

Developing a critical ethos in Higher Education: What undergraduate students gain from a Reader Response task

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ABSTRACT

The importance of incorporating “critical thinking” into education is widely and globally acknowledged. In Singapore, too, there is an increasing emphasis on the teaching of skills that will equip students for the challenges they will face in the 21st century. One of these skills is “critical thinking”. In this article, I focus on my attempts to encourage critical thinking and reading in an undergraduate academic writing module that I teach at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. Aiming to encourage students to critically evaluate the academic texts they read, and to then express their opinions in writing, I routinely require my students to write short Reader Responses to their assigned readings. To find out how effective this task is in fostering a critical mindset, I conducted a survey, asking 33 students for their views on the experience. Their responses, I suggest, give us an indication of whether such Reader Response tasks benefit students and can play a part in developing critical thinkers in higher education.

KEYWORDS: *critical thinking, undergraduate, writing, reader response, university*

Introduction

The ability to think critically is a quality that is highly prized in the context of Higher Education. This is especially so in the current climate, where technological advancements have made vast amounts of information readily available to anyone who takes the time to look. Access to information, then, is no longer a privilege reserved for those enrolled in educational institutions, and hence, increasingly, what is being demanded of and expected from those who emerge from Higher Education is a certain critical mindset characterised by a disposition to think and evaluate, and an ability to articulate those thoughts and assessments in appropriate ways.

This article is centred around an attempt I made to encourage critical thinking and reading in a compulsory undergraduate academic writing module that I coordinate and teach at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. As one of my aims for this module is to encourage students to critically evaluate the academic texts they read, and to then express those opinions in writing, one

of the assignments that I routinely set for my students is a Reader Response task which requires them to write short responses to their assigned readings. To gauge the effectiveness of this task, I conducted a questionnaire survey at the end of one semester with 33 students in that cohort, aiming to find out (a) if they noticed any changes in the way they approached the reading of academic articles during the Reader Response task, (b) what specific academic skills they felt they acquired as a result of the task, (c) what they disliked and what they enjoyed about the task, and (d) whether they felt the Reader Response task encouraged “critical reading”. My discussion of their responses forms the crux of this article.

I would add before going any further that I am fully aware of the limitations of self-reportage, and acknowledge that this method cannot in fact tell us conclusively whether this particular task really was effective in raising the level of critical thinking in my students. However, I would argue that the students’ perceptions of the Reader Response task and what they felt they gained from it can at least give us some indication of whether students benefit from such tasks, and whether such assignments can be useful in fostering critical thinkers in higher education.

Critical thinking and critical reading

“Critical thinking” as an educational concept has been widely addressed in the literature (e.g. McPeck, 1981; Paul, 1993; Halpern, 1999; Browne & Freeman, 2000; Burbach et al., 2004; Phillips & Bond, 2004; Paul & Elder, 2006), and various researchers have offered their own definitions of the notion. For instance, Guest (2000), writing with students in higher education in mind, has defined critical thinking as “the ability to analyse argument, demonstrating reasoning skills appropriate to the level of intellectual sophistication required for higher education” (p. 291), adding further that this encompasses “such skills as identifying and clarifying critical terms and definitions, reasons and conclusions, and assumptions underlying reasoning” (p. 291). Paul and Elder’s (2006) take on “critical thinking” includes several additional dimensions. Their assertion that “[c]ritical thinking is the way we should approach *everything* we do” (p. xxii, my emphasis) suggests that they see critical thinking as not just a skill (or collection of skills) that one applies in dealing with argumentation, but a mentality that one has, which prompts one, whatever the circumstance, to question received information, to assess it using appropriate criteria, and to recognise the existence of alternative views. Seeing critical thinking in this way, as not just a way of *doing* but also a way of *being*, highlights what Sears and Parsons (1991) would call the “ethic” of a critical thinker, and this perspective is mirrored by researchers, such as Halpern (1999), who focus on students’ dispositions toward critical thinking. The argument of such researchers is that the teaching of critical thinking must go beyond ensuring that students are introduced to the requisite “skills”, to helping them develop the right attitude towards being a critical thinker. As Halpern (1999) says,

It is not enough to teach college students the skills of critical thinking if they are not inclined to use them. Critical thinking is more than the successful use

of the right skill in an appropriate context. It is also an attitude or disposition to recognize when a skill is needed and the willingness to exert the mental effort needed to apply it. (p. 72)

Such a holistic view of critical thinking is extended even further by researchers (e.g. Bailin et al., 1999; Veugelers, 2000; Kim, 2003; Gong, 2005) who argue for the association of “critical thinking” with social responsibility and the development of moral values. Kim (2003), for instance, clearly demonstrates a concern for the principled and ethical use of “critical thinking” when she writes:

