

**Title:** Approaching Shakespeare Critically

**Author:** Jonathan P. Lamb

**Affiliation:** University of Kansas

**Summary:** An English professor rethinks his course assignments and assessments in an effort to critically engage students in course material and to create a better understanding of academic critical conversation.

**Background:**

My course redesign focuses on English 332, Shakespeare, an undergraduate literature course in which students learn how to study and engage in critical conversations about William Shakespeare's plays. The course typically enrolls around 25 students, most of whom are English majors. The course fulfills the "major authors" component of the KU English major. We devote most of our class time to in-class discussion of primary texts (and sometimes secondary ones) and historical or conceptual issues, with occasional lectures and modeling, group work, and student performances. These occasional activities usually work in service of the course's primary goals; for example, students perform the final scene of *Othello* using actor's parts as Shakespeare's actors would have done, and this performance offers a new perspective with which to approach the play.

The intellectual goals for students include:

- Developing a basic knowledge of William Shakespeare's writings and their significance;
- Cultivating the ability to read, study, and discuss critically a Shakespeare play or poem;
- Writing thesis-driven interpretive arguments that draw on appropriate evidence and reasoning; and
- Understanding what constitutes a scholarly, critical conversation about Shakespeare, and why it matters;
- Beginning to forge connections between past/other cultures and students' own cultures, and to respond in a thoughtful and sustained manner to those connections.

In most iterations of the course, student understanding of course content is assessed through reading quizzes, two exams, and several writing assignments, including a final project.

## Implementation & Student Work:

### *Brief Narrative of Revisions*

My redesign of ENGL 332 occurred in two different phases. Between years 1 and 2, I made one set of changes aimed at improving students' critical engagement, in and through a scholarly conversation, with Shakespeare's plays. Between years 2 and 3, I narrowed those aims and focused on affirming "the basics" of the course in order to achieve the goals articulated above. Together, both phases of revision improved 1) student familiarity and engagement with Shakespeare, 2) student ability to read, study, and critically discuss a Shakespeare play or poem, and 3) student understanding of what constitutes a critical conversation about Shakespeare. The chart below tracks the changes through the three years of the project.

	<b>Year 1: Baseline</b>	<b>Year 2: Revision</b>	<b>Year 3: More revision</b>
<b>Rhetorical analysis</b>	3 iterations	3	4/5
<b>Article Abstract</b>	0 iterations	2	2
<b>Assessment Frameworks (rubrics)</b>	0	2	2
<b>Final Project</b>	Students choose among five options	Students choose among five options	Synthetic take-home final assignment
<b>Exams</b>	2 (midterm, final)	2 (midterm, final)	1 (comprehensive final)
<b>Library sessions</b>	0	2	1
<b>Supplementary readings &amp; assignments</b>	Mostly introductory materials	Mostly scholarly readings	Mix of introductory and scholarly readings

### *Year 1*

Below, is a snapshot of year 1. These notes offer a sense of the baseline from which I was working.

Originally, the course's shorter writing assignments focused on developing students' close reading skills, as most students struggle to comprehend the language in Shakespeare's plays. For instance, several times over the course of the semester, I asked students to write a short rhetorical analysis of a scene, speech, or line from one of the plays we read. Student performance on these rhetorical analyses varied, but tended to improve throughout the semester. The following are examples of student work representing a range of student achievement:

Example 1 – Grade A

Example 2 – Grade A

Example 3 – Grade B

Example 4 – Grade B

Example 5 – Grade C

Example 6 – Grade C

Example 7 – Grade D

Example 8 – Grade D

Though students appreciated this focus on close reading, I was concerned that it entailed short-changing historical and cultural contexts, explicit conceptual and theoretical concerns, and higher-level research and scholarly pursuits.

Though students often presented thoughtful, well-articulated ideas in their written work, I noticed that students consistently seemed to have difficulty in their treatment of secondary sources on final projects. Specifically, students frequently treated secondary sources uncritically. This lack of critical awareness had three qualities.

- First, students often treated secondary sources as unquestionable sources of authority. They did not question the assumptions or conclusions of scholars. My guess is that this problem had less to do with a lack of ability than it does to do with a lack of incentive: although the final assignment prompts explicitly called for engagement with the critical conversation, I did not lay any kind of groundwork for this engagement in the class.
- Second, students did not have a clear grasp on how to enter into the scholarly conversation. Once they identified a topic and research inquiry, they were uncertain how to place their ideas and claims in conversation with those of the secondary sources they have gathered.
- Third, and perhaps a precondition for the first two, students struggled to gain a sense of what counts as strong, serious Shakespeare scholarship. I think this had to do with the fact that I almost never took students to the library for research sessions.

