A Focusing Tool: Helping Students Read More Objectively

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Overview

Our tool is a template designed to help students do a "straight" read of a text before jumping in with their own ideas, connections, or commentary. Students who are good readers do this internally, but many students need help identifying the main claim of a reading. Template divided into Author's Ideas, Author's Purpose, Language (Terms, Style, Tone), Other Voices, and Thesis.

·   ### *Who is in your cohort and what are your teaching contexts?*

- Reagan Henderson, Sr. Lecturer at Eastern Washington University: teaches required composition classes, primarily English 201, which is an advanced composition course involving reading, doing research, and writing a researched argument paper.
- Denise Lambert, English Instructor at Spokane Community College: teaches both developmental and college level writing classes(English 096, 097, 099, 101, and 102)
- Frank Newman, ELD teacher at Lewis and Clark High School: teaches low intermediate English Language Learners who have typically been in the United States for 4 years or less.

·   ### *Briefly describe yourselves professionally.*

<u>Reagan Henderson</u>: I am in my eighth year at EWU. Although I primarily teach advanced composition now, I used to teach English 100 often, which is our developmental class. I also work with the EWU College in the Classroom program as a faculty mentor, which involves visiting high school teachers who teach our curriculum, and I hold a secondary education teaching credential in English. All of this is to say that I am highly interested in bridging the gap between high school and college. Additionally, many of my students are nontraditional; some are veterans, immigrants, parents, and first generation college students, and they have diverse struggles. Through observation and discussions in my cohort, it became clear that all of our students struggle with close reading and comprehension. Students leap to offer their opinion on what may be a misinterpretation of a text, so we thought focusing on reading comprehension could benefit students at all levels.

Denise Lambert: I am in my 31st year of teaching English at Spokane Community College. I have devoted most of my career at SCC to teaching our developmental writing and reading courses. Our campus is centrally located in Spokane and draws students with a wide range of abilities and skills. Many need to sharpen their writing and reading skills before they can be successful at the college level. This population is interesting to work with because a teacher can see very clearly the gains the students make in just 10-11 weeks of classwork. Over the years I have noticed that reading is a most essential skill for college work and many students lack reading experience and reading skills. The template we designed and implemented was intended to help students identify the thesis , or central point, of a document and distinguish other aspects of the piece that aid in the development of that central point.

Frank Newman: I am in my twenty-seventh year of teaching English Language Learners. I have taught at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels. I am primarily interested in how best to educate English language learners. To that end, I have tried my best to keep up with current trends in ELL pedagogy. Currently, I am focused on how educational technology, 21st education, and globalized education can influence current teaching practices. I am most bothered by how institutions do not understand how to work with and best support immigrant and refugee students. This is why I joined this project. Since reading is the most important factor in college success, our focus on close reading seemed natural and most appropriate.

·   *What significant problem of practice did your intervention target?*

Problem: Students do not read critically and are unable to distinguish between their own thinking and the thinking of the author. They also struggle to distinguish between an author's voice and the other voices/perspectives/sources the author builds upon and references. As a result, they are unable to make deeper connections and cannot make the leap into effective writing.

 Based on reading discussions in our classrooms, we determined reading comprehension to be a problem at all levels. Denise Lambert and Reagan Henderson (myself) also conducted pretests in our classes that measured students' ability to articulate and/or identify an author's thesis. The results confirmed our suspicions and led us to craft and test our reading template.

·   *What CCSS relate to this problem and how (including portraits and math practices)?*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2
Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis;

provide an objective summary of the text.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3
Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
Craft and Structure:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6
Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

· ***What scholarship (articles, books, reports) did you consult and how did it inform your project?***

 Leist, Cathy W., Mark A. Woolwine, and Cathy L. Bays. "The effects of using a critical thinking scoring rubric to assess undergraduate students' reading skills." *Journal of College Reading and Learning* 43.1 (2012): 31-58.
Paul, Richard, and Linda Elder. "Critical Thinking... and the Art of Close Reading, Part III." *Journal of Developmental Education* 28.1 (2004): 36-37.

