Simple Strategies to Help your Students Think Critically

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At the university level, students must be able to think and reflect critically, to analyze a subject in depth and not merely memorize or understand theoretical content. This implies that they are engaged in their learning in order to develop their critical reflective thinking skills.

In addition, it is important that critical thinking be designed and incorporated into a course in a gradual and consistent manner, which requires that professors spend time planning in order for the students to develop a specific set of critical thinking skills.

The following document will assist professors in better understanding what is meant here by the term critical thinking and help them to think about the possibilities for effectively incorporating it into their university courses.
**Why incorporate critical thinking in university teaching?**

Incorporating critical thinking in university teaching helps to educate thinking and responsible individuals (Van Gyn and Ford, 2010, 11) by ensuring that students are actively engaged in their learning. Consequently, developing critical thinking skills goes hand in hand with dynamic learning since it is centered on the actions of those learning and not on those of the professor (Duron, Limbach and Waugh, 2006, 160).

The University’s mission is to convey a culture of thinking, reflection, and critical analysis to students, to encourage them to ask questions, to find and analyze the relevance of information. Indeed, as future professionals, students need to be prepared to face situations drawn from real life and encouraged to make informed decisions.

On the other hand, critical thinking is based on listening to others, the ability to accept opinions without always being in agreement with the ideas themselves. These are particularly important skills in the context of collaborative work and are sought after in most professions, regardless of the field of specialization.

**Critical thinking: What is it?**

“Critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thoughts in order to improve” (Elder and Paul, 2008). According to Ennis (1985), critical thinking is “reasonable and reflective thinking aimed at making a decision regarding what to believe or do” (in Boisvert, 2000, p. 603).

It is important to know how to overcome prejudice in order to provide well-founded, realistic, fair, rational and honest critical analysis. The Descartes principle serves as a reminder of this. Consequently, critical thinking requires listening to others, an act that can be linked to the humanistic theory in which impartial judgements and a reliance on well-supported arguments are used to present rational thought. Critical thinking relies on a quality of thought that is characterized by self-managed deliberation in the face of a challenge, a situation or a task; it involves exploration and producing alternatives to make judgements. These are based on criteria justifying the conclusion and that can be applied to a relational statement or empirical value (Van Gyn and Ford, 2006).

**Strategies to effectively incorporate critical thinking into university courses**

Critical thinking is closely related to dynamic learning because a thinking student is engaged in their learning through specific challenges. It is important to define the learning outcomes beforehand and to choose strategies that will enable students to think and be engaged in the classroom (Duron, Limbach and Waugh, 2006).
In addition, it is important to make the choice of strategy clear to students to help them understand the goals that have been set. The incorporation of critical thinking should be gradual and constant so that students develop skills for practical reflection.

In the following section we present two main ways of incorporating critical thinking in education and making students more active in their learning style:

- Ask questions that encourage critical thinking.
- Incorporate a comprehensive model for critical thinking.

**Ask questions that encourage critical thinking**

This method can be put into practice fairly quickly and helps encourage critical thinking among students. Open-ended questions can serve to encourage and demonstrate the use of critical thinking.

Questions can be pointed or specific. The following are a few examples:

“The author is trying to tell us something or other.”

- How can we verify or test the author’s conclusion?
- What acts as a bias? What is your bias?
- What are the implications?

“This report concludes that we should do Y and Z.”

- What is the reasoning behind the conclusion?
- Are there other issues to take into account?
- Can you offer a well-reasoned alternative?

**Incorporate a comprehensive model for critical thinking**

This option requires a little more planning and time to ensure that the strategies used allow students to reach the desired learning outcomes.

Using references from critical thinking research, we have suggested a model based on three essential steps in the critical thinking process.

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<th>Research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Determine the question or the problem</td>
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<td>• Determine the pre-existing biases or personal opinions and evaluate the assumptions (your own and the author’s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Acquire sources of information</td>
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<td>• Evaluate the credibility and relevance of your information sources</td>
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<td>• Select useful and credible sources</td>
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<th>Analysis</th>
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<td>• Analyze or evaluate arguments, interpretations, opinions and theories</td>
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• Find significant similarities and differences

• Identify contradictions, implications and consequences

• Combine the many elements of this research

Communication

• Produce a presentation, oral or written, that explains the results of critical thinking and that includes:
  
  • Research results

  • Possible errors

  • Explanation of the coherence and logic behind your conclusion, your opinion or your interpretation

It is important to modify or revise the model to align with your discipline and the needs of your students. It is clear a discipline will focus more on certain aspects than others. You will also need to determine the most important points and think of ways to assess the performance of your students. Most of all, do not hesitate to offer encouragement and give feedback to your students so that they have the intellectual courage to carry their ideas and opinions (Elder and Paul, 2008). For each item, write a concrete example with a brief description of its importance and activities that will allow students to put it into practice. You can refer to the example on the next page.

Step

• Determine biases or personal opinions and evaluate the preconceived notions (your own and the author’s)

Example: In sexology

• The authors of this study are associated with a conservative (or liberal) organization that espouses values that are in conflict with my own.

Importance in the discipline

• I must determine if their point of view has influenced the data used or their conclusion. Determine my personal opinion in order to manage its influence.

Activities for students

• Read the article, determine your own bias and describe how this bias might influence which side you take regarding the article.

Lastly, developing critical thinking skills requires gradual and regular practice, but it is important to support students through this difficult exercise. Depending on the discipline being taught, the model can be incorporated into a course by using one aspect or point from each of the steps. This is one method for covering the model in its entirety. However, it is also possible to work more in depth by touching on each point in every step along the way.
Conclusion

University teaching requires students to develop a number of basic and critical thinking skills over the course of their university studies. Students should be engaged in their learning and participate in activities that require a high level of thinking—a difficult task from a cognitive point of view. The critical thinking process is complex and must be gradually and consistently incorporated into teaching, ensuring that students are faced with challenging situations and are asked to make unbiased, objective and valid judgments. For the professor, it is a complex task that requires thorough planning to ensure that students develop critical thinking skills that serve them in the future as individuals and as responsible citizens.

References


