A Method to the Madness: Infusing Critical Thinking Strategies Into Online Courses

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A Method to the Madness: Infusing Critical Thinking Strategies into Online Courses

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A progression of skills

– Our goal was to develop critical thinking using a 4-step critical thought model

– Experiences with assignments in our course and with research we have done, shows that limited tolerance for ambiguity interferes with critical thinking

– Experiences with assignments in our course show that the tendency to make inferences and assumptions exacerbates a lack of tolerance for ambiguity

– So, we were looking for assignments that would promote tolerance for ambiguity by exploring inferences and assumptions and this would prepare students to make progress in critical thinking.

– The goal is to promote Critical Thinking, which requires Tolerance for Ambiguity and these, together, will foster Intercultural Sensitivity
Steps in The Model

1.) **Recitation** – state known facts or opinions.
   - A critical component of this step is to acknowledge what aspect(s) of what is being stated is factual and what is based on opinion.

2.) **Exploration** – analyse the roots of those opinions or facts.
   - This step requires digging below the surface of what is believed or known and working to discover the elements that have combined to result in that fact or that opinion.
   - This is an initial analysis without an attempt to comprehend the impact of those facts or opinions.
Steps in The Model

3.) Understanding – involves an awareness of other views and a comprehension of the difference(s) between one’s own opinion (and the facts or other opinions upon which that opinion is based) and the opinions of others.

– To truly “understand” our own opinion in relationship to others, we must initiate an active dialogue with the other person about his or her opinions and the roots of those opinions. In other words, once we become aware of the roots of our own opinions, we must understand the roots of the opinions of others.

4.) Appreciation – means a full awareness of the differences between our views and opinions and those of others.

– To truly appreciate differences, we must be aware of the nature of those differences. The active dialogue undertaken in the third step (understanding) should lead to an analysis of the opinion as recited by the other.

– The result should be a complete awareness of the similarities and differences between our own opinions (and the roots of those opinions) and those of the “other.” Although we may still be aware that our opinions differ, we are now in a position to truly appreciate and value those differences.
More on “understanding”

– In our view, it is important to acknowledge that “understanding” does not mean to “accept.” The goal is not to get everyone to agree; the goal is to get people to truly explore and understand how and why opinions differ.

– To understand means to realize the circumstances and motivations that lead to difference and to realize that those differences are meaningful. It is our belief that discussing social issues (such as prejudice or racism) without requiring students to explore the roots of their views, to understand the roots of other views, and to appreciate the nature and importance of different views about those issues, perpetuates ignorance.

– To raise the issue without using the elements of critical thinking and exploration we have outlined above may simply reinforce prejudices by giving them voice without question.
We wanted to teach our students to be more effective critical thinkers. We found a myriad of definitions for critical thinking (e.g., Chaffee, Halonen, Halpern, Smith) but quickly realized that a definition for critical thinking was not what we needed most – we needed to know what critical thinkers would be able TO DO, so we could design assignments to facilitate progress on those skills.

We found our answer to this dilemma in the work of Randolph Smith (2002). In his book, “Challenging Your Preconceptions”, Smith outlines the 7 characteristics of critical thinkers.

According to Smith:
7 Characteristics of critical thinkers

– (1) critical thinkers are flexible – they can tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty,
– (2) critical thinkers identify inherent biases and assumptions,
– (3) critical thinkers maintain an air of skepticism,
– (4) critical thinkers separate facts from opinions,
– (5) critical thinkers don’t oversimplify,
– (6) critical thinkers use logical inference processes, and
– (7) critical thinkers examine available evidence before drawing conclusions
Intercultural Sensitivity

– Bennett outlines six points on a developmental continuum of intercultural sensitivity.
– By referring to Intercultural Sensitivity as “developmental” in nature, Bennett is making powerful assumptions about it. Specifically, if something is “developmental” it:
  – Develops across time,
  – Is affected by experience,
  – Progresses more in some than in others,
  – Can cause dramatic changes in a person.
Intercultural Sensitivity

- **Denial.** Being comfortable with the familiar. Not anxious to complicate life with “cultural differences”. Not noticing much cultural difference around you. Maintaining separation from others who are different.

