

Critical Pedagogy: Briefs as a Social Science Instructional Tool

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Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how briefs can be used as a critical pedagogical tool. This tool is useful to facilitate student success in content learning, critical thinking, and writing skills. An effort is also made, while using this tool, to increase the metacognitive ability of students to recognize and appreciate the presence of diversity in a multi-cultural environment.

During the early 1980s, there was a growing concern that the quality of education, especially in America's high schools, was declining. Then Secretary of Education T. H. Bell established the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) to study the problem. The committee's report, *A Nation at Risk*, concluded that "the educational foundations of our country are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." (NCEE 3)

In response to widespread public concern that education was on the societal casualty list, a number of reports and a myriad of literature in the field of educational psychology

in particular, and across the curriculum in general proliferated on the academic market. These works submitted directives, directions and suggestions for solving this problem. A common cord ran through the themes of these writings, i.e., the pertinent need to address the saliency of teaching students to think. These concerns have contemporary significance. Recently the present Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos was on CNN stating that far too many of our students: 1) do not have an adequate grounding in scientific and mathematical facts and knowledge, 2) do not understand how historical events have an impact on contemporary issues and 3) can not discern the significance and impact of political issues, structures and concepts.

While there is recognition and appreciation for the numerous volumes regarding the need to teach thinking and provide writing experiences, this theoretical framework is set by several basic works: 1) Quakenbush, Steve. "Ruggiero: The Importance of Teaching Students to Think." *The Community, Technical and Junior College Times*, The American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, Vol. II, No. 19, 25 September 1990, p. 5; 2) Bloom, B. Englehart, M., Furst, E., Hill, W., and Krathwohl, D. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*. Handbook I: Cognitive Domain. New York: Longmans Green; 3) Kraft,

Robert. "Writing to Learn." *The Teaching Professor*, Vol. 4, No. 3, March 1990, p. 1; and 4) Proceedings of the Ninth Annual and Seventh International Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform. 6-9 August 1989. Under the Auspices of the Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique and Sonoma State University.

Each of these works emphasizes one or more of the following conclusions. One, teaching should facilitate learning or the process of acquiring knowledge and skills. Two, learning should occur in the matriculation process and students should be given an opportunity to practice thinking skills. Finally, writing experiences and class discussion can clarify the mind and edify the ability to communicate ideas and ideals.

The proceedings of the Ninth Annual and the Seventh International Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform issued a statement warning that lower order learning (recall on Bloom's taxonomy) is the order of the day, and in itself is not enough to facilitate higher order learning. "Upholding this practice of solely stressing lower order learning is a network of assumptions that must be refuted, namely:

- 1) that students will learn how to think if only they what to think,
- 2) that knowledge can be given to students without their having to think it through for themselves,
- 3) that to become educated is to store up content

analogous to a data bank,

- 4) that quiet classes with little student talk are typically reflective of student learning,
- 5) that students can gain significant knowledge without seeking or valuing it,
- 6) that material should be presented from the point of view of the authority, the one who knows,
- 7) that superficial learning can later be deepened,
- 8) that coverage is more important than depth,
- 9) that students who can correctly answer questions, provide definitions and apply formulae demonstrate substantial understanding, and
- 10) that students learn best by working alone in silence." (Conference on Critical Thinking and Educational Reform, 1989)

The flip side of these assumptions would be beliefs would be beliefs that support higher order thinking; namely:

- 1) that students can learn what to think only as they learn how to think.
- 2) that knowledge is acquired only through thinking,
- 3) that educated persons are those who have learned how to gather, analyze, synthesize, apply and assess information for themselves,
- 4) that classes with much student talk, focused on live issues, is a better sign of learning than quiet classes, focussed on a passive acceptance of what the instructor says,
- 5) that students gain significant knowledge only by valuing it,
- 6) that information should be presented so as to be understandable from the point of view of the learner, and this requires it be related to the learner's experiences,
- 7) that superficial learning is often mislearning

that stands as an obstacles to deeper understanding,

- 8) that depth is more important than coverage,
- 9) that students can often provide correct answers, repeat definitions, and apply formulas while yet not understanding those answers, definitions or formulas, and
- 10) that students learn best by working together with other students, with a good deal of experience in mutually supportive debate and empathic exchange of ideas. (Ibid)

The second set of assumptions point out that a change is needed in the paradigm pertaining to views on education, knowledge, teaching and learning. From this vantage point, we can appreciate the utility of writing experiences that encourage and enhance higher order learning (Kraft 1). In other words, reading and writing skills are intertwined with critical thinking (Quakenbush 5.)

