deal with a raft of new terminology. For example, Tina complained that the readings were:

*in-depth, really technical...you had to mull over them ... to really get the gist ...that was
very hard... There was heaps and heaps of readings to do and expected to do in like a few
nights...and I'm going like 'I can't do this'.*

Others also complained that they lacked the cultural background knowledge to understand the
texts. The texts at first seemed *long, boring ... and the print was too small* (Sally).
Engagement with the texts could not be avoided as their first assignment, due in week six,
required them to refer to at least three of the first six readings. This was certainly "high
challenge".

However, the subject also provided "high support". The readings were presented in the brick
with advance organisers (a brief summary of the main points and some directive questions)
which *helped provide a focus* (Alice). Students appreciated the fact that the readings, and the
assignment, were actively discussed in tutorials, and woven into the lectures. The Academic
Skills Program (ASP) offered optional reading workshops addressing the four reader
resources which students found *really helped* (Sally).

The strong support structures resulted in the students being able to engage successfully with
the texts, employing critical reading strategies and believing that they were really learning:

> *There were readings that really sort of got you thinking and present your ideas and
> you question them and you think critically about the ideas before, look at your own
> thoughts and you would ask more questions* (Alice).

Integration
Integrating the reading closely into the subject was perhaps the most important element in
stimulating critical reading. In a subject that drew frequent praise, students were assigned one
or two readings each week from a brick. These readings presented challenging positions,
although the language was usually quite accessible. Every other week students had to submit a
journal, which was returned within a week with feedback and a notional grade. In the journal,
they were asked to explain their understandings from the texts, demonstrating a vigorous
attempt to listen to the author's position. They were also required to take turns in leading
discussion of the readings in tutorials. Ann commented:

> *You really <u>had</u> to do the reading; you had to analyse your thoughts on the readings
> and you really had to do so much for it, but I know though that I learnt so much from
> it... Everybody had input, everybody really grew because ... we were looking at the
> readings and the subjects so deeply. Not only did we write the logbook but then we
> went in to talk about it each week.*

At the end of the semester, the students submitted an assessable essay of 2000 words based on
the journals. This intersection between reading, writing and discussion is fertile ground for
learning. In this subject, there was total integration between reading, teaching and assessment.
High challenge and high support combined to extend students' learning in the discipline as
well as their acquisition of critical reading skills.

Feedback on reading
Feedback was another factor we found to be an important aspect of supporting critical reading
practices. Subjects in which there was early feedback, through an essay or through the
journals, allowed students to establish how well their reading practices enabled them to
achieve successful grades. Grades for the weekly journals in the subject described above were
only notional and allowed staff to give honest feedback without fear of jeopardising students'

overall success. High standards were set at the outset—for example there was zero tolerance of plagiarism, and this was easy to monitor as students were all responding to the same texts. Of course, this was a double-edged sword in subjects where students discovered that surface reading strategies could produce passable results.

Nearly all the students in the study commented on how useful it was to discuss readings with fellow students. It appeared from the data that a considerable amount of reciprocal teaching occurred informally in some subjects, as students struggled with the set tasks. In several subjects, students were encouraged to bring questions from their reading to tutorials for discussion and where this was a valued and central part of the culture of tutorials (rather than treated lightly and given little attention), students within the subject became a community of readers, interacting vigorously in debate within the discipline.

One aspect of reading which gave students most difficulty was in "text user" practices of synthesising from sources and referencing appropriately. Students required substantial and on-going feedback on the cultural expectations of academic referencing.

Promoting metacognition
Several subjects in the first year focused students' attention on metacognition. For example, the ASP was invited to run optional reading workshops to support the first major assignment in a first semester subject. Students were also asked to complete an assignment reflecting on their metacognitive skills using the ASP study skills website (http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/reading.htm). The interviews resounded with the voice of this website: students talked about *reading for the main idea; linking the readings to my previous knowledge; skimming and marking what I need to come back to; identifying the structure of the text; taking notes; talking with the text.*

Relating to the reading
A crucial factor in students' engagement with the texts was their burgeoning identity as teachers. Students commented that what made the readings interesting was relating them to their future careers. In some cases this was an easy link to make; with more theoretical texts it was harder. For example, Alice commented:

> *I enjoyed the textbook* [a developmental psychology text] *more than the reading brick because it related to practice. The case studies helped me visualise what I will be doing as a teacher, whereas some readings in the brick were hard to relate to practice or how they will affect you as a teacher.*

Assignments that called for a personal opinion seemed to help students make these links between theory and their own future practice. Chris commented that what helped her most in developing critical literacy skills was *learning to write in the first person, identifying what I think and then using theory to support it.*

Such comments showed the students developing as critical readers, becoming thoughtful text users as well as text participants and decoders.

