

# Using Short Writing Assignments to Teach Critical Thinking in a Large Intermediate Micro Course

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# Overview

- ▶ Why Writing?
- ▶ Task design elements.
- ▶ Scaling up.
- ▶ Lessons learned.

# Instructor goals

- ▶ Achieve learning course objectives.
- ▶ Students able to transfer knowledge outside of specific course context.

# Course Design

Learning Objectives  
(Bloom's  
Taxonomy)

Create  
Evaluate  
Analyze  
Apply  
Understand  
Remember

Learning Activities

Algorithmic  
Problems

Assessments

Midterms/Finals

# Why Writing?

- ▶ Writing to learn.
- ▶ Open-ended: explore topic in-depth, independently, and critically.
- ▶ Transferable skills: authentic tasks.

Implementing them at scale?

# Is Just Writing Enough?

- ▶ Writing is the mode of delivery. Economics is the focus.
- ▶ Key: Assessment design
  - ▶ Learning objectives at forefront.
  - ▶ Guide students through the process.

# Task Design Elements

- ▶ Critical Thinking (Brookfield 2012)
  - ▶ **Open-ended:** Identify assumptions and link to inferences.
  - ▶ **Evaluation task:** generate different arguments, choice based on a set of defensible criteria, preferably using supporting evidence.
- ▶ Transferability: abstract conceptual **connections** between the situation and class material.

# Implementation

Narrow course concepts  $\iff$  specific, student relevant context

- ▶ Consistent grading.
- ▶ Academic integrity.

Ask: How did I approach this task? How can I design supports for students to guide them through this process?



# Examples

- ▶ Force students to work for 10 hours in a course or not?
- ▶ Buy disability insurance or save?
- ▶ Recommend a type of price discrimination for new education app.

# Choices to Lower Costs

- ▶ Short (750 words) with a single topic choice for all students.
- ▶ Well defined concepts: consistent, efficient grading.
- ▶ Three assignments  $\Rightarrow$  prior feedback becomes formative.
- ▶ Use technology + rubrics.

# Rubrics

- ▶ Transparency about grading criteria.
- ▶ Communicates expectations and indicate relative importance.
- ▶ Information in the categories makes giving feedback efficient.

# Example

	Excellent
Critical  Economic Analysis	21-25
Use of ECO206 framework	Appropriate framework chosen and clear from context.
Quality of Economic Analysis	Argument is specific, focused, developed very well without any errors.
Critical Analysis	Strengths and weaknesses of argument tied to assumptions and the conditions under which they hold. Evaluation criterion, i.e. why they chose Adopt/Not, clear. Counterarguments addressed related to own argument and addressed effectively.
Application of economic concepts to real world situation	Excellent job translating task into framework. Shows independent thinking and any new ideas are developed and integrated into analysis.

# Lessons Learned

- ▶ Integrate writing into the fabric of the course.
- ▶ Identify challenges unique to your context and design around them. E.g. ELL.
- ▶ Make communication a two-way process.
- ▶ Continually experiment.

# Writing in Intermediate Micro

- ▶ Way to develop and assess critical thinking and transferable skills.
- ▶ Writing as delivery mechanism.
- ▶ Narrow, specific tasks with rubrics help economize grading resources.
- ▶ Requires communication, experimentation and integration to be successful.

# Contact Information

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