

# Australian Journal of Teacher Education

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Volume 37 | Issue 3

Article 8

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3-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Starks, D., Nicholas, H., & Macdonald, S. (2012). Structured Reflective Communication as a Meta-Genre in Teacher Education: Creative Uses of Critique in a Teacher Education Program. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(3).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2012v37n3.8>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol37/iss3/8>

## **Structured Reflective Communication as a Meta-Genre in Teacher Education: Creative Uses of ‘Critique’ in a Teacher Education Program**

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### **Introduction**

This paper develops an expanded, collaborative and structured view of the process of critiquing observed lesson fragments and shows how this process can be used as a model for developing students’ understanding and thinking about teaching and learning processes. We introduce Carter’s (2007, 392) notion of a meta-genre, “[a] way of doing instantiated in written genres” to frame this overall approach. We show how a specific meta-genre “structured reflective communication” can be used in two ways: 1) to challenge beginning teachers to articulate a personal teaching theory in response to an observation of a videoed teaching excerpt and 2) to show how its use can inform lesson planning. In this process of viewing, reflecting and re-contextualising critical reflection within a meta-genre of structured reflective communication, new opportunities are created for the use of critique. As Kumaravadivelu (2006) advocates, this process helps make explicit beginning teachers’ views about the roles of students and teachers and how they connect with personal teaching theories. Although there is an extensive literature in the area of critical reflection (Smyth, 1989; Schön, 1983; 1987; Harrison et al, 2005), in much of teacher education, critical reflection is a gloriously fuzzy concept, a synonym for a personal reflection exercise as well as for both structured and unstructured discussions. Within educational contexts, critical reflection is often associated with spoken discourse and because of its flexible character, it is viewed as a central part of teacher education for unpacking privileged positions and empowering participants to adopt valued professional positions (e.g. Krull, Oras & Sisask, 2007; Harford & MacRuaric, 2008; Fernandez, 2010).

In developing theories of teaching in teacher education programs, there is often a focus on personal reflections in response to concrete examples of teaching (such as in micro-teaching or in video-based teaching segments where the teachers can see examples of the various practices). These practices use critical reflection to enable teachers to explore multiple possible perspectives while also building in opportunities to compare and contrast those perspectives to make more salient specific elements of what they have observed (Zhang, Lundeberg, Koehler & Eberhardt, 2011). Since many of these perspectives are partial (Beyer & Davis, 2009), a consequence of acknowledging and incorporating them into teacher education processes is that they open up multiple ways of thinking about teaching.

The personalised nature of critical reflection allows individuals to highlight selective aspects of what has been observed. This is a key point in its strength because appropriate scaffolding allows the different positions to be contrasted with one another and their motivations and consequences explored. However, the backward-looking nature of this strength (the focus on what was observed) is also one of its weaknesses. Without explicit direction forward, there is often no automatic connection with other more forward-looking activities that are part of a teacher’s professional action thinking. To connect the two directions of reflection, critical reflection needs to be embedded within a larger text construct.

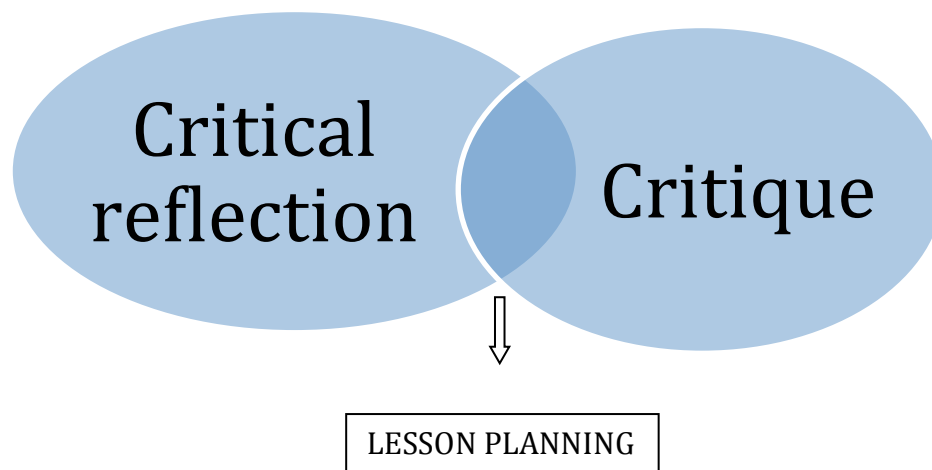
Our model offers such a construct that encompasses both reflection and communication as a connected form of social action. Within the meta-genre of structured reflective communication, we can both look backward to a specific observed piece of teaching (critique) and look forward to a specific proposed piece of teaching (lesson planning) as part of a connected process of critical, collaborative reflection.

Central to this process of looking forward is an inward reflection process that involves the unpacking of concepts. These concepts will reflect the different learning and other experiences of the participants as well as their personal ideologies. The concepts will also be shaped by issues such as the extent to which the students perceive that there are specific answers that their teachers want to hear. In reference to reflecting on lesson plans, Beyer and Davis (2009, 518) distinguish between critiquing and adapting. Critiquing is “identifying a lesson’s strengths and weaknesses” while adapting is “making changes to a lesson during planning and enactment”. When referring to both activities at the same time, they use the term “analysis”. The term “analysis” captures the general manner in which the idea of critical reflection is intended to be used in Education. Beyer and Davis argue that scaffolding mechanisms, such as their *Principles of Practice*, often do not have enough overt framing to form a comprehensive view of what occurs in the lesson and how beginning teachers should relate to it. Our proposed model provides this framing.

We argue that critical reflection has to embody analysis. We contend that scaffolding critical reflection benefits from incorporating writing as a tool for achieving related forward and backward perspectives in critical reflection. Structured written critiques allied with the process of critical reflection offer opportunities to reflect on the various ways in which beginning teachers view and interpret others’ lessons. This form of reflection on others’ lessons acts both as a means of understanding and reflecting on one’s own teaching experiences and as a means of shaping a related form of social action, in this case lesson planning. To achieve this, the genre of critique needs to be articulated more explicitly than it currently is (see the discussion in Carter, 2007).

One immediate difference between critique and critical reflection is that the notion of critique as a genre has focussed on the written text while critical reflection is often spoken. Typically and crucially written critique does not formally incorporate the context and purpose of application for the individual writer. However, recently, this perspective has begun to embrace voice and empowerment as central elements (Danielewicz, 2008) so that it is now possible to look for connections between individual perspectives and the critique itself. These changes provide opportunities to create new ways of exploring the potential usefulness of critiques for developing professional thinking (and decision-making) during teacher education programs.

