Exploring Critical Thinking Skill Development in the 21st Century College Classroom: A Multi-Case Study

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Abstract : Employers today expect college graduates to not only develop and demonstrate content-specific knowledge but also 21st century skillsets such as critical thinking. International assessments suggest students enrolled in United States (U.S.) educational institutions are underperforming in comparison to their global peers in areas such as critical thinking and technology. This multi-case study examined how undergraduate digital literacy courses at a four-year university in the U.S., as implemented by instructors, fostered students' development of critical thinking skills. The conceptual framework for this study presumed that as students engaged in complex thinking within the context of a digital literacy course, their ability to deploy critical thinking was contingent upon whether the course was designed with the expectation for students to use critical thinking skills as well as the instructor's approach to implementing the course. Qualitative data collected from instructor interviews, classroom observations, and course documents were analyzed with an emphasis on exploring the course design and instructional methods that provided opportunities to foster critical thinking skill development. Findings from the cross-case analysis revealed that although the digital literacy courses were designed and implemented with the expectation students would deploy critical thinking; there was no explicit support for students to develop these skills. The absence of intentional skill development resulted in inequitable opportunities for all students to engage in complex thinking. The implications of this study suggest that if critical thinking is to remain a priority, then universities must expand their support of pedagogical and instructional training for faculty regarding how to support students' critical thinking skill development.

Keywords : critical thinking skill development, curriculum design, digital literacy, pedagogy
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