

# Writing Practices for Learning

Embedding Writing-Based Learning Activities to Develop Students' Reflective & Critical Thinking Skills for Engaged Learning

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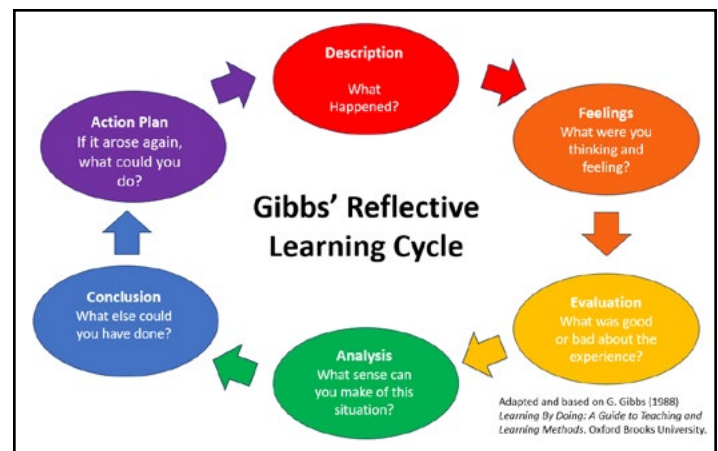
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**Abstract** This paper examines a pilot study<sup>1</sup> undertaken during the 2022-2023 academic year within a first-year undergraduate comparative government module at Birkbeck College, University of London, United Kingdom. The study investigates the impact of embedding different writing for learning practices within live seminar sessions, on students' learning and their perceptions of their learning. It introduces and uses different writing-based learning practices (reflective writing, process writing, deep reading together, writing in the zones) to enhance student engagement and learning on the module. A key rationale for embedding these writing practices through classroom activities is to develop students' reflective and critical thinking skills. Setting aside time within a structured class setting: 1) provides students with opportunities and space to reflect on what has been read/learned, to start the critical thinking process; 2) the writing provides an "opening" for students to become more active participants who engage in their learning; 3) it normalizes reflective practices as a valued part of the learning process; and 4) students begin to see practices as transferable skills to be used in other modules and beyond their studies. The pilot project is evaluating impact through observations of student engagement and learning, and through student self-perceptions of their learning in the module.

**1. Introduction** Over many years of teaching in higher education as well as adult education, I have noticed that while we teach note taking, summarizing, and writing academic essays as study skills, we do not explicitly teach critical thinking, reading, or reflection as skills. It is assumed that students will learn to be critical thinkers from other study skills and in the process of learning, and so there has been less emphasis on teaching students to be reflective, critical thinkers. Perhaps, instead of working from this assumption that students will develop this necessary skill through their studies, we, as educators, should consider how we can encourage the development of these skills with more practical tasks and activities embedded into synchronous and asynchronous learning environments.

<sup>1</sup> This study is a requirement of the CLASP Fellows Program, undertaking a small research project that examines the use of writing and "reading together" practices drawn from the liberal arts pedagogy, literature and creative writing practices. The Open Society University Network—Center for Liberal Arts and Sciences Pedagogy (OSUN-CLASP) is a 2-year professional development program for early to mid-career faculty from across OSUN institutions. <https://iwtclasp.bard.edu/fellows/>

This led me to consider redesigning the curriculum for a core politics undergraduate model to create these opportunities for additional skills development. I borrowed ideas on action research pedagogy,<sup>2</sup> which centers the educator as having "a vested interest in the particular setting and with the particular problem of practice" (Mertler and Hartley 2017, 2) for this work. My project uses a process of experimentation with new methods based on pedagogical reasoning, that utilizes Gibbs' cycle (1988) to reflect and evaluate one's own teaching practices (Figure 1).

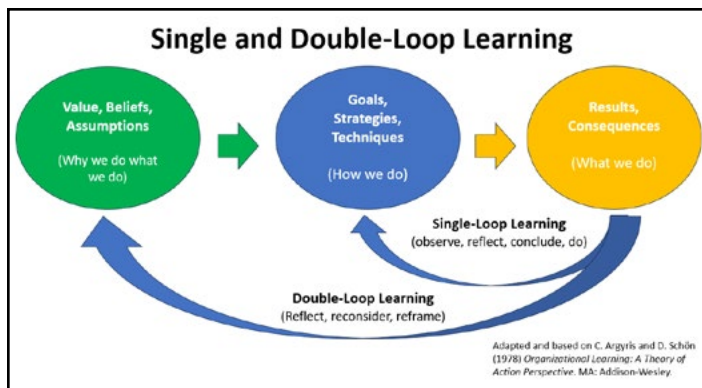


**Figure 1.** Image created by the author of Gibbs' cycle of reflection and evaluation as part of the Action Research process.

This cycle of planning, implementing, evaluating, and reflecting is important to better understand the impact that these changes of practices have had, and whether further adjustments need to be made to reach the overall goal of addressing the particular learning problem. It is through using the Gibbs cycle (1988) that I reflect and evaluate my own teaching practices to identify a range of effective methods to develop students' critical thinking skills and increase engagement with their learning during and outside of face-to-face seminar sessions. This cycle of "reflection in action" allows for the collection of data (information) that informs the making of small changes to then feed into further reflection on the impact these changes have (Argyris and Schön 1976 cited by Clark 2015). One key point that Argyris and Schön make with

<sup>2</sup> Action Research is "education research... that is conducted by educators for themselves" (Mertler and Hartley 2017, 2)

their double-loop learning reflective cycle (Figure 2) is that the process should include learners. Learners' participation in and feedback on class activities serves as a powerful tool for identifying the "drivers" for learners that can be used to feed back into future adjustments and planning (Miller 2010).



**Figure 2.** Image created by the author of Argyris and Schön's Double-Loop Learning Model

Therefore, our practices as reflective teachers should provide, as Dewey (1933) stated, "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it tends" (Rikkers and Loyens 2017, 41). We should cultivate reflective practices within our teaching practices to continually improve teaching and student learning.

To this end, this project embedded writing-based learning activities into the curriculum within a core politics module called *Comparative Government*. The *Comparative Government* curriculum was split over two terms of 10 weeks each, so in total, it ran for 20 weeks with 90-minute synchronous face-to-face seminar sessions once a week. The students on this module are engaged in a range of courses of study—some study only politics, others are studying for a history/politics degree, and a few are also studying for a social sciences degree). These students also vary in terms of their previous experience with studying and in their ages. Some have previous degrees in other fields of study, and for others, this is their first higher education experience. In terms of ages, they range from their early 20s through their 70s and some are retired from their previous employment. One of the key things that sets these students apart from more traditional students undertaking higher education studies is that they all study (part-time or full-time) in the evenings and on weekends. Birkbeck College is considered unique in that all of its teaching provision is delivered in the evenings and over the weekends. This is to accommodate the fact that the large majority of students in the college are working during the day while studying in the evening, and

for some, they have caring responsibilities during the day, which means studying in the evenings or on particular weekends makes undertaking a degree feasible.

The writing-based learning activities embedded in the module were for face-to-face sessions. In addition to the face-to-face sessions, students had a number of pre-session activities to complete (e.g., preparatory reading, listening to pre-recorded lectures, completing embedded mini-question quizzes within the pre-recorded lectures, and uploading any key questions / comments they have on key concepts/theories into the online post-it note board in Moodle (virtual learning environment—VLE—that the College uses). The study itself introduces specific writing-based practices, such as focused freewriting (FFW), process writing (PW), writing in the zones (WITZ), and deep reading of texts into the weekly face-to-face sessions.

The goal of the project was to introduce and use four different writing-based learning practices<sup>3</sup>:

- Focused freewriting (FFW): students are provided a specific writing prompt, set a specific amount of writing time, and informed that they would be sharing some of the writing in some way.
- Process writing (PW): students reflect on the writing previously completed; reflective writing on the writing process.
- Writing-in-the-zones (WitZ): students receive specific writing prompts, set timings, and write within a specific zone (the start of the exercise is to take a clean sheet of paper and to draw out the different zones to be used).
- Deep-reading & annotation of texts for analysis: reading in class an excerpt from a specific text; everyone individually annotates their copy of the text—noting key ideas/concepts/phrases. There are multiple layers of reading of the text and discussion at each layer.

