

Critical thinking students

Science



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A critical student is one who ‘ does not accept information without first examining it from different angles or perspectives. ’ Discuss this definition in relation to the critical thinking expected of university students in essay writing. Incorporate relevant readings in your discussion. In the changing landscape of the Australian education system, it can be difficult to ascertain what is expected of university students in essay writing. Indeed expectations can vary from institution to institution and even tutor to tutor, however the one commonality is the expectation of critical thinking in students.

In this essay, I will argue that in universities, critical thinking is not only encouraged of university students in essay writing, but is also expected. I will explore what it means to be critical in one's thinking, discuss the expectations of students in essay writing and will provide alternative learning methods to illustrate other viewpoints. In order to achieve this, I will draw upon relevant readings to support my thesis. The word ‘ critical’ is to describe “ that which is urgent, serious, crucial or of fundamental importance” (Craig 1994, 54).

In relation to essay writing, to be critical in one's thinking is to “ question the phenomenon of study rather than simply accept and repeat the facts” (Craig 1994, 54). Warren (1995) provides some context to these definitions in her essay ‘ The critical self’. She defines critical thinking as a reflective and reasonable thought process that dictates our decisions on what we do or believe (2). She refers to her teaching experiences and at the lack of the critical thinking abilities in her students at that time.

Through these experiences and subsequent teachings on philosophy and specifically critical thinking, she draws conclusions that students like to think in this way and consequently their self-esteem improves as they are able to develop these skills (1). Her strong conviction that “critical thinking is both necessary and vital to learning itself” is a powerful statement to her beliefs in this area (Warren 1995, 1). In order to evaluate Warren’s claims, we must discuss what is actually expected of university students in relation to essay writing.

According to Krause (2005), the Australian higher education has significantly evolved in recent years and as such student and university staff expectations have also changed (1). She points out that students now spend less time on campus than in the past and discusses how technology has influenced an increase in a more diverse range of students engaging in study (3). This has resulted in a larger number of students studying via correspondence and an increase in mature age and international students when compared with ten years ago (4).

Given this changing landscape in university learning, it is clear why there is sometimes disconnect between what student’s believe is expected of them and what a university actually expects, specifically in relation to essay writing. This disconnect becomes more evident when distance is a factor. Warren (1995) provides an interesting example on the poor performance of her students in relation to essay writing. According to Warren, her students were attentive in class, actively participated and dedicated the required amount of study.

Her evaluation of the poor performance was that her students “lacked critical thinking skills” (1). To properly assess the expectations placed on students, it is necessary to look at the wording of an essay topic. In all essay topics, one is asked to argue a thesis or debate a claim. The ability to present arguments in a manner that influences or persuades others is central to critical thinking (Marshall and Rowland 2006, 43). The very nature of how essay topics are structured and assessed can only lead to the conclusion that critical thinking is expected in essay writing.

Without debating and negotiating positions, resolving conflict, reflecting and dealing with opposition, all of which are acts of critical thinking, the essay is not fulfilling the basic requirement of arguing a position (Marshall & Rowland 2006, 43). If part of critical thinking is reflection, as stated by Warren (1995), then it is important to understand the reflection process. Pavlovich (2007) suggests the reflection process begins with asking questions and states it is “as much a state of mind as it is a set of activities” (284).

She argues the end result of reflection is a deeper understanding of all matters (284). Self-reflection is the ability to critique oneself, to ask questions like “What is my goal in life?” “What am I striving for?” “What is my purpose?” (Rogers 1697, 164). These are questions that some are unable to answer through their entire lives and yet within the context of university learning and specifically essay writing, there is an expectation that students are able to self-reflect, to see multiple facets of an argument, to question and to be critical.

Warren (1995) also talks about the self-reflection process and argues that critical thinking “ is an aspect of reflective thinking” (2). She asserts that only when critical thinking, creative thinking and content knowledge - what she describes as ‘ the 3 C’s’ - overlap, does one has all the components of reflective thinking (2). She further argues that one can only be critical in the context of their surroundings or circumstances, such as gender or race and without the willingness to identify with and use background knowledge one “ is not a critical thinker” (3).

In the context of being a university student and writing essays, to think critically is to learn to process information and “ to form reasoned opinions, evaluate beliefs, construct positions... (and) articulate a thesis” (Warren 1995, 4). Critical thinking in this context is to realise ones full potential as “ to really learn anything at all one must engage the critical self” (Warren 1995, 4). Of course, there are many other methods to learning and it can be argued that one size does not fit all.

In certain disciplines, it can be assumed that critical thinking is not necessary, for example in complex technical environments where ‘ x’ must always equal ‘ y’. In many cases, there is a mismatch between personal learning styles and learning demands of different disciplines (Kolb 1981, 233). Kolb (1981) explores various learning styles and his discussion can lead one to believe that critical thinking is not central to the acquisition of knowledge (233).

One could argue that in some fields it is imperative to memorise information and follow set instructions and not to look at information from various

viewpoints. For example, there would be an expectation that a surgeon follows strict protocol when performing a complex operation. I would argue however, that some of the greatest advances in human history have been a result of those who are willing to question the way things are done and to explore alternatives options.

Whilst it is important to recognise different learning styles suit different individuals and to adjust expectations accordingly, the basis of a student not accepting information without “ examining it from different angles and perspectives” (Craig 1994, 54) is central to learning and is a key expectation of students in essay writing at university. The expectations placed upon students in relation to essay writing at university may vary, but the common denominator is the expectancy on students to be able to think critically and to articulate this in written form.

I have provided a definition of critical thinking and have discussed how the changing landscape of the Australian education system can cause some confusion around expectations placed on students. I have offered alternative learning methods to demonstrate the need for some flexibility and adaptability around the expectations placed on students to cater for different learning style. Throughout this essay, I have maintained that regardless of these different learning styles, there is a universal expectation placed on university students to think critically, particularly in relation to essay writing and have used examples to argue this thesis.