Quality Enhancement Plan for USF Sarasota-Manatee: Critical Thinking

QEP Steering Committee

University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee
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Profession-bent students should be helped to understand that in the twenty-first century the world will not be run by those who possess information alone...Access to factual knowledge of all kinds is rising exponentially while dropping in unit cost...Soon it will be available everywhere on television and computer screens. What then? The answer is clear: synthesis. We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.

E.O. Wilson, (1999) (p. 294)

Access to information has never been easier, and consequently was never less valuable. The availability of information through clunky mechanisms such as televisions and computer screens, referred to in the quote above, has given way to sleek smartphones and tablets that allow instantaneous access to any content in almost any context for almost every demographic of people (e.g., Duggan, 2013). Access to information has become so ubiquitous that questions have arisen about the dependence of human memory on search engines such as Google (Sparrow et al., 2011). Given this unprecedented access to information, what exactly is the role of the modern university? To answer most succinctly we rely on a prescient 1921 quote by Albert Einstein: “The value of a college education is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think.”

The training of the mind to think critically seems to be the greatest aspiration of modern day educators (Willingham, 2007; Clabaugh, 2008). It is listed as a goal in nearly every university’s catalog and is the most frequent topic for QEPs (SACSCOC, 2014). The practical
application of critical thinking to make decisions and solve problems is currently the most valued quality by employers (National Association of Colleges and Employers[NACE], 2014; Casserly, 2012). Critical thinking as a job qualification has doubled since 2009 (Korn, 2014). Ironically, students believe that they possess critical thinking skills that employers do not. In a recent Washington Post article reporting on the disparity between employers’ and recent college graduates’ perceptions of graduates’ skills, no greater disparity was observed than with the skill termed “Critical/Analytical Thinking” (Selingo, 2015). While 66% of recent graduates felt they possessed the skill, only 26% of employers agreed. This divide could be the result of a common cognitive bias observed where individuals overestimate their facility with any skill (Van Vellen & Nowak, 2011). Alternatively, the divide could be a lack of understanding of what critical thinking means.

Although critical thinking clearly has been identified as an important skill by educators and employers, a unified (and concrete) definition has been elusive. Most definitions are multifaceted. For example, Willingham (2007) split critical thinking into three categories: reasoning, making judgments and decisions, and problem solving. Cognitive psychologists, however, would consider these components of critical thinking distinct processes. In fact, textbooks devote separate chapters to each (e.g., Galotti, 2008). As another exemplar of the variations in definitions, Clabaugh (2008) parsed critical thinking into nine distinct skills. We chose to adopt the definition of critical thinking used by Scriven & Paul (2015) because it has captured emerging themes from many different definitions of critical thinking:

*Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from,*
or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.

Even with such an actionable definition capturing the essence of critical thinking, important questions remain about critical thinking. The first of these questions echoes from decades of debate in psychology about whether thinking skills such as critical thinking are innate or learned. The answer, as with nearly every cognitive skill, is likely “both” (Diamond & Amso, 2008). That is, people have the capacity to learn cognitive skills such as critical thinking, but an experiential component is necessary for their development. Underscoring the importance of experience in the development of critical thinking skills are studies of the teachability of critical thinking skills. Both qualitative (Halpern, 1998) and quantitative (Abrami, 2008) review studies have concluded that critical thinking skills are teachable.

Given evidence that critical thinking skills are teachable, the next question arises: Are they transferable? In other words, can critical thinking skills generalize across classes, majors, and especially from campus to job sites? Halpern (1998) would argue that the teaching of critical thinking is not mutually exclusive of the transferability of critical thinking. Certain features of critical thinking that foster transferability can be taught. These features include a desire to put in the extra cognitive effort necessary to think critically (the human default setting is to be “cognitive misers” [Fiske & Taylor, 1991]); learn the skills necessary to apply critical thinking (e.g., reasoning, argument, ruling out alternatives, probability analysis, and decision making); recognize the common structure of problems across multiple domains; and objectively monitor one’s own critical thinking process (Halpern, 1998).
A need for increased critical thinking ability has been identified by educators and employers. Despite a history of nebulous and multi-faceted definitions of critical thinking, common themes have emerged to capture the essence of critical thinking. These themes are both teachable and transferable. Given these principles, the goal of this project is to improve the critical thinking skills of our students. These skills will be defined and taught in a way that they can be applied to all of our disciplines and can be translated to real world contexts. Specifically, we would like all of our students to emerge with the following outcomes (from Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2014, p.2):

1. Raises vital questions and problems;
2. Gathers and assesses relevant information;
3. Reaches well-reasoned conclusions and solutions after testing alternatives against relevant criteria and standards;
4. Thinks openmindedly within alternative systems of thought; and
5. Communicates effectively the reasoning process and its results.
References


www.criticalthinking.org


