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ACTIVE LISTENING AND DISCUSSIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ АКТИВНОГО СЛУШАНИЯ И ОБСУЖДЕНИЙ В РАЗВИТИИ НАВЫКОВ КРИТИЧЕСКОГО МЫШЛЕНИЯ

М.А. Одинцова

М.А. Adzintsova

Академия Управления при Президенте Республики Беларусь
Минск, Беларусь

Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Belarus
Minsk, Belarus

e-mail: onemaryn@gmail.com

По многим причинам в последние годы педагоги стали интересоваться обучением навыкам критического мышления, а не обучением информации и содержанию. В данной статье исследуются такие инструменты для развития навыков критического мышления, как дискуссии и активное слушание, которым можно обучать на традиционных занятиях и онлайн. Более того, они могут применяться для любой дисциплины. Обсуждения и активное слушание помогают обеспечивать обратную связь, поддерживать правильное направление взаимодействия, а также рефлексировать о самом занятии.

Ключевые слова: критическое мышление; навыки критического мышления; модель критического мышления; дискуссии; активное слушание.

For many reasons, in recent years educators have become interested in teaching critical thinking skills rather than teaching information and content. This paper examines such instruments for developing critical thinking skills as discussions and active listening which can be taught both in face-to-face classes and online. Moreover, they can be applied to any discipline. Discussions and active listening are found to be helpful in providing feedback, keeping interaction in the right direction, and reflecting on the class.

Keywords: critical thinking; critical thinking skill; critical thinking model; discussions; active listening.

All the time the teaching and learning processes need some changes as the world where we live changes. It is getting faster, more technological, and requires different approaches and solutions to its newly emerging issues. In the current modern world the development of such skills as leadership, teamwork, communication, work ethic, positive attitude, and critical thinking are of great importance for the people who want to achieve progress in their studies and to find a relevant job for themselves. This paper examines the concepts of critical thinking, discussions and active listening that help encourage learners to find best solutions providing that these concepts are taught and developed during the learning process.

The roots of critical thinking come from the Socrates times. According to Socrates “one cannot depend on those in “authority” to have sound knowledge and insight”. His method of critical thinking development is now known as “Socratic Questioning” where the need for “clarity” and “logical consistency” is highlighted [1]. John Dewey is considered to be the father of modern critical thinking. He calls it “reflective thinking” and defines it as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it ends” [2]. According to Michael Scriven and Richard Paul “critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined 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. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness” [1]. Richard Paul defines critical thinking as “the mode of thinking – about any subject, content or problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them” [2].

The era of information age requires from teachers to encourage and promote critical thinking since the way people get and digest information has changed. Today’s goal of teaching isn’t the one to introduce the whole flow of information we encounter but to stimulate learners to life-long learning. The more information is given, the less the learners get and achieve. Critical thinking should be widely applied across the curriculum. It is a process and a skill that can be improved and taught along with exposure, practice, and experience.

In 1956 Benjamin Bloom offered the taxonomy which helps to classify instructional activities as they advance in difficulty. There are six levels: the lower ones like knowledge, comprehension, and application require less

thinking skills while the higher levels like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation require more. Later on, on the basis of the taxonomy, a 5-step model encouraging learners to critical thinking has been offered:

- Determine learning objectives which involve defining the behaviors students should exhibit and the target behaviors in higher order thinking;
- Teach through questions applying questioning techniques and interactive discussion;
- Practice before you assess, which means making a shift toward active learning by applying experiential learning and reflective dialogues (journaling, portfolios, and papers);
- Review, refine, and improve, which means a continuous development and improvement of the course you teach. The activities should include tracking student participation, keeping a reflective journal, and refining the course itself taking into account student feedback.
- Provide feedback and assessment of learning, which involves continuous and consistent feedback to students, opportunities for self- and peer-assessment and the improvement of the course instructions [3].

Most education has recently been disapproved of all the efforts spent and wasted on solving well-structured, deterministic tasks, paying too much attention to memorizing the course material, being unwilling to introduce creative learning experiences, and concentrating a lot on content at the expense of skills development and improvement.

Different ways of promoting critical thinking skills in the higher education context have been offered and implemented. For instance, Bean (1996) considers that introducing writing and active learning plays a crucial role. To improve such skills, he proposes to apply such strategies like problem-solving, the encouragement of small talks, engagement, and interaction. In addition to this, he adds that the use of inquiry in research papers should be highly encouraged and developed. At the same time, King (1994) supposes that formulating a set of provocative and captivating questions aiming at the development of such skills as analysis, synthesis, prediction, evaluation, comparison-contrast, and taking other points of view and perspectives stimulates higher-order thinking [3].