The writing-based learning practices were then introduced and embedded across the module. For instance, the FFW was introduced as a weekly session starter activity, as it was found to create space before speaking and discussion, but also allowed an access point for students who had struggled to engage with the pre-session activities, to still participate and contribute to the class session. The deep-reading activity was also one that was embedded on a weekly basis. The process writing activity was one that was introduced and used across the term, and in a few cases, the activity started in-class and then students were asked to complete it as part of the post-session work by adding parts of these to the Moodle (VLE) blog for that session. With the WitZ activity, this was used only

<sup>3</sup> For more details about the individual writing-based learning practices mentioned below, please see [Appendix B](#).

once with students in Week 5, as an essay brainstorming/ planning activity.

With the main purposes of this project are:

1. Following the rationale that developing reflective and critical thinking skills in students is important, it asks whether these skills can be developed through embedding writing-based activities.
2. Asking if the embedding of writing-based activities can also create an environment to enhance active engagement in learning by students?

The project evaluates these two foci, through the use of student questionnaires, self-observations of me as the lecturer, and observations of an external independent reviewer. In addition to these data sources, the project includes students' own writing work to illustrate how specific writing activities were completed.

**2. Literature Review** The work of the project builds from two key pedagogical underpinnings. The first is the development critical thinking skills and the second is writing-based practices for learning. In order to situate the project and its importance to student learning and engagement, I will provide a brief background on the literature of each approach.

**2.1. Developing Critical Thinking** If we begin by viewing critical thinking as a skill to be developed like other study skills, we need to start with defining what it is. Using Beyer's definition, we can understand critical thinking as "judging the quality of something such as information, an assertion or an event, against some criteria" (Pleschová 2017, 12). This leads to an interesting but often overlooked part of developing critical thinking and reflection skills, the questions What does the learning environment look like? What kind of learning tasks or activities are students being asked to engage with? Biggs (2003) discusses this idea of learning environment and what he calls "constructive alignment." Here, constructive alignment has two parts, where "constructive" refers to the idea that "students construct meaning through relevant learning activities" and "alignment" refers to "what the teacher does, which is to set up a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes" (Biggs 2003).

This focus on creation of the learning environment and of learning activities that provide space for students to construct experiences in learning, links to the work of others like Philip Race (1993) and his "ripples in a pond" model of learning, as well as Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984) (Hill 2003, 28–30). These ideas focus on learning as doing, similarly to what Pleschová (2017) presents in terms of how to encourage the development of critical thinking in students through formulating questions, providing

guidance and modeling practices, and assisting students to structure knowledge (p14–20). In particular, activities created can be scaffolded to provide students with the tools to consider new ideas, concepts, theories, and alternative perspectives and better understand these with depth (here the formulation of questions and pinpointing answers to them). This formation, along with incorporating opportunities for reflection, "enhances the quality and depth of knowledge" (Rikkers and Loyens 2017, 41). This deep understanding then becomes the precursor for critically evaluating and assessing the placement, validity, and methodology to reach those answers. It allows students to create judgments of their own work or others' work and underpinning these judgments with support of other perspectives, experiences, and examples.

Another part of the critical thinking skill is what Perkins and Salomon (1988) refer to as "Teaching for Transfer." While we can conceive of this as the next layer of the scaffold in students' critical thinking skill development, it is an important one. Transfer is important as "students often fail to apply knowledge and skills learned in one context to other situations" (Perkins and Salomon 1988, 22) as it requires active engagement. There is an assumption that "transfer takes care of itself" and students will be able to make the connections between knowledge and different contexts for solving problems (Perkins and Salomon 1988, 23–24). Creating learning activities that allow for scaffolding and through a series of what Yancey et al (2019, 276) call "reiterative reflective activities" will assist students to begin to recognize their agency within their learning through critical thinking. Next, we look to developing learning activities more purposefully to assist students.

**2.2. Writing-Based Practices for Learning** Building on the previous literature, here we think about activities that will engage students and offer them the space to develop a scaffolded approach to critically assessing the information they encounter. These scaffolded stages, as described by Kellogg (2008, 3) in his work on the development of writing skills, begins with telling what one knows (or has read), transforming this knowledge to show what one knows, and then to craft this knowledge and be able to share or explain it to someone else.

The emphasis of writing as the method for developing learning is based on the idea that "thinking is closely linked to writing" and that to write "text at an advanced level involved not just the language system," it also involves "cognitive systems for memory and thinking as well" (Kellogg 2008, 2). This relationship between memory and knowledge is an important aspect of the thinking and writing processes. It could be said that,

writers must be able to retrieve their knowledge during composition and creatively apply it to decide what to say in the text and how to say it. Accessibility in working memory or through rapid, well-timed re-

trieval from long-term memory is necessary or else the writer's knowledge is inert during composition (Kellogg 2008, 14; Kellogg 1994).

It is during this process that a student needs to have the "ability to coordinate complex interactions of planning ideas, text generation, and reviewing ideas" (Kellogg 2008, 14). This is where writing to prompts or questions can assist. Important to this is what Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993) called the use of "deliberate practice" (Kellogg 2008, 17). Deliberative practice highlights five actions that are key for the development of writing as a skill and as an important part of the learning process. The five actions as mentioned by Kellogg (2008), based on the work of Ericsson et al (1993) are:

1. Engagement in the task to improve the skill;
2. Motivation to engage in the task;
3. Practicing tasks or activities that speak to where an individual is, in terms of ability or knowledge;
4. Feedback on the task or activity;
5. Repetition

As others such as Boice (1985), Kellogg and Raulerson (2007) have considered, the task is to develop the writing and thinking skill over a length of time so that it becomes known and familiar. This follows some of the earlier literature on reflective practices and links to Vygotsky's (1978) "zone of proximal development" concept that learning in an environment with support structures that allow for learning by doing as well as learning by observing, allowing students to develop beyond their current level (Kellogg 2008, 19). This is the type of learning environment that I plan to create for students on the *Comparative Government* module and embed specific writing practices.

Some of the writing practices I plan to introduce are: focused freewriting, deep reading and annotations, and writing in the zones. As mentioned by Nicole Wallack (2009), the use of "Focused Freewriting" (FFW) where specific writing prompts are created and students can actively engage with their thoughts about a topic or problem FFW purposefully shapes the content of students' writing, and this is then shared with others in the classroom setting. It can be used to "situate writing as a dimension of reading" or for "metacognitive purposes" (Wallack 2009, 29). It is for this former purpose in the first instance, that FFW will be integrated as a learning activity at the start of each seminar session.

Two other writing methods I plan to use in the module are deep reading and annotations for collaborative learning. It allows all students access to engage with texts, ideas, concepts, and theories that are "unfamiliar, difficult, or

strange texts" to "play with point of view or challenge conventional modes of expressions" (Lesnick 2009, 83). This type of writing is important as it provides an entrance point for all students to participate—they can select a sentence or short passage to read out loud verbatim and then comment on why they selected it. It also provides valuable processing—thinking time for students. It asks them to really listen to one another and consider the possibility of multiple perspectives.

In the development of this project, these areas of literature were a valuable source for selecting the writing activities chosen for the module. There were sources of inspiration and reflection on what others have done before me and the challenges and benefits they found in the use of these writing-based learning practices.

**3. Methodology** This research takes an "action research practitioner" approach to introduce and reflect on teaching and learning activities, using mixed methods. Its objective is to improve teaching practices and make them more effective for learners (Sagor 2000, Tummons and Duckworth 2012). The tested hypothesis is that inclusion of writing-based practices has a positive impact on developing students' critical thinking and writing skills, as well as impacting their perceptions of their own learning. Mixed methods of data gathering are used within the experiential process to demonstrate that the results converge towards the same conclusion.

