

Use of Student Feedback on Reflection Papers to Assess Critical Thinking

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Abstract

Religious Studies presents a special challenge to the teaching of critical thinking. Reflection papers that asked students in World Religion classes to summarize, analyze, interpret, evaluate and apply to life the beliefs and practices of various religions, helped them to hone their critical thinking skills. Five separate classes of World Religions over a two-year period were asked to list the benefits and shortcomings of the reflection papers at the end of the semester. Besides affirming critical thinking as their highest choice, other students preferred outcomes such as better retention, preparedness for class, vibrant class discussions, improved writing ability and application to life.

Students from six World Religion classes over a two year period from a State University College were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of reflection papers to promote higher order levels of thinking. They were asked to summarize in reflection papers ten weekly readings over the semester and to critically analyze, evaluate and apply to their lives the content of the material. At the end of the semester, students submitted an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the use of reflection papers to their progress in critical thinking. They found many other advantages in their assessment of the reflection papers that went beyond the assignment to promote critical thinking.

Although critical thinking has been a goal of Educators in the past, its necessity has been strengthened by our contact with so many world cultures. Students must analyze, interpret and evaluate world events that are communicated daily by our mass media. They must make intelligent decisions regarding the occurring events and ideas in a pluralistic and global society. Courses in World Religions challenge our students to apply the techniques of critical thinking to the various beliefs and practices of Eastern and Western religions that appear with such prominence in the media.

Alexander Astin (1993) in his popular book *Assessment for Excellence*, says, "Of all the skills that are considered basic to the purpose of liberal education, critical thinking is probably at the top of the list". Perry (1999) stressed the need for reflective thinking focused on the evaluation of various alternatives as essential to critical thinking. A longitudinal study by Giancarlo & Falcione (2001) tested the critical thinking dispositions of freshmen and then again four years later as seniors. Students showed a growth in critical thinking skills in that "they came to endorse more strongly the ideal of putting aside personal biases in the pursuit of good evidence and reason" (2001). The authors also found that humanities, letters and language students scored highest in truth seeking and open-mindedness.

Challenges to Critical Thinking in Religion Classes

Although World Religions is a Humanities course, students in some of our classes appear to be challenged to stay open-minded when discussing values, laws and beliefs which seem to be in conflict with their own. Religion by its nature promotes certitude in its adherents and thus becomes a challenge to critical thinkers. A study of world religions provides so many alternate beliefs, practices and values that some students feel threatened. The students find the issue of truth seeking challenging because they have definite ideas of truth formed by their own religious and cultural traditions. As important as reflection

on multiple interpretations of subject matter is to critical thinking, many students find it difficult to be open-minded when their cherished values are at stake. There is a fear when examining many diverse scriptures and beliefs of various religions that the investigation may lead to relativism. The thought arises that with so many scriptures from so many religions, none of them may be true. Or perhaps all of them have truth. If one religion is as good as another, what is the purpose of adhering to one's own religious tradition? Or it might work in reverse, in that some students believe that only their religion contains the truth, so all others must be in error.

Critical thinking is so important for students of World Religions classes because they not only have to reflect on their own opinions and assumptions, but also they need to consider alternate positions. Some of the Eastern Religions that we study focus on a monistic approach to life rather than the dualistic system with which they are so accustomed. Some students have difficulty adjusting from the categorical thinking of the West to the more integrative thinking of the East. Reflective thinking helps students to avoid the pitfalls pointed out by Paul, Elder and Bartell (2004) "Human thinking left to itself often gravitates toward prejudice, over generalization, common fallacies, self deception, rigidity and narrowness".

Definitions of Critical Thinking

Robert Ennis (1987) defines critical thinking as "Reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe. Gerald Nosich (2005) adds the actions of "questioning, seeking answers to our questions through reason and research and believing the results enough to act on them". In deciding our actions, one must decide what to value and how to weigh competing values and how best we can achieve our goals. In order to avoid the pitfall of making too hasty conclusions, Bailin et al. (1999) characterizes critical thinking as "responsible assessment of reasons and arguments, along with responsible deliberation". Pithers and Soden (2000) refer to the need for disciplined thinking that is practiced by accepting and rejecting arguments based on purposeful and reasoned judgment, not based on emotions or assumptions.

A key ingredient of critical thinking is knowledge, which is necessary to make informed decisions. Each of the World Religions must be evaluated on its own merits as a philosophical system, not on the ways they fail to adhere to Western criteria. Rather, each religion needs to be evaluated on the

correlation between their beliefs, rituals, and practices, which include their moral standards. For instance, when Hinduism worships a plurality of gods and goddesses, they are not inconsistent with their belief in one Ultimate Reality. The various deities are just manifestations of the One Ultimate Reality, Brahman. Students need the knowledge of the doctrines and scriptures of each religion before they can attempt to evaluate them.

