Course Evaluation Informed by Student Feedback: Improving Research Writing Instruction

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Abstract

Following the author's previous studies (see Morooka, 2022; 2024), this paper seeks to evaluate her Research Writing (RW) course at International Christian University (ICU) in Spring 2024 based on the student feedback obtained via the end-of-term questionnaire and interviews. The course evaluation includes positive and constructive feedback about general course experience besides specific course features, including topic exploration through newspaper article-sharing and mind-mapping activities. The analysis of data findings gives a variety of hints to improve her RW instructions, such as reducing time for content exploration and allocating more time for research and drafting, allowing more collaboration in exploring the subtopics and flexibility in searching not only newspaper articles but also other materials at an earlier stage, and changing the requirements or guidelines of the first draft and the final paper presentation. The future research aspiration for gathering more data from diverse stakeholders is mentioned at the end.

Course development and improvement are essential aspects of teaching, especially in higher education, where course evaluation often influences teachers' future careers. It is important for teachers to utilize student feedback, examine their current course instructions, and refine their teaching practices constantly. Since Winter 2021, I have taught the Research Writing (RW) course four times as an English for Liberal Arts Program (ELA) instructor at International Christian University (ICU), modifying the course materials each time, with the Spring 2024 teaching being the latest. In my first year of teaching RW in Winter 2021, I encountered several occasions of critical incident, namely, "an unplanned and unanticipated event that occurs during a lesson and that serves to trigger insights about some aspect of teaching and learning" (Richards & Farrell, 2010, p. 113), and analyzed them to understand my teaching practices further (see Morooka, 2022). Subsequently, during my second and third years of teaching RW in Winter 2022/Fall 2023, I tried to improve my instructions by conducting action research (AR) (see Morooka, 2024), which refers to "contextual, small-scale, localised" (Burns, 1999, p. 30) investigation by a practitioner to enhance their practice systematically. However, the AR project, inspired by the critical incident analysis, primarily relied on my subjective reflections and observations with some course questionnaires support.

Therefore, in this study about my fourth year of teaching in Spring 2024, I aim to build on my previous studies about critical incident analysis and AR by using student feedback as the main source of data, through course questionnaires and interviews, and strengthen my analysis. Based on the course evaluation informed by student feedback, I suggest possible ways to adapt my RW teaching practices and hope to share insights about course improvement with other

writing instructors. This paper starts with a brief introduction of the RW context and a literature review of course evaluation, followed by methodology, results, and analyses of overall course experience and specific changes, and ends with a conclusion.

Research Writing (RW) Context

Course Profile

The goal of RW, a mandatory ELA course for sophomore ICU students, is to equip them with research and writing skills, which will help them to succeed in their major-related courses later in their academic life (English for Liberal Arts Program, 2024). The RW course for Stream 3 students, B1-B2 intermediate English learners by CEFR, is held in Spring, Autumn, and Winter Term. Their expected final product is a 1500–2000-word research paper about a specific topic of interest within the general theme that each instructor has already determined. To achieve the outcome, students go through multiple stages, such as specifying their topic, conducting research, developing an outline, drafting, and revising. During the process, they have several mandatory tutorials with the instructor on their drafts, and they are encouraged to utilize the Writing Support Desk (WSD) services in the ICU library to schedule an optional tutorial with the student tutors.

Student Profile

In Spring 2024, my RW course had 20 students, all of whom were sophomore Stream 3 students without re-takers. This student compilation differed from my previous teaching experiences, where I had at least a few re-takers. Moreover, since the RW this time was held in spring, the students just finished the freshman ELA program when they took the course. Most students selected my RW willingly by early registration, which was a vast difference from my first year of teaching. In fact, all 20 students passed the course this year for the first time since I started teaching RW.

Content and Writing Skills

The area of inquiry for my RW course was technology, which was the same as the previous teaching times. However, this time, the sub-topics covered were drastically different. In previous course iterations, I had introduced four specific sub-topics related to technology, namely, online learning, social media, virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI), but in Spring 2024, I gave my students wider categories, ranging from educational/communication technology, sports/entertainment technology, to bio/medical technology, for more freedom in choosing a topic of their interest. Regarding writing skills, the students were taught how to write a thesis statement, paraphrase, summarize, cite sources, maintain an academic writing tone, and so on. Their final paper was evaluated in terms of the following: content and thesis, organization, quality of evidence, language style, and format.

