

HOW TUTORS CAN HELP TUTEES IMPROVE THEIR CRITICAL THINKING

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As with any rewarding experience, there are challenges that go with the “turf” of tutoring, and many skills are required of tutors besides those in a particular content area. Being asked to teach higher order thinking skills to students already having difficulty in a subject may seem like an unreasonable request to prospective tutors. Furthermore, tutees often have high frustration levels in response to academic difficulties and other problems that often run in tandem. So why should we ask more of either the tutor or the tutee?

There are two reasons why aiding tutees in developing their reasoning abilities is a good idea. In the first place, helping tutees improve their critical thinking skills is not a question of *more*. Teaching critical thinking does not involve teaching content; rather, it is a method of getting tutees to think for themselves and to ask good questions as they study. Critical thinking is a *way* of approaching subject matter, not more of it. Moreover, getting students to think well on their own should be the tutor’s ultimate goal, and the best way to accomplish this is to teach students not just content area skills but effective problem solving strategies as well. This will make the tutor’s job easier, not harder, and empower tutees to become more active in their own education.

So how does the tutor help develop students’ ability to think? First, the tutor needs to understand clearly what “critical thinking” means. The educator, John Dewey, first coined the term in 1933, but preferred to think of it as “reflective thinking” (p. 9). Edward M. Glaser, another influential early thinker in the field, identified three principal elements of critical thinking: a disposition to consider thoughtfully the problems and ideas one

encounters, a knowledge of methods of inquiry and problem solving, and skill in implementing those methods (1985, p. 25). For both these men, critical thinking was more of an inclination or an attitude than a series of steps.

Many definitions have been generated for the concept. What we have in mind, however, when asking tutors to work with students to develop critical thinking skills is helping them move beyond a passive acceptance of ideas and rote learning of information toward a knowledge-seeking stance where concepts are broken apart, reconfigured, questioned, combined, and evaluated. In short, critical thinking asks students really to grapple with ideas and to question what they are learning.

The tutor must recognize that, to be effective, he or she must teach more than just facts and formulas; coaching higher order thinking should also be a goal. To do so, tutors must move away from seeing themselves as the “Answer Fairy.” A good tutor must know when to provide support and when to challenge. Rather than immediately providing answers, tutors need to challenge tutees by asking questions of the tutee. This approach encourages tutees to be more active in their own learning.

To ask good questions, tutors should understand the hierarchical nature of knowledge. Bloom’s taxonomy is one good model to work from. According to Benjamin Bloom (1956), there are seven progressively more sophisticated levels of thinking: memorization, translation, interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. All learners are familiar with the learning by memorization and translation method of grade schools. At these levels, students are simply being asked to recall and paraphrase information. Much of what is learned, such as multiplication tables, simply needs to be committed to memory. The next two levels, interpretation and application, ask learners to extend and work with

knowledge by rearranging, relating, and building. Level five, analysis, asks the learner to break concepts into parts, to take them apart to better understand them. Synthesis asks the learner to put ideas together to create something new. Evaluation, the highest level, asks learners to critique or to judge the value of an idea.

“Critical thinking” generally refers to the examination of ideas that goes on at the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy. The term *critical*, despite its somewhat negative connotations, refers to the evaluative thinking characteristic of the highest levels of thought and also reflects the importance of doing so.

Much critical thinking involves problem-solving. Many problem-solving models have been formulated, some specific to a particular academic field, some more all-purpose. Regardless of the model and how many steps are in it, virtually all begin by seeking a clear statement of the problem. In solving any problem or in working successfully with any concept, we must first define it as precisely and specifically as possible. We should do this by asking students to state exactly what they are doing on a particular task or assignment and why they are being asked to do it. Getting the student to articulate the problem constitutes the first important step in effective problem solving and often begins to bring the solution into focus for them.

Once a problem or idea has been clearly identified, the student must be encouraged to talk it through. Students should be encouraged to look for more than one answer – the more the better, in fact. At other times, the tutee may not be problem-solving per se, but trying to understand and work with a concept. Here too the tutor can use questioning strategies to assist the tutee. The questions will vary depending on the subject area, the level of the student’s understanding of the subject, and the task. To move the student through

progressively more demanding levels of thinking, the tutor should “pull” or “draw” knowledge from the tutee by framing questions which will elicit the desired kind of thinking.

Teaching critical thinking is hard work and may still seem somewhat abstract. Here are some concrete tips for tutors to help tutees improve critical thinking:

- Do not automatically answer questions the tutee has. Instead, whenever possible, turn the question back to the student. Ask questions such as these: *What do you think? What ideas do you have about that? What has been your experience?*
- When presenting new information, rather than simply telling the tutee, try asking questions. Develop a repertoire of generative questions, such as the following: *What do you already know about that? What do you mean by that? Is there another way to view this? Might anyone else see it differently?*
- Encourage specific responses and reasons for students’ viewpoints with questions such as these: *Can you be more specific? Why do you think that? What exactly do you mean by that?*
- Encourage students to see the problem, situation, or concept from a different viewpoint. If working on a math problem, for example, ask the tutee if he or she can think of another way to solve the problem. *What would happen if we changed the order in which we solved the problem?* When working on a history issue, ask *How might this issue have looked to the opposing side?*
- Help students talk through problems. Encourage them to think out loud and model this yourself by vocalizing your own thought processes, trying to implement specific reasoning skills as you do so. This fosters better thinking in students by enabling

them to evaluate their own process and serves as a means to understand the student's thought process. It also enables you to discover where errors in thought occur.

- Encourage students to begin generating questions of their own. Show them how to build simple questions from the table of contents, chapter headings, and main idea statements using the six reportorial questions – who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Have students analyze their own work, looking for patterns in their thinking and in their mistakes.
- Pay attention to where tutees are in the process. As long as they are able to respond effectively to your probing, continue asking questions. If they become frustrated or seem lost, you will want to provide more guidance.
- Lengthen your response time. Remember that it takes time to think. Remember too, tutees may be anxious, particularly if they feel they are put on-the-spot, and this causes the mind to go blank. Be sure they feel comfortable and unhurried.
- Remember that the tutees probably know more than you – or they – think they do. Your most important tutoring goal should be empowering tutees, enabling them to trust their own abilities. And remember too, thinking – real thinking – is hard work. Be gentle with those you are tutoring and give lots of support, encouragement, and reinforcement.

References

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