

Building Critical Thinking Skills in ELAI 990 Students

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Wicked Problems

- "10 years ago, few people anticipated the opening of Myanmar to the rest of the world, the rise of the Islamic State, face-to-face chat on cell phones, legislation of gay marriage across the United States, fake news, or the Zika virus. The parameters are changing. The tools and technologies are changing. We live in a wicked world, an unpredictable world. We need wicked graduates with wicked competencies." – Paul Hanstedt, *Creating Wicked Students: Designing Courses for a Complex World*, 2018



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How to Solve Urgent Wicked Problems?

- “Much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed, or down-right prejudiced. Yet the quality of our life and that of what we produce, make, or build depends precisely on the quality of our thought.”—Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools*

The Goal and the Problem

- ELAI 990, English Language for Advanced Integrative Skills, the capstone course in ELAP (English Language for Academic Purposes)
- SLO: Use **critical thinking skills** to paraphrase, summarize, synthesize and respond to information from multiple readings orally and/or in writing.
- An advanced integrated skills course for non-native speakers of English. (reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills to prepare students for credit-level courses)
- The Problem: How can I help my students learn this challenging skill?

Scholarship

- *Teaching Change: How to Develop Independent Thinkers Using Relationships, Resilience, and Reflection* by Jose Antonio Bowen

“Research... indicates that most of our implicit approaches to teaching critical thinking have mixed results, and that **explicit critical thinking instruction is significantly more effective**. We are still at an early stage of understanding which exact methods work best, but it is clear that **critical thinking is hard and that explicit instructions and active practice are essential**... We need to define critical thinking, explicitly teach it, and then integrate, embed, and reinforce it (with more chance for practice) in all other courses” (369).

A Definition

“Critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it” (4).

– *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking*

Scholarship

- *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking* by Richard Paul and Linda Elder:
- **“To help students learn (critical thinking skills), teachers should pose questions which require students to apply them, questions which hold students accountable for them, questions which, through consistent use... help students internalize them. The ultimate goal, then, is for these standards to become infused in the thinking of students, forming part of their inner voice, which then guides them to better and better reasoning” (10).**

My Strategy

- Developed by The Foundation for Critical Thinking
- *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools* by Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder
- Specifically, I used “Criteria for Evaluating Reasoning,” a set of eight questions that increase in difficulty related to purpose, question, information, concepts, assumptions, inferences, point of view, and implications
- Students responded to these eight questions on the discussion board when analyzing arguments of writers. Students were asked to write in complete sentences, to cite sources, to use direct quotes to support their points, and to explain how those quotes supported their points. We later read and discussed students’ comments on the discussion board.