Literature Review on Course Evaluations – Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs)

Course evaluations by students, also referred to as "student evaluations of teaching (SETs)," are commonly administered practices in higher education across the globe, including Japan (Burden, 2012). They are mainly used to assist universities' decision-making about instructors' promotion or tenure opportunities (Kember et al., 2002), but they can also offer

precious information to improve course design and delivery from students' perspectives (Ahmadi et al., 2001). Although the most predominant form of SETs is a quantitative survey questionnaire for its convenience (Erikson et al., 2016), it is often criticized for various reasons, such as its questionable utility for course improvements (Huxham et al., 2008) and its uncertain validity and reliability (Spooren et al., 2013). More specifically, for the career-related purpose above, the pre-determined questions in the quantitative SETs are naturally made to judge course quality rather than to develop course instructions (Penny, 2003), and the collected responses fail to have adequate details about student course experience needed for meaningful course improvement (Chapple & Murphy, 1996). In many cases of quantitative SETs, students are seen by institutions or administrators as "consumers of their learning as opposed to active participants and co-producers of the learning experience" (Freeman & Dobbins, 2013, p. 145), so students perceive that the SETs are conducted mainly as administrative duties and that their responses would seldom inform course development (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002). Therefore, they often complete the questionnaires without seriousness (Ahmadi et al., 2001), possibly affecting the evaluations' reliability and validity.

Therefore, the traditional quantitative SETs tend to be problematic, and alternative methods are explored to elicit more thoughtful responses about different dimensions of teaching and learning to shape high-quality instructions. In Steyn et al.'s (2019) study, qualitative SETs, in the form of tutorials to receive student recommendations about improving the course, were implemented to upgrade the university academic program for business students in South Africa. They found that qualitative SETs could address the weakness of quantitative SETs and provide more holistic and context-specific data for course development (Steyn et al., 2019). Moreover, Thang's (2005) study about Malaysian learners' perceptions of their distance-learning English courses collected qualitative data via semi-structured interviews to supplement the quantitative data based on questionnaires, facilitating a more profound understanding of course aspects influencing the learners. Thus, more and more faculty worldwide are adopting such approaches to concentrate on why and how students learn and viewing students as "partners, change agents, evaluators, and co-creators" (Signorini et al., 2020, p. 82), thereby treasuring student voice in pedagogy (Cook-Sather et al., 2019). Although qualitative SETs require a significant amount of time and resources to conduct and analyze, they can "engage students as co-learners, co-researchers, co-inquirers, co-developers, and co-designers" (Healey et al., 2016, p. 2), revealing rich and diverse data to inform teachers' course instructions.

Methodology

Valuing student voice in the course evaluation, I utilized a mixed method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative research data in this study. The mixed method was used to triangulate the data and compensate for the shortcomings of the quantitative approach, such as numerical oversimplification of complex issues, with a more in-depth qualitative approach to achieve broader comprehension of the phenomena (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). All the following data were collected from the student participants who gave informed consent for this research, which had gained ethical approval from the ICU Research Ethics Committee.

The End-of-term Course Questionnaire

The end-of-term course questionnaire consisted of three parts: writing process and skills, specific activities and assignments, and overall course improvement. It was conducted online in the last RW class, and consent was sought from students to use their responses as data. Those 16 consented responses, including some free comments, were then anonymized and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively for this study. To show ethical consideration, I told the students that their responses would never affect their final grade and that their honest feedback would be appreciated; however, some of them possibly could not give their frank opinions because the questionnaire was not anonymous. Nonetheless, many students gave not only positive course evaluations but also critical and constructive feedback.

Semi-structured Interviews

I conducted online individual interviews in Japanese with two student volunteers (Students A and B) about their course experiences after the term. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. It was a semi-structured interview with an interview guide containing a list of possible questions, but it proceeded flexibly. I asked them to elaborate on their questionnaire comments, especially those I found a little confusing or interesting. Moreover, some questions or topics emerged naturally during the interviews, so while maintaining the original focus, they had a little more authenticity and dynamics than structured interviews, which is a strength of semi-structured interviews (Pathak & Intratat, 2012). Thus, the semi-structured interview data complemented the questionnaire data in giving a deeper understanding of the students' course experiences.

Overall Course Experience and Evaluation

Based on the questionnaire and interview data, the following section describes the findings about the students' overall course experience and evaluation separately.

