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Encouraging Critical Thinking: A Strategy for Commenting on College Papers

Patrick Slattery, University of Michigan

Many assignments in college require students to write on complex topics about which they have little or no firsthand knowledge, and therefore many teachers ask their students to use multiple (and often contradictory) sources of information to write about these topics. We are probably all familiar with the kinds of problems that students can have with this type of writing; many students, for instance, initially have trouble with the skills of summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, and citing sources. In my experience, however, students writing from sources have had more difficulty with analyzing divergent viewpoints and staking out and justifying their own positions. To help my students with these intellectual processes, I developed a strategy for writing end comments that encourage critical thinking by both supporting and challenging the students' ideas. Before illustrating this strategy, I will describe several papers that typify the problems my students often have with writing college papers.

Representative Student Papers

The following synopses of three student papers illustrate the types of essays—dogmatic, nonjudgmental, and analytical—that my students tend to write when they confront the multiple points of view expressed in their sources. Each of these papers focused on a complex topic and brought to bear on that topic several magazine, newspaper, and journal articles.

A Dogmatic Essay

The author of "Using Animals for Laboratory Testing" recognized that scientists and antivivisectionists disagree about the use of lab animals in research, explaining that "many feel that animals should not be used for testing because it is cruel and inhumane," whereas "others feel that they must be used in order to make medical advances." According to the paper, however, this diversity of opinion is not really legitimate. "Medical advancements have benefited the members of the antivivisectionist groups," the student wrote. "Don't they realize this? When taking an aspirin tablet or a bite of prepackaged food, the members of those groups should realize that a laboratory animal had to try it first!" To justify his position in favor of animal research the student presented the view of a high-school teacher I will call "Mr. Green": "Mr. Green, religion teacher at Memorial High School, says, 'The Bible tells us that animals were put forth on earth by God in order to serve man.'" After summarizing Mr. Green's point of view, the student modeled his own position exactly on that of this authority, concluding, "I believe that vivisection is ethically and morally right. I believe that animals were put forth on earth by God to serve man."

A Nonjudgmental Essay

The author of "Soap Operas: How They Are Affecting Viewers" realized that some authorities believe watching soaps is detrimental and that others think it is beneficial. She explained that one expert argues that teenagers tend "to misjudge the amount of sex between unmarried partners and married partners" and "to overestimate signifi-

cantly the number of unfaithful spouses, divorces, illegitimate children and abortions in the real world.” Furthermore, according to the student’s paper, some experts believe that even adults have trouble distinguishing reality from fantasy: once, when a character was kidnapped on a daytime soap, an older viewer “placed a long-distance telephone call to the network station and told them where they could find the missing character.” “On the other hand,” the student wrote, “some studies have shown it may be beneficial to watch soaps.” She noted that one authority believes that “teens who watch soaps tend to take fewer drugs because the soaps serve as the same kind of an escape as drugs do” and that some adults “may even be prescribed to watch a soap opera if there is a character dealing with the same problem the patient is.” This student offered a balanced picture of the topic, concluding, “All in all, whether you should watch soap operas or not seems left up to your own judgment. I think it all depends on your own view of soap operas.”

An Analytical Essay

The author of a third paper, “Terrorism: Protecting US Embassies and Diplomats,” evaluated solutions set forth by three experts—increased security, better intelligence, and military retaliation. The student wrote that if security included “less glass and fewer windows, blast-resistant walls, and better electronic monitoring systems,” embassies would be “better able to resist substantial damage from terrorist attacks,” but he acknowledged that “this plan will not curtail the attacks themselves.” Considering the second solution, the student explained that “as information about a planned terrorist attack is obtained, the US can activate such preventive strikes as arresting terrorists before they can attack or moving military forces to the threatened area,” but he admitted that intelligence “cannot curtail the effects of terrorist attacks when they do happen.” After pointing out both solutions’ strengths and weaknesses, the author reasoned that a combination of the two proposals would create a more comprehensive, and therefore better, solution, writing, “Increased intelligence must be used in conjunction with better security.” Turning to the last solution, the student pointed out that some officials, many of whom believe that “idle threats create the impression that America is impotent,” argue that military force is the best solution, but he also noted that “some experts of terrorism believe that actual retaliation will . . . fuel anti-Americanism, thus resulting in even more terrorist attacks against US embassies.” Responding to these two viewpoints, he argued that because “the risks in using and threatening to use retaliation are too high . . . retaliation should not be included in Washington’s plan to better defend US embassies abroad.”

