Week 10: Engaging Questions for Critical Thought

Context:
The ability to think critically is a necessity within a myriad of disciplines and tasks. We enact critical thinking by analyzing and synthesizing information as well as by giving evidence for our ideas, opinions, and theories. Even though the majority of teachers would include critical thinking as a goal for their courses, we are often at a loss as to how, specifically, to teach students to think critically.

Experience:
One way to engage students in critical thinking is by asking, and teaching them to ask, questions that require students to dig deeper into ideas. These are often the “why” and “how” questions, but scholars Ron Richhart, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison have compelling research on one, seemingly straight-forward “what” question. That question is, “What makes you say that?” What these researchers found is that when asked with genuine respect and interest, this question, as well as contextually-based variations on it, move students into an introspective mode that uncovers their thinking in many different situations. Just as important as providing ways for students to show how they have learned the content of a course, asking this question also creates an opening for instructors to understand where a student’s thinking process has been solidified or even where it might have moved off course.

(from Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for All Learners)

Reflection:
(Take some time to consider the following prompts. You may find it helpful to write or sketch your thoughts.)

Is critical thinking one of the goals of your courses? In which ways do you specifically teach students how think critically?

Consider the kinds of questions you ask students during interactive lectures, class discussions, and even on exams. Do these questions generally fall into the informational category of naming and identifying facts, or are they in the analysis, synthesis, evidence category? What is the intention behind your questions?

Action:
Using the “what makes you say that?” question template experiment with the kinds of questions you ask students during your next class meeting. Use variations as appropriate to the natural progression of the class and the content such as “What do you see, what do you know, or what evidence were you able to find that makes you say that, or supports your idea?” Look for moments when students makes assertions, give explanations, provide interpretations, or offer opinions as openings to ask the question in a natural way.
Evaluation:
(The following questions are meant to be used at a later time after you have completed the Action, but may be used as a way to shape the action as well. It may be helpful to write or sketch your responses.)

With what intentions did you redesign or create the learning experience? How did those intentions present in the learning experience? Did the experience change the ways you see teaching, learning or the course?

How do you know if the change made a difference in student learning? For which students did the change make the most difference? Are there negatives for any students associated with the change you made?

What will you do next?

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Thank you for participating in this week’s reflection.

The next reflection will be posted on Friday, November 9th. All reflections are archived for future use. For more information on this week’s topic, CTTL services, programs, or events please consult the website at http://slu.edu/cttl.