### 3.1. Ethics

Ethics Approval Reference Number: 950534-959516-104585166.

All participants were given an information sheet that provided the project details and asked to sign a consent form (two copies; one for the respondent and one for the researcher) so that they understood that they will not be identifiable in any presentation of this research without a further written consent. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw any information at any time before it has been anonymized and combined with other data. Each participant was randomly assigned a serial number with all personally identifiable information being removed—Personally Identifiable Information (PII) includes names and student identification numbers. Ethics approval has been granted and any ethical issues that arise in the field will be initially referred to the departmental ethics coordinator for discussion. The study is of very low risk of severe impact on individuals—so a DMP (Data Management Plan) is deemed sufficient.

**3.2. Participants** For the project, participants were asked to opt in with the use of information and consent forms, as well as completion of the start / end of module questionnaires. The students recruited to participate were



those enrolled on the *Comparative Government module* (Summer 2023).

- Inclusion criteria—those who are enrolled in the module and elect to participate in the study.
- Exclusion criteria—none; except students who decide not to participate in the study.

In total, there were 7 participants from the Summer Term 2023 cohort who agreed to participate. The age range of participants were from 18–70 years of age<sup>4</sup>

**3.3. Data Collection and Research Methods** During the study, primary qualitative data (as discussed in more detail below) was collected over the duration of the teaching term for the *Comparative Government* module.

I sought to evaluate:

- students' engagement with the writing-based practices
- students' perspectives of their own learning
- observer-participant observations
- external observations of
  - engagement by students with practises
  - impressions of how the writing-based learning practices impacted learning.

Evaluation was undertaken using three methods of data collection as follows:

**Method – Questionnaires** – The first qualitative data set came in two forms from students: there was a student questionnaire administered at the start of the module in Week 1. This was to gain a baseline of students' individual goals for the module, as well as their previous knowledge of and/or experience with writing-to-learn practices before the module. Another survey was administered in Week 9 (second to last session). In this end-of-module questionnaire, students were asked to self-reflect on their engagement with the writing practices in class and to self-reflect on specific writing practices and how they felt it impacted their learning on the module. Additionally, students' anecdotal comments about specific writing practices were recorded by the teacher-observer throughout the term.

**Method – Observer Reflections** – The second source of data was my own self-reflections following each class session. I kept a diary to record my observations that used

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<sup>4</sup> This is estimated. I did not have the exact ages of students who were enrolled on the module and participating in the study.

a reflective learning cycle (see Figures 1 and 2 earlier) to evaluate the impact of writing-based practices for students on the module. The diary entry included comments on student engagement in seminar: with the writing-to-learn exercises, with small group/paired work, and with whole class discussions. It included comments on the depth of discussion on weekly topics, how students engaged with case study examples, and whether they could demonstrate linkage to the topic of the session in a critically evaluative way.

**Method – External Observations** – The third form of qualitative data took the form of an external observer's observations. Here, a colleague familiar with writing-based learning practices visited the module on two occasions as an external observer. They attended the first session (Week 1) and the second to last session (Week 9) and completed observations of both classes. The observations included comments about the instructor's and students' activities, students' engagement with the writing tasks during seminar, and comment on overall student engagement and depth of seminar discussions. This additional feedback of the independent external observer will add to the other qualitative data collected for determining effectiveness in use of writing-based practices on both teaching and learning.

**Supporting data** – To support observation and assessment, I sought and gained students' permission to use their in-class writing-based learning work (anonymised) as examples to demonstrate their engagement with the tasks. These pieces of work were then linked to the other three types of data collected to evaluate impact of the writing-based practices on students' engagement and learning on the module.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

**4.1. Questionnaire Findings (Start of Module)** The results in [Table 1](#) are from the start-of-module questionnaire that students completed.

There were only seven students of the ten on the module that completed both the start and end-of-module questionnaires. For this reason, the findings are based only on those seven students. Through the start-of-module questionnaire, I found that only one of the seven students had any previous experience with writing-based practices. This one student mentioned experience with written and video blogs specifically in response to this question. The other six students listed either "no experience" specifically or "no reply" to the question. Speaking to those who listed "no reply" to the question of previous experience with writing practices, most had not heard of the term before, or as one student mentioned, their previous learning could be characterized as "chalk and talk" and no opportunity for writing (beyond note-taking), much less discussion or questioning.

Student	Q1. Key goals for yourself	Q2. Expectations for this module	Q3. Have you ever used reflective writing practices/techniques previously as part of a previous course or studies? If yes, name/describe.
A	Get a better grade in the assignment than my last. To go more into detail with my work.	Basic key knowledge of political culture and the influence it has in society.	(no reply on the form)
B	To enhance my understanding of political systems and how to critique them—using the techniques we started to develop in the previous module.	I am hoping to achieve some of the objectives above! (previous question)	(no reply on the form)
C	To learn a lot more about governments & the role sub-governments play. The pros and cons of countries who use either; and to come to my conclusion as to what the strengths & weaknesses are.	A lot of information on sub-levels. Clear definitions that I can remember and really understand the depths of the subject matter.	(no reply on the form)
D	Greater understanding of political / government processes in a variety of contexts and environments.	Discussion in sessions to bring out individual experiences from fellow students from overseas.	Not familiar with the term.
E	Explore government structures and its processes in the UK. Further understand and explore political culture and what is meant by political culture.	Understand the module better and how key aspects such as political culture play a key role in the day-to-day politics both at home and abroad.	(no reply on the form)
F	Improve politics vocabulary and terms. Learn more about UK & world politics + current examples. Find new interesting areas in politics to discover.	Same as above. (previous question)	Yes—logs, video logs, written logs.
G	Establish an understanding and insight into key processes of government and using a comparative approach.	Proactive learning. Critical thinking/analysis. Explore key political processes using a comparative approach.	Cannot think of any. Learning has tended to be “talk and chalk”.

**Table 1.** Student Replies to the Start-of-Module Questionnaire

**4.2. Observer Reflections** Based on these students’ starting points above in terms of familiarity with writing-based learning practices, it was interesting to then gain a view of their engagement with the different writing-to-learn activities through my own observations and those of my colleague who visited on two occasions. From my own observations, the early engagement of students was mixed. While all engaged with the writing tasks in some way during the first session, I noted that at least three of the seven students found it challenging in weeks two and three to engage with the private freewriting exercise. However, I noted that when the second exercise was a focused freewriting (FFW) task to jot down anything that came to mind from their homework readings or related to the specific topic to be discussed in the seminar, all

students found it easier to engage and write for the duration of the time set. This FFW task became the starting point for our seminars as the introduction of the topic for each session. From week three onwards, students all engaged in the FFW task, as it provided an entry point for paired or class discussion to draw out key concepts, ideas, perspectives, and arguments from readings.

The FFW task was sometimes then integrated as the first “loop” within a loop-writing exercise that delved further into specific arguments/perspectives on a topic such as “democracy,” allowing students to respond to the prompts before then pairing up to share their writing and producing key points or case study examples to share with the larger class group on the topic for the session.

The loop writing exercise usually consisted of three loops—the first two completed individually, and the third loop for sharing / small group discussion. I observed that the exercise improved the depth of discussion. Students demonstrated this in the way they linked specific ideas from the readings to country-specific examples, and in some cases, linked to their own lived experiences. For example, one student was able to share with others how party politics impacted citizen inclusion/exclusion related to LGBTQ+ issues in Spain. This became a case study discussed in the class group, linking the topics of political party formation, voting systems, and civil society participation. Such discussions added and demonstrated students' depth of understanding of nuances of the topics discussed, as well as engagement with their learning from each other in addition to the lectures and readings.

One of the most successful writing activities students engaged in during the module was the “writing in zones” activity which was used for essay planning. Here, success is measured in terms of engagement of students with the activity, and from students' own perspectives of what they gained from the activity. In this activity, students followed the writing prompts for each zone as they progressed through the exercise completed in class, and the final task of the activity was to give peer feedback on a partner's writing. Below are screenshots of the question and instruction slides for the activity. Following these are examples of the zone-writing activity from the seven students participating in this project.