Students had five options for their final project. These options included a conventional academic paper, a critical introduction to an anthology of “Shakespeare’s Greatest Scenes,” an open-ended creative project, an analysis of a Shakespeare film adaptation, and an examination of Shakespeare’s source texts. All of these options required students to engage in some way with the scholarship surrounding Shakespeare’s works. In my experience, students tended to select the first sources they found and engaged with them only on a surface level. I didn’t want to force students to complete a traditional research paper for this project, as this format did not seem to benefit most students. This led me to the central question of my course redesign: How can I prompt students to engage more critically with secondary sources without forcing them into a narrow “academic research paper” model?

In the next section, I provide a snapshot of year 2, in which I considered the effects of the first phase of revisions. Note the way in which my attempts to address the problems identified in Year 1 made visible more problems, some of them latent in the first iteration of the course and some of them new to Year 2.

## ***Year 2***

Having spent year 1 studying how students performed in my “baseline” Shakespeare course, I spent year 2 making revisions to the course. Because several forms of evidence assured me that students actually do learn a lot in the course, I did not totally scrap the course and rebuild it from the ground up. Instead, I selectively revised several assignments and created new ones, implemented new assessment features, and reorganized the class sequence. I made these changes based on two related goals, which emerged as I finalized the baseline section of this project.

The first goal was to enhance students' critical engagement with secondary sources, throughout the semester and specifically on their final projects. The second goal was to integrate the close-reading focus of the class (i.e., we focus on how to approach Shakespeare texts closely and critically) with the engagement with secondary scholarship. To achieve these goals, I implemented several innovations.

*Innovation #1: New assignments*

To guide students in finding, selecting, reading, analyzing, and engaging with secondary sources, I created two new assignments. In the first assignment, students chose from a list of journal articles (selected by me) and wrote a long abstract of the article. Not merely a summary of the article, the abstract had to give a full account of its argument, methods, evidence, and organization.

In the second assignment, students had to find their own peer-reviewed scholarly article and write an abstract of it. The parameters of this assignment were the same as the first one, except that here students found their own article.

In addition to the new assignments, I maintained the rhetorical analysis assignment focusing on a play excerpt of the students' choice.

*Innovation #2: New course readings and activities*

As part of the lead-up and follow-up to the abstract assignments, I added new reading assignments. Whereas in previous iterations of the course I assigned only Shakespeare plays, this time around I assigned selected secondary readings about those plays, to be read after students had read and discussed a given play. On the class days when students had read the secondary texts, we dedicated considerable class time to discussion of these sources. We discussed not merely their arguments about the play but their rhetorical structure, evidence, methodologies, and assumptions. We also discussed sample abstracts, looking at how they addressed the same issues.

*Innovation #3: Targeted library sessions*

We took not one but two trips to the library for an intensive research session. In the first session, which took place two weeks before the abstract assignment was due, we discussed how to find and assess secondary research in the humanities, and in Shakespeare studies in particular. With the help of an expert KU Libraries undergraduate research librarian, we discussed the process of peer review, the operations and audiences of academic journals, the collection mechanisms of databases, how to search for and access academic scholarship using those databases, how to read an academic article well, and how to situate one's own arguments within the scholarly conversation. The goal for this workshop (aside from all of the information literacy acquired) was for students to leave with at least one credible, recent article on which to write their abstract.

The second library session, which took place several weeks in advance of the final project deadline, took a much more straightforward, conventional approach. Again with the help of a KU librarian, we discussed the kinds of secondary sources one might seek based on a particular assignment prompt and topic. (Recall that students chose from five options for their final project.) Then we spent an hour of workshop time, in which the librarian and I worked our way around the room, offering help where needed.

*Innovation #4: Assessment frameworks for written work*

Finally, I developed rubrics for the iterative assignments due throughout the semester. These assessment frameworks proved helpful in conveying to students what constitutes a successful, strong paper. I elected not to fill out rubrics for each graded assignment. Instead, I gave students copies of the rubrics and spent considerable time talking about how they reflected the expectations and the goals of the assignment. We used the rubrics to assess some sample assignments.

*Assessment of Year 2 revisions*

Innovation #1 led to thoughtful, engaged student work. In attempting to account for a complicated scholarly argument about Shakespeare, students had to read closely and critically, and write with precision. Based on my rubric-driven assessment of both abstract assignments, asking students to write not one but two abstracts (and offering them the chance to revise the first one) proved fruitful. Many students simply didn't know how to write an account of a scholarly argument, so the iterative quality provided them multiple opportunities to practice and improve, with feedback. What's more, the fact that I hand-selected the articles for the first assignment and asked students to find their own articles for the second proved enormously productive, as it scaled up the assignment's rigor even as the assignment remained iterative. The rise in student performance from first to second abstracts bears out these reflections.

