

Chapter 23

Enhancing Students' Critical Thinking through Portfolios: Portfolio Content and Process of Use

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ABSTRACT

Portfolios can serve a crucial role in helping students develop their critical thinking in writing, thereby promoting write-to-learn philosophy in education. Still, not any portfolio's content and approach can guarantee the achievement of this goal. Teachers' concern in promoting students' critical thinking needs to be reflected in their decision that is related to the evidences of students' needs that helps to select their approaches of integrating and using them into class. Students' reflection needs to underpin all stages of portfolio assessment through providing opportunities for their decision-making, initiation and creativity. Therefore, this chapter puts forward a student portfolio model along with its content and process of use. This learning tool was integrated within the course of Written Expression and used by 33 students at the Department of English at Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University during the academic year 2013-2014. Recommendations are also provided in order to make it a vehicle for critical thinking.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid changes in present, networked, knowledge society give rise to new challenges and requirements for work life competence. Productive participation in such society requires that individual professionals, their communities, and organizations continuously surpass themselves, develop new competencies, advance their knowledge and understanding as well as produce innovations and create new knowledge. To be able to productively participate in knowledge work, students must develop high-level cognitive skills such as problem solving and critical thinking, to learn to go beyond individual efforts, and collaborate for the advancement of knowledge.

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To this end, assessment needs to be considered not only as a tool for measuring learners' achievement, but also improving the quality of their learning. Within such culture, learners are active agents in the assessment process who make judgments about their own work and that of others, monitor their progress and make decisions to improve. To create such learning opportunities self-assessment is regarded as an important tool for those committed to such goals as learner autonomy (Boud, 1995). Portfolios are among the self-assessment tools, which can have the potential benefit to make the link between learners' engagement and success through promoting a reflective approach to learning where they take responsibility for what and how they learn.

Hence, enhancing students' critical thinking via portfolios depends on the content and approach of implementing them within a given course. Indeed, such an objective is unlikely to be attained in case these tools are considered mere folders of collected work where students' reflection and creativity are not involved. To this end, this chapter proposes a student portfolio that aims to develop student critical thinking in writing and thus autonomy in learning. In addition to explaining the content of that student portfolio, this chapter also aims to clarify the process of its use including its assessment. It needs to be noted that the provided illustrations and evidence concerning portfolio's content and process were gathered by the author along with implementing this tool with her students within an EFL learning context. Yet, prior to engaging in such task, one needs to account for what constitutes critical thinking, its relation to creative problem solving and the role of portfolios in enhancing that process in learning.

CRITICAL THINKING: SOME DEFINITIONS

Living in an information-driven society, students need to construct their own meaning and apply what they have learned in new situations. To do so, they need to learn to think critically about knowledge and the world. Indeed, as Huitt (1998) claims in the information age, *thinking* plays a significant role in one's success in life. Thus, meaningful education entails equipping learners with the tools that can help them think critically while providing them with multiple opportunities to make concrete such process through exercising their creativity, decision making, initiation, thereby involving actively in their learning process. Within this conception, academic success goes beyond achieving grades to developing reflective minds that can search for and evaluate information, solve problems, and learn through interacting and collaborating with others.

To help learners engage successfully in critical thinking, there is a need to understand what this process means. Critical thinking has its roots in critical theory and the concept of scepticism - the questioning of the source of truthfulness and the reliability of knowledge (Breachin et al., 2000). Hence, reviewing the literature shows that despite widespread interest in promoting this goal "there is no consensus on a definition of critical thinking" (Fasko, 2003, p.08). Indeed, critical thinking has been defined from different perspectives. Definitions that draw upon philosophy often stress the metacognitive element of critical thinking, arguing that it can be defined as "thinking about your thinking while you are thinking to make your thinking better" (Paul, 1993, p. 91). In the same concern, Elder and Paul (1994) argue that critical thinking means that thinkers take charge of their own thinking. This also presupposes that people develop sound criteria and standards for analyzing and evaluating their own thinking processes and use of these criteria to improve the quality of their thinking (Uden & Beaumont, 2006).

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