

Fall 2020

## Advancing College Students' Thesis Writing Ability: A Case Study of an Online Library Instruction Course

Derek Stadler

*CUNY La Guardia Community College*, [dstadler@lagcc.cuny.edu](mailto:dstadler@lagcc.cuny.edu)

Dianne Gordon Conyers

*CUNY LaGuardia Community College*, [dconyers@lagcc.cuny.edu](mailto:dconyers@lagcc.cuny.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/sotl\\_ip](https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/sotl_ip)



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stadler, Derek and Gordon Conyers, Dianne (2020) "Advancing College Students' Thesis Writing Ability: A Case Study of an Online Library Instruction Course," *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Innovative Pedagogy*. Vol. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/sotl\\_ip/vol2/iss1/4](https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/sotl_ip/vol2/iss1/4)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Innovative Pedagogy by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact [kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu](mailto:kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu).

# ADVANCING COLLEGE STUDENTS' THESIS WRITING ABILITY: A CASE STUDY OF AN ONLINE LIBRARY INSTRUCTION COURSE

Derek Stadler

Web Services Librarian, Associate Professor  
CUNY LaGuardia Community College

Dianne Gordon Conyers

Serials Librarian, Assistant Professor  
CUNY LaGuardia Community College

## ABSTRACT

The following case study adapted a library instruction course to support students' ability to construct a thesis statement. Given at an urban junior college, the goal of the credit-bearing course is for students to acquire effective research strategies for finding reliable information and to develop information literacy skills. For this study, pedagogy divided thesis writing development over the course of several weeks in which students reviewed sample theses and the work of their peers, providing feedback to fellow students and revising their own work based on feedback from both students and instructors. The class section in this study utilized Blackboard instructional technology for both lessons and assignments, and did not meet face-to-face. In an effort to simulate active learning in a virtual environment, the instructors prepared a form of think-pair-share for students to review and comment on each other's work. To review thesis statements, both students and the instructors utilized a set of questions aimed at examining the effectiveness of the argument. Results of the study will determine whether students improved thesis writing ability. It will also establish whether feedback, both from their peers and from instructors, helped students revise their thesis, and if think-pair-share was successful in an online environment.

*Keywords:* Library Instruction, Thesis Statement, Information Literacy, Feedback, Credit Courses

## INTRODUCTION

Post-secondary studies on the teaching of writing commonly note the various genres that students write in college-level disciplines. In business or

engineering, students may write case studies or project reports. In the sciences, they write a lab report or a research report. In English or history, they write a research paper or argumentative essay (Johns, 2008, p. 249). Many of these

compositions do not have thesis statements, but the research paper or argumentative essay often requires a formal argument. Argumentative essays generally have an introduction or opening, a body of content, and a conclusion to summarize or close the essay (Owusu & Adade-Yeboah, 2014, p. 56). Typically, the introduction ends with the author's thesis statement. By definition, a thesis is "a statement or theory that is put forward as a premise to be maintained or proved" ("Thesis", n.d.). Petrić (2005) defines the thesis both as "the main thought to be developed and the statement of the purpose of the essay" (p. 223) and "an expression of opinion" (p. 224). In writing an argumentative essay, students often times have difficulty constructing a thesis statement. Common problems students face is that statements are often not specific in detail nor arguable (Owusu et al., 2014, p. 59). Statements can also be too narrow, or an announcement of fact rather than a unique idea (Langan, 2001, p. 53). Van Camp and Van Camp (2013) suggest that students struggle "providing synthesized evidence for their thesis statements, and summarizing an author's position when using it to support their own claims" (p. 86). In a study of business students using thesis statements in expository essays at two prominent private universities in Ghana, Owusu et al. (2014) concluded that "language teachers and lecturers should devote ample time in teaching students" thesis writing (p. 62). For the two-year college student, those working to receive the associate's degree at a junior college, writing an argumentative essay may be more difficult than it is for their four-year counterpart. The two-year college student may have "little knowledge concerning academic conventions and behavior, including academic writing conventions

and expectations" (Hansman & Wilson, 1998, p. 21). Developing academic writing skills is central to success and moving on to the four-year school.