Critical thinking in world religion classes depends upon the students' ability to entertain ideas without necessarily accepting them. Some students have become so enamored of Buddhism that they have contemplated conversion to that religion. Others just admire the admirable essence of the teachings without trying to make them their own. Some in their zeal to refrain from judging negatively on a certain religion will accept such practices as bride burning, female infanticide and suttee of widows as part of the cultural norms. A discussion on objective moral values, such as the dignity of the human person and the priority of human life helps students to critically analyze the reasons given for some of the questionable practices. Applying the principles of critical thinking is essential to the application of religious, cultural and political issues so those students can see the multifaceted dimensions of the questions as they reflect on their own participation in a pluralistic world.

Methodology

I assigned Reflection papers that were due each week over the semester that asked students to summarize, critically analyze, evaluate and apply to life the assigned readings. At the end of the semester, students were asked to list the pros and cons of the assignment for a five point extra credit. There were no other directions. They generated the advantages and disadvantages themselves without any outside help. They attached their names to the evaluation which attracted almost full class participation.

Shakirova (2007) says there are four stages in developing critical thinking, all of which involve motivation and reflection. Students must (1) see the relevance of the knowledge, awakening an interest and curiosity toward the subject, (2) engage in critical reading and writing, (3) engage in contemplation or reflection, shaping a personal opinion and attitude toward the material, (4) generalizing and assessing the information and application to life's problems. With these criteria in mind, I gave the following directions for the reflection papers.

Because the academic study of religion demands that we examine each religion from the viewpoint of the insider, we cannot judge or compare religious beliefs from a sectarian viewpoint in class. However students should have the opportunity to analyze, evaluate and critically reflect on the various aspects of each religion.

Therefore ten reflection papers are assigned at 5 points each so that students may engage in higher order thinking as they prepare for class. The papers should contain a summary of the chapter and your reflection on the material as you critically analyze, interpret, evaluate and apply it to life.

The papers are to consist of no less than one full page or no more than two pages of double spaced 12 point typing. Half of the paper will contain your summary of the subject matter and the other half your critical analysis and application to life. My evaluation of your papers will be confined to your ability to summarize the material and the connections you make to your reflection. It will not include your opinions. Papers will be collected each Monday and returned each Wednesday with my comments.

Students were asked at the end of the semester to list the benefits and shortcomings of these ten reflection papers assigned over the semester. Five classes of World Religions were involved in the study over a two-year period, four regular semester classes and one summer session class. Most of the students were seniors and juniors.

The total number of returns was 172, with 565 responses because there was no limit to their comments. The affirmative responses numbered 480 and the negative responses were 85. Because the responses were freely given with no restrictions to the number of benefits or shortcomings, many answers were repetitious. I tried to consolidate the divergent responses into the following categories. They are recorded according to the number of answers beginning with the highest.

Affirmative Responses

1. Promoted critical thinking	65
2. Can give my personal opinion	60
3. Helped me to study for tests	54
4. Helped me to understand the topics more in depth	54
5. Kept students up to date and prepared for class	52
6. Liked the ability to apply the readings to life	41
7. Added to class discussions because everyone was prepared	32
8. Growth in writing ability, summarizing and note taking	30
9. Made me read the chapters	26
10. Helped me to learn, retain and process information	19

11. Allowed me to compare the religions to my personal faith	18
12. Learned more about myself	18

Negative Responses

1. Too difficult to summarize a whole chapter in one page	44
2. Too difficult and time consuming to have a paper every week	41

Interpretations

1. Promoting critical thinking

Students did place this factor highest on the hierarchical plan, indicating that they thought they attained some competence. Because some students hold their religious beliefs and practices strongly, they are not eager to question them. The elements of critical thinking involving analyzing arguments and searching alternatives seem heretical to them. Students of the fundamentalist persuasions are very resistant to questioning their own beliefs, but can be somewhat judgmental in their observation of others. But their answers to the survey questions indicated that they were able to overcome some of their prejudices over time.

On the other hand, many students are so fearful of judging others, that they refrain from making any negative comments even in the face of objectively evil practices. Various religions justify in their teaching such issues as wars, oppression of women, infanticide and lack of human rights. It is sometimes difficult for our students to understand that some actions are objectively wrong regardless of religious beliefs and practices. Some students struggle toward the tendency to generalize to a whole religion such incidental practices as suicide bombing and assassinations, resulting in narrow understandings and stereotypical thinking. Even with all these challenges to critical thinking, most students saw the value to its use.