**Task 3 – essay brainstorming**

Essay Questions (select ONE):

1. Does mass media shape or reflect public opinion? Discuss with reference to at least two specific case study examples.
2. 'Compulsory voting strengthens democracy.' Discuss with reference to at least two specific case study examples.
3. 'Referendums support representative democracy.' Discuss with reference to at least two specific case study examples.

Figure 3. Screenshot of PowerPoint slide with essay question choices.

**Task 3 – essay brainstorming**

**'Writing in the Zones' for our essay planning**

- 1 - individually select and complete the different 'zones' on the worksheet provided in-class
- 2 - each zone will include a different piece of writing to complete within a specific timeframe
- 3 - zone '6' is will be your reflection on next steps
- 4- the final zone for a peer to complete on review of what you have written

Q selected here

Feedback from a peer: anything missing; anything for your peer to consider in their planning

Figure 4. Screenshot of PowerPoint slide used for explaining Writing-in-the-Zones activity during the seminar session.

# Task 3 – essay brainstorming

## 'Writing in the Zones' for our essay planning

**Starting Step** – write your selected question in the middle block area

**Zone 1** – write key terms/concepts you need to identify and/or define from your question

**Zone 2** – identify and write any sub-questions you need to ask that will help you to develop your essay question

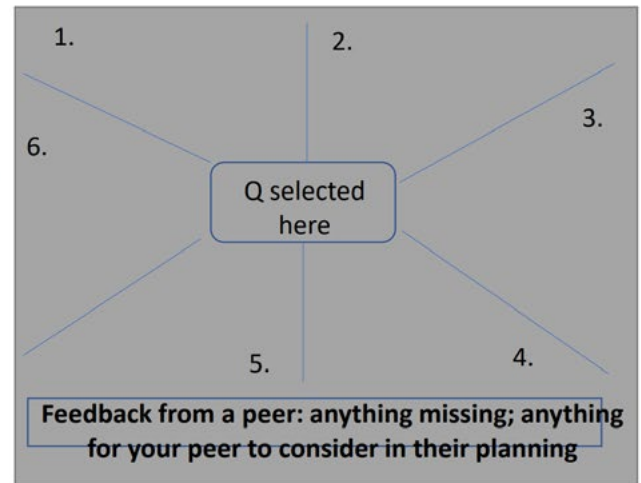
**Zone 3** – Identify at least TWO arguments in support of your reply to the essay question (no more than 3 arguments)

**Zone 4** – Identify at least TWO counter-arguments that would come up against your supporting arguments

**Zone 5** – Identify and list the evidence (e.g., case study countries, specific examples) that will support your main arguments  
Identify any readings that you can use that will help you to develop your key arguments and demonstrate knowledge of the literature focused on your topic  
\*If you can't think of any specific evidence; identify what you would need to find to support your argument and develop your essay

**Zone 6** – Reflection on what you have in the other zones; What are your next steps to progress your essay forward from this mapping

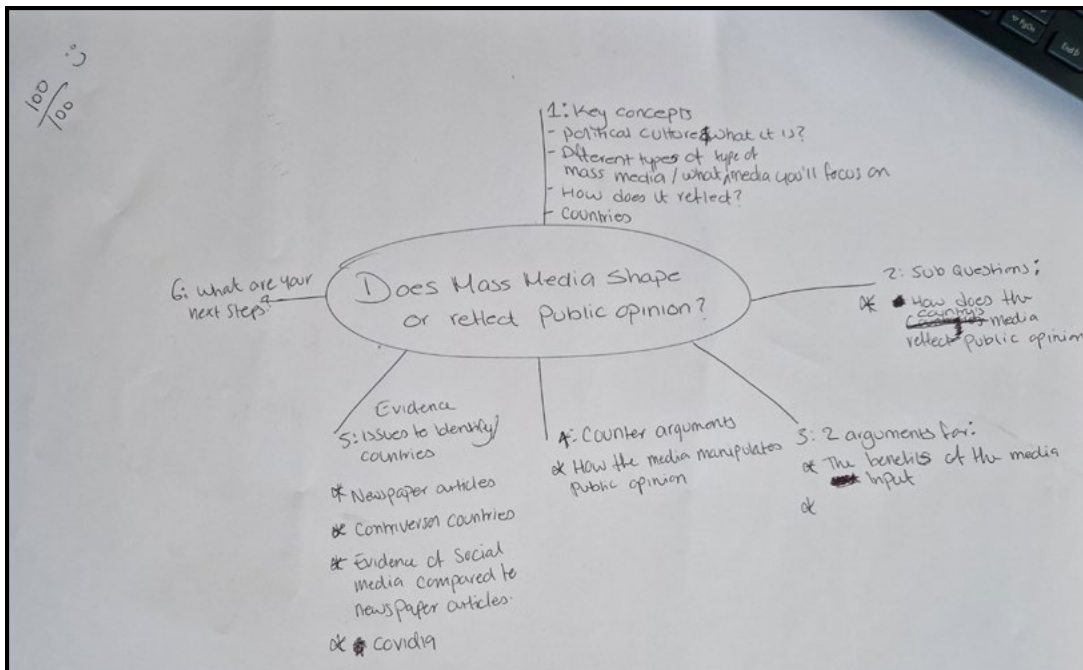
**Final step:** in the box/space at the bottom (or back of the page) – Peer Review a colleague's mapping – read through all, ask questions of your peer, find ONE thing you liked / found interesting AND ONE suggestion you might have for them – maybe another perspective they had not thought about yet



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**Figure 5.** Screenshot of PowerPoint slide with specific writing prompts, used for explaining Writing-in-the-Zones activity during the seminar session.



