Teaching Note

Writing a Literature Review: An Essential Component of Critical Thinking

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This teaching note describes how using the requirement of a literature review helped students become critical thinkers. Literature reviews, as assignments, are often difficult for students because of the need for intense writing, analysis, and evaluation. As part of a larger assignment, students read 7 to 10 research articles and discussed them in class. The students were then assigned the task of writing their own literature reviews using the same research articles. The authors explain how using the practice of critical reading and critical writing helped students engage their review of the literature with a critical thinking mindset.

The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS; Council on Social Work Education, 2008) for social work stress that the teaching of research methods (2.1.6 and 2.1.10.d – single subject/system research design [SSRD]), writing (2.1.3), and critical thinking (2.1.3) are essential explicit curriculum elements. Considered separately, each of these standards can elicit a sigh from any professor who teaches research methods, given that (a) very few students enter their research methods classes with enthusiasm; (b) getting students to write well is as difficult as teaching them research methods (Allwardt [2011], in a recent Teaching Note, stated that "learning to write a scholarly literature review is often difficult for undergraduate students," p. 597); and (c) critical thinking can be just the last straw. But taken collectively, the standards can serve to make each one enhance the pedagogical practice of the other. This teaching note describes how one BSW program combined all three of these standards to motivate students toward high achievement of each while also helping them see the real necessity and relevance of each in their future practice, leadership, and success.

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Literature Review

Social workers, as EPAS notes, need the ability to discern and distinguish relevant information. The need to think critically when assessing and assisting clients is vital to practice and is developed, in part, through assignments requiring students to obtain relevant, timely, and authoritative information followed by practicing discernment related to the type of information viewed as critical (Gambrill, 2005). The ability to locate research and to read literature reviews and study findings with a level of discernment entails critical thinking (Ennis, 1987). In this fashion, the act of reading is viewed as enabling a critical analysis of thinking.

Writing, as has been declaimed multiple times and across multiple venues within the social work arena, is an area in which students are deficient (e.g., Alter & Adkins, 2001; Lillis & Rai, 2011). Social work is certainly not alone in this concern—psychology students have shown difficulty mastering writing within the profession (Fallahi, Wood, Austad, & Fallahi, 2006), and various strategies to improve their writing outcomes, including specific courses in writing, have been implemented (Johnson, Tuskenis, Howell, & Jaroszewski, 2011). Yet writing, like reading, is also seen as connected to thinking (e.g., Gage, 1986). Although it is clear that student writing needs to be improved, perhaps the type of writing social work students are assigned needs to be discussed. The consequence, for example, of giving a mechanical writing task (e.g., note taking; short-answer type of activities) is that low-level types of knowledge (which are more often assigned in courses than their critical thinking counterparts; Langer & Applebee, 1987) will be given in return (e.g., recall), as opposed to the results of writing assignments that foster critical examinations.

Linking the concepts of *reading as thinking* along with *writing as thinking* advances by quantum leaps the potential practices toward critical thinking. For example, when students write as they read, they become more critical of their own thinking and that of the authors they read (Langer & Applebee, 1987; Salvatori, 1986; Tierney & McGinley, 1987). Deliberately combining higher levels of critical reading, through such activities as revision, reflection, refocusing, and dialoguing, helps students expand their thinking and obtain multiple perspectives on their topics (Mumm & Kersting, 1997; Tierney, Soter, O'Flahavan, & McGinley, 1989).

Teaching to enhance the learning outcome thus becomes the goal, but the course activities or requirements selected also can further critical thinking. In other words, what is taught is essential, but how it is taught is equally significant (Cross, 1987). Given that students learn by doing and practice (e.g., Berliner, 1984; Dewey, 1938/1997) and that they succeed if high yet attainable goals are set (Richardson, Fisk, & Okun, 1983), the impetus is to provide the type of activity that allows those achievements.

How a subject is taught can be related directly to Freire's (1992) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as well as to social work's concept and engagement of social jus-

tice. Critical pedagogy, for example, provides a deliberate curriculum focus on how social hegemonies suppress and oppress freedom of accurate information and ultimately prevent public discernment of the information received. In other words, critical pedagogy is teaching for social justice and is a deliberate classroom practice that helps students learn to become critical thinkers (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007; Anyon, 2009; Apple, 2000; Fay, 1987; Harding, 1991). Social work educators must help students learn to discern, through critical analysis, the socialization of and within oppressive systems. Through deliberately using critical pedagogical practices, for example, students can begin to comprehend that, for example, "it does make a difference who says what and when" (Harding, 1991, p. 269). One goal of critical thinking through critical pedagogy is to expand intellectual freedom to actively expand society's potential (Burbules & Berk, 1999): social justice through critical thinking.

