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UF IFAS Extension UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

AEC546

Integrating Critical Thinking into Extension Programming #3: Critical Thinking Style[1]

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Introduction

Critical thinking, as a cognitive style, "explains how an individual prefers one particular method to another when processing information, or critically thinking about a particular topic" (Gorham, Lamm, & Rumble, 2014, p. 44). While the critical thinking skills someone employs may lead them to different conclusions or solutions to a problem, different viewpoints while solving a problem will be exhibited by differences in critical thinking styles. This EDIS document is the third in a series on integrating critical thinking into Extension programming. It introduces the concept of critical thinking style and describes the two styles of critical thinking. The entire series includes the following EDIS documents:

1. Critical Thinking Defined (http://www.edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc206)
2. Developing Critical Thinking Skills (http://www.edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc207)
3. Critical Thinking Style (http://www.edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc208)
4. Measuring Critical Thinking Styles Using the UFCTI (http://www.edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc209)
5. Using Critical Thinking Styles to Enhance Team Work (http://www.edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc210)

Critical Thinking Style

An ideal critical thinker will (1) raise clear questions while processing new information, (2) gather and analyze all information relevant to the situation, (3) come to conclusions through rigorous reasoning and testing, (4) recognize and consider different opinions, and (5) communicate effectively about the solutions they found (Paul & Elder, 2007). Unlike the use of critical thinking skills, critical thinking style describes ***the way*** an individual goes about thinking and reaching solutions to a problem. Style also determines how an individual communicates about the thought process they used to reach their final solution (Irani, 2006). While there is not a right or a wrong way to think critically, research has shown that critical thinking style can be measured on a continuum between a preference for seeking information and engagement, as shown in Figure 1 (Lamm & Irani, 2011). By understanding more about critical thinking styles, Extension professionals can preemptively create experiences or reach out through specific communication channels that will resonate with a certain style they are trying to reach (Gorham et al., 2014).

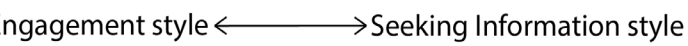

Figure 1. Continuum of Critical Thinking Style.
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Seeking Information

People with a high tendency for a ***Seeking Information*** critical thinking style are aware of their own predispositions and biases, recognizing that their current opinions and positions have been influenced by who they are, their environment, and their experiences (Lamm & Irani, 2011). These individuals are "hungry learners," open to the opinions of others, and take care to seek out divergent points of view, consistently looking for new knowledge, considering these points of view objectively when making decisions or arriving at a solution. Such people have a desire to know the truth, even if the truth conflicts with presently held beliefs and opinions. These individuals actively seek out research, reading, and questioning to enhance their knowledge of their profession, their situation, their life, and their world. They recognize that most problems are more complex than they appear on the surface and understand that rarely is there "one right answer" to problems they encounter.

Engagement

An individual with a high tendency toward the ***Engagement*** style is aware of their surroundings and is able to anticipate situations where good reasoning will be necessary to employ (Lamm & Irani, 2011). They look for opportunities to use their reasoning skills and are confident in their ability to reason, solve problems, and make decisions. This person also is a confident communicator and is able to explain the reasoning process used to arrive at a decision or problem solution.

How to Use this Information

Research has shown individuals with a Seeking Information critical thinking style (seekers) and individuals with an Engagement critical thinking style (engagers) gather and process information in different ways (Lamm & Irani, 2011). The seeker prefers to think critically about information they actively seek in order to answer the question in front of them, whereas the engager obtains information from their environment. For example, an engager is more likely to obtain information through word of mouth communication and then cognitively process this information (Lamm & Irani, 2011).

In general, people rely on traditional modes of communication to obtain information, including reading magazines and newspapers, watching television, and listening to the radio (Brodie, Kjellson, Hoff, & Parker, 1999). Most recently, the Internet has become a primary source of information, providing fast and convenient ways to search and seek new information (Cotton & Gupta, 2004). Print media, static webpages, and other forms of one-way communication are suitable for the seeker; while an engager will prefer collecting information through conversations when thinking critically (Lamm & Irani, 2011).

Social media has been considered a modern way of conversing through the Internet. Social media "describes a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues" (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004, p. 4). Through various forums, such as blogs, social media network sites, consumer email, forums, and email, social media has allowed the creation of conversations on the Internet (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) and could serve as an avenue to reach engagers.

Extension professionals should consider a variety of educational techniques when trying to engage audiences from both critical thinking styles. Seekers are going to be more interested in information and experiences they can "seek" out, including brochures, fact sheets, static web sites, newspaper articles, etc., while engagers are going to be more interested in interactive media such as blogs, email forums, and face-to-face programming. The UF Critical Thinking Inventory (UFCTI) can be used to identify critical thinking styles. To learn more about identifying critical thinking styles, please refer to the fourth EDIS publication in this series, *Measuring Critical Thinking Styles Using the UFCTI* (http://www.edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc209).

Conclusions

Extension professionals who understand what critical thinking styles are and can identify the two types of critical thinking styles are better prepared to develop Extension materials that relate to both styles. By acknowledging that every Extension program should incorporate techniques that will resonate with different styles of critical thinking, Extension professionals will be prepared to develop programs that integrate learning experiences so that clientele are more likely to engage in critical thinking experiences and further develop critical thinking skills.

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