

Modifying Classroom Routines to Provide Reflective Space

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This Instructional Note describes a reflection activity that invites students and teachers to reimagine the delivery of written assignment directions.

In the required writing courses I teach, I try to prioritize activities and assignments that are designed to foster metacognitive reflection. Based on my own experiences as a writer, I know that my ability to reflect deeply on my writing processes and practices enriches each new writing experience I have and what I take from it. Research in educational psychology and writing studies confirms the critical role of reflection in transformative learning. As Elizabeth G. Allan and Dana Lynn Driscoll have recently put it, reflection provides “an opportunity for students to describe their internal processes, evaluate their challenges, and recognize their triumphs in ways that would otherwise remain unarticulated” (37). Reflection has also been linked with positive transfer of learning, as it offers students the chance to detect links across learning experiences that might otherwise seem isolated and disjointed (Salomon and Perkins). Therefore, it makes sense to me that reflection—as a concept and as an activity—should be emphasized in the writing courses I teach.

In practice, though, I sometimes forget that students bring limited experience with reflective writing into first-year composition (FYC). As a result, I tend to overlook opportunities to build reflection into my day-to-day teaching. This challenge has been widely acknowledged by college writing teachers. In the editor’s introduction to a recent issue of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, Holly Hassel observes the challenges that writing teachers face in making metacognition a central component of their instruction, “short of brief reflective pieces like author’s notes and writer’s memos” (245). Such genres, while valuable, often are assigned at the end of a formal writing project and thus may appear to the writers in our classrooms as an afterthought, or as something separate from the act of writing itself. Reflection, of course, is not detachable from writing and from learning; and

so teacher-scholars in the field continue to describe and theorize reflection as a more integrated component of structured writing experiences (see Finer; LeVan and King; Nowacek).

What I take from this conversation is not only that reflection is essential for learning, but also that students need abundant practice in the reflective writing and thinking skills that will help them see connections across seemingly distinct writing environments. I have found this to be especially true with my students at a school that emphasizes technical and vocational training. They often enter the required courses I teach with a view of writing as an important yet purely instrumental skill, not as an intellectual activity or as an occasion for learning and for growth. When I perceive resistance to reflective writing activities, I am reminded of Jennie Nelson's observation that students entering college are "already long-standing members of the culture of school, and are highly literate about how classrooms work" (411). That is, the evaluative nature of the classroom may cause students to approach reflective writing assignments as just another paper to write for their teacher instead of for themselves, rendering their views of writing untransformed. Therefore, I have been looking for ways to defamiliarize the routine classroom operations that students have come to depend on or expect. My goal of developing students' reflective mindsets should be infused within my day-to-day classroom practice, informing even the most seemingly mundane components of my teaching.

One way I've worked toward infusing my everyday teaching habits with the concept of reflection in mind is to rethink the way I distribute and introduce formal written projects in class. In the past, I would hand out an assignment and read it aloud to students. The sheet contained a description of the context and purpose of the assignment, along with the formal requirements or expectations and a sense of how the project would be assessed. Most of the time I would include a reflective component in the grading rubric, either as something that would be assessed in the essay itself (in the case of narrative writing) or as an additional document (such as an author's memo submitted in addition to the essay). But it did not fully occur to me until recently that the way I was delivering assignments could itself be limiting students' ability to engage in ways that would be most meaningful to them. Narrating clear directions for assigned tasks has a potential, as Gesa Kirsch has suggested, to "reinforce many students' beliefs that writing tasks can be solved by following a 'right' formula" (81). So while the practice of distributing and reading assignment prompts to students seems rather ordinary and harmless on the surface, I realized that it may not be entirely conducive to promoting deep and authentic reflection.

It may be more productive to have students make sense of what they are asked to do on their own, before it is communicated to them in their instructor's voice. In this piece, I describe a classroom practice in which students read, interpreted, and wrote informally about the assignment prompts they received in their required first-year writing courses. I gave students intentional space to reflect on the task they were asked to complete on their own—apart from my influence. I hoped this space would encourage students to estimate and articulate the value of the assignment and how it related to other kinds of writing and thinking they

had performed or may perform in the future. Giving students the opportunity to read and interpret assignment prompts before they start composing, I found, may work toward promoting what Gwen Gorzelsky et al. have termed “constructive metacognition,” as it encourages student interaction with and use of rhetorical concepts, and to see how those concepts are linked across writing contexts. It also aligns with recent frameworks for conceptualizing learning transfer, such as the “detect–elect–connect” model described by transfer researchers David N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon, as it gives students a chance to detect initial links between the current task they face and other writing situations.

