

## **Reflective Practice of Research Writing Instruction: Suggestions Drawn from Critical Incident Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to explore a first-year instructor's experience of teaching a Research Writing (RW) course at International Christian University (ICU) by reflecting on and analyzing the critical incidents observed in the RW course, which cover issues concerning plagiarism and assignment rationale. The suggestions regarding the specific changes for future course revision are provided following the analyses and are complemented by the findings in the term-end student course questionnaire. The critical incident analyses indicate that writing skills, especially paraphrasing, summarizing, and referencing, should be taught more extensively and that research skills for finding appropriate sources should be taught at an early stage before choosing a topic. The limitations of this study and the aspiration for further research are also mentioned at the end.

It is vital for teachers to be actively involved with reflective practice as part of self-directed professional development and growth (Farrell, 2014). By reflecting especially on critical incidents, that is, unexpected and memorable classroom events, teachers can understand their teaching practices with new perspectives (Richards & Farrell, 2010). In the winter of 2021, I taught Research Writing (RW) course for the first time as an English for Liberal Arts Program (ELA) instructor at International Christian University (ICU). However, since RW allows flexibility in the course content development and each instructor has the freedom to determine the themes and materials to be covered, it was extremely challenging to teach the course as a first-year instructor. Additionally, a high ratio of students re-taking the RW course added further difficulties to my experience. Those struggles motivated me to write this paper, focusing on my reflections on teaching RW.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze critical incidents during my first time teaching RW in the winter of 2021 without any prior academic writing teaching experiences. By reflecting on my experience of teaching RW, I aim to examine my underlying teaching values and assumptions about academic writing and to identify areas for improvement in my teaching practices for future versions of my RW course. I also wish to share insights with colleagues, especially novice university instructors like myself. In the following sections, this paper first introduces RW context, provides a brief literature review on reflective practice and

critical incidents, explains about critical incidents observed in my RW course, and concludes with suggestions for course revisions and hopes for further research.

## **Research Writing (RW) Context**

### **Course Profile**

RW is a compulsory sophomore course that aims to develop students' research and writing skills. The students take RW as the culmination of their learning throughout the ELA program, and it is expected that they make a smooth transition from the ELA courses to their major-related courses held in English after completing RW (English for Liberal Arts Program, 2022). By the end of the course, they are expected to write a 1500–2000-word research paper about a specific topic of their choice within a broad theme already assigned by each instructor. The learning outcomes include narrowing down a topic, acquiring research skills, developing research questions and a thesis statement, creating an outline, evaluating and incorporating secondary sources, and citing sources properly. The final grade is determined based on the quality of the assignments related to content and writing skills as well as attendance and participation (English for Liberal Arts Program, 2022).

### **The RW Course**

#### ***Students' Profile***

In this case study, a total of 10 students at the intermediate English level were enrolled in the RW course, seven of whom successfully passed the course. Three of the students were seniors, four were juniors, and three were sophomores. Therefore, seven out of 10 were re-takers who had failed RW at least once before. Generally, students are given the opportunity to choose their RW course based on their preference for the themes or instructors by early registration. However, as this registration happens before new instructors join the ELA, students cannot choose the new instructors' course. Instead, they simply get placed in the new instructors' course if they do not make a choice or are re-takers. Therefore, none of the students willingly chose the course out of interest, and the student compilation was a little uncommon in that the majority were re-takers and that they did not have a particular interest in the selected RW content theme.

#### ***Content about Technology***

The overarching content theme chosen for this RW course was technology. The topics covered included online learning, social media, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence (AI). Within the broad theme, the students were provided with the autonomy to propose a wide range of topics, such as online learning challenges, the digital divide, fake news regulation, artificial intelligence in social welfare and education, social media for the elderly, and remote work. Various textbook chapters, newspaper articles, and TED talks were used as materials to explore different topics.

#### ***Writing Skills***

The writing skills taught included selecting a topic, writing a research proposal, making an outline, avoiding plagiarism, incorporating sources, making citations and references,

paraphrasing, and using academic languages, such as hedging and transition words. These skills were mainly taught using a textbook for writing a research paper entitled *Writing research papers: From essay to research paper* (Zemach et al., 2011), sample papers, and websites. The final paper was assessed in terms of the following five criteria: content and thesis, organization, quality of evidence, language style, and format.

