

# Critical Thinking Skills: The Recipe for an Overwhelming Success in the 21st Century

Nazmi Al-Shalabi  
The Hashemite University  
Jordan

## Abstract

*It is argued that the need for critical thinking in university education is accentuated in response to the rapidly changing world and the complexity of today's world where people are required to comprehend, judge, and participate in generating new knowledge and processes. It is also argued that critical thinking skills are an important prerequisite for learning and the sole recipe for success in the twenty first century. The discussion shows the manner in which critical thinking skills are promoted and employed in the classroom to enhance learning and equip learners with the skills that prepare them for their future careers and enable them to achieve success in different fields of life. It has been demonstrated that critical thinking skills are indispensable, advantageous, and necessary. It has been also shown that critical thinking skills constitute the recipe for success in the 21st century. Without these skills, learners won't be able to function well and actively participate in social and political spheres.*

**Keywords:** critical thinking, function, equip, complexity, prepare, indispensable, learners, recipe, success

I have argued elsewhere that critical thinking is an asset, and that it is something of a weapon that we equip learners with to enable them to cope with changing realities. By virtue of this weapon, students can easily become successful individuals in their countries. They can contribute to the development of these countries because they can effectively deal with social, scientific, and practical problems and solve all of them. They can also apply their knowledge to real life situations. Individuals armed with skills are in great demand in today's society that is replete with problems whose number keeps going up. The reason underlying this increase is that education which is mainly based on transmitting information to learners has not been doing them any good. This education has been focusing on giving rather than investigating information. Therefore, it has been disregarding the social responsibility towards learners, which justifies its disappearance and its being replaced by another variety which emphasizes critical thinking and which all educators dream of its being the outcome of the learning process. To fulfill this dream, critical thinking should be integrated into the learning process to help students with realizing their full potential. This critical thinking is not a method to be learned. Rather, it is a process that concentrates on analyzing arguments, making inferences, evaluating, and making decisions. Critical thinking has been defined in various ways. To Logan(1976),for instance, it is simply a "rational method"(31).To Stauffer (1980), it is "demystification and clarification," a "transcending of common sense culture"(254).To Klooster (2001),critical thinking is independent thinking that uses information as the starting point(36-37).Following Logan, Stauffer, and Kooster's steps, Facione(1998) maintains that critical thinking is about "how you approach problems, questions, issues. It is the best way we know to get to the truth" (paragraph 26). Like Facione, Ennis (1962) views critical thinking as "the correct assessing of statements" (83). To Scriven and Paul, critical thinking is an intellectually disciplined process which encourages conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/ or evaluating information. In brief, critical thinking is a process that involves the analytical evaluation of a situation.

These definitions reveal that critical thinking skills are of great value. Emphasizing this value, Shakirova (2007) holds that critical thinking skills enable students to "deal effectively with social, scientific, and practical problems"(42).Similarly, Raymond S. Nickerson (1987) claims that the failure to develop one's potential in critical thinking precludes the full expression of one's humanity(32).Like Nickerson, Shaila and Trudell (2010) argue that critical thinking is essential, especially for students living in a country with political and socio-economic problems for it "will help them to look at issues with different viewpoints and become independent thinkers and responsible citizens"(6).

Realizing the dire need for these skills, Chet Meyers writes that “the development of thinking skills ... is particularly acute today, when our culture’s output of information far exceeds our ability to think critically about that information” (xi). Stressing this need for skills, Stein (2000) contends that the meaning of “knowing” is being shifted “from being able to remember and repeat information to being able to find and use it”. Underlining the necessity of this shift, Clement (1979) stated that “we should be teaching students how to think. Instead, we are teaching them what to think” (1). Criticizing the disregard of critical thinking skills, Norman noted in 1981 that “it is strange that we expect students to learn, yet seldom teach them anything about learning” (1). Whereas it is useless to memorize information and repeat it, it is highly significant to teach learners how to find information for themselves, assess it, analyze it, evaluate it, make reasoned