The following case study describes a method for librarians and instructors who may have less experience teaching writing skills how to integrate thesis writing into a college-level course. Students typically receive library instruction while in college, often in a single session to introduce them to the library or to help finding resources for an argumentative paper. For-credit library instruction is also available at some institutions in a semester-long course. Given at an urban junior college and taught solely by librarians, the goal of the credit-bearing course in this study is for students to acquire effective research strategies for finding reliable information and to develop information literacy skills. For this study, the course instructors divided thesis writing development over the course of several weeks in which students reviewed sample theses and the work of their peers, providing feedback to fellow students and revising their own work based on feedback from both students and instructors. The class section in this study utilized Blackboard instructional technology for both lessons and assignments, and did not meet face-to-face. Online courses such as this became standard practice at colleges and universities throughout the world in the spring of 2020 following the COVID-19 virus pandemic (Lederman). In an effort to simulate active learning in a virtual environment, the instructors prepared a form of think-pair-share for students to review and comment on each other's work. To review thesis statements, both students and the instructors utilized a set of questions based on Harvard University's strategies for essay writing aimed at

examining the effectiveness of the argument. Results of the study will not only determine whether students improved thesis writing ability, it will provide suggestions for instructors looking to convert classroom practice into a virtual practice since the return to a physical classroom is uncertain in the aftermath of COVID-19. It will also establish whether feedback, both from their peers and from instructors, helped students revise their thesis. The authors want to make the case that course pedagogy utilized in the study to improve student writing skills can be adapted to college-level instruction, whether a three-unit course or single-session library instruction, or an online course or a course that meets face-to-face.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is limited library instruction literature supporting students' writing ability. Library instruction, both in single sessions and in for-credit courses, primarily focuses on fostering information literacy skills. The Association of College and Research Libraries (2019) defines information literacy as "the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning" (p. 3). In lieu, this literature review covers efforts to advance students' thesis writing skills, the value of feedback on student success, and the use of think-pair-share in the college classroom.

#### *Advancing Students Writing Skills*

To begin, there are disciplinary differences

in thesis writing. At the post-secondary level, instructors teach highly specific disciplinary texts and they rarely assign the generic argumentative essay. In the sciences, nursing, and social sciences, students need to formulate a hypothesis and then test it using empirical methods, presenting their work in a lab report or article. In business, social work, and engineering, students analyze a problem and then determine what information and disciplinary concepts can solve the problem (Johns, 2008, p. 249). Still, Beaufort (2007) suggests that instructors need to focus on teaching students how to write in new situations that they encounter. Often, instruction is content-specific and not adaptable to a variety of writing situations (p. 15).

Argumentative essays are more prevalent in the two-year school or high school. Freshmen composition classes teach not only how to write narrative and descriptive essays but expository and argumentative essays to get students to write at the college level. Knowing the difference between the narrative essay and the argumentative essay helps students understand that everyone comes from a different discourse community and that they can use their personal voice in a narrative but also need to write at the academic level (Wang, 2000, pp. 2, 5). Gokcora (2016) suggests that it "is essential that students learn to bring a critical perspective to the topics discussed" and that "acknowledging the opposite point of view verifies that writers can practice argumentation" in their writing (p. 45).

To help students identify thesis statements, Van Camp et al. (2013) designed a weekly assignment where students in a social psychology course read text and identified thesis statements, listing

three pieces of evidence the authors used to support it. Typically, the class examined the text as a group and the author provided guidance in how to identify the thesis (p. 90). In written feedback, one student added, “the weekly reading assignment really helped my vocabulary and finding evidence in texts to support the thesis” (p. 95). Another said, “Having to do the weekly readings I can say has greatly improved my ability identifying the thesis and evidence” (p. 95). On the other hand, in a study at the City University of New York Graduate School, Friend (2001) uncovered that summarization instruction in generalization aided students to construct a more effective thesis statement (p. 3). “Generalization is a cognitive process involving classification and categorization” (p. 6) where a reader distinguishes important and unimportant ideas as a hierarchy of related ideas in expository text. Likewise, in a pre-freshman writing class of entering college freshmen who had failed the university’s writing assessment test, students given summarization instruction in generalization wrote significantly better thesis statements, “synthesizing a global statement from the individual sentences and paragraphs of the original text” (p. 20), than students receiving summarization instruction using argument repetition.

At the high school level, instructors use composition exercises to advance thesis writing. Darrow (2005) suggests a six-step lesson plan. First, the class instructor distributes four different thesis statements and asks students to score them on a four-point scale. Second, the instructor divides the class into pairs and together students write a thesis statement on a future topic or assignment. Third, students write the thesis on a large piece of paper, without their names, later displayed in

the classroom. Fourth, students score each other’s thesis statements. Fifth, the instructor leads the class in creating a rubric-rating matrix of thesis statements. Lastly, the instructor leads a discussion focusing on why statements scoring a three or a four are examples of a well-written thesis (p. 36). In another approach, Moore (2006) developed a series of handouts to help high school students organize and develop their thoughts. The handouts guided students in identifying and interpreting literary elements, culminating in students writing a thesis statement based on the evidence that they found (p. 167). In the process, students develop critical thinking skills by analyzing a piece of literature and formulating an opinion based on their analysis (p. 168).

