Developing criticality

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Thinking Writing, QMUL

Thinking Writing

- Now part of Learning Development in Student Services

- Small team working with academic departments to develop writing within the learning and assessment processes of the subject
- Ways of working:
  - Collaborate with academic teachers to enable them to develop more effective teaching and assessment
  - Discussion, ideas, resource development, critical questioning, team teaching, evaluation
  - Task, module and programme level

Thinking Writing website resource

Evolving work with secondary schools and post-16 colleges

Initial focus on working directly with students

Academic Literacies

Making the bridge to university

Students came to QMUL

Shift to focus on language in coursework

Workshops given in schools/college

How we're now working in a school and a post-16 college

- A working group model with teachers
- Initial workshop followed by a commitment to participate in series of meetings over 12-18 months
- c.6 twilight meetings of 60-90 mins in the school
- Focus on integrating critical reading and writing in everyday teaching
- Feedback, discussion, then input of additional practical ideas
- Additionally - observations and collaborative development with individual teachers/teams

Assumptions in our work on criticality:

- being critical is highly valued but often under-considered
- criticality is judged by what students produce as texts
- we get to an understanding of criticality by looking at contexts and practices, not by working only to an abstract definition
- criticality is dependent on and differs between contexts; it is not a skill
- by changing aspects of practices – and by implication the beliefs that underpin them – we can develop people's ability to be critical and nurture a critical disposition
- So, we need to work with people in their contexts *in a sustained dialogic process*

From our discussions, we've learned…

- Factors that influence ability to create a context in which people can be critical:
  - Practical constraints around teaching
  - Institutional and regulatory framings of learning
  - Behaviours and beliefs around what being a teacher and a student is – roles and expectations
- These factors are a ongoing feature of our working group meetings
- They can't be ignored…

Where can students improve in criticality?

- Making connections between different parts of texts, topics, subjects
- Reading
- Taking/making meaning from texts
- Being specific and accurate enough
- Making judgments about content
- Moving between instance and theory (small picture/big picture)
- Recognising what’s important in a question/text/discussion
- Taking ownership

Examples of individual activities

Prioritisation

Ask everyone to mark, say, five sections of the text that they find significant, relevant, questionable… (could be a phrase, a couple of sentences, a paragraph).

Then ask them to put these in order, so that they choose the *most* significant, relevant, questionable… for them

Now get them to write about *why* they chose it.

Share and discuss points across the class (and see how much of the text gets covered)

Then get them to go back to their own section and write the idea in their own words.

Negative Summary

Rather than highlight points in a text, use a thick marker pen to delete everything that is NOT necessary. Try and leave only 5-10% of the text visible….

Over to you….

- Can you reflect on why these were thought by the teachers to be helpful in developing their students criticality?
- What does the fact that these activities were seen as novel tell us?

Case study – whole unit change

- Bigger picture of reconceptualising how one might encourage criticality over a larger unit of work – example of history,
  - What wasn’t happening that teachers wanted to happen?
  - What changed to accommodate this?
  - What were the risks?
  - What were the outcomes?

Outline of a typical unit of work in history – pre-working group development

Week 1		Week 2		Week 3		Week 4		Week 5		Week 6		Week 7	Week 18
Lesson – new	Lesson – new and review	Lesson – new and review	Lesson – new and review	Lesson – new and review; intro to coursework essay	Lesson – new and review	Lesson – new and review	Lesson – new and review	Lesson – review	Lesson – review	Lesson – writing coursework draft	Lesson – writing coursework draft	Hand in coursework draft 1	Hand in final draft
Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5	Topic 6	Topic 7	Topic 8	All topics	All topics				
Teacher-led plenary, group discussions, note making, reading; introduction to coursework writing assignment										Writing draft, individual appointments with teachers for feedback.			

Outline of a unit of work in history after working group development

Week 1		Week 2		Week 3		Week 4		Week 5		Week 6		Week 7	Week 18
Lesson – new	Lesson – new	Lesson – review and extend with particular focus - share	Lesson – review and extend with particular focus - share	Lesson – review and extend with particular focus - share	Lesson – new and review	Lesson – new and review	Lesson – new and review	Lesson - writing retreat	Lesson - writing retreat	Lesson - writing retreat	Lesson - writing retreat	Hand in coursework draft 1	Hand in final draft
The big picture: getting a sense of the story; introduction to coursework		Theme	Theme	Theme	Theme	All themes, bigger picture	All themes, bigger picture						
Teacher-led plenary, group work, student-led group teaching through presentations, frequent short writing tasks, frequent reading and note making, textual analysis; introduction to coursework writing assignment								Intensive writing in class, with feedback from teacher/peers in class as needed					

Seeded activities

- Short writing tasks – focus on content and ideas development and can include:
  - Language focus –
    - refer to author by name, be specific, get to the point, modifying a topic, so what?, developing focus
- Writing retreats in the classroom

Over to you

- How relevant is this case study to you?
- What aspects might be applicable in your contexts? What wouldn’t be applicable?

- Discuss!

Key Questions for

- Is criticality an important goal in your teaching?
- In what ways does your teaching practice encourage criticality?
- What factors influence the extent to which you and your students can engage with criticality (developing the ability to be critical and nurturing a critical disposition)?
- What would you like to change?