- **Defense.** A strong commitment to one’s own thoughts and feelings about culture and cultural difference. Some distrust of cultural behavior or ideas that differ from one’s own. Aware of other cultures around you, but with a relatively incomplete understanding of them and probably fairly strong negative feelings or stereotypes about some of them.
Intercultural Sensitivity

- **Minimization.** People from other cultures are pretty much like you, under the surface. Awareness that other cultures exist all around you, with some knowledge about differences in customs and celebrations. Not putting down other cultures. Treating other people as you would like to be treated.

- **Acceptance.** Aware of your own culture(s). See your own culture as just one of many ways of experiencing the world. Understanding that people from other cultures are as complex as yourself. Their ideas, feelings, and behavior may seem unusual, but you realize that their experience is just as rich as your own. Being curious about other cultures. Seeking opportunities to learn more about them.
Intercultural Sensitivity

- **Adaptation.** Recognizing the value of having more than one cultural perspective available to you. Able to “take the perspective” of another culture to understand or evaluate situations in either your own or another culture. Able to intentionally change your culturally based behavior to act in culturally appropriate ways outside your own culture.

- **Integration.** To varying extents, have integrated more than one cultural perspective, mindset, and behavior into one’s identity and worldview. Able to move easily among cultures.
http://www.idrinstitute.org/page.asp?menu1=15
Intercultural Sensitivity

The first three stages are considered “ethnocentric” or monocultural in that one’s own culture is seen as the only culture or to varying extents the “better” culture. The last three stages are considered “ethnorelative” or multicultural in that one’s own culture is seen as equal among many other cultures.

It is easy to see how these theories, when reinforced and put into practice, can facilitate progress on these stages of intercultural sensitivity.

But, how do we promote growth connecting these theoretical perspectives to the individual?

First, have students “self assess” on the 6 stages:
Assessing Intercultural Sensitivity

Now that you have read about the model and read about each level, give yourself a score from 1 to 4 on each level using the following scale:

- 1 = I show very little of this level
- 2 = I show a little of this level
- 3 = I show a moderate amount of this level
- 4 = I show a lot of this level

You will end up with 6 scores that you should discuss in your forum posting:

- _____ = Denial
- _____ = Defense
- _____ = Minimization
- _____ = Acceptance
- _____ = Adaptation
- _____ = Integration

In your Forum posting discuss HOW you scored on each level, WHY you think you scored that way and anything your might WANT to change about these scores and WHY.
Tolerance for Ambiguity

- Pre and post scores on Tolerance for Ambiguity (measured via McClain’s (1993) Mstat-I), and (3) performance (grades) in an online course on the Psychology of Prejudice, Discrimination and Hate.

- We hypothesized that students who scored higher on the measure (those scoring as the most intolerant) when comparing pre and post scores, would receive lower grades in the course than those who scored as more tolerant.

- In other words, these students would be “less” ready to benefit from a SoTL approach who are less tolerant of ambiguity.

- As expected, those students showing the least amount of decrease (or even an increase) in intolerance across the semester, earned lower grades in the course than those students who showed a significant decrease in intolerance, t(1,19) = 4.659, p<.001.
We are going to do Hypothesis Testing

- Break into groups of 3-4 (no fewer than 3, no more than 4)
- Your goal, as a group, is to figure out the correct sequence of cards using as FEW trials as possible
- Looking at the cards already played, determine – as a group – the next likely card in the sequence.
- Decide what hypothesis you think explains the sequence of cards. You can “test” this hypothesis by raising your hand. When I come over to the group – “play” the card, and I will tell you “yes” if it matches the sequence and “no” if it does not.
- Keep “testing” cards until you are confident of the sequence.
- When ready reveal your hypothesis to me, raise your hand and “test” it by telling me the sequence you believe explains the cards. I will say “yes” if it correct and “no” if it is not.
Hypothesis Testing

– Remember that your goal, as a group, is to figure out the correct sequence of cards using as FEW trials as possible
– Keep testing cards and your overall hypothesis as often as necessary to get a “yes” for your sequence hypothesis or we run out of time
– You have 10 minutes to be successful. The group that gets the correct sequence hypothesis in the fewest number of trials, wins!