

Assessing Core Outcomes: Critical Thinking in Developmental Education

Follow Up Report: June 22, 2010

Specifically: Reading 115 Book Review Rubric

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SAC: Developmental Education

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Plan for Assessing “Critical Thinking” in Reading 115 Classes

Background:

I took the class “Assessing PCC’s Core Outcomes” during the Winter 2010 term, and I had to create an assessment tool. I decided that it would be very useful to create a rubric for an assignment I give to my Reading 115 classes. I have been assigning a book review project for many years in that class. My main purpose is to get students to read a book they might enjoy, but I also want them to think about it and communicate their thoughts to me. I have been grading papers holistically and on a curve, with the best papers earning As and the worst papers earning C-s. Some students produce beautifully written essays. However, far too many students write papers lacking in several areas. Writing a rubric to evaluate these papers forced me to think about what I really want students to be able to do. Ultimately, I hope that it will help them to think and write critically about their reading. Sylvia Gray, the Chair of PCC’s Learning Assessment Council, suggested that if other instructors were to use the rubric, it could serve as the DESAC’s contribution to the College’s district-wide assessment mandate.

Reading Assignment:

Some Reading 115 instructors ask students to do an outside reading project or two in addition to the class textbook. Students may either be assigned a particular book, or may choose their own from a list. In either case, students are asked to write a book review. Students must summarize their books and write critiques (see assignments). In order to do this, certain facets of critical thinking must be demonstrated. These may include, but are not limited to:

1. Differentiating important details from less important ones
2. Relating themes, characters, settings, etc., to the student’s own life experiences and connecting them to global themes

Book Review Evaluation

Turn this in stapled to your book review.

Grade Summary

A+ The story's central idea/theme and major details are fully conveyed. Original title of book and name of author included within summary.

A to B+ Summary contains storyline with plot, characters, conflict, setting, etc. Original title of book and author's name included in summary.

B to C+ "Rewrote" the book with too much detail

C to C- unable to differentiate major from minor details; OR, summary is missing key information.

D or/NP Sketchy, vague; no actual plot events or characters mentioned.

Critique

Makes statement relating the significance of the book to the world as well as self in a mature, thoughtful way. Comments on recommending the book (or not) are done in such a way that is implied or inherent, rather than explicit.

Comments on how book relates to self or others. Refers back to text for support. Comments make the paper feel finished. Recommendation given.

Has basic recommendation/evaluation, but contains little support from book for ideas.

May feel unfinished or limited. States whether the book was enjoyed or not. Recommends book to a certain kind of person or to people in general. May be repetitive.

Little or no discussion on the quality of the book or the reading experience. Comments may be trite, overly brief, or not there at all.

Mechanics

Very few writing errors, if any. Uses varied sentence structure with interesting, original language.

Few writing errors, but word choice is limited. Sentence structure is not varied.

Many errors in grammar, sentence structure, word choice, and spelling that distract the reader's rhythm.

May use slang or be overly chatty. Sentence errors are distracting.

Many writing errors in grammar, sentence structure, word choice, making it difficult to understand. Errors interfere with reading paper.

Format

Thoughtful, catchy title; well-developed and transitioned paragraphs making up 1-2 pages balanced with 2/3 summary and 1/3 critique; Word processed.

All of the above with balanced, well-transitioned paragraphs that could have been developed more. Is long enough, but not too long.

Is long enough – not too long or short – but may have some imbalance to paragraphs or ratio of summary to critique.

2 pages of fairly disjointed paragraphs or a distracting imbalance in ratio of summary to critique.

Less than 2 pages, or more than 3 pages; no clear paragraph differentiation or organization; May or may not be word processed.

3. Understanding and communicating the theme/central point of the book and reflecting on how the book addresses that theme
4. Developing a “catchy title” that is a reflection of the reviewer’s attitude toward the book
5. Making thoughtful, mature comments on the book as well as the language or style of the book

Assessment:

Using a rubric developed by me for the “Assessing PCC’s Core Outcomes” class, two other instructors and I modified the rubric to evaluate student book reviews. We assigned similar projects to students. Two more instructors also decided to participate. As of April 14, all of us have assigned the book project and distributed the rubric. We have gone over the rubric with students so they know how to make their reviews good ones. We plan to have students read some book reviews so they will be familiar with them. The due dates for the reviews vary.

The Finale:

After we have collected book reviews from students, we will use the rubric to determine grades. We will each collect a few examples of student work. In May, we will get together to discuss, among other things:

1. Are we all using the rubric the same way?
2. Have we “calibrated ourselves to the rubric?”
3. How did students do on the assignment?
4. Does the rubric need to be changed?
5. Does the rubric actually evaluate what we intended it to evaluate?
6. What could we do in class to help students do better on the review? Do we want to use our time that way?

My hope is that this process will lead to a better project, a better evaluation of the project, and ultimately, better book reviews by students.

The Book Review Assessment Team is composed of these members:

Valerie Ambrose, Monica Christofili, Susan Larson, and me. --Submitted by Lisa Rosenthal

Completion:

The Book Review Assessment Team (BRATs) met to discuss the book review developed this past winter. The three of us were not impressed by the book reviews submitted by students during spring term, even though they had received what we believed to be sufficient instruction on the rubric and on book reviews in general. We discussed how we would like to change the book review rubric, and modifications have begun to be made (thanks to Monica!). We felt that the rubric was too demanding for the typical Reading 115 student, and that a paper could still earn an A without the most demanding requirements made on the original rubric.

We also discussed the differences to our approaches to the book review itself. We may want to focus less on the writing part of the assignment in general and focus more on the reading of a book, understanding the book, and relating the book to a student's life. We even discussed the possibility of changing the assignment entirely, and instead of writing a book review that includes a summary and a critique, we might decide to ask for a summary/response, a reading journal, or a summary/connection assignment instead.

We all agreed that using a rubric for grading was a positive experience. However, given the generally mediocre book reviews of students, we did not agree to use the rubric for our next Reading 115 book assignments. Students clearly need to work on their summary writing skills, although some did better than others, but the critique portion of the assignment, with the demands of the rubric, is perhaps outside the realm of the Reading 115 classroom, and it may not serve the purpose of having students interact with a book on a personal level. Since we know that summary/response writing is a component of many Writing 115 classes (and possibly, Writing 121 as well), it might be better to have students gain some experience with a different kind of writing as it pertains to reading a novel, biography, or memoir. Alternatively, we could further modify the rubric to make the critique portion less formal and more about the student making some kind of connection to a text.

---Respectfully submitted by Lisa Rosenthal