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Analyze This: Creating Student Value through Critical Thinking

📅 May 22, 2023   ✏️ Lindsay Tan(https://www.facultyfocus.com/author/ff-lindsaytan/)

On the first day of every class I teach, I make it clear to my students that I'm not interested in wasting their time. I want every class to be valuable and relevant to their personal goals. Values-driven teaching is all about starting with what matters and building out from there. To do it right, our teaching toolbox needs to include critical thinking.

When we encounter new information, critical thinking helps us evaluate the *value* and *relevance* of that information. If we don't see value in what we are learning, the content may be ignored or underutilized. Done well, critical thinking helps us make connections between our existing values, new content, and future goals. It also promotes curiosity, creative problem-solving, and offers a counterbalance to negative or self-limiting beliefs. And yes, critical thinking is crucial for success in the workplace.

Educators will point to developing critical thinkers as our *raison d'etre*—yet research suggests few of us actually teach (https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/teaching-critical-thinking-practical-points/) these skills, spending most of our time on facts and concepts (https://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/the-state-of-critical-thinking-today/523). The results are telling: according to dozens of interviews (https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2022/07/15/employers-recent-grads-rate-their-skills-opinion) with front-line managers, recent graduates move too quickly to find a solution rather than thinking carefully about the issue at hand. They provide surface-level observations and don't consider the broader implications. They have a "Google it" mentality.

In my experience, helping my students become skilled thinkers in my first-year interior design course hasn't required overhauling my content. But it has meant stripping away less essential work and investing time and energy in making the practice of critical thinking more explicit for my students.

For intellectually demanding tasks, transparency is key

Thinking critically is hard work, and because it is hard, transparency is essential. Before any exercise, I want to inspire my students with the "why" behind what we are doing and connect the content and activities we undertake to their value outside the classroom. What am I asking them to do? Why is it important? Most importantly, how will this information be helpful, whether consulting with a client or simply appreciating how a built environment shapes our experiences and behaviors?

Of course, transparency about "why" goes hand-in-hand with transparency about "how." How might they start approaching the problem? How will they be evaluated? And how does the work they are doing connect to their personal values and future goals?

Transparent teaching, it turns out, is also equitable teaching. Historically, marginalized students are often less familiar with strategies that can make them effective learners. Being transparent about the purpose behind our efforts and what students need to do to be successful has been shown to deliver a (https://my.cgu.edu/preparing-future-faculty/the-value-of-transparency-in-the-classroom-for-equity-minded-teaching/)variety of benefits (https://my.cgu.edu/preparing-future-faculty/the-value-of-transparency-in-the-classroom-for-equity-minded-teaching/). A single course or assignment built with transparency can also teach students how to improve outcomes in other courses as well, building the academic confidence that is so important to our sense of belonging.

Using discussions to practice critical thinking

As future designers, I want my students to look at a space and be able to describe what they see, the good and bad, to know *why* they formed that opinion, and to comment on how it could be better. This is called a critique, in the design profession.

As an exercise, I'll ask my students to read a critique before attending class. To avoid reactionary discussions, I lay out the ground rules before we begin the dialogue. The key is to approach the conversation in steps.

First, I ask them to think about the context of the article. What do we know about the author and what problem does the piece address? Next, I'll ask them to consider the theories we've covered and how they relate to the issues in question. Is there a particular theory that is useful in framing our observations? Last, do students agree with the assessment? Did the author miss something important?

By breaking things down into steps, discussions have become a meaningful way for my students to strengthen their ability to evaluate the work of others. Using a student engagement platform like (https://tophat.com/)Top Hat (https://tophat.com/) has been especially helpful. For each phase, I create a discussion thread, giving students time to reflect before inputting their answers. Discussion threads also let my students see how their classmates are responding and to "upvote" responses they find insightful, which, incidentally, makes my job as a facilitator that much easier.

Critical thinking can be fun

Most of my students have never written an article for a magazine or academic journal, but they are familiar with social media. One of my favorite assignments is, *Bad Design is Bad Advertising*. Here, I invite students to analyze a space, like a coffee shop or a dive bar. I then ask them to write a negative review for social media using contemporary terminology and concepts (and yes, emojis are welcome).

Framing assignments around mediums students are already comfortable with makes critical thinking exercises less intimidating yet no less valuable. Using classroom technology to capture and share the work with the class also creates a sense of community, allowing me to use some of the more astute or playful examples to stimulate discussion.

Conclusion

Beginning with the first day of class, I try to be transparent with the "why" and "how" of everything we do. I challenge my students to think critically about what we are learning and to reflect on the connection between the content and their values and goals. They won't remember everything they learn in my class—not by far—, but if there's one idea I want to ensure sticks, it's not the content itself but rather *how to learn*. Critical thinking is learning thinking. It is a portable, stackable life skill that matters.

Lindsay Tan is an associate professor and interior design program coordinator at Auburn University.

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Mick Charney
10 days ago

Excellent piece! So very well written and organized. I **EMAIL**ecially love the fact that we finally get a chance to read and reflect upon the content of a "Focus" article that deals specifically with the employment of teaching strategies in the visual and plastic arts rather than the more usual scientifically-technologically- or psychologically-oriented disciplines. We need more of this sort of arts and humanities perspective. SoTL lessons drawn from the arts/humanities have broad implications for so many other disciplines. Thank you!

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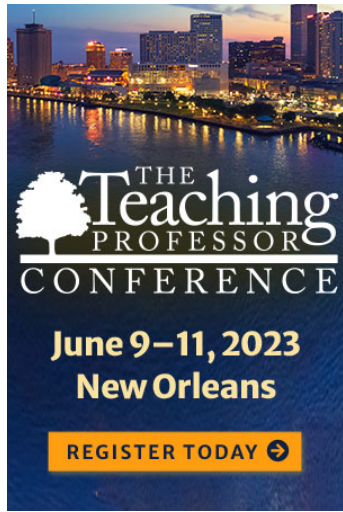protected by reCAPTCHA
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