Promoting Reflection through Interpretive Writing about Assignment Prompts

In “From Incomes to Outcomes: FYW Students’ Prior Genre Knowledge, Meta-Cognition, and the Question of Transfer,” Angela Rounsaville et al. suggest that it may be beneficial for students to anticipate what they believe they will learn or gain from completing an assigned task, before they actually start to compose the project itself: “It would be well worth the time,” they state, “for teachers to ask students to reflect on what they perceive the assignment is asking them to do, what the assignment is reminding them of, and what prior resources they might be able to draw on or need to adapt in order to complete the assignment” (108). Following from this recommendation, the pedagogical activity I describe here aimed to give students a chance to interpret assignment instructions on their own terms, to consider the options they had, and to articulate previously learned strategies that would aid them in completing the assignment. By defamiliarizing students’ experiences with receiving assignment prompts, I hoped to provide a space for authentic metacognitive reflection.

This activity was designed and implemented within a specific context and with a particular student population in mind. I currently teach at a small regional university in western Pennsylvania offering both bachelor’s and associate’s degrees, mostly in STEM-related fields. We are a 100 percent commuter campus with an enrollment that is predominantly working-class and first-generation college students, many of whom face challenges in adjusting to the expectations and conventions of the academy. Many question the purpose of learning styles of writing that feel far removed from the discourses and communicative practices that “worked” for them in high school, at home with their families, and among other communities of which they are a part. The activity described below is especially suited for this student demographic, as it’s designed to both revise their expectations about “how school works” and to facilitate an initial encounter with key rhetorical concepts, allowing them to write about those concepts in a language that make sense to them.

Students wrote informally in response to sets of questions at five different points throughout the semester. They filled out a “writing experiences survey” at the beginning of the semester, which asked them about their prior experiences with writing in school, as well as four reflective surveys following the distribution

of each assignment prompt and rubric. The writing experiences survey was designed to prompt students' recollection of the kinds of writing they had been asked to do in high school, about the written directions and instructions that accompanied those assignments, and how they remembered making use of those instructions.

Then, for each of the four major writing projects assigned in the course, I gave students a prompt and grading rubric. Following the distribution of these documents, students were given ten minutes to read the prompt silently. They were encouraged to write on the prompt and rubric, to mark the specific terms, concepts, or sentences that stood out as the most important, or that reminded them of something from a previous assignment, or as requirements on which they would need clarification. After they had read and marked the prompt, I distributed a set of questions that were intended to guide student reflection and interpretation of the assignment guidelines. The questions asked students to articulate how they were understanding and making sense of what they had read in the prompt, how they believed it related to previous writing assignments they had completed, and what they believed they would learn or gain through completing the project. Specifically, students wrote in response to the following questions:

1. *Read and Interpret:* Using your own words, describe what you believe this assignment prompt is asking you to do.
2. *Reflect:* Look through what you marked on the assignment sheet. What words or phrases stand out to you as important? Why do you think these words or phrases are important?
3. *Looking Back:* What past writing experiences have prepared you to complete this project successfully? What concepts or skills have you learned that will be useful as you compose this assignment?
4. *Looking Forward:* What knowledge, strategies, or skills do you think this assignment will help you develop? How do you think they might be valuable or useful in future writing situations?

I asked them to write in response to these questions for ten minutes, and I collected their writing when this time was up and read it by the next class period. My sense was that this informal and interpretive writing would be valuable not only to my students, but also for me as the instructor. It allowed students to dwell on and make sense of what I was asking them to do, and to detect links across past, present, and future writing situations. Additionally, I was able to use their reflections to come to a better sense of what they understood and what they overlooked, which allowed me to emphasize key features of the assignment in class that some struggled to articulate. Their writing, in other words, provided useful insight into how students were conceiving of the task apart from my influence.

Outcomes

When I say *outcomes*, I mean what I noticed in my students' informal writing and the reflective work this writing suggested to me. By and large, I did notice that students were actively looking for connections across assignments in a sequence;

this leads me to believe that there may be some value in giving students space to interpret assignment prompts. I've categorized some of the themes that emerged from my reading of student reflections below, focusing on their answers to the second, third, and fourth questions of the assignment prompt surveys.

