

Online Classes: Improving Critical Thinking Skills

Andrea G. Shenkman
Kaplan University
Palm Beach State College
Lake Worth, FL, USA
ashenkman@kaplan.edu
shenkmaa@palmbeachstate.edu

Abstract: As online colleges continue to grow, the debate about the benefits of online classes continues. This perspective, based on personal teaching experiences, shows that when students are given a framework for thinking that assists in organizing their thinking, they are able to readily adapt to the online teaching format. The presentation of the material in the online classroom gives students a visual and hands-on experience of the organization of information. By weaving this hands-on experience with problem-solving, a framework is presented for developing a new way to think about thinking. This perspective provides college professors a template for encouraging students to use technology to develop the higher order process of critical thinking.

Purpose

As a college professor teaching strategies for success to first-year students, I've observed how online classes assist in improving critical thinking skills. By answering the following questions, I will present a perspective on how the organized structure of the online class promotes the development of the higher order process of critical thinking:

1. How is critical thinking defined and what are its components?
2. How does critical thinking promote college success?
3. What is the value of critical thinking skills in today's global economy?
4. What are the implications of online classes improving critical thinking skills?

How is critical thinking defined and what are its components?

A definition:

A universally accepted definition of critical thinking does not exist. However, to provide a basis of reference for this discussion, several actively used definitions will be cited. Kaplan University uses the following definition in their online strategies class: Critical thinking refers to a disciplined approach or analysis (breakdown) and evaluation (scrutiny) of information. The University of Maryland uses John Dewey's definition: "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends". Michael Scriven and Richard Paul of criticalthinking.org define critical

thinking as "...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. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness." Dictionary.reference.com uses the following American Psychiatric Association supported definition for critical thinking: "the mental process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information to reach an answer or conclusion."

The definition of critical thinking that I use in my strategies class is: critical thinking is a disciplined approach to evaluating information. The purpose of using this particular definition is to introduce a simple concept of critical thinking for first-year students.

The components of critical thinking:

To assist students in developing this higher-order process, the following concepts are discussed as the components of critical thinking:

1. development of problem solving which includes:
 - definition of the problem
 - analysis of the problem
 - search for possible solutions
 - application of solution
 - reflection
2. difference between fact vs. opinion

Students have the opportunity to apply these concepts in the online discussion boards.

How does critical thinking promote college success?

The hallmark of critical thinking is methodical deliberation; this methodical deliberation allows for the interpretation of the information. Interpretation of the information leads to the ability to manage the information; this includes gaining an understanding of how to use the information. Asking where, when and how information will be applied assists in broadening understanding of material.

Within the classroom, the following questions are asked to begin the discussion about critical thinking:

- How do you think?
- How do you organize your thoughts?
- Where do your thoughts come from?

- Are you a critical thinker?

This type of inquiry leads to thinking about thinking; something that we all do but spend little time examining. The differences between fact and opinion and inferences and assumptions are explored. These concepts along with Professor Bill Dorman's characteristics of a critical thinker provide a framework for students to use to answer for themselves how they go about thinking. Professor Dorman's characteristics are:

- Reason is used to evaluate the evidence.
- Knows how to examine differing points of view and is prepared to answer objections.
- Does not allow vivid information and anecdotal evidence to carry undue weight in the reflective process.
- Realizes the effect that emotions and feelings and prejudices may have on the thinking process.
- Is open to revising a position when presented with verifiable, contrary evidence.
- Is sensitive to clarity and can detect vagueness.
- Remains unimpressed by the sheer force of someone's rhetoric and conviction.
- Stops to think. Before arriving at a conclusion, readily asks, "Am I being swept away by the heat of the moment?"
- Thinks, judges and acts mindful of the limitations of time and information imposed by the situation.

These critical thinking skills are reinforced in the online classroom because of the organized presentation of the material. Class activities are accessed through tabs. There is a tab for each week and within each tab the information is first outlined for the week and then subsequent pages elaborate on the information. Readings support the activities for the week and the assignments. This organized presentation supports the methodical deliberation of critical thinking by reinforcing focus and time management skills. This organized presentation along with the hands-on work needed to participate in class and to complete the work gives the students visual evidence of the results of their studies.

What is the value of critical thinking skills in today's global economy?

The internet provides access to information 24-hours a day, 7 days-a-week. A by-product of this global accessibility is a rapid growth of knowledge. Carter, Bishop, and Kravits state in their book *Keys to Success*: "Knowledge in nearly every field is doubling every two to three years." As a result, employers are seeking individuals who have the critical thinking skills needed to interpret this information so that it can be utilized to improve company performance.

In an article published in the March, 2006, issue of the American School Board Journal, the author, Naomi Dillon, states:

“Teaching students how to find, analyze, and judge data for its worth is a key skill at a time when just about everything is a mouse click away. Understanding how technology works, both for and against you, is an integral part of information or media literacy, since technology has made it all accessible.”

What are the implications of online classes improving critical thinking skills?

Critical thinking is used as the foundation of my strategies class. This reference point is continually referred to throughout the class. Students report that becoming aware of their thinking process empowers them to become proactive in their studies.

Since the written word is used in all online activities and assignments and since these activities and assignments are archived for the student as the term progresses, students create a visual portfolio of their class work. Students quickly understand how the more they exercise their brains the more class work they complete. As awareness grows of getting closer to achieving the goal of obtaining a college degree, confidence improves which helps to improve the support skills of focus and time management.

Conclusion

As the debate about the benefits and deficiencies of online teaching continues, college professors are in a position to encourage students to use technology to enhance their lives. The natural organization of the online class along with an organized template for thinking helps students to develop the higher order process of critical thinking, a skill that promotes college success and that readily translates into everyday life and that is valued by employers.

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