

# Structures for Student Self-Assessment

Critical thinking is thinking that assesses itself. To the extent that our students need us to tell them how well they are doing, they are not thinking critically. Didactic instruction makes students overly dependent on the teacher.

In such instruction, students rarely develop any perceptible intellectual independence and typically have no intellectual standards to assess their thinking with. Instruction that fosters a disciplined, thinking mind, on the other hand, is 180 degrees in the opposite direction.

Each step in the process of thinking critically is tied to a self-reflexive step of self-assessment. As a critical thinker, I do not simply state the problem; I state it and assess it for its clarity. I do not simply gather information; I gather it and check it for its relevance and significance. I do not simply form an interpretation; I check my interpretation to see what it is based on and whether that basis is adequate.

Because of the importance of self-assessment to critical thinking, it is important to bring it into the structural design of the course and not just leave it to episodic tactics. Virtually every day, for example, students should be giving (to other students) and receiving (from other students) feedback on the quality of their work. They should be regularly using intellectual standards in an explicit way. This should be designed into instruction as a regular feature of it.

There are two kinds of criteria that students need to assess their learning of content. They need universal criteria that apply to all of their thinking, irrespective of the particular task. For example, they should always be striving for clarity, accuracy, and significance. Of course, they also need to adjust their thinking to the precise demands of the question or task before them. If there are three parts of the task, they need to attend to all three parts. If the question requires that they find specialized information, then they need to do just that.

One simple structure to use in attending to this dual need is to provide students a set of performance criteria that apply to all of their work, criteria that they will be using over and over. Then, make specific provision for encouraging students to think in a focused way about the particular demands of any given task or question before them.

There are a variety of additional structures that can be used:

## Assessing Writing

1. students in groups of four, choose the best paper, then join with a second group and choose the best of the two. This last paper is read to the class as a whole and a class-

wide discussion is held about the strengths and weaknesses of the papers chosen, leading to the class voting on the best paper of the day.

**2.** students in groups of three or four write out their recommendations for improvement on three or four papers (from students not in the group). The written recommendations go back to the original writer who does a revised draft for next time.

**3.** students in groups of three or four take turns reading their papers and discuss the extent to which they have or have not fulfilled the performance criteria relevant to the paper.

**4.** one student's paper is read aloud slowly to the class while the instructor leads a class-wide discussion on how the paper might be improved. Then the students work in groups of two or three to try to come up with recommendations for improvement for the students in their group (based on the model established by the instructor).

## **Assessing Listening**

Since students spend a good deal of their time listening, it is imperative that they learn critical listening.

**1.** We need to call on them regularly and unpredictably, holding them responsible either to ask questions of clarification or to be prepared to give a summary, elaboration, and examples of what others have said.

**2.** We ask every student to write down the most basic question they need to have answered in order to understand what is being discussed. You then collect the questions (to see where they are at) or you call on some of them to read their questions aloud or you put them in groups of two with each person trying to answer the question of the other.

Through activities such as these students should learn to monitor their listening, determining when they are and when they are not following what is being said. This should lead to their asking pointed questions.

## **Assessing Speaking**

In a well-designed class, students engage in oral performances often. They articulate what they are learning: explaining, giving examples, posing problems, interpreting information, tracing assumptions, etc... They need to learn to assess what they are saying, becoming aware of when they are being vague, when they need an example, when their explanations are inadequate, etc. Here are three general strategies that have a number of tactical forms.

**1.** Students teaching students. One of the best ways to learn is to try to teach someone else. If one has trouble explaining something, it is often because one is not as clear as

one needs to be about what one is explaining.

**2. Group Problem Solving.** By putting students in a group and giving them a problem or issue to work on together, their mutual articulation and exchanges will often help them to think better. They will often help correct each other, and so learn to <sup>3</sup>correct<sup>2</sup> themselves.

**3. Oral test on basic vocabulary.** One complex tactic that aids student learning is the oral test. Students are given a vocabulary list. They are put into groups of twos or threes and are asked to take turns explaining what the words mean. They are encouraged to assess each other's explanations. When some seem prepared, they are assessed by the teacher. The students who pass then become "certifiers" or "tutors" and are assigned to assess other students (or tutor them). Everyone gets multiple experiences explaining, and hearing explanations of, the basic vocabulary.

## **Assessing Reading**

In a well-designed class, students typically engage in a great deal of reading. Hence, it is important that they learn to "figure out" the logic of the what they are reading (the logically interconnected meanings). Good reading is a dialogue between the reader and the writer. The writer has chosen words in which to convey the meaning of his/her thoughts and experiences.

The reader must translate from those words back into his/her own thoughts and experiences, and capture the meaning of the author thereby. This is a complex process requiring good reasoning. We can teach the students the process best by modeling it in the following way:

Structure for teaching critical reading.

You put the students into groups of threes, each with a letter assigned (A, B, or C). You then read a paragraph or two out of the text aloud slowly, commenting on what you are reading as you are reading, explaining what is making immediate sense to you and what you need to figure out by further reading.

After modeling in this manner for a couple of paragraphs, you ask A to take over and read aloud to B and C, explaining to them, sentence by sentence, what he/she is able to figure out and what he/she is not. After A is finished with two paragraphs, then B and C comment on what they do and do not understand (in the paragraphs that A read).

Then you read aloud to the whole class the two paragraphs that A read, commenting as you go. Then B takes over and reads the next two paragraphs to A and C. Then A and C add their thoughts. Then you read aloud what B read. Then you go on to C who reads the next two paragraphs to A and B. And so on. And so forth. As the students are reading in their groups of three, you are circulating around the room listening in and getting an idea of the level of proficiency of their critical reading. The more you use this process, the better students get.

## Doing A Global Self-Assessment

One of the most powerful complex structures is that of requiring students to do a global analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of their performance in a class overall. In order for this tactic to work, the following have to be true:

- students must be given, early on, performance profiles (correlated with grades)
- students must be given multiple opportunities to assess their own work and that of their peers using the performance profiles
- students must be given a thorough orientation on what is and is not expected in the global self-assessment
- students should be required to support all claims that they make with relevant and representative evidence and reasoning
- students should understand that if they argue for a higher grade than they deserve, their grade will be lowered.

{This article is adapted from the resource: *Critical Thinking Basic Theory and Instructional Structures.*}