

Instructor-led FD: Critical Thinking in EDC Discussions

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a faculty development session led by the author during Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Fall 2019 orientation. The aim of the session was to stress the importance of activating background knowledge for critical thinking in discussions, and to give participants a chance to brainstorm methods of creating better quality discussions. This paper describes the rationale, organisation, and procedure of the session, before commenting on its perceived effectiveness. Sufficient description is provided so that others may follow this format for similar training sessions in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The motivation to create this workshop was hearing numerous comments from fellow instructors about a lack of variety in student ideas during class discussions. On the one hand this could perhaps be expected, considering that the student body is relatively homogenous. What is more, exercising critical thinking (CT) in a second language is more difficult because both linguistic and analytic demands result in an increased cognitive load (Floyd, 2011; Luk and Lin, 2015; Manalo and Sheppard, 2016). However, within the literature on the topic, research shows that activating and cultivating background knowledge is important for fostering better CT (Sternberg, 1986; McPeck, 1990; Stapleton, 2001). With this in mind it was hoped that a faculty development (FD) session giving instructors the chance to share ideas on fostering CT in preparation activities for class discussion would be of benefit. This was especially the case at the time of running the FD because changes in Rikkyo University lesson scheduling meant that there was an extra ten minutes added to the lesson length, thereby allowing more time for additional class activities. One way in which this additional time could be used is to better prepare students to analyse the discussion topics in detail.

The workshop was held during the Fall instructor orientation period. The reason for holding it in Fall rather than Spring was because the Fall semester requires students to use phrases which facilitate deeper analysis of the discussion topics, such as discussing advantages and disadvantages, other people's points of view, and information from outside sources. Furthermore, the topics included in the Fall textbook, such as poverty, gender, and crime, are intentionally more complex than the more familiar topics featured in the Spring textbook. It was also hoped that utilizing CT would make discussions more interesting for participants, as they could delve further into the topics. Although the development of CT is not a stated goal of the course, this could also have the benefit of increasing student motivation, as student course feedback sometimes mentioned a desire for deeper discussion content (Brereton, Schaefer, Bordilovskaya, & Reid, 2019). From the instructors' point of view, it was hoped that the FD would be beneficial because all instructors need to do preparation activities as part of the English Discussion Class' (EDC) unified syllabus lesson plans, and these preparation activities are an area of lesson planning over which instructors have a lot of control. In this sense the workshop would be of practical use for all participants.

In what follows I shall first outline the organization and staging of the FD. I will then show the Power Point slides used and describe how they were incorporated. This will provide a format by which this FD can be modified or followed by others. I then discuss my perceptions of how the actual workshop went, before concluding.