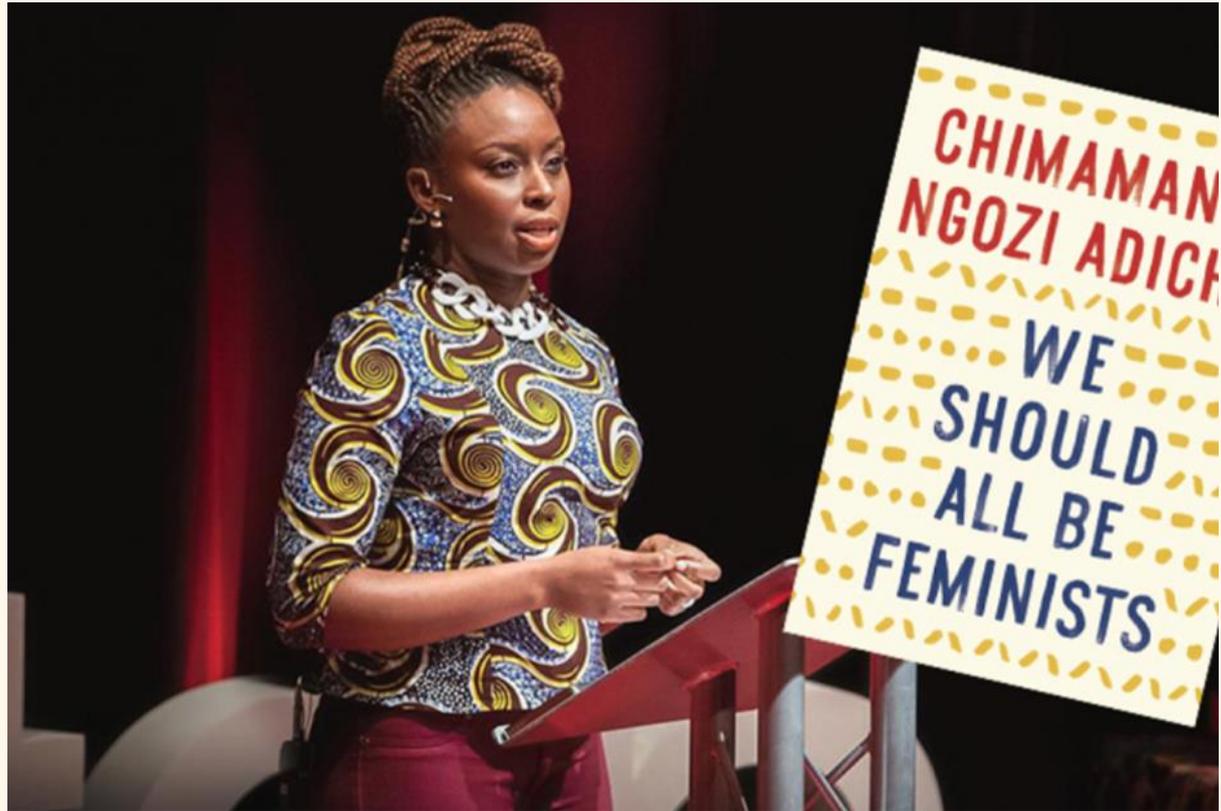
Assignment 1



“Confederate Statues:
Billboards for Racism” by
Ken Paulson, Director of the
Free Speech Center at
Middle Tennessee State
University (*USA Today*)

Assignment 2

“We Should All Be Feminists” by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (TED)



Assignment 3



“My Hopes, Dreams,
Fears for My Future
Black Son” by poet and
educator Clint Smith
(TED)

Assignment 4

“The Muslim on the
Airplane” by Syrian-
American poet and
activist Amal Kassir
(TED)



Criteria for Evaluating Reasoning

1. Purpose: What is the purpose of the writer? Is the purpose clearly stated?
2. Question: Is the question at issue well-stated? Is it clear and unbiased?
3. Information: Does the writer cite relevant evidence, experiences, and/or information essential to the issue?
4. Concepts: Does the writer clarify or define key concepts when necessary?

Criteria for Evaluating Reasoning, continued

5. Concepts: Does the writer clarify key concepts when necessary?
6. Inferences: Does the writer develop a logical line of reasoning explaining how they arrived at their conclusion?
7. Point of View: Does the writer show a sensitivity to alternative points of view?
8. Implications: Does the writer show a sensitivity to the consequences of the position they are taking?

Challenges / How Project Evolved

- It takes *a lot of time* and *a lot of examples* to teach basic terminology used to assess critical thinking
- Students initially struggled with understanding the terminology
- I realized that I needed to give examples of poor reasoning in addition to examples of strong arguments