Purpose of the Course

The political science course is a study of how the American government operates. It is designed to give the student an opportunity to comprehend how the American political system works and why it produces the policy that it does. Consequently, an effort is made to establish for students a solid foundation or grounding in the essential nuts and bolts of American government as well as an understanding of why and sometimes how these matters have evolved, their impact on government and the American citizenry and why they are worth

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learning and/or controversial. During the journey of the course particular emphasis is placed on the question of how responsive is government or, in the words of Harold Laswell, "who gets what when and how."

The course objectives call for: 1) expanding the students' cognitive data base, 2) increasing metacognitive skills and 3) increasing the propensity to utilize problem-solving skills inside and beyond the classroom.

The first objective involves exposing students to ideas, concepts and literature within the political science discipline that is pertinent to American government. The common course outline has sixty-four concepts that all good students of politics should master. Thus, this objective is significant for the acquiring of knowledge (learning) and for final exam-taking purpose.

The second objective calls for increasing metacognition. Metacognition is the ability to control and monitor one's own thinking. This process by perforce requires eliminating the tendency to have knee jerk reactions that have no logical foundation. An educated, intelligent and humane person has a tendency to be reflective and flexible in his or her thinking.

An expansion in the ranks of the intelligent make a valuable contribution to the process of enabling our polity

to continue being the great nation that it is. We need an educated and informed citizenry to make democratic decisions and commitments. An educated citizenry is vital for world peace and prosperity. Without these commitments, each and all are lost.

Three, encouraging the utilization of problem-solving skills beyond the classroom. Students are informed that they should respect themselves and know that ultimately they can teach themselves to be creative and to solve problems on the individual and societal level. Students must be willing to employ critical thinking skills (or use higher order thinking, i.e., analysis, synthesis and evaluation).

The production of informed citizens committed to logical thinking and democratic commitments would stimulate the edification and evolution of the individual and eventually society to a higher level of existence (to an improvement on the quality of life). An atmosphere is established to allow student success in attaining course objectives. This climate is nurtured through numerous teaching methods which foster student involvement in class activities and personalize the learning process. This paper focuses on the role of the brief as a tool to provide an opportunity for students to practice thinking and to comprehend the concept of "selective incorporation."

Since the major portions of the Bill of Rights apply to both levels of government in the U.S. federal system, Americans feel that the Bill of Rights has been nationalized. The controversial questions in these cases were initiated by persons representing a cross section of the American society. Thus, individuals from diverse classes, genders and races contributed to a process that benefitted the entire society.

There are usually liabilities accompanying most writing requirement endeavors, and the use of briefs is no exception. During the initial days of the course, there were a few student comments expressing a perception that this assignment was too difficult for a course offered by a two year college. As time went on frowns turned to smiles when the majority could see that this requirement was an attainable task. Briefs were conducted in class to clarify other concepts. For example, the following cases were put in brief form during class: 1) *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819) to examine the concept of implied powers; 2) *Marbury v. Madison* (1803) to understand how Chief Justice Marshall attained for the court the power of judicial review; and 3) *Barron v. Baltimore* (1833) to note that the Bill of Rights literally applies limitations only on the national government. By providing practice in class and being available for consultation in the office, this professor has garnered positive experiences with the brief requirement.

During last year alone, the majority of my students said that they enjoyed doing the brief on the day it was due for submission. Consequently, I rate this tool as beneficial in providing an opportunity to allow students to conduct higher order thinking.