

IMPROVING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS: AUGMENTED FEEDBACK AND POST-EXAM DEBATE

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ABSTRACT

Studies have confirmed critical thinking skills are necessary for a comprehensive education and successful business career, but methods for developing these skills are often missing in the classroom. The “Student Self-Initiated Challenge of Examination Questions” method is a pedagogical technique that encourages and increases critical thinking skills by allowing students to challenge objective examination questions through written feedback and classroom debate. The method was found to facilitate class discussion and participation while simultaneously reinforcing course content and was well liked by the students surveyed. Discussion and areas for future research follow presentation of data.

JEL: A22, K40, K41

KEYWORDS: Critical Thinking, Classroom Techniques, Objective Examinations, Class Discussion, Participation, Business Law Course

INTRODUCTION

Developing student critical thinking skills is a consistent priority in education. The reason for this prioritization is the desire to have students with the ability to see beyond simple facts and apply knowledge in complex ways that can make decisions, solve problems, and master concepts (Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn, & Harding, 2012). Though critical thinking is inescapably linked with factual knowledge, the application of those facts enhances a student’s education. To achieve this goal, faculties need to engage students in the pedagogy of critical thinking (Bannon, 2014). By embedding critical thinking skills in course content, students develop stronger skills in critical thinking processes. According to Braun (2004), continuing to focus business education on the development of critical thinking will lead to stronger decision makers for the next generation. Additionally, with a continued effort to include critical thinking in coursework, the business graduate will be able to obtain, analyze, and effectively use information to solve future problems more effectively (Celuch & Slama, 1999). Unfortunately, little coursework in business schools includes critical thinking components (Bobrowski & Cox, 2003). This research serves to understand the practice of augmented feedback in a post-exam situation. The reasoning is to understand if the augmented feedback enhances student critical thinking skills to better prepare students for their future careers. This research is organized starting with a literature review of related peer reviewed articles on the topic, assessing the augmentation process and the impact on student critical thinking skills, the methodology of application in engagement, findings, and conclusions and future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper serves to understand the practice of augmented feedback in a post-exam situation. The reasoning is to understand if the augmented feedback enhances student critical thinking skills to better

prepare students for their future careers. The best way to reinforce course priorities and enhance effective learning is to assess the process (Boylan, 2015). Current literature on the development of critical thinking has four consistent themes. First, more effective classroom methods for developing critical thinking skills are needed. Second, simultaneous methods to incorporate covered material into the content of a college-level course should be employed. Third, to be effective, the pedagogical approach must motivate students to engage with the professor orally or in writing, as well as with other students in the classroom, so the learner can benefit from exposure to multiple perspectives. Finally, teachers need an instrument to measure the skills students are developing.

Presently, there are few studies on testing methodologies, their level of effectiveness, and student preferences. Few scholars have explored student opinions about testing formats, but those that have researched this topic found students prefer a multiple choice format with an opportunity to earn extra credit points (Scanlan, 2013). Even fewer studies have addressed testing methods that enhance critical thinking (Carlson, 2013). In contrast, there is significant research on critical thinking skills and class participation. Studies have consistently shown that these learning outcomes are important factors in student understanding of course material, the overall effectiveness of education, and student success in future careers. Because critical thinking skills are a prerequisite for a successful career, educators should develop ways to assist students in developing these skills (Celuch & Slama, 1999; Flores et al., 2012; Young & Warren, 2011). In general, educators wholeheartedly support critical thinking as a primary goal of higher education (Bissell & Lemons, 2006). Given this is a long-term goal, any method promoting analytical and critical thinking should be considered (Vo & Morris, 2006) and consistently applied to the entire curriculum. Business schools engaging critical thinking as part of a degree program would address a reported weakness students possess when entering the workplace (Braun, 2004).

Poor teaching of critical thinking skills is a major weakness in our education system. Students seldom express an original idea, offer an opinion, or provide any sort of evidence (McEwen, 1994). The lack of critical thinking has an impact on the workforce and on an individual's ability to exercise leadership (Flores et al., 2012). Accordingly, the practitioner community has long called for educators to equip students with critical thinking and communication skills (Braun & Sellers, 2012). The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (A.A.C.S.B.) has emphasized critical thinking as an important component of business education (Page & Mukherjee, 2007).