Comments to Support and Challenge Student Thinking

I suspect that many composition teachers can recognize in these three examples some of the ways in which their own students think and write about multiple perspectives; nevertheless, it is difficult to account for the differences in the student papers. Theorists in cognitive development suggest one kind of account—the possibility that differences in students’ thinking are related to intellectual orientations that develop during college. In *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (Holt, 1970), William Perry suggests that “dualistic” thinkers, who assume that legitimate authorities have access to absolute knowledge about reality, dogmatically adopt the point of view of the “right” experts and denounce the position of the “wrong” ones. Students who construe experience from a “multiplistic” orientation, however, might implicitly assume that objective reality exists, but, since they do not

believe that it can be known without uncertainty, assume that one point of view is as valid as another. Finally, "relativistic" thinkers realize that authorities cannot know reality without uncertainty and yet, through analyzing and evaluating alternative opinions, make judgments concerning which points of view probably offer better or worse approximations to reality. Although Perry's model seems to account for some of the differences in the three student papers, the scheme can be problematic since its research base was limited to male undergraduates at Harvard. In "William Perry and Liberal Education," Patricia Bizzell argues that the model is culture-specific (*College English* 5 [Sept. 1984]: 447-54), and in *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (Basic Books, 1986), Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule point out that it is gender-biased. Furthermore, Perry's scheme can lull teachers into reducing differences in thinking to a series of sequential positions, a reduction that can lead to pigeonholing students into particular stages (see, for example, Christopher Burnham, "The Perry Scheme and the Teaching of Writing," *Rhetoric Review* 4 [Jan. 1986]: 152-58).

In spite of the limitations of Perry's model, it is valuable because it suggests a strategy for commenting on student papers. To encourage critical thinking, a composition teacher can tailor end comments to the intellectual approaches each of his or her students takes in different papers. I believe teachers' comments foster intellectual growth most effectively when they both support students in terms of how they currently think and challenge them to think in slightly more complex ways. Students need to be challenged, since it is when they are confronted with experiences they cannot conceptualize that they develop more complex types of thinking. Without sufficient support, however, a student can become overwhelmed by the painful and risky process of intellectual growth.

To respond to the first student paper, "Using Animals for Laboratory Testing," a teacher could support the student's recognition of competing points of view but challenge him to realize that this diversity of perspectives is epistemologically legitimate. A support response could praise the student's introductory summary of scientists' and antivivisectionists' perspectives, and a challenge response could encourage him to remain more open to these opposing points of view and to realize that no experts have access to absolute knowledge. The challenge responses I write usually take the form of questions. Comments such as the following might be used to respond to the first paper:

Support Response

In the beginning of your paper, you do a good job of summarizing the viewpoints that scientists and antivivisectionists have on animal experimentation. The topic is complex because both groups have some legitimate claims.

Challenge Response

On what basis do you reject the antivivisectionist view and accept the scientists' perspective? Can you imagine a situation in which it would not be ethically sound or scientifically valid to conduct experiments on animals? Can you identify the assumptions of any of the experts you refer to? What might be the particular biases of a religion teacher, a scientist, and a member of the animal rights coalition? Do you have biases concerning this topic?

To comment on the second paper, "Soap Operas: How They Are Affecting Viewers," a teacher could support the student's understanding of divergent points of view but challenge her to recognize the relative worth of these perspectives. A support response could commend the student's openness to experts who have contradictory opin-

ions about soap operas, and a challenge response could encourage her to structure the essay in a way that lends itself to comparing and analyzing these divergent viewpoints. A teacher might use comments such as these to respond to the second student paper:

Support Response

In researching your topic, you've found that experts disagree about the effects that soap operas have on viewers, and in your paper you summarize the experts' viewpoints accurately and fairly.

Challenge Response

You structure your paper around the negative and positive effects of soap operas, first presenting the negative effects that some researchers say soap operas have on teenagers and adults, and then presenting the positive effects that other researchers say soaps have on these same age groups. To evaluate these experts' contradictory views, you might try organizing the essay around the two age groups rather than around positive and negative effects. Can you consider the potential positive and negative effects of watching soaps on one age group at a time, teenagers for instance, and compare the different points of view? What types of research, evidence, and reasoning do the experts provide? Do some conclusions seem more valid than others?

The comments suggested for the first two papers are designed to help the writers think more critically. But because the author of the third essay, "Terrorism: Protecting US Embassies and Diplomats," already seems to think and write reflectively about his topic, this goal seems inappropriate for the end comment on his paper. In responding to this essay, a teacher could commend the student for evaluating the experts' proposals and challenge him to think just as critically in other content areas. A support response could point out that the student reflectively evaluates the experts' proposals and bases his own judgment on critical analysis. A challenge response could encourage him to think critically about another paper topic. A teacher's response to the third paper might look something like this:

Support Response

You evaluate the experts' proposals well. By analyzing each solution's strengths and weaknesses, you persuasively argue for a combination of increased security and improved intelligence. Furthermore, although you decide against using military retaliation, you consider an opinion in favor of this solution and seem to understand the reasoning behind it.

Challenge Response

As you draft your essay on US responses to world hunger, try to analyze your new subject as you have this topic, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of different proposals. What have been the successes and failures of US attempts to abate world hunger? What are the political, social, and economic contexts from which the different programs have emerged? After evaluating past attempts to curb hunger, see if you can make any recommendations for the future.

I believe we can respond individually to our students' papers with comments that both support and challenge different intellectual orientations. Although we need to keep in mind the limitations of developmental models such as Perry's, these schemes allow us, I think, to empathize more easily with our students as they struggle with college writing. More importantly, however, theories of conceptual development can give us insights into how to comment on students' papers in terms of critical thinking.