Teaching Students to Think Critically

As a new faculty member, I was midway through my first semester when I realized three things: 1) most first-year students and some upper-level students were not thinking critically about the subject matter; 2) they did not know what critical thinking was; and 3) I needed to slow the pace, even eliminate discussion topics, in order to familiarize students with the process and provide the time necessary to apply critical thinking skills. Based on my initial experiences, I developed a list of strategies I’m now implementing.

**Define Critical Thinking to Students** – Like most professors, I assumed that students knew how to think beyond rote memory. After students expressed their confusion and uncertainty, I decided to begin a discussion of critical thinking with Bloom and Green’s clear definition. “Critical thinking generally embraces all forms of higher-level thinking that are more complex or deeper than mere acquisition of knowledge and factual recall.” I have also developed a handout that lists several higher-level, critical thinking skills.

**Discuss the Difference Between Rote Learning and Critical Thinking** – When I forced my students to think critically, they protested. In an effort to ease their pain and bolster confidence, I used an exercise that demonstrated the superiority of critical thinking. I made two columns on the board, one marked rote learning and another marked critical thinking. Then I had students brainstorm the characteristics of each. By the end of the discussion, they saw the inadequacy of rote-level thinking and understood that it requires only a certain limited kind of intelligence.

**Create a Critical Thinking Environment** – Even after the above exercise, I still felt that students were reluctant to work on their critical thinking skills. I discovered that they felt intimidated when they were asked to think out loud or respond to questions in front of the other students. To ease their concerns I pointed out repeatedly that critical thinkers are risk takers and that they stand to learn more and understand better when they try.

**Debrief Students After Completing Practice Assessments** – Students want to know whether or not they are thinking critically. I learned that it was important to acknowledge their effort. I identified what they did well, lauded their risk-taking, and noted any progress. Then I talked about skills that were used incorrectly, inefficiently, or not at all.

**Prepare Students to Take Assessments Requiring Critical Thinking** – My students also expressed fear of essay and problem-solving questions, fear that was based on not knowing what the test would be like or what kind of responses the instructor was expecting. Demystifying the test-taking process eases students’ test anxiety. Share exam logistics (number of questions and their types) with them and explore study and test-taking strategies. Providing an opportunity for students to take a practice quiz or test before the scheduled assessment also reduces anxiety. I plan to give students a practice take-home test the day I pass out the syllabus. For me, slowing down and eliminating content areas were a challenge because I initially thought students would view it as a negative or a sign of unpreparedness. I was wrong. Most students viewed my slowing down as an effort to improve their critical thinking abilities, which they now consider valuable to their learning.