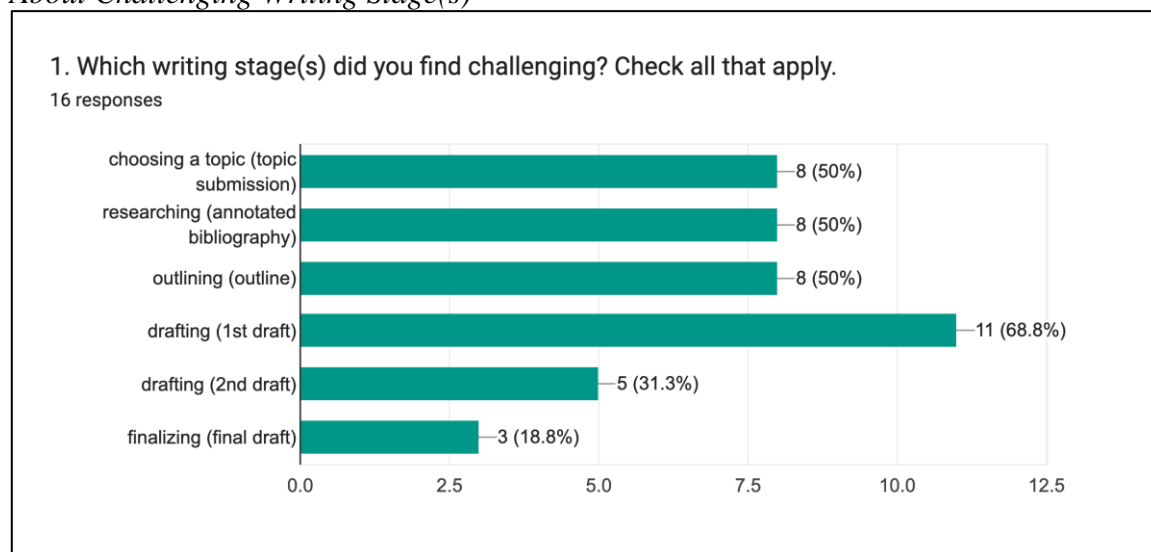**Course Experience: Writing Process and Skills**
What Was Challenging
Figure 1 shows the questionnaire responses about which writing stages the students found challenging, revealing that many more students (nearly 70%) perceived it as difficult to write the first draft than the second or the final draft (about 20-30%). In the first draft, the students wrote the introduction and the first half of the body in approximately 800 words. During the interview, Student B supported that it was hard to write only the first half of the body in the first draft because she was unsure how much would make the half without having all the body information. She added that she usually writes an introduction at the end because she changes body information a lot while drafting, so writing an introduction first would make it difficult to see what information is overlapping. Therefore, she suggested starting with the body section first and requiring the entire body information in the first draft, although some students might find it rather challenging to write the whole body if they needed adequate researched information at that stage.

Figure 1
About Challenging Writing Stage(s)

What Skills Were Acquired

Table 1 shows the skills the students acquired from this course. Student A reiterated during the interview that through this course, she enhanced her research skill of finding sources efficiently, which she had always struggled with in her freshman ELA courses. She said that my tutorial feedback on her ideas for the guiding questions in the topic proposal document, especially the one about further research areas, helped her to learn what other keywords to use for additional research and find many more sources.

Table 1
Questionnaire Responses: What Did You Learn in This Course?

What skills were acquired	Respondents
Research skills/strategies	6
How to organize ideas with logical clarity	4
How to choose an appropriate topic	3
Summarizing and citing skills	2
English writing skills for long essays	2
How to utilize digital tools	1

What Skills to Improve More

Table 2 shows what skills the students are still not confident about. Student A wrote in the questionnaire that she was still uncertain about developing logical arguments and organization and reflected during the interview that she lacked an objective perspective as a reader about how to present information effectively. She added that during the tutorials with me about her drafts, she realized that she was missing the ability to examine which sentences should come first logically, especially within the paragraphs.

Table 2
Questionnaire Responses: What Skills Are You Still Not Confident About?

What skills to improve more	Respondents
Creating a logically structured outline	6
Choosing an appropriate topic/essay type	2
Researching more credible sources	2
Citing sources accurately	2
Using correct grammar and vocabulary	2
Managing time well	1

Course Evaluation: Positive and Constructive Feedback
What was Helpful

Table 3 shows what the students found helpful in the course. Despite one comment about unequal tutorial time allocation, many students wrote that the individual tutorials with me were helpful because they were able to organize their thoughts by explaining their ideas, receive advice on how to revise their paper by asking many questions, and find solutions to the issues by discussing the weakness of their paper. In fact, during the interview, Student A appreciated receiving my detailed written feedback because she could tell how to revise the paper and fix as many parts as possible before the tutorials. She said that she got the impression that I wrote comments more carefully about the parts requiring significant changes by describing what was confusing in what way. She added that although too many written comments could be overwhelming, she was grateful for thorough comments because she wanted to fix what she could based on the comments before the tutorials and discuss other complex parts in the limited tutorial time.

Table 3
Questionnaire Responses: What Did You Find Helpful in This Course?

