Teaching Close Reading Skills in a Large Lecture Course

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ABSTRACT

Close reading is a very detailed analysis of a text, which includes commentary on such formal features as meter, theme, imagery, figurative language, rhetorical strategies, tone, and diction. It is a skill necessary to the serious engagement with literature of all periods and central to students’ intellectual development, regardless of their major. This poster presents strategies for giving students in a large (120 students) British literature survey course significant opportunities to practice close reading—in ways that do not create an overwhelming burden for the instructors.

Repeated Practice Advances Close Reading Skills

In lecture
- Lecturer demonstrated close reading skills
- Students participated orally in close reading exercises in whole-class and small groups

In discussion sections
- GSIs demonstrated close reading skills
- Students participated in close reading exercises in whole-class and small groups

Out of class
- Students took three online essay quizzes to practice close reading skills
- Students regularly wrote objective quiz questions, which encouraged them to review and synthesize material
- Students wrote weekly posts on CTools Forum, raising questions and ideas that would be explored in discussion sections

Selected References

1. Elbow, Peter, and Mary Donne Saraceni. “Using High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Writing to Enhance Learning.” In McKenich and Swinarski: McKenich’s Teaching Tips, 213-34.

KEY QUESTIONS

1. Does repeated practice develop students’ close reading skills?
2. From an instructional perspective, can additional writing be assigned without a commensurate increase in grading time?

Close Reading Rubric

Progress in close reading was assessed through three on-line close-reading quizzes that were graded electronically using a 6-point rubric (Figure 1) and brief GSI comments. The close reading grading rubric enabled instructors to diagnose quickly students’ different skill levels and to give relevant feedback to students individually and as a group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Marked by analytical originality and specificity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pays excellent attention to details and nuances of formal features</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Demonstrates evidence for cogent conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Shows awareness of layers of meaning and tensions among formal features of language</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Offers good if not fully developed analysis of details and nuances of language</td>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Non-responsive to the question (e.g., a fragment or an unrelated original poem)</td>
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Close Reading Quiz Comparison

A comparison of quiz performance over the course of the semester demonstrates clear improvement in students’ close reading skills (Figure 2).

- **First quiz:** 57% of students were working at the 1 level. Their responses were often plot summaries or vague and impressionistic observations.
- **Second quiz:** Only 23% of students remained at the 1 level. 46% earned 2s by including analytical elements in their responses. The remaining 30%—over twice the number for the first quiz—incorporated good analysis and evidence, earning scores of 3 or above.
- **Third quiz:** 22% of students remained at the 1 level and 38% at the 2 level. Definite improvement was seen in the number of students who made clear arguments supported by detailed textual analysis, with 39% earning a 3 or above.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

- Repeated practice develops students’ close reading skills.
- The course was writing intensive, not grading intensive.
- Without requiring a great deal of written feedback, students’ performance on quizzes served an important diagnostic function, revealing to the entire instructional team both the general level of skill and the range of skills within the class.
- The close reading rubric is a useful tool for giving undergraduates clear signposts about their developing skills and areas that could use improvement.

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