In the most important sense of the term, critical thinking involves certain intellectual and even moral virtues, such as sincerity ..., open-mindedness, fairness and autonomy in reasoning. Without such virtues, biased thinkers who hold unwarranted and irrational premises or rules of inference could use their critical thinking skills to support unwarranted or self-serving conclusions. (p. 74)

Moving away from ethical and behavioural considerations, other researchers have a more text-bound approach to critical thinking, focusing on the visible manifestation of critical thinking in written texts, and pointing to the demonstration of intertextuality, interpretation, and synthesis in writing as signs of critical thinking. Scott (2000), for instance, draws on the Bakhtinian dialogic tradition and argues that critical thinking “reveals itself in an essay (as elsewhere) as a text’s transformation of other texts” (p. 280). And Sodden and Maclellan (2004, p. 340) offer a list of “indicators” that they used for coding a corpus of 6000-word position papers for, among other things, evidence of “critical discussion of ideas/evidence”.

It is not my purpose here to offer an in-depth critique of the extensive work on critical thinking in the field. Rather, my purpose here is to give a flavour of the research backdrop against which I formulated the objectives and tasks of the academic writing module that I teach at the National Institute of Education, and to set out a working understanding of “critical thinking” which can inform the rest of the discussion here. Indeed, sifting through the literature, it appears that *analysis, interpretation, evaluation* and a *critical awareness* of one’s own reasoning process are at the centre of many conceptions of “critical thinking”, and this is the basic understanding of the term that I work with in this article. In addition, the idea of developing the disposition of a critical thinker is something I return to periodically as well.

Definitions of “critical reading” follow in roughly the same vein as those for “critical thinking”. Paul (1993), for instance, writes that a critical reader “actively looks for assumptions, key concepts and ideas, reasons and justifications, supporting examples, parallel experiences, implications and consequences, and any other structural features of the written text, to interpret and assess it accurately and fairly” (p. 461). This conception of critical reading, it is clear, bears much similarity to the definitions of critical thinking discussed above, with the key difference, perhaps, being the need for a reader to scrutinise the *structure* of the written artefact as well. Interestingly, the one other element which features in discussions of critical reading (and which does not feature as prominently

in discussions of critical thinking) is a focus on dialogicality or writer-reader interaction. Paul (1993) who sees critical reading as “an active, intellectually engaged process in which the reader participates in an inner dialogue with the writer” (p. 461) is a good example of this (see also Elder & Paul, 2004, and Fairbairn & Fairbairn, 2001).

For the purposes of this article, then, I will take critical reading to involve a reader engaging or dialoguing with (the writer of) a text, questioning, analysing, interpreting, and evaluating the content and structure of the written text, and making connections between the text and the reader’s own lived experiences.

The importance of “critical thinking” in education

The importance of incorporating “critical thinking” into education is widely and globally acknowledged (e.g. Halpern, 1999; Bailin, 2002; Kim, 2003; Burbach et al., 2004; Phillips & Bond, 2004; Tapper, 2004). In Singapore, too, “critical thinking” is increasingly being foregrounded in our national education agenda. This can be seen, for instance, in the current vision of our Ministry of Education—“Thinking Schools, Learning Nation”, an initiative that encourages our schools to be “constantly challenging assumptions, and seeking better ways of doing things through participation, creativity and innovation” (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2005). During the 2005 Ministry of Education Work Plan Seminar (attended by representatives from schools across Singapore, as well as teacher educators from the National Institute of Education, the sole teacher training institute in the country), the then Minister for Education of Singapore, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, spoke of “progressively shifting the balance in education, from learning content to developing a habit of *inquiry*”. Although his remarks were targeted at primary to pre-university education, it is clear that this push for critical thinking to be fostered in our schools must be mirrored by a similar emphasis at the tertiary level in general, and in particular, at the National Institute of Education, a university institute whose job is to train the very people who will eventually teach our primary to pre-university students. If school pupils are to be guided into becoming critical thinkers, then their teachers must themselves be equipped to meet this challenge.

With this as the contextual backdrop, then, I briefly set out next my vision for the academic writing module that I teach at the National Institute of Education. I also introduce the Reader Response task that I initiated to encourage critical thinking in my students.

