# Chapter 3
# The Online Forum Impact on Student Engagement and Critical Thinking Disposition in General Education

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## ABSTRACT

*This study explores the influence of blended learning on nurturing critical thinking (CT) disposition in the context of China's general education courses, addressing challenges like low engagement, large class sizes, and diverse academic backgrounds. It highlights the importance of teaching for thinking and the significance of CT disposition in academic and professional success. Despite a dearth of literature on CT disposition development in general education, this mixed-methods research utilized semi-structured interviews and a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with 93 participants. SPSSPRO facilitated moderation analysis and paired-sample T-tests to assess changes in the dependent variable. Results indicate that integrating online forums in blended learning significantly improves students' engagement and CT disposition, with different academic backgrounds having no substantial impact. These findings may offer valuable insights for enhancing students' engagement and CT disposition across diverse educational settings.*

## INTRODUCTION

General Studies refers to a diverse and broad-based educational program that offers a wide range of subjects across various disciplines, enabling students to gain a comprehensive understanding of various fields and fostering critical thinking (CT) and analytical skills (Bouchrika, 2023). The World Bank (2000) identifies the primary goal of the general education program as cultivating students with proficient CT, writing, and communication skills, an appreciation for diverse knowledge acquisition, a broad understanding of cultures and history, moral and ethical reasoning abilities, and depth in specific fields of knowledge. A minimum of fifty per cent of employers perceive the skills acquired through a general education as 'highly significant' for college graduates (Flaherty, 2021). In summary, the background of General Studies as a diverse educational program aligns well with the context of fostering CT skills. While CT has been extensively studied, there is a scarcity of literature focusing on the development of CT within the context of general education, particularly in Chinese universities' general courses.

The essence of teaching for thinking lies in the liberation of minds, as it involves the cultivation of critical thinking (CT) skills and the fostering of positive habits of mind, which unequivocally stand as the most liberating aspects of the educational process (Facione et al., 2013). CT has been widely acknowledged as a paramount thinking skill due to its significant impact on academic and professional achievements (Castaño et al., 2023; Facione et al., 2013; Quitadamo & Kurtz, 2007). According to the online surveys conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2018), the learning priorities (critical thinking) that hiring managers place on a highly important level (84%).

Students' engagement, a longstanding educational buzzword, is widely recognized as indispensable to the educational process, yet the precise methods for cultivating engaged students remain ambiguous (Bernstein, 2022). Enhancing students' engagement has been a continuous concern for educators, and among the various strategies, utilizing web tools to foster lasting engagement establishes a direct and relevant connection with the digital world students are immersed in (Best, 2020).

Online discussion forums enhance education beyond traditional classrooms, promoting active peer participation. Educators valuing collaborative learning face new challenges. Video conferencing, while helpful, limits interaction to synchronous classes. Instructors should also use asynchronous tools to enrich online learning, unbound by time or place. Chat systems and discussion forums extend educational boundaries flexibly. Despite occasional criticisms of informality and superficiality, strategic use of asynchronous tools can effectively engage students, especially when platforms combine chat and discussion features, fostering authentic interactions (Armonize, 2020). The utilization of online forums as a pedagogical strategy within

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