TEACHING EFFECTIVE SUMMARY-WRITING: A REFLECTION ON THE EFFICACY OF SCAFFOLDING

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ABSTRACT

First-year college students often struggle with summary writing, especially when summarizing a text that is lengthy or complex. Some students, for example, see summarizing as an activity where "excessive copying" is permitted, putting them at risk for plagiarism (Yoshimura, 2018, p. 2). Other students struggle with summaries because they are not effective at picking out the main ideas in a text (Spirgal & Delaney, 2016). As Frey et al. (2003) note, being able to accurately and efficiently restate another author's thesis is a necessary skill for research papers and academic writing. Based on Kolb's experiential learning theory, which posits a four-stage learning cycle consisting of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract concepts, and active experimentation (Kolb et al., 1999), I incorporated scaffolding techniques into my pedagogical approach to summaries. To improve students' comprehension of the document's main points, I asked them to organize it into clusters of paragraphs that focused on the same topic for the same audience. When students finished "clustering" the 30 paragraphs in the court document that we were analyzing (Oregon v. Kinkel, 2002), the essential information came into sharp focus, which enabled them to create summaries that accurately reflected the main points and disregard non-essential information.

Keywords: summarizing, scaffolding, reflective practitioner, pedagogy, rhetorical analysis, first-year composition, college writing

English Composition I (ENG-105) is the first of two college-writing courses required of most Grand Canyon University's (GCU) incoming freshmen. I have taught different versions of ENG-105 in online and traditional classrooms for more than 11 years. The course's primary learning outcomes are to have students understand writing as a recursive process and that different essay genres have different requirements. According to first year composition guidelines set by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (2019), by the end of the first year of college composition classes, students should be able to

- Learn and use key rhetorical concepts through analyzing and composing a variety of texts;
- Gain experience reading and composing in several genres to understand how genre conventions shape and are shaped by readers' and writers' practices and purposes;
- Develop facility in responding to various situations and contexts, calling for purposeful shifts in voice, tone, level of formality, design, medium, and/or structure. (para. 7)

GCU's English faculty incorporated these learning outcomes in the design of both first-year composition courses. They were initially developed and assessed in the students' first assignment in Composition I, the rhetorical analysis essay.

In the sections of ENG-105 that I recently taught, the students learned how to perform a

rhetorical analysis of this public document: State of Oregon v. Kipland Philip Kinkel (2002). This document summarizes the decision of Oregon's Appeals Court to deny Kinkel's motion to reduce the sentence he received four years earlier for a "shooting rampage…[that was] among the most horrific in Oregon's history" (para. 28). On May 20, 1998, Kinkel, a 15-year-old student at Thurston High School, murdered his parents. The next morning, he shot into the cafeteria in his school, killing two classmates and wounding 26 others before being apprehended. At the sentencing hearing, psychologists testified that Kinkel was a paranoid schizophrenic who went off his medication and became obsessed with guns. He was sentenced to 111 years and eight months in a maximum-security prison.

The report that summarizes the Oregon Appeals Court's decision to uphold the U.S. Circuit Court's sentence and deny Kinkel's appeal is formidable in several ways. The document is lengthy, containing 4,752 words in 30 paragraphs across nine single-spaced pages. The document must convey an enormous amount of information about the crimes, the sentencing trial, Kinkel's mental disorder, and the justification for the denial of his appeal. Written by Presiding Judge Haselton, the document contains legal jargon, scrutinizes related cases, and analyzes relevant sections of the Oregon Constitution. Oregon v. Kinkel (2002) also incorporates numerous examples of Haselton's use of rhetorical appeals, which the students must identify and analyze.

