Title: Preparing Students to Use Relevant Quotations to Support Claims
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Summary:

My main goal was to enable students to use relevant quotations to support claims about an author’s position on an issue. My main conclusion to date is that significant scaffolding is necessary to enable them to do this well.

Background:

COMS 232: The Rhetorical Tradition is designed to acquaint students with rhetorical theories from classical to contemporary times. This course is required for undergraduates wishing to pursue the rhetoric track of the Communication Studies major. By the conclusion of the course, students should be able to read rhetorical theories and explain how they address major, recurring issues involved in thinking about rhetoric—who gets to practice rhetoric, why, how, in what contexts—and to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. The course enrolls about 15 upper-level students.

The course also fulfills KU Core goal 3 (breadth of knowledge) and Communication Studies Department goal 6 (synthesize major communication theories, appreciating their histories and using them to generate contemporary understandings).

The CHRP project provided an occasion to redesign teaching and assignments to improve students’ ability to use quotations from primary sources to support their claims about an author’s position on major, recurring issues in thinking about rhetoric. Ultimately I want students to be able to explain the major issues in rhetorical theory, identify an author’s position on major issues when they read rhetorical theory or see rhetorical practice, support their claims about what the author’s position is with quotations or other textual evidence, and evaluate strengths and weaknesses of an author’s position.

I had been assessing students' achievement of these goals through three papers on select major figures in the rhetorical tradition, a presentation, and a variety of minor assignments and quizzes. For example, the second paper and presentation involved comparing two rhetoricians’ views on a recurring issue in rhetorical theory.

To prepare students to perform that assignment, my main teaching strategies were: (1) recommend that they answer study questions as they read, because answers to these questions would help them to make sense of difficult reading and collect quotations they could use as evidence in papers; (2) begin class meetings with short quizzes based on the study questions so they would have additional incentive to answer the questions as they read; (3) and using a combination of lectures and group work, use class time to lay out an author’s position on major issues and point to quotations that illustrate what their position is.
Implementation:

My course redesign involved two major changes. First, instead of simply suggesting that students write answers to study questions, I asked students to write answers and hand them in for credit. The rationale for this change was that students would have an incentive to write answers to earn credit and, in doing so, would read, better understand what they were reading, and begin collecting quotations that they would be able to use to support their claims about an author’s position. Second, I changed two of the paper assignments to a debate brief and debate assignment. The rationales for this change were: (1) an oral performance would help students to hear the claim-evidence structure that they may not have been seeing as clearly on paper, (2) they would engage in collaborative learning as they worked in teams to select evidence, and (3) they would have added incentive to make a well-supported case since they would be performing for their colleagues and would be accountable to their debate partners.

Because I anticipated that students would have tried to answer the study questions before class, I typically began classes by asking students what they thought about the questions. We could then begin discussing which were confusing, difficult, simple, and so on. Then students would spend at least one third of the class meeting working with their debate teams to try to identify issues, authors’ positions on the issues, and quotations they could use to support those positions.

For the first of the two debates, students decided which recurring issues in rhetorical theory they wanted to debate. They formed debate teams based on the issue they wanted to debate. The assignment outlined the debate format and provided guidelines for the brief. I asked students to prepare the brief using the Blackboard wiki tool, because the tool would make it easy for them to work on a single document together. I created a sample draft wiki to help them see the basic structure of a case. Student work on both the briefs and debate was poor, in part because they were confused about how to identify issues, which authors to discuss, and how to write the brief.

As a result, I revised the second debate assignment. First, I specified which two authors to focus on rather than allowing them to choose. Second, with students’ input, I specified which major issue each group would focus on. Third, I substituted an “issue table” for the debate brief on the wiki and tried to clarify how the document was designed to show what the issues are and how authors clashed. Fourth, I simplified the debate format. I assessed performances on the debate and issue table using rubrics.
**Student work:**

In Spring 2014 our department began developing rubrics for assessing whether we were meeting department goals. I piloted a rubric for our department goals in Spring 2014 that included information on students’ ability to use evidence. The results are here.

Student work from the baseline year (Fall 2014) on papers shows that, though some students do effectively integrate source material effectively into their arguments, many choose irrelevant quotes from the source material or incorporate this material ineffectively. (Examples of student work: sample one, sample two, sample three, sample four) The results are here.

Student work from Spring 2016 shows that there continues to be room for improvement. Some of the debate teams worked with opponents to create a single issue table rather than each team working on an issue table. The issue tables did not reflect a deep understanding of what the positions were, and they included few to no relevant quotations to illustrate authors’ positions (Examples of student work: 1.2, 2.2, 3.2, 4.2, 5.2). Rubrics used to evaluate the issue tables are here (Examples of student work: 1.2, 2.2, 3.2, 4.2, 5.2). The results are here.
Reflections:

Giving students minor assignment credit for completing study questions did not motivate them to answer them; in a class of 15, I could count on perhaps 3 students to consistently read carefully and write answers to the questions. I need to continue working on motivating students to read at all, and to read with the aim of identifying issues, authors’ positions on the issues, and quotations to use as evidence of their positions.

Moving forward, beginning to construct scaffolding from the first class meeting onward can provide more motivation to read and skill in reading difficult texts. I need to implement scaffolding—such as modeling reading and note-taking, or insisting that members of debate teams take on specified roles (e.g., issue identifier, evidence collector)—early in the semester. In addition, I may scale back the number of theories we cover from four to three in order to use more class time for scaffolding and arrange for deeper reading during out-of-class time. I am underestimating the level of difficulty of reading historical sources of rhetorical theory.

In addition, changing the final project from a debate to a different form of presentation with which students have experience and familiarity can free in-class time for focusing on reading and analysis. I underestimated how much teaching of debate skills is necessary in order to have a good debate. I also plan to design assignments that feature practical stakes of understanding what the issues are, possible positions authors can take on them, and providing evidence to provide more incentive for engaging difficult texts.