### Literature Review

#### Reflective Practice

The term *reflection* has been defined in different ways, but Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) view it as “those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations” (p. 19). With reflective practice, teachers can analyze their teaching experiences and examine their emotions, thus gaining fresh insights into their regular teaching practices. This definition is also highlighted by Walsh and Mann (2015), who claim that reflective practice should be more data-driven, evidence-based, and cooperative. In their article, they point out the challenges of current reflective practice, including inadequate spoken data and the lack of collaboration due to an excessive focus on individual reflections. They suggest adopting a more evidence-led and dialogic approach, utilizing appropriate data collection tools, such as portfolios, narrative accounts, and discussion of teaching recordings with other colleagues, especially regarding critical incidents. This paper emphasizes the use of critical incidents to reflect on teaching experiences in a concrete manner.

#### Critical Incidents

Generally, the term *critical incident* is regarded as “some event or situation which marked a significant turning-point or change in the life of a person or an institution (such as a political party) or in some social phenomenon (industrialisation, a war or some legal negotiations)” (Tripp, 2011, p. 24). In the context of teaching, such highly significant events rarely happen in teachers’ daily experiences, and most of the events that do occur are typical rather than dramatic or obvious. However, those seemingly unimportant events can be interpreted as critical incidents after an extensive analysis of what happened because they reveal the teachers’ underlying values and assumptions in their routine practice (Tripp, 2011). In contrast to the general definition above, Richards and Farrell (2010) define *critical incident* more specifically to teaching, considering it to be “an unplanned and unanticipated event that occurs during a lesson and that serves to trigger insights about some aspect of teaching and learning” (p. 113).

Farrell (2014) states that critical incidents can be categorized into either positive or negative events by examining “teaching highs” or “teaching lows” (Thiel, 1999). To elaborate, a teaching high might be a successful part of the lesson, whereas a teaching low could be a difficult moment that puzzles teachers. Since teachers are generally inclined to concentrate on teaching lows, it is recommended that they should reflect on both positive and negative incidents (Farrell, 2014).

The goal of critical incident analysis involves exploring teachers’ values and beliefs influencing their teaching practices (Farrell, 2007) and constantly adjusting their routines to

enhance their skills for successful professional development (Tripp, 2011). To analyze critical incidents, Farrell (2014) adapted McCabe's (2002) framework and presented four steps:

1. Orientation, which introduces the general setting of who, what, when, and where
2. Complication, which describes the specific problem that happened
3. Evaluation, which interprets the event and induces the general significance out of the specific context
4. Result, which proposes a solution to the problem  
(McCabe, 2002, as cited in Farrell, 2014).

In the following section, this paper attempts to analyze four specific critical incidents from a winter 2021 RW course by applying this framework.

### **Case Study of Critical Incidents in RW**

As mentioned above, it is important to reflect on both positive and negative critical incidents. Therefore, a selection of both types of events is included in the critical incidents described below in chronological order. It should be noted that the orientation step, which concerns the general setting, has already been described in the RW Context section above. Hence, only the complication, evaluation, and result steps will be discussed for each of the critical incidents below.

#### **Critical Incident 1 – Questioning Assignment Rationale**

##### ***Complication***

After the initial topic exploration and research, the students were given two assignments, namely a topic submission and a research proposal. For the topic submission, they were asked to list their topics and rationale, background information, research questions and a thesis statement, at least three references, and further research areas. After receiving my written feedback on the topic submission, they were required to write a research proposal in one paragraph, covering all the essential information from their topic submission. However, after class, one student questioned the difference between these two assignments before submitting a research proposal. I tried answering their question by instructing them to organize the listed information into a unified writing piece, but I could not explain the difference well because those two assignments were essentially the same. After hearing my answer, they said they understood, but did not look convinced or fully grasp why they needed to do the assignment or what was expected out of the assignment.

##### ***Evaluation***

The student who asked the question offered insights because they made me reflect on the rationale behind the two assignments provided. When they asked the question, they did not seem to have the intention of challenging me, but rather, they seemed to be confused about what to write in a research proposal and wanted to understand why they had two different assignments for virtually the same task. Reflecting on this experience now, I was also unsure about how it differed from the topic submission, and yet I created the assignment of a research proposal because I believed that it was a mandatory step in RW. However, it turned out that the assignment was ineffective because it puzzled the students for having to submit almost the same

content again. They were still in the stage of brainstorming or refining ideas for their topics, not in the drafting stage; therefore, it did not make much sense to produce a coherent paragraph about their topics using citations at this stage. In actuality, the results of the term-end course questionnaire showed that many students, five out of seven respondents, found this assignment challenging. Since the purpose of the assignment was unclear, the students might have lost the motivation to complete it, as shown in a few late or no submissions.

