

Reflective Writing in the Classroom to Enhance Student Learning and Critical Thinking



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Introduction and Background

The importance of self-reflection is frequently noted in the literature and is becoming an increasingly critical part of professional development and lifelong learning. When learning about complex and controversial issues it is important to think critically and be able to articulate one's thoughts on issues. Critical thinking is defined as "intellectually disciplined process of actively analyzing and evaluating information gathered from experience, observation, or communication as a guide to belief and action" (National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction, 1987). Critical thinking is an ongoing process and often can be hard to measure.

The importance of reflection has been recognized as a key educational tool and thus, was incorporated into a general education course, Health Sciences (HSC) 208-Dynamics of US Contemporary Health Issues. However, the question that remained for this educator was if this tool was indeed contributing to learning and improved critical thinking for students. This study sought to answer this question by understanding college student's perceptions on the effectiveness of the use of reflective writing to enhance their learning and critical thinking skills in a general education course. The purpose of the course was to help students think more carefully and critically about important health issues in American society. This was done through a variety of teaching methods and assignments. One core assignment included writing a reflection at the end of every class in response to an issue or set of questions. Most reflections occurred in the classroom with reflections being 1-2 paragraphs in length, and allowed students an opportunity to be actively engaged in the classroom.

Methods

A total of 59 students enrolled in two sections of HSC 208 were sent an e-mail invitation to complete an anonymous web-based survey at the end of the course. The primary constructs to assess critical thinking factors were taken from a critical thinking rubric developed at Washington State University and adapted by Drs Roger Gilman and John Casey for use at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU, 2005). Those factors included:

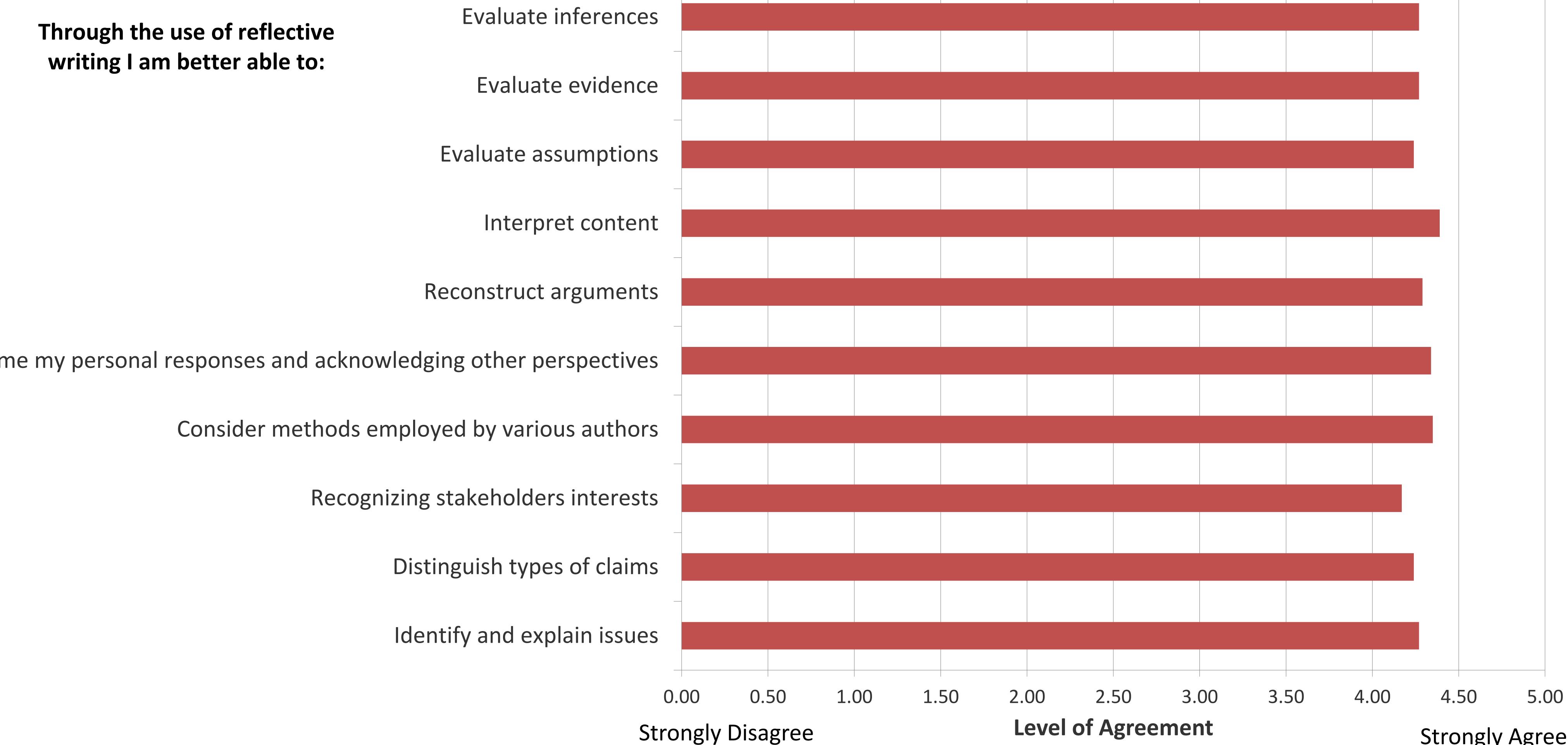
- 1) identifying and explaining issues
- 2) distinguishing types of claims
- 3) recognizing stakeholders and contests
- 4) considering methodology
- 5) framing personal responses and acknowledging other perspectives
- 6) reconstructing arguments
- 7) interpreting content
- 8) evaluating assumptions
- 9) evaluating evidence
- 10) evaluating inferences

Students were asked to respond to a five-point likert scale on their level of agreement that written reflection contributed to their learning of these factors. Additional questions included perceptions on proficiency before and after the course, overall level that reflection contributed to learning and critical thinking, and overall usefulness in helping students improve learning and critical thinking.