In order to achieve these opportunities, it is necessary to have a framework that connects the narrow, rhetorical definitions of critique and the broad educational activities in critical reflection so that critique’s elements can be used for other ‘different’ purposes, in this instance, lesson planning. Our model aims to connect the three key components: critical reflection, critique and lesson planning as part of a single meta-genre. This is diagrammed in Figure 1 below.

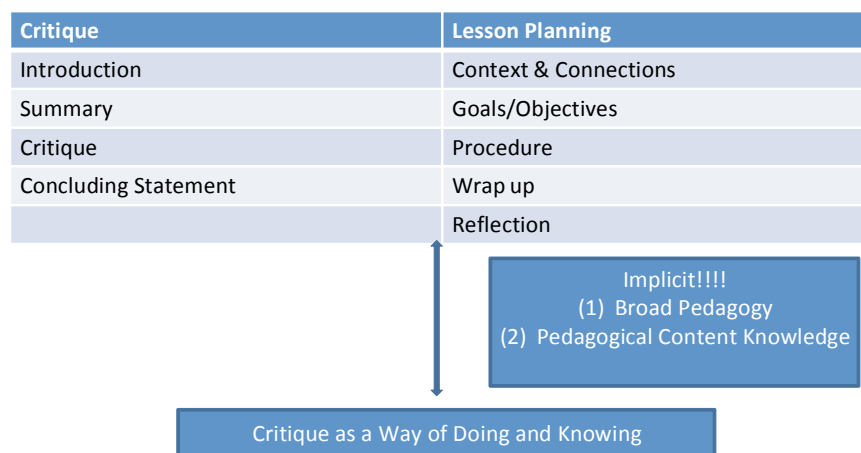


**Figure 1: the components of a model**

### **Key Connections Between Critique and Lesson Plans**

In the literature on rhetoric, a critique typically has four parts: an introduction, a summary, a critique and a short concluding statement, each a field of action. In the action of each of these parts, there are connections that can be identified between the reflective critique and the act of lesson planning. These connections offer the grounds for viewing structured reflective communication as a meta-genre. Both 'critique' and 'lesson plans' have a clear (and similar) structure, a critical step in identifying their shared membership in structured reflective communication.

Recognising these connections means that we can connect critique with superficially unrelated activities involved in lesson planning. As elaborated below, it is possible to identify connections between the critique of someone else's teaching and the elaboration of the writer's own thinking as a way of shaping lesson planning.



**Figure 2: two key structures in the meta-genre**

Both critique and lesson planning have two aspects in common: a structure and strong connections within the structure. The introduction to a critique sets the scene, orienting the readers, as does the opening of the lesson. Such information serves as the beginning to a critique and also provides the backdrop for writing a good lesson plan. Similarly, the short concluding statement of the critique mirrors the summary (or closing) step in a lesson. Writing both lesson plans and critiques has a key reflective component, yet the reflection occurs in different places in the process of the two types of writing. By raising awareness of further similarities, we open up deeper discussion of similarities between writing a critique and writing a lesson plan. We elaborate on eight similarities below.

**Point 1: A Balanced Structure**

Although there are several ways of writing a critique (Behrens & Rosen, 2011; Swales & Feak, 2004), most critiques have a relatively straightforward and balanced structure. If the introduction is too detailed, the reader will have difficulty determining what is important. If the introduction is not detailed enough, it will be insufficient to draw the reader into the text. A lesson (and its planning) must be likewise structured, albeit with different labels (i.e., hooks/warm-ups and wrap-ups etc). Both a critique and a lesson must be balanced in their structures as incongruous domination of one section will alienate some or all of the readers/viewers/participants/learners.

**Point 2: A Need to Establish a Context**

Critiques provide insights into what happened, and why from the perspective of the author. They require the author to provide a succinct overview of aspects that they deem pertinent to the context and to give a clear and concise summary of points they consider

relevant. This includes thoughts about the implicit rules and frameworks that might have formed and created the context itself. Different authors will define these aspects differently (see Point 4). A lesson can have both clear and explicit aims as well as implicit ones that can become more obvious through reflection. Whether conscious or not, these aims set and define the learning context from the perspective of the teacher. Of course, they may or may not define the context from the perspective of the learners, but in a good lesson plan, the intention is that this connection should be established. Because the aim of the introduction to both a critique and a lesson is to establish a (shared) context, between the writer and the audience, introductions need to be able to stand on their own, letting the readers decide for themselves if they should read further and encouraging the learners to decide (hopefully) to “tune in”.

### **Point 3: Selectivity**

The critique delves into what its author considers important because in any event or situation, there are multiple participants and activities. A critique cannot be all things to all potential audiences. A value of critiques is that they empower writers to select. This selection is important as it provides opportunities to discuss and highlight relationships between different aspects of and perspectives on what is being critiqued, in this case an instance of teaching. In preparing a lesson, a teacher is similarly required to make choices that personalise the lesson and the embedded approach to teaching. Since no lesson can cover everything, planning any lesson requires choices about purpose, context and material.

### **Point 4: Taking a Stance**

A critique provides many challenges. Critiquing someone else’s teaching is a high risk-taking activity in that a position must be established. Elaborating the critique can be made less face-threatening by the use of appropriate processes that highlight and explore the multiple possible stances available and the reasons for selecting them. Selecting a reference point from which to start shapes the author’s stance, whether positive, negative or mixed. The actual stance is in some sense, irrelevant. A successful critique relies on a strong, well-justified argument. When students write a good critique, they engage in a special type of writing. A critique is about ideas - useful and interesting ones. So when teachers critique a lesson, they want to know what made it work, or perhaps “not work”, for them. They also want to know what they can take from the observed lesson and use in their own teaching “*How is language taught in this lesson, and why?*”. To do this, they need to be able to place this lesson in context. For example, “*Was the lesson appropriate for an intermediate class?*” or “*Did the teacher cater for the diverse range of students?*”. These content issues have implications for different parts of the critique. But more importantly, they also have implications for the way in which teachers design lessons. When planning a lesson, a teacher also has to take a stance about what is important, how the material will be connected to a (selected) context as well as what kind of and how teacher/student relationships and interactions will occur. In our approach, shaping the process of taking a stance so that the process is shared between participants mitigates face threat in that stances are articulated in relation to one another and participants are encouraged to see the multiple possible stances and reasoning involved in invoking them. For us, it is important not to impose stances, but to open up ways for students to take diverse stances. In employment situations, there may be stronger coercion to take a particular stance.