### ***The Power of Feedback***

Literature maintains that instructor feedback is constructive in helping students. In a study examining the effects of feedback on students’ writing in an English language class, researchers determined that teacher’s feedback on early drafts of written work improved writing skills. The study compared teachers’ feedback with electronic feedback in the online writing practice tool Criterion, developed by Educational Testing Service (Hefferman & Otoshi, 2015, p. 64). Comments focused on four rhetorical features of writing, one being the thesis statement. While students receiving teachers’ feedback showed great improvement in constructing a thesis statement, students receiving feedback from the Criterion system did not show any improvement. The researchers concluded, “Instruction from a teacher is of the utmost importance when learning to write” (p. 73). In another study, Song, Hoon, and Alvin (2017) analyzed the

extent to which students made revisions of their work after receiving feedback from their instructor. Their findings suggest that when instructors provide feedback regarding thesis statements, students make appropriate changes. However, when instructors comment on the development of ideas in the rest of the paper, students only make superficial changes. The reason for the disparity is that in the former students focus on a single sentence, making it clearer and specific, rather than a larger, more complex portion of a paper that can take time (p. 367). A Pennsylvania State University study utilized video to give in-depth, specific, and personalized feedback. In one of the six focus areas of feedback, instructors commented on theses and the overall focus of student papers. Results of the study indicate that students utilized feedback to revise their thesis more than other areas, favoring video feedback over written comments (Moore & Filling, 2012, p. 9).

Few studies delve into the possibilities of peer feedback versus instructor feedback. When a course employs both, based on how they revised their work, Zhao (2010) suggests that students used more teacher than peer feedback. However, in the study of Chinese university English learners, Zhao argued that students used instructor over peer feedback without understanding its significance or value (p. 3). At the same time, students understood a larger portion of the comments and suggestions provided by their peers, but they did not make use of it because they viewed instructor feedback to be more trustworthy and important. Zhao concluded that student "use and understanding of feedback should be viewed as two equally important factors for deciding whether peer feedback should be integrated with teacher feedback"

(p. 14). Zher, Hussein, and Saat (2016) propose, "Peer learning provides enriching possibilities for feedback," especially in large classrooms. They advocate, "Students are often better than the teacher in explaining to their peers in their language which is more accessible" (p. 12). In addition, in the role of providing feedback to their peers, students develop the skill of judgement by analyzing another's work and determining its strength. Similarly, Cao, Yu, and Huang (2019) advocate peer learning because it enhances student learning. Their qualitative study evaluated students' perspectives of what they learned or did not learn by giving and receiving peer feedback. Almost half of the students in the study believed that they could benefit from both providing feedback and giving it (pp. 106, 108, 110).

Through collaboration with faculty and campus endeavors, librarians can play a supporting role in helping students develop writing skills. In a case study at Middlesex University, Rahanu et al. (2016) highlighted the role of Library and Student Support, a one-stop shop for academic support where students receive help in academic writing. Rather than a lecture style approach, the initiative "facilitates student involvement by using games and other activities, and by focusing workshops on a central project theme relevant to the student group" (p. 221). Librarians help by identifying resource and support needs, and by teaching information literacy skills to incoming students through interactive workshops (p. 220). At the secondary level, Brown (2012) conceived of a method whereby the instructor works closely with the school librarian. After a lesson on developing a strong thesis statement, the librarian leads a discussion on the importance of supporting a

thesis statement with research findings, showing students research that provide good support and not-so-good support. For example, a not-so-good resource may be on the same topic as the student's paper but not support the argument. In the next phase, students work in groups with a sample thesis statement and examine resources related to the argument, both in print and electronic. Selected by the librarian, some sources are in support of the thesis and some are not. Using a worksheet listing all sources, students must decide which sources should be included in a paper with the particular thesis. In the next phase of Brown's concept where a librarian first supports thesis writing and then helps find good support materials, students develop their own thesis and search for sources to support it. Later, the instructor and the librarian assess student progress on thesis statements using a rubric and an Exit Ticket questionnaire that asks students what they learned in class and whether they felt confused (pp. 55–56).

