Assessing and Cultivating Critical Thinking Online

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One of the major advantages of the online learning environment is the capacity to help students develop critical thinking in more effective and efficient ways than the classroom environment allows. Emphasizing student engagement through online discussion forums is a powerful way to cultivate critical thinking.

By having students engage more intentionally with texts and media, and respond to well-crafted prompts and questions, instructors can immediately assess the level of a student's understanding and concepts acquisition. Reading student responses to well-crafted prompts and questions is akin to a form of mind reading. The instructor gains immediate feedback on what the student thinks, *how* a student is thinking, the level of understanding achieved, and can identify misunderstandings.

Assessing online student responses allows the teacher to provide correctives, follow up with clarifying questions, challenge fuzzy thinking, and push for specificity. In this way the teacher can cultivate critical thinking and assess evidence about how well students achieve it throughout the course.

Critical thinking is one of the universally desired goals in teaching. The current ATS M.Div. program goals includes ". . . development of capacities—intellectual and affective . . . " as one of its ministerial formation outcomes (Degree Program Standards A.3.1.3.). The online discussion experience is one of the most useful methods for developing and assessing critical thinking.

What is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking is a particular cognitive activity evidenced by specific components. Attached is a handout, "Assessing and Cultivating Critical Thinking Online" with nine of those components. Other components of critical thinking not included are credibility, sufficiency, reliability, and practicality. You can use the handout to assess student responses for critical thinking. Sharing the chart with your students, or, converting it into an assessment rubric for online academic discussion can help your students cultivate critical thinking and help you assess how well they achieve it.

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