2. Can give my personal opinions

The academic study of religion demands that the instructor and student remain neutral regarding personal opinions and refrain from comparing one particular religion with another. Students seemed to enjoy recording their own opinions without fear of grade penalty. I thought it was important to see the

arguments they constructed to justify their opinions. After a few comments on their papers commending their efforts, supporting arguments improved. Some students, still hesitant to express judgment on other religious beliefs and practices needed to be prodded to place their negative opinions more on the practices rather than on their beliefs. This helped them to evaluate the religion more on its consistency between the dimensions of beliefs, rituals and practice rather than emotional reactions.

3. Helped me to study for tests.

A priority for success in college is achievement on tests. Students are realistic in determining the benefits of their time and energy toward that goal. Our students are pragmatists and passing exams takes precedence over many other activities. Testing usually causes anxiety in students and they seek out any aids to insure their success. Students in study groups said that their summaries were helpful because they stressed the important points. Their test results compared favorably to previous classes that had not written reflection papers.

4. Helped to understand the topics more in depth

The assignment was designed to promote higher orders of thinking so I was pleased that so many students said that they understood the topics more in depth. With so many religions to study in a short time, it is essential that students have more than a cursory overview of each one. We hung each religion on the framework of its three most salient dimensions: the intellectual dimension includes the scriptures and doctrines, the experiential involves rituals, prayers, and meditations, the organizational describes the leadership, offices, and creativity expressed in art, artifacts, music and architecture. Students often made these connections in their reflection papers, especially if they could see the relation to their majors.

5. Kept students up to date and prepared for class.

The results of the NESSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) study indicated that students often missed their reading assignments and came unprepared for class. When students are familiar with the vocabulary of the discipline, especially the scriptures, rituals, leadership roles etc., the lectures and class discussions are more meaningful. Repetition has the benefit of aiding retention of the material, which helps students in the testing process. Writing summaries forced students to read thoughtfully, looking for the important points. Part of the goals of higher order thinking is to challenge students to put

ideas into their own words rather than regurgitating the material. It took some time over the semester to help students refrain from copying words from the text. Because attendance was taken from the papers received, students were conscientious about handing in the readings.

6. Liked the application to life

Students said they were motivated to read because the material was relevant when they could apply it to their lives. Each religion has its own version of spirituality, which is connected to their everyday living. The problem of suffering and suggestions for coping with it according to Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity showed many similarities among them, which stimulated student interest. The moral code of Shinto and the concern for ecology of the Native Americans was most appealing to our students. Opposed at first, our students began to look more kindly at the arranged marriages of Hinduism. Confucianism's concern for order in society, although paternalistic, seemed quite relevant to our present culture of individualism. It was the persistence in prayer, five times a day in Islam that aroused the most admiration in our students. Because the issue of suffering is tied so closely to the problem of evil, it prompted some deep inquiry and reflection on the part of the students.

7. Added to class discussion because everyone was prepared.

Unfortunately, it did not refer to everyone, but the quality of the discussions did improve over previous classes before I assigned the reflection papers. Their ability to summarize on the papers did improve, leading to a shortening of the meandering comments during the small group discussions. The reflections from their own opinions and experiences seemed to interest their listeners and encourage similar responses. Small group discussions helped the instructor to accommodate to students' diverse learning styles. Grasha (1996) has defined learning styles as "personal qualities that influence a student's ability to acquire information, to interact with peers and the teacher, and otherwise participate in the learning experience". The exchange of information and personal experiences helped to build a sense of community, which showed in the conversation before and after class. The downside of this community building was that it was difficult to break up the groups for discussion with other students because they became so comfortable with their companions in their own groups. The large class discussions benefited from their preparation because it involved more students instead of a usual few.

8. Growth in writing ability, note taking and summarizing

I noticed a distinct improvement over the semester in the student's ability to summarize. My own comments on their papers changed from "use your own words", "do not copy the book", to "succinct expression", "captured the essence" etc. Even their short essay exams over the semester exhibited a honed writing ability that kept to the point rather than supplying extraneous information in the hope that one might hit the correct answer.

9. Made me read the chapters.

Although this is not very commendable motivation, the grade assigned to the papers gave an impetus to handing them in on time. A point was deducted each day a paper was late because the class lecture and discussion were geared to the prepared reading. A few students said that the reflection papers made them buy the book, something they rarely did.

10. Helped me to learn, retain and process information

The retention showed in their higher marks in their exams, however, the processing was more difficult to evaluate. When they were asked on the department class evaluation form at the end of the semester "what they liked best about the class", almost every person answered, "learning about different religions".

11. Allowed me to compare the religions with my personal faith

Since we tried not to compare religions, but only generalize salient features that all religions contain, students needed an opportunity to reflect on the similarities and differences between their own religion and the religions studied. Some of the students who did not know much about their own religions were forced to do some research. Others did reflect on the merits of some of their own religious practices, especially the attitudes displayed towards women.

