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Owning my thoughts was difficult: Encouraging students to read and write critically in a tertiary qualitative research methods course

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Abstract

This paper adds to the nascent literature on teaching research methods and what students learn from courses and assessment. Postgraduate students are often confronted with large amounts of reading, and the content of material can be intimidating. Convincing them also to engage critically with readings is even more difficult. We report on a successful strategy used to help postgraduate students in a qualitative research methods course develop the skills to read efficiently and critically. We outline the synopsis method and report on an evaluation of students' experiences of it as an assessment and learning tool.

Evaluation showed that students saw their learning experience as challenging and rewarding and could articulate how the synopsis method was useful for specific reading/writing skills, critical engagement and reflexivity, content knowledge, and motivation. We were surprised students found it novel to be asked to question or critique 'published' papers and articulate subjective reflections on them. Our evaluation shows that the synopsis method is an effective learning strategy to improve students' critical reading and writing skills.

We argue that in learning the craft of qualitative research, students must understand not only how to summarise and critique but must also master the skill of articulating personal, reflexive responses.

Keywords

teaching qualitative research methods; critical reflection; critical reading and writing; self-directed learning

Introduction: The Challenge of Critical Reading and Reflective Writing

Encouraging postgraduate students to complete assigned reading, let alone engage actively with literature, is difficult for those teaching research methods. We report on an evaluation of a successful strategy to encourage students to read literature using qualitative research methods and develop critical reading, writing and reflection skills. This work contributes an evidence-based response to invitations from Wagner, Garner and Kawulich (2011), Earley (2014) and Kilburn, Nind and Wiles (2014) to help develop a pedagogical culture of research-methods teaching by exchanging ideas on teaching research methods in a climate of systematic debate, investigation and evaluation. Reviewing literature on research-methods education, Earley (2014) observes a lack of research on assessment and what and how students learn in a unit. Likewise, Kilburn et al. (2014) propose that discussions of student-centred pedagogies for research methods must now be accompanied by empirical research into what students learn and how we assess them.

Many students find research-methods units challenging, perceiving them as abstract or irrelevant (Dousay, Igoche & Branch 2011). Researchers note the need to understand the negative attitudes of students taking research units, ranging from apprehension to apathy (Earley 2014; Wagner et al. 2011). Teaching qualitative research methods presents particular challenges. For example, the dominance of positivist views in professional lives and academic curricula can constrain novice researchers' ability to embrace tenets of qualitative inquiry (Cox 2012). Moreover, as well as covering technical aspects of designing and conducting research, units in qualitative research methods need to support the development of critical thinking and reflexivity (Kilburn et al. 2014).

Often students have negative attitudes towards reading in particular. MacMillan and MacKenzie (2012) observe that as journals proliferate and become more specialised, the language of many articles becomes more technical and difficult for even experienced readers. The communicative purposes of academic language are different to those of ordinary conversation (Nagy & Townsend 2012); understanding how and why is informed by, and informs, better understanding of research practice. In our experience, students find the technical language in qualitative research literature especially challenging.

There is growing evidence that to overcome these difficulties, we must engage students as actively involved learners, rather than relying on didactic modes of teaching (Earley 2014). The objectives of research-methods units include developing students' abilities to be "critical consumers of research" and enabling them to become research producers; thus combine knowledge, skills and practice should be combined in a student-centred learning experience (Dousay et al. 2012, pp.23-4). For example, structuring unit time to include active reading, with explicit instruction in strategies, may improve student attitudes, confidence and depth of engagement with material (MacMillan & MacKenzie 2012). MacMillan (2014) comments that when students are provided with explicit modelling, instruction and activities that demand active engagement, they can connect to texts in ways that may be surprising. Ongoing feedback may encourage students to challenge their preconceptions and assumptions (Cox 2012). This paper presents a critical evaluation of the synopsis method, a strategy designed for a postgraduate qualitative health research-methods unit to help students engage with and respond reflexively to new reading material.

Conceptualising Critical Reading, Writing and Reflexivity

While most academics consider critical thinking to be core to their teaching and approach (Phillips & Bond 2004), there are diverse definitions of critical thinking, with different implications for teaching and learning (Tsui 2002). Investigating how academics in different disciplines understand critical thinking, Moore identifies at least seven definitional strands: critical thinking as judgement, scepticism, simple originality, sensitive readings, rationality, and activist engagement with knowledge or self-reflexivity (Moore 2013). Moore (2013, p.521) proposes that critical thinking might be thought of as an “extra edge of consciousness”. Barnacle (2006) argues that critical thinking implies more than just an intellectual exercise, and includes action and links to identity as well. Phillips and Bond (2004, p.292) identify a “continuum of criticality” in students’ understandings of critical thinking that ranges from simple acts of comparison to more relative, plural and transformative dimensions. Central to both practising and evaluating critical thinking is the need to encourage students to be more critical readers and writers.