The academic writing module and the Reader Response task

The academic writing module that I teach at the National Institute of Education is compulsory for all our first year undergraduates. These students are enrolled on either a Bachelor of Arts (Education) or Bachelor of Science (Education) degree programme, and take degree-level modules in their chosen academic specialisation(s) (e.g. English, History, Physics) in addition to modules dealing with educational theory, the (primary or secondary) school curriculum,

and language and voice skills. The academic writing module that I teach is one of several modules that *all* first-year students take, regardless of their academic/teaching specialisation, and I see the module as an opportunity to introduce the new students not only to what is required of them when they *write* at the university, but also to what *being* a university student entails. Indeed, there is considerable research to show that how students write at the university is intimately tied in with who they are, the identities and roles they inhabit at the university (e.g. Bartholomae, 1985; Ivanič & Simpson, 1992; Lillis, 2001; Ivanič 1998; see also Perpignan, Rubin & Katznelson, 2007, who write about the higher education and lifelong values and thinking practices that students gain as a result of academic writing instruction).

One of my aims for the module is to encourage my students to see that thinking and reading critically is central to university academic life. To this end, I try to embed everything that we do in the module within a wider “culture” of critical inquiry. As researchers have argued, helping students develop the “ethic” (Sears & Parsons, 1991), “disposition” (e.g. Halpern, 1999), or “spirit” (Siegel, 1980) of a critical thinker—where they are *always* prepared to think, question, and reason their way through the information they come into contact with—is important. Each topic covered in our module (e.g. how to handle question prompts, how to write a research paper, how to use the web for research) thus involves the students in the critical reading and analysis of genuine samples of academic text, discussions about genre conventions and evaluative criteria, discussions about language use and rhetorical effect, and so on. Critical analysis cuts across all the topics that we cover.

I was keen however to give one aspect of academic literacy special prominence. Based on feedback from colleagues in various departments, it emerged that one key concern was the difficulty students appear to have with evaluating and “transforming” (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) the academic texts they draw on to complete their assignments. Perhaps students feel they lack an “adequate knowledge base” (Allison, 1997, p. 16) to critique what they read. Perhaps students “think the content and the style [of published texts] must be right because books are printed, and written by academics” and they are not aware that within the academic context “any reader has a right to take a position as a reader” (Ivanič & Simpson, 1992, p. 149). Whatever the case, colleagues indicated that the tendency for their students to, in Bereiter and Scardamalia’s (1987) terms, “knowledge-tell” was a problem. With the specific aim, then, of encouraging our students to read critically, and to then express their opinions in writing, I introduced a Reader Response component which constitutes 25% of the module’s overall assessment.

The Reader Response task requires students to respond to a specified number of their assigned readings by writing a response of about 500 words. The readings they are to respond to are spread across the semester, and guiding questions are given to help the students focus their thoughts. The guiding questions vary in focus, from content and writer style, to affective response (e.g. surprise, disagreement) and similarities to personal experience. The idea is to introduce students to the ways in which readers might legitimately respond to academic

Table 1

Examples of assigned readings and guiding questions

Assigned reading	Guiding questions
Ivanič, R., & Simpson, J. (1992). Who's who in academic writing? In N. Fairclough (ed.), <i>Critical language awareness</i> (pp. 141-173). London: Longman.	Did the writers say anything that surprised you? On p. 143, the writers say that they tried to write their chapter "in such a way that any students like John could understand what [they] have written". What do you think they mean? What did you think of the style or tone of the chapter?
The Colorado State University Writing Centre online writing guide on ARGUMENTATION.	Which, for you, was the most useful part of the reading? Why?
Stapleton, P. (2005). Evaluating web resources: Internet literacy and L2 academic writing. <i>ELT Journal</i> , 25, 135-143	Choose any one or two of the concerns Stapleton has about the web being used increasingly as a source for research, BRIEFLY explain the nature of this/these concern(s), and discuss whether you think he is right to be concerned about this/these particular issue(s).
Hyland, K. (2002). Authority and invisibility: Authorial identity in academic writing. <i>Journal of Pragmatics</i> , 34(8), 1091-1112.	How do <i>you</i> feel about using first person pronouns in your own academic writing? Do you use them in all the ways that Hyland highlights?

texts, and to get the students used to asking themselves what they think about what they are reading.

Table 1 contains examples of the kinds of assigned readings my students had to write responses to, and some of their guiding questions.

The questionnaire survey: Overview

To get a gauge of how effective this Reader Response task is in encouraging students to become more critically-minded, I conducted a questionnaire survey at the end of one semester with 33 students out of the entire cohort (which numbered 105 that semester). Of these 33 students, 11 were my own students, and the others were from groups taught by three other tutors. All the students involved gave their permission for their responses to be used in published research. In what follows, questionnaire responses referenced as, for example, "Student 17", indicate that the students wanted anonymity. A full name reference indicates that the student wished to be acknowledged by name, and a reference with first name only indicates that the student had no preference either way.

The following questions were asked:

- (1) Do you read an assigned reading differently when you know that you will have to write a Reader Response for it?
- (2) What in your view is the most important academic skill you have learned as a result of having to write Reader Responses for this module?