decisions, and take a purposeful action. A learner with these skills can easily utilize the information at hand to solve any problems, engage in self-learning, and upgrade his/ her knowledge. Taking the great value of thinking skills into account, it becomes quite easy to understand how they empower learners and help them not only with solving their problems but also becoming successful individuals capable of contributing to the development of their countries. Unfortunately, many teachers have been unable to make use of these skills. Most teachers have been concerned with rote learning that doesn’t help students with learning anything of value. Giving priority to memorizing information over understanding, these teachers limit themselves to lecturing and never try helping their students with thinking critically about the material taught. As long as testing is based on the method of instruction, these teachers do their students further harm by giving them questions that focus only on memorizing information, which gives the few who are good at cheating the opportunity to relax, and get a high grade without necessarily attending any class or learning any piece of information. Teachers who act this way take themselves to be working hard for the good of their country, the good of parents, and the good of students themselves. In fact, these teachers do students more harm than good because they train them on how to memorize information, and answer questions without understanding anything out of the material. In a sense, they train students on how to be helpless because students taught this way do lack critical thinking skills, and, consequently, fail to consider in a thoughtful manner the problems and subjects that come within the range of their experiences.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that students belonging to this category are failures. These students fail both in the workplace and in their personal lives. This failure occurs because of their inability to separate facts from opinions, examine an issue from different perspectives, make rational inferences, withhold personal biases, question information given to them, go beyond surface meaning to discover the deep meaning, etc. Without these skills, education becomes a waste not only of time but also of money and energy. Unfortunately, this worthless education that turns the learner into a parrot is still practiced in many schools despite the talk that has been going on about improving the quality of teaching and the necessity of changing and being in harmony with the ever-changing world. In this paper I argue that teachers should teach students how to think rather than what to think in order to improve the educational process. Regarding the way to achieve this objective, it is the teacher’s duty to create activities that foster critical thinking in the students themselves. To take an example, the teacher can ask students to do a summary of a short story they have read. This teacher himself should advise students to use their own words. When this job has been done, the teacher can ask them to read the summaries in class. After reading, the teacher can ask them a number of questions based on the summaries. He can ask them, for instance, to argue for or against a certain argument, and to justify their views. He can also give them questions that can be answered in different ways. For instance, if he is teaching Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, he can ask about Hester, or Dimmesdale, or Roger Chillingworth as follows:

Do you regard Hester to be a good or a bad mother? Give reasons!

Do you hold Arthur Dimmesdale to be sinful or sinless? Give reasons!

In your own judgment, is Chilingworth blameworthy? Give reasons!

Who do you blame for Hester’s sin? Give reasons!

In addition to these questions, the teacher can also ask other questions that call for passing judgments as follows:

Does Hester fit into today's society? In what way?

Does Dimmesdale fit into today's society? Explain!

Does Chillingworth fit into today's society? How?

Questions of this sort examine not only the clarity and accuracy of students' thinking but also its depth and breadth. These questions also necessitate that students think critically and process their responses. Commenting on the time needed for responding, Schafersman (1991) claims that students need at least 8-12 seconds to process and formulate their responses. Poor students certainly need much more time to investigate information and apply knowledge which are both necessary for promoting critical thinking skills. These skills can be also promoted by means of the exam. The teacher can do this job by giving students essay questions that are real indicators of understanding.

Examples of these questions are:

You have studied Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*. Which one of these novels do you hold to be your favorite? Give reasons! Did these novels impact you? How? Did these novels change you? How? Do you hold yourself to be great? In what way? Compare and contrast Fitzgerald and Crane or Hawthorne and Crane!

What do you think of Crane's contention that Maggie is innocent? Do you agree or disagree with him? Give reasons for your answer! Can you think of a different ending of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or S. Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*? Do you see any connection between *Gatsby* and today's men? Explain! Do you see any connection between Maggie and today's girls? Explain! Do you see any connection between Pete and today's young men? Explain!

Questions of this sort promote critical thinking skills because they require that students think about the question, contemplate their thoughts, organize these thoughts, evaluate the data, and present their conclusions in a convincing manner. In addition to the lecture and exam, the teacher can employ the homework assignment to promote critical thinking skills. He/She may ask students to paraphrase or summarize a reading assignment, stipulating that they use their own words. He/She may also ask them to write about their own experiences and their opinions of a writer's argument. In addition to this, the teacher may ask a question about classification which plays an important role in critical thinking for it calls for identification and sorting according to certain criteria that students should understand and apply. To take an example, the teacher may ask students to classify all the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The House of the Seven Gables* and determine the romantic ones, the flat ones, the central ones, the round ones, the passive, the marginalized, the ones lacking identities, the poor, the rich, etc. Another example is to ask students to look for a pattern similar to that of sin and retribution or sin and concealment that occurs in Hawthorne's novels. By giving students questions of this sort, the teacher can develop their critical thinking skills.

It is worth mentioning that these skills themselves constitute the sole recipe for success in the 21st - century world that is complex, rapidly-changing, and challenge-presenting. As regards challenges, they are legion. Employers face numerous challenges, and so do employees and learners. All of them are after success. While employers badly need employees who are competent, innovative, capable of solving problems, and able to communicate and collaborate with others, employees and learners equally need the critical thinking skills that empower them and help them with meeting unpredictable challenges and achieving success. Whereas employers need hands equipped with skills to compete with others and stand out, employees and learners need critical thinking skills to succeed not only in the workplace but also in their personal lives. Arguing in support of this claim, J. Willard Marriot, Jr., Chairman and CEO, Marriot International, Inc. holds that "young people need more than basic reading... they need substantial content knowledge and information technology skills; advanced thinking skills to adapt to change; and interpersonal skills to succeed in multicultural, cross-functional teams." Emphasizing the same needs, another employer claims that he has hands unable to ask questions.