The United States education system has performed poorly in producing critical thinkers (Flores et al., 2012). According to Bannon (2014), though introductory courses meet required content needs, they often do not incorporate critical thinking. To address this problem, methods to promote critical thinking in existing courses modified (Page & Mukherjee, 2007). A challenge to engaging critical thinking is the difficulty faculty has in allocating time and expertise to the practice. In regard to time issues, some educators are concerned teaching critical thinking skills will mean inadequate time to cover course content (McEwen, 1994) and assessment (Braun, 2004). Often faculty training has not been effective in regards to assessment techniques (Peach, Mukherjee, & Hornyak, 2007).

Communication skills are critical to professional success (Albrecht & Sack, 2000). Educators have advocated a shift away from the primary focus on teaching toward a greater emphasis on student learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Bok, 1988). A fundamental component of this shift has been a call for instructors to use strategies designed to engage students actively in the teaching-learning process (Bonwell & Eisen, 1991; Wulff & Nyquist, 1999). According to Dallimore, Hertenstein, and Platt (2010), class discussion not only helps students learn content, but this discussion also helps build communication skills. Time constraints in the workplace have also increased; therefore, critical thinking development in the classroom will prove more valuable to future employers (Braun, 2004).

Class discussion requires listening closely, taking a position on an issue, speaking up to defend one's position, questioning another student's logic, experiencing diverse perspectives, and developing communication skills. Communication and interpersonal skills are the number one quality employers seek when hiring business school graduates (Mainkar, 2008). Furthermore, research shows learning is an active process, not a passive one; students learn best when they take an active part in the learning process (Petress, 2006). Students tend to retain ideas better through engagement than through vicarious learning, so all students should have the opportunity to participate in class discussion and debate (Petress, 2006). Techniques used to improve critical thinking include in-class discussion and debate (Cotter & Tally, 2009). Class discussion also leads to increased mastery of course content and enhances communication skills (Dallimore et al., 2010). For the educator, offering students an opportunity to participate in classroom discussion "is a most satisfying undertaking because it offers the reward of seeing students apply knowledge in ways that will clearly enhance their careers" (Bannon, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The researchers understood the need in a business program to incorporate critical thinking into the entire curriculum. The researchers developed a pedagogical method to address the need for critical thinking practice in the classroom. The "Student Self-Initiated Challenge of Examination Questions" (SSCEQ) is a new approach that seamlessly incorporates the development of critical thinking skills with no loss of time to cover the course material. This method permits students to identify and challenge objective examination items such as true/false and multiple-choice questions in written form directly on their examinations during testing and orally in class after the examinations are scored and returned. The opportunity to improve their grade motivates students to engage with their professor and other students, thereby increasing overall class discussion and participation. SSCEQ has become so popular students have affectionately deemed it the "Dot Method."

The methodology looks into the relationship between an advanced curriculum design and engaging critical thinking to ensure stronger academic performance. Testing pedagogy assessed the effectiveness of engaging business student learning by researching a business law program. The curriculum design focused on several key objectives: ensuring students were motivated to learn, develop student's ability to properly interpret questions posed, teach students how to understand multiple sides of an issue, and strengthen student's ability to respond to objective questions. The design of the SSCEQ program motivates students to learn. The goal of the researchers was to improve classroom techniques. This improvement utilized both positive and negative reinforcement. On the positive reinforcement side, students were able to see the "real life" application of course content by engaging academics in a manner aimed at what future careers require, engaging students in the academic process, and an ability to improve grades using reinforcement techniques. On the negative side, students may have felt peer pressure to be prepared for the classroom discussion and pressure from students holding opposing viewpoints.

