

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING IN LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking. It means making reasoned judgements that are logical and well thought – out. Critical thinking includes both cognitive skills and dispositions, in terms of attitudes or habits of mind. The ability to think critically is an essential life skill, though; this focal point is missed in many students' education. Students are taught memorization with little or no time left for the development of critical thinking skills. Empirical research suggests that people begin developing critical thinking at very young age and all people can be taught to think critically. The present paper will explain the three main strategies i.e. cooperative learning, discussion and mind movies needed to promote critical thinking among learners that can improve their academic performance as well as helping them to develop the skills necessary to compete economically in a global environment. The finding of this research suggests that (1) critical thinking has a positive effect on student and teacher engagement within the classroom. (2) It has a positive impact on student achievement and students' higher order thinking skills. (3) Critical thinking will also lead to self- directed learning and self- motivation for learners.

Key words: Critical Thinking, Cognitive Skills, Student Engagement, Self- Directed Learning

INTRODUCTION

The development of critical thinking (CT) has been a focus of educators at every level of education for years. Critical thinking is the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking. It means making reasoned judgements that are logical and well thought – out. Critical thinking includes both cognitive skills and dispositions. Critical thinking is known as a basic competence of the 21st century. This skill is acquired in a life-long process and is developed starting in infancy. This ability comes from an inner capacity of structuring cognitive structures that include high levels of complexity (Piaget, 1952). Further, the mental capacity for higher-level thinking continues to develop across the life span (Piaget, 1952). In terms of cognitive development, one of the most important skills to develop in preschoolers is the thinking process. Every new situation becomes an opportunity for young children to assimilate and accommodate information in order to create new conceptual structures on their own (Piaget, 1952). A task faced by an instructor is to learn how to apply critical thinking strategies in the classroom setting regardless of whether that setting is traditional or online. Often times in a classroom session, instructors present course concepts and terminology without promoting rigorous interaction with the students (Brookfield, 2011). Researchers contend that critical thinking is positively linked to student engagement (Barkley, 2009; Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011; Carini, Kuh

& Klein, 2006). Critical thinking not only improves learners' academic performance but also help them to develop the skills necessary to compete economically in a global environment. Developing the ability to think critically is an essential life skill and it is important to practice critical thinking strategies on daily basis in classrooms.

Dispositions

Most researchers also agree that in addition to skills or abilities, critical thinking also involves dispositions (Facione, 1990). As early as 1985, researchers working in the area of critical thinking recognized that the ability to think critically is distinct from the disposition to do so (Ennis, 1985).

Empirical evidence appears to confirm the notion that critical thinking abilities and dispositions are, in fact, separate entities (Facione, 2000). These dispositions have variously been cast as attitudes or habits of mind. (Facione, 2000) defines critical thinking dispositions as “consistent internal motivations to act toward or respond to persons, events, or circumstances in habitual, yet potentially malleable ways” (p. 64). Researchers tend to identify similar sets of dispositions as relevant to critical thinking. Recently researchers have begun to investigate the relationship between the disposition to think critically and CT skills. Many believe that in order to develop CT skills, the disposition to think critically must be nurtured as well. For example, the most commonly cited critical thinking dispositions include:

- Open-mindedness (Bailin et al., 1999; Ennis, 1985; Facione 1990, 2000; Halpern, 1998);
- Fair-mindedness (Bailin et al., 1999; Facione, 1990);
- The propensity to seek reason (Bailin et al., 1999; Ennis, 1985; Paul, 1992);
- Inquisitiveness (Bailin et al., 1999; Facione, 1990, 2000);
- The desire to be well-informed (Ennis, 1985; Facione, 1990);
- Flexibility (Facione, 1990; Halpern, 1998); and
- Respect for, and willingness to entertain, others' viewpoints (Bailin et al., 1999; Facione, 1990).

QUALITIES OF A CRITICAL THINKER

1. **Critical thinkers are *objective in their approach*.** They are fair and focused. Critical thinkers are not affected by emotions, situations and any other internal or external influence. They know their goals and work towards them.
2. **Critical thinkers are *rational and not impulsive*.** While making a decision, critical thinkers always think logically before putting their ideas into action.
3. **Critical but *creative*.** Thinking out of the box is a great quality of a critical thinker and thus, gives a fair chance to new and creative ideas.

4. **Critical thinkers are reflective in their approach:** They take their previous knowledge and experiences into account in order to tackle present situation and take decisions accordingly in future.
5. **Critical thinkers are curious** for more knowledge.
6. **Critical thinkers are keen observers and active listeners.** They listen to others and are always open to discussions.

METHODS TO PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING

Educators can use various methods and strategies to develop critical thinking among learners in the classroom. Learners need to be exposed to diverse methods of teaching that promote critical thinking. Critical thinking happens when students analyze and evaluate evidence, arguments, claims and beliefs and learn to make judgments and decisions based on others' points of view, interpret information and draw conclusions. The three methods that can promote critical thinking in learners are mentioned below:

(a) **Co-operative learning:** Working in group is an effective way to allow learners to think out of the box which requires that students work together toward a common learning goal. When learners do co-operative learning they get exposed to the thought processes of their peers and learn how other people think and that their way is not the only route to explore. When this valuable skill is introduced to students early in the education process, they become better problem solvers when presented with difficulty. Cooper (1995) argues that putting students in group learning situations is the best way to foster critical thinking. "In properly structured cooperative learning environments, students perform more of the active, critical thinking with continuous support and feedback from other students and the teacher" (p. 8). Students who are allowed to work in small, collaborative peer groups demonstrate greater cognitive engagement. Higher levels of cognitive engagement are also reported by students who rate their instructors as enthusiastic, effective, and responsive.

(b) **Discussions:** Classroom discussions offer an important opportunity for critical thinking. It has become one of the important strategies for the teacher to teach the students to think critically when conveying their ideas and become more proactive and creative. Teachers can model this important skill for students and guide them to practice. In this, one can use open-ended

questions and real-world connections and prompts to bring the discussion to life. Encouraging students to make connections to a real-life situation and identify patterns is a great way to practice their critical thinking skills. Teacher should encourage students to challenge traditional ways of thinking about issues and concepts. Daily newspaper clippings directly related to current classroom content that allow an instructor to incorporate discussion into the classroom.

- (c) **Mind Movies:** When concepts that are hard to learn, encourage students to create a movie in their mind. Teach them to close their eyes and picture it like a movie is playing. In this way learners will develop higher order thinking and will also help them understand the concept in a powerful, unique way.

CONCLUSION

Educators have long seen critical thinking as a desirable educational outcome. Critical Thinking is a skill that can be taught in both the traditional and online classroom. It is clear from the above discussion that critical thinking has a positive effect on student and teacher engagement within the classroom. It has a positive impact on student achievement and students' higher order thinking skills and moreover, critical thinking will also lead to self-directed learning and self-motivation for learners. Critical thinking in the classroom involves time, skill, dedication and motivation. Critical thinking is a process that demands for a higher level of thinking beyond recall. Engaging students in critical thinking encourages interaction and allows a platform for meaningful and rigorous discussion that leads to life-long learning. Regardless of the methods used to promote critical thinking, care must be taken to consider the many factors that may hinder a student from thinking critically. The student's disposition to think critically is a major factor, and if a deficit in a disposition is noticed, this should be nurtured. Students should be encouraged to be inquisitive, ask questions, and should not accept everything they are told. Finally, it is important that critical thinking skills should be encouraged and reinforced in all classes by teachers at every level of education.

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