- (3) What, for you, was the worst part about having to write Reader Responses for this module?
- (4) Did you find anything enjoyable at all about writing the Reader Responses?
- (5) What is your understanding of the term “critical reading”? Do you think the Reader Responses assigned in this module encourage “critical reading” as you have defined it?

The questionnaire survey: Findings and discussion

Question (1): Do you read an assigned reading differently when you know that you will have to write a Reader Response for it?

Of the 33 students surveyed, five said “no”, there was no difference in the way they read an assigned reading when they knew they had to write a reader response for it. These students implied that they were always active readers, with two of them writing:

No. I treat every reading for a course similarly. I read and take notes by the side and also highlight key words. (Kelvin)

No. I usually read an article with an open mind. (Choon Tee)

An overwhelming 28 out of the 33 students surveyed, however, indicated that they did read an assigned reading differently when they knew they had to write a reader response for it. Sifting through these 28 responses, there appear to be five main ways in which the students’ reading behaviours changed. Firstly, some students indicated that they started challenging the ideas they encountered in their reading more:

Yes. ... I have to consciously look out for ideas that can be challenged in the readings. (Student 29)

Yes. I will read it more carefully, in much more details and more critically. At the same time, I will try to think of my own opinions towards the reading. (Ng Huimin)

Secondly, some students revealed that they started to consciously look for links that could be made between what they were reading and what they had experienced in their own lives:

Yes, I will ... constantly make links with my own personal experience. (Student 16)

I would read it with much detail and ... see if the information presented coincide with my personal experience. (Maszelin)

Thirdly, some students wrote that they started reading with a specific goal or objective in mind when they had to write a response:

Yes. Analyse the text more indepth as there is a significant purpose and objective that needs to be met by the end of the reading. (Xin Yi)

Yes. I'll tend to read the article carefully, and identifying sections that relate to the questions asked for the reader response. (Larene)

Fourthly, there were those who learned, through having to do the Reader Responses, to focus on the interpersonal aspects of texts instead of merely their ideational (content) dimension:

Yes. I tend to focus on the style of writing, the writer(s)' intention to write in a particular way instead of just the content. (Sing Wee)

And, finally, in the fifth category are those students who indicated that they started to interact more with the physical artefact of the assigned reading (e.g. by making notes, underlining) in their attempts to engage mentally with it:

Yes. ... I have a greater tendency towards making notes on the side and in general defacing the hard copy of the paper with highlighters. Mostly, these notes are related to my personal perceptions and also linked to other readings I have read. (Janet)

Yes. For readings which are not required to do reader response etc, normally I will just skim through it quickly. But for the assigned reading, I will go through it carefully and highlight any details and make notes beside important points. (Miao Ling)

These then are the five main ways in which the students said they read an assigned reading differently when they had to write a Reader Response for it:

- (a) they challenged ideas,
- (b) they made links to personal experiences,
- (c) they read with a specific goal in mind,
- (d) they focused on interpersonal concerns of the text, and
- (e) they interacted with the physical artefact of the text.

For our purposes, what is interesting to note is that these five new ways of reading correspond to elements of "critical reading" (sometimes referred to as active reading or close reading) identified in the literature. Cheek et al. (1989), for instance, state that "[c]ritical reading involves evaluating the relevancy and adequacy of what one reads ... [and] making use of what one reads by relating ideas or information read to one's experience or problems" (p. 8). (This relates to (a) and (b) above.) Elder and Paul (2004, p. 36), in discussing "close reading", also talk about the need for students to ask themselves if they can "give examples from [their] own experience of what the text is saying" (which relates to (b) above), and they further say that readers should read, "understanding [their] purpose in reading" and "adjust[ing] reading to specific goals" (p. 36), which point to (c) in the list above. Ivanič and Simpson (1992) emphasise the right of student readers to ask themselves whether they want to accept how a text they are reading "positions" them (which relates to (d) the focus on interpersonal considerations). And Fairbairn and Fairbairn (2001)'s explanation of the fundamentals of "active reading" relates to all five of the new reading behaviours highlighted by my students—they exhort students not to take what they read at face value, to "establish connections between the meanings that the author is trying to convey and what [they] already know" (p. 76), to "[a]pproach the text

with questions” and “decide what [they] want to get from it” (p. 79), and to “[e]valuate the author’s success in communicating her ideas” (p. 77). They also devote a whole chapter to how note-taking plays a part in active reading.

