Abstract

This dissertation seeks to contribute to understanding of the concept of critical thinking, of the present state of teaching and learning for critical thinking (within systems of education), and of how to improve teaching and learning for critical thinking (from an empirical perspective). Historical, theoretical, and empirical sources imply that the concept of critical thinking is becoming increasingly embedded within educational mission statements, curricula, student “outcomes” lists, and other similar documents. However, there is far less actual evidence of successful teaching and learning for critical thinking than should be expected in light of these publicly expressed values. Further, there is little empirical understanding of how best to improve teaching and learning for critical thinking across the curriculum, especially within large educational institutions. Based on these investigations, an ambitious outline for future historical, theoretical, and empirical research is laid out.

The original empirical investigation reported herein focuses on an institutional improvement and reaccreditation plan at a major U.S. research university designed to improve teaching and learning for critical thinking across the curriculum. My goal has been to uncover: 1) improvements in teaching and learning for critical thinking, 2) significant factors that helped achieve those improvements, and 3) challenges faced in the attempt. Three parallel research questions organize the empirical investigation and presentation of results.

Due to the nascent state of the field, an exploratory and qualitative approach was taken that included 38 interviews (of leaders, professors, staff, and students), 38 observations (of both on-site critical thinking workshops as well as university classes given by participating professors), and some documentary analysis (syllabi and student work). Data collected give evidence that all participants improved their understanding and practice in critical thinking, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees. The most significant factor in fostering campus community members’ critical intellectual development was the explicit theory of critical thinking chosen on-site (the Paulian approach) coupled with participation in a “learning community” led by facilitators personally committed to critical thinking improvement. The most significant challenges to reform emerged as a result of previous negative experience with (largely superficial) reform efforts, and from the natural human tendency towards intellectual arrogance (believing that we know more
This dissertation argues for a deeper and more integrated approach to the study of critical thinking than is typically found in academia. If educational institutions genuinely value teaching students fairminded critical thinking, they must undergo rigorous self-analysis to determine the extent to which they do so. They must identify their strengths, weaknesses, and targets for critical reform. A custom-made, sophisticated, long-term, and intellectually rigorous plan for improvement must then be drafted and supported by substantial financial, intellectual, and cultural resources. Special care must be taken in the selection of critical improvement targets and relevant critical thinking theory, as these will in large part determine the focus and critical intellectual potential of the improvement plan. Without such theory or with poor theory, the impact of the project will be limited and/or potentially harmful.