**Point 5: Drawing on Available Resources**

Most writers cannot provide an argument using only their own observations. It is often a more convincing argument if thoughts and ideas relate to broader issues and concrete illustrations – often stimulated by the contributions of others. Critiques are informed by the resources available to their authors. In lesson planning, teachers require (multiple) additional resources to shape the lesson itself, and their students' learning processes. Communicating with others during lesson planning increases the resources available to the teacher because it widens what is drawn on and helps clarify what is specific to the particular resource.

**Point 6: Leaving Your Audience with a Clear Message**

A critique typically ends with a succinct final concluding sentence, which provides one last attempt to woo the reader. These parting words, like the concluding moments in a lesson, can be used to wrap up ideas in useful and interesting ways. In planning a lesson, a teacher needs to form a view of the message that the students will leave with.

**Point 7: Engagement with the Audience**

A critique engages the reader in the world of the author and widens the reader's thinking. Part of making a successful critique is creating an audience. Successful authors put colour and life into their work to enable readers to picture themselves in the scene. While even mundane aspects can be presented in new and interesting ways, most authors who write about the mundane (e.g. *This lesson was good because the teacher's instructions were clear*) fail to engage their readers. The same texts may even fail to inspire the authors themselves, leaving them to contemplate why they wrote the critique in the first place. The critique is in many ways like a lesson, it fails if it has no "audience". Similarly, a lesson has to be designed to engage the key participants, the learners.

**Point 8: The Individual Nature of the Task**

No one ever writes the same critique as someone else, as we all have different views of the world, different experiences, and different views of how things are "best done". No teacher can ever replicate another teacher's lessons for exactly the same reasons. With this foundation of relationships between critique and lesson planning laid, we now consider how critical reflection, critique and lesson planning can be constructed as elements in a meta-genre of structured reflective communication.

**Meta-Genre as a Construct**

Miller (1984, 151) argued "that a theoretically sound definition of genre must be centred not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish." The connection between discourse and action is characteristic of much of the writing on meta-genre. As the concept is used in different ways, we need to position ourselves within this discussion. Reflecting Miller's broad position, Giltrow (2002, 190) proposed the "category *meta-genre* – situated language about situated language". Giltrow's (2002) thinking about meta-genre has two dimensions both of which are fulfilled in our version of meta-genre.

The first dimension is guidelines prepared by ‘experts’ to assist ‘novices’ to master a particular genre. The second refers to the “atmospheres of wordings and activities, demonstrated precedents or sequestered expectations – atmospheres surrounding genres” (p. 195). This wording has been interpreted as

... [g]enres interact with other genres in what has been called genre sets (Devitt, 1991) and then genre systems (Bazerman, 1995), within the framework of metagenres (Giltrow 2002), activity systems (Russell 1997), or a variety of relationships dependent on their actions in context (Devitt, 2004, 54-59). (Devitt, 2009, 44)

*(This second meaning links backwards through work in literary theory to the work of Kant and Herder (Rajan, 2000) and its clustering connotation has been picked up in media and music research (Demers, 2010; Groscurth, 2007). In more opaque ways the idea of clusters of ‘genres’ figures in debates reflecting Lyotard’s scepticism relating to metanarratives (Carroll, 1984) being contrasted with Habermas’ (1981; 1983) view of universals of discourse ethics and communicative action, which is sometimes reduced to a proposition of three meta-genres of information, entertainment and education).*

This meaning was highlighted for professional writing contexts by Berkenkotter (in reference to the conference paper version of Giltrow’s work):

I would like to thank Janet Giltrow (1998) for coining this term. I use it here to refer to commodious genres around which other genres cluster and from which they draw features, conventions, and substance (content). Metagenres are mutable and possess resources for translating information across professional and cultural boundaries. (Berkenkotter, 2001, 345 fn10)

Without explicit reference to Berkenkotter, Carter (2007) used the term meta-genre in ways that focussed on what was done, emphasising the connection “patterns of doing and particular kinds of writing” (pp. 391-2)

Carter’s position is that

A metagenre ... directs our attention to broader patterns of language as social action, similar *kinds* of typified responses to related recurrent situations. ... a metagenre indicates a structure of similar ways of doing that point to similar ways of writing and knowing. (Carter, 2007, 393)

Carter saw features of the academic work in these disciplines as shaped by the requirements of distinct academic activities (metadisciplines): problem solving, empirical enquiry, research from sources and performance. This notion of a metadiscipline opens up the possibility of looking for connections across different types of content to broader purposes of activity. We argue that the focus on ‘doing’ in the context of a professional (teacher) education program is wider than has been captured in Carter’s initial articulation of the concept and is generalisable with a meta-genre of structured reflective communication. This wider focus has been alluded to in the works of Berkenkotter (2001) and Devitt (1991) when they document the relationships between different kinds of writing in different professional contexts.

Aided by this new perspective, we expand Carter’s view of ‘doing’ through writing to incorporate the ‘doing’ involved in both professional thinking and professional activity in lesson planning (see also Berkenkotter, 2001). By professional thinking we mean the reflection involved in drawing together and enacting elements of practice. Carter does not provide any detail about how meta-genres are constructed, nor does he provide any indication of how this might be done. We detail our thoughts on this for the meta-genre we label “structured reflective communication”. We argue that writing that is organised (constrained) with the purpose of reflecting on important but diverse understandings of [professional]



knowledge or skills can help to develop new (more explicit and controlled) ways of undertaking important [professional] activities.

### **Necessary Conditions for Structured Reflective Communication as a Meta-Genre**

A vital purpose of critical reflection in education is the development of professional thinking. This process can be located within the meta-genre of structured reflective communication. Broadened in this way, critical reflection includes writing and other forms of communication that allow us to capture evolving ways of “doing” and “knowing”. Gunn (2010, 217) believes repeated reflection is a necessary step in lesson planning. Gunn (2010) argues that to become able to engage in “framing and reframing” (p. 218), students need more practice, because many do not “completely understand what reflection is” or “see the benefits of it” (p. 221). We argue that structured reflective communication provides a means for beginning teachers to engage in the practice of framing and reframing their practice and decision-making through acts of communicating (writing).