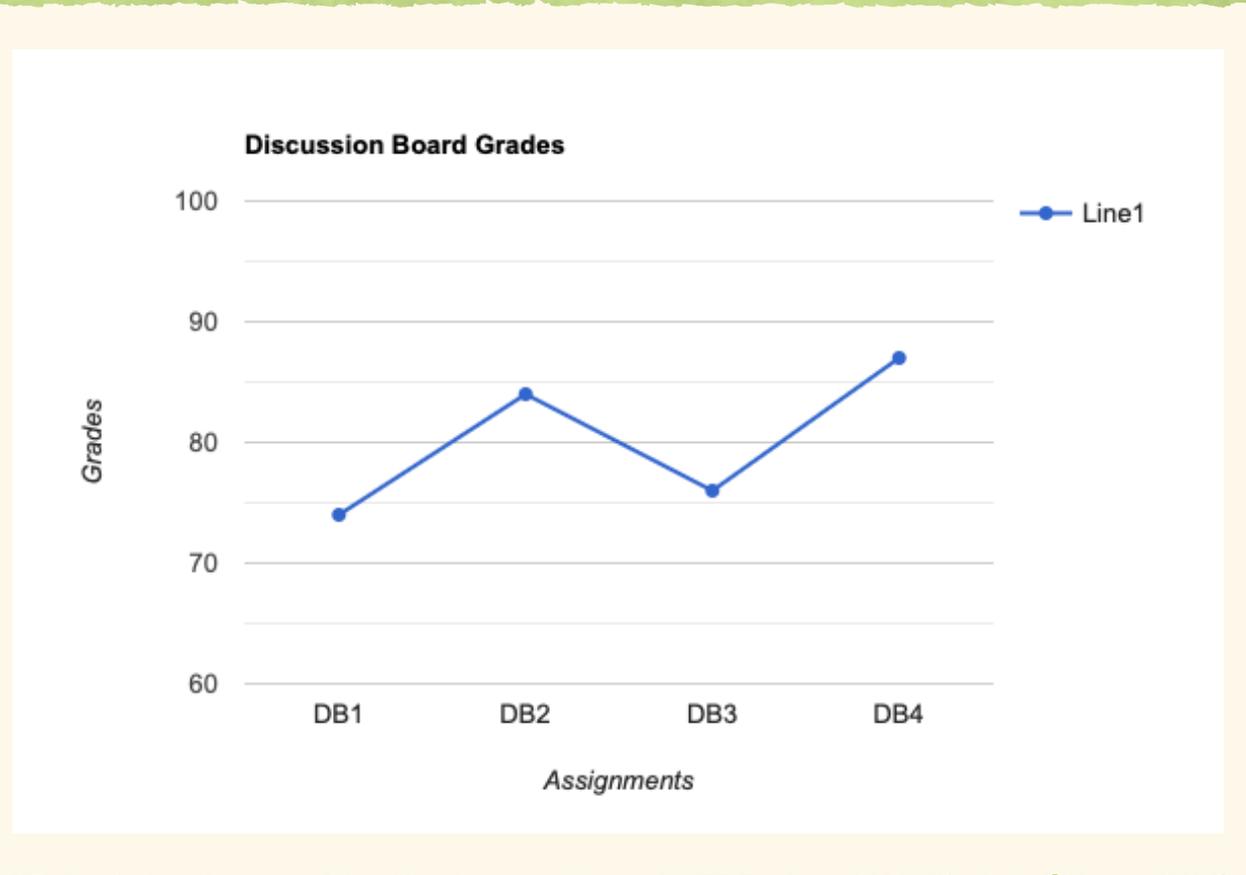
How I Assessed Students

- Used a simple rubric with four criteria:
- Answers questions directly from the prompt and writes at least four sentences (novice, competent, proficient)
- Edits carefully for grammar, spelling, and punctuation (novice, competent, proficient)
- Uses direct quotes and examples to support points and explained quote (novice, competent, proficient)
- Demonstrates critical thinking and reflection (novice, competent, proficient)

Assessment of My Strategy

Fall Semester: DB 1:
average 74%, DB 2: 84%,
DB 3: 76%, DB 4: 87%

Was the DB 3 reading
more difficult? Were
students tired at this
point in the semester?



Student Reflection 1

- “I never knew about (critical thinking skills) because in Uzbekistan, where I studied, we never did tasks like this. At first, I did know what to write, and it was very difficult for me. To be honest, I did not like this task and generally thought, why (do) we need it? The professor has always explained that this is a very useful exercise...So week after week, we answered these questions. Over time, I got used to it, and it even became interesting to me because I read the article, answered questions, looked for a suitable quote, and then paraphrased. I felt a lot of progress in this because now, reading various articles in magazines or news, I began to be attentive to the information that I read, and I ask myself those eight questions.” – Tamila Urumbaeva

Student Reflection 2

- “Before this course, I used to read just to understand and memorize what was written; now, every time I read an article or have a conversation, I remember the eight questions I used in the discussion board to examine articles. Last night I was looking at some news websites for information to use on my Essay 3 assignment. I did not use most of them because they did not consider the opposite points of view. The assignments also became easier as I was completing the course. The first assignment on the discussion board was incredibly challenging for me. It took me more than 4 hours to complete, but the last one was easy, and it took less than an hour to complete.”

- Meba Tadesse

Student Reflection 3

- “I practiced four times the critical thinking activity in (the) Discussion Board with classmates. Now, those eight methods for evaluating an article are deeply ingrained in my mind. When I read... I will subconsciously think about what (the writer’s) purpose is in each chapter. Does she clearly state her purposes, or does she cite many relevant experiences? The further outcome of the critical thinking skill for me is that I will paraphrase or make conclusions of her opinions in my own words because I believe that only when I write down those ideas can I remember them.” - Jiaxin Li

Final Thoughts:

- Grateful to have had the opportunity to reflect on this issue and to try a new approach to my teaching
- Grateful for Joan Naake's leadership and direction
- Grateful for my colleagues in my cohort for their thoughtful and meaningful discussions every month
- Truly enjoyed the readings and discussions and highly recommend the SET experience
- Thank you!