

ON WRITING by Morton D. Rich FALL AGAIN

We need to ask how to teach and use critical thinking in our courses at the beginning of each semester. What we did last semester will not suffice because some of our students failed to learn, no matter what we did. So let us begin again. Some suggestions:

1. Ask students to write something during the first week of class, for example, a two-page summary of your introductory class. What better way to find out what each one received during that crucial first hour? You will then know on what basis your course stands (or falls) for each student, by judging what each found important or missed in your presentation. And you will know something about each one's capacity to think, as revealed by the quality of her/his writing. Writing with clarity, exactness, logical organization, and force applies equally to every discipline.

2. Write your own operational definition of critical thinking in informal language, taking into account the situation to which it applies. I suggest using informal language in order to avoid the potential traps of academic philosophical language. You may need to write more than one definition as you think about your audience. Present a definition-in-progress to a class for discussion, supporting your process and theirs through dialog. When we offer students finished definitions of anything to commit to memory, many opportunities for learning may be lost. How we arrive at a working definition of critical thinking within a discipline involves critical thinking, not a presentation of facts. Being open about how we think in our disciplines invites students into the process and reduces mystery and confusion for them.

3. Design discussions, quizzes, essay assignments, labs and field work, using tested principles of critical thinking. Rewrite last semester's assignments, building in new challenges to engage students in thinking that requires several steps and leads each one to an individual conclusion based on self-correcting reasoning. Rich discussions result when the same question or research produces different results. Students benefit more from exploring process than from arriving at correct conclusions, especially when they suspect the instructor had the answer before asking the question.

4. Involve students in the creation and design of assignments. They can show us how they learn and what they value in our courses by what they create for the class to use. Why not put to use all that trapped energy that often emerges as frustration and resistance to learning? Student-written exam questions can tell us what each student thinks the focus of the course is and the relative weight of parts of our materials. We may also see what they want to avoid on an exam and what they find more accessible. What they want to avoid may need to be re-taught in another way, with student input helping you shape an alternative approach.

Finally, let students know what you are thinking when you create a course and a set of assigned readings, writings, experiments, field work, lab work, exercises, practices. Question yourself concerning each decision you make about content and methodology. Be willing to make changes that accommodate both your growth and a changing student population.

Morton D. Rich teaches writing and literature in the Department of English at Montclair State. This first of his monthly columns for the year is a reprint of last September's column.

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INSTITUTE FOR CRITICAL THINKING
MONTCLAIR STATE COLLEGE
UPPER MONTCLAIR, NJ 07043
Telephone: (201) 893-5184

WENDY OXMAN, DIRECTOR
MARK WEINSTEIN, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

ERIKA FRANZEL, Project Asst.
PAMELA STEVENSON, Admin. Asst.
PAMELA SMITH and PAULA KING,
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Because critical thinking is an interdisciplinary field, we ask that you explain how critical thinking is meant to be understood in your article. Please include in the opening paragraph or two, or in a footnote on the first page, the definition of critical thinking with which you are working.

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