Critical reading incorporates many complex aspects, which must be learned, practised and supported. The ability to read critically is considered to be under-developed; concerns about the ability of tertiary students to read scholarly materials are well-documented (Abbott 2013; MacMillan 2014). While most teachers consider this an important skill for students, there are again a variety of definitions. A pragmatic description from the health field suggests:

The purpose of critical reading is to develop independent thinking and skills in analysis and judgment. The student must first recognize what the author is attempting to say. Secondly, they must weigh the evidence for reliability, accuracy, and representativeness. They must be able to separate opinions from facts, and identify the viewpoints and biases of the writer. In analyzing the material, the reader checks the author's assumptions and logic and traces the relationship between the evidence, assumptions, and conclusions. (White 2004, p.42)

Although White’s definition highlights the layered complexity of how to read critically, it also prioritises a mechanistic and rather positivist stance and does not mention the role of the reader. Others espouse more-reflexive elements to critical reading, where students must learn how to bring themselves in to the reading. MacMillan (2014) contends that rather than understanding “surface” and “deep” reading as a binary distinction, they sit on a continuum: from reading the words to reading the text as a whole, and ultimately to reading the meaning behind and beyond the text. She argues:

If we want students to become familiar with key terms or memorise key facts, then surface approaches actually work better...if we want to encourage deep reading, we need to ask different questions and consider different kinds of connections... I now model and encourage students to make [deeper connections], specifically analogies and integrations with professional or academic practice. Other useful prompts include evaluating where the text fits in wider contexts or what it might mean to particular audiences. (MacMillan 2014, p.951)

Both surface and deep strategies are important for engaging with new work, and students should understand how to move between them. This requires opportunities for students to practise and apply these skills. They must become familiar with new technical language and content, but also engage at a personal level with the “deep-processing” strategies of “delving into the text” (Alexander 2003, p.11). Leong (2013) stresses that learning to critique published research needs to be a “two-stage process” of summary and then in-depth critique, the latter learned with practice and effort, as the tendency is for “surface” critique only. Abbott (2013) sees the reader as in active and critical dialogue with the writer and the validity of what they read; because text is socially and culturally constructed, students must understand what they

read comes from “a particular discursive position which can be interrogated and challenged” (Abbott 2013, p.194). He suggests that students must develop academic reading skills by moving from absorbing information as uncontested or “objective” fact that can be separated from the biases of the author, to critical engagement with a text. This presents an additional challenge to learners. As Kilburn et al. (2014) assert, novice social researchers are caught in a “double bind” between learning the methodological tools of their trade and questioning their validity.

Teachers must help students to explore how their personal perspectives inform their view of knowledge and contested “truth”. This is where critique and reflexivity are enmeshed; rather than leaving their prior experience outside the door of the classroom, instructors can encourage students to connect reading to their prior knowledge and experiences. Reading is a situated activity, affected by the reader and the content (Abbott 2013; Taraban et al. 2004). Reading qualitative health research situates students as learners, and in many cases also as professionals, and as future researchers. Many students are new to qualitative research theories and methodologies, especially the requirement to reflect on and lucidly write about their own roles in every aspect of research (Sargeant 2012).

Writing critically and reflexively is also challenging. Producing a succinct and accurate summary of relevant literature and expressing considered, critical opinions are crucial skills for students and practitioners in many fields (Swales & Feak 2004). Good writing is often regarded as something we “just do”, an innate talent rather than a skill and a craft (DeLyser 2003, p.170). Tertiary instructors assume that senior students have learnt to write well by a sort of osmosis in their undergraduate years, or that because their grades are good, so are their writing skills (Hill 2007). This has been identified as a problem, with difficulties in both writing and reading in a scholarly fashion seen as widespread (Lea & Street 1998; Wallace & Wray 2011); this is especially so in professional schools, where many students also work as practitioners and have little time to refine their reading and writing skills (Whiffin & Hasselder 2013).

Writing should also be a situated activity. It is not just a form of transferring, or merely presenting findings; the process of writing is also a mediated and constructed form of learning and inquiry (Jackson 1991; Lea & Street 1998). Writing is part of critical thinking and identity development within cultures such as tertiary institutions or specific professions (Lee & Murray 2013). Like language, writing is a constitutive force, shaping a specific view of reality and of the self (Richardson & St Pierre 2005). Writing is also essential for effectively and persuasively communicating findings to different audiences (Liamputtong 2013). As Richardson and St Pierre (2005) argue, writing is especially important in qualitative research, which carries its meaning in the reading of the text, rather than in tables or graphs.

