

Integrating Critical Thinking Skills into American Literature Classes

INTEGRER LES COMPETENCES DE PENSEE CRITIQUE DANS LES CLASSES DE LITTERATURE AMERICAINE

Nazmi Al-Shalabi^{1,*}; Shadi Neimneh¹; Kifah Omary¹; Halla Shureteh¹; Maisoun Abu-Joudeh¹

¹ The Hashemite University, Jordan.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

It is argued that the need for critical thinking in university education is accentuated in response to the rapidly changing world and the complexity of today's world where people are required to comprehend, judge, and participate in generating new knowledge and processes. It is also argued that integrating critical thinking skills into American literature classes is a prerequisite for learning and succeeding not only at school but also in the workplace and personal life. The discussion shows the manner in which critical thinking skills are promoted and employed in the classroom to enhance learning and equip learners with skills that prepare them for their future careers. It has been demonstrated that critical thinking skills are indispensable, advantageous, and necessary. Without these skills, learners won't be able to function well and actively participate in social and political spheres.

Key words: Critical thinking; Integrate; Function; Equip; Complexity; Prepare; Indispensable; Learners; Replete with; Outcome; Strategies

Résumé

Il est fait valoir que la nécessité pour la pensée critique dans l'enseignement universitaire est accentuée en réponse à l'évolution rapide et la complexité du monde d'aujourd'hui où les gens sont tenus de comprendre, juger, et participer à la création de nouvelles connaissances et les processus. Il est également fait valoir que l'intégration des compétences de pensée critique dans les classes de littérature américaines est une condition préalable pour l'apprentissage et de réussir non seulement à l'école mais aussi dans le lieu de travail et la vie personnelle. La discussion montre la manière dont la pensée critique sont

promus et utilisés en classe pour améliorer l'apprentissage et aux apprenants des compétences qui les préparent à leur future carrière. Il a été démontré que les compétences de pensée critique sont indispensables, avantageuse, et nécessaire. Sans ces compétences, les apprenants ne sera pas en mesure de bien fonctionner et de participer activement à la vie sociale et politique.

Mots clés: La pensée critique; Intégration; Fonction; Equiper; Complexité; préparer; Indispensable; Apprenants; Remplis de résultats; Stratégies de croissance

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Critical thinking is an asset. It is something of a weapon that we equip learners with to enable them to cope with changing realities. By virtue of this weapon, students can easily become successful individuals in their countries. They can contribute to the development of these countries because they can effectively deal with social, scientific, and practical problems, and solve all of them. They can also apply their knowledge to real life situations. Individuals armed with skills are in great demand in today's society that is replete with problems whose number keeps going up. The reason underlying this increase is that education which is mainly based on transmitting information to learners has not been doing people any good. This education has been focusing on giving rather than investigating information. Therefore, it has been disregarding the social responsibility towards learners, which justifies its disappearance and its being replaced by another variety which emphasizes critical thinking and which all educators dream of its being the outcome of the learning process. To fulfill this dream, critical thinking should be integrated into the learning

process to help students with realizing their full potential. This critical thinking is not a method to be learned. Rather, it is a process that concentrates on analyzing arguments, making inferences, evaluating, and making decisions.

Critical thinking has been defined in various ways. To Logan(1976), for instance, it is simply “rational method” (31). To Stauffer (1980), it is “demystification and clarification,” a “transcending of common sense culture” (254). To Klooster (2001), critical thinking is independent thinking that uses information as the starting point (36-37). Following Logan, Stauffer, and Kooster’s steps, Facione (1998) maintains that critical thinking is about “how you approach problems, questions, issues. It is the best way we know to get to the truth” (p.26). Like Facione, Ennis (1962) views critical thinking as “the correct assessing of statements” (83). To Scriven and Paul, critical thinking is an intellectually disciplined process which encourages conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information. In brief, critical thinking is a process that involves the analytical evaluation of a situation.

These definitions reveal that critical thinking skills are of great value. Emphasizing this value, Shakirova (2007) holds that critical thinking skills enable students to “deal effectively with social, scientific, and practical problems”(42). Similarly, Raymond S. Nickerson (1987) claims that the failure to develop one’s potential in critical thinking precludes the full expression of one’s humanity (32). Like Nickerson, Shaila and Trudell (2010) argue that critical thinking is essential ,especially for students living in a country with political and socio-economic problems for it “will help them to look at issues with different viewpoints and become independent thinkers and responsible citizens” (6). Realizing the dire need for these skills, Chet Meyers writes that “the development of thinking skills...is particularly acute today, when our culture’s output of information far exceeds our ability to think critically about that information” (xi). Stressing this need for skills, Stein (2000) contends that the meaning of “knowing” is being shifted “from being able to remember and repeat information to being able to find and use it”. Taking the great value of thinking skills into account, it becomes quite easy to understand how they empower learners and help them not only with solving their problems but also becoming successful individuals capable of contributing to the development of their countries. This value also justifies this paper’s argument that critical thinking skills be incorporated into American literature classes.