Due to the complexity of the document, I was concerned that first-year students might find it too dense and difficult to understand. At a 2016 presentation at the annual conference of the Two-Year Community Colleges Association entitled "Rhetoric Together: Diverse Student Experiences of Analysis," my co-presenter and I discussed the following theories of rhetorical analysis: modernization theory, MAPS (medium, audience, purpose, and situation), and the rhetorical triangle. At the end, we polled our audience to get their opinion on whether Oregon v. Kinkel was an appropriate document for first-year students to analyze. The strong consensus from the faculty present was, "They are college students now; they should be able to understand this document." Armed with that affirmation for the reading, I decided to concentrate on teaching students how to improve their skills in writing an effective summary. My general approach to this summary activity has been through Kolb's experiential learning theory, which posits a four-stage learning cycle through concrete experience (CE) leading to reflective observation (RO) (Kolb et al., 1999). This reflection then transforms into abstract concepts (AC), resulting in "implications," which we can then engage within active experimentation (AE) (Kolb et al., 1999). In this case, the CE was that the students struggled with the summary aspect of a writing assignment. Through reflective observation of their performance over a few semesters, I realized that this struggle impacted not just the students' actual summaries but their overall understanding of the challenging text and their resulting ability to write about it with fluidity and nuance. Consequently, I decided to engage in active experimentation to see what could be done to break this assignment down and scaffold it for my students to increase their understanding of the text and improve their ability to write about it.

Additionally, I approached this problem through the lens of Schon's theory of reflection on action, wherein the practitioner (the instructor in this case) reflects on the process after it has occurred and considers what could have been done differently (Schon, 1984). The aim was to be a reflective instructor by applying "critical reflection," Larrivee's (2000) term for merging critical thinking and self-reflection. Using these two models to reflect upon and recalibrate my pedagogy allowed me to provide my students with a greater comprehension of the reading, which is an essential skill for academics and life.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

As noted above, I approached the teaching of this court document with caution. Although students consistently do a first-rate job of identifying and analyzing Haselton's effective use of rhetorical appeals, they struggle with the summary component of the writing assignment, albeit for understandable reasons. It is not easy to summarize a nine-page court document in a paragraph of 150-200 words. Students often devote too much time to describing in detail the crimes and Kinkel's mental state and not enough attention to identifying the grounds

for Kinkel's appeal and Haselton's reasons for denying it. Recognizing this, I set out to adjust my pedagogical approach to this assignment. Teaching students to summarize effectively would benefit them not just on this assignment but also in many other ways. Summary is an important educational skill in academic writing and one that presents challenges. As Frey et al. (2003) note, being able to restate another author's thesis accurately and efficiently is the foundation for research papers and academic writing. Yet, some students see summarizing as an activity where "excessive copying" is permitted, putting them at risk for plagiarism (Yoshimura, 2018, p. 2). Other students struggle with summaries because they are not effective at picking out the main ideas in a text (Spirgal & Delaney, 2016).

College instructors may take for granted that their students come in with the skills to summarize a text adequately, but this is not always the case. In previous semesters, I had been frustrated with the ineffective summaries that I had encountered on this assignment. I decided to take a step back from this assignment and see how I could better facilitate strong summaries among my students. Larrivee (2000) notes that reflective instructors should "move beyond a knowledge base of discrete skills to a stage where they integrate and modify skills to fit specific contexts, and eventually, to a point where the skills are internalized enabling them to invent new strategies" (p. 294).

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

The instructions for the assignment titled, "Rhetorical Analysis of a Public Document," asks students to include a summary of the document that does not exceed a paragraph (see Appendix). Recognizing that I needed another way to approach the summary section with students, I reflected on the roadblocks listed above and some possible approaches to addressing them. I made the first adjustments to my pedagogical approach to this assignment in the fall of 2019. I decided to allow students to outline, draft, and revise their summaries in class. I asked them to number the paragraphs in the court document from 1-30, so everyone could quickly find the passage being discussed, and I asked them to bring paper copies of the document to class so that they could annotate as we analyzed Oregon v. Kinkel (2002) together. I also scheduled a workshop wherein each student would receive two peer reviews of their summaries. This more collaborative approach to working on this summary assignment received positive student feedback, and the discussions with peers allowed students to comprehend sections of the document that they may not have understood or simply overlooked.