Disengaging with reading

After so much careful scaffolding in some of the first year subjects, it was disheartening to find in the middle of their second year, that most of the students had virtually stopped reading or had reverted to code-breaking reading strategies. For example, Alice confessed,

> *I think I got a bit lost this semester actually. I was more focused last semester and had a bit more of an idea of academic literacy last semester;*

and Ann commented,

> *I just knew that everything that I was handing in was just mediocre... I attended tutorials, I attended lectures, didn't really do as much reading as I probably should have. It was very surface line.*

Students not challenged to read

A common problem in some second year subjects was that the reading was not integrated into the fabric of the subjects on a regular basis. The lecturers expected the students to be reading widely. However, the subject was not structured so as to demand on-going commitment to reading – let alone to critical reading. There was an expectation that students would be sufficiently motivated to read widely of their own volition, which did not happen.
In some cases this was because the assignments were not structured to demand critical reading, although they were interesting and professionally challenging tasks. One task that students enjoyed particularly was a commission from the National Science Museum to design a display area for early childhood visitors. Some students conducted research for their group by browsing websites or visiting similar facilities. However, some students completed the task on the basis of prior knowledge and common sense with little or no background reading.

Another reason for the retreat from critical reading was the duplication of content between the lectures/tutorials and the reading. For example, in one subject the set reading was a superbly scaffolded textbook that also formed the basis of the course. Students didn't really have to read this text, as lecturers and tutors presented the same concepts through interactive and experiential learning in class. It was suggested that students write a response journal based on the textbook from which they should quote in their final assignment, but our interviewees reported that most students invented these "quotes" in retrospect. In many respects, this subject was brilliantly taught, but there was no challenge to students to read. Many students commented on how useful and relevant the subject was to their professional development: they felt they had learned useful, applicable knowledge and skills from the dynamic presentation, but the subject did not contribute to critical literacy acquisition.

Textbooks of the kind used in this subject have great advantages as they introduce concepts very supportively; key terms in the margin, advance organisers, chapter summaries, revision questions, examples in coloured boxes, frequent headings, well-devised formatting, attractive diagrams and pictures. The students appreciated such textbooks. For example, Maidy explained:

> *I really like the textbooks. They're easy to read and colourful. I like how they have highlighted points and that helps me find out what I should be looking for.*

Although this packaging of content represents "high support", it does not constitute "high challenge" and could indeed be criticised as "dumbing down" academic reading and encouraging an uncritical approach to reading. Maidy, for example, tended to read such texts for confirmation of her own position:

> *I say, 'Right. What do I think? And then I read through the books and sometimes you realise that there are quotes and chunks that actually back up your ideas ... I have a look through the book and think 'Oh! This matches what I think!'*

The authoritative tone of such texts effectively excludes dialogue and makes it hard for students to engage in text analysis, whereas a clash of voices can make it easier for students to think critically. An ideal model for literacy development might be to use a basic "high support" textbook, but for students to have to extend their reading into more challenging areas through tasks which demand a critical appraisal of relevant literature.

Inaccessible set readings

The opposite problem was identified by Alice, who had moved on to another university and taken a subject in which the reading consisted of three or four readings every week taken from advanced journals in the discipline. As a novice to the discipline, she was effectively locked out of dialogue with these texts. She resorted to secondary school texts borrowed from a former teacher to fill in on background knowledge, and afterwards plodded through the readings: *they were pretty heavy a lot of them, but they weren't readings that promoted questions.*

A similar criticism was leveled by Maidy (who had not attended the ASP workshops) at some first semester readings

> *We learnt a lot of different theories and background of education but not much of it sunk in because it was just so much information in the readings and they were very complicated and I felt it really hard to take in.*

The data pointed to the importance of selecting texts for students which challenge, provoke, and yet are accessible to students with diverse abilities.

Insufficient scaffolding

In another technically-orientated subject, the task was to place a weekly 250 word comment on the WebCT bulletin board, responding to a set question and relating their response to readings indicated in lectures and to readings that they found online. The task aimed to promote student learning through debate and engagement with the discourse community, including their peers. The task was compulsory, but not assessable, and students did not receive feedback until after the end of semester. At the end of semester, students wrote a short essay linking their own reading with other students' postings on the bulletin board. The subject convener was disappointed by the standard of work. The students commented that they did not find this task very useful, as they spent a lot of time looking for articles which didn't seem to be well-related to the given topics, or were not from reliable sources. Alice commented:

> *I looked at the questions and I had no idea about most of them. I wasn't really sure what my view was and I couldn't find a lot of things to help me. There were a few internet links, but I didn't find them helpful.*

The tutors found it hard to devote time to tutorial discussion of the topics, as their focus was on teaching the technical skills of the subject.

Conclusions

The findings of our study suggest that with good scaffolding and a conscious focus on literacy, university teachers can promote the acquisition of critical reading skills and dispositions. But if the scaffolding is withdrawn before these skills are sufficiently embedded, students' practices regress. This finding suggests that scaffolding around critical reading needs to continue into at least second year, and perhaps beyond.

Instead of simply assuming that students will read critically, our findings show that lecturers need to:

- demand critical reading of students through assessment practices and intimate integration (but not overlap) of readings with subject content
- guide students to readings which offer both high support and high challenge
- provide explicit instruction in critical reading to raise students' metacognitive awareness of reading
- provide feedback on reading to reinforce critical reading strategies.

In conclusion, tertiary students need to develop advanced critical reading skills in order to develop higher-order thinking skills which can support a lifelong quest for improved professional practice: turning knowledge into wisdom. Clearly these skills and dispositions do not emerge from an occasional academic skills workshop, or even from a whole semester of integrated critical literacy development. They need to be developed on a longitudinal basis which can only be achieved through coherent course development and a university-wide commitment to critical literacy skills.

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