

Chapter 9

Developing Meaning–Making to Promote Critical Thinking

Sarah E. Schoper

Western Illinois University, USA

Craig E. Wagner

Buena Vista University, USA

ABSTRACT

Promoting critical thinking is a demand today's teachers are asked to meet (Association of American Colleges and University [AAC&U], 2005; Hart Research Associates, 2013), yet doing so requires that teachers themselves are critical thinkers. In order to critically think, teachers must have the capacity to make meaning complexly. Making meaning complexly allows for individuals to consider experiences from multiple perspectives and make responsible, ethical decisions for the common good. In other words, complex meaning making allows for critical thinking. Thus, a method for promoting critical thinking is to develop complexity in how meaning is made, and one way to do so is to implement the learning partnerships model (Baxter Magolda, 2004). This chapter explores using the learning partnerships model in the classroom to engage in the development of how one makes meaning, so as to develop critical thinking.

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is dependent upon an individual's capacity to make meaning of their experiences in complex ways. Seeing the world as simply black or white, or allowing the environment to fully dictate one's thinking, for example, can result in decision making that fails to consider the fuller picture. More complex reasoning, alternatively, allows individuals to see and consider multiple

perspectives, make responsible decisions for the common good, and advocate in an increasingly diverse world. Thus, the greater one's capacity to make meaning in complex ways, the greater one's ability is to think critically. Furthermore, a more complex way of making meaning enables individuals to assist others in developing their own critical thinking abilities just as someone knowledgeable in physics is better equipped to teach physics than someone with no experience in the matter. As it is

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8411-9.ch009

harder to lead someone to a place one has never been, it is similarly difficult to develop a person's critical thinking when one is unable to think critically themselves. Hence, it is a necessity for those preparing others, including teachers, to be critical thinkers if they are to assist others in the development of critical thinking. With time and purpose, increasing one's ability to critically think can be fostered. Indeed, this chapter's objective is to explore a method designed to intentionally facilitate growth in critical thinking and complex meaning making: the learning partnerships model (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

BACKGROUND

Perhaps more than in the past, today's teachers are asked to develop their students' abilities to think critically (AAC&U, 2005; Hart Research Associates, 2013). Yet, a recent article in the Huffington Post indicates that institutions of higher education are, "not preparing graduates for the kinds of interdisciplinary critical thinking roles they will be asked to play in the work force or as citizens" (Kerry, 2013, para 6). Additionally, a report produced by Northeastern University (2013) stated that 62 percent of respondents said colleges were only doing a "fair" or "poor" job of preparing graduates for the work force (p. 8). In spite of the preparation graduates are receiving from institutions of higher education, employers continue to look for, "skills of communication and critical thinking, innovation and collaboration, integrity and responsibility" (Krislov and Volk, 2014, para 13). Thus, while today's teachers are being asked to develop critical thinking skills within their students, it does not appear as though the teachers themselves are prepared as critical thinkers. Assisting others in developing an ability to critically think requires that those who do so are also critical thinkers. Kegan (1994) raised this point by asking, "Are we willing to support people's moves to places we ourselves have already

been? Are we able to be good company on the path to fresh discoveries no longer fresh to us?" (p. 292-293), which highlights that individuals helping develop others need themselves be already developed. Zull (2002) also builds upon the claim that teachers must become critical thinkers in order to cultivate critical thinking in others by discussing the connection between the physical brain and the learning process. Zull speaks about the importance of teachers showing their students what it is that teachers hope students will learn, saying, "People see what we show, and when they truly see, when their eyes are opened, they will not need our explanations" (p. 147). This is not to mean that teachers should do the work for their students, but, rather, identify and explore examples that effectively illustrate and role model the points deemed most important. Zull asks, "What do we really want our students to learn? ... We should show what we hope our students will eventually be able to do themselves" (p. 147). Successful teachers must have the capacity for critical thought and then demonstrate that ability for their students. Hence, the process of preparing students who desire to become teachers must intentionally develop critical thinking ability if the goal is to have them develop critical thinking within their own students. Developing greater capacity to critically think requires a greater capacity to make meaning complexly, which is discussed next.

How Meaning Is Made

Researchers such as Dewey (1925), Montessori (1948), and Piaget (1974) all explored the process of how meaning is made, and each focused their research primarily on the meaning making process of children. In fact, the meaning making of adults was not considered until researchers such as Kegan and Baxter Magolda began exploring the topic by building upon this earlier research. Nonetheless, understanding the process of meaning making in adults is important to intentionally designing environments that promote complex reasoning.

21 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:
www.igi-global.com/chapter/developing-meaning-making-to-promote-critical-thinking/133719

Related Content

Evaluation of Multi-Peer and Self-Assessment in Higher Education: A Brunei Case Study

David Hassell and Kok Yueh Lee (2020). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (pp. 37-53).

www.irma-international.org/article/evaluation-of-multi-peer-and-self-assessment-in-higher-education/245772

Faculty Videos of Resilience Narratives at Two Institutions: Residency Resilience Skills Program Innovation

Hedy S. Wald and Brenda Bursch (2020). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (pp. 16-24).

www.irma-international.org/article/faculty-videos-of-resilience-narratives-at-two-institutions/245770

The Encore Chapter: The Culmination of Lifespan Development

Kimberley Gordon and Jill Auten (2018). *Handbook of Research on Positive Scholarship for Global K-20 Education* (pp. 157-172).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-encore-chapter/199432

Analysis of User-Experience Evaluation of French Winery Websites

Coralie Haller and Daria Plotkina (2021). *Handbook of Research on User Experience in Web 2.0 Technologies and Its Impact on Universities and Businesses* (pp. 147-160).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/analysis-of-user-experience-evaluation-of-french-winery-websites/264576

Teaching-to-Learn: Its Effects on Conceptual Knowledge Learning in University Students

Melissa McConnell Rogers (2021). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (pp. 1-14).

www.irma-international.org/article/teaching-to-learn/289863