ORGANIZATION

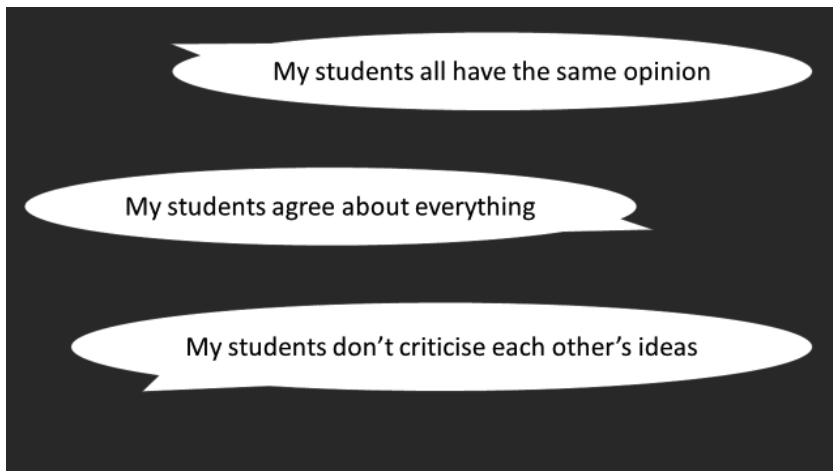
Orientation scheduling meant that the FD was conducted twice. To begin with half of the EDC instructors attended the first session of the FD, then half of the instructors the second session that followed immediately after. This was beneficial in that running two sessions allowed smaller group sizes for the workshop activities, which were more conducive to participants sharing ideas than would otherwise be possible. To begin with, participants sat on tables of four and listened to a commentary presenting background information on CT. This took about 10 minutes. Power Point slides were used to present information, using black backgrounds with white text so that the lights could be kept on in the room. Slides were in general text-light, as the workshop intended to provide sufficient background context for the practical activities to follow, rather than present detailed explanations of critical thinking theory. In other words, I did not want to get bogged down in theory because this was supposed to be a practical workshop. For the practical stage of the FD the first part required pair work, and so participants worked with the person sitting next to them. For this, handouts were prepared for participants, showing a discussion page from the new EDC textbook for the Fall semester. There were enough different handouts so that each pair could discuss a different preparation activity from a different unit of the textbook. Pairs of participants discussed how to create a preparation activity which encouraged CT among students. Participants could make notes on the handouts they received. This stage lasted about 10 minutes. The second part of the practical activity required participants to move places and form new groups of three instructors, whereby each of the three group members had talked about a different unit of the textbook. Instructors then compared the ideas they had come up with and had the chance to ask questions about each other's ideas. Doing so meant that participants were exposed to a range of different activities and exercises for the coming semester. This stage lasted about 15 minutes. Finally, the FD was wrapped up by asking the participants to share any new or interesting ideas that they had heard from the discussion.

PROCEDURE

This section of the paper shows the Power Point slides that were used and contains a step-by-step description of how the FD was conducted. It is organised around themes in the FD.

FD rationale

Slide 1

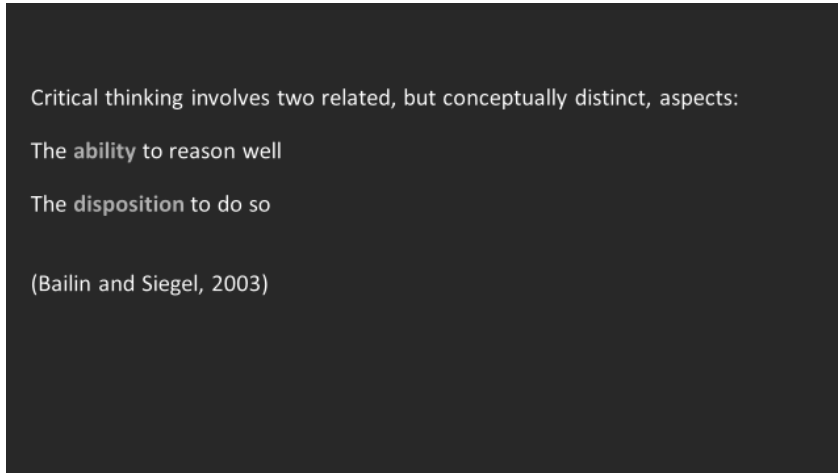


Slide 1 displays three generic comments that I have frequently heard instructors make. This was intended to engage the audience by showing that the FD addresses a relevant issue for their professional role: something they may have already noted themselves.

Views of critical thinking

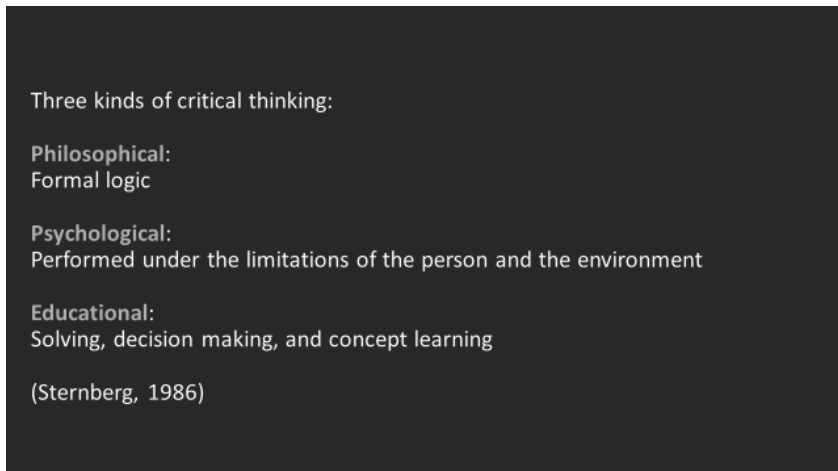
Slides 2-5 present a brief overview of some classifications that have been suggested for CT. These were intended to give participants an overview of the field. I gave participants a few seconds to read each slide, then added a brief explanation of my own.

