

Courtney Joiner: Faculty Champion Report  
Reflections on Critical Thinking Exercise  
Fall, 2012

In the spring of 2012, I implemented a new exercise in both my HIST 2111 and 2112 courses. It was a document-based paper – a research paper without the research. My goal was to focus on introducing the students to using appropriate primary documents from key historical figures to answer a question. I provided the documents, the question, a rubric for the final paper, a set of guidelines and deadlines, and a set of worksheets to help them through the organizing and writing process. The students split into groups in class to discuss each document, then they discussed the document with the rest of the class. In both my courses, this work went very well. They didn't have too much time to stray from their task, but they had enough time to analyze the document. I moved around the room trying to make sure there weren't a lot of "group moochers," that there was decent collaboration. I was pleased with the efforts taken by the students in all my classes. I performed the same exercise in my courses in the fall of 2013, with some changes that I have indicated below.

We started the worksheets as a class, breaking down the question – what is being asked, the location involved, when is the time period involved, what is already known about this time period, etc. The intent of this is to teach them how to go about answering a question. The rest of the worksheets had to be done by the students on their own, and they involve analyzing each document to see what information can be gleaned from it and used to either support or refute the answer the student wants to argue. The worksheets also help them to organize what outside information they want to use to support their argument, and the sheets help them to write a thesis for the paper, topic sentences for each paragraph, and what documents and information they want to use in each paragraph. The students had to turn in the worksheets for a portion of the overall grade. For the most part, the students did this work well. One class was particularly high-performing all semester, and their worksheets were done very thoroughly; the lowest performing class of the semester had many students who didn't do the work, didn't have the sheets, had done light work, with only a couple who had finish out the worksheets sufficiently to earn full credit for that part of the overall grade. I also had a number of students who had finished the sections of the worksheets analyzing the documents, but they did not go on to the sections requiring them to start grouping their thoughts into paragraphs, and writing a thesis statement and introduction. This was frustrating, knowing as I did how much doing the worksheets would help them with their final paper.

The students were required to turn in a rough draft, and on that day, I walked around to the students as they came in the door, checking that they had a sufficient rough draft. That would mean that it was typed, seemed to be of sufficient length, seemed to be on-topic after a quick scan, etc. The students then had to swap with a classmate to proofread. I passed a sheet around during class for each student to sign their name next to the students whose paper they were proofreading, showing that they accept responsibility for the proofreading. The students received a bit of credit for having the rough draft, and they got some credit when they returned the proofread paper to the writer in the next class

time. I checked with the students quickly about whether or not they had received their paper, and if it appeared to be proofread. A change I implemented this semester based on what I learned in the spring is that the proofread papers were looked at by me before being returned to the students so I can make sure some proofreading had been done. Unfortunately, there were many students who did not have a rough draft at all, and I know that hurt their grade in the long run. I also encouraged the students to take their papers to the AIR Center for further proofreading or to let someone they trust do further proofreading.

Then the students had a deadline to turn in their final papers. I had a couple issues with plagiarism – students who went online to get further information – something they were instructed not to do, and those students received a zero for the assignment. Another change I implemented this semester based on experience was that was a little clearer about them not doing further research. In fact, I told them to write on the top of their worksheets “Do not go to the Internet.” I emphasized that they have all the research they need with the documents, their textbook, their knowledge from the class lectures, etc. I reminded them that one of the main purposes of the entire assignment is to help them learn how to avoid plagiarizing, and I am still considering the possibility of having them write their papers in class. I just am uncertain as to the logistics of all this and am still toying with various possibilities. One new problem is that one of my classes meets three days a week for 50 minutes, not the 75 minutes that a twice-a-week class has for writing.

The overall skill I was hoping the students would develop, however, wasn't so much about the writing process and avoiding plagiarism, although those were huge concepts for them to work on, but I wanted them to focus on how to analyze documents and use them to help the students develop an opinion about a historical event and support their opinion. The collection of documents includes selections that could lead a student in different directions for their thesis. Of course, the high performing students from class and the tests were high performing on the paper as well. They were already using critical thinking skills in class and were willing to put forth the effort it takes to think critically. Some students showed evidence of trying – one or two paragraphs in their paper would reflect some critical thinking while the rest of the paper would fall flat. Some students had a completely flat paper, and of course, some students didn't turn in a paper.

Overall, however, I was excited by the exercise. It needs tweaking, but I could see the students really thinking during the in-class work, and I know many of them continued their thinking outside of class. I believe that as our student body improves, this work will improve as well. As much as any tweaking, I need to work on the timing. The topic of the paper for HIST 2111 was at the beginning of the course, dealing with the development of the colonies, and that worked well. The students could also use the skills introduced for their term paper later in the semester. The topic for the paper in HIST 2112, however, was toward the end of the course, dealing with the reasons behind the bombing of Hiroshima, and that meant they didn't have as much time to use their skills for the term paper. It also made them very pushed toward the end of the semester. It was, on the other hand, a topic that interested them greatly, so that will need to be considered as well. I am still considering changing topics, but the student interest is high for this topic.