Reflexivity is “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the ‘human as instrument’” (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba 2011, p.124). This may include different types of reflection, such as “personal and epistemological reflexivity, and technical, practical, and critical reflection” (Sargeant 2012, p.42). Adopting a reflexive approach means making the reader’s *and* researcher’s personal, social and professional contributions to the interpretive process explicit, and acknowledging that “researchers play a key role in how their data are shaped and analysed” (Liamputtong 2013, p.30). Researchers – and readers – cannot avoid taking their value positions into the research process; the resulting dialogue between perspectives and experiences can make research meaningful, and indeed should be seen as a resource rather than a form of error or bias (Johnson & Waterfield 2004). Reflexivity means that researchers and readers must own their thoughts and situated perspectives, and thoughtfully incorporate this knowledge into research interpretation and presentation.

Thus reflexivity, too, must be incorporated into active learning. Mann et al. (2009, p.610) observe that “the ability to reflect seems to be amenable to development over time and with practice, and in the presence of certain stimuli”. These stimuli include supportive intellectual and emotional learning environments, accommodation for individual differences in learning style, an authentic context, mentoring, group discussion, support and free expression of opinions. Sargeant (2012) discusses encouraging students to develop their reflective skills in qualitative inquiry that does not seek a right or wrong answer. Her [undergraduate] students struggle to acknowledge their role in the production and analysis of qualitative research, and she argues that the process of reflection should be gradual, “built in as an integral aspect” throughout coursework rather than concentrated into a single session (Sargeant 2012, p.42). Finally, Fullana, Pallisera, Colomer, Peña and Pérez-Burriel (2014) examine students’ perception of the usefulness and difficulties of incorporating reflective learning methodology. Students in their focus groups discussed the importance of writing as a strategy for improving the learning process, helping them organise ideas, find information for later use and improve their professional practice (Fullana et al. 2014). They noted the tension between writing to learn and writing to be assessed, which caused them to consider what they disclosed, especially when related to professional practice. While students perceived that they developed greater self-awareness and learned to be more critical, they reported difficulty understanding the aims of the experience, or discomfort at the unaccustomed tasks or demands of activities (Fullana et al. 2014). These authors also highlight the novelty for students of having to think about their beliefs and attitudes, and the usefulness of self-reflection as a tool for enhancing and internalising their learning and for relating concepts to practice.

The Synopsis Method

Context

We use “the synopsis method” in our postgraduate class, *Undertaking Qualitative Health Research*. Postgraduate units in our institution are taught as “blocks”, where classes meet four or five full days (in our case once a month), enabling students with work commitments to participate. Students include those undertaking a postgraduate diploma, master’s degree or PhD in health disciplines; they may also be part- or full-time health practitioners. JW has taught this unit since 2006; RA and RB have been students in the unit, and subsequently taken tutoring and teaching roles.

Our broad learning goals in the unit are to develop students’ ability to critically evaluate qualitative health research, and give them the basis for planning and executing their own qualitative studies; that is, to be critical and creative consumers *and* producers of research. We aim to grow practical understanding of a range of methodological approaches together with knowledge of their epistemological foundations. Examples of more-specific learning goals include understanding ethical and philosophical research issues, creating appropriate research questions and approaches and evaluating presentation of research.

To enable meaningful discussion and encourage students to bring their experiences to the classroom, it is essential that they read consistently and thoughtfully throughout the unit. Very practically, the particular content of this unit demands time for reflection; given the block nature of the timetable, we needed a way to encourage appropriately paced and self-directed reading and reflection.

Method

The synopsis assignment helps students engage with a wide range of literature in the relevant field, reflect critically on reading and engage personally, professionally and academically through regular written reflection. Key aspects include:

Weekly readings. Students submit a weekly one-page synopsis on a reading. A mark and detailed comments are returned weekly. We give plussage (the top nine marks of 12 synopses count) to allow room for practice of a difficult skill.

Weighting. Giving the synopses a weighting of 50% of the unit assessment is intended to convey that reading, writing and reflection are best-practice learning strategies, and key for qualitative research; and to encourage and reward active-learning behaviours. A recent formal revision of the unit has increased this weighting to 60% to correspond with the effort required of students and to provide direction towards learning strategies.

Balance of summary and critique. The synopsis should balance *description* of an article with *critical engagement and reflection*, sufficient that another novice reader (or the students themselves some time later) could understand what the article was about, and be persuaded by the critique.

Take-home message. We prompt students to identify the “take-home” message of a reading. This is the one- or two-sentence message summing up the key idea, constructed in accessible, lay language.