Slide 2



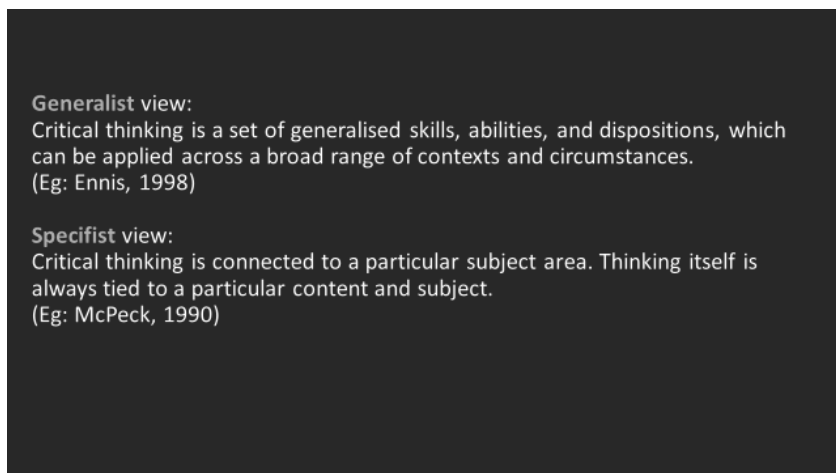
Slide 2 presents two ways CT has been conceived of: as a technical skill, and as a psychological attitude.

Slide 3



Slide 3 presents three ways in which CT has been categorized: as a mathematical style process of logic, as a personalized (subjective) analysis, and as a problem-solving process.

Slide 4

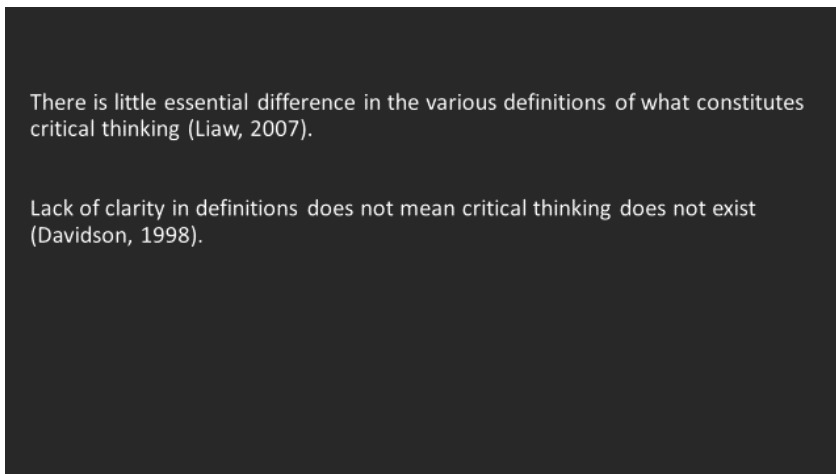


Generalist view:
Critical thinking is a set of generalised skills, abilities, and dispositions, which can be applied across a broad range of contexts and circumstances.
(Eg: Ennis, 1998)

Specificist view:
Critical thinking is connected to a particular subject area. Thinking itself is always tied to a particular content and subject.
(Eg: McPeck, 1990)

Slide 4 presents an important debate in the literature, about whether CT is an ability which transcends subject boundaries, or whether it is limited to specific academic subject areas. This is relevant for the EDC context because if instructors believe CT is limited to a subject area they may wish to concentrate on developing topic knowledge, but if they think CT is generalizable they may wish to do specific activities which develop CT.

