Demystifying Critical Thinking through the Exploration of Social Media

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Abstract

Critical thinking is a term used to describe one of the aims of higher education programs around the world. As an example, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (2011) clearly lists critical thinking as one of five inherently desirable educational outcomes in post-secondary writing in the United States. However, the definition of critical thinking is complicated by a large variety of philosophical concepts and a lack of clarity as to what students should actually learn and do (Moore, 2013). Too often, university courses impose unclear expectations on students, which adds unnecessary difficulty, particularly for multilingual, multicultural, and international students, who might not be socialized into the use of critical thinking in academic work. (Robertson, et al., 2000; Tran, 2011). Even university instructors themselves admit to a lack of comprehensive understanding of critical thinking and how it can be taught (Hang, 2011). In so far as standards for critical thinking in academic work will be imposed on students, there is a need for a clarification of critical thinking, leading to practical directions for classroom instruction.

In this chapter, I propose a pedagogically focused definition for critical thinking and illustrate how this definition can be applied to a teaching approach involving the exploration and presentation of information on social media. It begins with an explanation to students regarding the epistemology of critical thinking, dispositions that support or deter its practice, and integrated skills. Adhering to this

framework of critical thinking, students then explore a variety of comments on social media in order to deepen their understanding of social issues and of society itself. This approach to teaching critical thinking also provides a structure for academic presentations or written assignments that may serve as final products of the learning experience. The nature of student perspectives with regards to this approach to teaching critical thinking is also discussed.

Keywords: Multilogical thinking, Higher-order thinking, English for academic purposes, English for specific purposes, Academic writing, Academic presentation

Introduction

Critical thinking currently remains, in theory, and practice, a convoluted concept for both teachers and students in academic writing courses, despite it being an integral part of desirable outcomes. The definition of critical thinking is complicated by a large variety of philosophical concepts and a lack of clarity as to what students should actually learn and do (Moore, 2013). Unclear conceptions lead to unclear classroom practices, and it is unfair to impose a standard of critical thinking in the assessment of academic work without clearly delineating its structure to students. This is particularly true for students from cultures that do not validate critical thinking or have entirely different conceptions of critical thinking. Despite this lack of clarity in the classroom, critical thinking remains a salient and clearly documented goal of higher education institutions.

Works of academic writing, in the form of essays or research papers, are the traditional educational products of higher education, and so, naturally, expectations in academic writing are a focal point for expectations for critical thinking. In 2011, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project solicited research and

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society, although it certainly has the potential for such aims. As mentioned previously, critical thinking is simply a tool for the exploration of possibilities and perspectives, a tool available for use toward any number of different goals. I suggest, then, that ideas within different schools of thought can provide direction for critical thinking's use toward specific purposes.

Finally, although I have defined critical thinking as the exploration of possibilities and perspectives to tailor it toward clear application in educational contexts, it is important to note that the larger concept of critical thinking instruction necessarily entails much more than this – namely, instruction in deductive reasoning. The thinking skills required to discern inaccuracies and falsehoods, solve problems, and provide appropriate evidence are invaluable to the holistic process of critical thinking. However, these thinking skills alone do not assure students an escape from non-critical reductive thinking. "Skillfully" discerning inaccuracies and falsehoods, if from a monological perspective, only serves to strengthen bigotry. Thus, I argue that critical thinking instruction should focus on exploratory and expansive thought, providing educators with a manageable set of practical teaching points that clearly distinguishes critical thinking from non-critical, reductive thinking. Explaining this distinction clearly is of the utmost importance when requiring critical thinking in academic courses. As teachers, it is our responsibility to explicitly communicate our expectations regarding critical thinking and our reasons for teaching it.

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