What was helpful	Respondents
One-on-one tutorials with the teacher	13
WSD tutorials with student tutors	2
Peer review	2
Group discussions	2
Assignments in general	1

How to Improve the Course

In the questionnaire, the students gave various suggestions about different course dimensions, such as topic exploration, newspaper article sharing, annotated bibliography, outline, and tutorials. Three students said that exploring each field of technology might be unnecessary, especially for those who already had their topic in mind, and that it would be more meaningful to choose a broad topic earlier based on pre-research and allow more time to work on the annotated bibliography and outline before the first draft. This suggestion was also confirmed in the interview responses by Students A and B, both of whom said that the topic exploration time could be shortened.

Furthermore, Student A offered a valuable comment about the final paper presentation, where the students gave an individual presentation about their final draft and led a discussion in small groups. She said that she simply copy-pasted a lot of information from

her paper to the presentation slides because the presentation guideline required the same points as the paper on the slides in the same order. Therefore, she suggested differentiating what to do for the presentation from what they wrote in the paper by summarizing their paper or explaining what they learned about their topic content and writing skills, respectively. She added that it might be engaging to share some interesting information they researched but could not necessarily use in their paper because she could not integrate all the intriguing information she found due to the logical flow constraint. In addition, she said that it might help those students themselves develop new research questions (RQs) and that future RW students might benefit from filling in the research areas that previous student papers could not address.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Findings and Analyses of Specific Course Aspects</h2>

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, the following section shows the findings and analyses of four specific changes I made in Spring 2024: (a) topic exploration, (b) newspaper article sharing and mapping, (c) annotated bibliography summary, and (d) peer feedback training. The findings of the questionnaire and interviews are complemented by my analyses in the same subsection about each change.
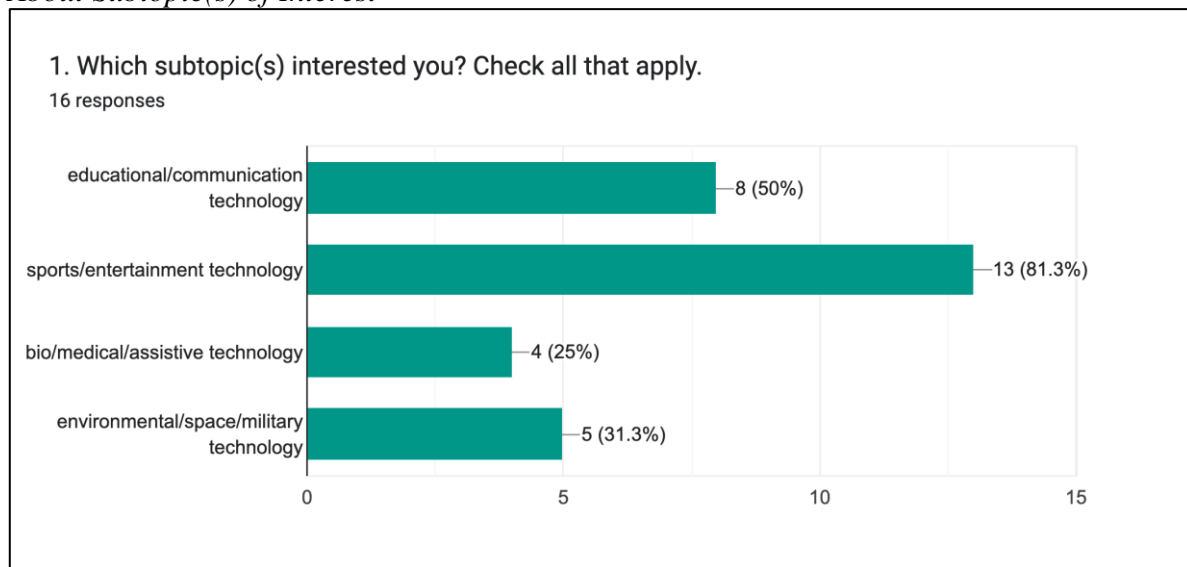
Change 1 – Topic Exploration
Questionnaire
While the sub-topics in the previous years were specific, such as online learning, social media, VR, and AI, those in Spring 2024 were generic, covering technology in various fields, such as sports, agriculture, and the medical industry. Figure 2 shows which of those subtopics the students were interested in. Most or more than half of the students had an interest in sports/entertainment or educational/communication technology, while only some students found environmental/space/military and bio/medical/assistive technology interesting. Furthermore, three students suggested exploring transportation and business technology as other potential subtopics.

