DEVELOPING & ASSESSING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This special session provides an opportunity for interaction about the development of our students' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is one of the most often mentioned educational outcomes desired by employers. Problem-solving and decision-making are similar concepts, yet critical thinking is more specifically about the process one employs to evaluate the arguments that have been developed in proposing a solution or recommendation. Employers probably want us to develop effective problem-solvers and decision-makers. Doing so depends on the development of effective critical thinking skills as well.

This interactive workshop will address the following questions:

What are the skills of critical thinking? What are the signs of effective critical thinking?

Critical thinking includes the skills and attitudes associated with applying rationale criteria in evaluating the merits of a proposed idea or course of action (Browne, 2000). Being aware of contradictions, adjusting beliefs, considering multiple perspectives, and evaluating information quality are signs of thinking critically. Being self-critical is another sign of critical thinking.

According to Lynch (2001), students who have attained a lower level of critical thinking skill development can identify and use a limited set of relevant information and can articulate some underlying uncertainties. Moderate skill development is seen when students are able to organize complex information, to appreciate multiple perspectives, and consider the quality of the evidence. Advanced level critical thinking skill corresponds with student ability to use well grounded principles and to reasonably justify the selection of an alternative solution, and to identify ways to overcome limitations of the solutions.

How far along are our students? What factors influence their development of critical thinking skills?

There are several cognitive development schemes that provide helpful insights into the growth of these higher order skills. (See Perry; Kolb; Myers-Briggs; Rokeach.)

What are the characteristics of critical thinking oriented classes?

Browne (2000) suggests that classes where evaluative questions are frequently asked by members of the class tend to be more oriented toward critical thinking (e.g. Why? What evidence supports this view? What is the quality of the evidence? What other explanations are there?). Controversies or other ways to develop tensions among viewpoints, uncertainties, ambiguous conclusions, and active learning are also hallmarks of critical thinking oriented classes. In short, classes should intentionally engage students in practicing the critical thinking skills with great hospitality in the process.

What are some best practices for developing critical thinking that we are using in marketing education? How are we assessing students' critical thinking skill attainment?

The panelists and audience will collectively identify effective learning and assessment strategies.

How much student progress can we expect to achieve?

Development of critical thinking skills is a longer term proposition than any one course can hope to accomplish. We should build improvement across our curricula. Even so, the goal may be to graduate baccalaureate students who have at least moderate skill levels, while the most advanced skill levels may only be achieved among graduate students.

What will it cost us to pursue critical thinking skill development further in our students? Is it worth the cost? Can we afford not to?

Critical thinking is hard, sometimes disconcerting work. Students may not want to be challenged beyond their comfort zones and may respond negatively to our efforts when completing course evaluations for example. It may be a long while after leaving school before they come to appreciate what we were trying to do. Yet, developing thoughtful professionals and citizens needs to be done.