**Figure 6.a.** Sample Work of students' Writing-in-the-Zones work from Week 5



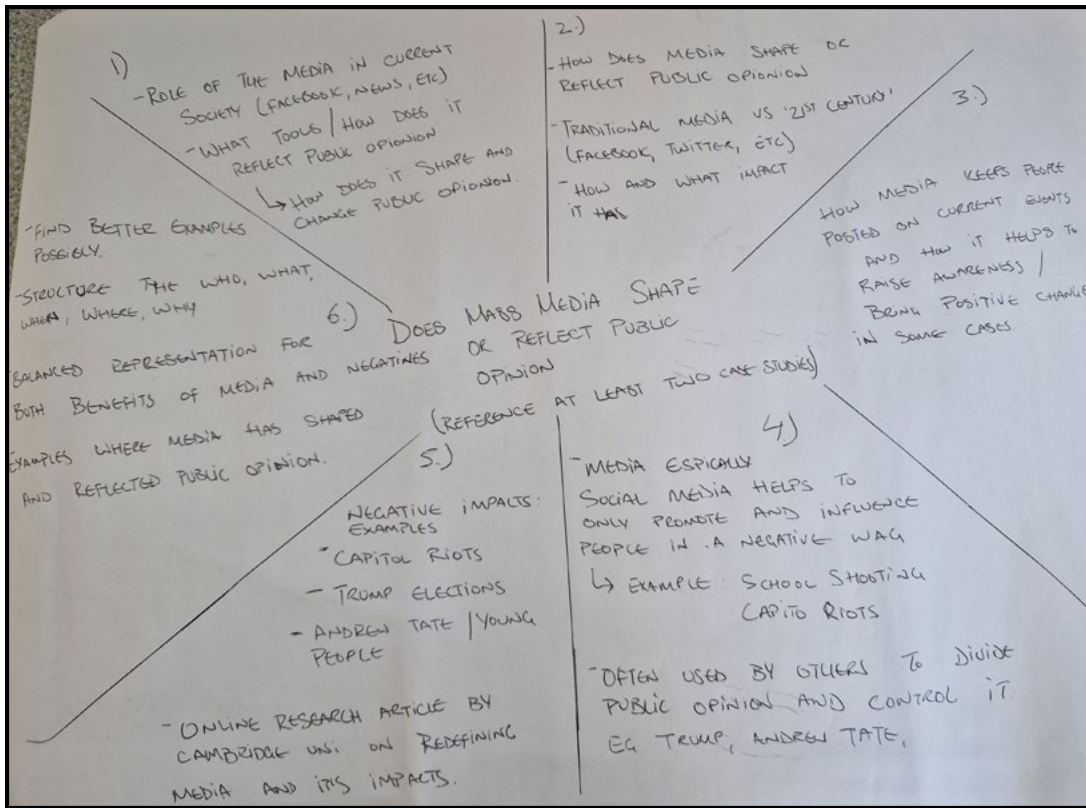


Figure 6.b. Sample Work of students' Writing-in-the-Zones work from Week 5

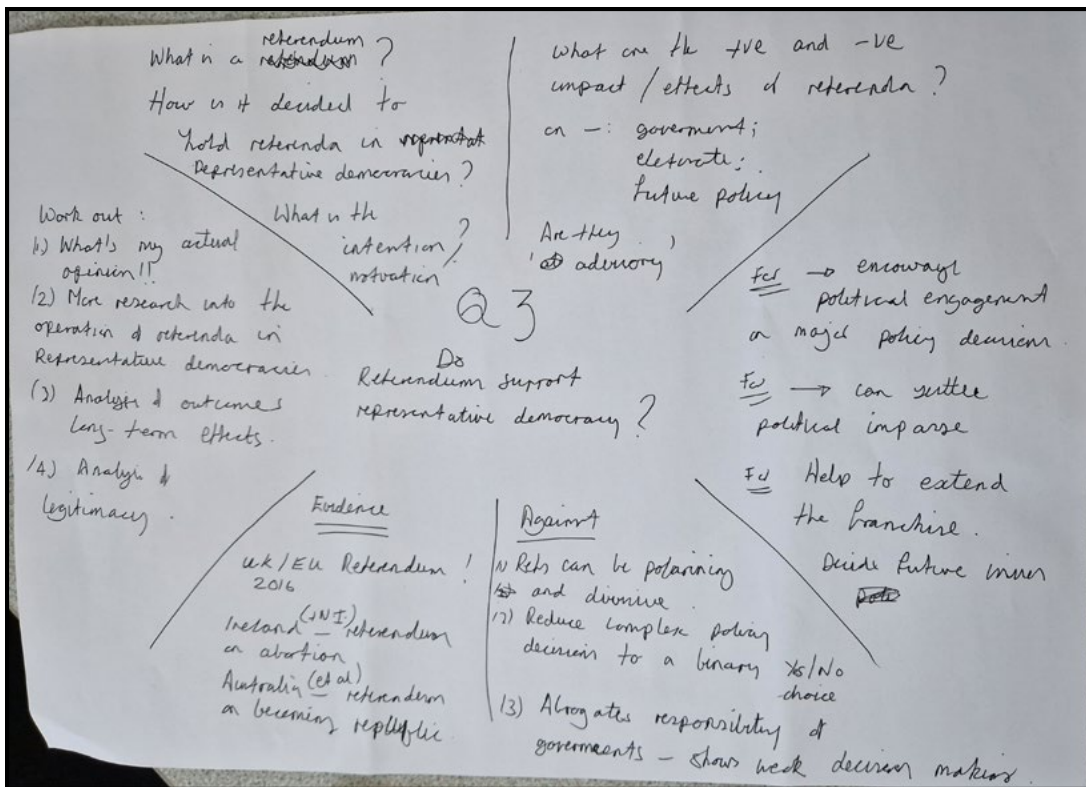


Figure 6.c. Sample Work of students' Writing-in-the-Zones work from Week 5

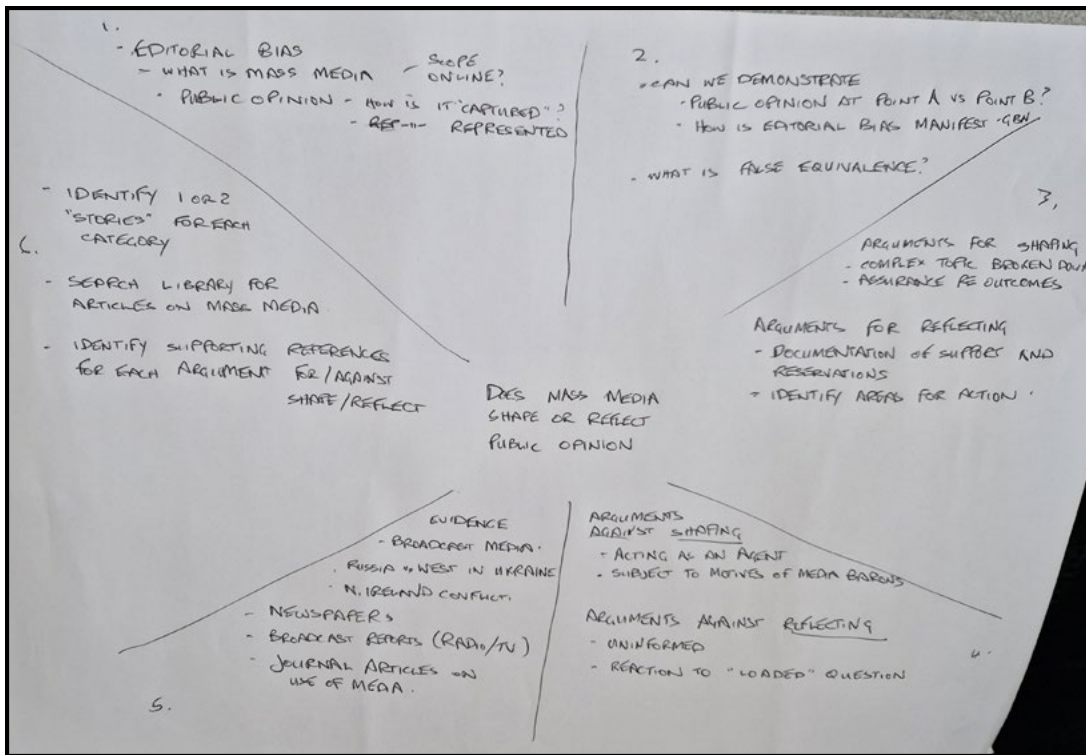


Figure 6.d. Sample Work of students' Writing-in-the-Zones work from Week 5

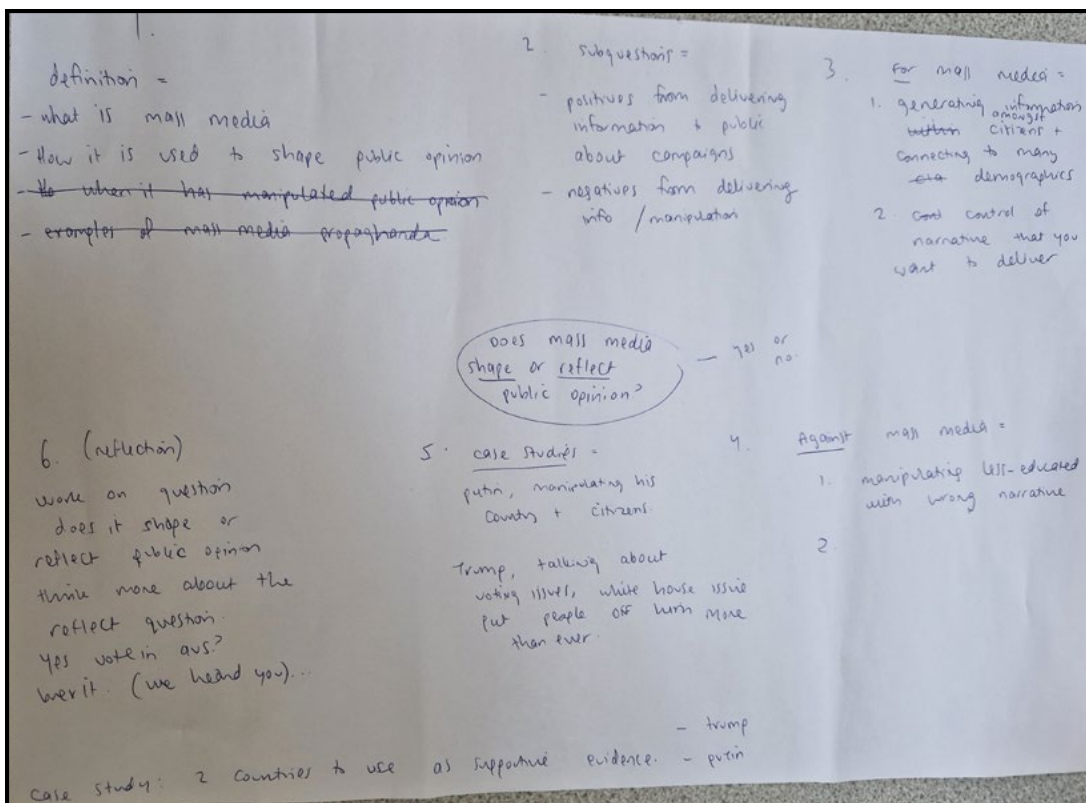
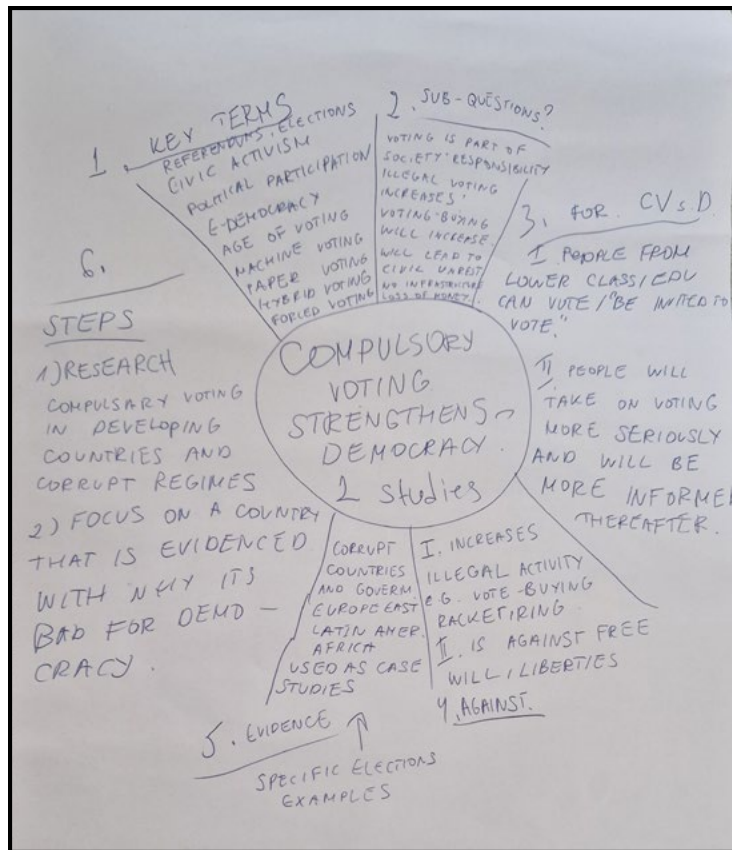


Figure 6.e. Sample Work of students' Writing-in-the-Zones work from Week 5



**Figure 6.f.** Sample Work of students' Writing-in-the-Zones work from Week 5

Above, in Figure 6, were examples of the writing-in-the-zones work students completed for essay brainstorming and planning, during the seminar session in Week 5 of the module. In each sample, we can see how having time set aside within the face-to-face class session, students are able to begin to brainstorm and develop their way towards refining their ideas for answering the essay question selected. The next step of this activity was verbal instead of written, where students shared / presented what they had written across the six zones to a peer in pairs. In this penultimate step of the activity, students were required to provide constructive feedback in the form stating what they heard from their presenting peers, questions that would help develop a part of the essay further, and any additional thoughts they wanted to share with their peers.

An assessment of the activity's success was based on my own observations of students' engagement with completing each zone in response to the writing prompt for that area. Additionally, this assessment was based on student anecdotal feedback during the activity at the end of the Week 5 session. Some of the students' feedback is quoted below:

[this was] the best activity I've done and it has really made me think about key aspects for building my essay;

I really like having the activity done in this visual way, as I can see clearly areas where I know I'll need to find more information and work to build for my essay;

I know that I need to go back to our readings and see how to integrate these as part of developing my essay thesis;

I need more detail on case studies as evidence for my essay, and that became clear when writing to that prompt

Overall, my observations and students' self-reflections of the zone writing activity was that it was a useful activity and allowed them to start planning and thinking about their essays. Importantly, an aspect many of the students mentioned in passing but hadn't considered previously, is how the sharing and explaining of their plan to someone else (the final step of the activity), allowed them to see gaps in their own ideas and also threw up some other routes for thinking, as some of their partners stated that they had also thought of x and y that might be useful for the development of the essay.

On the whole, my assessment of the writing activities embedded in class sessions are positive. I noticed that at first some students were hesitant with the focused freewriting, but by the end of the term, this became