### ***Result***

This critical incident gave me an opportunity to reconsider assignments for my future RW. Next time, it will be more meaningful to assign a revised topic submission instead of a research proposal so that the students can refine their ideas about the topic, not necessarily their writing. Moreover, after having the students revise their topic submissions based on my written feedback, I can ask them to submit an annotated bibliography as an additional assignment. The bibliography can consist of several parts, such as a citation, a summary, an evaluation, and a reflection for each source. That way, the students will be encouraged not only to find relevant sources but also to examine the quality of the sources and consider how to incorporate them into their writing more carefully. No matter what kind of assignments I give to my students, I need to understand the purpose of the assignments myself and be transparent about the expectations to avoid any confusion as above.

### **Critical Incident 2 – Sample Paper Analysis**

#### ***Complication***

When learning about how to create a paper outline after the submission of a research proposal, the students analyzed a sample paper arguing against the use of AI for recruitment purposes and engaged in the following classroom activities. They first chose the most appropriate headings from the given options to produce a simplified paper outline. Next, they created a more detailed outline by writing additional subheadings on their own. After that, they reviewed the features of an introduction, a topic sentence, and body paragraphs by discussing what information is included in each part of the sample paper. In addition, they evaluated and critiqued the sample paper by discussing what makes it effective and what can be improved. After learning about how to write a conclusion, they also wrote a conclusion for the sample paper, which was intentionally omitted for practice purposes.

#### ***Evaluation***

The students seemed to be actively engaged in all the activities of sample paper analysis. Since the topic of the paper was related to technology, they seemed to be more interested in the content, compared to when they needed to read a previous sample paper about the danger of sugar provided in the assigned textbook. It appeared that they found it helpful to check the sample paper to understand what was expected in their final paper more deeply. Since the paper analysis consisted of several hands-on scaffolded exercises, they seemed to be able to apply what they learned and reinforce their knowledge about the paper structure and the characteristics of each section of the paper. Furthermore, by critiquing the paper, it seemed that they had the opportunity to examine not only the organization but also the content, in particular, the quality of evidence in the sources. I acknowledge that these are all subjective perceptions of how successful the sample paper analysis went, but the positive interpretations of these

activities were supported by the student responses in the term-end course questionnaire. In fact, all the seven students who responded found the sample paper analysis either “very helpful” (57.1%) or “helpful” (42.9%).

### ***Result***

Although the overall impression of the sample paper analysis was positive, there is still room for improvement. As it was my first time teaching RW, the sample paper I used was not my previous students’ work, but it was a paper kindly provided by one of my colleagues who had taught a similar-themed RW course before. However, it did not perfectly fulfill all the assignment requirements I set for my students’ final paper. Next time I teach RW, it will be more effective to use sample papers written by former students because they should meet the expectations and possibly increase the motivation of future students, inspired by the quality of their peers’ papers. Hence, I attained permission to use the final papers from most of the students in this RW for future classes.

### **Critical Incident 3 – Changing Arguments**

#### ***Complication***

After submitting their outline, the students were asked to submit a 700–1000-word first draft, which contained the introduction and about half of the body paragraphs. Later, they were asked to submit a 1500–2000-word second draft with all the required sections of the paper, which was revised into a final draft. Throughout the term, they were required to attend at least three individual tutorials with me to receive feedback, including ones following the research proposal, the first draft, and the second draft. One student, who was writing about the benefits of online learning in the first draft, had few reliable sources to support their position on the topic. They argued that the advantages of online learning outweighed the disadvantages, but their sources only came from a website of a particular online cram school in Japan that presented biased information. In the tutorial after the first draft submission, I told them that their argument was weak and suggested finding more reliable sources. Thus, the student decided to change their stance, and they eventually wrote the second draft on the challenges of online learning with the solutions to the digital divide, using more trustworthy sources.

#### ***Evaluation***

Although it is natural that an argument develops as more research is done, it was a little surprising to see a student drastically change their argument after submitting the first draft because I did not expect them to do so at that stage. It seems that it was more manageable in this instance for them to find sources about the digital divide than online learning benefits. This incident indicates the significance of choosing a topic or a stance based on what kinds of evidence are found in the sources. This clearly shows that students should not choose a topic or develop an argument without adequately researching prior to writing. As a matter of fact, the results of the term-end questionnaire also supported the students’ difficulty with developing an argument and finding suitable sources to align with their claims.

### ***Result***

In this critical incident, the lack of appropriate sources in the student’s argument was identified in the tutorial on the first draft, but it could have been addressed earlier in the outline.

They had a detailed outline, including the sources to support each point, but I could not detect this problem because I mainly paid attention to the structure, not the reliability of the sources. Next time I teach RW, I could check the validity of sources in the outline stage more carefully, or if I give an annotated bibliography assignment, as mentioned earlier, I could even detect the problem before the outline. In any case, it is essential to teach research skills, especially how to find and evaluate sources, how to create research questions, and how to develop a thesis statement in the early stages before they submit a topic and a research proposal.

