

Commenting is Not Just for Instructors: Student Metareflective Comments as a Strategy for Fostering Disciplinary Writing Skills

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Research Overview

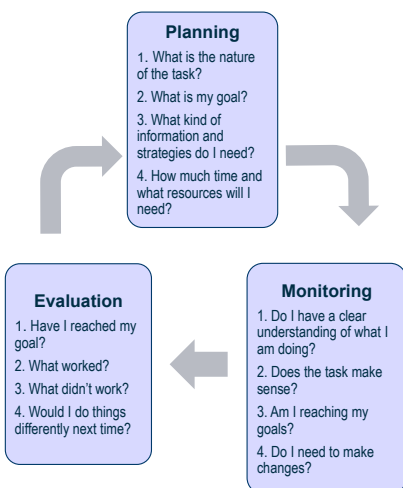
This three-year project asks: What instructional interventions foster deeper disciplinary thinking among undergraduate students in the context of their academic writing?

Specifically:

- What reflective practices will help students better understand course content and discipline-specific modes of thinking and writing (Pace, 2004)?
- Which of these strategies will help faculty gain insight into the depth of student understanding (Bass, 1999)?
- At what point(s) in the assignment process is it most effective to intervene with metacognitive strategies (Schraw, 2001)?

Theoretical Background: Promoting Metacognitive Awareness

The field of metacognition provides a number of models and frameworks for helping students develop the ability to monitor their own comprehension and to make their thinking processes explicit to teachers (Hartman, 2001; Kuhn & Pearsall, 1998; Zohar & David, 2008; Bannert & Mengelkamp, 2008; Diaz et al., 2008). The following model, adapted from Schraw (2001), highlights three stages for intervention in the writing process. *The use of metareflective comments in our research is an attempt to intervene in the Monitoring phase of students' writing and critical thinking.*



Year One: Metacognitive Intervention

Research Sites

Economics 432: Government Regulation of Industry (Jim Adams)
Psychology 351: Advanced Laboratory in Developmental Psychology (Margaret Evans)

Protocol

As a strategy for Monitoring, students were asked to use the "comment" function in Word to insert 3 to 5 comments in the margins of their papers to communicate with their instructor about writing choices they had made. Comments were to address where students drew on key concepts from the course, felt they expressed ideas particularly well, or felt uncertain or confused.

Data Collected

- Student papers with student-inserted metareflective comments and instructor responses
- Pre-term and post-term surveys of students
- Pre-term and post-term interviews with instructors
- End-of-term student focus groups

Metareflective Comments: Examples and Student/Instructor Feedback

Metareflective Comment and Response: Economics

Student: I was not sure if we needed to take time to explain the Sherman Act here. Even though we covered this in class, I was thinking that in a paper such as this, it is important to reestablish what exactly the law is regarding the question of the case.

Instructor: I think you're right that it's important to explain the law. Even so, for most cases it wouldn't make sense to quote the Sherman Act. It's more important to explain the law as it applies to a particular case. But I think you got it right here because the case is very broad in the way that it applies the Sherman Act.

Feedback from Economics Student Focus Group

"I write the paper first and then read through to find places where I would put comments and through that revision process I think you get to edit your paper a little more, you get to think about it. Usually when you're done with the paper you don't want to read it again, so I think this was a good way to give it a second look."

Feedback from Economics GSI Interview

"It made writing the final comments easier because I had already addressed a lot of the specific stuff....I think I gave better feedback because if they didn't explicitly say 'hey I'm curious about this particular section,' I might not have ever addressed it... and not known that it was something they wanted extra help on, and so that was useful. I liked it actually."

Metareflective Comment and Response: Psychology

Student: I'm concerned about my results section. I feel that it's underdeveloped. Is there something I'm missing? What can be done to improve this section?

Instructor: You have enough information, but you want to make sure that it's the right information (see comment about recalculations) and that you're presenting it using APA format.

Feedback from Psychology Student Focus Group

"It made me think about the answers to my own questions that I would have about my own writing....There were certain times when I was like 'Oh I have a question about this,' but then [needing to insert comments] made me think about the question [and] made me realize I had the answer myself or I knew how to find the answer, and so I think it improved the overall quality of my paper before I even turned it in."

Feedback from Psychology GSI Interview

"I felt like I did them more justice in grading their papers because...I included whatever comments I would include normally, but I was also able to address...their specific questions."

Findings

1. Metareflective comments are a "low-cost" source of insight into student thinking, easy to integrate into existing assignments.
2. Students reported that the strategy helped them reflect on the assignment and their own writing processes.
3. GSIs reported that comments created a new opportunity for dialogue with students that gave them better understanding of student struggles and allowed them to give feedback targeted to student concerns.

Year Two

This research will expand its focus to include interventions that engage students in metacognitive strategies at each of the three stages outlined in Schraw's model:

Planning

Activities that ask students to reflect on the knowledge, skills, and processes they will employ to complete major writing assignments.

Monitoring

Activities that ask students to consider and make transparent their strategies and choices, as well as any roadblocks they encounter while writing. This stage will continue our exploration of the effects of student-inserted metareflective comments.

Evaluation

Activities that ask students to articulate what they've learned about the discipline, what they continue to struggle with, and how this knowledge will influence their approach to future assignments.

We will situate this research in Upper-Level Writing Requirement courses in psychology and political science, two of the largest concentrations in LSA. Specific interventions for the Planning and Evaluation stages will be designed in collaboration with participating faculty.

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