Figure 2
About Subtopic(s) of Interest

Interviews

When asked about the topic exploration, Student A said that she did not find it difficult to have a broader category of technology subtopics presented; rather, she found it beneficial that her topic possibility broadened, learning that there were many types of technology. When I made the topic exploration more flexible, I was concerned that students might be faced with too many topic options. However, her comment indicated that it was not the case with her, although she did mention that some students who already had their topic in mind might find it unnecessary to explore that many types of technology. She suggested exploring topics for the first two weeks instead of the three in the future and allowing more time if students still feel unable to decide on their topic.

Moreover, she said it was rewarding to listen to other students' newspaper article reports about different types of technology each time. The students brought a newspaper article of their interest about a certain type of technology and shared their summary and reaction in small groups for the first few weeks. However, Student A suggested that, instead of all the students looking for a different newspaper article about the same type of technology, they could be divided into two groups, find a newspaper article about an assigned technology type, and share their articles within their group and with the other group that searched a different technology type. She added that afterward, each student could individually research the technology subtopic they found interesting further.

Analysis

Overall, the students positively received the decision to widen the categories of technology, as seen in the questionnaire and interview responses. As a matter of fact, they chose various topics, such as programming education, online concerts for market expansion, AI systems in sports, food supply chain technology, and VR in the medical field. Notably, sports and medical technology were new topics that none of my previous RW students chose. However, no students selected assistive or space/military technology topics this time. From the questionnaire results, only one-third and one-quarter of the students showed interest in bio/medical/assistive and environmental/space/military technology, respectively, so those types of subtopics might need reconsideration. As in some student suggestions above, they could be replaced with transportation or business technology in future RW courses. Also, considering different students' interests and needs each year, technology subtopics could be randomly assigned to different groups or students so that they would only need to explore some of the subtopics themselves, following Student A's advice.

Change 2 – Newspaper Article Sharing and Mapping
Questionnaire

After covering almost all the subtopics, mainly through the newspaper article discussions, the students wrote their summary and reaction about one article among all the articles they had reported and posted on the discussion board, also replying to at least two classmates' posts. Figure 3 shows the students' responses about how they found these assignments. Besides the newspaper assignments, they made a mind-mapping sheet with some possible RQs every time they finished reporting about a different type of technology and shared their mind-maps and RQs in small groups. Figure 4 shows the students' responses about this mapping assignment, which was my new attempt in the hope that it would help them to choose their topic later if they reflected on each type of technology every time; however, more students seemed to think it was not as helpful as I expected it would be.

Figure 3
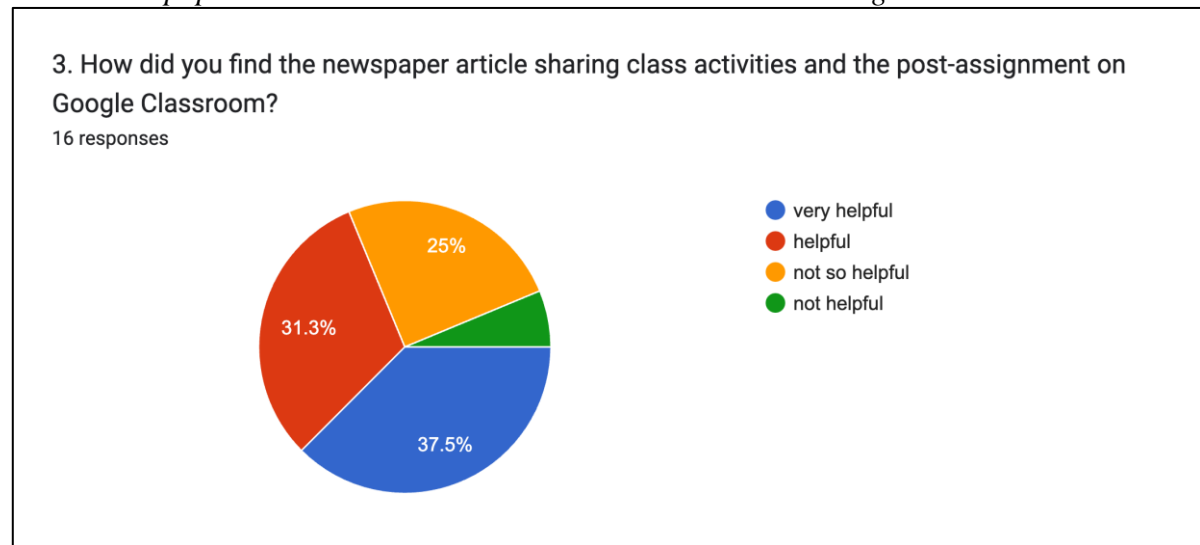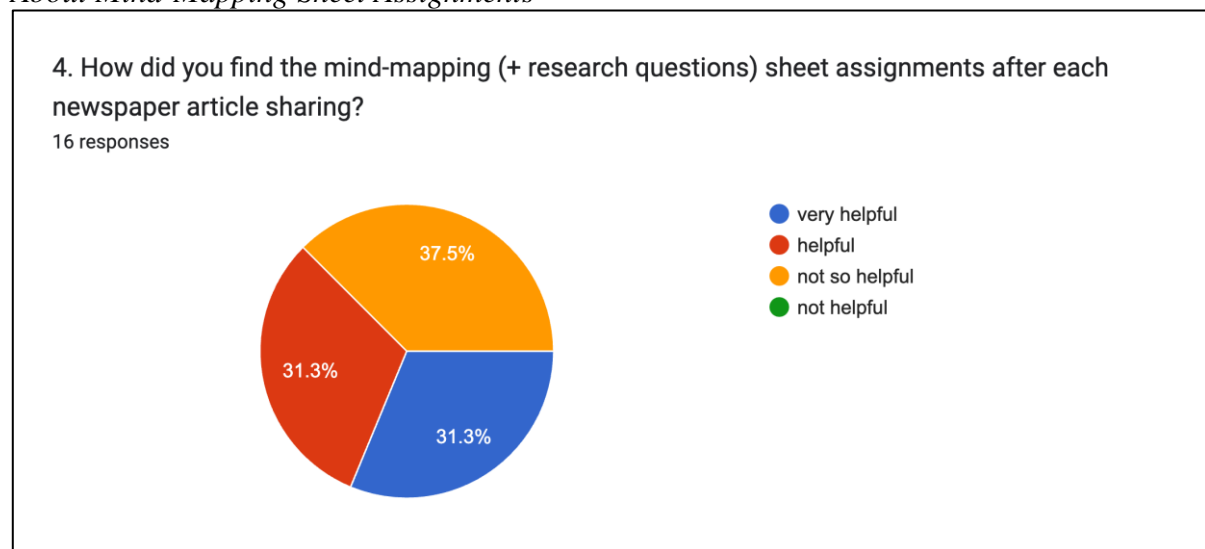*About Newspaper Article Class Activities and Discussion Post Assignments*

