

## The Power of Inferences and Assumptions: Using a Humanities Education Approach to Help Students Learn to Think Critically

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**Abstract :** A four-step 'humanities' thought model has been used in an interdisciplinary course for almost two decades and has been proven to aid in student abilities to become more inclusive in their world view. Lack of tolerance for ambiguity can interfere with this progression so we developed an assignment that seems to have assisted students in developing more tolerance for ambiguity and, therefore, opened them up to make more progress on the critical thought model. A four-step critical thought model (built from a humanities education approach) is used in an interdisciplinary course on prejudice, discrimination, and hate in an effort to minimize egocentrism and promote sociocentrism in college students. A fundamental barrier to this progression is a lack of tolerance for ambiguity. The approach to the course is built on the assumption that Tolerance for Ambiguity (characterized by a dislike of uncertain, ambiguous or situations in which expected behaviors are uncertain, will like serve as a barrier (if tolerance is low) or facilitator (if tolerance is high) of active 'engagement' with assignments. Given that active engagement with course assignments would be necessary to promote an increase in critical thought and the degree of multicultural attitude change, tolerance for ambiguity inhibits critical thinking and, ultimately multicultural attitude change. As expected, those students showing the least amount of decrease (or even an increase) in intolerance across the semester, earned lower grades in the course than those students who showed a significant decrease in intolerance,  $t(1,19) = 4.659$ ,  $p < .001$ . Students who demonstrated the most change in their Tolerance for Ambiguity (showed an increasing ability to tolerate ambiguity) earned the highest grades in the course. This is, especially, significant because faculty did not know student scores on this measure until after all assignments had been graded and course grades assigned. An assignment designed to assist students in making their assumption and inferences processes visible so they could be explored, was implemented with the goal of this exploration then promoting more tolerance for ambiguity, which, as already outlined, promotes critical thought. The assignment offers students two options and then requires them to explore what they have learned about inferences and/or assumptions This presentation outlines the assignment and demonstrates the humanities model, what students learn from particular assignments and how it fosters a change in Tolerance for Ambiguity which, serves as the foundational component of critical thinking.

**Keywords :** critical thinking, humanities education, sociocentrism, tolerance for ambiguity

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