The use of personal experience as a strategy for critical reading and writing. A Practice Report

Ella R. Kahu and **Hannah Gerrard**
Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

Abstract*

Increasingly it is recognised that universities are preparing students for an uncertain future. Accordingly, key graduate attributes of Massey University's redeveloped Bachelor of Arts degree are critical reading and writing skills and engaged citizenship. The authors teach two large first-year courses in these topics. Student engagement is critical in these courses because the student cohort is diverse, the courses are compulsory, and the topics are developmental. Some of the assessments have been designed to engage students with the use of personal experience as a strategy for critical reading and writing. While not without its challenges, this approach has proven to be effective: emotionally engaging students and enabling them to critically reflect on themselves and the world around them through the development of connected skills and dispositions in critical reading and writing.

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Introduction

This emerging initiative paper reports on two first-year courses that explicitly draw on student engagement theory to actively engage students through assessments that use personal experience as a strategy for critical reading and writing. The courses, part of a cluster of core Bachelor of Arts (BA) courses, teach identity and citizenship, and critical reading and writing skills. The particular nature and context of the courses led us to look for new ways to actively engage students in their learning. One strategy was developing assessment tasks that ask students to use their existing experiences and beliefs to generate and ground their critical commentary on reading material. This approach allows students to practise and develop key skills and dispositions in critical reading and writing. It also fosters all three dimensions of engagement (behaviour, emotion, cognition) with a particular focus on emotional engagement, students' interest and enthusiasm.

Context

Tertiary institutions are increasingly faced with the challenge of preparing students for an unknown future – the jobs students will do may not yet exist. More and more employers are also recognising the importance of 'soft' skills. Recent research at Google is a prime example – the study showed that the characteristics of success at the technology firm are skills such as critical thinking, communicating, listening, having empathy, and problem solving; in contrast, technology skills were eighth on the list (Davidson, 2017). Relatedly, Barnett (2004) argues that the rapidly changing world means students need a greater "sense of themselves and of their relationship with the world around them" in order to manage and work with the world's increasing complexity and uncertainty

(p. 253). He suggests that learning for this unknown future demands an ontological turn where learning is best understood not in terms of skills or knowledge but rather dispositions and human qualities.

Recognition of these issues informed Massey University's decision to recently redevelop its Bachelor of Arts degree and to add five compulsory courses with two strands: transferable skills and citizenship (Massey University, 2014). The BA graduate profile includes "participate as engaged, informed and ethical citizens" (Massey University, 2017, p. 1) as a key attribute, recognising that the ideal of higher education is that students emerge able to "add to the world and be exemplars of human being" (Barnett & Coate, 2004, p. 137). This emerging initiative focuses on two of three compulsory first-year courses; one teaching practices of university-level writing and inquiry, and the other, the first-year citizenship course, focusing on identity and belonging. The other core courses are a first-year critical thinking course, and second- and third-year citizenship courses.

The first-year citizenship course starts with concepts of identity, belonging, participation, context, and citizenship. The course then has four modules: Faces – Māori as tangata whenua (indigenous), and the current make-up of New Zealand; Voices – how people express their identities through politics, protest, and art; Places – how identity is shaped by the places where we encounter others (university, home, and digital); and Stories – a critical look at three narratives that shape our national identity (egalitarianism, clean and green, and Anzac[1]). Each week the students read a chapter from the course textbook (Cain, Kahu, & Shaw, 2017) and a secondary academic or popular reading. As well as essays, they have a weekly task of a 300-word critical reflection on an idea from those

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[1] Anzac Day is a national holiday commemorating New Zealand and Australian veterans. The First World War is often seen as a defining moment in the development of an independent New Zealand national identity.

readings. The first-year writing and inquiry course guides students through a sequence of three major assignments. The first, a summary and response, asks students to work with a short yet complex text on the theme of either cultural, online, or student identity. The second asks students to rhetorically analyse an academic article on a topic relevant to current Aotearoa New Zealand society and culture. The final assignment asks students to use this article and other sources to compose a research-informed argument on a connected topic of their choice. The course is taught in a small-group writing workshop, where students are supported through drafting, revision, and peer review, and taught useful writing strategies.

Importantly, the core courses have been designed with linkages to give students a sense of a cohesive whole and to enable them to use their developing skills and knowledge across the core. For instance, the readings in the writing and inquiry course often have themes that connect to the first-year citizenship course, and the latter aims to also develop the students' critical writing and thinking skills.