an activity that everyone expected and was prepared for. Similarly for the deep reading work, some students found this more challenging—partly due to English not being their primary language, and for others, needing more time to read and take in what a piece of text was trying to argue. One of the ways I attempted to assist students further with the deep reading activities was to sometimes use the reading homework and select specific sections for this activity, instead of material new to students. From both activities, I noticed higher levels of engagements each week, with all students participating in paired and small group discussions, and for one or two of the quieter students, even feeling able to share their group’s key points into the larger class group. The depth of the discussions was also clear—that having time to think and write out key points and small group work built on this individual or paired writing, allowed students to ask deeper questions and share other readings they may have done around the topic and bring these details into the discussions.

**4.3. External Observation Findings** These observations were made by a colleague coming into the module space on two occasions—during the first session (Week 1) and the penultimate session (Week 9). For personal reasons, the External Observer (EO) was able to join the class in-person in Week 1 but joined via an online hybrid connection in Week 9. The observations were detailed in relation to the specific writing activities and the impact on discussion levels and engagement of students of both visits.

In summary of the visit in Week 1, the external observer wrote:

enjoyed seeing how the lecturer integrated writing tasks into the seminar. I think the positives were that this allowed students to formulate and then test their ideas with peers before sharing these. They could also adapt and add to their initial answers in the later class discussion or when the lecturer provided clarification (EO).

However, in this first session, it was felt that perhaps there had been a heavier focus on the writing tasks and that this left less opportunities for students “to test ideas, ask questions and seek clarification on points in the reading (EO).” Nevertheless, it was noted by the observer that the students seemed to engage with the writing and use these notes in their paired work. The writing seemed to “assist students to confidently share their answers in pairs and [they] were able to add examples (EO).”

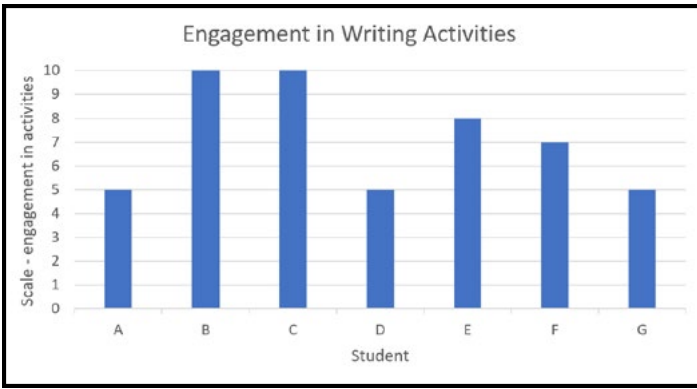
My colleague’s observations assisted me in refining my use and embedding of the writing activities into the module. One of the key things it made me reconsider was how much writing to include and to strategically use the writing to drive discussion among the students. For example, instead of setting three writing prompts, I would set two prompts where students were writing individually, and then the third prompt would be used in pairs to process what each had written, say, about constitutions and constitution preambles.