One goal of the SSCEQ design was to ensure students properly interpret questions. Using a 360-degree feedback methodology, the goal of the curriculum design was to ensure teachers asked questions in a format students understood about the material to develop a platform for pulling important information from a conversation to seek clarification and be able to ask for additional information if needed. This style of learning matches the circumstances students will encounter in their future professions. Each client and case is unique to the individuals involved; business and the legal professions demand critical thinking and reasoning skills to address this uniqueness. Professionals must be able to process and react to a constantly changing environment. The ability of business and legal professionals to use critical thought ensure strategic thinking to address the increasingly tumultuous legal and business environment.

The SSCEQ requires a debate from all sides of an issue. This debate strengthens a student's skills by honing their understanding of others' arguments and requiring them to articulate responses to those

arguments. This process also encourages students to brainstorm possible solutions. The researchers applied SSCEQ to basic and advanced level business law and paralegal studies courses at an AACSB accredited institution within the University System of Georgia to develop critical thinking skills. The courses this curriculum was applied to involve freshman to junior. The freshman level course was “Introduction to Paralegalism & Ethics.” The sophomore level courses include “Legal Environment of Business,” “Legal Research & Writing I,” “Civil Procedure & Litigation I,” and “Civil Procedure & Litigation II.” The junior level courses included “Survey of the Legal Environment of Business” and “Criminal Procedure & Litigation II.”

Students complete a variety of graded assignments in each of these classes. These include completing written projects and several examinations. Due to testing time constraints, objective examination items such as true/false and multiple choice questions are a large component of examinations. With SSCEQ, the researchers invite feedback about these objective test items to enhance the development of critical thinking skills as an integral part of the learning process.

The researchers created SSCEQ to address several classroom challenges. First, the method seems to facilitate student understanding of the course material. The real value in teaching legal principles lies in a student’s ability to apply concepts to real-life events. However, textbooks, professors, and examples, which are routinely provided, use real-world and fictional examples to demonstrate legal principles, examinations can be used to provide another opportunity. Providing engagement by using graded examinations and possible extra credit is another way students can enhance their thinking skills. This is done by providing a forum for understanding why an exam response may be incorrect. Students are incentivized to understand the material, think more deeply about the subject, formulate a cogent argument to support their propositions, and persuasively present arguments to their professor and other students.

The researchers also designed SSCEQ to develop critical thinking, encourage class discussion and participation, and develop oral and written communication skills. To obtain credit for an incorrect exam item, students must not only understand and critically think about the item and course material, but they must also listen to others’ arguments about the item, take a position, defend their positions, and question other students. This process, above all, requires effective articulation. Participating in class debate enhances communication skills, which should aid students throughout their college classes and in their careers. The SSCEQ method is straightforward. While taking an exam, if a student wishes to explain an answer on any true/false or multiple-choice item, the student may articulate a challenge on the physical paper exam next to the questioned item. The student then places a dot to the right of the item on the computerized answer sheet to notify the professor about the challenge. During the grading process, if a student misses a dotted item, the professor retrieves the physical paper exam and reads the comments. If the student satisfactorily demonstrates understanding of the material, the professor uses discretion in determining whether to give partial or full credit for the item despite the incorrect answer. Those students who dot the item and present a cogent argument in challenging the item earn credit for their responses.

When the examinations are returned to the students, the professor sets aside a fifteen to thirty-minute period during which students may review their examinations and answer sheets. During this time, students may orally challenge any of the items, regardless of whether they dotted them on their answer sheets. If students demonstrate their knowledge of the material and provide a well-reasoned argument defending their answer, students earn partial or whole credit for the item. Students are then encouraged to listen to and participate in supporting or challenging their classmates’ arguments. As stated previously, this research serves to understand the practice of augmented feedback in a post-exam situation. The measurement of the impact will be based on the following research questions: (a) Does SSCEQ help students develop a better understanding of the course material? (b) Does SSCEQ aid students in developing critical thinking about the course material? (c) Did SSCEQ encourage class participation? (d)

Does listening to others aid student understanding of course material? (e) Does listening to others aid the development of critical thinking skills?