Engagement, students' emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to their learning, is widely recognised as critical to student success; students who are engaged experience better outcomes in terms of knowledge, skill development, grades, and retention at university (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Engagement is important for all students, but our courses have three characteristics that mean it is a particular priority. First, the transition to university is difficult as students work through the process of adapting to university ways of teaching and learning; our first-year courses are taught in the first semester and are often the very first courses that new students complete. Second, as well as campus-based classes, the courses are delivered digitally to a large cohort of distance students. This diverse cohort includes many older students, first-in-family students, and students without much university preparation and/or without recent experience of education. Many of these students are also studying part-time while juggling care-giving and work commitments. These distance students have traditionally low retention rates and therefore a strong teaching presence and effective engagement strategies are essential. Finally, the courses are compulsory, interdisciplinary, and focused on self-development. Research with first-year university students highlights that they are more engaged and motivated when they can easily see the relevance of their learning to their future work goals (Kahu, Nelson, & Picton, 2017); courses such as ours must convince students of the relevance and importance of course material, and overcome some students' resistance to taking compulsory courses outside their major.

Aims

Our courses' design draws on Kahu's (2013) framework of student engagement, which views engagement as multidimensional: emotional engagement, the student's interest and enthusiasm for the content; behavioural engagement, the student's time, effort, and activities; and cognitive engagement, the student's deep learning and self-regulation. The framework synthesises the engagement literature and illustrates the diverse range of institutional and student factors that interact to influence whether or not a student is engaged or disengaged. A later modification of the framework argues that the student experience occurs in an educational interface – a dynamic place at the intersection of student and institution (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). This approach recognises that students do not leave their existing identities, beliefs, and experiences at the door when they enter an educational institution but rather higher education is an "ongoing transformation of being" (Barnett, 2007, p. 38). This aligns with the BA core's theme of citizenship. The aim of the initiative then was to design assessments that would

actively engage our students in a way that would enable skill development alongside such a transformation.

Assessments are a critical aspect of course design. As Boud and Falchikov (2007) remind us, assessment "has the major influence on student learning. It directs attention to what is important, acts as an incentive for study and has a powerful effect on students' approaches to their work" (p. 3). The key feature of this emerging initiative is the use of personal experience as a strategy for provoking critical reading and in turn writing. Both courses ask students to use their personal experiences to generate and ground their critical commentary on reading material. Most notably, in the first-year citizenship course, students write a weekly 300-word paragraph: a "critical reflection or reaction to an idea or issue from that week's content that particularly resonates for them". In the writing and inquiry course, students use personal experience in the first assessment as evidence in their response to the reading.

Personal reflection was built into the assessments for two related reasons. First, the approach models some key practices and dispositions that are among the implied outcomes of citizenship education. It is relatively 'accessible' as an approach in that it invites students to occupy a position of some authority, even as they face the challenge of framing their experience in the terms of the university and taking on our discourses as their own (Bartholomae, 1986). However, the courses push students to use their experience as evidence for an emerging claim, rather than treating it as self-evident or simply an example of a concept from a source too authoritative to be questioned. The critical learning objectives of the courses and the implicit political stance of citizenship education mean simply 'relating' to the course readings is insufficient; students need to demonstrate that their own interpretations of experience are being actively reworked in conversation with the reading,

even if (or perhaps ideally if) that is because their experience challenges or extends the argument of the reading. We would contend that this reading/writing practice is a good example of where 'content' and 'skills' merge in the teaching of citizenship – inviting students to a conversation where their perspective and experience matter, and where they have to engage in respectful and thoughtful dialogue, models a kind of civic disposition and a set of civic practices (see also Gerrard, 2017). This is particularly challenging and crucial work when students are working on topics of deep personal significance, such as those having to do with the complex social problems or debates in contemporary New Zealand society that feature in both courses.

Second, using course readings to reframe personal experience (or vice versa) is likely to lead to intrinsic rather than instrumental motivation to understand the material. Constructivism, a philosophy considered important for adult learners and for distance learning, argues that people construct their own understanding and knowledge through experience and reflection (Huang, 2002). Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) contrast procedural engagement, where the student is behaviourally and cognitively engaged as a means to an end such as gaining good grades or completing a qualification, with substantive engagement, where the student has an intrinsically motivated investment in the learning driven by their emotional engagement with the content. Giving students space to reflect critically on their previous life experiences and their current perspectives facilitates this substantive engagement, making the course more relevant and interesting to the student. This emotional engagement drives both behavioural and cognitive engagement. 'Story' is a powerful mode in public writing today (Tumarkin, 2016) but here it is equally crucial as it enacts a 'citizenship' curriculum that demands students juxtapose and examine diverse experiences of the shared world, and

situate their own perspectives in context and in relationship.