In summary of the visit in Week 9 near the end of the module, my colleague found that the writing exercises observed worked really well. These allowed “for reflection and great, productive discussions (EO).” They also noticed that “students set about this [focused free writing] straight away and seemed engaged in this—they could be seen either writing freely or consulting their notes before writing (EO).” While the overall feeling was that student engagement in the writing activities and their learning was high, and that the writing drove well-developed discussions, my colleague also highlighted a gap that could be filled. They mentioned that perhaps the writing activities could be further used not just to get students to focus on key issues that allows for discussion and knowledge building, but to also create more opportunities for clarification and further questioning within the learning space.

**4.4. Questionnaire Findings (End-of-Module)** The results presented and analyzed here are of the end-of-module questionnaire completed by the students. In total, only 7 of the total class of 10 completed both the start and end questionnaires. Included in the tables below are replies to questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5—which focused specifically on the writing-based activities. The replies to Q1 and Q2 are presented separately in [Figure 7](#) and [Table 2](#), while the results from Q3, Q4, and Q5 are presented together in the table in [Table 3](#). Each table will be discussed separately in this section.

In Question 1 ([Figure 7](#) below), the question asked students to self-reflect on their engagement with the writing activities across the module. The question was posed for them using a Likert scale of 1 through 10, with 1 being they engaged once this term, 5 being they engaged in at least half of the seminars, and 10 being they engaged in every session. The self-assessments were interesting and aligned mostly with students’ attendance over the 10-week module, although a few that listed “5” were interesting in terms of their perceptions of their engagement in comparison with my own notes about their engagement with the writing activities and the module overall.





**Figure 7.** Table of Student Replies to Q1 of the End of Module Questionnaire

**This question asked of participants:** “How often would you say that you had engaged in the writing activities?” **On a scale of 1–10;** 1 = once this term, 5 = at least half of the seminars, 10 = every session

The results in Table 2 of responses to Question 2, about which specific writing activities students self-assessed themselves to have participated in, reflected several trends. In particular, I noticed that Student F responded to having engaged only in three of the 6 writing activities available. This student in particular had a tendency to use a tablet during the sessions throughout the module and for the first half of the module, I noted that despite being informed we would be writing weekly in sessions, did not come with paper or pen/pencil. However, when provided with the opportunity to use the tablet for FFW and / or being provided with paper and pen, the student

did actually attempt to engage with FFW at the start of sessions. Otherwise, the result of this question demonstrates a clear trend among those participating students, of engagement with the four key writing-based learning activities throughout the term.

The final set of data presented here, concerning questions 3–5 of the end-of-module questionnaire, indicates a high level of self-assessment among the students that the writing-based activities they engaged with over the module were useful to their learning. The trend from the data suggests that all participants found the FFW activity useful in organizing their thinking in preparation for discussions. The WitZ activity also showed the same trend as the FFW results, the exception being that one of the students had not been in-class the day of the activity, so it could be stated that all who were present found the activity useful and perceived it as having a positive impact on their learning and preparation for writing their final essays. The final question on the deep reading indicates a more mixed picture. While five of the seven students indicated they saw it as positive for their learning on the module, two indicated that it was less helpful, and they found it challenging for different reasons.

**5. Conclusions** The goal of this study was to gather data to support the two key purposes: the embedding of writing-based activities into the curriculum to both engage students in their learning, and develop their reflective and critical thinking skills. The results, while limited due to the sample size, have indicated that students do engage with many of the writing-based practices. These findings are consistent not only from my own observations as the lec-

Student	Focused Free Writing	Loop Writing (two—three questions before discussion)	Deep Reading	Writing in the Zones (essay planning)	In Moodle (Moodle board online post-it notes)	In Moodle (2-point summary blog post)
A	x	x	x	x		
B	x	x	x	x		
C	x	x	x	x	x	x
D	x	x	x	x	x	
E	x	x	x	x	x	
F		x	x	x		
G	x	x	x		x	

**Table 2.** Student Replies to Q2 of the End of Module Questionnaire

**This question asked of participants:** “Which specific writing / reading activities did you engage with in our module?”

Student	Q3. Did you find the Writing-in-the-zones activity for essay planning useful? If so, why? If not, why not?	Q4. Did you feel the focused free writing in our weekly seminar assisted in your learning / understanding of the topic? Why? Why not?	Q5. Did you feel that the reading together (deep reading) in sessions, assisted with your learning / understanding of the topic? Why? Why not?
A	Yes, partly—it got me thinking about my essay, but there was a lot of zones I couldn't write in very much as I didn't know what to write in them.	Yes, it got me writing down anything I could remember about the topic from the pre-recorded lectures or readings that I might have understood.	I found this difficult, as I have found I didn't understand some of the concepts and ideas covered during the module, even with listening to the recorded lectures and doing the reading. So I sometimes only read part of the in-class readings and waited for discussion.
B	Yes, a useful mind representation—helpful in constructing the base for the essay. I used the one I've went through in class [to develop my essay].	Yes—very useful to encourage discussion / debate.	Again, interesting to read—then the open discussion encourages critical thought.
C	Yes, it gave me time and opportunity to re-think any questions I may have had and heard other students and how they were getting on.	Yes, to re-engage with the week's topic and remind myself about what I have learnt from pre-class studies.	Yes, it gave the class and subject more depth and gave the class something to talk about and collaborate with / on.
D	Useful. Good way to create the skeleton of an essay	Yes—focuses thoughts; sharing expands understanding.	Yes—Similar to writing, exchange of interpretations expands understanding.
E	Yes, very useful as it helped me to have a layout and put all my potential points on paper. Also helped with gaining a different perspective after reviewing peer work.	Yes, the free writing helped greatly in terms of writing ideas down and getting a different perspective.	Very helpful! (Dale is a star 😊)
F	Yes, it helped me a lot, since I'm dyslexic and find it hard to formulate my thoughts and paragraphs in an essay.	Yes, it helped me in the beginning of the seminar alongside checking my notes.	No, I prefer it at home beforehand and spend the time discussing it instead [in class].
G	Was not present for this session.	Yes—helps to actively process information and to analyse curriculum content.	Yes—develop speed reading skills and identify core concepts.

**Table 3.** Student Replies to Q3, Q4, and Q5 of the End of Module Questionnaire

turer of the module but are also supported with the data gathered from an external observer and students' own self-assessments of their learning. Overall, I observed the positive impact the writing-based activities had on students' engagement and learning, as well as their own perceptions about their engagement and learning on the *Comparative Government* module. In particular, I saw the most engagement, learning, and high levels of students' perceptions of their learning with use of the writing-in-the-zones activity.

Perhaps more importantly for Birkbeck students, coming from diverse backgrounds, previous educational experiences, and having different study needs, the

writing-based practices can serve as the basis for their development as reflective, critical thinkers and active participants in their learning environments. The next step would be to continue the study across another cohort of *Comparative Government* students, as well as on other undergraduate modules. In the future, I would like to see how the practices introduced on this project can be shared and adapted to further support student learning across the wider college.

**6. Acknowledgments** This research was financially supported by the Open Society University Network's CLASP Fellowship, directed by Bard College's Institute of Writing and Thinking. I would like to thank Erica Kaufman, Sammy

Furr, and Jen Sweeney for all of their support during the fellowship. I would also like to thank all of the CLASP Fellows Cohort 2023 for their constant support and friendship, and bent ears along the way as we worked through our projects, we did it! Adding special thanks here to Amanda Landi for her reading and feedback of drafts of this manuscript. I would also like to thank Mary McDonnell for her suggestions and our discussions about this project. The research on this project was reviewed and approved by Birkbeck's Research Ethics Boards. I want to thank my colleagues across the levels (department, School, and College-wide) who assisted in reviewing and approving of this project to work with our students. Many thanks to the students in the *Comparative Government* module (2022 cohort and 2023 cohort) who engaged in their learning with excitement and allowed me to use our learning space and their contributions to this study. Lastly, I'd like to thank my husband and sometime editor, Richard Lowe, for reviewing the full manuscript and lending his expertise in writing and review, assisting me in finalizing this manuscript and getting it out the door (or hitting the "send" button for the email).