Innovation #2 proved effective, though not only for the reasons I expected. My assumption was that students would make use of the secondary materials as a way of thinking about their own work for the course. That is, I assumed that as they read the secondary sources, they would be thinking about the assignment prompts. To be sure, they did think about the assignment parameters, but this was not their foremost concern. Rather, students engaged with these critical texts *as critical texts about Shakespeare*. The scholarly readings provoked curiosity, disagreement, and thoughtful responsiveness, not for the sake of the assignment but for the sake of intellectual rigor. This made for a pleasant surprise, because that kind of engagement is far better than the kind focused on meeting a set of assignment criteria. Moreover, students used the secondary readings as models for thinking and writing about Shakespeare--again, not explicitly the purpose of assigning them, but perhaps a better outcome than the intended one.

Innovation #3 did what it needed to do (i.e., promoted information literacy, provided contextual information about scholarship, trained in research skills, gave students a chance to find secondary sources). But I'm not persuaded that the library sessions increased the quality of student work. The final assignments were just as unengaged with secondary scholarship as they have been in previous semesters. This led me to wonder whether I needed to revise the final assignment options, which I always liked and to which students always responded well.

Innovation #4 worked beautifully. Although several colleagues suggested that I use the rubric as a grading mechanism and not just as a framework for assessment (that is, they said I should fill out a rubric for each student assignment and return it to the student), my decision not to do so seemed to be a good one. My substantial written feedback on student papers offered a much more specific version of the feedback work the rubric does, and when coordinated with the rubric, this feedback promoted stronger work on subsequent iterations of the assignments. In terms of the data, student performance improved based on a combination of my feedback with intensive discussion of the rubric. I decided that, in year 3, I might experiment with filling out the rubric for students, if only as a way of comparing student improvement between the phases.

Overall: I was pleased with the results of this revision, but not so pleased that I did not want to revise again. My main concern was that there was still a disconnect between the iterative assignments completed in the course of the semester and the final project due in the last week of the semester. If I didn't so dislike the metaphor of scaffolding, I'd say that the short assignments built an intellectual scaffold but not a practical one. Students developed the information literacy and content knowledge to complete their final project, but they did not take their final projects as opportunities to exercise that new knowledge and those new skills and literacies. I wondered whether this disconnect resulted from several factors working in cahoots: the fact that there were *five* options for the final project, which dispersed the amount of attention we could give any one assignment; the fact that all five options entailed slightly different engagement with secondary sources; the fact that there was also a final exam in the course, distracting students from thinking of the final project as the summation of their learning in the course; and the fact that I was asking students who were already studying Shakespeare's plays (no mean task) to supplement that work with an equally ponderous discourse (Shakespeare scholarship).

My task as I looked forward to the third and final phase of revision, therefore, was how to address this disconnect. My instinct was that I may have to abandon the final project as it was currently conceived, however incredibly popular and productive it was for students.

### ***Year 3***

Based on the assessment of Year 2's revisions, I introduced several more revisions in Year 3. Many of these changes were provisional, partly because I remained uncertain about exactly what kind of summative, synthetic work I wanted to ask students to perform at the end of the course. The final projects in Years 1 and 2 did not adequately connect with the rest of the course, but they did have the virtue of allowing students to synthesize and put into practice what they learned in the course. I also introduced revisions to make quizzes and rubrics more effective. (For the sake of conceptual coherence, I number these innovations in sequence with Year 2.)

#### *Innovation #5: No final project*

After seeing the gap between the final projects and the rest of the course, I eliminated the original final project. I did this provisionally, knowing that in future semesters I will introduce a different, presumably more effective, final project, and that doing so will involve changing other aspects of the course to provide adequate scaffolding. I did not introduce a new final project this semester because I wanted to assess the effectiveness of the other aspects of the course revision.

#### *Innovation #6: New final exam structure*

To provide students an opportunity to synthesize and apply their learning in the course (which the now-defunct final project previously provided), I introduced a two-part structure for the final exam. The in-class portion remained the same, but I created a take-home final, in which students responded to prompts asking them to write about several Shakespeare plays at once.

#### *Innovation # 7: Changes to article abstract assignments*

As the revised prompts demonstrate, I also made some key changes to the article abstract assignments. In the first assignment, the whole class read, discussed, and wrote an abstract of the same scholarly article. The goal here was to think as a class about how to read, assess, and account for a scholarly argument. In the second assignment, I encouraged students to find and write about an article about any play we read during the semester (not just *Hamlet*, as in Year 2).