Both texts helped inform the topics of focus we included in our reading template. Paul and Elder outline the relationship between critical thinking and reading, emphasizing that many college students lack the intellectual tools to comprehend what they read and need to "get beyond impressionist reading" (36). The skills addressed include: Paraphrasing, Explicating the Thesis, Analyzing the Logic, and Evaluating or Assessing the Logic (Paul and Elder 36). Likewise, Leist, Woolwine, and Bays devised a rubric to assess college student reading skills and categories included Accuracy, Clarity, Precision, Depth, Relevance and Logic (40). Our group attempted to simplify these topics into four quadrants on our reading template, and all of these we hoped would lead to student success in reading objectively and identifying an author's thesis (see Artifact 1 Reading Template).

· ***What intervention did you test and how did each person in your cohort try it?***

Henderson: The first step was designing a tool to help our students focus while reading and improve comprehension. I informally tested out this template in my Winter 2016 English 201 class sections and had concerns about usability (See Artifact Initial Template and Artifact 3 Instr

Video). At our meeting, our cohort decided to redesign it to be more user-friendly and we spent a lot of time deciding what vocabulary to use for the different boxes on the template (See Artifact 1 Reading Template). I tested out the newly designed template more formally in my Spring 2016 classes. I pretested my students' ability to identify and articulate a thesis from a homework reading,an academic nonfiction essay,(in my case, Turkle's essay "Growing Up Tethered") without the intervention or any instruction. We evaluated student ability to articulate the author's thesis with a simple system:

- + plus sign if the student nailed it
     -- Student clearly understood Turkle's main point and decently articulated it
- check mark if the student was close but not quite getting it
     --Student somewhat understood but perhaps it is vague or badly articulated
- - minus sign if the student missed the mark
     --Student wrote something down but it was too vague to be clear or it clung to one of Turkle's points, but not her main point.

Then I introduced the intervention, the Active Reading Template, teaching students the terms and directions in a partner, small group, and whole class instructional session (Artifact 2 Template Instr, and Artifact 3 Instr Video). After engaging with the template in a group setting, the students were asked to use it independently with other readings over the course of the quarter. In my class, even if it was assigned independently, we almost always discussed it as a group afterwards.

For both of these tests, I did not discuss the assignment with students before collecting them to avoid students "changing" responses. Also the essays are similar in length and difficulty.

Lambert: We tested a reading skills intervention. We all agreed early in our discussions that students had a very difficult time isolating a central thesis in many of their readings. We used this template to help both the teacher and the student focus their energies and attention. One challenge I faced while using our template was the difficulty in determining the accuracy of a thesis (central point, main idea) in the pre and post testing. Students phrased their understanding in so many different ways that I had to use my best holistic understanding to make a determination about the students' accuracy and improvement. However, I did see improvements in their ability to hone in on the thesis of a piece.

Newman: The biggest challenge for me was bridging the sophistication of language needed for the work on our project with the level of my English Language Learners. During the first year, it became clear that I would need to create major scaffolding in order for my ELLs to understand the product that we created.

· ***How did you determine the effectiveness of your intervention?***

Henderson: At the end of the quarter, I did a post-test that followed the same protocol as the pretest-- assigning a reading and asking students to articulate or identify the author's thesis. This was an attempt to assess student ability to read a text objectively and accurately identify an author's thesis.   My results are as follows:
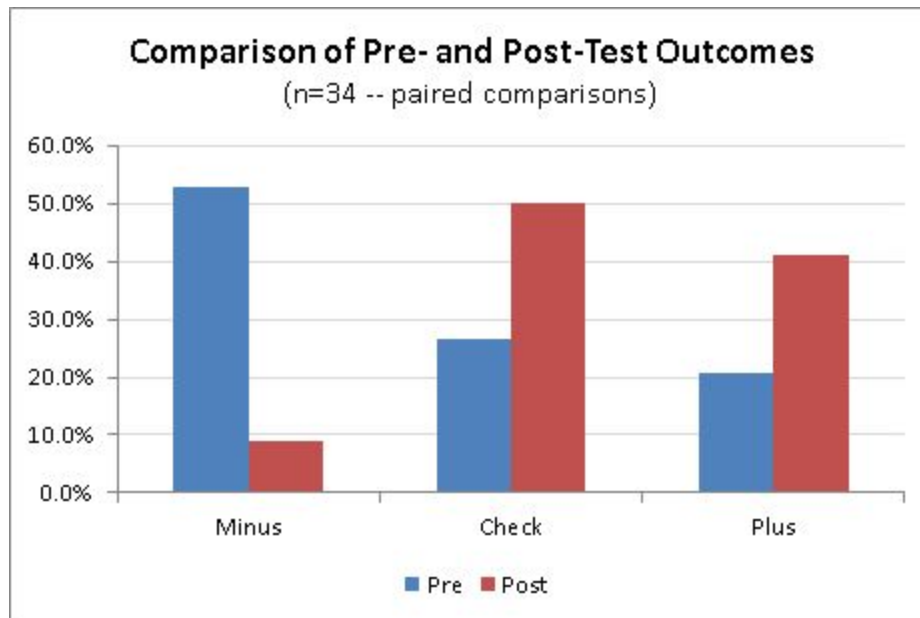
*See Artifact Henderson Pre/Post for full results breakdown

The results were positive in that student ability to articulate/identify an author's thesis had improved.