Impacts

The courses have now been running for two years (five iterations), and while no formal research has been undertaken, feedback from the teaching staff and from student course evaluations indicate that this aspect of the courses is effective and is valued by students. The use of personal experience in this manner not only provides a motivating context for learning: it models a disposition towards critical reading and writing, and develops these skills, in ways that support students in both the assignments under discussion and in subsequent coursework in our courses and others.

By asking students to draw their own experience into dialogue with course texts, we facilitate their practice and development of perspective-taking, by implicitly endorsing their authority to engage in academic conversations and projects, and by asking them to see their experience as material to be interpreted in conversation, rather than as self-evident. They practise selecting and elaborating an example so it can serve as the basis for an emerging claim, a crucial generic writing skill that later assignments ask for with ever-increasing complexity and use of multiple source texts; here, students practise with examples from their own experience, bracketing the challenges of multiple source texts for the moment and focusing on issues of pertinence, precision, and detail in representation. They also develop awareness of audience as they consider what from their personal experience has public relevance, and what is not merely an instance of 'relatedness' but material that might further a conversation if cast in the terms and concepts offered by another writer.

In turn, this framing of academic reading and writing as conversation casts reading and writing not simply as comprehension and reporting of information, but as ongoing inquiry and knowledge-making. Here again we see disposition and skill as intertwined, as students' capacity to engage with readings is deepened with the self-reflexivity built into our course design. Giving personal experience this space in academic work means that critical thinking is not something only to be directed at the arguments of others, but at the student's own assumptions. In turn, the arguments of others take on layers of complexity as they are understood as perspectives developed in context (not simply weakened by 'bias' but richer for being particular and situated). In course evaluations, students comment on how the critical reflections, and the feedback they receive, are valuable for their skill development, sometimes explicitly evoking the close links between writing and self-reflexivity: "They improved my writing and helped me look at things from various angles and think more critically about what I was reading rather than just my view". Pushed not merely to relate but to historicise, anatomise, compare, and question their perspectives, and to extend that critical thinking to the perspectives of the writers they read, students develop capacity to see ideas and experiences in relation (recall Barnett's (2004) concern with students' "sense of themselves and of their relationship with the world around them" (p. 253) quoted earlier).

This is not always an easy process; the approach can bring to the fore quite deeply-held and unarticulated assumptions, crucial to any interrogation of identity. Thus, the student's emotional engagement is not always 'positive' in the sense of enthusiasm or pleasure: "Having to think about many uncomfortable issues about this land we live in was often confronting and changed my views of things as I have become much more politically aware". Helping students work through conceptual difficulty and confronting material is part of our

pedagogy, and part of the challenge for staff in marking and providing feedback on these types of tasks. This is particularly challenging when the student's response dismisses the argument of the reading, whether out of hostility, feeling threatened, or lack of awareness. It is complex work to simultaneously acknowledge students' interpretation of their experience while pushing them to be open and to reflect more deeply on the connections between that experience and the reading. The pedagogy of both courses thus works hard to show students how their experience can be framed and their commentary on that experience directed such that it evidently enters into *conversation* with ideas in the readings, rather than expecting that experience to speak for itself. The use of multiple iterations or drafting and revision in assignment design is also crucial for development here.

Of course, not all students value the opportunity to reflect on existing views and beliefs, or take it up in depth. Sometimes students' work is limited to personal story with little critical reflection or explicit connection to the course concepts, and a few students in the first-year citizenship course are resistant to bringing in any personal experience, with one commenting that the purpose of attending university is not to "navel gaze". However, when asked the open-ended question "what aspects of the course most helped your learning" in regard to the first-year citizenship course, a large number of students mention the value of the critical reflections. Their comments indicate that our goal of emotionally engaging students is successfully met; for example: "I think the critical reflections are an amazing way to take course content and make it applicable to a student's everyday life, thoughts, beliefs, and practices". Teaching staff also comment on the diversity of topics and experiences that students use in the tasks, and the thoughtful reflections that they generate, illustrating the value of this approach.

While our curricular context with its dedicated space and mandate for developing civic competence is not available in all institutions, we would argue that our concern here with these intertwined outcomes of disposition and skill development, and engagement, is of interest to undergraduate education more broadly. Developing students' skills in reading and writing in dialogue and with a disposition towards situatedness in the ways we have discussed is of relevance to many curricula, as are strategies that draw academic reading and writing into richly engaging territory where students develop a personal investment in their academic work. Such acts of critical reading and writing, where students can read a complex civic scene and conversation, and respond, will certainly be crucial in that uncertain future.

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