Contextualising. Students should evaluate context, such as the authors’ disciplinary backgrounds, physical and institutional locations, the literature used, conceptual framing of research questions and whether there is convincing and adequate information about data interpretation and analysis, as well as the data collected.

Audience. The intended audience and motivation for the paper needs consideration: for example, whether the paper is intended to disseminate research findings, synthesise and review research, educate students, convince policymakers or enlighten practitioners.

Presentation. Students should also consider whether the writing style works with the theoretical and methodological framework, or for the intended audience. Is there a convincing explanation for why it is presented in this way? How well are the experiences and voices of other participants in the research represented?

Personal engagement. We encourage students to explore how the material resonates with their professional or personal experiences (or not), and reflect on whether the material engages (or enrages!) them, whether they find it accessible, and whether they are convinced of the value and merits of the work.

Class discussion. The synopsis method was developed to ensure that students do their readings, providing a shared basis for class discussions. In workshops, the instructor reflects on the paper and ample time is built in for small- and large-group discussion of readings, loosely structured around relevant questions.

Follow-up. After comments and marking are returned each week, two or three of the stronger synopses are posted online for the class (with the student author’s permission). This was a response to student requests to see models of excellent work.

The unit is regularly evaluated for unit and lecturer quality with our institution's standard University Lecturing Questionnaire. We were intrigued by comments from students in the open-ended section of this survey regarding the synopsis method, and decided to explore further in an evaluative survey.

Evaluation Methods

We aimed to ascertain how students experienced the synopsis method as a tool for assessment and learning. Over three years, students in the unit were invited to participate in the evaluative survey, asking about the most useful and challenging aspects of the synopses, and what they learned overall. They were also asked to comment about balancing "summary" and "critique" and developing their personal critical voice, and about their views on assessment weighting, timing and intensity and completion of required reading.

The survey was completed anonymously at the conclusion of the final day's teaching. Students were given verbal and written information about the study and invited to opt in. Thus, anyone absent by the end of the final teaching day did not give feedback, nor did anyone who opted not to respond. There were 16 responses in 2010 (class $N = 19$), 12 in 2011 (class $N = 15$), and 13 in 2012 (class $N = 19$).

We used NVivo to support data management as we reviewed all responses and developed categories; these categories were then analysed by the three authors in group discussions to further explore the layers of meaning (Braun & Clark 2013). Narrative analysis (Wiles, Rosenberg & Kearns 2005), where the students' narratives stand as meaningful data, also informed our reflections on the students' comments, within the philosophical worldview of social constructionism (Bruffee 1998). We were not seeking a definitive objective "truth" in the students' reflections, but rather to evaluate the pros and cons of the synopsis method from the learners' perspective. We present narrative comments illustrating categories in the data.

Evaluation Findings

Students reported struggling with the synopsis assignment initially. The reading was sustained and intensive, and the succinct write-ups required more work than first anticipated. Achieving an appropriate balance of description and critical analysis was difficult. Yet, overall, the students strongly endorsed this assignment. Tables 1 and 2 show general feedback; more detailed comments are then discussed.

Usefulness of the synopsis method

Students stated that they learned valuable skills related to synthesis and critique, and felt more prepared for classes than they usually did. Table 1 summarises the key positive aspects, with examples of student comments.

Table 1. What were the most useful aspects of doing the synopses?

Positive aspects of the synopsis method	Illustrative quotes from students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provided motivation to undertake unit readings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It encourages you to read articles that you may not otherwise find time to read.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Facilitated a deeper level of engagement with the unit content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The reading/writing synopses are extremely useful, and contribute to much of the learning in this [unit].... [It] gets you reading, thinking and writing from the get-go.</i> • <i>Makes you internalise the information.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Aided understanding of qualitative research concepts/theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Enforced reading, followed by enforced thinking, followed by critical thinking that can be taken into other areas.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provided an opportunity to have a “voice” in academic writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It was especially nice to feel as though you could be honest within your critique, and bring personal experiences and perspectives to the table – without being marked down for not being objective. This is valuable as a student who comes from a cultural history of oppression and silencing.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enhanced learning and engagement in lectures/classroom teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>[I learnt that] reading and reflection is essential and a major component to qualitative research. Most of what I did learn from this [unit] has been from the synopsis readings, which enabled me to follow the block classes and participate meaningfully in discussions.</i> • <i>Including my own “voice” in articles was new to me, and I ended up enjoying this once I relaxed.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learned to locate “self” in writing appropriately 	

We highlight the emphasis on motivation, understanding and participation and the sense of progress shown throughout these comments. The synopsis method also seems to be effective in showing students *how* we want them to learn. The student perception that their skills had improved is supported by an analysis of the collective average class mark on a week-by-week basis throughout the semester, over several years. Figure 1 shows the class average mark for each synopsis, with the solid line showing the average, the dotted line showing the maximum mark and the dashed line showing the minimum mark. Typically, for the first synopsis the class average has been a B-/B, showing steady improvement throughout the semester to typically reach an average in the B+/A- range. We are also intrigued to note that the class *range* of marks typically decreases throughout the semester, from a span of up to six grades to two or three grades; while the stronger students typically improve steadily, weaker students tend to improve dramatically.