A “writing” act followed by critical reflection on the students’ own writing acts allows participants to engage in the shaping of different versions of that thinking, bringing about a process of observation and reflection, which can lead to an alternative (owned) creation of ideas and their instantiation in practice.

To engage in structured reflective communication as a way of knowing and doing, meta-genres have to meet six necessary conditions, entailing views of:

1. Writing as Social Activity
2. Writing as a Means of Creating an Authoritative Voice
3. Writing for Explicitness
4. Writing for Connection
5. Writing for Context
6. Writing as Critique

### **Writing as a Social Activity**

Writing critiques of lesson plans may help beginning teachers’ ways of thinking about lessons, but in and of itself, writing a critique does not help with Gunn’s (2010) view that students need to frame and reframe their ideas. Enabling students to take up Beyer and Davis’ (2009) belief that when critiquing lesson plans, we need to both critique and adapt entails that we elaborate a way of thinking and acting that connects the reflections in the academic institution to the teachers’ domains of professional action outside their learning institution. This, in turn, can develop “shared communal ways of thinking and knowing” (Schneider & Andre, 2007, 11-12), a central characteristic of critical reflection in education. One way to start this process is this is through active discussion of the similarities and differences in how students critique the same lesson, using the eight points discussed previously.

### **Writing as a Means of Creating an Authoritative Voice**

An authoritative voice is crucial in three ways. It is critical for an understanding of the content, an understanding of the relevant genre conventions, and for empowering a personal and professional voice. Such a voice takes time to develop, it is demanded by the very role of

the teacher, but becoming a teacher involves negotiating the specific nature of that voice that will work for the individual – based on (sometimes painful) experience.

Schneider and Andre (2007, 3) argue that “Students have no hope of writing an effective critique in an authoritative voice if they do not understand the material that forms the subject matter for their peers’ writing”. The significance of subject matter knowledge for critique writing in lesson planning is also argued by Duncan, Pilitsis & Piegaro (2010) on the basis of their investigation of the criteria used by intending biological sciences teachers. They noted that their pre-service teachers’ critiques were limited by a lack of specific notions of science (NOS) and noted that initially “the distinction between inquiry and NOS seemed rather blurry” (p. 93) and despite some improvement over the period of instruction “their ability to address these shortcomings [in the lessons], as well as their understanding of NOS and inquiry were still tenuous” (p. 95). They noted that

[T]he need to create lesson plans that can be understood by others (the instructor and peers in the methods course) may have also heightened the teachers’ attention to what is explicitly noted in the plan without making assumptions about instructional intents not explicitly mentioned. (Duncan, Pilitsis & Piegaro, 2010, 100)

Schneider & Andre (2007, 3) point out that “[i]n order to critique others’ work effectively, students must also have an understanding of the relevant genre conventions”. Schneider & Andre (2007) prioritise these points because they see writing as “a social activity”. We argue that these points are crucial for providing students with a critical and empowered voice. Learning how to present professionally requires explicit instruction in the structure of the appropriate genre(s). Developing this skill needs to occur at a stage in teacher education programs when students feel that developing a voice will serve wider professional purposes.

### **Writing for Explicitness**

Heightened attention is important because teachers (regardless of whether they are in practice or in training) are generally unaware of their own views, or in the words of Haim, Strauss & Ravid (2004, 872) “unaware of their mental models”, and how these models influence classroom teaching. Haim *et al.* argue that there is a need for implicit aspects of teacher instruction to be made “explicit” and that this can only be achieved when teachers are able to evaluate their mental models and relate these to “their own knowledge, personality, methodological approach, and teaching contexts”. They argue that such undertakings should occur in pre- and in-service education programs and offer a number of possible techniques. They argue what is needed is contexts in which in-service teachers articulate their views of what occurred in a lesson and share “their multiple perspectives on the lesson including micro-teaching followed by re-reflection and analysis”.

Our approach draws on and expands on the ideas advocated by Haim, Strauss & Ravid (2004). We argue that structured scaffolding tools are needed to make mental models explicit. While some people are able to do this kind of reflection on their own, most people benefit from guided engagement with some form of an ‘other’. One way of structuring such scaffolding could be through explicit instructions to beginning students as to the type of content to include in their critiques.

### **Writing as Connection**

We need to make a connection by creating contexts in which students can look both forward and backward. Students will only develop and own theories of teaching through attempts to articulate their own ideas that involve the relationships within their own thinking and between their thinking and that of others. This relating will occur best when they see this act of doing as forward looking.

As Danielewicz (2008, 421) argued

... students who do write when something is at stake are participating in public discourse; they expect something to happen as a result of writing. This profound belief in the possibility of action is the best prospect we can offer as teachers.

A start to developing this sort of connection can be made by highlighting the similarities between writing lesson plans and writing critiques. This is best achieved after the students have had an opportunity to write a critique of an observed lesson.

### **Writing as Awareness**

Beginning teachers need to be scaffolded into greater awareness of specific aspects of what they are being asked to critique. Detailed discussions of how explicit teaching of writing aids control of writing and content learning can be found in Tardy (2009) and Grabe (2002). Much of the thinking that informs such scaffolding may be interpreted in ways that are professionally meaningful beyond the teacher education program, but there is little evidence of this occurring (Blomberg, Stürmer & Seidel, 2011; Seidel, Stürmer, Blomberg, Kobarg & Schwindt, 2011; Poyas & Eilam, 2012; Scherff & Singer, 2012). In this situation, we need to look for means to make the connection between the reflection and professional action more explicit. Our concept of a meta-genre of structured reflective communication provides such a starting point.

### **Writing as Critique**

In seeking to help teachers develop their own thinking, critiques of examples of teaching offer three specific advantages. They give those teachers a concrete and shared beginning point. Further, a video recording of a lesson can be reviewed for further detail or reflection. Critiques do not have to constrain what the person writes. All three advantages enable different elements of the reflection to be articulated and the thinking of those doing the critique to become more apparent to others. Central to this process is exploitation of the open-ended potential of a critique since, as has been argued for pre-service science teachers evaluating their lesson plans (Beyer & Davis, 2009), most participants focus on one or two issues rather than analysing the entire lesson in relation to identified criteria. Furthermore, Beyer and Davis point out that participants frequently make reference to only one or two framing points rather than making use of more comprehensive perspectives (p. 531). For our purposes, a positive consequence of these diverse perspectives is that they open up multiple ways of thinking about the 'same' artefact. These different ways of thinking create multiple links within the meta-genre, which offer different possible connections between the observed lesson fragments and the students' own development of lesson plans.

