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The QCS Method

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During my early years at Plymouth State College, I encountered two clearly related problems: first, many students had apparently not done the assigned reading prior to class; and second, when I attempted to provoke class discussion, a relatively small percentage of students seemed willing to participate. Some means was needed to ensure that the material was read and to democratize class discussions.

My colleague Boyce Ford provided one very workable solution to both problems: the QCS. A QCS, which stands for Question, Criticism, or Statement, is essentially a reaction to some aspect of the assigned reading, thought out and written at home, and due when the reading is due.

Assume the assignment deals with Freud's theory of personality. I tell the class that, inevitably, they will come upon at least one idea (if not more) that strikes them as either good, bad, inspired, bizarre, or provocative. They are asked to respond to this idea. They can ask a question about Freud, criticize him, offer a comment or statement, make a comparison to some other theorist, offer an illustration from their own experience, cite an experiment or an observation that supports/disconfirms Freud, and so on. The important things are that they a. think critically about Freud, and

b. write down what they think.

This gives me several options for the following class. With 8-15 students ready with prepared QCS in hand, I can begin by covering Freud, leaving the latter portion of the class for QCS reading (or paraphrasing) and ensuing discussion. Alternatively, I could cover the entire Freud chapter, albeit in somewhat haphazard fashion, by plunging directly into the QCS's. Any major points that do not get covered can be brought up at the end of class. If time is short, I won't have QCS's read in class that day, but I will read them on my own before the next class. I can then single out the better ones for comment during the following class. This last technique guarantees quality but does violate the principle of democracy.

Obviously a student has to have read all or a good chunk of the reading in order to write a sensible QCS. And, should certain shy students not volunteer their QCS, I feel justified in calling on them to share their ideas, thus solving the participation problem. I find that students who hesitate to speak up in class spontaneously, perhaps feeling "on the spot," are much more assertive when it comes to reading a pre-thought-out paper.

On occasion students will ask not to read their QCS on the grounds that either the same points have been already covered by a previous QCS, or the material is too personal, a situation that often comes up in "soft" Psychology courses. I am amazed, though, that many students feel comfortable enough to *write* about very personal issues (e.g., having been abused as a child) as long as the QCS is for the professor's eyes only.

I have on occasion used other techniques which also involve "forcing" the students to write reactions to the book, but usually they involve doing exercises prefabricated for the students by the

textbook author (e.g., analyzing dreams for the presence of anima/animus figures). Although these exercises ought to generate enthusiasm and sometimes do, students too often resist being constrained. The advantage of the QCS is that it lets the student *choose* the topic for exploration, thus ensuring a greater likelihood of ego-involvement. In fact, many QCS's revolve around the students' own experiences vis-a-vis the reading (e.g., bulimia, depression, birth order, suicide, drug use, and peak experience).

Some Nuts and Bolts Issues

I use an evaluation system I refer to as “semi-grading.” Students receive five points for doing a “decent” job and getting the QCS in on time. They can then earn up to five additional points by writing a particularly good QCS, although two-three bonus points are more common. Examples of QCS's of varying quality are included below. Students who volunteer to read their papers in class are given a slight edge in grading; the occasional less-than-adequate paper earns fewer than five points; and late papers lose the option for bonus points. Dr. Ford argues that late papers should receive no credit at all since the major purpose of the QCS is to provide a basis for discussion. While conceding this point, I still feel that the written work itself deserves some credit. The teacher clearly has options here.

I do not number grade QCS's, feeling that this focuses attention too atomistically on the points earned and not on the overall quality of the essay. Instead, I employ a more impressionistic system, akin to letter grades: an adequate QCS receives a “check,” a better than average QCS a “check” with a stripe across it, a very good QCS a “check +,” and the rare superb QCS a “+.” The occasional inferior QCS, exhibiting little thought or care, receives a “check” with a squiggle (the mathematical symbol for “almost”).

Only when I compute the grades at the end of the term do I transform the checks into numerical grades.