Beyond instituting a more collaborative approach, I felt more could be done to increase students' understanding of the document, so in my spring of 2020 section of first-semester composition with 49 students, I instituted a second set of adjustments to my pedagogical approach. First, I asked students to write a one-sentence summary of each of the 30 paragraphs. Then I asked them to group the paragraphs that seemed to be about the same topic into clusters and to label each cluster. For most students, the resulting cluster list looked something like this:

Paragraph(s)	Topic Cluster
1	Appeal of Sentence (Purpose of Document)
2-3	Crimes (May 20-21, 1998)
4-5	Confession, Sentencing Agreement
6-16	Sentencing Hearing Evidence (Medical experts, victims, parents)
17	Circuit Court's Sentence
18	Appellant's Argument (Two Grounds for Appeal)
19-30	Appeals Court's Rebuttal (Justification of Denial of Appeal)

This list clearly shows what the presiding judge's priorities are. To support his rhetorical stance that the U.S. Circuit Court's original sentence was constitutional and just, Haselton has to devote considerable verbiage (paras. 6-16) to the testimony of medical experts, who agree that Kinkel's disease was treatable but not curable, and to the suffering and concerns of Kinkel's victims, who believe he deserved a lengthy sentence and who fear his return to society. To achieve his rhetorical purpose—which is to convince the main audience groups of this document that the Oregon Appeals Court's decision to uphold the original sentence is correct—Haselton must discuss the constitutional and judicial reasons why the appeal was denied (paras. 19-30). Looking at their cluster lists, students could now clearly see what the focus of their summaries should be.

Reflecting on the immediate task of summarizing and the larger context of the rhetorical analysis, I decided to ask students to expand their cluster lists by having them identify the rhetorical purpose of each cluster and the primary audience. (The class had decided that the audience for this court document comprised the legal community, the counseling/psychology community, the victims and their families, and the general public.) The expanded lists were completed in week four, after students had outlined, drafted, and received peer reviews of their summaries. Here is what one student's expanded list looked like:

Paragraph(s)	Topic Cluster	Rhetorical Purpose (principal appeal)	Primary Audience
1	Appeal of Sentence	Identifies rhetorical situation (logos)	All
2-3	Crimes (May 20-21, 1998)	Describes punishable crimes (pathos)	Public
4-5	Confession, Sentencing Agreement	Gives legal justification for first trial (ethos)	Legal Community
6-16	Sentencing Hearing Evidence (Medical experts, victims, parents)	Justifies sentence (pathos)	Psych Community
17	Circuit Court's Sentence	Establishes constitutionality (ethos)	Legal Community
18	Appellant's Argument	Recognizes grounds for appeal (ethos)	Legal Community
19-30	Appeals Court's Rebuttal (Denial of Appeal)	Provides justification of denial (logos)	All

REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

The obvious concern about teaching summaries this way is, would it work? Would this approach enable first-year students in a college composition course to break down a complex text for better understanding? Would it result in concise summary paragraphs, avoid editorializing, and focus on only the most important information? Students have been asked to provide summaries and to pinpoint main ideas in passages in standardized testing for most of their academic careers, so when asked to write a summary paragraph, they often feel fully confident in their abilities to do so successfully, which may or may not be the case. After all, it is unlikely that many first-year composition students have been asked previously to summarize a complex court document of almost 5,000 words. Many students also likely feel somewhat intimidated by a document that describes three different legal proceedings in two different courts, assesses the relevance of legal precedents, and analyzes sections of the Oregon State Constitution.

Another reason for the problem is the continuing decline in reading comprehension. A recent search on Google Scholar for "Decline in Reading Comprehension of College Freshmen," produced 7,200 titles published since 2017. At the end of 2019, The New York Times reported that two out of three primary school students did not meet the standards for reading proficiency set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a test administered by the National Center for Education Statistics, the research arm of the Education Department (Green & Goldstein, 2019). A thorough discussion of the causes and effects of declining literacy is beyond the scope of this paper.

EVALUATION OF REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

In consulting the existing literature to explore the problem students were encountering and to solidify my approach to helping students, I found that a vast amount of energy had been devoted to the problem at hand. Across levels and disciplines, teachers searched for ways to improve students' ability to summarize. Students struggled with this apparent "easy" activity of summarizing a document, which led them not only to submit weak summaries but also to limit their full understanding of the text and their ability to analyze its use of rhetoric. Rather than assume students know how to summarize, instructors must teach students how to do the task step-by-step (Dollins, 2011). Teaching students to summarize more effectively and succinctly is beneficial in several ways. It can help improve their summary-writing skills, avoid inadvertent plagiarism (Yoshimura, 2018), and enhance students' content retention (Spirgel & Delaney, 2016). In fact, in a meta-analysis, Hebert et al. (2013) found that summarizing a passage improved the understanding of a text more than simply asking students questions about the text.

