



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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INVOCATION AND EVOCATION: SUPPORTING TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

“Deo gratias—thanks be to God—is felt as a response of relief at the end of a long Bible reading which takes place in the middle of the night” (emphasis added).

This tangible image from Illich’s commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon is drawn from a passage that discusses the way in which young novices in monasteries learned the meaning of Latin terms through literal responses to the environment. The monastic environment also lends a helpful context for the discussion that is to follow. The central notions of (1) an authority that is held in common by a group of otherwise disparate people—the invocation—and (2) an individual reaction or response to that authority—the evocation—informed my use of an assessment tool that turned out to offer more than I expected to my teaching and learning environment. Within my courses, I have turned to short writing assignments to give students a further voice for engagement with the content of the course.

Assignment Requirements

These short writing assignments have two parts. The first part of the assignment is a summary. This is the invocation portion because the goal here is for the student to outline the key points of the discussion. The second part of the assignment is a personal response. As evocation, it is a discussion of the responses that were evoked in the student as a result of the content. In the standard version of the assignment, both the summary and the response are related to the in-class discussion and the presentation of the course content.

In a moment of shocking unimagination, I decided to call these assignments “Summary and Response Pieces.” Apart from the structural components, this assignment has a number of logistical specifications that must be met. First, there must be a balance between the summary portion and the response portion. The stan-

dard version of the assignment requires that each portion is roughly the same length (i.e., 50% summary and 50% response). Second, there are overall length parameters for the assignment. This decision is subject to some variables, such as class size and the nature of the course content; however, the typical parameters are between one and three typed, double-spaced pages. Third, and this is important for many of the pedagogical benefits of the assignment that will be discussed later, the pieces summarizing and responding to a given class period are due the following class period.

From an overall course mark perspective, these Summary and Response Pieces are worth 10% of the final grade. For this 10%, students are to submit five of these pieces throughout the semester. The final deadline for submission is the last class of the semester. Students are able, then, to choose five classes over the duration of the semester as the basis for the assignment. An additional requirement that only one Summary and Response Piece will be accepted on a given day further underlines the need for students to plan and manage the submission of the pieces effectively. Many of the classes I teach meet twice a week, so five short writing assignments is not a particularly onerous requirement.

When assessing these pieces, two components are foremost in the evaluation: the accuracy of the summary and the quality of the response is considered. For the response, the question of quality takes into account the apparent level of thought put into the response, the logic of the response (i.e., not a stream of consciousness), and whether there are innovations or additions that demonstrate an integration of the course content into a broader perspective. Also, my assessment includes questions of writing style, grammar, and usage.

In classes where the Summary and Response Pieces are used as part of the evaluation, the assignment is introduced on the first day of class, and a list of the specifications and expectations is included in the course information package.

Pedagogical Benefits

These short writing assignments provide a wide array of pedagogical benefits. Many of the benefits are



derived from the short deadline that is imposed on the submissions. In general, the assignment provides near-instantaneous feedback on student comprehension of the material and on the delivery of the material. As the short writing assignments are handed directly to the professor, students are given a voice to “speak” and are remarkably frank. In addition to getting to know the students more directly, these assignments provide an opportunity to affirm students’ knowledge and comprehension of the subject matter. It provides an avenue to draw quiet students into the class discussion through spoken praise and encouragement. Moreover, parts of the course material that have been misunderstood or not seen as important to the student can be reviewed, augmented, or re-presented within a week. No student is singled out because I am simply “going back to last week’s topic to clarify a few points.”

Finally, I gain valuable feedback on my delivery of material before it is too late. In the response section, students, without prompting, provide comments on the delivery of the material. Comments have included:

- too much/too little time on a concept,
- too many/too few examples,
- not enough visuals,
- unrelated or “campy” support materials, and
- use of difficult diction.

Students respond to aspects of the delivery that enhance their understanding—e.g., “the graphic really helped me get the idea.” Also, as a result of these Summary and Response Pieces, I am more experimental with my delivery methods because the experiment gives the students something to write about; and I can gauge, anecdotally, the success or failure of the idea.

Useful Adaptations

Throughout the discussion of the Assignment Requirements, the focus is on the “standard version” of the Summary and Response Pieces. These writing assignments are adaptable in a variety of ways. At the simplest end of the spectrum is the length of the pieces and the frequency of submission. The weight of the pieces in the calculation of the final grade can be changed. Personally, 10% has become optimal. Also, depending on the course and the requirements that are set, a best x out of y situation (e.g., the best five submissions out of seven submissions will count for the final grade) can help students get started with the assignment without risking too much.

Approaching the more complex end of the spectrum of adaptation, specifications can be added for the summary as well as the response portion of the assignment. In some instances, it has been a requirement that the Summary and Response Pieces be based on a journal or

periodical article related to the course material. In this case, for more junior classes, a list of acceptable periodical or journal titles has been provided. Other possible adaptations might include:

- requiring a certain number of secondary sources in the response,
- for heavily theoretical courses, including a practical example of the topic, or
- requiring a summary and response of an assigned course reading prior to the discussion of the topic in class.

In some ways, the options for adaptations are limitless. Experience suggests that the most successful implementation of these short writing assignments involves some flexibility that is built in from the beginning.

Conclusion

Finding the optimal balance for these Summary and Response Pieces for different courses takes some work and fine tuning. Occasionally, concessions have to be made in order to manage the marking of the submissions. This is most notable in knowledge courses, courses where the goal is to amass and apply knowledge, rather than to learn, practise, and hone skills. In these instances, I have moved to a more binary evaluation approach, with marks for submission rather than content. This shift has very seldom been troubling because of the benefits of these short writing pieces: connection and interaction with the students as individuals, responsive delivery of course material, and thoughtful and thought-provoking nature of the submissions.

More importantly, when given this avenue of more direct communication with the professor, the students almost always provide a response that is evocative of the level of their intellectual and emotional involvement with the course content and delivery. In fact, this more complete engagement with the content and delivery of the course gives the students the opportunity of invocation. The professor’s reaction, the evocation, is “felt as a response of relief” when the shared teaching and learning environment of the course proves to be successful.

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