Teaching Critical Reading at the Undergraduate Level

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Introduction

At the undergraduate level, most courses in language concentrate on communications skills and academic writing but not on critical reading which is an important prerequisite for writing critically and ultimately developing critical thinking. This paper argues that in academic contexts, it is not just enough to read texts and understand their content, but it is equally important to examine the claims and evidence presented, verify the results of an experiment and then decide whether to believe in the text or not. Further, using an example   the paper illustrates how a text can be read critically in the classroom.

At the tertiary level, students are expected to write research reports, dissertations and research articles for their courses. They are expected to develop a given topic into a well-structured essay in their course exams and other international exams such as GRE or TOEFL. They could be asked to develop a central idea, take up a position in the context of an academic debate and put forward points for and against that particular position, adopt a perspective to analyse the given problem / situation, and link theory and evidence to draw a conclusion and critique the conclusions drawn. In their research articles, students are expected to show a clear understanding of the relevant literature and use that information to build their theses. Instead of blind acceptance of the matters presented, if students analyse it, they will develop professionally, and in the long run be able to participate in the larger academic debate in their areas of interest and contribute to the growth of the discipline.

Critical reading is a necessary prerequisite for critical writing and critical thinking skills. In contrast with general reading (where the reader aims at merely understanding the content), critical reading involves among others, a clear understanding of the structure of the text (which includes understanding the relationship between parts and rhetorical organization), interpreting it within the context and judging its credibility based on the strength of the arguments / evidence presented. Surprisingly, this skill is neglected in the curriculum as well as in classrooms. In this article, I will attempt to explain why critical reading is an important skill and illustrate how it can be taught.

What is Critical Reading?

Reading can be non-critical or critical. A non-critical (or pre-critical) reading is a linear activity whose goal is to make sense of the text as a sequence of thoughts, to understand the information, ideas and opinions stated in the text from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph. As a result, the focus of reading is limited to a mere understanding of the content.

Critical reading on the other hand is an analytical activity where the reader reads and rereads a text to identify the patterns of organization; carefully examines language usage and consistency of arguments; understands implicit assumptions and theoretical frameworks chosen or not chosen; understands the context of the

content and evaluates its current relevance; examines the methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation for consistency and bias and finally arrives at the underlying meaning of the text as a whole. Critical reading thus involves bringing outside knowledge and values to evaluate the given text and decide what to ultimately accept as true.

Why do we Need to Read a Text Critically?

The next question is why we need to read texts critically. After all, in academic contexts authors mean to be honest, logical and objective. Still, as Wallace & Wry (2011) observe, sometimes it is possible that the authors have been misled by the evidence into concluding something that others might consider as untrue. Similarly, the logical arguments of the text may have some flaws or some preconceived notions or biases which may have influenced its arguments and conclusion. Therefore, when students read a particular text they need to be aware of its logical fallacies and preconceived notions or assumptions if any and develop a strong sense of what is research and what is not.

Strategies

Critical reading basically involves asking three types of questions while reading a text. They are: analysis asks, interpretation asks and evaluation asks (Duncan, n.d.). We will discuss each of these in detail with reference to a text. The text that I have chosen the excerpt from is an article written by Bill Thompson for BBC entitled "Open Societies Need Open Systems" (for the complete article see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8493006.stm). The article is a journalistic piece of writing. It was written in the context of a dispute between Apple and Adobe over Apple's iPhone not supporting Adobe's Flash system. It shows that the text can be an important source of information if you want your students to form

an opinion about open access to systems, technology and products, an issue which is more relevant now than ever before.

Analysis Asks

When we analyse a text, we look at how it is organized and how the ideas are presented in it. Under analysis, the first question we should ask ourselves is: What is the thesis or overall theory of the text? This can be achieved by looking at its title, introductory and concluding paragraphs or abstract. If we look at the title "Open Societies Need Open Systems", we can guess that the article is about freedom of choices. The word "open", which occurs twice in the title, usually refers to freedom, free access, or no limitations or restrictions. The word "systems" could refer to socio-economic systems in a society (such as marriage, democracy), or computer systems. When we read the beginning and concluding paragraphs, it becomes clear that "open societies" refers to a democratic set up and "open systems" refers to computer systems. We can also infer that the author is against restricting their access to the common public in democratic societies. The next task is to identify what type of text it is. The word "need" in the title indicates that the text is probably an argumentative piece in favour of open systems. The by-line ("must be defended") confirms that it is an argumentative text and the phrase "must constantly be alert" in the concluding paragraph further supports that the text is argumentative. In an argumentative text we expect the author to take up a stance and argue strongly in favour of it.