### **Critical Incident 4 – Plagiarism**

#### ***Complication***

Before submitting the first draft, the students had a lesson about avoiding plagiarism, where they discussed the ICU's policy on academic integrity. More specifically, they learned about the definition and types of plagiarism, possible penalties upon violation, and ways to avoid plagiarism. However, when submitting the second draft, one of the students plagiarized their work heavily, copy-pasting multiple passages from different websites without citing them. I was unable to give them points for the plagiarized work and had a tutorial with them to understand why they chose to plagiarize. They said that they knew plagiarism was wrong, but that they did not think their work could be considered plagiarism; however, they did not give clear reasons why they thought so. I explained why it was considered unacceptable and emphasized the severity of the academic dishonesty. Subsequently, I decided to give them an opportunity to redo the work for partial credit if they fixed all the plagiarized parts and resubmitted it as their second draft; however, they did not. Later, when they submitted their final draft, they did fix some parts and made a little progress, but in the end, it was not enough improvement for them to pass the course.

#### ***Evaluation***

From my viewpoint, it was shocking to see the excessive degree of plagiarism in my student's work because it seemed to me that it was clearly intentional and obvious, even though they said they were not aware in the tutorial. Based on my observation, it appeared that the student in my RW plagiarized for many different reasons. It might be that they simply did not know how to write the paper, including how to paraphrase, summarize, or cite information. They could have also lacked sufficient time to write the draft due to their other courses and merely wanted to submit the assignment on time. It is also possible that they underestimated my ability to detect plagiarism in their work, although I had explained to the whole class that I would use plagiarism-checking software. In fact, various factors seem to contribute to students' decisions to plagiarize in source-based writing. In Liu and Wu's (2020) study on Chinese undergraduate EFL students' perception of plagiarism in their academic writing, the student participants gave a variety of reasons for plagiarizing, such as laziness, low English proficiency, including poor paraphrasing abilities, and lack of knowledge about citation rules. Similarly, Can (2021) points out the EFL students' insufficient command of citation rules, possibly causing plagiarism in writing, claiming the need to teach those skills effectively. Therefore, the student in my RW could have plagiarized for a combination of different factors, primarily due to their lack of English writing skills.

### **Result**

The reasons why the student in my RW plagiarized remain uncertain because they did not explain why they chose to plagiarize fully, but the fact that they still plagiarized after the lesson on plagiarism indicates that they did not understand the seriousness of the issue. Whatever the reasons might be, the lessons should be improved to prevent students from choosing to plagiarize their work. As mentioned above, many EFL students have difficulty with paraphrasing, summarizing, and referencing when writing from sources. Therefore, it seems essential that I spend more time teaching those specific writing skills next time. For example, I could incorporate more exercises to practice paraphrasing and summarizing different materials, such as newspaper articles and research articles, at both sentence and paragraph levels. Another activity that could be done is citing and referencing exercises, where students identify mistakes in given citations and reference lists and try to correct them on their own. Besides strengthening their specific writing skills, to raise students' awareness of plagiarism, it might be effective to stress the negative impact of plagiarism on the students' success more explicitly by sharing the past cases of students who did not pass the course due to plagiarism.

### **Conclusion**

This paper highlighted the four critical incidents that occurred in my RW course during the winter term in 2021: (a) questioning assignment rationale, (b) sample paper analysis, (c) changing arguments, and (d) plagiarism. The analysis of each critical incident suggested that my future RW courses might benefit from adopting an annotated bibliography assignment, using a sample paper written by former students, teaching research skills for judging the usefulness of the sources at the initial phase, teaching paraphrasing, summarizing, and referencing skills carefully, and emphasizing the grave consequence of plagiarism.

Although this paper aimed to describe and analyze the incidents as objectively as possible, the subjectiveness of reflective practice cannot be overlooked. Another limitation of this paper is that the results of the term-end course questionnaire were used to supplement the analysis, but only a total of seven respondents contributed to the survey. Despite these limitations, writing this paper enabled me to reflect on my first experience of teaching RW and deepen understanding of my teaching values and expectations. To strengthen this initial reflection and make the research more cogent, it is necessary to gather additional evidence, such as teaching recordings, portfolios, and student interviews, next time. Further investigation could be done when I teach future RW courses and implement the suggested changes above. I sincerely hope that this paper will not only help me improve the course but also benefit future instructors who will teach RW and similar writing courses.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Peter Brereton for helping me with the RW course preparation before and during the term and for also giving valuable advice regarding how to approach this paper. Moreover, I would like to sincerely thank Keita Yagi for their generous support as my mentor during my first year of teaching at ICU. I would also like to



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thank Jeanne Bufalino, my former graduate school classmate, for their help with the paper revision.

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