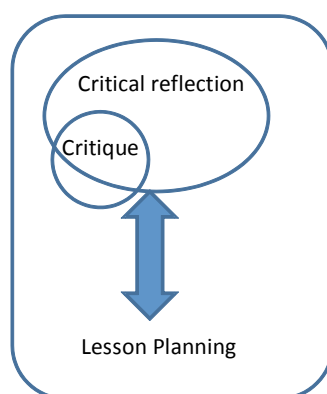
Writing as structured critique builds and supports the other necessary conditions for effective knowing and doing. It helps students articulate their implicit views of teaching and creates a context which forces selection. This creates opportunities to highlight multiple

perspectives and voices in clear and transparent ways that raise awareness, and help to give each student their own authoritative voice. These elements are all important ingredients for good lesson planning. The final advantage of the necessary condition of writing for critique is that it creates a “tangible” record for reflection and a basis for discussing alternatives. It is critical for necessary condition 1: Writing as a Social Activity.

The meta-genre of structured reflective communication is portrayed in Figure 3 below. The meta-genre is a way of knowing and doing that involves critical reflection and critique, but is not identical to either. As outlined, it has six necessary conditions, and eight points of similarity between its elements to help build a way of knowing and doing that connects lesson planning with critique.

NECESSARY CONDITIONS

1. Writing as Social Activity
2. Writing as Authoritative Voice
3. Writing for Explicitness
4. Writing for Connection
5. Writing for Context
6. Writing as Critique



**EIGHT POINTS OF SHARED PURPOSE** : a purpose to engage with the audience, a balanced structure, a clearly established context, selectivity, a clear stance, a relationship to available resources and a goal to leave the audience with a clear message, the individual nature of the task

**Figure 3: “Structured reflective communication” as a meta-genre.**

The meta-genre enables a discussion of points of difference, and opens up ways to discuss the implicit nature of much lesson planning, and the reasons why lesson planning fails to engage students in broad pedagogical discussions. As illustrated below, structured reflective communication as a meta-genre opens up ways in which the meta-genre can be used as a social activity to inform better practice.

### **An Illustration**

The assessment task that we discuss here was part of the subject ‘Introduction to language teaching,’ a graduate level subject taught in an Australian university. The subject was part of a program that catered for in-service teachers from preschool to adult and university contexts from a wide range of countries. This assessment task was a central move in a series of assessment tasks designed to scaffold lesson planning by increasing student awareness of language structures, the key components of lessons, and the diversity therein. The series is diagrammed in Figure 4 below. The individual critique of the observed teaching fragment was preceded by activities that explored the students’ understandings of language, language teaching and language learning (Nicholas, Starks & Macdonald, 2011). The reflections and the critique fed into a lesson planning activity (done in pairs) and a subsequent

microteaching task where the same pairs of students had to work together to design and teach a language lesson. The subject assessment was concluded with an individual reflective essay that connected back to the initial theoretical positioning task and the microteaching task. The assessment tasks all aim to connect views of language with views of language learning and teaching. The sequence of activities encourages students to communicate their personal views to others who may or may not share those views.

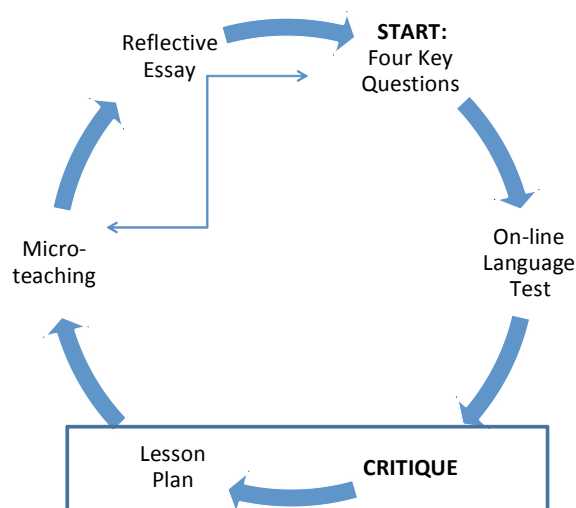


Figure 4: the assessment cycle in ‘Introduction to language teaching’

For the critique part of the assessment, the beginning language teachers were asked to write a 750-850 word critique of a 10-minute videoed language lesson from a DVD attached to their textbook (Harmer’s 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *The practice of English language teaching*). The DVD contained several lessons, but the one we chose for this exercise involved the use of an interactive whiteboard. In practice any short video with relevant content would achieve the same purpose. The task motivated the beginning teachers to watch and engage with the lesson intensively. These teachers were instructed to restrict their analysis to the video clip, and to only use prescribed references, mainly from Harmer’s textbook.

While the assessment criteria to evaluate the task referred to holistic outcomes using wording such as *effective, comprehensive, insightful*, the task itself was one that was more constrained than in-service teachers normally encounter. Students were provided with explicit, detailed instructions (Appendix A) about the format of the text and were required to write to a set formulaic four-part structure: introduction, summary, critique and concluding sentence. For each of these parts, there were detailed instructions as to the expected content, often to the point of positioning each of the sentences. For example, in the introduction, students were to provide information about “who is giving the lesson, what is the lesson about, when was the lesson delivered and to whom”. This was to be followed by a brief 1-2 sentence summary of the content of the lesson followed by a statement which summarised their overall evaluation of the lesson in 75-100 words (equating to approximately 10% of the total text). In essence, the introduction forced students to create a balanced structure (**point 1**), establish a context (**point 2**), select what they saw as important (**point 3**), take a stance (**point 4**), draw on a set of similar resources (**point 5**), and leave the audience with a clear message (**point 6**). These points re-emerged elsewhere in the writing of the text. Word limits and

detailed instructions as to the content meant that the student critiques were balanced in similar ways (**point 1**). To summarise the content of the lesson in 250-300 words entails selectivity (**point 2**), to critique it in 400-450 words entails taking a well-developed stance (**point 3**), and to write a final summary sentence in 25-50 words or less entails leaving the audience with a clear message (**point 6**). We argue that these commonalities in the processes force choices that create opportunities to highlight multiple perspectives in a clear and transparent way that students can relate to.