We can see then that the five new reading behaviours mentioned by my students in fact constitute elements of “critical reading”, and the fact that 28 out of the 33 students surveyed highlighted these changes in their reading behaviour suggests that the Reader Response task does fulfil its primary aim of promoting a more critical mindset. On a separate note, however, I would suggest that these responses are also somewhat disturbing because they unfortunately also confirm that the traditional concern of university lecturers over our students being unable and/or unwilling to evaluate what they are reading is in fact legitimate. If students say that having to write a Reader Response for an assigned reading “made them read differently” in that they started to challenge ideas, make links to personal experiences, read with a goal in mind and so on, then this implies that these are *not* routine actions that they perform when they do their academic reading. The challenge that I face, that we all face, is how to encourage these students to choose critical reading behaviours, now that they have tried it, even when they are not required to write graded Reader Responses for their readings. This is an issue I take up again in the final section of this article.

Question (2): What in your view is the most important academic skill you have learned as a result of having to write Reader Responses for this module?

The responses to this question can be grouped into four categories. Firstly, more than half the students surveyed (18 out of 33) indicated *critical reading* or *challenging the writer* as the most important academic skill they picked up. Here is a sample of these responses:

The most important skill that I’ve learned was to read articles critically and not just agreeing with the writer. (Pei Yan)

It is the ability to be critical of my own work as well as to question the ideas and opinions of scholars and writers. (Haslin)

I’ve learnt the importance of being a critical reader, reflecting upon what I’ve read through, attempting to apply or not apply in Singapore/Asian context. (Guat Kheng)

Not to accept whatever written materials at face value but to be critical and see whether I agree/disagree with points made and to what degree. (Student 28)

The second category of responses, offered by 8 out of the 33 students, I would classify as *expression* or *finding of the self*:

To confidently write my opinion. ... Be confident to have my own stand. (Joycelyn)

I am able to learn to “find myself” in the readings in order to respond to it. (Kelvin)

To learn how to use "I". ... Asian students dare not express self thought so need to learn this skill. (Ai Li)

Thirdly, for three students, *the development of writing skills* was to them the most important academic skill they acquired:

I have developed my own style of writing. (Choon Tee)

To write critically, engaging with my own writing ... (Sharon Jodi)

And finally, one student identified *the development of the ability to see the larger issues* as the most important skill she learned:

Ability to see the readings from a broader perspective I tend to "entangle" myself in the "micro" and miss out the bigger picture. (Li Za)

We see from these results that more than half the students surveyed felt that critical reading in some form was the most important academic skill that they acquired. This is an encouraging sign, as my aim in assigning the Reader Responses is precisely to help students develop the skill and habit of critical reading. And, looking at the second largest chunk of responses (the eight responses to do with the expression/finding of the self), I would suggest that this aspect of the reading and writing experience in fact goes hand-in-hand with "critical reading". In order to be "critical readers", students first have to realise that they have a right to their own opinions within academia (see Ivanič & Simpson, 1992; Ivanič, 1998). Published works are not sacrosanct, and the student reader is not "merely ... a sponge, soaking up ideas and information" (Fairbairn & Fairbairn, 2001, p. 64). Feeling comfortable with expressing their selves and their opinions in their writing, I would argue, is an important aspect of becoming a critical academic reader. Putting the first two categories of responses together, then, we see that, from the perspective of a significant proportion of the students surveyed, the Reader Response task does lend itself to developing the critical faculty.

Question (3): What, for you, was the worst part about having to write Reader Responses for this module?

This question was included so that I could get a sense of the difficulties my students faced in completing the task, and also so that I could improve the activity in subsequent semesters. Apart from one student who reported finding nothing bad about the task at all, the other 32 students all identified negative aspects of the task, highlighting some pertinent issues in the process. The difficulties they had fall into two broad categories: (a) issues to do with reading the articles, and (b) issues to do with writing the responses.

With regard to *reading* the articles assigned for the Reader Response task, some students indicated that they had problems understanding what they were reading because the readings were too difficult:

[The worst part was] the reading. Some articles are too thick, language are rather difficult, makes understanding process very slow. (Student 16)

For me I find it difficult to understand the language of one of the articles.

I wonder is it because I am weak at English. Hyland's article was difficult to read. (Joycelyn)

Other students found the task heavy-going because of the length of the assigned readings and the number of readings they had to do for the task across the semester:

Probably actually reading the readings. The readings are long, so that takes time Week after week, gets a bit tiring. Even though the weightage is not that high, I still end up spending a fair share of time doing it. (Sunita)

Having to finish reading chunks of articles in a short period of time before the next one comes along. (Student 20)

Other students found some of the readings difficult to understand for yet another reason—they found the experiences discussed in the readings to be alien to them:

The reading of those articles that I was not able to comprehend because I could not relate my experience to it. (Lay San)

The concerns articulated by these students are legitimate, and I can understand why these aspects of the task would pose problems for them. The length and number of assigned readings, for instance, was an issue for many students, even some of my best students. I took on board their feedback, and for the subsequent semester selected shorter readings. With regard to the *number* of assigned Reader Responses, however, I found through experimenting that reducing the requirement to fewer than four Responses across the semester did not work very well from a pedagogic standpoint. Having to write four Reader Responses within ten weeks kept the importance of critical reading at the forefront of the students' minds. Any fewer than four, and the students could afford to go several weeks within the semester without thinking about the need to read critically. Given that one of my main aims for the module, and the task, is to get the students accustomed to reading critically *all the time*, it seems clear that the students need to write sufficient Reader Responses across the semester for the purpose of the task to be fulfilled.

