

Academic Study Skills for Students

Skills and personal qualities that influence the development of critical thinking in education

Shauna Hawker
2108848
ECGE4003P

What is critical thinking?

The most basic definition of what it is to be a critical thinker is to “take a questioning approach to everything” (Eales-Reynolds et al. 2013. P.2). Rather than taking everything at face value, the critical thinker asks questions, analyses, and reflects on information in order to bring them to a place of understanding. This inquisitive approach helps them to be open minded, willing to listen and flexible in their ideas.

If a person is lacking in critical thinking skills within education, it is likely that they will develop a narrow mindset and a limited understanding of the content that is taught. Alternatively, the critical thinker can be empowered to make informed decisions and draw conclusions that will likely be more factual. According to Wilhelm von Humboldt, students need to be aware that knowledge is not infallible and to consistently approach learning with careful thought and attention (Erikson, M. G., & Erikson, M. 2019).

This can be achieved by forming the skills and qualities needed to become an effective thinker. Asking critical questions, reading, and teamwork are all tools that need to be developed and practiced in order to take steps towards this way of thinking.



(Source: Horgan, 2021)

Teamwork – makes the dream work

Teamwork is a group of diverse people coming together with one mission in mind, whether that be to complete a task, create change, or simply get to know one another. When groups of people come together to collaborate, it's important to recognise that there will be differences of opinions, space to share knowledge and individual experiences, and a variety of communication and listening abilities within the team. For teamwork to be successful a few skills need to be put in place. Cottrell (2019. P.171) describes having an openness to what others have to offer, personally communicating well, agreement in giving and receiving constructive criticism, supporting one another whilst keeping boundaries, and finding your personal role within the team and contributing effectively.

One can agree to a certain point that there are many roles within a team. According to Cottrell (2021, p.164) “there are nine types of people within a team, some of which are implementers, co-ordinators and completer-finishers”. It's important as a team to play on each other's strengths whilst understanding each other's weaknesses. It means there is room for everyone present to be involved. It's important to be committed to one another through the successes and losses and having a growth mindset that can lead to the team's highest potential. Cottrell (2019. P. 175) describes a few guidelines in approaching group work; being sensitive to other's feelings, easing any concerns people have, and discussing the expectations of one another such as time-management, commitment, behaviour and boundaries. It is important to stay on track, as with many voices, the main topics can be easily lost. To avoid this happening, keep focused on the group's purpose, set a clear schedule as to what will be discussed, and consistently check your progress. It is crucial, once allocated a role, that you work hard to maintain your responsibility so that the group can function well. All of this can produce healthy, productive teams.

Teamwork can create an environment for an individual to experience new opportunities and grow in personal skills, as well as different roles. This can empower an individual, create resilience, change mindsets, and show the brilliance of collaboration. Teamwork develops personal qualities such as; awareness of others, friendliness, confidence, leadership, inclusivity, along with many more. (Motschnig, R. & Ryback, D. 2016) and (Bartlett, S. 2021) All of these are desirable qualities and skills that are sought after in the competent professional.

Question Everything – asking critical questions

It cannot be denied that asking critical questions within higher education increases your knowledge of various topics, gives greater insight and understanding, and differentiates between fact and opinion. Cottrell (2019, P. 256) suggests that if we practice asking “what, why, who, when, where, which, how, and how else” questions then we will be more likely to advance in thinking creatively. These questions can be developed further and more widely through group discussions and interactive lectures. Open-ended questions provide much more information than a simple yes or no could give. An example of these might be:

A closed question:
Are you happy with the topics we have covered?

An open question:
What other topics would you like to cover?



(Source: Gajdhar, 2020)

Emma Sue Prince (training zone, 2020) in her article on critical questioning, writes about the difference between open and closed questions and explains that the most crucial element to asking the questions in the first place is that you come away with more in-depth information and greater insight than what you had before. This is the difference between simply learning facts and gaining understanding.

Before asking critical questions, you must first understand and be able to relay back the information you have heard or is being taught to you. This is where critical questioning can come into play, and where your critical thinking skills can begin to develop. Being able to ask critical questions within education makes one's learning that much more exciting. This is where a student's thoughts and ideas can become limitless. Learning in this way can give you depth of understanding, equip you with knowledge that you didn't have before, and help you to see from multiple viewpoints. The only way to develop this skill is to practice, so start asking questions! (Judge et al. 2013)

Effective Reading – for a purpose

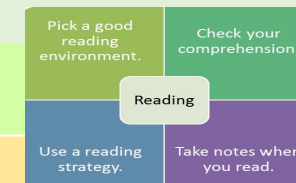
Reading may be something that we do daily without even realising, but in furthering ourselves in higher education, effective, scheduled, and intentional reading is needed. Slotting specific times into a busy, weekly schedule on purpose might be the only way to get into an academic reading habit. Giving time to reading slowly is key to critical thinking as it requires analysing, reflecting and evaluating. If this skill is not implemented relatively quickly into starting University, then assignments and other given tasks can feel overwhelming resulting in a lack of motivation. (Cottrell, 2017. P.129)

Always know the reason for reading the content. Much reading with lack of direction can end up causing confusion when writing assignments. To prevent this from happening, keep focused on the question at hand, the assignment purpose, and the module title and specification. Investing oneself fully in all academic reading can help with engagement and enjoyment throughout the learning process. Reading in this way can also increase vocabulary, which in turn enhances assignment writing, presentations and overall communication. (Godfrey, 2013, p. 7-8)

According to Cottrell (2019, p.215-217) to become a smart reader you must implement effective and regular reading strategies. Choose the most appropriate content that relates to your assignments, stick with up-to-date and reliable reading sources, referencing reading lists compiled by tutors and engaging in wider reading. Learn to read suitable sections of a book rather than unnecessary bulk reading. Become efficient at skimming and scan reading to find the information you need. Use the contents page, sub-titles and main titles to distinguish whether it's worth reading or not. Making notes and writing down ideas in advance can be helpful when planning to write an assignment or prepare for a presentation.

It's important to note that a more thorough reading technique is to be implemented once skimming and scanning has helped you select the most useful information. This could include asking questions such as, where was the source published, is it a reliable source, who has written it and why, what are the intentions behind this piece of writing, and is the writer trying to steer it's readers into a specific direction? (Pritchard, 2008, p. 28-35)

Within this skill of reading, it's important that we reference all the sources as we're going along. This may be simply making a reference list or bibliography, depending on which is needed for the given module.



(Source: Oregon State University, 2021)

Conclusion:

All of this shows us that critical questioning, effective reading and teamwork are pivotal in forming us into critical thinkers as students and professional practitioners. These skills help to develop deeper understanding, they teach us to listen to others, they give us a robust approach to questioning, and they make our lives and our learning that much richer.

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