One of the inherent strengths of a critique is its openness, allowing readers and viewers to engage with the text in diverse ways (**points 7 and 8**). As a result of the highly restricted functional and structural context that we created, students were required to create their own voice through their own views of the world (of language teaching). The texts that the students create offer opportunities to highlight differences and to explore these multiple voices. The authentic nature of the experiences that are invoked makes comparisons more meaningful.

The task also helped to fulfil the necessary conditions of creating texts that can be used at a later point in a different, social activity. It created individual texts, each of which had its own authoritative voice, context, and levels of explicitness and awareness. The individual texts enabled students to develop a greater awareness of their own views of learning, and how they were similar to and different from others.

To illustrate how the common structure enabled both similarities and differences to emerge, we focus on extracts from the critiques, starting with the beginnings of two introductions presented below. In the discussion of the examples, direct quotes from the extracts cited are presented in italics.

1. This piece of writing is a critique of a lesson taught by an experienced language teacher on [the topic of] annoying rules. Barbara, the teacher, makes use of an interactive white board to deliver a lesson to a group of intermediate adult students of mixed ethnic backgrounds. The lesson is conducted in English in a UK classroom.

2. To be critiqued is a lesson delivered by 'Barbara', an experienced English teacher whose morning class comprised ten multilingual, intermediate learners and included roughly equal number of males and females. The lesson, which had both listening and speaking objectives, centred on the topic of 'annoying rules'....

Both of the introductions captured similar views of the class. They both introduced the purpose of their writing (*This piece of writing is a critique of a lesson/To be critiqued is a lesson*). They introduced the teacher (*an experienced language teacher .... Barbara/Barbara, an experienced English teacher*). The class was described (*a group of intermediate adult students of mixed ethnic backgrounds/ten multilingual, intermediate learners*) as was the lesson's topic "*annoying rules*"

Despite these commonalities, the views presented by the students differed. The class was *of mixed ethnic backgrounds* in (1) but it is described as *multilingual* in (2). In (1) the learners are *adults*, whereas in (2) this is left unstated. In (2) there is more detail about the numbers of students, and the gender balance. The means of delivery, an interactive whiteboard is mentioned in (1) but not (2). In (2), the objectives of the lesson receive special mention. Although each writer focuses on the same lesson, they differ as much as, if not more than, they are similar. These differences contextualise the observed lesson distinctively. Extract 1 identifies details of the learners (their ages) and of the technology. However, Extract 2 draws out more detail in relation to the lesson's purpose and arguably is more precise in the details related to the linguistic background of the students. Overall, one critique is not more specific than the other, but rather the key characteristics of the lesson invoked by the critiques

differ. These alternative contextualisations initiate alternative shapings of the critiques. The differences open up ways of engaging the students in reflection on what was selected and why.

This is most aptly illustrated towards the ends of the introductions, as two different writers select their focus and present a stance. Writer 1 (in Extract 3 below) selects as her focus the development of *receptive and productive skills* and how these emerge through an *ESA approach* to teaching while Writer 2, in Extract 4 below, introduces the structure of the lesson and its various parts. Focussing on the structure of the lesson allows Writer 2 to critique one part of the lesson, but praise another. In both extracts, while the stance is mixed, the outcomes of the lesson are generally viewed as positive.

3. Students use both receptive and productive skills in a lesson that adopts an *engage, study and activate (ESA)* approach to teaching. (Harmer, 2007,66) The lesson was not perfect, however it effectively developed students' language skill and met the key lesson objective which was to "have the students speaking and using the phrases they had heard in the listening".

4. Following the introduction, students listened to the target phrases: speakers' complaints about annoying rules before working more closely with this language and then attempting to employ it in the ensuing group discussions. While the introduction and gist listening task appeared effective, greater exploitation of the target phrases during the secondary listening task would have provided greater support for students during speaking.

The introduction to the critique is followed by a summary of pertinent details. Here the participants provided detailed background information about the various parts of the lesson, the activities, the methods and theoretical perspectives employed. While the main summary of the content of the lesson was fairly constant across the participants, there were many different methods and theoretical perspectives identified. While some teachers saw the lesson in broad language teaching frameworks such as communicative language teaching or task-based teaching, others took different perspectives e.g., the lesson applied an *inductive approach* (Extract 5), it was structured around a framework promoted by the local educational jurisdiction, the *5 Es (Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, Evaluate)* (Extract 6), or it incorporated a combination of different approaches and theoretical perspectives (Extract 7). These different views also allow for fruitful discussion around the theory/practice interface.

5. Barbara seemed to apply what Harmer (2007) called an "inductive approach" (p.207), as she always expected the students to think of an answer to her questions first and then she clarified ...

6. Although she tries her best and use the 5Es (Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, Evaluate), there are certain drawbacks in her teaching, which make her lesson less effective and informative.

7. Barbara's methodology was the circular model of Practice, Production and Presentation (PPP) (Harmer 2007, 66), and she drew elements from the theoretical perspectives of Krashen's 'comprehensible input I + 1' (Harmer 2007, 50) the 'focus on forms' theory with particular emphasis on 'task performance' as described by Sandra Fotos (Harmer 2007, 54), and on 'noticing' as advised by Richard Schmidt (Harmer 2007, 54).

As illustrated, there was heavy but diverse reference to Harmer (2007), the author of their textbook, for diverse ideas to frame their understanding of the lesson, highlighting how teacher resources (point 5) influence thought.

The third section of the critique is the crucial part of the text, where selectivity resurfaces as stance and where the diverse interests and views of the students are contextualised and argued. In this section, the participants overtly presented their own voice.

For example, one student (Extract 8), who focussed on the interactive whiteboard (IWB), thought that this *dominant teaching tool* created a *teacher-centred* class.

8. Barbara had a clear rationale, target language focus and an organised procedure. However, by delivering the lesson through the PPP procedure (Harmer, 2007), using an IWB as the dominant teaching tool, Barbara assumed a teacher-centred role. She acted as a controller (Harmer) and led from the front of the classroom.

Another student (Extract 9) saw the teacher as a *prompter* who facilitated discussion through asking questions, using *very short and clear phrases* and who *checked [student] understanding by asking [students] to share* their ideas. In the latter case, the whiteboard received no mention. Again, these different written acts of “doing” provide opportunities to discuss and reflect on practice.