Figure 4
About Mind-Mapping Sheet Assignments

Interviews

Since Student B answered in the questionnaire that she found the newspaper article-sharing and mind-mapping activities not so helpful, I asked her to explain why. She openly stated that the former part of the RW course felt slow-paced with newspaper article sharing, but they suddenly had to decide on their paper topic, and the rest of the term felt quite busy. She questioned the relaxed pace at the beginning of the term and suggested shortening the topic exploration period, acknowledging the need to take more time for those who still cannot choose their topic.

In addition, she said that now that she had completed the course, she came to wonder about the meaning of the newspaper article-sharing activities and the discussion post assignment. She said that she used more academic sources like journal articles to write her paper, so it might be more meaningful to include a wide range of sources without limiting it to

newspapers. She added that she could not see the rationale behind the newspaper article assignment and how it was connected to the rest of the writing process. On the other hand, as for the mind-mapping activities, she said that she could see the connection with the later topic proposal assignment. She further shared that it was more helpful to discuss and evaluate the RQs they made and think about what makes effective RQs than sharing the mind maps in small groups. She said that she liked the discussion time about how to improve the RQs and learned how to develop RQs for her own paper topic, noting that some of her classmates were making unsearchable RQs before the discussion.

Analysis

The interviews, particularly with Student B, gave much richer data and information than the questionnaire about the students' perceptions of the newspaper and mind-mapping assignments. Although the newspaper article-sharing activities provided the students with opportunities to explore different topics by listening to others' reports (as Student A noted), they might not need to be restricted to only newspaper articles (as Student B noted). Searching for newspaper articles and recent events could be a good starting point for choosing a topic, but as students develop more interest in particular subtopics, they could find more academic sources and share what they learned in small groups again. The RW course this time spent too much time on just newspaper article sharing for the first few weeks, which might have been less relevant or valuable to many students when they started writing their papers; therefore, the topic exploration period should be reexamined for efficiency and effectiveness, with more links to the upcoming stages.
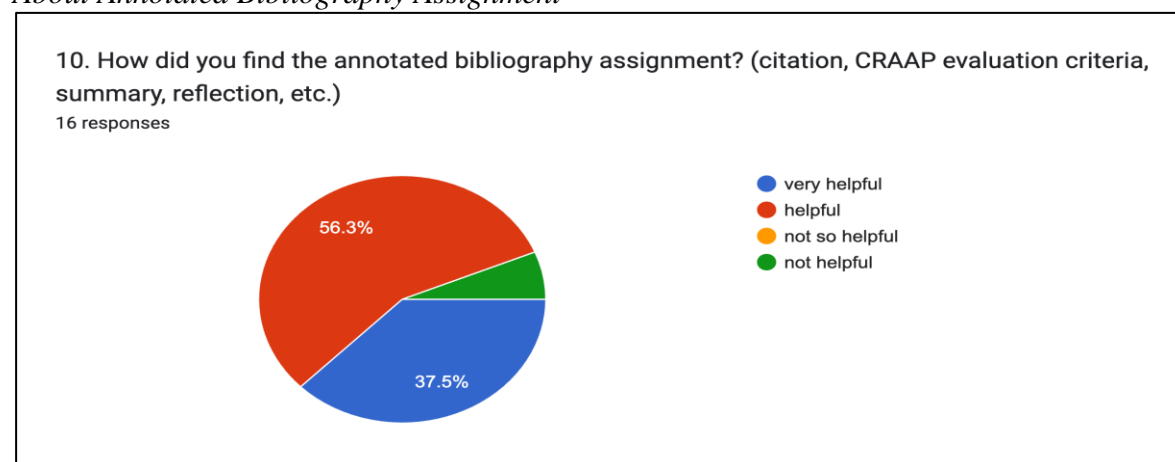
Change 3 – Annotated Bibliography Summary
Questionnaire

After the topic exploration, the students submitted a topic proposal document, which they needed to revise after receiving feedback in the tutorial. Simultaneously, they were required to submit an annotated bibliography assignment, which included an APA citation, a summary, an evaluation, and a reflection for at least five sources they found. More than 90% of the students found this assignment very helpful/helpful (see Figure 5). However, one student wrote that the annotated bibliography was not helpful as it came too late in the course and that the whole time for newspaper article sharing should be devoted to researching their topics of interest and building their RQs.

Figure 5
About Annotated Bibliography Assignment

10. How did you find the annotated bibliography assignment? (citation, CRAAP evaluation criteria, summary, reflection, etc.)
16 responses

- very helpful
- helpful
- not so helpful
- not helpful

56.3%
37.5%

Interviews

Student B said that this annotated bibliography was challenging because they needed to scrutinize the sources to complete it. More specifically, she struggled with choosing the sources that she could evaluate and write about properly among the many sources she found. She also encountered some sources whose source type she was unsure about, such as journal-looking ones but not, when they were expected to explore various types of sources and write the source types in the assignment. The sample annotated bibliography I gave only provided a book chapter as an example source, so she said having a list of different source types in the sample might be helpful. I put little thought when I made the sample, so it is a valuable point from students' perspectives that I would not have noticed myself.

Instead of writing a coherent one-paragraph summary like in previous years, this year's students were asked to write the main idea in a few sentences or to list a few pieces of information they found interesting or useful in bullet points. Student B reflected that she was a little confused about whether she was supposed to write the central ideas or specific details because of the bullet points for this summary part. She suggested that writing a summary in a logically structured paragraph would foster skills to think about sources more carefully. However, she ultimately said that writing a summary in bullet points was preferable for her because it fit her learning style and enabled her to identify what the source was about while researching. She said that she usually compiles information about different sources in her document by writing one brief comment about each source, which was essentially the same as what she did for this annotated bibliography assignment.