Marshall University in West Virginia is one of the establishments that have come to the decision to introduce discussions as a tool promoting critical thinking skills. Moreover, it has been done in online courses and programs. The staff have developed a list of questions for discussions where they have facilitated answering them by providing relevant and easy-to-understand directions. It's rather important to say here that they have stimulated learners' performance through the use of grades, the obligatory participation and contribution to one another's posts, and peer feedback without

assessment. As a result, the conducted survey shows that learners find it helpful to enhance learning this way. They point out the value of their teachers' feedback and their group mates' comments. Many of them enjoy the format of the discussions. Quite a number of learners say that it would be more valuable to get feedback, facilitation, explanation, and assessment at once. Since the University offers such a platform as WebCT, it's impossible as it doesn't offer online discussions [4].

Today there are enough opportunities to choose a satisfying-your-demands platform for online discussions. Moodle is one of them. It has such a form of communication as chat. There is a possibility for both a teacher and a learner to express their spontaneous reaction in the form of questions, advice, suggestions, and feedback, including the correction of language mistakes, either grammar or lexical ones.

In online discussions, active listening (and active reading) can be applied as the instrument and the skill that helps people's interaction and stimulates critical thinking. Recently, when engaged in communication, people have become more and more distracted by television, the Internet, cell phones, etc. By learning and teaching active listening skills, people are able to build rapport, understanding, and trust in communication.

Among the techniques offered to develop active listening (reading) skills are:

1. Concentrate on reading the whole post.

You shouldn't be distracted by the things around you: the Internet, a cell phone, television, drinking coffee, and cooking. Be fully present and try to think about what you are reading. If you are having a difficult time concentrating, try reading out loud.

2. Reflect before responding.

Being an active listener requires self-awareness and reflection. It doesn't need a quick and spontaneous reaction. Thus, before you respond, try to answer such questions: What assumptions and judgments are you trying to make? Is your reaction offensive or helpful? Is it something that needs to be said? Will your response bring greater awareness about the problem to the person who posted? Before giving your feedback, perhaps clarify the post.

3. Make sure you understood what the other person wrote.

It can happen that you don't fully understand what the other person is saying or the other person isn't receptive to what you want to say. Here are the techniques you can use to clarify the situation. You can ask him/her:

"Are you saying that...?"

"I'm not certain I understand. Do you mean...?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but..."

Sometimes you can summarize or restate with your own words and understanding what the other person means. For instance:

"Let's see if I'm clear about this. . ."

"So it sounds to me as if. . ."

"Let me see if I understand. You..."

"It seems that you..."

4. Offer alternatives.

Another way to understand someone is to offer alternatives to their decisions and conclusions. You can begin your response with:

"Is it possible that...?"

"I wonder if..."

"Would you agree with this idea...?"

When you suggest taking the other person's ideas in a new direction, you offer an interpretation that is different from theirs. Thus, it makes a person to think about his/her situation critically, which is helpful in taking any decision.

5. Share your views, ideas, knowledge, and experience.

"I have also experienced this, when..."

"Your post reminded me of..."

"I noticed that..."

6. Be receptive to the emotional side.

Many people's reaction to what the other person is saying is bowing or the repetition of the last words of the person. Instead some useful phrases can be used:

"This seems really important to you..."

"You appear to be feeling..."

"That sounds really frustrating (exciting/ scary...)."

7. Request more information.

Often when we ask for more information, we can get deeper and more meaningful information, and this can make the discussion more meaningful. Or you may just be curious about their experience and want to know more. In either case, some useful expressions to ask for more information are:

"Can you tell me more about your experience..."

"I am curious about your post, can you tell me more about..."

"What do you think would happen if you...?"

Any of the techniques are useful to use but it's always obligatory to think about the other person and his/her feeling at the moment and to show respect, to be open, honest, and receptive.

At the same time to become an active listener, you should be aware that there are a number of communication blockers that can interrupt or stop a good talk. Among them are:

- “Why” questions. They sound more defensive.
- The phrases that show that you are absent from the situation: *“Don’t worry about that. Let’s do ...”*
- The attempt to force someone to talk about something they would rather not talk about.
- The patronizing behavior. It makes the other person feel pitied. E.g., *“You poor thing, I know just how you feel.”*
- A constant offer of advice. It may seem valuable only to you. E.g., *“You should. . .”* or *“You shouldn’t. . .”*
- The interruption. It shows that you aren’t really interested in what the other person is saying [5].

Today for a teacher of any discipline it is essential and effective to give thorough consideration to the instructional methods they apply. Implementing critical thinking is likely to require a commitment to active and student-centered learning. From the start, it may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable to both learners and teachers. Introducing discussions, either face-to-face or online, appears to be quite an effective instrument. The knowledge of the techniques of how to become an active listener for both, a teacher and a learner, will make such discussions enjoyable, intriguing, useful and helping to develop critical thinking skills.

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