So far many teachers have been unable to make use of these skills. Unfortunately, most teachers have been concerned with rote learning that doesn’t help students with learning anything of value. Giving priority to memorizing information over understanding, these teachers limit themselves to lecturing and never try

helping their students with thinking critically about the material taught. As long as testing is based on the method of instruction, these teachers do their students further harm by giving them questions that focus only on memorizing information, which gives the few who are good at cheating the opportunity to relax, and get a high grade without necessarily attending any class or learning any piece of information. Teachers who act this way take themselves to be working hard for the good of their country, the good of parents, and the good of students themselves. In fact, these teachers do students more harm than good because they train them on how to memorize information, and answer questions without understanding anything out of the material. In a sense, they train students on how to be helpless because students taught this way do lack critical thinking skills, and, consequently, fail to consider in a thoughtful manner the problems and subjects that come within the range of their experiences.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that students belonging to this category are failures. These students fail both in the workplace and in their personal lives. This failure occurs because of their inability to separate facts from opinions, examine an issue from different perspectives, make rational inferences, withhold personal biases, question information given to them, go beyond surface meaning to discover the deep meaning, etc.. Without these skills, education becomes a waste not only of time but also of money and energy. Unfortunately, this worthless education that turns the learner into a parrot is still practiced in many schools despite the talk that has been going on about improving the quality of teaching and the necessity of changing and being in harmony with the ever-changing world.

Realizing the dangers involved in the instruction paradigm at an early stage, We have made up my mind to shift to the learning paradigm to offer my students better education by equipping them with critical thinking skills. We have determined to act this way to be different from others whose teaching techniques promote memorization, and, thus, as Clement (1979) claims, teach students “what to think” (p.1). Reiterating the same point, Norman (1981) holds that “it is strange that we expect students to learn, yet seldom teach them anything about learning” (p.1).Instead of teaching students “what to think”, we have been teaching them how to think. We do this job by creating activities that foster critical thinking in the students themselves, such as doing summaries, arguing for or against a given opinion, posing questions that can be answered in different ways, etc.. While teaching Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* or *The House of the Seven Gables*, for instance, I ask students to summarize certain chapters and read them in class. When they have read the summaries done, we ask them a number of questions about them. We ask them, for instance, about Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester, and Roger Chillingworth.

The questions are as follows: Do you hold Dimmesdale to be sinful or sinless? Give good reasons for your answer. Do you regard Chillingworth to be blameworthy? Give reasons. What do you think of Hester? Is she a good or a bad mother? Give reasons. Who do you blame for Hester's sin? Give reasons. Does the house architecture resemble the Pyncheons' architecture? In what way? Explain! Can it be said that the seven gables of the house represent the seven deadly sins? Explain! A number of values can be attached to the house of the seven gables. Discuss these values in details!

Apart from these evaluation questions, class discussion promotes thinking about current events. We often ask students about the relevance of certain happenings and themes to today's world. We ask them, for instance, if Hester fits into today's society, and stipulate that they give me good reasons for their responses. We may also ask them the same question about Dimmesdale or Chillingworth. These questions are as follows:

Does Hester fit into today's society? Give reasons!

Does Chillingworth fit into today's world? How?

Does Dimmesdale fit into today's world? In what way?

Questions such as these require that students examine not only the clarity and accuracy of their thinking but also its depth and breadth. When we ask students questions of this sort, we give them enough time to think critically because most students need, Schaferman (1991) maintains, at least 8 to 12 seconds to process and formulate their responses. We think that our students need much more time because they have been passive learners accustomed to just memorizing and recalling information. Crippled by memorization, these students find it difficult to be engaged in active learning situations. Although we keep trying hard to get them engaged in these situations, they maintain their reluctance, taking it to be a big deal to speak in class. To resolve this serious problem, we keep guiding them to create a nonthreatening learning environment, and urge them to express their minds, which contributes to developing their various skills and personalities. In stark contrast with this atmosphere is the teacher-centered classroom where the aura of teacher's authority is, Karim (2011) contends, "constantly maintained, promoted and cultivated at the cost of students' personality, language and critical thinking faculty development" (298). Unlike this hell-like classroom where thinking is curse, our classrooms are not just comfortable but also enjoyable. We engage our students in investigating information and applying their knowledge, two jobs which promote their critical thinking skills.

Anxious to achieve this objective, we seize the opportunity of the exam to promote critical thinking skills. A good example of what we do is that neither do we give our students any questions requiring only "yes" or "no" responses, nor do we ask them to fill the ins or choose the correct answer out of a number of answers. Rather,

we give them essay questions that are real indicators of understanding. Examples are:

You have studied Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*. Which one of these novels do you hold to be your favorite? Give reasons! Did these novels impact you? How? Did these novels change you? How? Do you hold yourself to be great? In what way? Compare and contrast Fitzgerald and Crane or Hawthorne and Crane! What do you think of Crane's contention that Maggie is innocent? Do you agree or disagree with him? Give reasons for your answer! Can you think of a different ending of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or S. Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*? Do you see any connection between Gatsby and today's men? Explain! Do you see any connection between Maggie and today's girls? Explain! Do you see any connection between Pete and today's young men? Explain!

Questions of this sort promote critical thinking skills because they require that students think about the question, contemplate their thoughts, organize these thoughts, evaluate the data, and present their conclusions in a convincing manner.

In addition to the lecture and exam, we employ the homework assignment to promote critical thinking skills. We often ask students to paraphrase or summarize a reading assignment, stipulating that they use their own words. We also ask them to write about their own experiences, their opinions of a writer's argument, and the connection between the work read and reality. In so doing, We hope to develop their thinking skills for writing necessitates that they get the necessary information, analyze it, and present it persuasively.

We hope we have demonstrated the significance of critical thinking skills and the necessity of integrating them into American literature classes. This integration serves many purposes. It develops students' numerous skills, enables them to make responsible decisions, and makes it easy for them to succeed not only in the workplace but also in their lives.

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