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How to develop critical thinking skills in the students of higher education institutions during English classes

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In the time of fast information circulation and unprecedented challenges, it is very important to develop an acute ability to think and analyse. And to generate this ability in people, the eyes of most scholars divert to the role of higher educational institutions. For this reason, the intricate analysis of the ways to develop Critical Thinking skills in the undergraduate students requires a special attention. To address this question effectively, it is important first to define the term Critical Thinking; then, analyse exceptional methodologies, and in the end, perform the synthesis of the suggestions and come to conclusive results. The results of such analysis will help the students of English faculties to start to think critically, apply these skills to all aspects of life and help to positively influence their character development.

Throughout the history of academic research, critical thinking was defined in numerous ways. The most suitable definition was given by Halpern where she defined critical thinking as “the use of cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome” [Halpern: 70]. She went on to enumerate necessary components of this thinking, such as purposefulness, consciousness, effortless and independent use. Also, she proposed that all such skills can be taught to any student. And many scholars have attempted to educate undergraduate students to think critically. When one of them proposed an indirect method where the term of critical thinking wasn’t identified to the target students [Lauer: 34], the others, such as Halpern and Gelder proposed a direct approach by clearly stating what critical thinking is and then working on achieving it. Halpern even proposed a four-part model consisting of “instruction in the skills, dispositions for critical thinking, structure training and metacognitive monitoring” [Gelder: 72-73]. She maintained throughout her book that it is very important to create special occasions for students where they could apply the learned skills. Surely, educators need to take special care when trying to implement critical thinking skills into their lesson plans. But given the curriculum and course load on a specific subject, adding a new material to it sounds laborious and energy-consuming.

Gelder analyses critical thinking through the lens of cognitive psychology. He offers six subjects to break down the concept and gives crucial guidelines on how to acquire the skills. He posits a deliberate thinking process to be the most effective. According to him, any thinker in a pursuit of improving his or her critical thinking abilities must concentrate on thinking for extensive time periods. Then, he suggests using the learned skills in varying areas. He embraces the idea put forward by Halpern that instructors must create dispositions for their students, so that they would be able to transfer their skills into a new, unknown area. Most importantly, unlike many other researchers and methodologists in this field, he offers the teachers first to familiarise the students with the theory of critical thinking. His methods seem reasonable and effective when we want the students to fully understand what critical thinking actually is and how to perform it. But when our objective is not the theories, but the actual practice in the context of course content, this method seems too lengthy and misfit.

The methodology proposed by Lauer suggests the indirect method that uses the content material to teach the students critical thinking skills. Describing an experiment he conducted while teaching biology to undergraduate students, Lauer suggested three phases - “introduction, mastery and evaluation” [Lauer: 34]. In the introductory process, the author familiarised the students with the content of teaching material using reflective inquiry [Hopkins; Johnson cited in Lauer: 35]. This was achieved by asking three different questions on different levels of acquiring information, which were proposed by Bloom [Lauer: 35], and as a result the educator got the students to demonstrate their factual knowledge, then use association skills to tie up those pieces of knowledge to define a new term, and in the end, use synthesis to try to alter the existing facts. This was how he challenged the students to use critical thinking while introducing the course material.

To conclude, having used such practices, students start to use critical thinking skills more effortlessly and independently that lead them to more successful decisions and positive outcomes. Moreover, as a result of raising critical thinking skills, the students develop certain skills such as raised self-awareness, high-level of reflection, acute detection of associations and effective decision-making.

References

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