These two arguments stress the dire need for critical thinking skills to excel in this century which is becoming an increasingly competitive working environment. These thinking skills are a prerequisite for success for a number of reasons. Firstly, today's world is marked by a vast amount of information that is at the disposal of humans who won't be able to make use of it without critical thinking skills. To be utilized, this information should be investigated, analyzed, and assessed to determine whether it is reliable or not, acceptable or not.

These jobs cannot be done without critical thinking skills. A person unarmed with thinking skills cannot make any use of them. The result is that this person fails to achieve success. Secondly, critical thinking skills are life skills. Not only do these skills contribute to success in the classroom, but also in the world. Critical thinking skills do the people equipped with them good as long as they are alive. These skills empower them, make them flexible, and enable them to take the initiative, to communicate with others, to work with them, and to be productive. Thirdly, critical thinking skills create borderless learning spheres. They prepare students to be learners for life. By arming learners with critical thinking skills, we help them with learning outside the classroom. By virtue of the skills they have been provided with, they keep learning on their own, which makes them stand out of the crowd. Fourthly, critical thinking skills are central to communication, innovation, problem solving, and collaboration which are all in great demand in today's world on account of their being factors of success. Reckoning with the given reasons, it becomes clear that students' futures will be at stake if they're not equipped with critical thinking skills. To do students justice universities should reconsider the current methods of instruction that are worthless, and adopt new ones that equip learners with the critical thinking skills which help them become creative, resilient, productive, and empathetic human beings. In other words, the school's arming learners with the thinking skills of the century has become an incumbency. Learners armed with these skills can ask appropriate questions, gather relevant information, sort through this information, reason logically from it, and arrive at reliable conclusions, which enables them to live well, and act successfully. In stark contrast with these learners are the ones without skills whose failure is a certainty, and whose survival is doubtful. I have demonstrated that critical thinking skills are the sole recipe for success in the 21st century, that they are indispensable, that they are central to functioning well and participating in different spheres, that they are in great demand these days, that they open new learning terrains, that they help learners with self-learning, and that they help learners upgrade their knowledge.

### **Works Cited**

- Clement, J. (1979). Introduction to research in cognitive process instruction. In Lochhead, J. and Clement, J. (Eds.), Cognitive process instruction. Hillsdale, J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ennis, R.H.(1962).A concept of critical thinking. Harvard Educational Review, 22 (1):81-111.
- Facione, P.A. (1998). Critical thinking. what it is and why it counts. Available at:  
[http://www.insightassessment.com/pdf\\_files/what\\_&why\\_98.pdf](http://www.insightassessment.com/pdf_files/what_&why_98.pdf)
- Karim, Asim. (2011).Critical thinking for literature teachers in university level academic setting in Pakistan. Language in India, Vol.11.
- Klooster, D. (2001).What is critical thinking? Thinking Classroom, 4, 36-37.
- Logan, G.H. (1976). Do Sociologists Teach Students to think more Critically? Teaching Sociology, 4(1), 29-48.
- Meyers, Chet.(1986). Teaching Students to Think Critically. p. xi.
- Nickerson, R. S.(1987).Why teach thinking? In Teaching Thinking Skills: Theory and Practice. Ed. Joan Boykoff Baron and Robert J. Sternberg. New York: W.H. Freeman & Co.
- Norman, D.A. (Ed.) (1981). Perspectives on cognitive science. Hillsdale, NJ; Erlbaum
- Schafersman, S.D. (1991).An introduction to critical thinking. Retrieved January 2, 2008 from:  
<http://www.freeinquiry.com/criticalthinking.html>
- Scriven, M. and R. Paul (2010). Foundation of critical thinking. Available at: <http://criticalthinking.org> Retrieved (2010).
- Shaila, M.Y. & B. Trudell, B.(2010).From Passive Learners to Critical Thinkers: Preparing EFL students for university success. English Teaching Forum, Vol.48, No. 2, 2-9. <http://criticalthinking.org>
- Shakirova, D.M.(2007).Technology for the shaping of college students' and upper-grade Students' critical thinking. Russian Education and Society, 49(9), 42-52.
- Stauffer (1980). Teaching Sociology, Vol.14, 254-256.
- Stein, S.(2000). Equipped for the future content standards: What adults need to know and be able to do in the 21st century. National Institute for Literacy.