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## Appendix A. Project Information Sheet and Consent Form

### Information Sheet

Department of Politics  
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London WC1E 7HX

Email of Researcher: [d.mineshima-lowe@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:d.mineshima-lowe@bbk.ac.uk)

#### Title of Study:

Writing Practices for Learning: Using Formative Writing and Reading Together Tasks within an Undergraduate Core Politics Module to Develop Students' Reflection and Critical Thinking Skills

Name of researcher: *Dale Mineshima-Lowe*

The pilot study will investigate the impact of embedding reflective writing and process writing practices within live seminar sessions on students' learning. It aims to gain an understanding of student uptake of, and engagement with the use of writing and 'reading together' practices drawn from the Liberal Arts pedagogy and literature & creative writing practices. It also aims to gain an understanding of whether such activities and practices introduced create particular perceptions within students, about their learning and the learning process.

The study is in the process of receiving ethical approval.

You will be asked to take part in a two-part questionnaire (a pre-questionnaire and an end-of-module questionnaire) to talk about your experiences and reflections about the use of the writing for learning and reading-together activities implemented during our module. I imagine this taking about an hour total (15-20 minutes for the pre-questionnaire; 15-30 minutes for the post-questionnaire).

I would also like to use the anonymised module feedback submitted through the College's Blue System at the end of the term.

And finally, as the writing activities will be integrated into our weekly seminars, my hope is that you will be participating in these activities in-class as part of the larger class group with others within the seminar—whether you elect to participate in the study here or not.

If you agree to participate, I will provide class time for you to complete the pre- and end-of-module questionnaires. You are free to stop your participation within the study at any time. You can withdraw from the study at any point.

Your data will be anonymised and stored securely in a cloud-based server, as well as on a separate external hard drive that is only accessible to myself as the sole researcher and is password protected.

The research, including findings that result from your participation in this study will be written up for academic publications and other project outputs including blogs, websites and podcasts. I can send you copies of these if you would like to see them.

Once our study is finished, the data from the anonymised questionnaires will be archived and other researchers will be able to access them.

For information about Birkbeck's data protection policies, please visit: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/policies/privacy>

If you have concerns about this study, please contact the School's Ethics Officer [sshpethics@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:sshpethics@bbk.ac.uk)

You also have the right to submit a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office <https://ico.org.uk/>

## Consent form

**Title of Study:** Writing Practices for Learning: Using Formative Writing and Reading Together Tasks within an Undergraduate Core Politics Module to Develop Students' Reflection and Critical Thinking Skills

Name of researcher: Dale Mineshima-Lowe

I have been informed about the nature of this study and willingly consent to take part in it.

I agree to the following data collection and processing approaches being used for my data: pre- and end-of-module self-reflection questionnaires, and cumulative results of any questions completed for the end of module survey questionnaire run by the College. All data anonymised and stored securely.

I understand that I will not be identifiable in any presentation of this research without my further, written, consent.

I understand that I may withdraw my data at any time before it has been anonymised.

I understand that the anonymised form of the data I have provided will be made available to other researchers through publications and other project outputs, and by being deposited in Birkbeck, University of London's data repository.

I am over 16 years of age.

Name

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Signed

---

Date

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There should be two signed copies, one for participant, one for researcher.

<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/policies/privacy>

If you have concerns about this study, please contact the School's Ethics Officer [sshpethics@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:sshpethics@bbk.ac.uk)

You also have the right to submit a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office <https://ico.org.uk/>

## Appendix B. Additional Information for Participants on the Writing-based Practices

**Title of Study:** Embedding Writing Practices for Learning: Using Formative Writing and Reading Together Tasks within an Undergraduate Core Politics Module to Develop Students' Reflective and Critical Thinking Skills

*Writing practices to be introduced*

**(Reflective) Focused Free Writing Practice** – this will entail 2 or 3 minutes of time for you to collect your thoughts about our seminar topic. This will normally be used at the beginning of the session to collect your thoughts to share from the reading/pre-recorded lecture/pressing questions you had from these. Or we will use this at the end of the seminar session—as a means of collecting your final summary of thoughts, comments, questions raised, questions you have to follow-up with, etc.

**Process Writing Practice** - we will take a deeper look at our writing—a short excerpt or a paragraph or two, and you will reconsider what you have written about a topic/ to a writing prompt, earlier. (Earlier writing will have included prompts on: Identified piece of reading and asked what it was stating/not stating in relation to our topic. Does it provide an argument? If so, what is it? Does it provide any definitions? Are there any terminology/words you are unfamiliar with?)

**Deep-Reading Together** – we will have an additional short paragraph or excerpt to read in class and consider. You will be asked to underline key words, phrases, passages that you identify. At the end of the time, you will be asked to share one thing from the reading and why you selected it (e.g., How does it relate to our general discussion for the topic of the seminar? What further questions does it raise for you?)

**Writing-in-the-Zones** – this is a writing activity that will include a set of writing prompts (questions) that you will be asked to write to in a specific visual format where each 'zone' is for a separate writing prompt. The entire process links one zone/writing prompt to the next and allows a deeper exploration and demonstration of knowledge and questioning. It is also intended to visualise any gaps in knowledge, understanding, resources. The exercise is a visual mind-mapping that can be used for unpacking different concepts/ideas, as well as for essay brainstorming.

## Appendix C. Start of Module Questionnaire

**Title of Study:** Embedding Writing Practices for Learning: Using Formative Writing and Reading Together Tasks within an Undergraduate Core Politics Module to Develop Students' Reflective and Critical Thinking Skills

*Pre-Project Start /Module Questionnaire*

Date:

Name:

What are your key goals for yourself on this module?

What are your expectations for this module? (What things do you hope to gain from your studying on this module?)

Have you ever used reflective writing practices / techniques previously as part of any previous course or studies? If yes, what have you used? (Note: if you don't know the 'name' of the practice, if you can briefly describe it please)

## Appendix D. End-of-Module Questionnaire

**Title of Study:** Embedding Writing Practices for Learning: Using Formative Writing and Reading Together Tasks within an Undergraduate Core Politics Module to Develop Students' Reflective and Critical Thinking Skills

### End-of-Module Questionnaire

Date:

Name:

What were the key things you felt you learned during the module?

What ONE additional question do you still have about any of the topics covered in our module?

Tell me about your engagement with the writing and/or reading-together activities during the module

1 - How often would you say that you had engaged in the activities? (From 1 to 10: 1 – once this term; 5 – at least half of the seminars; 10 – every session I attended this term)

2 – Which specific writing/reading activities did you engage with in our course? Tick all that apply:

<input type="checkbox"/>	a) Focused Free Writing (start of our classes)
<input type="checkbox"/>	b) Loop Writing (two or three questions we write to before discussion)
<input type="checkbox"/>	c) Deep reading and identifying one word/phrase/sentence to share
<input type="checkbox"/>	d) Writing in the zones (we used for our essay planning/writing)
<input type="checkbox"/>	e) In Moodle – Moodle board post-it notes
<input type="checkbox"/>	f) In Moodle – 2-point summary blog post

3 – Did you find the 'Writing-in-the-zones' activity we did for thinking about /planning for the essay question useful? If so, why? If not, why not?

4 - Did you feel that the focused free-writing time integrated into our weekly seminar sessions assisted in your learning / understanding of the topic? If so, how? If not, why not?

5 - Did you feel that the reading-together time integrated into some of our sessions, assisted in your learning / understanding of the topic? Why? Why not?