The next question is: How is the text organized? By now, we know the text is argumentative in nature. So we can expect that in the text the author puts forth his argument in favour of free access to systems and backs his claims with reasons and examples. The thesis statement in the introductory paragraph amply hints at what

we can expect in the remaining text: "…two skirmishes in a war that could define the future shape of the internet and may even have some impact on those societies…". We can also predict that the author is going to talk about "two skirmishes" in detail and explain why they are significant in the debate on free access to systems.

The next questions are: What are the supporting points? How do these supporting points create the argument? How do they relate to each other and to the thesis? If we read the body of the text critically, we can find these answers. The author discusses two disputes in the domain of computer systems as supporting details to strengthen the argument. Let us first understand the content of the text: paragraphs 2 and 3 are about a tussle between Amazon and Macmillan, whereas paragraphs 4 to 6 are about a dispute between Apple and Adobe. In the first case, there was a series of events: i) Amazon proposed some changes in e-pricing; ii) Macmillan was not happy about it and objected; iii) Macmillan's objection made Amazon unhappy and Amazon removed all Macmillan stocks from its website; iv) There was widespread criticism about Amazon's action; v) Amazon had to put Macmillan's stocks back on the site. In the second case, there was a series of arguments and counter-arguments over Apple's products not supporting Adobe's Flash: i) The iPad was launched without Flash support; ii) Apple argued that Flash was responsible for more crash reports in Mac OS X; iii) Adobe counter-argued that Flash is de facto standard for rich media content; iv) Apple did not agree; it said new standards are available. In both these events, as the author remarks in paragraph 13, there "lies an attempt to limit the ways in which the network and the computers connected to it can be used" and ultimately they "serve the interests of corporations." Both the events are related to computer systems and in both there was a threat to open access to systems.

If we read carefully, we observe that in addition to narrating two factual events (as described in the preceding paragraphs), the author makes statements that make his stance explicit: "Neither adversary in the current disputes clearly has right on its side", "I will not go gladly into a locked-down world". He uses two analogies to support his arguments: i) Just as religion was used as opium in the past (luring people away from questioning authorities with a false promise of a better world to come), today corporate interests are forcing closed systems, locked-down technologies and wholly-owned supply chains on the masses on the pretext of providing better services to them; ii) "Just as we must work to retain our democratic forms of government in the face of adversity, so we must constantly be alert for those who would remove open systems in the name of efficiency and effectiveness" (in the concluding paragraph).

The concluding paragraph links with the introductory paragraph: in the introduction the author mentions two events that could "define the future shape of the internet and may even have some impact on those societies". In the conclusion, the analogy ties together both societal systems and computer systems and the author argues that we must fight for openness in both.

Interpretation Asks

Once we have understood the content, structure and organization of the text, we move to its interpretation. Here we are basically concerned with the context in which the text was written and its current relevance. We first ask ourselves: In what context was it written? The text was written in February 2010, when the dispute between Apple and Adobe had escalated. Steve Jobs wrote an open letter defending Apple's actions in April 2010 (http://www.apple.com/hotnews/thoughts-on-flash/). His action was criticized and the entire episode drew a lot of

media attention (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apple_and_Adobe_Flash_controversy for details). Since the issue was serious, one can understand the strong position taken up by the writer in the text.

The next question is: Is the text relevant now? How can it be interpreted in the light of new developments? We can say that the issue is still relevant. One can connect it with disputes between Apple and Samsung, Nokia and HTC, Microsoft and Kyocera, Oracle and Google, and Motorola and Microsoft among others in the technology domain. In the broader domain, one can connect it with the European Antitrust Law, the Indian Competition Act, etc. In fact it may also be relevant currently due to the raging controversy on 'net neutrality'.

Evaluation Asks

The final set of questions we will be asking are related to the credibility and the importance of the text.

Since the text is an argumentative piece, we need to ask: Does the evidence and reasoning adequately support the theory/theories presented? The writer uses two factual events as evidence to support the main thesis. This is more credible than imaginary events or examples. Also, the writer quotes experts in technology, well-known blog writers and thinkers. The analogy of democracy may appeal to people since in many countries there are strong clashes over democracy. Another related question is: Is the argument logically consistent and convincing? Are there any logical fallacies? One can see that from the very beginning the author's position is consistent. The conclusions are drawn on the basis of factual events and experts' opinions. However, the opium analogy is not very convincing. Here the writer seems to be overreacting. Also, he mentions democracy only in the end and does not adequately build the analogy.

Next we check the reliability of the author, sources and publisher. A check shows that the writer is well known in his area of expertise (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Thompson_(technology_writer) for details). Moreover, the text was published on BBC, which is a trustworthy entity. All these factors make the reader take the arguments in the text seriously before forming his / her position on the issue.

Conclusion

Critical reading helps in writing academic texts. In fact, there is a strong association between reading and writing. The key to successful writing is to anticipate what the audience expects from the text and how they would approach it. A critical reader will keep in mind all the above-mentioned aspects while writing a text.

References

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