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Critical thinking in the liberal education history course

Jeff Mullins

Early in my career, I discovered, as so many of us do, that many introductory-level students do not substantially improve their writing either by being told what to do or through peer review. I therefore redesigned my introductory courses with the express purpose of getting students to regularly practice executing the precise skills of argument that are most crucial to their future university work. Each week, students were required to write not essays but argument outlines. Each chapter of the history textbook supplied a set research question demanding engagement with the material. Students created an outline that stated the question, provided a thesis statement asserting an answer to that question, and then listed five or more pieces of evidence from the materials in the chapter. For each piece of evidence the outline would have to contain a short paragraph explaining how the evidence connected to and supported the thesis point. This new course design had several advantages: making thinking compulsory; giving the students an understanding of how to choose and support what would be most important in their own arguments—and recognize that prioritizing in accounts of history; engaging the students directly with the materials of history in an argumentative way, so that history would no longer be understood as a static collection of facts. Additionally, it avoided the phenomenon of “I wrote ten pages on the Civil War—I must have an argument in there somewhere.” By having only the core steps of creating an argument (and nothing more), it became nearly impossible for students to fail to see when they had (or did not have) the requisite elements of making a case for their position.

Critical thinking and the literary imagination

Judy Dorn

One thing that amazes me as I teach first-year writing (English 191) is that about half the students have a lot of trouble just setting criteria for how they evaluate or define something. That is, if you are going to label something, can you list the criteria you use so you aren’t just name-calling? Can you explain how something fits or doesn’t fit the criteria for that label?

Thinking back, I realize how well high school literature prepared me for critical thinking. For example, we all had to write the essay “Is there a tragic hero in Julius Caesar? By what criteria do we recognize a tragic hero?” Here are some additional ways literature courses teach critical thinking:

- English courses generally make students aware of how words shape what we know of the world; students learn to feel empowered to work with words, but also to see through problems, such as conflicts between people, that come from people attributing different meanings to terms or just confusing meanings.
- Stories demand from us highly integrated practices of critical thinking by providing us with analytic models. Engagement with literature “virtually” requires that we imagine the points of view of others and integrate them as at least examples in the repertoire of our own personal experiences. Readers conceptualize new ideas and become comfortable with the difficulty of insisting on a generalization about human experience. They must come to the maturity of accepting that ambiguities and unknowns remain—as do competing theories put forward by their classmates. In fact, multiple hypotheses may fit. One risk for novice social science students is that, encouraged by our culture of polling, they may put faith in the language of reductively simple experiments and survey instruments, and in the results from the handful of people who agree to participate.
- Interpreting constructs if...then reasoning is essential whether we’re engaged in empirical research or developing imaginative intelligence.
- By having only the core steps of creating an argument (and nothing more), it became nearly impossible for students to fail to see when they had (or did not have) the requisite elements of making a case for their position.