The Instructor's Challenge: Moving Students beyond Opinions to Critical Thinking

By Ronald C. Jones

Critical thinking is defined as a reflective and reasonable thought process embodying depth, accuracy, and astute judgment to determine the merit of a decision, an object, or a theory (Alwehaibi, 2012). Creative thinking involves analysis, evaluation, and a synthesizing of facts, ideas, opinions, and theories. Possessing the capacity to logically and creatively exercise in-depth judgment and reflection to work effectively in the realm of complex ideas exemplifies a critical thinker (Carmichael & Farrell, 2012).

Mere thinking might lead a student to engage in the offering personal opinions or life experiences to address a topic, yet the challenge for an instructor is to move students beyond offering personal opinions. Gaining additional thinking skills prompts a student to research the existing body of topical knowledge and respond by repeating the ideas and theories of experts in the subject matter. Quoting scholarly authors is a step above proffering personal beliefs and perceptions, yet regurgitating the thoughts of others does not equate to critical thinking.

As instructors, the goal should be to create a learning environment that causes students to engage in critical reflection and evaluation of the existing literature to render judgment based on a compilation of synthesized evidence. Although a student's opinion might be relevant and provide a bridge for additional discussion, the challenge is to prompt students to provide justifications and founded explanations of their views. What does a student learn if the only criteria for the assignment is read the textbook and tell me what the author said? An effective method for beginning to teach the critical thinking process is for the instructor to respond to students with research-supported replies. By the instructor setting the example, students at least have the opportunity to view a reflective, evaluative response.

The asynchronous online classroom instructor can use a variety of techniques to facilitate critical thinking skills in his or her students. The fact that students must write discussion responses fosters a deeper level of thinking than reactionary verbal responses. Online students have the opportunity to think and organize their thoughts prior to responding to a question. Instructors must remove actual or perceived communication barriers to allow students to enjoy a strong comfort level with posting responses, asking questions, or contacting the instructor. Specific techniques to build critical thinking skills in students include:

- Providing timely, positive, yet constructive feedback
- Expressing agreement, appreciation, and encouragement
- Posing challenging questions to students
- Teaching the value of comparing and contrasting; everything is not right or wrong
- Openly praising high quality work so other students can see what excellent work resembles
- Encouraging students to provide problem-solving responses as opposed to offering textbook definitions
- Keeping the discussion within the context of the subject matter; herd in the strays
- Rewarding excellent participation; penalizing poor performance. I've found that the only way to encourage scholarly participation by a portion of the students is through the grade book.

Helping Students Think Critically

A student's critical thinking skills can be strengthened when an instructor probes the student's viewpoint on the discussion topic by seeking additional clarification, explanation, and justification from the student.

Instructors should prompt students to gain proficiency in research skills to be able to move beyond using personal opinions as the sole basis for responses. Recognizing that critical thinking involves assessment, examination, and reflective reasoning of existing information, ideas, beliefs, and speculations, effective instructors encourage students to gain proficiency in the ability to locate and retrieve scholarly information on the assigned topic. Instructors should respectfully challenge a student's viewpoint to elicit a deeper, more reflective response by:

- Setting the example: responding to the student with a reply supported by peer-reviewed literature
- Mandating the use of peer-reviewed sources in addition to the course textbook
- Asking questions directly related to the student's response as opposed to posting an off-the-shelf, well-worn reply
- Asking for clarifications, deeper explanations, and justification
- Disallowing the use or, at a minimum, the overuse of direct quotes
- Teaching the technique of synthesis of sources instead of rewarding a quantity of words
- Not responding to students in such an authoritative manner that kills the discussion; the goal is to keep the discussion moving, and not cause students to assume the instructor always has the final word
- Soliciting opposing views; encourage students to make a justified argument for or against a topic
- Posting questions that cannot be answered with a yes or no answer or one-liners
  By stimulating a student's reasoning process through probing and thought-provoking questions, instructors move students beyond being able to define a topic to possessing the ability to make an evaluative value judgment based on in-depth, sound interpretation of relevant information.

Dr. Ronald C. Jones, president, Ronald C. Jones, Inc. and associate faculty, Ashford University.

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