9. The teacher’s role was more of a ‘prompter’ and she used very short and clear phrases to prompt discussions amongst her students by allowing them to work in pairs. She would always check their understanding by asking them to share and [provided] feedback to the group.

The critique sections also reflect what is not in the lesson, or at least what is sidelined. In some instances, it allows students to focus on what they did not see. In Extract 10, one teacher commented on the absence of interactive language and play. In Extract 11 another teacher critiqued the relative amount of talk by both the teacher and the *more confident* students while in Extract 12, the writer focussed on a particular group of students, *the Asian students*, who the writer saw as not participating in the group work to the same extent as other class members. The possibility that the two teachers in Extracts 11 and 12 are selecting similar events is open for debate.

10. One feature that was clearly lacking in this lesson was elements of play, linguistic or otherwise, where instead of typical language associated with communicative tasks including moments of transactional learning, people are free to express themselves through ‘songs, games and humour’

11. The teacher has provided opportunities for students to do discussions in groups and in pairs, however, Teacher Talking Time (TTT) is still very high and Student Talking Time (STT) is not maximized well. It also seems that the teacher fails to encourage or include every student to speak up during the STT. The speaking activities are dominated by several students who seem to be more confident with their speaking skills.

12. Her teaching method was PPP (Presentation, Practice and Production), but I could see that not everyone was involving in the ‘Practice’ aspect. Two Asian students were paired together in one discussion group. They hardly participated in this discussion.

The critique part of the text also opened up opportunities for the participants to engage with the specific content that was their focus in teacher preparation, language teaching. Again the amount of attention to language, and the foci varied from one student to the next. This part of the critique was difficult for many of the students. Their texts often did not take an overtly positive or negative stance, as in Extract 13. Yet, the writing, as an act of doing, necessitated some form of a stance, (i.e., *the learners were immediately engaged, ...it activated their schema, the language function ... was identified*), *providing a means of ...*, highlighting the importance of explicit views about subject matter knowledge.

13. Barbara’s lesson was designed to improve receptive and productive skills (Harmer, 2007). It progressed through sequential stages following the PPP practice; outlined in Harmer. In the Presentation phase the learners were immediately engaged as the topic was familiar; it activated their schema. They



had some pre-existing knowledge on rules about cars and aeroplanes. The language focus was made explicit; rules and, more specifically, annoying rules. The language function ‘complaining’ was identified.

When discussing language teaching, some of the participants wrote about connections between what was not taught, and why, focussing on how an absence of error correction was useful for developing fluency (Extract 14). Others considered the language which was used in the class, and why (i.e., how for example, language was authentic, scaffolded and recycled) (Extract 15). These connections are an important part of becoming a language teacher, and the texts provide a means of examining this. Teachers of other content areas would need parallel opportunities to explore key ideas (e.g. Beyer & Davis’ (2009) and ‘Notions of Science’) at this moment in the meta-genre. The participants’ stances create texts out of texts and provide them with a means of moving from one genre (a critique of a lesson) to a second (a critique of the critiques). In turn, this allows backward reflection into the observed lesson and more importantly, creates opportunities for additional, forward reflection into the effects of selectivity, stance and resources and how these frame lessons and are ‘done’ in the lesson planning process.

14. ...another interesting aspect is the fact that she didn’t make any corrections when learners were speaking. While students were expressing their opinions, some grammar errors were found. However, she let them keep speaking and did not correct their mistakes because the aim of this lesson was improving learners’ listening and speaking abilities. In other words, her lesson was focused on ‘fluency’ than ‘accuracy’. According to Harmer, giving immediate and constant feedback when students speak in a fluency activity doesn’t necessary because it can interrupt their communication and hinder improving their oral proficiency. (2007, p.143) Thus, she encouraged the learners in expressing their opinions as she didn’t correct their mistakes.

15. Barbara’s lesson integrated a range of language focuses, complementing her main objective as follows: subject matter/cultural concepts with the wheel clamp and reference to parking in London; grammatical structure evidenced by her repetition of - This rule is very annoying/This person is very annoyed; vocabulary with her interchangeable use of ‘annoyed’ and ‘angry’, repeatedly modelling their uses in speech; and text and discourse type being informal speech, using authentic texts through the audio tapes. A further strength was that the lesson demanded cognitive effort from students within the listening to authentic audio texts for gist and responding. Also, the lesson recycled language with students repeatedly cycling through PPP of language (Harmer 2007, 66). In this, Barbara incrementally introduced elements of challenge, effectively scaffolding learning so that students were extended toward autonomous production. Also effective was the procedure in which student production followed her explicit teaching of lexical phrases (Harmer 2007, 37). This was timed appropriately, being placed within the sequence of techniques she utilized. Students were already using the language of focus and the explicit teaching of lexical phrases at that point worked to focus their language understanding, knowledge and use. That is, she was concerned with ‘input’ (Harmer 2007, 78). Moreover, with the three pictures of relevant sites, she prompted autonomous language production by establishing a real context for the language, thus sustaining engagement and supporting language production.

The final section of the critique is the concluding statement. A good concluding move provides the final piece of the text and the final act of the lesson. The concluding sentence balances the critique, and where required, re-affirms the setting, highlights the selected parts,

and revisits the stance. The conclusion of a lesson provides the final reminder of the relative importance of the parts to the whole. A good example of this is provided in Extract 16.

16. Barbara's lesson provided useful tips for teaching by demonstrating the importance of listening with the aid of the interactive whiteboard, grouping and pairing students to achieve cooperative results, questioning techniques to promote class discussion and scaffolding the lesson in a sequential way in order for students to have a good understanding of 'annoying rules', which can be applied in their everyday experiences.

## Discussion

Critical reflection is viewed as a central part of teacher education for unpacking privileged positions and empowering participants to adopt valued professional positions (e.g. Krull, Oras & Sisask, 2007; Harford & MacRuairc, 2008; Fernandez, 2010). Yet the notion of critical reflection is not well-developed or explored within the field. We have considered the usefulness of structured reflective communication as a meta-genre for engaging teacher education participants in a critical evaluation of video-based extracts of teaching-in-practice. Although our context was an in-service language teacher education program, we believe that the model that we have developed would apply to other kinds of both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs.