As for the perceived difficulty of the readings, this too is understandable. As researchers (e.g. Ivanič, 1998; Hyland, 2000; Lillis, 2001) have pointed out, academic language is often "packaged" differently from everyday conversational language, making it difficult to extract a writer's ideas from a text. Although I took care in this particular semester to ensure that the initial readings I assigned were all written in clear and accessible language, the final reading I assigned was a little more challenging. I had thought that the students could handle something more difficult at the end of the semester, but this turned out not to be the case, and I learned my lesson—that final reading was substituted by a much simpler one dealing with the same issue. I am reminded that, as academic literacy teachers, we do need to remember that, for a new undergraduate student, academic reading and writing can be akin to entering a whole new world with its own "code", its own ways of speaking and thinking which can take some time to learn (see Bartholomae, 1985; Ballard & Clanchy, 1988).

As for the students who pointed out their difficulty with relating to the experiences reported in the readings, I thought they made an excellent point. Many of the most prominent academic literacy readings originate from the Anglo-American academic tradition, and while the ideas contained within may be perfectly sound, the *specifics* of the academic experiences described within can at times be somewhat remote from the reality facing young Singaporean students. And, on hindsight, if my aim is to encourage my students to voice their opinions and participate in the academic “dialogue”, then assigning them only readings from the Western academic tradition surely does nothing to indicate to them that they as Singaporean undergraduates have any voice at all in the intellectual exchanges of the university. I now make it a point to include readings which either incorporate an Asian perspective, or which report research done with Asian students.

We move on now to those students who indicated that the worst part of the Reader Response task had to do with the actual *writing* of the responses. Some students highlighted their struggles with the writing and revision process:

To be precise in the use of language so that our critical ideas (whether for or against) what was written can be put forward without ambiguity. (Student 28)

The worst part was the editing of my own work as I would have a difficult time deciding on what is best to present to the reader. I would sometime spend hours rewriting my work (Haslin)

Yet other students felt that the worst part of the Reader Response task occurred when they found themselves not having much of an opinion about a particular reading but still having to write a response to it:

Writing in depth. It is really not easy when I don't have much opinions/thought about it. (Li Za)

Towards some articles (minority), I had very little opinions, but no matter what, I still have to “squeeze” something out to fulfil the word limit. (Ng Huimin)

As a reader, I can empathise with concerns like these. We do not experience the same degree of reaction towards everything we read. Some works provoke a strong response; others do not. In other feedback, the students themselves suggested one possible solution to this problem—give them some choice regarding which readings to write a response to:

Let students choose what article to respond to from a list of assigned readings. (Peiyan)

Let us choose which reading we want to respond to. Each reading will affect us differently due to differences in everyone's background, culture, personal experiences. There may be some readings we felt more strongly to. (Sing Wee)

While certainly a possible solution, I should point out that going down this route has its drawbacks. Teachers of modules which have large student numbers and no end-of-semester examination will realise that it is often a challenge to

ensure that all the students in the cohort are engaging with a core set of issues deemed central to the module. One way of ensuring this is to require students to write about these central topics. Because the allowance of choice always carries with it the possibility that the person choosing may not take the time to consider all the available options before making his/her choice, there is a danger that giving students a choice as to which readings to write a response to may result in some readings on the options list not being read at all. Clearly, then, if one is keen to ensure that students engage with all of a certain number of topics, the way around this would be to give the students choice *within* each topic, and not *across* topics, but this would almost certainly, on paper at least, increase the reading load for the already overworked students.

Question (4): Did you find anything enjoyable at all about writing the Reader Responses?

After asking the students about the negative aspects of the Reader Response task, I wanted them to reflect on its positive aspects, as encouraging the students to consciously think about positive elements they can take away with them from a particular pedagogic activity is, I believe, a form of “meta-cognitive reflection” (e.g. Granville & Dison, 2005), and is itself a vital part of the learning process.