Outcome 1: Students paid attention to key rhetorical concepts as they read assignment directions. The second question asked students to identify important words, phrases, or sentences that stood out as significant to them. In asking this question, I was curious to see what specific

parts of the prompt the students would pay attention to. I assumed that students would gravitate toward the surface-level details of the assignment; however, this was not the case. By and large they tended to take note of concepts that are valued in writing studies scholarship over more superficial features, such as those pertaining to page length, format, or due date. They transcribed words such as *analysis*, *evidence*, *support your opinion*, *audience*, *context*, and *argument*. This was encouraging to me, as it indicated that students were either already familiar with these concepts, or that they were able to sense their importance in the context of our class.

Outcome 2: Students gradually used those concepts to make connections to previous assignments. The third question asked students to write about previous writing experiences that have prepared them to complete the present task. Student responses to this question got increasingly specific. While their reflections on the first assignment were less detailed, they incorporated more exact terminology, concepts, and ideas as the semester progressed. For instance, one student's first response was, "The papers I wrote in high school have prepared me for this assignment," and by the final project he wrote about how previous assignments had helped him learn how to "find and cite reliable sources to make a persuasive argument." Responses such as these suggested to me that students were actively recalling key concepts from prior assignments in class, and that the informal reflective writing offered an occasion to think through how and why those principles would be helpful in composing the project. The reflective space provided seemed to work to promote what Gorzelsky and her colleagues have termed "constructive metacognition," which they describe as "reflection across writing tasks and contexts, using rhetorical concepts to explain choices and evaluations to construct a writerly identity" (233). I noticed students creating "writerly identities," as their reflections increasingly depended on ideas and constructs valued in writing studies scholarship. It's not clear whether they would have come to those conclusions without the opportunity to reflect on and interpret the task before they started composing the project itself.

Outcome 3: Students acknowledged that those concepts would be advantageous for future writing contexts. The fourth question asked students to interpret the purpose or value of the assignment, to predict what they might learn through the process

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of completing the project that would be useful for them in future writing situations. In response to this question, students generally identified practices related to higher-order thinking and the rhetorical skills and knowledge valued in writing studies. Several students described the value of learning how to present evidence effectively when composing arguments, as suggested by one student's assertion that her researched argument project would give her "practice in using studies, research, and other evidence to build a strong argument." Others noted that the rhetorical analysis assignment would help them become better readers, or, as one student put it, "to learn to think about what I read in a careful and critical way." And some made

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comments that evidenced that they believed the assignments would help them learn more about the kinds of reading, writing, and thinking valued by the university, evidenced by comments such as, "This assignment will help my ability to read and understand academic journals, which will be helpful for the annotated bibliography I have to write for psych," and "It will help us understand why we're asked to do the writing we do in college." On more than one occasion, students

noted that the essays they were asked to compose would help them develop independent thinking skills. One student, for example, emphasized how an assignment would encourage her "to think about something in [her] own way." I read such statements as indication that writers approached the prompt mindfully, that they were actively looking for practices and principles they might abstract from FYC to repurpose in new contexts.

Giving students the opportunity to read and interpret assignment directions before they start composing promotes the kinds of practices that are espoused by theories of transfer and metacognition, from both within and from outside the field. It aligns, for instance, with the "detect-elect-connect" model of transfer recently proposed by David N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon, which identifies three mental bridges necessary for positive learning transfer to occur. As Perkins and Salomon describe, learners first need to "detect," or discern the possibility of a connection between two dissimilar concepts or contexts; they need to "elect," or be motivated to pursue the connection, and they need to "connect," or actively undertake the work of filling in a gap between the two things (250). While *connection* is the mental bridge that makes transfer most visible, the concept of *detection* and the labor of preliminary uncovering that it implies should not be overlooked; without it, learners are less likely to connect what they've learned across contexts. Therefore, I see reflective writing about assignment prompts as providing students with an initial opportunity to perceive possible connections, which may prime them for making those connections explicit as they draft and revise their writing.

Additional Observations and Recommendations

Overall, I was encouraged by what I saw in the interpretive reflections students composed. It seemed to me that allowing the students space to read and make sense of the tasks I gave helped enliven the reflective mindsets that are characteristic of effective learners. Students seemed to develop increased familiarity with key rhetorical concepts, and many of them employed those concepts effectively in their responses. Further, I saw them working to articulate through-lines across past, present, and future writing contexts as the semester progressed, which suggested mindsets oriented toward transfer.