After reading pretests, I observed that some students clearly didn't read the article closely and some students just didn't have an understanding of "thesis statement." At the end of the quarter, I knew my students better and I was surprised to see that some of my best students (high achieving, diligent) got a minus on the pre-test, showing that being an academically successful student doesn't correlate with their success in identifying a thesis. Perhaps lack of prior knowledge or lack of reading strategies contributes?

After reading post-tests, I observed that most students understood the nature of a thesis statement-- that it is a sentence and not a smattering of ideas or questions. Some students took the thesis directly from the author, which I had always offered as an option, but no one did that in the pre-test. The thesis statements of the post-tests were also written in language that is much more specific. It occurred to me that perhaps students "tried harder" on the post-test because I had been their teacher for several weeks at that point and they had learned that I

wasn't kidding about collecting and actually grading homework. When I assigned the pre-test, they didn't know me well or how closely I'd look at homework.

Lambert: I took each student's pre and post test and compared them directly. One thing I noticed which I did not expect was that students not only identified a thesis more accurately but their responses were worded more confidently.

· *How did students respond?*

Henderson: I used the template several quarters in a row, although I only did pre and post-tests in Spring 2016. I surveyed my Fall 2016 students at the end of the quarter to get feedback on their perception of the impact of the reading template. While I do believe the template helped students better comprehend their reading, when surveyed at the end of the quarter, they did not attribute their improvement in reading to the intervention but to discussions (which were directly focused and facilitated by the template). https://www.surveymonkey.com/analyze/8pJL8epf0KwxiXvnoz_2BEr3OxkKM9ct9U1UYuDh3xBwU_3D. In fact most students didn't think their academic reading ability had changed much. In the end, I did not feel that the survey was very helpful when given months after the intervention, which happened in the first two weeks of the quarter.

In Winter 2017, I decided to ask for feedback in a different way and sooner after using it. Immediately after students used the template a few times, I asked them to freewrite an answer to this question: *How did using the template change your reading process, if at all?*

I told them their reflections wouldn't be graded and that there was no right or wrong answer; hopefully this steered them away from telling me what I wanted to hear, but that is always a possibility. I then looked for concepts or words that appeared frequently in these reflections and coded them into a chart. Most of the students discussed that the template helped them in some way, to focus better, or to better understand the material in some way. A few students commented that it could have been better in some way, or that it didn't help them much because they already were good readers, or had learned good reading strategies in other classes. The overwhelming response was positive, however.