Slide 5



There is little essential difference in the various definitions of what constitutes critical thinking (Liaw, 2007).

Lack of clarity in definitions does not mean critical thinking does not exist (Davidson, 1998).

Slide 5 addresses a possible objection I anticipated some instructors may have; namely, that the conception or practice of CT is not valid because it cannot be precisely defined and agreed upon. I wished to make the point that while the literature presents different views of what CT is, and instructors themselves may have different conceptions of what CT is, definitions of the concept share enough similarity enough to be valuable. I likened the different interpretations of what CT is to other terms in Second Language Acquisition literature which have been defined in various ways, such as *motivation*, *autonomy*, and *willingness to communicate*. I wished to show that practically speaking the participants are essentially on the same page with their view of the topic.

Controversies regarding critical thinking

Slides 6 and 7 present the arguments that have been proposed for and against incorporating CT in second language lessons.

Slide 6

Critical thinking “is largely a sociocognitive practice that draws significantly on shared cultural practices and norms that mainstream students have (had) access to” (Ramanathan and Kaplan, 1996)

“critical thinking is cultural thinking” (Atkinson, 1997)

Critical thinking:

- privileges rational, linear thought over intuition and emotions
 - is individualistic, aggressive and confrontational, rather than collaborative
 - favours the values and practices of the dominant groups in society
 - presupposes the possibility of objectivity
- (Bailin and Siegel, 2003)

Slide 6 shows some criticisms that have been voiced over the past few decades. These could be summarised as the argument that CT is a Western-centric cultural practice which may not be appropriate for people from other cultures, and as such should not play a role in second language education.

Slide 7

The perception of Asian students as passive learners lacking in CT skills has been questioned (Littlewood, 2000).

Critical thinking skills are differently expressed in some cultures, rather than non-existent (McKinley, 2013).

Once taught, critical thinking skills are useful throughout daily and professional experiences (Facione, 1998).

Critical thinking is part of education as self-emancipation (Paul, 1990).

Careful analysis, good thinking, and reasoned deliberation play an important role in democratic life (Bailin and Siegel, 2003).

Slide 7 shows rebuttals to the previous criticisms, arguing that CT is an innate skill, is applicable to many areas of life, and plays a vital role in education that aims to empower the individual. I included these slides for instructors who may have had reservations about using CT, and because I did not want instructors to feel this topic was being approached without consideration of its strengths and weaknesses.

The importance of activating knowledge

Slide 10

Background knowledge is important for critical thinking (McPeck, 1981; Hare, 1995).

Students with broader background and content knowledge of an issue exhibit a wider range of critical thinking (Stapleton, 2001).

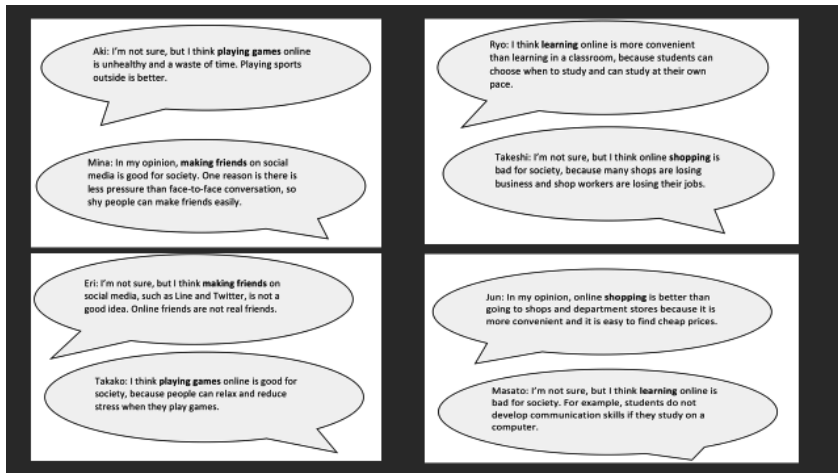
Bloom's taxonomy moves from understanding up to analysis, so background knowledge is necessary (Sternberg, 1986).

