

TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS TO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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Nearly everyone agrees that one of the main goals of education is to teach students to think critically. The ability to engage in careful, reflective thought is a fundamental characteristic of an educated person. Students with learning disabilities, as well as most students in general, often do not have well-developed critical thinking skills. The teaching of good critical thinking is, therefore, crucial in preparing students with learning disabilities for future employment opportunities and the ability to keep pace with the challenges of a today's society.

Most teachers will agree that teaching good critical thinking skills to students with learning disabilities can be a difficult task. Students with learning disabilities do not intrinsically think critically. They frequently assimilate information, ideas, and arguments at the concrete level without engaging in higher-order thinking. This tendency toward concrete reasoning can often result in an inability to examine or question the validity of information when deciding what to believe or do. To further exacerbate the problem, younger students with learning disabilities may manifest lower critical thinking skills simply as a result of their educational experiences in special education classes or having to attend a Learning Resource Center for remedial assistance. Remedial instruction is often scheduled during class periods that provide extra-curricular activities emphasizing exploration and discovery that lend themselves to the development of critical thinking. As a result, skill deficits in the development of critical thinking may be as much a function of their educational experiences, as specific information processing deficits related to having a learning disability.

If students with learning disabilities are to learn to think critically, they must be afforded the opportunity to practice critical thinking inside and outside the classroom. It is common for students with learning disabilities to make more errors in interpreting social situations and predicting consequences than their non-learning disabled peers. They often show deficits in identifying social problems and generating desirable solutions to those problems. Research

shows, however, that students with learning disabilities who do develop good critical thinking skills can devise strategies to compensate for processing difficulties resulting in these behaviors.

Although there is no “best” approach to teaching critical thinking skills, there are some proven approaches that instructors may take to enhance the development of critical thinking skills in these students.

Below are some strategies for teachers to enhance the development of critical thinking skills:

- **Model critical thinking for your students.** Modeling critical thinking is the most effective means in advancing critical thinking skills in students. The instructor should demonstrate the critical thinking process in daily problem-solving activities and be an effective role model for students to follow. Showing students how to evaluate information, identify assumptions, and discover implications of the decision-making process is vital in providing students the opportunity to develop good critical thinking skills in their lives. Permit students to be active participants in solving classroom problems by making your decision-making process transparent. Think of yourself as a “coach” or “guide” in helping students practice good critical thinking skills. Whenever possible, relate practical solutions to problems you faced in your life and how students may use the same principles in solving their daily problems.
- **Ask open-ended questions that do not assume one “right” answer.** Asking meaningful, relevant questions is fundamental to critical thinking. Ask questions that require explanations, not simply “yes” or “no” answers. Allow students ample opportunity to process information and think through questions. This may require providing students ample time to process questions prior to giving an answer. Require students to explain how they reasoned through the question and/or problem in order to arrive at their answer. Help students “step out of the box” and look for new answers. Provide a non-threatening atmosphere to allow students the opportunity to explore or examine alternative positions on controversial topics and voice their views and opinions.

- **Listen attentively.** Frequently evaluate your listening skills. Patiently allow students to be active participants in the learning process by listening attentively to their comments and ideas. Allow students to verbally go through their decision-making process and demonstrate how they reached their conclusions. Show respect for each student's information processing skills while evaluating their critical thinking process. Acknowledge all student responses and provide feedback in a supportive classroom environment.
- **Make students aware of the component parts of critical thinking.** Reinforce the eight Elements of Reasoning developed by the Foundation for Critical Thinking (www.criticalthinking.org). These elements are considered building blocks to the critical thinking process. They include the purpose of thinking (goal, objective), the question at issue, fundamental concepts (ideas, theories), information (data, facts), point of view (frame of reference), inferences (interpretations, conclusions), assumptions (things taken for granted), and implications (consequences). Model each component individually and help students identify how each component may be used in classroom activities and assignments. Develop critical thinking exercises to show how the components fit together and reinforce each other. Help students identify how these elements can help them make good critical thinking judgments outside the classroom.

Teaching students to think critically may be a challenge, but is not impossible. The more we practice good critical thinking skills during student activities inside and outside our classrooms, the more students will improve their critical thinking skills. Students who use good critical thinking skills will become more responsible for their learning. Students with learning disabilities can learn to think critically. It takes time and practice. By following the above steps, you will not only enhance the learning process for your students, but also, teach the critical thinking skills essential to the long-term success of your students.

Dr. Johnny Good is Professor of Critical Thinking and Director of Outreach Programs at Beacon College. Beacon College is the only four-year college offering academic degree programs solely to students with learning disabilities. For more information on how Beacon College may assist your program in the development of critical thinking skills, contact Dr. Good at: jgood@beaconcollege.edu.