

Critical Thinking in Psychology

A proposal for an ACS Teaching with Technology Fellowship

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Background

The development and refinement of critical thinking skills is at the very heart of a liberal arts education. Virtually every educator affirms the value of such skills, yet a large body of research literature points to the regrettable conclusion that critical thinking is not an inevitable outcome of higher education (e.g., Bensley & Haynes, 1995; Langer & Applebee, 1987). For example, based on a large scale evaluation of research on critical thinking Kennedy (1991) notes, "American students can compute, but they cannot reason.... They can write complete and accurate sentences, but they cannot prepare arguments.... Our students are not doing well at thinking, reasoning, analyzing, predicting, estimating, or problem solving" (p. 665).

Unlike many areas of inquiry, psychology is a discipline that is particularly plagued with the dissemination of myths and other forms of haphazardly gathered information which often results in the uncritical acceptance of "facts" and theories about human behavior. With the explosion of various media outlets bogus and pseudoscientific "psychological knowledge" and other information about human behavior is being transmitted to a large segment of the population at an astonishing rate. Keith Stanovich argues that, "the transfer of 'psychological knowledge' that is taking place via the media is largely an illusion" (pp. ix). Stanovich's point is that what the public and even well-educated persons view as psychology is most often not psychology at all and worse yet, that this proliferation of "psycho-babble" has made it difficult for the public to independently evaluate claims about human behavior. Unfortunately, even most Introduction to Psychology courses have little effect on the misconceptions held by students or faculty outside the discipline (e.g., Higbee & Clay, 1998; Vaughn, 1977).

Human behavior is at the core of many disciplines such as literature, law, political science, and the arts. As such, a critical understanding of human behavior would benefit students from a variety of disciplines. The primary objective of the proposed project is to foster the development and honing of critical thinking skills as they relate to an understanding of human thought processes and behavior.

Description

The proposed project will develop materials and resources aimed at educating students (and the general public) about a range of critical thinking skills and attitudes and various barriers to thinking critically about human behavior. In essence, the proposed project will be directed at the consumer of psychological information. The product of the proposal will be an extensive, multi-layered web-site consisting of a number of sub-components including, but not limited to guidelines to critical thinking, biases in human reasoning, judgment and memory, "best-practices" examples, informal fallacies and examples of pseudoscientific and unsubstantiated claims about human behavior. The site will also include a substantial set of links to critical thinking sites on the WWW as well as an extensive bibliography of printed resources. While a number of critical and skeptical thinking sites are currently available, few address specifically issues within psychology. Even fewer include information on why people often fail to think critically about human behavior or on the variety of roadblocks that impede such thinking. Likewise, unlike most sites, I plan to offer numerous examples and practice questions for each concept covered in the site. Finally, there will be information specifically designed to assist psychology instructors (and others) on infusing critical thinking into their classroom. Future plans include gathering information and resources from other disciplinary colleagues on critical thinking within their disciplines (e.g., English, Music, etc...) with the objective of constructing sites that offer advice specific to a variety of disciplines.

Timeline

The web-site will be completed and operational by the Fall 2004 semester.

Technology

I have experience with and access to a variety of html editors that will be necessary to complete the project.

Other Support

Web servers will be provided by the home institution. No other support will be required.

Learning Outcomes

The project is aimed at a wide audience including faculty, students, and the public. The site will be freely available and advertised at my home institution. Once faculty and students are aware of the site, the information should serve to aid both the instruction of pertinent classes as well as students' ability to reason critically about human behavior in a variety of contexts.

Curriculum

The materials would be appropriate for virtually any psychology course, but especially for courses such as introduction to psychology and research methods and statistics. It would also be of value to courses in English, Sociology, Political Science, Economics, Accounting, and other course where a critical consideration of human behavior is important. The concepts should be easily adaptable to a variety of courses and teaching styles.

Assessment

During the development of the page, I plan to consult a number of colleagues on appropriate information to include in the site. Once available, I plan to assess the integration and feasibility of these materials into a variety of psychology courses. After the Fall 2004 term, I plan to send a survey to faculty and students to assess their perceived value of the site and their amount and type of usage of the site. I will also track usage of the site on a regular basis.

Dissemination

The materials will be made freely available via the WWW.