Five positive aspects of the Reader Response task were identified by the students. Firstly, many students wrote that they enjoyed having the freedom to express their own personal views about the assigned readings:

I feel my views were being heard. I am aware of my position as a writer. Most importantly, I'm free to express my views and opinions without fearing that I'd be marked down or penalised ...! (Student 20)

I found that being able to express myself freely in an academic writing is enjoyable. (Kelvin)

Secondly, some students reported being pleased with the opportunity to engage with their tutor, to get feedback on their opinions:

I enjoyed having responses to my views about the assigned readings. (Sing Wee)

The most enjoyable part was reading the feedback from my tutor as from her comments I find that there is meaningful interaction between two people in the discourse and it gives me great satisfaction to know that my work is valued (Haslin)

Thirdly, students mentioned enjoying the opportunity to reflect and organise their thoughts after each reading:

I enjoyed writing the Reader Responses because it allows me to reorganise my thoughts and opinions after every reading. (Sebastian Lau)

When I read through my own Reader Response and try to internalise what I've read and written to make the whole process more meaningful. (Guat Kheng)

Fourthly, some students enjoyed the task because it challenged them to develop new ways of reading and writing:

I was forced to read beyond the lines as I had to do the Reader Responses, which elevated my understanding of the articles. (Larene)

The enjoyable thing is that it forces one to read not only with an open mind but also to be critical not simply to be critical but to be able to support the critique with evidence ... (Student 28)

And finally, some students reported that what they found enjoyable was the sense of achievement they felt on completion of the task:

When I've completed my reader response(s), I feel a sense of achievement! (Guat Kheng)

The sense of satisfaction when I feel I have met the criteria for each reader response. Quite proud that I can come out with such points of view from the readings. (Sharon Jodi)

What is interesting to note here is that each of these aspects that the students found enjoyable about the Reader Response task encompasses some element of critical thought. Expressing personal opinions, engaging dialogically with the tutor, reflection and organisation of thoughts after reading, and trying new ways of reading and writing—these are behaviours that only a person who is thinking critically and analytically will engage in. The fact that students found these to be *enjoyable* suggests that they were beginning to recognise that these are aspects of learning worth engaging in, and they were starting to take pleasure in being critical thinkers. Even the sense of achievement that some students felt having completed the task implies a critical thinker—a person cannot feel satisfied at what he/she has accomplished unless he/she is capable of evaluating his/her own performance in the light of the requirements of the task.

Question (5): *What is your understanding of the term “critical reading”? Do you think the Reader Responses assigned in this module encourage “critical reading” as you have defined it?*

This final question came in two parts. Addressing now the second part of the question first, 24 out of the 33 students surveyed said “yes”, they thought the Reader Responses encouraged critical reading. 8 students only gave their definitions of the term “critical reading”, and did not give any indication of what they thought of the task, which was probably my fault as I should not have asked the two questions together. One student responded that she was “not sure” as she “tend[s] to agree with the reading”. And, very worth noting is the fact that *none* of the students surveyed said “no”, the Reader Responses did not encourage critical reading.

With this survey being conducted just after the students’ final Reader Responses were due, and at the end of a semester in which critical reasoning had been heavily emphasised, it was heartening to see that most of the students could of their own accord give remarkably cogent definitions of “critical reading”. Here

are a few of the most encouraging responses:

Critical reading is reading with questions in mind and assessing the material being read for its value and contribution to the reader's knowledge and understanding. The reader responses do encourage this as without this task, the reading would not have been intensive enough for students to form opinions (Haslin)

Personally, I would see "critical reading" as a reader playing an active role in processing his readings instead of just absorbing any information that are presented in published articles. I strongly agree that the "Reader Responses" has engendered "critical reading". (Sebastian Lau)

Critical reading is when you analyse the reading, going beyond what is laid there for you; make connections and identify controversies. (Student 16)

"Critical reading" refers to reading with an open mind and forming your own judgements. I think Reader Responses encourage "critical reading" as it allows us to form our own opinions about the ideas that were presented by the writer. (Pei Yan)

"Critical reading" involves evaluation and assimilation of reading material (where appropriate) into my schema—it requires me to question what I have read and to be courageous enough to challenge thoughts/statements if required. I think the Reader Responses do just that by virtue of the requirement that we engage in the text. (Janet)

Summative thoughts: What the students appear to have gained from the experience

From the questionnaire responses discussed above, it seems clear that most of the students who participated in my survey agree that the Reader Response task has encouraged critical reading. This we can see from the opinions they explicitly expressed in response to survey question 5. While I acknowledge that self-reportage is not always entirely reliable, and that we cannot, based on the responses elicited for question 5 alone, conclusively argue that some sort of cognitive development has truly taken place in these students, I want to suggest that the responses that my students gave to *all* the survey questions collectively give us a strong indication that they did benefit from the experience and that the Reader Response task did in fact encourage critical thinking and reading. For instance, the students were able to point to changes in their reading behaviour which all tied in with the different dimensions of "critical thinking" identified in the literature. Those aspects of the task that students identified as "enjoying"—for instance the freedom to express personal viewpoints, the opportunity for dialogue with the tutor, the opportunity for reflection—also point to the fact that they were beginning to enjoy being analytical and engaged in their own reading and writing.