### ***Think-Pair-Share***

The study herein used a form of think-pair-share, an active or performance-based method used to engage students in the classroom. Active learning differs from common lecture-style or passive teaching, in which students simply listen to the instructor or wait until asked to participate. In active learning, instructors may break a class into time segments or into groups, and students continually participate and contribute to the lesson. Think-pair-share usually entails the instructor asking students a question designed to make them “process or apply the content, which is then discussed with a partner and subsequently shared

with the whole class” (Gentile, 2010, p. 1951). Prah (2017) suggests metacognitive questions or application questions rather than fact-based questions. Questions with more than one possible answer best promote discussion. When designing the think-pair-share activity, the instructor should also have the learning goal in mind so that questions support the desired outcome (p.7).

Studies advocate the use of think-pair-share in the classroom. In a review of implementing think-pair-share in associate degree nursing curriculum, Fitzgerald (2013) observed an increase in both student preparation and confidence since students worked collaboratively and celebrated their knowledge with other students (p. 90). In a study, Kaddoura (2013) concluded that the think-pair-share strategy in class pedagogy improved critical thinking skills of baccalaureate nursing students since “they can formulate creative solutions to the problems, link ideas and make assumptions” (p. 20).

Think-pair-share is also not restricted to one-on-one classroom discussion. Some studies use a virtual environment. Slone and Mitchell (2014) used Google Drive to facilitate think-pair-share activities in a classroom setting where students recorded group reflections in a single Google document (p. 103). Azlin (2010) utilized Collaborative Environment for Teaching and Learning systems, allowing students to interact and share ideas in an online chatroom (p. 28). The following study used Blackboard's discussion forum to simulate the think-pair-share activity in the virtual environment, allowing students to post their thesis statement and then provide feedback to each other's work.

## METHODS

The urban junior college in this study is a two-year, Associate's Degree granting institution in the United States. More than 60% of students are foreign-born and the majority are overwhelmingly low-income, with more than 70% coming from families with incomes of less than \$30,000 per year. The majority are also first-generation college students. These facts make for a unique data set. Many students did not come through the traditional American school system and some may be unfamiliar with the argumentative essay or constructing thesis statements. The findings of this study may suggest a better approach to improve thesis writing for students new to the concept.

LRC 103, Internet Research Strategies, is a one-unit course offered in both face-to-face and online sessions. Taken as an elective and typically by students nearing graduation who need one credit for completion, its primary goal is for students from any discipline or major to acquire effective research strategies for finding reliable information on the Internet, including resources in the Invisible Web not accessible using standard search engines. Instructed by the authors, the LRC 103 class section in this study was given online during the Spring 2018 semester. To simulate twelve face-to-face sessions in an online environment, the instructors used Blackboard instructional technology to build lesson content and assess assignments. Class curriculum mirrored that described in a previous study of LRC 103. Several lessons and assignments sought to advance student research ability by fostering information literacy skills. Like the former study, prior to the

midsemester examination in this study, students learned how to: 1) develop a research question, 2) find scholarly material using a library database, 3) find background information on a topic, 4) break down a topic in a concept map, and 5) craft a thesis statement. The midsemester examination assesses acquired skills, asking students to create an annotated bibliography based on a thesis statement and research they have done in the class to that point (Stadler & McDermott, 2018).

To advance students' writing skills, this study revised course pedagogy, adding a thesis-writing element to assignments given prior to the midsemester examination. The authors also modified lessons to better guide students in the thesis-writing process from week two through the midsemester examination. Rather than begin with an introduction to fundamental database tools and scholarly research, week two's lesson demonstrated how to find background information on a topic and how to develop a research question. Since the class was online, the authors created an instructional video demonstrating how to find background information using an encyclopedia and posted it to Blackboard. They also posted a second video from another academic institution explaining how to generate a concept map. A concept map breaks down a topic into related issues and examples for further research. It also helps generating keywords for subsequent searches (Appalachian State University: Belk Library and Information Commons, 2017). The assignment accompanying the lesson asked students to create a concept map of a topic found in the online encyclopedia Gale Virtual Reference Library and develop a research question using a research topic worksheet. Topic

suggestions given in the assignment prompt were gentrification, social media, minimum wage, and organic food.