Slide 10 is central to the objective of the workshop, presenting literature stressing the benefits of background knowledge for CT. Although I did not delve into detail with other aspects of CT because it may not be relevant for many instructors, there is slightly more information here in order to highlight how the literature suggests background knowledge is necessary for the use of CT. This links wider theory to the practical purpose of discussion preparation activities in the EDC unified syllabus lesson plan. It provides the rationale for doing detailed discussion preparation activities.

Examples of classroom application

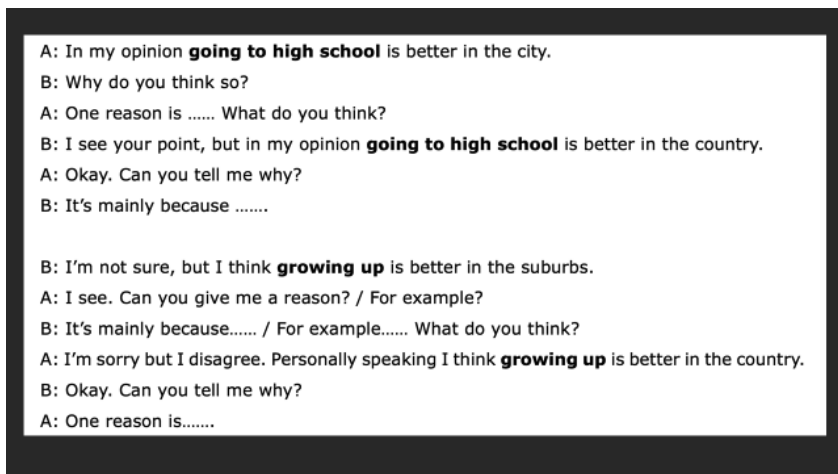
The FD then moved to demonstrating application of the theory. The next two slides give examples of what can be done in class in order to model the kind of activity participants might come up with in the practical activity stage to follow. It is my personal experience from attending conferences and reading academic papers that theoretical discussions of Applied Linguistic concepts are not always presented in a way that helps readers imagine how they might be applied in a classroom setting. These examples were intended to demystify CT for participants.

Slide 11



This is an activity I have used in which pairs of students receive one of the four pieces of paper on the slide, and discuss how far they agree with the opinions. Each piece of paper includes one opinion from the textbook activity, and an additional opinion which is the opposite of one of the four opinions presented in the textbook activity. It thus provides additional perspectives on the topic for students to consider before going into the discussion, and aims to have students take in ideas on the topic that they may not have previously been exposed to.

Slide 12

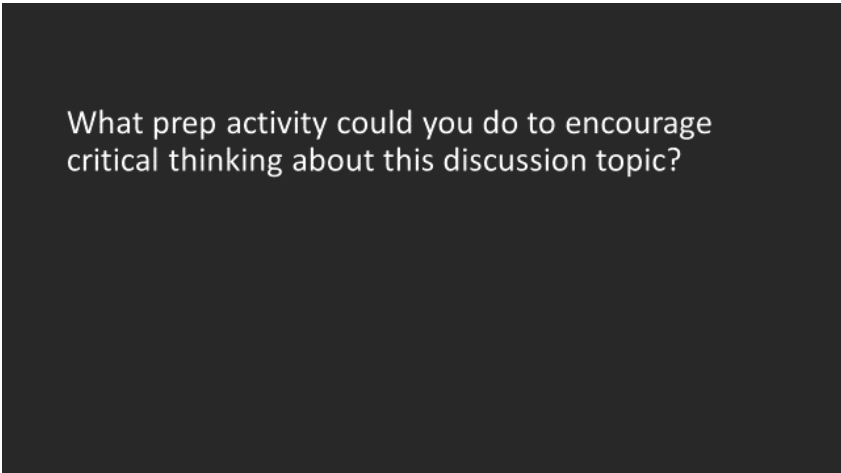


This activity is a controlled practice conversation, using expressions from the EDC textbook, in which one student presents an opinion on the discussion topic and the other student has to disagree with it. It is intended to foster CT by having students consider both sides of an argument.