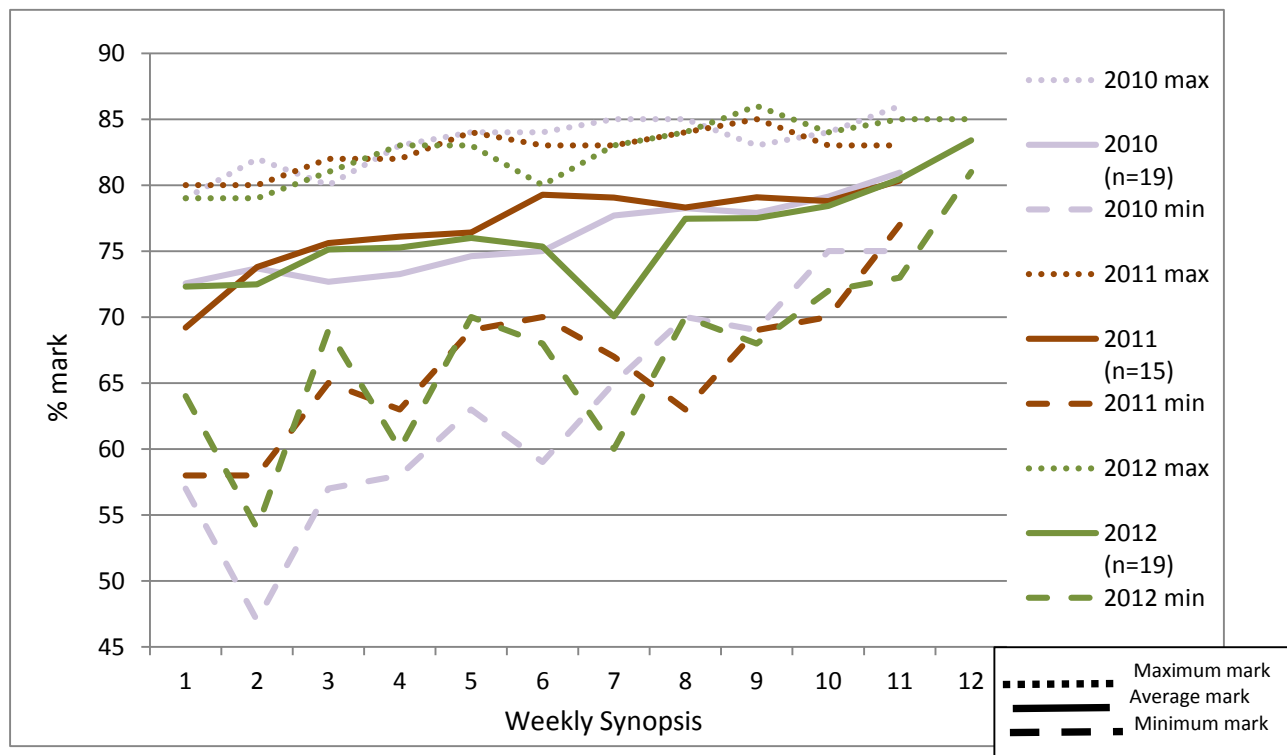


Figure 1. Collective average synopsis mark along with maximum and minimum mark throughout semester, 2010-2012

Challenges of the synopsis method

Each year, we note that the synopsis-method assignment is initially met with resistance and uncertainty (Table 2).

Table 2. What did you find challenging about the synopses?

Challenging aspects of the synopsis method	Illustrative quotes from students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Volume of work ▪ Weekly cycle of assignments (scheduling with other commitments) ▪ Level and complexity of theoretical content ▪ Writing succinctly (one-page limit for synopses) ▪ Critiquing confidently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>On top of other work, having a marked piece of writing to do every week was, at times, stressful and felt like a burden.</i> • <i>It is hard to manage a once-weekly assignment that is a fairly largish piece of writing.</i> • <i>At first I thought it had to be objective critical analyses, like in all other facets of academia, so owning my thoughts was difficult.</i> • <i>Critiquing articles about concepts that you know little about [was challenging]. How do you know if it's being done well or not?</i> • <i>Quite easy to summarise an article, but a challenge to critique an article, and feel comfortable doing that.</i>

Students struggled with the volume of work and the challenge of the limited word count. Some found the assignment frequency difficult, but toward the end of the unit, they mostly found the process “easier”, and expressed increasing confidence in their own critiquing abilities. Many were uncertain about the idea that critical thinking should incorporate their views and experiences as readers, or that their views would be sufficiently “expert” to be warranted.