Lessons in week three introduced students to fundamental database tools and scholarly research. Instructional videos were either created specifically for the lesson or taken from other institutions such as Purdue University's Online Writing Lab. They helped students: find scholarly articles, use Boolean logic strategies to complement a keyword search, and create a thesis statement. The first part of the assignment given asked students to find a scholarly article in the Academic Search Complete database based on the research question developed for week two's assignment and to write a 200-word description of the article, summarizing the author's viewpoint on the subject and any evidence they provided in their argument. Next, students needed to construct their own thesis statement related to the topic. This was the first of three writing exercises designed to construct a better thesis (see Figure 1).

In week four, students learned how to generate a citation in MLA style. The assignment accompanying the lesson was the second thesis-writing exercise (see Figure 2). It utilized a form of a think-pair-share exercise, an active or performance-based method used to engage students in the classroom. To simulate the think-pair-share design in an online environment, the authors created a discussion board forum in Blackboard and divided the class into groups of three students in a discussion thread. Similar to a think-pair-share exercise, each group was given two thesis-driven student paper samples and asked to identify the thesis in each paper. Each

student was required to reply to the discussion thread, post their own argument for each sample, and explain why they selected it. They also needed to reply to the other students within their group and state whether they agree or disagree with their peer's choice. The goal of the exercise was that students could identify a thesis in a paper and argue the reason for their decision. It also allowed students to provide feedback to their fellow students in a virtual environment.

Week five's lesson introduced the Opposing Viewpoints in Context database, using a video developed by the Gale database aggregator and a video created by the instructors. The database is an excellent source of opposite viewpoints on contemporary global issues. The assignment accompanying the lesson asked students to revise their thesis statement from week three's assignment using instructor feedback and the student samples as a guide, and to post their revision as a reply to a discussion thread in Blackboard (see Figure 3). In the second part of the assignment, in another think-pair-share exercise, students analyzed the work within their group, examining and determining the quality of the other students' thesis and delivering feedback as a reply in Blackboard. As a guide, the instructors asked students to evaluate their peer's thesis based on five questions from the Harvard College Writing Center. First, did the thesis have a definable, arguable claim? Second, was it narrow in focus, clear and specific as possible? Third, was it not a question? Fourth, was it not a list? Lastly, was it not vague, combative or confrontational (Rodburg & Tutors of the Writing Center at Harvard University, 1999)? Although the questions are not open-ended, students needed to respond in

complete sentences and not simply supply a yes or a no feedback, giving as much detail as possible to support their answer. The goal of the exercise was for students to determine the strength of a thesis statement in order to learn how to improve their own skills.

The following week's lessons explained how to create an annotated bibliography, and introduced the midsemester examination (see Figure 4). The examination required students to: 1) provide a final, revised thesis statement, 2) create an annotated bibliography of at least three articles on their topic, with two in support of their thesis and at least one opposing viewpoint, and 3) write a 250-word paragraph reflection on their progress constructing a thesis. Reflection prompts included: 1) what was most difficult about creating a thesis statement and did you overcome it, 2) in what ways did class lessons and assignments affect your thesis statement development, 3) what class lesson helped you most to create a thesis statement, and 4) would you use techniques learned in this class in future assignments in other classes. Student reflection demonstrates metacognitive competence, one of the four domains in metaliteracy, as students show "a reflective understanding of how and why they learn, what they do and do not know, their preconceptions, and how to continue to learn" (Mackey & Jacobson, 2014). Metaliteracy stresses that the metaliterate student must continually learn given the evolving information landscape.

Assignments in the course were five points each. To grade assignments, the authors created an assessment rubric based on four criteria. For a full five points, students needed to: 1) submit

assignments and reply to the questions within the deadline indicated, 2) have enough information to answer the questions and demonstrate comprehension of the material covered, 3) demonstrate understanding of Internet concepts and issues related to the use of information, and 4) be able to identify scholarly and popular sources. If students did not meet any of these criteria, they lost a point for each. The grading criteria rubric for the midsemester evaluation was the same as the assignment rubric but adjusted to fifteen points.

For the study, the authors evaluated both the progress of students' writing ability and the mean average score of assignments from the first thesis-writing assignment through the midsemester evaluation to determine if class instruction and peer feedback helped students construct a better thesis. The authors developed criteria for student progress in four categories and calculated a student percentage for each. The four thesis benchmarks were: 1) the student's work did not need major revision and was a unique, arguable claim, 2) the student's work demonstrated substantial improvement, 3) the student's work displayed overall improvement, and 4) the student's work had minimal or no improvement. To demonstrate overall improvement, students revised a thesis that failed at least one question of the Harvard College Writing Center's suggestions. To display substantial improvements, students revised a thesis that failed in two more suggestions. The authors also reviewed student reflections in the midsemester evaluation to uncover what students thought they struggled with most and to determine what class instructional methods helped students best.