Results

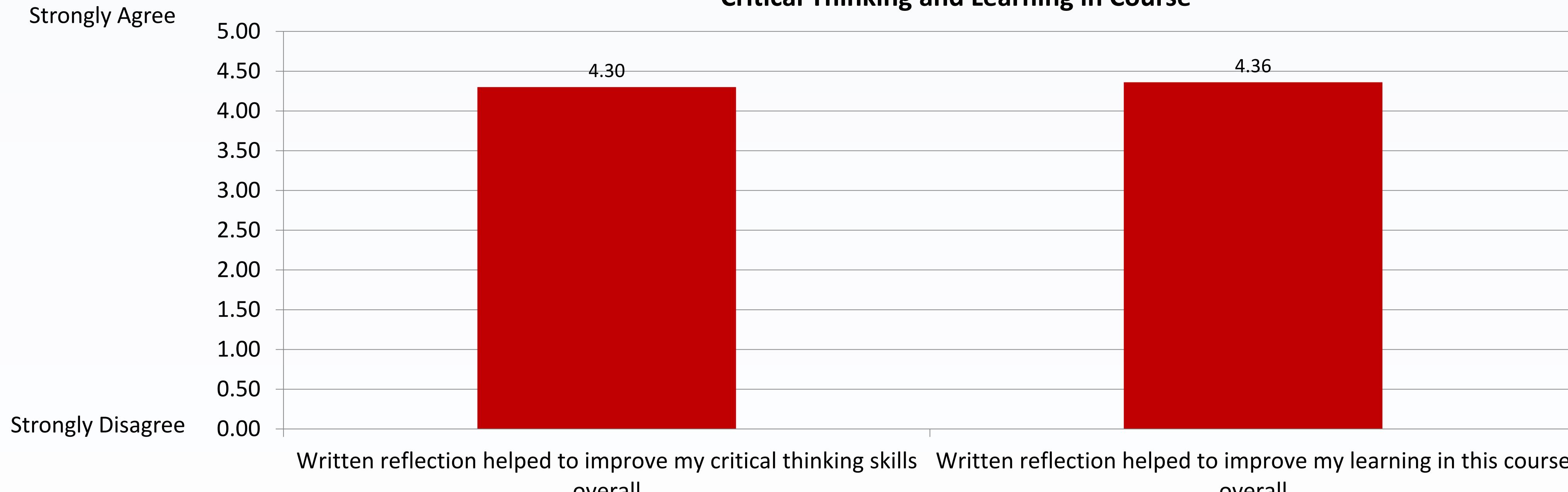
A total of 54 students completed the survey to yield a response rate of 92%.

Figure 1 - Student Perceptions on How Reflective Writing Impacted Learning of Critical Thinking Factors



As outlined in Figure 1, the average rating was above 4 for all indicators showing a strong agreement that the use of reflective writing positively contributed to the development of critical thinking factors.

Figure 2 - Student Perceptions on Reflective Writings Overall Contribution to Critical Thinking and Learning in Course



There was a strong level of agreement that written reflection helped to improve critical thinking overall (average 4.30) and learning in this course overall (average 4.36) as shown in Figure 2.

In addition, the use of reflective writing was perceived to be useful in improving students critical thinking (average 4.16) and learning (average 4.30) in the course. Ninety-one percent of students would recommend continued use of this educational tool in future sections of this course with the other 9% responding maybe.

Conclusion

Written reflection has been a staple in this general education course for several years as a way to actively engage students in class and as a way to contribute to the development of critical thinking. I have seen the evolution of thinking by students and it was reflected in there measurable coursework, analysis papers and presentations. Through this survey, students affirmed that the use of reflective writing has also been a useful and effective tool to help improve their critical thinking and learning in this general education course. According to one student, "written reflection is a good way to express your ideas in a private manner as well as help you understand how to weigh the pros and cons of an issue." Another student noted that, "they were very helpful in both introducing material and furthering my knowledge of material."

Limitations and Opportunities For Further Study

This study indirectly measured reflective writing's contribution to critical thinking based on student self-assessment and perceptions. Since this is a self-assessment, the issue of response bias could be present in that there may be a tendency for students to answer questions in the way they think the questioner (their instructor) wants them to answer rather than according to their true beliefs. Utilizing direct measures by incorporating the NEIU rubric in grading of papers, written reflections, and a pre/post assessment of critical thinking would provide more insight into the effectiveness of the use of reflective writing in this context.

References

- National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking. Defining Critical Thinking. 1987.
- Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU). Critical Thinking Rubric. 2005.

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