Overall, a surprising aspect of student feedback was how novel they found it to be asked to critique “published” papers and articulate their subjective reflections, or to “own [their] thoughts”. Critiquing the printed word seemed unfamiliar:

I have learnt to read critically and I am starting to accept that I can have an opinion (and voice it) on published papers.... I always find it difficult to critique other work – it appears, especially if in print, as unchallengeable expert opinion.

Such comments are thought-provoking. While reflexivity is a crucial skill in qualitative research, the awareness of context and ability to reflect on subjective responses are critical for any form of research, regardless of methodology (Mansvelt & Berg 2005). Students from non-dominant ethnicities found the notion of being allowed to have a “voice” valuable, as suggested by the student with a “cultural history of oppression and silencing” (Table 1).

Students also indicated that learning how to express subjective views appropriately and in more than a superficial way was also difficult. We challenge our students to produce responses explicitly positioned in their worldview and experience, including their disciplinary and professional backgrounds and personal socio-cultural circumstances. Our feedback often focuses on how to more effectively and precisely situate and reflect on their subjective

responses, which many find challenging. As one student wrote, “Certainly I have developed a critical eye, and an appreciation for good criticism”.

Aspects of the synopsis method

Analysis of data related to specific aspects of the synopsis method shows that students can articulate the specific skills they have developed, including how these will apply in their academic and professional practice.

Weekly readings

Students were asked to comment on the structure of having a specific synopsis required weekly, as opposed to the usual “required unit reading”. Many admitted they typically did the minimal reading necessary for a unit or quickly skimmed abstract and conclusions, but the synopses in this unit required more critical attention:

[I have learnt] a wide range of topics that I would probably have not read/reflected about if I wasn’t required to submit the synopses.

Would certainly not have read as thoroughly or as critically. Makes you read a wide range of content and writing styles closely.

Some acknowledged that the weekly routine helped them avoid “last minute” work and maintain consistent engagement, but this also added pressure:

[The weekly synopses] definitely pushed me to give attention to this paper every week – I wouldn’t have done that otherwise.

Felt relentless but got into the rhythm of weekly due dates.

Consistent engagement and self-directed learning was a key goal in developing the synopsis method, so these comments were encouraging.

Assessment

Most students felt that the 50% weighting of the synopses captured the time involved in completing them:

I think this is appropriate given that most of my learning and development of writing and critiquing skills occurred during the process of constructing the synopses.

I like the weekly nature and small % weighting given to each synopsis – you get lots of chances to get it right rather than, say, a 50% essay.

Some noted that it was novel to get direct assessment credit for reading and reflecting, and that it shaped their perception of what was important as part of their learning process:

[The assessment weighting] placed reading and reflection at the same level as writing assignments, which caused me to really focus on those, where in other classes, writing assignments are the main focus by far.

Synopses were such a different way of assessment compared to other papers. I think it was really useful to improve summarising, critiquing and writing skills.

Students also recognised that without marks (that is, feedback only but no assessment grading), motivation would drop:

Marks gave me motivation to do better and [let me know] if I was on track...
Feedback was valuable so I know where I missed the marks.

It is resource-intensive to provide this kind of feedback; however, this evaluation showed its importance in motivating and guiding students. They responded positively to the transparency around their progress and the worth placed on the assignment in terms of managing their time.

Writing skills – Balance of summary and critique

Several students noted that negotiating the balance of summary and critique was a way of learning how to write well, including the skill of being more concise and the art of expressing what one described as “crisp analytic insights”. Another commented:

[Most useful was] learning to write concisely but coherently while summarising often large and complex readings articulately.

Some observed how balancing the two aspects of summary and critique made different contributions to their learning:

Summary – Helpful practically, just developing the skill of reading a work and finding key points. Critiques – Knowing what to look for but also examining my own thoughts and sociocultural lens through which I approach research.

Successfully achieving this balance is one of the most difficult aspects of the assignment. Marker feedback typically encourages students to be more methodical in their description, bolder in their evaluative critique and more daring in their personal engagement with the literature.

Critical skills

As noted, students were surprised to learn they were permitted to reflect critically on published papers. As the unit developed, they developed more tools and confidence to do so:

I have learnt how to find underlying opinion, perspective and bias in research articles. I have learnt how important experience and position are in interpreting how the world works.