## RESULTS

Twenty students enrolled in the class in the Spring 2018 semester. Fifteen students qualified for the study, agreeing to be included and having completed at least the first thesis-writing assignment and the midsemester examination. Four students were not included in this study. The most common student challenge was failure to develop a unique argument. For example, the statement “personal well-being contributes to living a healthier lifestyle and making healthier choices like eating organic foods” is not a distinctive argument, but rather in agreement with another author. Another common challenge was not constructing a narrow focus, as in the statement “social media has a good and bad impact on students; student should be able to be safe while using it if they are shown ways to protect themselves and others online.” Students were also unable to develop an arguable claim. While the statement “social media possesses addictive qualities like drug and alcohol addictions” is a claim, it is difficult to argue without indicating what the addictive qualities are. Other student challenges were writing multiple sentences without a solid claim or composing an overview of their paper, beginning with the line “this paper will discuss the effects of gentrification on minority communities,” rather than stating an argument.

Based on 100%, the student grade average was 80% in the first assignment, 98% in the second assignment, 88% in the third assignment, and 89.2% on the midsemester evaluation (see Figure 5). Two of the 15 students, or 13.34%, had unique, arguable claims on their topic in the first

thesis-writing exercise and did not need major revisions (see Figure 6). The instructors suggested only narrowing the focus of the argument. Two students, or 13.34%, demonstrated minimal or no improvement, failing in two or more areas of the Harvard College Writing Center’s suggestions. Of these two students, one student struggled to narrow down their focus in their revision on the midsemester evaluation while the other did not include a thesis revision. However, six students, or 40%, displayed overall improvement in their thesis-writing ability. For example, the statement “organic food makes a beneficial impact on the global trade market by helping local economies and the food industry” was too broad a focus. The student revised this statement to “organic food and its use should be part of school curriculum” for a focused, arguable claim. Five students, 33.34%, exhibited substantial improvements. The statement “what ways does social aspects of social media impact society” is not only a question, it is not arguable or narrow in focus. The student revised this to “the heightened enjoyment and temporal dissociation that social media causes on its users is highly associated with increased usage which leads to addiction with a final outcome of high levels of depression.”

Although they utilized instructor feedback to revise their thesis for the midsemester examination, students also revised their work based on their peer’s comments in the third assignment. In a comment, one student recommended narrowing a two-sentence thesis down to a one-sentence claim, which their peer took into consideration in their revision. In another comment, a student suggested the “thesis could be more narrow and

short --- it just needs to be short and straight to the point.” In an additional example, prior to feedback, a student’s thesis was “while there have been many positive outcomes from social media, there have also been some negative and damaging effects.” The feedback received was “thesis statement does not have a definable arguable claim... just stating an opinion and is a very broad statement.” Although somewhat wordy and still in need of further revision, the student revised the statement to “despite the fact that social media provide services such as, entertainment, information, and communication through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, there are some negative consequences that the user has to endure, which are inclusive of; a lack of privacy, cyberbullying, and also the fact that it takes up a lot of our time, which can lead to social isolation.” These examples demonstrate that students revised their work not only from instructor feedback, but also from feedback received from their peers.

While generally students found class assignments and lessons helpful, the videos were the most beneficial according to some students:

- “I watched the videos a few times just to get a good interpretation of how I can form my thesis statement and combing my claims and key points in one sentence”
- “The videos that were posted on Blackboard about how to create a thesis statement were really clear and useful which helped a lot when it came to thinking about what I needed to write in the thesis statement section”
- “The videos from Youtube explaining the steps of writing thesis statement helped me the most and

the examples provided along with them made it more clear and easy”

Another student suggested that feedback given to fellow students helped their own development, adding, “I also enjoyed providing feedback to my other class members because it allowed me to think more deeply about my topic and how I presented it in the thesis statement.”

## DISCUSSION

The limitations of this study was the small sample size. However, the majority of students demonstrated improvement. Student grade average between the first thesis-driven assignment and the midsemester evaluation exhibits gradual improvement in the course overall. The higher grade in second assignment suggests that students performed best when identifying theses in argumentative papers and working collaboratively with their peers in the Blackboard forum. The grade average in the third assignment was also better than the first assignment indicating that students improved their thesis and could successfully comment on another student’s work. Student reflections also suggest that course curriculum and the collaborative exchange with peers and instructors helped students revise and construct a thesis.