Student Reaction to Template
How did template affect your reading of the texts, if at all?
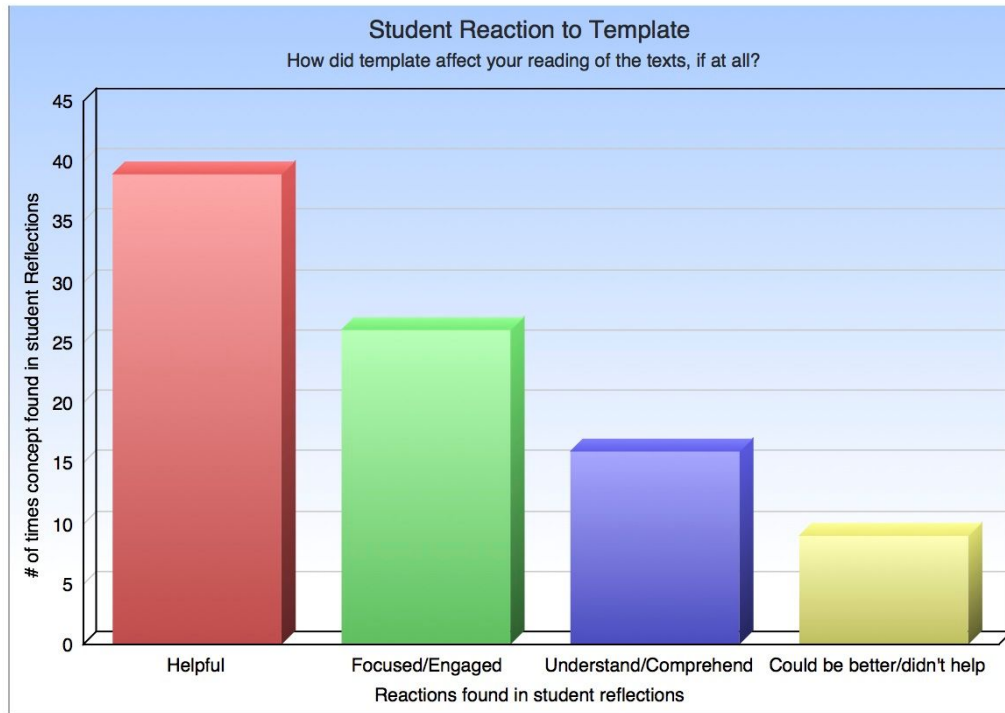
Lambert: My students seem to like our template tool. A few thought it was unnecessary for them and a few expressed gratitude for the tool and a dependence on it. I don't mind the dependence since I think it will translate to an inner understanding of how to look for a thesis and separate it from the supporting material more easily in their future.

NEWMAN: After creating a scaffold called, "text analysis sheets" that were meant to help my ELLs, and after using them multiple times in class, I sent out a survey to students. There were 32 students who responded. The results are below:

Question	Responses	Percentages
Do you like analyzing text?	● It depends on the text ● Usually yes ● Usually no	● 22/32 or 69% ● 10/32 or 31% ● 0/32 or 0%
When you read text, do you automatically know what to "look for" so you can analyze the text	● Usually yes ● Usually no	● 16/32 or 50% ● 16/32 or 50%
Do the text analysis sheets help you so you can analyze the text better?	● Usually yes ● Usually no	● 30/32 or 94% ● 2/32 or 6%
Do you feel the text analysis	● Sometimes	● 20/32 or 65%

sheets help you in reading?	● Usually yes ● * usually no	● 10/32 or 32% ● 1/32 or 3%

Anecdotally, I believe the "text analysis sheets" did focus students better. One comment I had from a student (paraphrased due to English ability) was, "There is much more to reading than just reading."

·   *In what ways has your work changed your thinking about students' transitions or your teaching?*

Henderson: When we sat down as a group to design and redesign our reading template, it became clear how important vocabulary is when trying to bridge the high school/college gap. When discussing "thesis," for example, we labored over "main idea," or "central point." Ultimately, we used thesis because that is what we use at the college level. Another box we discussed at length was the "Other Voices" concept. We knew we needed a spot for students to acknowledge and reflect on the "other" ideas the author built upon or brought in for support or opposition. The ability to differentiate between different ideas in a text is an important skill, but how could we label that so students (and teachers) would understand? If we labeled the box "References," the students would include the author's citations without thinking about how they were used in the text. If we used "Other Authors," it limited the box to a student's concept of an author. In the end, we labeled that box "Other Voices," not only because it plays upon the idea that academic discourse is a conversation, but because it encompasses any genre an author might reference (See Artifact 3 Instr Video for further explanation of these boxes). Having used the template in my composition classes for over a year now, I believe it helps focus student reading and in-class discussions. It provides a nice platform for the next step, too, which is asking the students what they think about a text (there is notably no place on our template for student opinion-- accurate interpretation has to come first).

Lambert: Yes, I agree with Reagan. The first insight I had after discussions within our small cohort and the larger group was how important vocabulary is. It became clear that a common vocabulary and agreed upon definitions for that vocabulary is essential in helping students transition from high school to college. I like the tool/template we developed because reading is a complex activity and anything that can aid students and teacher to navigate the complexity is valuable. Our template helped me direct students' attention to those areas of investigation that I feel are most helpful in improving their reading. I will continue to use this template, not just in my reading classes but also in my composition classes, which relies heavily on readings.

Newman: I do wonder if our districts and educational institutions had the same vocabulary and processes for text analysis (and everything else pertaining to how we talk about English) if it would aid in creating a more seamless educational experience for students. I wonder if this would be a benefit to all especially non-traditional students who have historically had difficult times being successful in higher education.