[I have] more confidence in providing critical comments in an academic setting, particularly as other [units] do not promote this in the slightest.

Students felt that the critical thinking and writing skills they developed through the synopsis method were generalisable to other settings, which was useful for those already working in health professions:

[I have learnt] to be a more critical thinker, not just with synopses but also in the workplace and other readings and reports I write.

Ability to critique articles – and consider various aspects (e.g., audience, author credibility is just as important as content). Also that my opinion/critique is valid.

Despite the emphasis on critical thinking in pedagogical discussions on tertiary teaching, we notice that it often takes several weeks of feedback before students begin to even attempt to express critical opinions, let alone manage these in a sophisticated way (e.g., not equating “critical” with exclusively negative criticism, nor making bland, general comments, such as “This was a challenging reading but I found it interesting”).

Take-home message

Related to the issue of concise writing was the skill of distilling a “take-home” message:

I have learned to drill down to the essence or key points in an article.

Learning how to summarise all these readings will be valuable in the future when trying to use the reading as a reference and remembering what it was about.

Articulating this short abstraction challenges students to identify what is relevant, a critical skill in itself.

Structure and presentation

Students must think about the contextual and structural elements of the reading, including presentation. Many found this productive:

Increased awareness of the effect of different writing and communication styles/modes, e.g. first- versus third-person, and their appropriateness in conveying research findings.

To personally reflect on an author’s thesis required an attentiveness to language and style that I hadn’t noticed before.

The synopsis method teaches readers to recognise and situate themselves as an active audience in the research process. This in turn facilitates the skill of relating to an audience as a writer.

Personal reflections

Students also acknowledged the novelty and value of incorporating personal and professional reflections into academic writing. For many, even using personal pronouns was uncomfortable:

After four to five years of very formal, third-person, academic writing, I found it very difficult to write reflectively in first-person, as it’s normally such a “no-no”.

Yet the use of personal pronouns in scientific publishing is not only acceptable, according to key scientific publishing guide the APA manual (APA 2010, p.69), but even desirable because the writing is more vivid (Gilgun 2005; Mansvelt & Berg 2005). This is often a first step towards researchers locating themselves as the producers of and participants in their own research and reflection:

The message was that personal engagement and reflection were crucial to doing well in the class, while most of the time [in other units] it's about memorising, throwing back and then forgetting.

The relevance to qualitative health research and the positionality required was also acknowledged:

Helped me learn to write in a qualitative way with my own "voice". Made me read the papers more thoroughly – probably would have skimmed them otherwise.

The regular synopses enabled students to gradually build confidence, from the initial use of "I", to a more sophisticated engagement with their professional and personal role in interpreting research. The following examples are from a student's early synopsis work, where the use of "I" is arguably at a surface level, and a later synopsis, where the student's personal response is emotionally engaged and related practically to the research being undertaken:

[Synopsis 2] As there is no introduction or summary I found this article to be an OK read but very hard to summarise.

[Synopsis 11] In terms of awe and inspiration, this is a great article; in terms of "how to", process and whether I would actually contemplate doing this with my research – less so.

Discussion: What Makes the Synopsis Method Work Well from an Educator's Perspective?

A number of key elements support the effectiveness of the synopsis method. Insisting on a short synopsis (no more than one page) is a deliberate strategy. Being able to write a succinct description is a difficult skill and requires good comprehension of the article. Our evaluation shows that most students reported finding this limit challenging, but many recognised that it forced them to identify the reading's most important elements. There was also evidence of a good synergy between the learning processes and unit content. For example, the development and application of "voice" and positionality in critical writing and reflection on previous literature prepares students well for their own research (Creswell 2013).

It is important that feedback given to students on their synopses is timely and pertinent. Quick and relevant feedback is essential to help students improve week to week, but also to make their effort feel worthwhile. In the first three to four weeks, we provide detailed individual feedback on each synopsis, although the level of feedback reduces during the unit as students become more comfortable with the requirements and familiar with the format. Early on, students often express anxiety about their performance. Others indicate frustration that they are not able to "immediately" grasp the synopsis requirements (as evident in their lower-than-anticipated marks); most are keen for further feedback to improve. While this does create a heavy demand on teaching resources and is less practical with large classes, in a postgraduate unit it can work well with effective tutor support. This is also a good way to develop mentoring and supportive relationships with students (Mann et al. 2009). Another learning

tool we have adopted in response to student requests and subsequent positive feedback is to post the synopses with the top two or three marks online (always with the permission of the student writer, including their decision whether to post it with their name). This creates a learning tool for the class, enabling them to see more than one strong approach to answering the question, and is motivating to the stronger students.