Overall, analysis indicates that feedback best influenced students to write a better thesis. How much of this was due to instructor or peer feedback is difficult to determine. The instructors provided feedback through the Blackboard assignment function. No student mentioned instructor feedback in their reflection, but some students

indicated that their peer's comments affected their work. According to Zher et al. (2016), students communicate with their peers better than their instructors do since they are in the same position as learners and speak the same language (p.12). Instructors providing guidance in thesis statements may consider this pedagogical strategy to advance students' ability in addition to traditional teacher feedback. Furthermore, Moore and Filling (2012) noted that students favored video feedback over written comments (p. 9). For a greater impact in an online course, instructors should contemplate giving video feedback. Likewise, students suggested the tutorial videos aided their progress, preferring visual learning to reading text-based instruction. Materials regarding thesis statements assigned in the course were mostly tutorial videos, with a few short readings from a free online textbook and the five-question Harvard strategy to evaluate thesis statements.

Librarians and instructors who may have less experience teaching writing skills can utilize the techniques presented in this case study. Whether it be a three-unit course or a one-session library instruction given to students at any college, instructors can design courses that adapt both instructor and peer feedback to improve thesis statements, instructional videos on thesis statements from Purdue University, and the Harvard Writing Center's five-step thesis assessment technique to improve students' writing skills. Writing an argumentative paper is typically an assignment given in most English classes at the junior college level. Constructing a focused and narrow thesis can also be a component in a science class where students need to make an argument and provide scientific evidence to prove it. Lastly, thesis statement skills

can also be integrated into library instruction given at most colleges and universities. Since the single information literacy session usually is designed to help students find sources for an argumentative paper, librarians can advance students' thesis writing skills by introducing techniques presented in this paper.

In a think-pair-share exercise, students can workshop each other's papers based on the Harvard Writing Center's suggested questions to critique a thesis statement. Slone and Mitchell (2014) utilized Google Drive to facilitate think-pair-share activities in a classroom setting to record group reflections in a single Google document (p. 103). In this study, Blackboard discussion forums offered a suitable alternative in a virtual environment. However, librarians and other instructors must be cognizant that students express their knowledge in the forum as they would in the classroom. It is important to give word limits to assignment prompts and ask students to illustrate their comprehension of class material in complete sentences.

## CONCLUSION

The scaffolded lesson plan in this study taught students how to write a thesis statement and find sources to support it. At the same time, as students began to explore scholarly research, they identified and analyzed theses and utilized these skills to better their own writing ability. Two components that the authors argue that must be part of course pedagogy is feedback and reflective writing. As revealed in this study and in existing literature, constructive feedback, from both peers and instructors, helps students construct a better thesis to their argumentative paper. In addition, reflective

writing in class assignments supports metaliteracy as students get a better understanding of how and why they learn. Using active learning techniques such as think-pair-share, instructors can help students write better thesis statements while showing them how to find resources to support or oppose their argument. With the switch to remote learning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, librarians and instructors who may have less experience teaching writing skills can incorporate course curriculum in this study into an online course to help students improve their writing and information literacy skills.

## REFERENCES

- Appalachian State University: Belk Library and Information Commons. (2017). Concept mapping. Retrieved from the Appalachian State University website: <https://library.appstate.edu/research-help-guides/vid-eo-tutorials/concept-mapping>.
- Association of College and Research Libraries. (2019). Framework for information literacy for higher education. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/il-framework>
- Azlina, N. A. (2010, September). CETLs: Supporting collaborative activities among students and teachers through the use of think-pair-share techniques. *International Journal of Computer Science Issues*, 7(5), 18–29.
- Beaufort, A. (2007). *College writing and beyond: A new framework for university writing instruction*. University Press of Colorado.
- Brown, H.G. (2012). *Social Studies: Developing a thesis statement*. *School Library Monthly*, 29(2), 55–57.
- Cao, Z., Yu, S., & Huang, J. (2019). A qualitative inquiry into undergraduates' learning from giving and receiving peer feedback in L2 writing: Insights from a case study. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 63, 102–112. doi:10.1016/j.stueduc.2019.08.001
- Darrow, R. (2005). Using the Big6 to write a thesis statement for high school English and History students. *Library Media Connection*, 23(5), 36.
- Fitzgerald, D. (2013). Employing think-pair-share in associate degree nursing curriculum. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, 8(3), 88–90. doi:10.1016/j.teln.2013.01.006
- Friend, R. (2001). Effects of strategy instruction on summary writing of college students. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 26(1), 3–24.
- Gentile, R. J. (2010). Teaching methods. In N. A. Piotrowski (Ed.), *Salem Health. Psychology & Mental Health* (Vol. 5, pp. 1949–1954). Pasadena, CA: Salem Press. Retrieved from [http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX2275200575/GVRL?u=cuny\\_laguardia&sid=GVRL&xid=32c34c7e](http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX2275200575/GVRL?u=cuny_laguardia&sid=GVRL&xid=32c34c7e)
- Gokcora, D. (2016, January). Motivating community college students when teaching argumentative rhetorical style using a documentary: Devil's playground. *Journalism and Mass Communication*, 6(1), 43–51
- Hansman, C. A., & Wilson, A. L. (1998). Teaching writing in community colleges: A situated view of how adults learn to write in computer-based writing classrooms. *Community College Review*, 26(1), 21.

