

Promoting Critical Thinking in the Classroom

Jessica L. Collett, Associate Professor, Sociology – jcollett@nd.edu

A number of my students think that sociology is common sense. Just as many think that it's simply espousing whatever theory, research, or findings reflect a liberal perspective. To combat both of these assumptions – and to ensure that students grapple with the issues we cover in class – I work to promote critical thinking in all my classes. I do this by teaching it, rewarding it, and modeling it.

1. *Teach it* – I find “critical thinking” to be a nebulous term. It is difficult to push students to do something – or to measure their progress on something – that isn't well defined, so I begin by telling students how I define critical thinking and give them a framework to work from (on the back of this sheet). This enhances the probability that students will recognize when critical thinking is needed, even in a novel context, and the comfort they'll feel with employing critical thinking strategies.
 - I begin the semester with a reading that demonstrates critical thinking about a specific topic – the crack “epidemic” of the 1980's – before I teach the framework. That way, they see it in action from someone other than me and I am able to draw on specific examples from the reading to illustrate the abstract ideas in the framework.
2. *Reward it* – Find ways to make students value good thinking and the work that is needed to achieve a critical interpretation.
 - After covering the framework, I give students an explicit assignment asking them to think critically about an assumption that is prevalent in society today.
 - I also make it very clear that whatever conclusions students ultimately come to in the class, I will not mark their ideas as wrong if they demonstrate they've thought critically about what they believe.
 - I tell students that it's not just something for this class or to help them succeed in college, but it will benefit them in other areas of their lives – for example, when debating with someone in the dining hall. ☺
3. *Model it* – Demonstrate it throughout the semester.
 - When we're caught off guard with things that students say, critically thinking out loud – and as a group – is a great way to get our bearings. Furthermore, it models how to think critically while also validating the usefulness of such an exercise.

There are lots of great books on critical thinking, why it's important, and how to teach it. I draw (very loosely) on Stephen Brookfield's framework from his book, *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting* (1987).

Brookfield's Critical Thinking Framework:

1. Identify and Challenge Assumptions.

In this step, we realize that many of our ideas and beliefs are assumptions that we accept without further consideration. These shape how we see and experience the world and are reproduced in interaction. For example, a common assumption in the U.S. is that women are inherently more nurturing than men and that men are inherently more aggressive than women. These assumptions shape our ideas about how men and women should act, how households should be organized, acceptable occupations, and so forth. When thinking critically, ask whether such assumptions reflect reality or if they shape what we observe in the behaviors of men and women. *In other words, do we observe women indeed being more nurturing, or do we only make note of their nurturing behavior? Further, we need to ask whether our expectations of women and men shape the ways in which they act.*

2. Awareness of our place and time in our culture.

We need to be aware of our location in a particular intersection of culture and history; how that is influenced by our race/ethnicity, social class, sex/gender, sexuality, ability, age, and other factors; and how these in turn influence the questions we ask and the answers we accept. *We believe that women are nurturing and men are aggressive because we have seen this time and again in the media, learned behavior like this from our parents, and so forth. Individuals in other cultures and at other times might have believed differently.*

3. Search for alternative ways of thinking.

Ask yourself if there's another way of thinking about your assumption. *Perhaps the roles that women are cast into are more nurturing and men's more aggressive, leading to this type of behavior. If we had a man who stayed home and a woman who was a cut-throat lawyer, would their behavior be different? Maybe this has to do with socialization, not biology. Even if there are differences, should one be rewarded in the workplace and the other as legitimation to sacrifice time and wages?*

4. Develop a reflective analysis.

A reflective analysis requires that we be skeptical. We ask who benefits from the current belief system and what it would take to change it. We also might ask ourselves why *we* hold a particular assumption. *Once we realize that gender differences might not be that "natural" (or real), we can work towards eliminating assumptions and the related inequalities of opportunity.*