I want to suggest additionally that the experience has benefitted the students also in that they were given the opportunity to express their opinions with a freedom that some of them did not at the start of the module feel they had. The

first reading for the module was Ivanič and Simpson's (1992) "Who's who in academic writing?", in which the writers assert, among other things, that "[a] student has a right to question and disagree with the content of what he reads (or hears or sees)" (p. 149). This sentiment was focused upon by numerous students in their first Reader Response, with many expressing surprise at it. For instance:

It has never come across my mind that we could disagree with what the writer says, especially if it is the writer of a required reading. (Student 33)

I have never dared to challenge any article that I read. ... [A]fter all the comments are made from an 'expert'. However, after reading this article, I was taken aback by the ideas that the writer mentioned. Of particular interest is that any reader has a right to take a position as a reader ... (Choon Tee)

This recognition of their right to have opinions of their own with regard to what they were reading at the university and to make those opinions known greatly excited some of the students, and the Reader Responses served as a ready platform for the students to immediately start trying to engage with texts in a way that many had not done before.

Such attempts by the students to engage with their reading, and their tutors' subsequent efforts at providing feedback on their written responses have wider implications in the broader academic context. Through the whole reading, writing, and feedback process, students begin to see that academic reading and writing are in fact dialogic. Writers write to offer ideas which readers then consider before accepting or rejecting. Readers may become writers as they feel compelled to express in writing their responses to what they have read. For those students in this particular cohort who had tutors conscientious enough to provide written feedback on their Reader Responses, the dialogic nature of academic reading and writing was even further emphasised, for just as the students were themselves encouraged to be active readers, they saw their tutors being active readers, responding to what they had written. And we see from the responses to survey question 4 that this exchange was in fact one aspect of the Reader Response task that the students greatly enjoyed. In a sense, then, the whole Reader Response activity is geared towards encouraging the students to see reading and writing at the university as dialogic, for it is only as students begin to see themselves as participants in the "academic dialogue" that they will start to respond actively to the ideas they encounter in texts (and elsewhere in the university) and to take responsibility for their own ideas.

Conclusion

It seems clear that students can indeed benefit in various ways from writing Reader Responses to the academic texts that they read, and that requiring them to engage with what they are reading does encourage them to read more critically, at least for the duration of the task. The challenge that academic literacy tutors face, however, is how to ensure that students will continue to choose such critical reading behaviours even when they are not required to write graded Reader Responses for their readings.

When I posed this question to a group of academic literacy practitioners and English teachers at a recent conference, the consensus appeared to be there was not and will never be any concrete way of “ensuring” that critical reading skills acquired in the course of a semester-long module will be transferred to the rest of a student’s academic life. Rather than end what I hope has been an encouraging report on such a dismal note, however, I would like to suggest one way in which we can perhaps create conditions ripe for such a transfer to take place.

For this, I would refer back to the work of those who see critical thinking/reading as not merely a skill but an “ethic” or “disposition” (e.g. Sears & Parson (1991), and Halpern (1999), discussed at the start of this article). I would suggest that as there is no way of policing students externally, our best hope is to foster intrinsic motivation—firstly, to help students find enjoyment and fulfilment in being critical readers and thinkers, and secondly to make them want not only to take on critical thinking behaviours, but to *be*, in essence, critical thinkers. The Reader Response task, I suggest, cannot effectively be employed to achieve the end of developing critical thinkers in a writing classroom that does not otherwise emphasise the importance of a critical mindset. As I mentioned at the start of this article, the academic writing module in which this Reader Response task is embedded is designed such that critical analysis cuts across everything that we do. The readings that are assigned, the topics that we cover, the way that we cover the various topics, the kinds of discussion that take place are all informed by an understanding of how important it is for the students think, evaluate, and work things out for themselves. Siegel (1980) has argued that students only become real critical thinkers when they develop a “critical spirit”, and the development of such a “critical spirit” will only occur if teachers nurture it in the classroom, by encouraging genuine probing discussions to take place, by themselves modelling critical reading and thinking behaviours (through their written feedback and classroom interactions, for instance), and by respecting and building on the attempts of students to make critical evaluations, even if some of these may not initially be flawlessly formulated. Developing in students a “critical spirit” overall, a willingness and desire to enter into the “rational life” (Siegel, 1980, p. 11) of the university, is then perhaps the one way we have of tipping the scales in our favour, of making it more likely that students will take what they have gained from one Reader Response task in one module with them as they continue their academic journey.

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