I did observe a couple of trends that help me think through how I might revise this activity in the future. Several students, I noticed, did not stray far from the language provided on the assignment prompt, even though I asked them to compose their reflections using their own words. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this happened especially in response to the rhetorical analysis assignment, which asked students to identify the rhetorical features of a given text. As a result, it wasn't always clear to me whether they would have used rhetorical concepts if these hadn't been suggested to them in the assignment prompt. For instance, one of the goals on the prompt stated: "This assignment is designed to help you better understand how writing is situated within a context." In the reflections composed for this prompt, many referred specifically to the word *context*, though with varying degrees of sophistication. At times, students transcribed sentences from the prompt almost word for word in their reflection. It seemed that these individuals had treated the activity as a word search puzzle, simply skimming the prompt for the answers they believed I was looking for.

This raised some red flags for me, at least initially: if students are reluctant to stray from the language provided on the prompt, I thought, surely the activity has failed. After all, how could I possibly be sure that students have engaged in authentic metacognitive reflection if the ideas they are "reflecting" are mine, and not their own? The more I thought about this, two realizations emerged: for one, I saw that more could be done to push students toward articulating the concepts in their own terms, perhaps through additional scaffolding prior to the distribution of the prompts in class. But also, I acknowledged that one of the central goals of the activity was to help students *detect* key rhetorical concepts—to facilitate an initial encounter—and in this respect, I couldn't say that the activity was altogether unsuccessful. Perhaps in this case, it's better to understand metacognition not as a singular, observable trait but more of a slow and nonlinear practice. From this perspective, the very act of identifying an important concept might prepare students for further engagement with and clarification of that concept.

Sometimes, too, students referred to rhetorical concepts that were not used in the assignment guidelines; and when this happened, it was often hard to tell if they really understood those concepts or if they included them because they had seen or heard them elsewhere—perhaps in previous school writing contexts. For instance, one student wrote about how they would use logos, ethos, and pathos to

compose an effective argument, even though those terms were not on the assignment prompt and had not been mentioned in class. This makes me think that many of the concepts I want my students to use and understand are not new to them; they are familiar with the rhetorical terminology that often characterizes the scope and focus of college writing pedagogy.

Finally, many students made reference to “following steps” in their reflections: “You’ve given us a great checklist to follow,” one student wrote, “so it will be easy for me to write the paper.” The supposition that the assignment directions that I provided would make the project “easy” was a recurring theme in the responses, suggested by comments such as “you just want us to hit all the bullet points on the sheet,” and “we need to just follow the steps slowly, including all tasks.” These kinds of comments seem to align with observations that students tend to view assignment prompts as formulas to be followed exactly, instead of as invitations to generate and explore new ideas. As Jennie Nelson notes, when students approach assignments as a strict blueprint, or as the “authoritative text” of the classroom with one correct interpretation and response, students may not seriously consider the options and agency they have as writers (413).

Based on these observations, I will probably change a couple of things when I try this activity in the future. These adjustments come out of my recognition that some students appeared reluctant to stray far from the language I had provided them on each assignment sheet.

- > First, I will try having students compose the reflections in groups of two or three, to encourage some discussion of the prompt and collaborative meaning making. This would give students a chance to collectively assess the purpose and value of the assignment with the help of others. Students may feel more comfortable trying to articulate concepts using their own words if they can first think through those concepts with others.
- > Additionally, I might add questions to the assignment prompt surveys that ask students to identify what’s already familiar and what’s new to them about the prompt they read. I would be interested to see where students’ familiarity with rhetorical concepts is coming from, and how they have come to define and understand those concepts as a result. Asking students to identify “what’s old” and “what’s new” might encourage them to recognize that they do bring prior experiences to the assignment, but also to specify how the upcoming project will develop their knowledge further.
- > Lastly, I will probably customize the set of questions I give to students based on the individual assignment. When I tried this practice initially, I wanted to keep the questions the same across the assignments in order to keep better track of what changed in their reflections across all four projects. Now, however, I think it might be more pedagogically salient to ask different and more specific questions based on what the assignment is asking them to do. So, for instance, the questions I ask for a rhetorical analysis assignment might focus more on the kind of contextual awareness that assignment is designed to promote.

It can be difficult to promote reflective mindsets in any required college writing classroom, and perhaps especially with student populations that appear to be more concerned with job preparation than with learning and intellectual growth. But while we can't guarantee that students will be transformed by the reflective writing we assign, we can look for opportunities to disrupt classroom norms that students have come to expect in an effort to jostle our students and ourselves out of familiar classroom routines. I've found that working disruptions into my day-to-day teaching practices, such as the reflective activity described here, communicates something to students that my words alone cannot. This activity in particular can catch students off guard to open up a new kind of reflective space, one that invites writers to approach what I ask them to do on their own terms and in light of their own experience.

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