MacKay et al. (2019) suggest that "metalinguistic and higher-order writing skills" are also likely at play when instructors ask students to generate a summary, particularly for those students who have

some difficulty with reading (p. 216). Because all these elements are at play in summarizing, scaffolding was often mentioned in the literature as the key to helping students write effective summaries. Johns and Paz (1997) have found it is important that students first understand the structure of the text they are summarizing, similarly to what I did in breaking down the components of this lengthy and complex court document. They also found that detailed instruction in summary exercises is an appropriate and effective way to help students summarize (Johns & Paz, 1997). The literature abounds with research that supports scaffolded and collaborative instruction in the writing of summaries.

DECISION

The decision to instruct students in summary writing through scaffolding is not new. It is a technique often used with middle and high school writers (Dollins, 2011; Frey et al., 2003). The decision to provide this kind of breakdown for students at the college level may seem unnecessary or even like "handholding" to some. However, the literature and my own classroom experience in this unit greatly support the systematic teaching of writing summaries.

Though I did not formally collect data from students, several students expressed appreciation for being shown a straightforward way of approaching this long, intimidating document. They generally seemed to say that the scaffolded work helped them dissect and understand the document and then write about it with efficacy. In fact, the first time I followed this approach of creating paragraph clusters, I saw an improvement in the quality of the summaries from prior years. The cluster outline clearly identifies the two areas of discussion emphasized in the document above all others: the justification of the original sentence (paras. 6-16) and the grounds for the denial of the appeal (paras. 19-30). Since 21 of the document's 30 paragraphs focus on these topics, students understand that two-thirds of their summaries must reflect that emphasis. The cluster outline also helped many students avoid the trap into which so many previous classes had fallen: the unnecessary recounting of the details of the murders, which are sensational but irrelevant because Kinkel confessed to those crimes. Furthermore, the appeal is not based on his guilt or innocence but rather on the length of his sentence. Aided by their cluster outlines, most students were more readily able to discern the multiple functions and rhetorical appeals of this document, which in turn made their analysis of the document's overall rhetoric that much stronger.

These results were satisfying and suggested that the adjustments to my pedagogical strategy had been beneficial. The improvement is especially promising because most students who take ENG-105 in the spring semester are those from developmental writing course (UNV-100) or those who failed or withdrew from ENG-105 sections in the fall semester. In other words, students who take ENG-105 in the spring are generally not as proficient at reading and writing as those who take it in the fall.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Summary writing is a skill students will need not only to be successful in their coursework but also in their careers, so investing the time to rethink how I approached this assignment with students held great benefit. Often, instructors assume that because students are in college, they have been adequately prepared to approach, understand, and summarize complex writing, but my experience told me this was not generally the case. As a reflective practitioner, I had to go beyond the rote expectations and the "status quo" (Larrivee, 2000) to find a way to strengthen my pedagogy and improve student performance. Asking students to outline and cluster Oregon v. Kinkel (2002) proved to be beneficial.

In future semesters, I might consider formalizing this approach in my teaching by creating additional presentations and documents that would enable students to be even more supported as they approach this work. I would also additionally like to collect some data to support this approach by creating a control class where I let them summarize the document based on whatever skills they have coming in, and then in my other class, I would introduce this scaffolding approach. I would ask a few colleagues to conduct a blind rubric scoring of the summaries to ascertain if those produced using these scaffolding techniques appear stronger to unbiased observers.

I would also like to collect additional information about how the students felt about this approach.

Getting their feedback through a brief survey and perhaps soliciting qualitative comments on the process would also better inform my own thinking about this approach. Having students think through their learning would not only provide information that could inform my pedagogy but also could quite likely increase students' sense of accomplishment and confidence, particularly for those who struggle with writing.

I see this reflection-on-action process as helpful in other areas in the composition classroom. Wherever students struggle with writing tasks, reflection on the struggles, the tasks, and the goals would allow composition instructors to reimagine their approach to teaching documentation style, effective paraphrasing, and logical organization. These tasks could be likely broken down into smaller steps if the teacher were to reflect on student roadblocks and how to move past them to positive outcomes. Rethinking writing tasks into these smaller building blocks could help make first-year composition—a mandatory and often dreaded course for many students—a less intimidating and more beneficial experience, setting them on the path to success in college and beyond.

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