Chapter 8

Self-Inquiry and Group Dynamics:
A Multidisciplinary Framework for Critical Thinking

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this chapter, the authors discuss ways in which pedagogical considerations involved in using a theoretical framework for self-inquiry and socially constructed knowledge led to the selection and implementation of mapping as a tool to (1) activate prior knowledge and scaffold content and process for pre-service educators working with students and families who are at risk and (2) assist adult learners in organizing multiple perspectives during small and large group discussion, while developing critical thinking and shared leadership skills through meaningful connections and action. A case study on how the utilization of a multidisciplinary approach informed the type of curriculum decisions to engage learners is provided. The case study also illustrates when and why instructional techniques and strategies were introduced and embedded to encourage both interactions and discussions focusing on modeling the ongoing use of skills for critical thinking and how each mapping strategy/ tool served as a formative and summative assessment plan to improve verbal and written communication.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

This case study showcases a framework for learning used in the capstone course in the graduate education program of a private, coeducational, non-sectarian, 80% residential, liberal arts college of approximately 1850 traditional aged undergraduates and about 300 graduate students in selected professional programs. The College, with a student-faculty ratio of 16:1, has been widely recognized for its innovative curriculum that integrates a core curriculum, required learning communities, experiential learning, and civic education.

The graduate education program prepares students for teaching positions in grades pre-kindergarten through high school in local public and charter schools. Graduate education students enroll in this capstone course in conjunction with full-time supervised student teaching experiences.

SETTING THE STAGE

Critical Thinking and Knowledge Construction: Prior Experiences and Pedagogical Considerations with Adult Learners

In higher education, we often discuss and promote concepts related to shared knowledge as a way to encourage and empower learners to engage in collaborative practices leading to individual and group goals. "…Central to the goal of adult education in democratic societies is the process of helping learners become more aware of the context of their problematic understandings and beliefs, more critically reflective on their assumptions and those of others, more fully and freely engaged in discourse, and more effective in taking action on their reflective judgments" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 31). Sharing multiple perspectives often provides opportunities for learners to experience the responsibility of being active members of democratic learning environments in which everyone has a role in the process of knowledge creation. As learners share knowledge, they take on "collective cognitive responsibility: the responsibility for knowing what needs to be known and for insuring that others know what needs to be known" (Scardamalia, 2002, p. 2). Empowering learners individually and collectively to use a critical lense in order to participate in ."..the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it" (Eider & Paul, 2008, p. 2) is important; however, " ...studies of student learning in higher education often point to the lack of skills for solving complex problems or ill-defined questions" (Muukkonen & Lakkala, 2009, p. 188). Faculty members interested in

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