Adapting the student satisfaction scales used by Helms, the researchers developed a survey to explore these questions (Helms, 2014). The University’s IRB committee approved the survey instrument submitted. The survey first asked students whether they had used the “Dot Method” during the semester. If students answered in the affirmative, they were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with four statements using a 5-point Likert-type scale: did the method (a) increase their understanding of the material, (b) aid in developing their critical thinking about the course material, (c) encourage them to participate in class discussion, and (d) provide an opportunity to improve their grades? All students, regardless of whether they used the method, were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with two additional statements: did listening to other students engage in the method during class (a) increase their understanding of the material and (b) aid in developing their critical thinking about the course material? Finally, students were asked open-ended questions about (a) benefits and detriments of the method and (b) suggestions they might have to improve the method.

During the last week of the semester, the survey announcement occurred during class time of thirteen selected business law and paralegal sections. Students were informed they would be receiving an email inviting them to take a survey about the “Dot Method.” The email contained a link to an anonymous survey on Qualtrics. For purposes of identification, once the students completed the confidential survey, they were automatically linked to a second survey, which asked them to provide their name and to identify the course and the professor of the section in which they were enrolled. The sample size involved 305 students from the fall 2014 and spring 2015 sections of business law and paralegal classes. Of the 305 students who were sent an invitation email, 236 began the survey and 227 completed it. This is a 74% response rate. Table 1 includes the student population demographics of the survey respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Data of Students Asked to Take Survey

	Males	Females	Total
Panel A: Fall 2014			
Legal Environment of Business (3 sections)	33	51	84
Survey of the Legal Environment of Business (1 section)	2	2	4
Introduction to Paralegalism (1 section)	4	27	31
Criminal Procedure & Litigation II (1 section)	2	10	12
Civil Procedure & Litigation I (1 section)	4	23	27
Legal Research & Writing I (1 section)	2	6	8
Fall Semester Total	47	119	166
Panel B: Spring 2015			
Legal Environment of Business (4 sections)	80	37	117
Introduction to Paralegalism (1 section)	4	18	22
Spring Semester Total	84	55	139
Total Students			305

**Some students were enrolled in more than one course but were not permitted to take the survey more than once; therefore, course totals reflected in Table 1 might not reflect the actual number of students enrolled in the courses.*

FINDINGS

The results of the survey reveal perceived benefits of SSCEQ. Of the students who completed the survey, 75% reported they had used the method, and three outcomes were discovered. These included an improved understanding of and critical thinking about course content, improved class discussions and participation, and grade improvement. Table 2 presents the student rankings of the statements in the survey. Students reported course understanding and critical thinking were improved. In all five of the research questions, there was overwhelming agreement of skill improvement.

Table 2: Student Rankings of Survey Statements

Statement	Percentage of Students Rating 1 or 2	Percentage of Students Rating 4 or 5	Mean	Standard Deviation
The “Dot Method” increased my understanding of the course material.	81%	1%	1.83	0.75
The “Dot Method” aided in developing my critical thinking about the course material.	90%	1%	1.66	0.68
The “Dot Method” encouraged me to participate in class discussion.	85%	4%	1.81	0.80
Listening to my fellow classmates challenge examination questions in class <i>aided my understanding of the material.</i>	88%	2%	1.64	0.73
Listening to my classmates challenging examination questions in class <i>aided in developing my critical thinking about the course material.</i>	90%	3%	1.69	0.71

**The remainder of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed. Scale: Strongly Agree (1); Agree (2); Neither Agree nor Disagree (3); Disagree (4); Strongly Disagree (5).*

In general, the responses from the five questions ranged between 81% and 90%. All of these results represent very positive results. In the written comments of the survey, students mentioned various benefits associated with the method: (a) helping them understand the grayer areas of law (3 students), (b) encouraging a more thoughtful approach to examination items (5 students), and (c) providing an incentive to study more (one student). Two students mentioned their negotiation/persuasion skills improved because of the method. Two questions experienced the highest favorability of 90%. Ninety percent of students also felt that the “Dot Method” aided students in developing critical thinking about the course material. Over 90% of students felt they developed critical thinking skills using the “Dot Method”. From this, it can be seen that simple acceptance of an answer as correct did not encourage students to think more critically, but the challenge of an answer did encourage the development of thinking skills. For these questions, only 2% and 1%, respectively, disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Three questions had slightly lower favorability scores. These include “Does listening to others aid my understanding of course material?” (88%), “the Dot Method encouraged me to participate in class” (85%), and “Does SSCEQ help students develop a better understanding of the course material?” (81%). For these questions, only 2%, 4% and 2%, respectively, disagreed or strongly disagreed. One student underscored this benefit: “The discussions that resulted from my fellow students’ challenges greatly improved my ability to retain the knowledge. When confronted with the same subject matter again, I was able to easily recall not only the correct answer, but the reasons that made it the correct answer.”

