

Integrating Creative Thinking, Critical Thinking, and Team-Building Activities into Lessons

Introduction

When you look at skills that are desired for students to learn in college, creative thinking, critical thinking, and the ability to work in teams are typically on the list. But incorporating them into existing courses is not always easy, and some course structures are not always conducive to integration within assignments.

In the Fall of 2016, we taught a first-year experience course grounded on practical skills to help the students be successful during the rest of their college careers. Each lesson began with either a creative or critical thinking activity and closed with a team-building activity.

Procedure

The goal was to keep each activity within about 10 minutes (20 minutes total), leaving 30 minutes for the lesson itself. Included in the 10 minutes was time to reflect on the activity itself. Before the semester began, we compiled a list of activities and tried to match activities to lesson topics when possible.

For creative thinking, activities were chosen to foster divergent thinking, such as coming up with different ways to use a brick, writing a haiku, or creating a tiled mosaic. For critical thinking, activities were sought out with one correct answer but different possibilities of reaching that conclusion. Logic and rebus puzzles are examples of activities that were used. For team building, activities were sought out that forced cooperation for a single goal. Spaghetti and marshmallow towers and crossing the hot chocolate river with marshmallows are examples of activities used in class. Google and Pinterest searches were helpful for all three categories. In finding one resource, there would usually be other similar resources available.

Activities featured discussion afterward to help ensure more occurred than physically engaging in the activity. In discussing the creative thinking exercises, the goal was to get them to see the variety of possibilities. In discussing the critical thinking exercises, the goal was to see how they narrowed down possibilities to the correct answer. In discussing team-building, the goal was to see how to cooperate with each other, negotiating and discussing to achieve the best answer for their team. For all three, we wanted to students to feel comfortable sharing their results and how they achieved their results, allowing them to see multiple ways of working toward the same activity goals.

Results

In all three types of activities, one key aspect was the variety of solutions the students provided. While this is the point of the creative thinking activities, it is not necessarily the goal of the other two. That said, it was important to note there were multiple ways to reach the same result. Care was taken to highlight multiple solutions. Part of the discussion process was to get

them used to sharing their thoughts when they differed from others and understanding there was not always a single correct answer.

As the semester went on, students seemed to get more comfortable with the activities because they happened every time. They also worked in the same teams the entire semester, so they knew each other better. By doing the activities each time, there became the expectation that they had to think critically or creatively at the beginning of the lecture and be prepared to work collaboratively at the end of the lesson.

Recommendations

The main recommendation for integration into a course is to choose one topic to focus on instead of three. At the very least, only do one activity per day. Two activities per day limited the time in class that could be spent on the core lesson and limited time to perform and discuss each activity.

In discussion, prepared guiding questions are recommended. This limits the need for you to come up with questions extemporaneously. That said, monitor the activities. If you see something happening with an individual or team that no one else is doing and they do not volunteer their perspective in the discussion, ask them.

Overall, the activities provided a good way to break up the typical structure of a college class. While these activities might not be appropriate for all classes, similar changes to the typical course structure can help students engage with the content in a different manner, as well as allowing professors to provide their own example of creative thinking to solve problems in the workplace that we expect from college graduates.

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