Critical Inquiry in The Classroom: Creating Opportunities for Deeper Learning and Application

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Critical Inquiry in the Classroom

Creating Opportunities for Deeper Learning and Engagement

SoTL Commons
March 8, 2012

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University of South Carolina Aiken
Presentation Overview

• Critical Inquiry (CI) and the CI course
• Teaching with a CI focus
• Sample course assignments and activities
• Portfolio assessment and early findings
• Discussion/Q&A
Critical inquiry is the process of gathering and evaluating information, ideas, and assumptions from multiple perspectives to produce well-reasoned analysis and understanding, and leading to new ideas, applications, and questions.

(QEP Committee Minutes, September 2009)

To put it simply, the idea of critical inquiry involves thinking deeply (Think DEEP!):

discover | experiment | evaluate | perform
Critical Inquiry Process from:
http://www.utexas.edu/academic/ctl/criticalthinking/#Attitude/Inquiry/inquiry_intro
Student Learning Outcomes

Through the QEP (CI course), our students will:

• apply the Critical Inquiry process by identifying and analyzing the main themes and ideas in an assigned reading;
• demonstrate information literacy by gathering, evaluating, and using information effectively and responsibly;
• exhibit an ability to consider multiple ideas and perspectives and communicate that understanding.
CI: Think DEEP Common Course Content

Evidence of each of these elements of the common course content will be included in the CI Portfolio.

The Last Town on Earth (First-Year Reading for 2011-12)

All sections of the CI course will use the selected First-Year Reading as the contextual foundation for the course. Through discussion and analysis of the book’s themes and issues, students will practice the process of Critical Inquiry. (SLO #1)

The Critical Inquiry process

Students will engage in the Critical Inquiry process, first through DEEP exploration of the First-Year Reading, and then by applying the process to inquiry-based group or individual projects and assignments. (SLO #1)

Information literacy

Through common instructional sessions and assignments on information literacy, students will better understand how knowledge is created and disseminated. Students will be able “to identify, locate, evaluate and effectively and responsibly use that information for the problem at hand” (AAC&U, 2010). (SLO #2)

Multiple opportunities for personal reflection that assesses thoughts, actions, and work

In addition to demonstrating content knowledge, students will move to deeper and more integrative learning by engaging in personal reflection on their thoughts, actions, and work related to the CI course. (SLO #3)
The Critical Inquiry Course

- Full time faculty and instructors
  - Trained every spring in critical thinking methods
  - Provided with materials and syllabi for planning
  - Faculty rotate through the program
- All first-semester college students enroll (~600)
- Sections are limited to 20 students
- All instructors participate in three Learning Community sessions during the semester.
- Spring semester sections to catch additional students

Think DEEP!
Teaching with a CII Focus

• The pilot implementation of the course involved faculty from across the disciplines, including representatives from the QEP Committee and the ad hoc General Education Committee.

• The course pedagogy emphasizes active and collaborative learning opportunities (e.g., discussion and problem-solving). Faculty explore strategies and techniques that promote this type of learning and engagement during the Think DEEP Institute, and through participation in the faculty learning community.
Sample Assignments & Activities

- Each class participates in a library instruction session, led by a library faculty member.
- The session draws from Carol Kuhlthau’s Information Search Process Model and engages students in collecting and evaluating sources based on a theme in the first-year reading.
- At the end of the activity, students are asked to reflect through the Self-Evaluation of the Research Process assessment. Then, students are asked to complete a common homework assignment, which is submitted in class (for a grade), and at the end of the semester in the CI Portfolio.
Sample Assignments & Activities

Examples of In-Class Exercises

- Observation/inference
  Different perspectives on a common experience
- Verbal/nonverbal communication
- Right and wrong:
  Black & white vs. gray (Is there always a “right”?)
- Triage: Making hard decisions
- Group pro and con debates
  - Often “blind” debates
Sample Assignments & Activities