It is also important to create enough time for classroom discussion of the readings and synopses. With such active preparation, class discussions are lively and stimulating, and a useful opportunity for both teacher and learner to model and practise critical reading and reflection processes. The evaluation also shows how classroom discussion is necessary for learning and clarification, and students found it valuable, especially hearing how others engaged with the reading. Group discussion also provides a supportive intellectual and emotional environment and an authentic context for their reflective practice, and accommodates difference and freedom of expression (Mann et al. 2009).

Establishing a supportive individual relationship is also important for students from social groups with collective histories of oppression and silencing or from socio-cultural backgrounds where the idea of openly challenging perceived experts may be problematic (Lea & Street 1998). For these students, understanding that critical evaluation can be a constructive and collaborative process of building research together, as much about articulating the strengths of a piece of work as criticising it, is empowering. In addition, having a space in which such discussion is explicitly encouraged is often exciting as well as challenging. For all students, regular personal encouragement is valuable.

With the synopsis method, we aim to encourage critical reflection on all aspects of the research process (including consumption and practice), and to make research more visible to students (Kilburn et al. 2014). Students learn to explicitly position themselves as critical readers and participants in the research process. We encourage students to skilfully bring their sense of selves, as clinicians, as cultural identities and as producers and consumers of research not only to their reading, but also to their writing, and in turn back into the classroom (Abbot 2013; MacMillan 2014). The synopsis method is challenging, for students and instructor alike, but also rewarding because both can see the critical reading, writing and reflexive skills that are developed. Using this method, students grasp the important and complementary roles of reading, writing and critical reflection in research (Kilburn et al. 2014), and equal emphasis is placed on both doing and appraising research (Earley 2014). The layered relationship between “surface-level” strategies to make sense of a paper, such as rereading and summarising, and deeper processing strategies (Abbot 2013; Alexander 2003; Leong 2013; MacMillan 2014) are made visible. Writing (both published and student works) is presented as a form of mediating and constructing knowledge (Lea & Street 1998). In the complexity of critical thinking, the synopsis method supports students in shifting along the “continuum of criticality” from superficial comparisons and criticisms to more-sophisticated critique (Phillips & Bond 2004).

Limitations. This was an opt-in study, and a potential limitation was that only those students who completed the unit or were present on the last day were able to comment on the evaluation. The written and reflective format of the evaluation reflected the style of the assessment well, but this initial exploration suggests it would be productive to conduct more intensive research, including with past students as to how they are still using the skills learned in the synopsis method.

In the field of health, there are two special challenges or opportunities. First, the “consumer/producer” research continuum takes on an additional layer of meaning, as many students are also clinical practitioners. As they become researchers, they face ethical challenges of negotiating different “hats”; it is especially important that they develop tools for

critical reflection and a sense of identity as critical thinkers (Barnacle 2006), and that they have the opportunity for practice so that this becomes habit (MacMillan 2014). Second, health is a trans-disciplinary field presenting special teaching challenges, and includes students from diverse cultural, educational and professional backgrounds. The active-learning aspects of the synopsis method help students develop tools to “own their thoughts” and see these thoughts as valuable contributions to their own and others’ learning, turning diversity into a strength for individual students and a valued asset in classroom discussions.

Concluding Comments

We concur with MacMillan’s (2014) comments on the surprising ways students can connect to texts when we demand active engagement. Our evaluation shows that students can be encouraged to read, and to develop critical reflexive reading and writing skills using weekly assignments structured to guide them to produce a short synopsis. It is helpful to provide prompt and regular feedback to develop relationships with students and stimulate an active-learning process with high expectations.

The synopsis method fosters a culture of self-directed reflection, and of reading, writing and reflection as socially mediated. The assessment engages students as active readers and encourages them to locate themselves in relation to the reading, and to learn to move easily between surface and deep reading strategies. Many of our students felt the emphasis on balancing succinct summary with multi-layered critique, along with regular personal feedback, helped them to develop their writing skills as well as understand the content at a deeper level. The personal feedback and the broader discursive context of the unit, which encouraged discussion of the material, helped students develop critical reflexive skills and understanding of content. A surprising number of students conveyed the relative novelty of being asked to formulate and express their personal responses.

This paper adds to the literature on teaching research methods and on what students learn from units and assessment. We argue that in learning the craft of qualitative research, students must not only understand how to summarise and critique but also master the skill of articulating personal, reflexive responses. Our evaluation shows that students appreciate this challenging assignment and recognise the useful skills they develop and hone. The synopsis method has successfully achieved changes in the self-perceived and assessed ability of students to critically analyse published material and write appropriately about it, as well as to express their own thoughts in a well-considered and robust way.

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