12. I learned more about myself

Critical thinking engenders self reflection. The study of spirituality examines motives for behavior, many of them hidden at first from the owner. Practicing the meditations led to self-knowledge, a criterion for critical thinking. Walker & Finney (1999) found that one of the benefits of reflection is self-awareness. "This in turn seems to have led to the development of a more thoughtful, inquiring and open-minded approach in both, their professional and personal life". Instructors of Religion courses never tell students

what to believe, only that they know why they believe. This self-knowledge leads to maturity, preparing our students for more satisfying and abundant lives.

Conclusions

A quote from one of the students helped to evaluate the assignment for me. "Most courses do not put a major emphasis on higher order thinking, but I believe that this higher order thinking which includes critical thinking is key to any education".

Some colleges have undertaken special Critical Thinking classes while others have chosen to incorporate the essentials of critical thinking into regular classes. I found that students were receptive to using the principles of critical thinking in their work when they were presented as characteristics of higher order thinking.

Students overcame their fear of questioning religious beliefs and showed willingness to question assumptions, a foundational rubric for critical thinking. They learned the difference between uncritical and predisposed judgment and objective evaluation based on evidence. Critical thinking encourages the study of scripture, values and beliefs of various religions to promote active engagement in a pluralistic world. Our global society demands the ability to understand and value perspectives other than one's own. The study of various religions offered opportunity to present unfamiliar concepts and perspectives that challenged students to use the skills of critical thinking. Religions by their nature encourage certitude, but the academic study of religion is more conducive to critical thinking than theology that structures arguments in defense of the specified religion. Our World Religions course uses analytical thinking which requires freedom of inquiry to examine controversial beliefs and practices. The reflection papers provided the opportunity for this examination and questioning in a private, conflict free environment.

The reflection papers stimulated class discussion, which allowed students to share their insights. The variety of student learning styles was reflected in the class discussions. Students who learn better through discussion rather than lecture, were prepared to contribute and assimilate the concepts of others. Full class discussions enabled the teacher and students together, to explore important issues that deepen understanding and respect for the viewpoints of the various religions.

Critical thinking skills contributed to the improvement of students' writing ability. One cannot write well without thinking coherently. Argument building, answering opposition viewpoints, and coming to

reasoned conclusions are elements of critical thinking that contribute to good writing. Future employers look for writing abilities that incorporate analytical thinking, effective communication, and collaborative problem solving skills. College professors can prepare students for these expectations through the use of reflection papers that promote critical thinking.

The study of World Religions encourages students to look beyond the classroom to the world's major questions that demand analytical, ethical and reasoned answers. Cooperative as well as individual performance will enhance the creative efforts engendered by critical thinking as our students move into a world challenged by a shortage of religious principles of justice, forgiveness, compassion and human dignity.

Teacher evaluation

Faculty often desire a richer feedback over the standard end of course evaluations required by college and academic departments. I would use the reflection papers again to gain the student feedback as one method of evaluation along with testing and class participation. Naidu and Jarvela (2006) suggest that student transcript analysis is an effective method to assess student learning. I was surprised at the various responses that claimed to help testing, understanding of the subject matter, improved writing ability, especially the improvement in summarizing; making them read the chapters and the chance to give their own opinions. I must admit that these were some of my hidden agendas, but I did not think that the students would recognize them so easily.

Assigning the reflection papers ten times over the semester helped me to adapt my teaching to the needs of the students in a timely fashion. For example, I found that I had to spend more time on the elements of critical thinking and the recognition of arguments.

Waiting until the end of the semester for course evaluation prevents the professor from adapting her teaching techniques to the advantage of student learning. Seldin (1993) gave sound advice, "If course evaluations are to be used to improve teaching, they should be given within the semester so that the instructors have a chance to improve their teaching".

In the future, I would like to compare grades of students who did not use the reflection papers with grades of students who did use them. Looking back to past classes, I did notice that the marks were better in these classes that used the reflection papers. I would like to use reflection papers in other

classes to see if the students would claim similar progress to the World Religion Classes. It seems that many subjects could benefit from the use of reflection papers, especially humanities courses. Students would be encouraged to use higher forms of thinking, hallmarked by critical thinking in literature, history, philosophy and theater courses. Because the papers gave me insight into the private lives of the students, my relationship with many of them improved. I could talk to them about their personal goals, fears, and hardships during office hours in a more relaxed manner.

It seems to me that obtaining direct information from students is more beneficial to the professor than reading about them from another author. Therefore I think that most classes from various disciplines would benefit from weekly reflection papers to enable students to grow beyond their own ethnocentric thinking as they consider solutions to our global world problems.

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