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Title: The Importance of Critical Thinking in the Adult Learning Process

Summary: Teachers assume that asking questions, assigning writing tasks, and giving tests enables students to become critical thinkers as learn the course subject matter.

Abstract: Critical thinking is not an automatic by-product of learning. The current teaching paradigm provides students with an understanding of course subject matter, but does not present critical thinking as a cognitive action that provides meaning and significance. The inclusion of critical thinking into the learning process increases student awareness of what they need to know, why they need to know it, and the process involved in applying it. The resulting ability to determine and analyze possible outcomes based on context and individual perceptions is the foundation of long-term learning.

Three learner-centered presentation objectives:

1. To increase teacher awareness of the importance of critical thinking skills in the learning process.
2. To learn how to incorporate critical thinking skills into classroom activities by combining subject matter expertise with practical application.
3. To implement a framework for the development and implementation of critical thinking activities in the classroom.

Best fit: Assessment, Student Learning

Session Description:

Effective, critical thinking is neither an incidental outcome of experience nor the automatic result of the study of any specific subject matter. Skillful thinking requires deliberate, continuing instruction, guidance, and practice in order to develop to its full potential. Instead of focusing on critical thinking skills, the common teaching paradigm assumes that students learn to think as they complete their assignments and take exams. If we review the common techniques used to teach thinking, we find that teachers often ask students questions at levels of increasing difficulty, have them fill in multiple choice worksheets, engage them in discussion, and of course, give them exams. The problem is that although these techniques enable students to learn the subject matter, they do not provide them with an awareness of the cognitive operations involved in learning.

Since people do not usually consider the other side of an argument, look beyond the first decent solution that presents itself, or ponder a problem before selecting a solution, it is easy to see why nurturing critical thinking skills is so important. Teaching critical thinking takes the classroom beyond the normal level of practice and rote memorization and enhances the excitement and attraction of classroom teaching and learning. Instead of relying on previous knowledge to make current decisions, students are able to acquire new knowledge and use it to analyze situations, determine needs, and develop practical, viable solutions.

Instead of making the subject matter the object of learning, teachers must: 1) make thinking the subject of the instruction 2) focus on the cognitive operations that constitute thinking, and 3) provide explicit instruction and guided practice in the execution of these operations in various contexts for a variety of purposes. By doing so, they can sharply enhance student proficiency in thinking and help students to maintain that proficiency for an extended period of time.

This presentation will focus on three key constructs: 1) the value of teaching students to understand the cognitive processes behind critical thinking skills, 2) key ways to engage students in this understanding for practical application, and 3) the implications for classroom teaching of thinking. Participants will learn various methods to teach critical thinking as part of the presentation activities.

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