It would seem obvious that if the goal of our teaching is for our students to become critical thinkers, then the definition, meaning, and implementation of it must be clearly operationalized (Lipman, 1988). That is, do we truly know what we mean when we say we teach for critical thinking? Even determining and knowing what thinking is, for example, is far from easy. Mason (2009) provides eight examples:

1. Thinking as doxa: forming an opinion or having an idea (opining).
2. Thinking as "vorstellen": representing a state of affairs (representing).
3. Thinking as ratiocination: developing a chain of premises leading to a valid conclusion (reasoning).
4. Thinking as problem-solving: scientific thinking (problem-solving).
5. Thinking as "beriff" (Hegel): conceptual or systematic thinking (conceiving).
6. Thinking as understanding or interpreting the particular case in terms of the universal (practical judgement).
7. Thinking as a revealing of what is concealed (the meaning of Being) (Heidegger's thinking).
8. Thinking as letting be (the later Heidegger's post-metaphysical "thinking"). (p. 15)

In defining the critical part in critical thinking, Socrates is noted for likely having said it best, "The unexamined life is not worth living." In brief, *critical* refers to a discernment/in-depth analysis of knowledge/authority (Burbules & Berk, 1999). From this, a teacher can determine his or her critical pedagogy, critical thinking activities, and critical readings to help lead students to a higher quality of thinking, discernment, questioning, and critiquing. Burbules and Berk stated that "to critical thinking, the critical person is something like a critical consumer of information" (1999, p. 48). (Note: The Association of American Colleges and Universities provides helpful "VALUE Rubrics" for assessing critical thinking, which can be found at http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/.)

Pedagogical Practice

In the second required quantitative research course of a BSW program (first course at 200 level; second course at Capstone 400 level), the mandatory assignments included the conceptualization, development, and implementation of an SSRD on one of the students' own behaviors in the students' field placement; an Internet-based survey; a literature review of 30 to 50 pages (using 25 or more studies from refereed journals) that provided the theoretical background and support for the survey; a basic statistical analysis of the survey results using SPSS; and a final written report of the survey findings. (Because the survey was implemented only within the class as a mock-survey, institutional review board permission was not needed.)

At first, the students viewed the literature review as just another assignment to complete in the course, although a particularly frustrating one. However, faculty members realized from the beginning that the students' writing should be carefully directed so that the documents produced would be at capstone level. Without such labor-intensive supervision, the resulting reviews could have been dismal, awkward, and even uncritical of the related research.

When the literature review as an assignment was reconceptualized to help students become critical reviewers of the related research, it began to take on a life of its own. For the students the literature review tied all the assignments together, improving students' critical writing abilities and enlightening them on social justice issues.

The process involved critical reading, critical writing, critical discourse, and continual student reflections on their own thinking about their reading and writing. The process began with the assignment instructions:

> Develop a topic of your choice in an area of social work of interest to you (e.g., homelessness; Head Start; students with disabilities). Find seven to 10 refereed research articles on that topic, then read the articles, while taking notes and categorizing what is being said, and come to class ready to discuss your analysis of the topics and articles.

The students came to class prepared to talk about their topics. But when asked to briefly and concisely provide their analyses across the articles (as opposed to relating an isolated example from one article), they began to grasp the concept of critical reading versus that of just reading. Through questioning and discourse, students were guided to reanalyze their articles in more deliberate and discriminating ways and to analyze the authority and integrity of the information.

Much like the arduous task of guiding students' writing toward higher levels, guiding them toward critical thinking involved equally deliberate practices. As they developed their critical thinking abilities, diving back into the research journals for more evidence from supporting articles on their topics became natural for them. It was a striking moment (and one that has been

repeated yearly) when they came to class and shared their 30-plus articles with pride about how much evidence they were now finding, *evidence* becoming the main term for them.

Next the writing of the actual literature review began. To their surprise, the students were told:

> Before writing your literature review, go back to your initial seven to 10 articles and reread the literature review in each one. But instead of just reading them, make note of how they are written. For example, answer the following questions: What do the literature reviews cover? How do they cover it? How are the reviews organized? How do the authors cite without interrupting the text? What points are foregrounded/backgrounded? How do these authors transition from one topic to the next? And how do the authors differ across articles?

Critical reading thus became the deliberate impetus and pedagogy for teaching critical writing. From that point on, writing the literature review became a more deliberate critical thinking activity for them.

Outcomes

Perhaps intuitively, it was originally understood by faculty members that critical reading begets critical writing, and that there is a difference between the two. By ultimately making such a distinction, an overt pedagogical practice helped students overcome their fear of writing a literature review as they became critical consumers and critical readers of such reviews. One of the goals for the students in regard to the literature review was to learn to synthesize, or what the new 21st-century version of Bloom's Taxonomy labels as "create" (Krathwohl, 2002). The objective was for the students to create a synthesis based on their reading of research articles that would conceptualize at a higher level the consequences of all the evidence.

Critical thinking is a challenge in undergraduate teaching, with the myriad students with their myriad abilities in writing, thinking, and learning. But through deliberate use of critical reading and critical writing, critical thinking is what makes the difference in the quality of the students' learning and in their sense of social justice/liberation. Using critical reading, critical writing, and critical pedagogy to guide the students' development of a literature review thus became the deliberate classroom practice to help foster their critical thinking.

About half the students in our program are nontraditional—mature adults returning to college after economic downturns and the disappearance of industrial jobs they had previously held. Many of these students had never dreamed of or intended to pursue a college degree, and more than half come to this program through community colleges. To watch these students grow in their reading, thinking, and writing skills and attain the pride of tackling and

completing a truly complex and difficult assignment is satisfying beyond measure. It is their pride in themselves, and our pride in them, that maintains our commitment to the time and energy that this assignment requires.

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