*Innovation #8: Use of rubrics to track student performance*

When grading the Rhetorical Analysis and Article Abstract papers, I marked rubrics to produce a more granular analysis of student performance.

*Innovation #9: New quiz structure*

While in past semesters, the course quizzes aimed to ensure that students kept up on the reading, I modified the quizzes to encourage student engagement with the materials they read (while still ensuring they keep up on the reading!).

Although many of these changes were stop-gap revisions that better revisions will eventually surpass, I think they help achieve the course goals while providing effective information for assessment.

*Assessment of Year 3 revisions*

Innovation #5 worked ok. With no final project to occupy their attention, the students seemed no more or less engaged by the course material than they were in previous semesters. I took this as a sign that the Year 1 and 2 final project options, though they had many virtues, were not clearly connected with the other aspects of the course. I need to create a final project that is a natural and compelling product of the intellectual work of the course. I hate to admit it, but I need scaffolding.

Innovation #6 had mixed results. Introducing a take-home final essay exam (in lieu of a final project) gave some students the chance they'd been waiting for to synthesize the material. But others, for whatever reason, did not seize the opportunity to do critical, summative work. Once I create a new final project, I won't use this take-home essay structure again.

Innovation #7 worked beautifully, or would have had the article abstract deadlines not fallen right during the peak of the 2016 US election. Many students, distracted from their coursework by these events, struggled with these assignments (some not even turning them in). Those students who persevered and completed both assignments did well, however. It worked especially well to have students write the first abstract about the same article: we discussed the article in class, talking about how we might write an account of the argument and its use of evidence. (One note: I'll choose a better article next time. The one I chose for this semester, while good, did not have the conventional structure of an academic article.)

Innovation #8, using the rubrics created in Year 2 to assess the changes in student performance, worked beautifully. Based on the data generated, I have a sense of how students improved and where to work harder. Overall, most students acquired the critical, intellectual capacities I wanted them to. One finding from these data surprised me: throughout the semester and with few exceptions, students struggled with writing clear, strong academic prose. Even papers with strong claims, clear uses of evidence, and coherent analytical structure were grossly inadequate in written expression.

Innovation #9 made improvements in how students engaged with the course material in writing, but it also revealed how little effort students put into their reading. Although this is frankly the students' problem, I do think it is connected to (and partly a product of) the problem I have identified all along, that students develop intellectually but don't have the right opportunities to demonstrate that development. They need something to *do* with their learning.

**Reflections:**

As I reflect on all three years of this project, I realize that the main question I continue to entertain is exactly what I want my students to accomplish. Most of my goals for the course are *intellectual* goals, not practical ones. Thus, the course goals listed in this portfolio emphasize students' critical and imaginative development rather than, say, "students will know how to write an eight page paper performing critical/scholarly work." I stand by these goals, but I also acknowledge that in doing so I do not offer students a chance to synthesize and practice the intellectual competencies I am asking them to develop. For all their problems, the final project options of Years 1 and 2 gave students something to do with all the knowledge they acquired in the course. The Year 3 revisions were effective, but like Year 2's innovations, they leave me with a sense that much else needs to change, if not be replaced outright.

The most important thing I have learned in this redesign is how to make visible the processes of learning. Although I long resisted using rubrics to grade student work, I now concede (and celebrate) that offering a clear, dimensional framework for assessment helps me and the students, and hurts no one. I'm excited to make more and better use of rubrics in the future. One thing I found in this course is that where the rubrics fail to address some aspect of student writing or work, that is where I need to be more precise in the expectations I am placing on students. This is a valuable heuristic. I've also learned that the rubrics can make visible exactly what and how students are learning. For instance, I learned in Year 3 that although many students are learning what it means to perform a strong rhetorical analysis, they are not necessarily improving in their writing, in part because that is not where our attention lies when we discuss the rhetorical analysis assignment.

To be honest (and a bit mopey), the CHRP/Teagle course redesign has made me want to trash the entire course and start again from scratch. There's no aspect of the course that I do not wish to rethink and even recreate. Even the short assignments, which received much of the focus in this redesign, do not seem to be as effective as I want them to be at developing students' imaginative faculties. According to the data I've collected, these assignments were most effective at helping C students become B and even A students, but most students who enter the course at the A, B, and D levels do not seem to be well-served by these multiple, iterative, short assignments. Moreover, I need to create a final project that integrates and synthesizes the learning in the course, or else I need to redesign the final exam to ensure that students perform that integrative work.

That said, I'm pleased that this redesign has demonstrably helped students learn. Over these three years, I have seen students learn to read, think, and write more effectively as a result of the changes. Although much work remains, we've accomplished much.