- Heffernan, N., & Ootoshi, J. (2015). Comparing the pedagogical benefits of both Criterion and teacher feedback on Japanese EFL students' writing. *JALT CALL Journal*, 11(1), 63–76.
- Johns, A. M. (2008). Genre awareness for the novice academic student: An ongoing quest. *Language Teaching*, 41, 237–252. doi:10.1017/S0261444807004892
- Kaddoura, M. (2013, June). Think Pair Share: A teaching learning strategy to enhance students' critical thinking. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 36(4), 3–24.
- Langan, J. (2001). *College Writing Skills with Readings*, Fifth Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies Inc.
- Lederman, D. (2020, April 1). Preparing for a fall without in-person classes. Retrieved from Inside Higher Ed website: <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2020/04/01/preparing-quietly-fall-semester-without-person-instruction>
- Mackey, T., & Jacobson, T. E. (2014). Goals and learning objectives: Developing metaliterate learners. Retrieved from the Metaliteracy website: <https://metaliteracy.org/learning-objectives>
- Moore, N.S., & Filling, M.L. (2012). iFeedback: Using video technology for improving student writing. *Journal of College Literacy & Learning*, 38, 3–14.
- Moore, S. A. (2006). They can when shown how. *Classical Journal*, 102(2), 167–171.
- Owusu, E., & Adade-Yeboah, A. (2014). Thesis statement: A vital element in expository essays. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 5(1), 56–62. doi:10.4304/jltr.5.1.
- Petrić, B. (2005). Contrastive rhetoric in the writing classroom: A case study. *English for Specific Purposes*, 24(2), 213–228.
- Prahl, K. (2017). Best practices for the think-pair-share active-learning technique. *American Biology Teacher* (University of California Press), 79(1), 3–8. doi:10.1525/abt.2017.79.1.3
- Rahanu, H.H.R., Georgiadou, E., Khan, N., Colson, R., Hill, V., & Edwards, J.A. (2016). The development of student learning and information literacy: A case study. *Education for Information*, 32(3), 211–224. doi:10.3233/EFI-150959
- Rodburg, M., & Tutors of the Writing Center at Harvard University. (1999). Developing a thesis. Retrieved from the Harvard University website: <https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/developing-thesis>
- Schneer, D. (2014). Rethinking the argumentative essay. *TESOL Journal*, 5(4), 619–653.
- Slone, N. C. & Mitchell, N. G. (2014, June). Technology-based adaptation of think-pair-share utilizing Google drive. *Journal of teaching and Learning with Technology*, 3(1), 102–104. doi:10.14434/jotlt.v3n1.4901
- Song, G., Hoon, L.H., & Alvin, L.P. (2017). Students' response to feedback: An exploratory study. *RELC Journal*, 48(3), 357–372. doi:10.1177/0033688217691445
- Thesis. Oxford Dictionaries. Retrieved from the Oxford University Press database: <https://premium.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/thesis>
- Van Camp, D., & Van Camp, W. (2013). Using content reading assignments in a psychology

course to teach critical reading skills. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning*, 13(1), 86–99.

Wang, X. (2000, April 14). Accommodating marked features of ebonics in freshman essays: From a narrative essay to a research paper. Retrieved from ERIC Institute of Education Sciences website: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED442112.pdf>

Zhao, H. (2010). Investigating learners' use and understanding of peer and teacher feedback on writing: A comparative study in a Chinese English writing classroom. *Assessing Writing*, 15(1), 3–17. doi:10.1016/j.asw.2010.01.002

Zher, N., Hussein, R., & Saat, R. (2016). Enhancing feedback via peer learning in large classrooms. *Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 4(1), 1–16.