Another problem is class size. Above I noted that I aimed for 8-15 QCS's per class, but what happens in a class of 30 or 35? Since most chapters require two to three classes for adequate coverage, I typically divide the class in half. For example, assume I have 30 students in my Tuesday/Thursday Abnormal Psychology class. Fifteen papers are due Tuesday, the other 15 on Thursday. Assignment to groups is usually alphabetical.

Over a semester, a typical upper-level course may require as many as a dozen QCS's, the combined point total often equaling or more than equaling the points earnable on an exam in that course. Thus, I caution students that failure to submit QCS's is equivalent to getting an F or D on an exam.

Typically I allow students to miss or flub one or two QCS's per term. If 12 are assigned, I may take their 10 or 11 highest scores and total them. This allows some flexibility. On the other hand, students who do poorly on tests and ask for a way to bring up their grade can be assigned extra QCS's. One semester, in which I had a class divided into two QCS groups, one ambitious student handed in QCS's for *both groups*, thus partially offsetting a tendency to get C's on exams.

The length of the QCS can be varied depending on the course. Typically, a QCS will run from a minimum of half a page up to a page or so. Some dedicated students seem to lose control and go on for pages, running from idea to idea, although I try to remind them to focus on a single pertinent theme! On the other hand, in two honors courses dealing with Psychology and Film, the reaction papers (one per film) were *expected* to be two typed pages or longer, with a much more encompassing approach.

Edited Examples

The following edited examples were all written for the identical reading assignment, a chapter in *Abnormal Psychology* dealing with personality disorders. I have received both better and worse QCS's than those presented here, but it seemed appropriate to pick a set of QCS's at random, to illustrate a "typical" crop of papers.

1. This "average" QCS (no bonus points) makes a point, but there is nothing particularly insightful here; there are no connections drawn. The student essentially confesses confusion over a distinction already made fairly clear in the text/class. Furthermore, the writing itself is rather uninspired:

While reading . . . the obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, I thought I was reading about the obsessive-compulsive disorder The only difference between them seems to be that the o.c. disorder is rare and . . . stronger than the o.c. personality disorder it is confusing to distinguish between the two.

2. Slightly better (but no bonus points) is the following QCS that at least makes a connection, albeit a rather obvious one. This issue has been hotly debated not only by psychologists, but by the popular media for years:

I remember seeing a film in Intro Psych that showed part of the 'Bobo Doll' experiment [a famous study showing how children will model aggressive behavior] I was ... wondering if there have been any conclusive findings from

studies of children and violence on TV Perhaps children who are more violent to begin with will be more likely to watch violent shows on TV.

3. More interesting is the following QCS (two bonus points), which relates the text material to the real-life situation:

Merton's theory of anomie claims that societies which value material objects (and only certain groups have such luxuries) acquire a state of 'anomie' ... in disadvantaged groups I am currently working on a project . . . regarding adolescents . . . I recently spoke with the detective of youth crime. He informed me that one factor that leads adolescents toward crime is economic pressures It is the detective's belief that these kids feel cheated by the society and this is a major reason for their behavior.

I frequently give extra credit to the student who can apply the abstractions of the text to real-life situations in an appropriate way. The writing style is also a bit more sophisticated than in the examples cited previously.

4. Better yet (three+ bonus points) was a QCS which proposed a somewhat original etiology for the "borderline" personality disorder. After first describing his friend in some detail and matching the symptoms to the text, the student concludes:

Later on I discovered that his parents actually encourage him to act out his moods instead of

repressing them I also found out that they would punish or reinforce him on a completely random basis, regardless of what he was doing. This also lends support to the theory of modeling because he saw his parents being unpredictable, so in turn he became unpredictable.

Above and beyond points earned for being a good case study, creativity deserves reward! Modeling theory had been proposed in the text, but in another context; it had not been applied to the borderline personality.