The meta-genre contains both a personal reflection task and a writing exercise. The two elements draw together the informal spoken discourse meanings of critical reflection in education, and the more formal definition of critique in rhetoric and genre analysis. These connections are drawn to argue that if critiques in education are seen as elements in meta-genres (ways of knowing and doing), the basic elements of a critique resemble the basic features of lesson plans. We argue that this connection has the potential to empower both pre-service and in-service teachers to engage with lesson planning as a critical reflection exercise that connects theory with practice and embraces voice and empowerment as central elements that create new opportunities for learning. These opportunities enable teachers to explore the usefulness of critiques for developing professional thinking (and decision-making) during teacher education programs.

Broadening views of critique as outlined above can be done when critiques and lesson plans are seen as encompassing the six necessary writing conditions, and the eight shared purposes that we have identified, and where shared similarities are accentuated.

Beyer and Davis (2009, 518) characterise critiquing as "identifying a lesson's strengths and weaknesses." The *Principles of Practice* scaffolding mechanisms that Beyer and Davis used enabled instructors of pre-service teachers to see where their students were starting from but did not provide an overt framing for where to 'go' in forming a comprehensive view of what occurred in the lesson. The backward-looking nature (the focus on what was observed) does not create an automatic connection with other more forward-looking activities that are part of a teacher's professional action thinking. We have proposed a specific meta-genre as a way to connect the two directions of reflection. We contend that this meta-genre, as a structured and shared reflective activity can both look backward to a specific observed piece of teaching and look forward to a specific proposed piece of teaching as part of a process of lesson planning. The meta-genre becomes the critical frame that links the two activities.

We argue, that if scaffolded as an act of communication, critical reflection can provide structured opportunities to reflect on the various ways in which teacher education students view and interpret their own and others' lessons. This framing offers a means of

understanding and reflecting on other teachers' lessons in relation to shaping a related form of social action, in this case lesson planning. It also serves to empower participants in teacher education programs with a greater understanding of relevant genre conventions and offers them ways of developing an authoritative voice. When critique is associated with shared communal ways of thinking and knowing, it takes on much more power, aiding professional learning by focussing attention on important practices in participants' own critiques and allowing comparison and contrast of their own with others' views, a point advocated by Duncan, Pilitsis & Piegaro (2010, 99).

We created contexts in which words mattered (because the assessment limited the words to be used) and forced students to focus on specific issues (so that they could not be avoided by claiming 'too few words'). We saw the emergence of both similarities and differences in the content of the individual participants' critiques and drew attention to both in our subsequent teaching. Haim, Strauss & Ravid (2004) argue that there is a need for implicit aspects of teacher instruction to be made "explicit". Both in-service and pre-service teachers need contexts to articulate their views of what occurred in a lesson and share "their multiple perspectives". This is as important in a critique as it is in lesson planning. Our approach draws on this idea and expands it, developing a structured, scaffolded tool for making mental models explicit, and for creating students who are both forward and backward looking in their critique writing and lesson planning.

The focus on 'doing' in the context of a professional education program is wider than was captured in Carter's (2007) initial re-articulation of Giltrow's (2002) concept of meta-genre. Our model incorporates how the 'doing' can involve both professional thinking and professional activity necessary for more effective lesson planning.

We argue that the processes of using writing in structured ways to reflect on observed lesson fragments and lesson plans ultimately creates new opportunities for the use of critique in teacher education programs to conceptualise the parts of lessons, and their functions and the roles of the in-service teachers' personal teaching theories in the construction of the lesson. When these points are accentuated, similarities between the two types of structured reflection become more apparent and vital implicit aspects of lesson planning, issues of broad pedagogy and pedagogical content knowledge are made explicit.

This paper has considered how critiques were used to scaffold in-service language teachers into focussing on the importance of structuring language and scaffolding activities for maximum learning. The critique was itself a scaffolding exercise, designed to engage students in active analysis of the teaching of others and as a means of encouraging active engagement with the design of their own lessons. The tasks provided a means of increasing student attention to the structure, complexity and organisation of lessons. The tasks also focussed on the structure, complexity and organisation of language within lessons. Both of these foci created a means of encouraging more detailed analysis of participants' own language lesson planning with the aim of helping them see lesson planning not as a course requirement but as an essential tool of elaborating a theoretically-informed language teaching practice. When critiques are seen as part of structured reflective communication, with both spoken and written components of "knowing and doing" (a meta-genre), connections emerge which empower teachers to connect theory with practice. Drawing connections is an important part of becoming a (language) teacher. Structured reflective communication does just that. It provides a means of engaging students in drawing connections between reflective, forward-looking and theoretically-informed lesson planning.

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## Appendix: Subject Materials

### EDU4ILT Task 1c – Critiquing a lesson

*Due to be submitted in the LMS on Monday, August 30<sup>th</sup>.  
(15% of requirements, 750-850 words)*

**For this task**, you will critique the lesson taught by 'Barbara'. The lesson is available in the DVD as part of Harmer, J. 2007. *The practice of English language teaching*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., UK: Pearson Longman (one of the required texts).

**To critique a lesson** you need to examine the parts of a lesson. There are four parts to a critique.

**Introduction: (75-100 words)** This is where you provide detail about the lesson you are critiquing (e.g., who is giving the lesson, what is the lesson about, when was the lesson delivered and to whom). This is followed by a brief 1-2 sentence summary of the content of the lesson. The final piece of the introduction is a statement which summarises your overall evaluation of the lesson. The purpose of this statement is to let the reader know what to expect in the following paragraphs.

**Summary: 1-2 paragraphs (150-250 words)** This section provides detailed background information about the parts of the lesson. What happened at the beginning of the lesson (How did the teacher introduce the topic, hook the students into the topic?). What was the structure and content of the lecture (methods, theoretical perspective etc)? What did the teacher/students do? How did the teacher wrap up the lesson?

**Critique: 1-3 paragraphs (400-450 words)** What did you think about the lesson? Was it effective, interesting, entertaining, useful *etc. etc. etc.*. Why or why not? What was good about the lesson, and why? What was less effective and why?

**Summary: (25-50 words)** A 12 sentence summary that rounds off your perspective.

### Assessment Criteria:

A. The introduction is effective. It can stand on its own. It is sufficiently comprehensive for the reader to have a good understanding of the content of the lesson and of the author's evaluation of that content. It is well-structured and well-written (3)

- B. The critique has a good summary of all parts of the lesson. The summary is well-structured and well-written. (5)
- C. The body of the critique is thorough and insightful and shows a good understanding of what a lesson should be all about. (5)
- D. The summary wraps up the main point of the critique in one or two well-written sentences. (2)