CONCLUSIONS

This research studied the practice of augmented feedback in a post-exam situation to determine if critical thinking skills were improved with the aim to better prepare students for their future careers. The methodology employed to look at testing pedagogy used to assess the effectiveness of engaging student learning. The points include ensuring students were motivated to learn, that students were able to properly interpret questions posed to them, teach students how to understand all sides of an issue and strengthen students’ ability to respond to objective questions. The findings lead the researchers to conclude that augmented feedback enhances student critical thinking skills to better prepare students for their future careers. Specifically, the findings suggest that a method similar to the Dot Method should be employed to aid in the development of critical thinking. In every category measured, at least 81% of students either strongly agreed or agreed the method advanced them academically.

The results show students perceived the advanced design of the curriculum to engage critical thinking as enhancing their academic experience. The basis of this conclusion involved the results of the following questions. First, 81% of students felt SSCEQ helped them develop a better understanding of the course material. Second, 90% of students believed SSCEQ aided students in learning to think critically about the course material. Third, 85% of students believed the method increased class discussion. Fourth, 88% of students felt listening to others aided their understanding of the material. Fifth, over 90% of students felt their critical thinking skills were improved.

An overwhelming majority of students surveyed believed SSCEQ increased their understanding of and critical thinking about course material, gave them an opportunity to increase their grade, and encouraged them to participate in class discussion. In turn, the classroom environment became a forum where active engagement deepened understanding, perpetuating the cycle. One benefit of SSCEQ the researchers discovered, but had not anticipated, was the impact on addressing question ambiguity. This confusion occurred because of the subjective wording on exam items. Such ambiguities often occur innocently and might not be recognized by the professor. Graduate students who might fail to recognize the ambiguities written into the exam items often draft test banks accompanying textbooks. Many disciplines, including but not limited to, the law, deal not with absolutes, but with the “gray areas” of concepts. It is not unusual for subjective topics to be misinterpreted. It is especially common in the field of law given there are always opposing sides to every story and there are significant communication barriers that can occur in a technical field with clients unfamiliar with legal jargon. In this instance, writing questions requiring cognitive analysis is more important than legal wording. The researchers suspect many professors who have no mechanism to evaluate their objective exam items do not appreciate the extent to which those items might be confusing their students.

The value in encouraging students to think critically about and desire to understand the course material is of real value, regardless of whether an item is clear and unambiguous or contains unperceived or intentional ambiguities. SSCEQ helps initiate class discussion and encourages students to clarify their understanding of the subject matter, even those items the professor and students agree are clear and unambiguous. Indeed, some professors employing SSCEQ might deliberately include a few ambiguously worded items in their exams to ignite class discussion and debate. There are several limitations to this study. These limitations include: there was no measure between academic success and student satisfaction; only one method, the Dot Method, was studied; the sample only had one year’s worth of data; and there is difficulty measuring the relationship between student satisfaction and academic output.

Future research can be expanded to other areas. In future studies, more detailed student demographics should be collected to discover whether perception patterns emerge based on race, gender, ethnicity, age, traditional versus nontraditional status, and student rank. This study looked into classes with a size between 15 and 35; another area of interest is looking into the effectiveness with larger class sizes. Another possible area of interest is the inclusion of this method with both online education and upper division or graduate courses. Possible other research includes comparing this group to a control group and adding a measurement to determine the extent of critical thinking improvement. Finally, scholars should investigate students longitudinally to ascertain whether SSCEQ has helped them in their chosen careers.

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