Analysis

I have assigned this annotated bibliography since my second year of teaching RW, but the specific change I made this time was about how to write a summary part, which was to list some important ideas independently in bullet points instead of writing a unified paragraph. I modified it this way because I thought it might make it easier for students to remember which source they got the information from by pinpointing interesting ideas in their own words. I also wanted to prevent them from plagiarizing this part, such as merely copy-pasting from the abstract of a journal article or relying on generative AI tools to produce a summary. However, I was concerned that it might not be called a summary if it is just a list of bullet points. The interview data confirmed that Student B also noticed the flaw of this change in the assignment. Nevertheless, she preferred this new format to organize information from different sources in an easy-to-see manner. Although writing a structured passage would demand more logical thinking about the main points for the summary, some students appreciated writing the ideas in bullet points. Therefore, this finding suggests that it might be effective to write a coherent summary of the main ideas and list or paraphrase some intriguing details. Furthermore, as in the questionnaire comments above, students could select their topic earlier and spend more time on pre-research for this annotated bibliography.
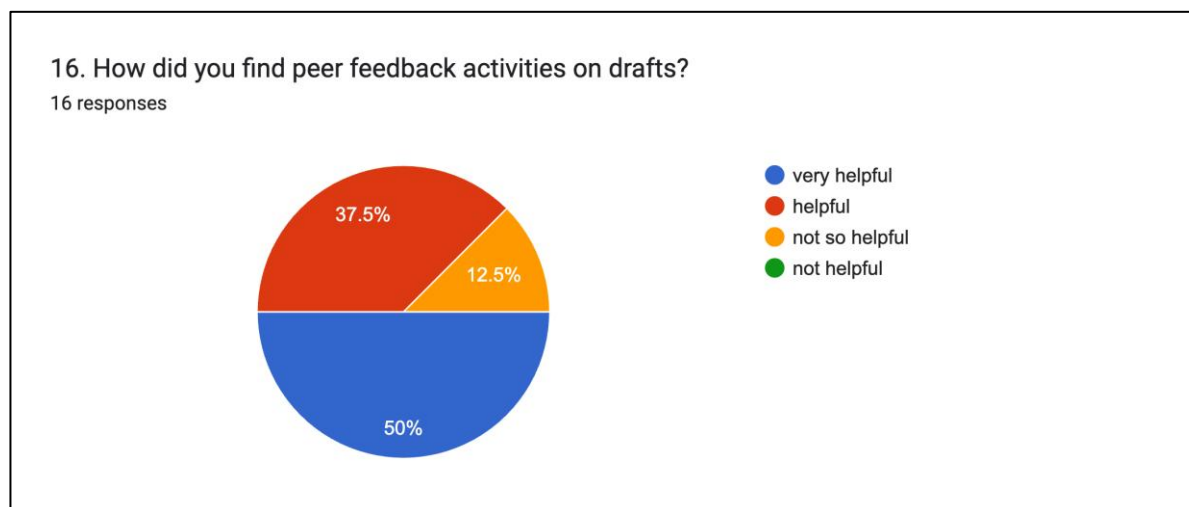
Change 4 – Peer Review Training
Questionnaire

Before the first and second draft submissions, the students engaged in peer review activities during class. They were placed into different groups of four depending on their paper topics and progress, and paired up with different people in the same group and wrote comments on the peer's document each. The questionnaire result showed that nearly 90% of the students found the peer review activities very helpful/helpful (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
About Peer Feedback Activities

Interviews

Student B said that during peer review, it was helpful to have some unclear sentences pointed out before the draft submission; however, she also said that some students did not have their draft ready for peer review, bringing unfinished or incomplete sections. She advised that it would be helpful for students if I emphasized having their draft finished by peer review, not just by the actual draft deadline. Besides, as for giving written feedback instead of oral feedback, she said that her peers' comments helped her to remember what to revise later, adding that oral exchange would help but not necessary. She also mentioned that it was difficult to incorporate some peers' comments requiring major changes on the draft because the peer review was conducted right before the submission deadline.

Analysis

The major difference from the previous years of teaching was the purposeful peer feedback training before the actual peer review activities. In the training, I told them that they should look at the overall picture of their peer's drafts, such as content and organization, rather than minor details like grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. I also told them not to evaluate but to share what they found interesting or to ask for clarification and more evidence, showing some example comments. Moreover, I had them break down the drafts into several small parts and decide who in the group was responsible for feedback on which part.

Both the questionnaire and interview data showed that most students had a positive experience with the peer review. Student B's comments above made me rethink the timing of peer review, whether to do it on the same day as the draft deadline. I expected that they would be able to address some paper issues after the peer review lesson and submit a fixed version by midnight. However, they might want more time to revise their draft after the peer review. Therefore, it might be ideal to conduct peer reviews more constantly throughout the term, not just right before the draft submission, to monitor their paper progress, even if their work is still halfway through. It might also be effective for students to have peer review both in oral and written forms, briefly explaining what their paper is about and what they need feedback on before asking for written comments.

Conclusion

This paper reported on the SETs of my fourth RW course in Spring 2024, where I made some modifications after my previous studies about critical incident analysis and AR. Both questionnaire and interview data were presented and analyzed about overall course experience as well as four specific aspects of the course: (a) topic exploration, (b) newspaper article sharing and mapping, (c) annotated bibliography summary, and (d) peer feedback training. The results showed some positive comments about the skills the students improved and the course guidance. However, the in-depth data analysis indicated the need to reconsider several course components, especially adjusting the course schedule and curriculum so that students can devote more time to research and writing after they narrow down their topic. Although this study has some limitations, such as the small number of research participants, it gave me valuable insights to hear student voices about course improvement through not only the questionnaire but also interviews. Further research could include collecting more data from a variety of stakeholders, such as the WSD student tutors as well as my RW students, to gain a more balanced understanding of how my course is experienced and how it can be further improved. By so doing, my research could also benefit other instructors even more, especially in terms of course design and material development.

Acknowledgments

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