Activity

From here the focus of the FD moved to the participants.

Slide 13



What prep activity could you do to encourage critical thinking about this discussion topic?

This slide is the activity that participants did. The handouts described in the Organization section were distributed, containing various different discussion questions from the Fall textbook that instructors would be using in the upcoming semester. Participants were asked to brainstorm ideas for how they might encourage CT in the preparation activity for the discussion questions on their particular handout. No more Power Point slides were necessary. After time for brainstorming I verbally asked participants to move to a new table and form new groups of three people with two other participants who had brainstormed for different textbook units, and to move to a different table to compare their ideas and ask questions about the activities.

DISCUSSION

My personal impression of the FD, overall, was positive. As mentioned previously, because all EDC instructors need to do discussion preparation activities as part of the unified syllabus, the workshop activities were relevant to all participants. What is more, this is an area of lesson planning which lends itself to variation and customization, hence the value of coming up with and sharing different approaches. The activity structure of brainstorming in a pair and then sharing these different activities in a new group of three seemed to work well. In particular, giving a handout with forthcoming units from the Fall textbook was appropriate because it made the activities as practical as possible: planning these activities is something that instructors would have to do for future lesson planning, so the FD allowed them to get a head start on their workload. The primary aim for the FD was to have participants go away with new ideas that they could use in forthcoming classes, and I felt that this aim was achieved. In terms of audience response, the participants seemed to take to the activities well, seemed to talk enthusiastically, seemed to have good ideas, and seemed to get useful perspectives out of the activities. Numerous instructors mentioned that the workshop was beneficial, and some asked me for more information about the sources I used when giving background theory.

In terms of difficulties in doing the workshop, it was hard to judge the appropriate amount of talking time to give for activities. On the one hand, in a real situation teachers would probably collaborate on designing an activity for longer than they were given in this FD, so in one sense it was a little short. However, on the other hand the FD intended to expose instructors to the process of *creating* these activities and to different *styles* of activity, rather than have them come away with a “perfect” completed activity. There is a balance to be struck between participants talking too long and eventually losing interest, and making sure to allow enough time for good ideas to

germinate. In both sessions of the FD I needed to finish the activities before participants had exhausted the topics, which perhaps was a sign this balance was appropriate. A second concern was the amount of background detail to provide on critical thinking. In particular, I considered whether I should have included more on how and why background knowledge is important for critical thinking, as this was the part of the literature on CT which was relevant to my workshop activities. However, seeing as it was supposed to be a practical workshop, I think going lighter was justified in the end. To reiterate, my goal was not to exhaustively inform the audience about CT but rather to develop activities for classroom use. My two key points were firstly that although there are varying definitions of CT, this does not invalidate the overall concept, and secondly that the political nature of objections to using critical thinking has largely been answered, especially in respect to outdated views of Asian students as passive learners (Littlewood, 2000; Floyd, 2011; Stapleton, 2002).

CONCLUSION

The information included in this article is intended to allow others to follow the same format for a similar workshop, or tailor the contents for their own circumstances. Over the course of planning and conducting this FD a number of points were of importance. It was clear that workshops should clearly state the need they address, should provide a rationale for what is being studied, should provide sufficient academic support for theories, and should address concerns or objectives that participants may have over the workshop content. In other words, the needs of participants should remain paramount. Above all, however, workshops should aim to generate new ideas that are practically applicable. This can be challenging in the case of a workshop for instructors who teach a unified syllabus (such as in the case of EDC), as lessons may be standardized to an extent that genuine innovation is hard to achieve. In the case of this workshop, however, instructors were given a somewhat new theoretical perspective on a classroom activity and asked to apply it. This hopefully provided a fresh impetus to a familiar aspect of lesson planning.

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