

Chapter 6

Confronting Critical Thinking Challenges “in” the College Classroom

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of this pilot study was to develop a learner-centered teaching tool that would promote meaningful learning and enable higher education instructors to model critical thinking through concept mapping. Learner-centered approaches emphasize not only content, but the context, purpose, and process of learning. They also focus on the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning. However, students may not possess the foundational critical thinking skills necessary to be independent learners. Concept mapping allows university instructors to demonstrate basic critical thinking processes and provides students with the opportunity to practice the critical thinking that is essential to their success inside and outside the classroom. It can also facilitate meaningful learning by encouraging students to integrate new knowledge into prior knowledge structures.

INTRODUCTION

Chigozirim

One of my students approached me after class to explain why she was not contributing to discussions. Though she had studied the assigned readings in detail, she was still at a loss as to how to relevantly connect this information to discussions. I offered some sage words of advice and left the conversation feeling a bit too pleased with my performance. A few weeks later, she dropped the class. I have often operated under the assumption that setting a positive climate, asking the right questions, playing the role of lively facilitator, and giving students ample opportunity to voice their opinions would be enough to support my “progressive” learner-centered approach to teaching. In fits of frustration (laced with a little arrogance), I have often said to colleagues, “This is college and I am not going to spoon-feed adults. Students need to take responsibility for their learning.” In the course of this project, I have learned that while it is important for undergraduates to play a more active role in the learning process, it is unrealistic to shove students into a new learning environment or paradigm without a compass and expect them not to get lost. However, translating this realization into every day practice is easier said than done.

Alexis

My students often come to office hours to discuss issues they have with assignments. When I ask them about their concerns, many are unable to formulate clear questions. This pattern of uncertainty has raised red flags in my mind concerning undergraduate education. Good students are not working to their fullest potential, and those who are struggling with their classes must make the life-changing decision of whether or not to remain in school. At the macro level, many universities are taking action to increase retention rates, but there must also be an increased emphasis on meaningful learning. On the micro scale, university faculty and instructors must strive to help students manage information and analyze it critically. It is the job of educators not only to help students “get through” college, but to acquire the life-long learning skills that are necessary inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, our goal here was to provide our students with a basic critical thinking tool to enhance their learning capabilities. My hope is that I will be able to have productive conversations with my students about their work in the future.

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