

Chapter 32

Promoting Reflective Thinking in Adult Learners: The Online Case-Based Discussion

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ABSTRACT

Case studies delivered in the online discussion environment offer many benefits for adult learners, including development as a reflective practitioner. The online case-based discussion helps learners develop into reflective practitioners and understand the finer points as to why things are done rather than simply how they are done. This approach is an effective tool for adult learners to enhance their ability to address ill-structured problems, those that are complex and controversial in nature. They become adept at engaging in salient dialogue, which, in turn, expands their reflective thinking skills. This chapter, grounded in a heutagogical approach, explores the use of the case studies in an online discussion format to promote reflective judgment capabilities. Focus is placed on the function and structure of online case-based discussions and methods for assessing learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Today's workforce demands employees with critical thinking skills. An individual who demonstrates these skills is intellectually engaged, capable of sound judgment, and has the ability to challenge her own thinking (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Critical thinking involves the analysis and evaluation of data, facts, information, and observable phenomenon. Ennis (1989) notes that critical thinkers possess abilities that set them apart from those who do not. These include but are not limited to:

- Exhibit open-mindedness
- Seek precision in information sought
- Consider the big picture
- Focus on the original problem

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- Seek options
- Show sensitivity to others' feelings and knowledge (as cited in Merriam and Bierema, 2014, p. 233)

LinkedIn, a business and employment-oriented social media platform, identified the most in-demand skills sought out by employers. Among them were competitive strategies, analytical reasoning, corporate communications, business analysis, and creativity (Lewis, 2019). In a 2018 national survey conducted by Morning Consult on behalf of Cengage, sixty-eight percent of employers stated that critical thinking skills are very important in their organizations and seventy-four percent stated that critical thinking skills are very important for leadership positions within their organization. Despite these demands by employers, forty-one percent feel it is somewhat difficult to find candidates who have the critical thinking skills necessary for their organization. For educators, this signals the need to provide a greater focus on the development of critical thinking skills in students.

Educators are also facing the demand of the increase in adult learners—specifically graduate students—in their institutions. In the past decade, enrollment in graduate programs across the nation has increased by nine percent. This pace of growth is expected to continue through 2026 (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2017). A recent study indicates that 56 percent of all graduate learners are considered “adult learners,” (Merriam and Bierema, 2014) between the ages of 25 and 39 years (NCES, 2018). Generally, these learners do not live on campus; rather, they are participants in virtual campus life. They are place-bound, goal-oriented adults, self-motivated, self-directed and with both jobs and family obligations (Kaufmann, 2015; Lehman and Conceição, 2013). Increasingly, adult learners assume a major role in tailoring their academic pursuits to address their knowledge and competence needs in their various life roles. While teachers play an important part as knowledge sources, they share this responsibility with the adult learner who brings expertise and experience into the classroom (Kasworm & Marienau, 1997). Employing heutagogical strategies that respond to the needs of adult students ensures that desired learning experience and outcomes are met. A term coined by Hase and Kenyon (2007), they conceptualized heutagogy as the notion of self-determined learning drawing upon familiar concepts including constructivism andragogy. Ideal for the adult learner, heutagogy is concerned with student-centered learning that positions the student as the major agent in her own learning. This occurs as a result of her personal experiences, professional practice, and motivation to learn (Snowden & Halsall, 2016). This distinction of the learner's role is important to note, as traditional post-secondary education puts the teacher in control of the course design and learning process—the “sage on the stage” approach. However, as more adults engage in online learning, this approach must evolve to meet the diverse learning needs of students (Gregory, Bannister-Tyrrell, Charteris, & Nye, 2018). This signals the need for teachers to adjust their methods not only in the traditional face-to-face classroom, but their approach to online course design so that it meets the needs of adult students.

Online discussion forums are a central component of online coursework and provide students an opportunity to engage with each other to explore topics and issues. Structured in a variety of ways, online discussions may engage learners in a Socratic dialogue, reflective inquiry, group hops, debates, live chats, or by soliciting responses to a case study (Bender, 2012; Brooke, 2006; Champion & Gunnlaugson, 2018). A case study (also referred to as a case or case method) frames a description of a real-life situation where individuals or an organization are faced with a problem or challenge that requires some form of decision-making to resolve (Popil, 2011). The format in which they are delivered to a class may be done in a variety of ways, as indicated by Penn, Currie, Hoad, and O'Brien (2016):

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