

Critical Thinking in the College Classroom

“Everyone agrees that students *learn* in college,
but whether they learn to *think* is more controversial.”
McKeachie, 1992, p. 3

The discrepancy highlighted by McKeachie is at the center of ongoing debate about the role of critical thinking in our modern classrooms. Compounding this dilemma even more are concerns about the passive learning stance adopted by many postsecondary students and the vast amount of readily available information provided by the media.

A recent [cartoon](#) shows a teacher helping a class of students working at computers as the teacher states “Just go to www.criticalthinking.com and click on ‘answers!’”. This humorous jab at society provides comic relief in the newspaper, but the reality of this type of thinking loses its humor when it is applied to the modern generation of college students. *As college faculty, how do we encourage critical thinking in our students?*

As described by MacKnight (2000, pg. 38), “we fall prey to modern communication media, which present a world where the prepackaging of intellectual positions and views is so ingenious that *thinking* seems unnecessary.” Thus, as our society becomes more advanced with an endless supply of information readily available via television, radio and the Internet, it is essential that faculty prepare students to be critical thinkers and cautious consumers of information.

Think About It

Think about each of the following questions and rate your response on a scale from 1 to 5:

- How important are critical thinking skills for college students?
- How important is teaching critical thinking within your degree/program competencies?
- How important is the development of students’ critical thinking within your courses?
- How well do your instructional strategies instill critical thinking strategies within your students?

What is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking... we all know what it is, but can we define it? Watch the following video to see how critical thinking is defined by faculty at GCU.

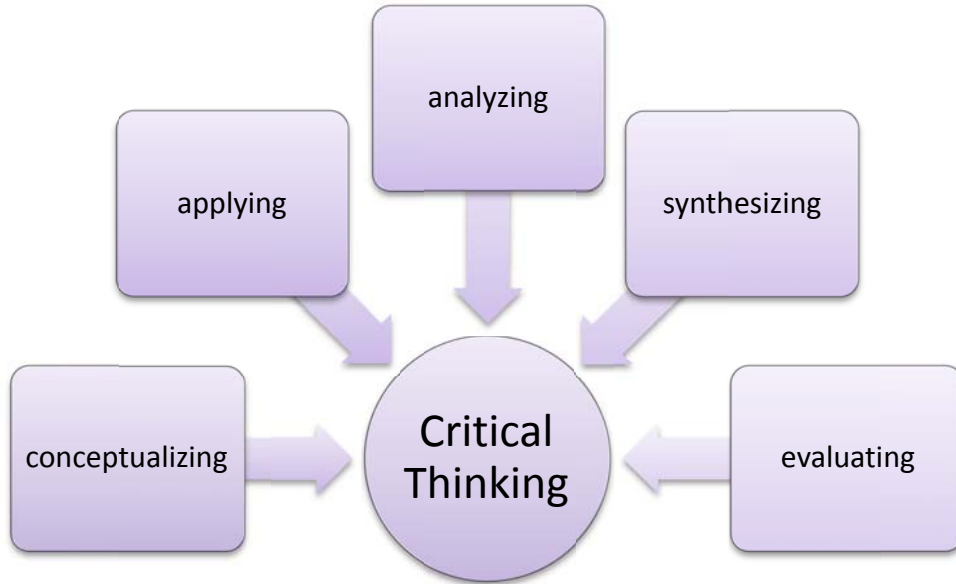
- [What is critical thinking?](#)

Research (Paul, Elder & Bartell, 1997) indicates that an overwhelming majority (89%) of university faculty claim that the promotion of critical thinking is a primary objective of their instruction. Yet, only 19% could define critical thinking and 77% had little, limited or no conception of how to reconcile content coverage with the fostering of critical thinking.

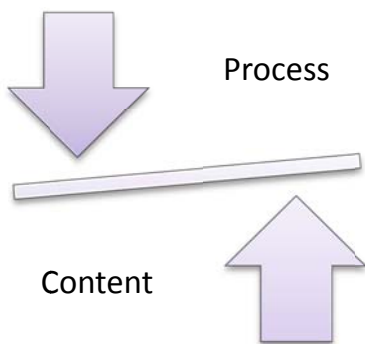
Where do you stand? Go to the [Critical Thinking Wiki](#) and provide your own definition of critical thinking. In addition, provide a brief narrative about the role of critical thinking in the courses that you teach.

This ambiguity only adds to frustrating challenge of structuring classroom activities to clearly and effectively meet an undefined goal. Thus, the first step of ensuring the promotion of this abstract intellectual ability is to operationalize critical thinking. Generally defined:

“Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplines process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action”
 (Center for Critical Thinking, 2004, ¶2)



This definition of critical thinking provides a framework, or a process goal, that leads to achievement of the specific course learning objectives.



When examining critical thinking in any given course, it is important to clearly differentiate between the *content* of a course and the *process* by which the content is mastered. The course learning outcomes provide guidance on the content goals, while critical thinking guidelines provide instructional strategies for approaching and learning the specific course content. As such, “instruction in critical thinking is to be designed to achieve an understanding of the relationship of language to logic, which should lead to the ability to analyze, criticize, and advocate ideas, to reason inductively and deductively and to reach factual or

judgmental conclusions based on sound inferences drawn from unambiguous statements of knowledge or belief?” (Dumke, 1980, pg. 3).

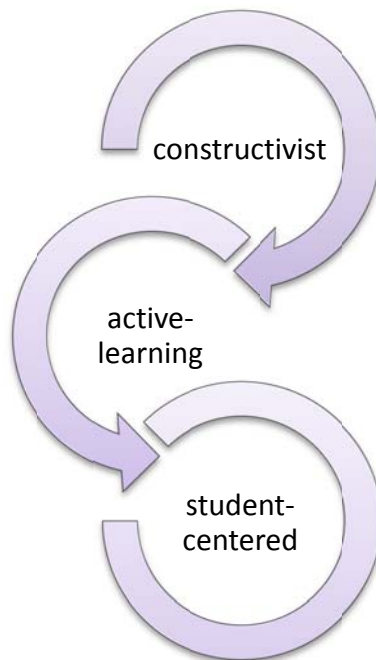
View the following videos for a brief discussion of how critical thinking is seen in specific courses:

Psychology	Religion	English	Accounting
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Education	Mathematics	Nursing	Management
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Embracing Critical Thinking

A plethora of research has been done in the traditional classroom environment to examine the relative value of various instructional strategies for the promotion of students' critical thinking abilities (see "Resources and Suggested Readings" for more detailed information). Research clearly supports the benefits of active learning strategies to promote enhanced understanding, retention and critical thinking over the shallow, passive learning that results from conventional lectures. The consistent finding across this research is that instructional approaches that incorporate constructivist, active-learning, student-centered philosophies are the most effective for enhancing students' critical thinking.



Constructivist learning philosophies tend to shift the emphasis from the instructor to the student. As described by Thanasoulas (n.d.),

“It is the learner who interacts with his or her environment and thus gains an understanding of its features and characteristics. The learner constructs his own conceptualisations and finds his own solutions to problems, mastering autonomy and independence. According to constructivism, learning is the result of individual mental construction, whereby the learner learns by dint of matching new against given information and establishing meaningful connections, rather than by internalising mere factoids to be regurgitated later on. In constructivist thinking, learning is inescapably affected by the context and the beliefs and attitudes of the learner. Here, learners are given more latitude in becoming effective problem solvers, identifying and evaluating problems, as well as deciphering ways in which to transfer their learning to these problems.” (¶ 2)