Group Project Examples

**Surveys**
- Harassment of gays and women in the military
- What would you do if...?

**Dissemination of Information**
- What to do during flu season
- Brochures summarizing research topics

**Presentations**
- History of medical care in the US
- History of the Women’s Rights Movement
- Patriotism and war propaganda in four US wars
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Excellent 4</th>
<th>Very Good 3</th>
<th>Satisfactory 2</th>
<th>Poor 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic Selection</td>
<td>Identifies a creative, focused, and manageable topic that addresses potentially significant yet previously less-explored aspects of the topic.</td>
<td>Identifies a focused and manageable topic that appropriately addresses relevant aspects of the topic.</td>
<td>Identifies a topic that while manageable is too narrowly focused and leaves out relevant aspects of the topic.</td>
<td>Identifies a topic that is far too general and wide-ranging as to be manageable and doable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification and Assessment of Evidence</td>
<td>Collects and synthesizes detailed information from relevant sources representing various points of view/approaches.</td>
<td>Presents detailed information from relevant sources representing various points of view/approaches.</td>
<td>Presents information from relevant sources representing limited points of view/approaches.</td>
<td>Presents information from irrelevant sources representing limited points of view/approaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Knowledge</td>
<td>Theoretical framework and project objectives well described. All elements of the methodology are skillfully developed. Appropriate methodology or theoretical framework drawn from across disciplines or from relevant subdisciplines.</td>
<td>Critical elements of the methodology or theoretical framework are developed and project objectives well-defined, however, more subtle elements are ignored or unaccounted for.</td>
<td>Critical elements of the methodology or theoretical framework are missing or incorrectly developed. Project objectives unfocused.</td>
<td>Inquiry design demonstrates a misunderstanding of the methodology or theoretical framework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Conclusions</td>
<td>Organizes and synthesizes evidence to reveal insightful patterns, differences, or similarities related to focus. Reaches a conclusion that is a logical extrapolation from the results of the inquiry.</td>
<td>Organizes evidence to reveal important patterns, differences, or similarities related to focus. Conclusion focused solely on the inquiry findings, and arises specifically from and responds to the results of the inquiry.</td>
<td>Organizes evidence, but is not effective in revealing important patterns, differences, or similarities. States a general conclusion that, because it is so general, also applies beyond the scope of the inquiry findings.</td>
<td>Lists evidence, but it is not organized and/or is unrelated to focus. States an ambiguous, illogical, or unsupported conclusion from inquiry findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>Provides insightful and detailed discussion of limitations and implications. Demonstrates clear understanding of conclusions and their implications.</td>
<td>Provides good discussion of limitations and implications. Demonstrates a good understanding of conclusions and their implications.</td>
<td>Presents limitations and implications. Demonstrates a good understanding of conclusions with some relevance to project.</td>
<td>Presents limitations and implications, but they are possibly irrelevant and unsupported. Demonstrates limited, if any, understanding of conclusions and their implications.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The CI Portfolio contains:

- Information literacy assignment
- Reflective essay
- Project evidence or artifact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Score (out of 4)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic Selection</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification and Assessment of Evidence</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Knowledge</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Conclusions</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>2.4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Comments in Reflective Essays

What did students comment on?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Comment</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking Skill Development</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Exercises</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year Reading</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of Engagement</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Literacy Assignment</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## CI Pre-Assessment

### Results from the ETS Proficiency Profile

#### 2011 First-Year Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>USC Aiken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading II</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading I</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing III</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing II</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing I</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“The Critical Inquiry class was the class I was least looking forward to... as a college freshmen... As I continued on through the course I began to actually enjoy the class discussion and group activities.”

“I was forced to take time and think... Then I had to draw parallels for what I learned in class to what I had read in the novel.”

“I also find myself in class asking different questions trying to find more meaning in things... It will definitely help me in the coming years not only in college but in other goals in life.”
• “I will take what I learned in this class to other college classes and eventually to the workplace.”

• “My knowledge has increased and I have learned how to be more detailed with all of my work...I appreciated this class and I am glad it was a requirement.”
CI Program Assessment

• Short term:
  • English 102 pass rates
  • Freshmen retention of scholarships
  • Writing Proficiency Portfolio scores

• Long term:
  • Capstone and student research scores
  • ETS-PP at graduation
  • 4-year retention
  • Course syllabi reviews
  • Student success after USCA
How might you adapt the activities, assignment, and assessment discussed in this session to promote deeper learning in your own courses?
Contact Us

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