5. The best of the lot (3+ bonus points) was the following QCS which relates a recently seen film to a disorder described in the text:

The ... Masochistic personality disorder is characterized by a desire to be controlled and hurt by others ... typically a sadist. An example of a masochist-sadist relationship is seen in the movie *9 1/2 Weeks* where the woman is controlled for the sexual pleasure of the man the man blind folds the girl and trickles a melting ice cube all over her body. Later in the movie we see him purchase a whip At one point ... he asks her if she has looked in his closet, and when she admits she has, he . . . punishes her by forced sex and violence it is obvious that she is greatly enjoying her submission this was sick and ... deviant. However, I am glad to see that a woman who enjoys being abused is classified as having a mental disorder this woman is not so far gone that she can't get out of this relationship

(though she puts up with 9 1/2 weeks of abuse)
... I don't think this disorder can be called an
excuse for blaming the victim. A victim of
abuse should not be blamed whether it is caused
by a mental disorder or not.

This paper is excellent for a number of reasons. First, it connects the textbook not merely to real life, but to a product of culture (a film), a rarer and more difficult feat in my teaching experience. Furthermore, the student exhibits a certain amount of commitment to, even passion concerning her beliefs about people and society. Yes, I factor in such non-academic elements, where appropriate! Finally, the paper touches on a political issue raised in the text, "blaming the victim." This QCS is well beyond being just another case study.

Also included in this set were a discussion of one student's rejecting father and the aftermath, another of an abused boy's developing antisocial tendencies, several descriptions of antisocial personalities known to various students, and a proposal to inject sociopaths with adrenaline [to increase their anxiety and make them more tractable]! Overall, the set provided some interesting, personally relevant material for the class to chew on.

As it happened, the next batch of QCS's brought a rare five bonus-point effort ["+"] by a non-traditional student. The assigned chapter was on addictive disorders and she wrote about a new method for treating addictions using electronic frequencies applied to the brain. She even included a tape of a lecture explaining the method more fully! This was totally new and very exciting to me, so she received top score.

Future Considerations

I plan to continue using the QCS method in my upper-level classes. Discussion of the QCS technique with colleagues generated several potential means for enhancing its utility in the future:

1. It often takes students a few tries to get the hang of writing a QCS.

For example, some students persistently summarize rather than react critically. Modeling would be one means of circumventing

this problem. On the first day of class I could hand out examples

of fair, good, very good, and excellent QCS's written on the identical topic. Each example could also include my comments as

to what makes this QCS fair, good, or excellent.

2. *Writing Across the Curriculum* emphasizes the importance of rewriting. The QCS stands somewhere between journal-keeping

and related spontaneous writing techniques, and the formal essay

students

would write their QCS on a word processor, thus making editing

a relatively simple affair. I could encourage this. I could also pair students, who would be responsible for modeling and criticizing each other's papers.

In the seven+ years since this article was originally published, 3. Thus far, I have not gathered any formal student feedback on my approach to using QCS's has changed very little. The method works well; all it requires is adaptation to contingencies of any particular course. Here are a few contemporary examples of such adaptations.

value of the QCS itself. Informally, my sense is that student response is normally quite positive, with a high correlation between overall grade received and liking for QCS's. Yet it might be worthwhile to examine student reactions to QCS writing, not a particularly forbidding task. Some workable modifications might even emerge.

1. In Lifespan Developmental Psychology, which hosts about 90 students per term, the class is divided into six groups. Each group is required to write three “discussion papers” on issues raised in the text, e.g., “What is your view on abortion?” Initially, specific questions are assigned to each group, but as the semester progresses, students are allowed more flexibility in topic choice. Papers are only rarely read out loud in class due to time constraints.

2. In Personality, I have at times dispensed with or reduced the importance of exams and instead required approximately 20 QCS’s. This approach favors the ability to think/write well over a penchant for rote memorization.

3. In the interdisciplinary Film and Society course, students are in most instances constrained to choosing from a list of discussion questions. Previously they wrote an open-ended critique of each film. I find that using leading questions helps students focus more effectively and results in more polished papers. For example, regarding the well-known movie *Witness*, students might be asked to describe the “social unconscious” undergirding Western and Amish realities. Having some understanding of this term from class, they are in a better position to say something meaningful about the Amish world as portrayed in *Witness* than if merely required to “discuss the film.”

On the other hand, by the final week of the course, students may be asked to devise their own questions and then answer them!

The QCS method--I think I'll keep it.