



Using films to develop the critical thinking competence of the students at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC): Testing an audiovisual case methodology in a distance e-learning environment



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to set out a teaching innovation project that seeks to advance in the development and assessment one of the fundamental students' competencies from any Business Administration Degree, such as: critical thinking. We are going to adapt an audiovisual case methodology, developed and already proved in traditional universities, in order to help the students develop and boost one of the competencies required to improve the efficiency and efficacy of their daily activity in organizations, and which previously has been highlighted as fundamental by the academia when the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was designed.

This methodology uses short clips of films – usually, true stories- to help students to understand the practical implications of the theoretical concepts explained at class. We are going to evaluate the implementation of this methodology, and also its impact on the students' learning process in an Open University.

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1. Introduction

Finding a way to develop and assess some fundamental students' competencies, such critical thinking, among others, has been a constant concern for academics and professionals since the EHEA demanded it. For conventional universities, its development is a challenge; but, for Open Universities, this fact becomes a great challenge.

In the academic field is a priority to develop methodologies to develop and effective evaluate this type of skills among students. That is why the development of teaching innovation projects, conducive to this fact, is a constant in universities as the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). In this paper we are going to expose a teaching innovation project that we have defined in order to advance in the development and assessment of one of the competencies needed by our students according to the White Paper of Business and Economy of the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) in Spain (Rodríguez, 2005). We are referring, specifically, to the critical thinking competence.

With the aim of developing a teaching methodology to facilitate the development and assessment of the previous competencies in an online learning environment, we will take as a reference an

experience that was previously successfully developed in a face-to-face learning environment. Based on the case study method, this experience was based on the use of audiovisual cases in order to identify and define organizational problems.

It is widely held that the courses' content in the Management field makes the case method very useful and relevant in the teaching-learning process. Its realistic character allows students to explore a topic in a real-world setting. Moreover, it gets the students closer to the enterprises' issues since it permits a better understanding of the complexity and multidimensionality of their real analysis, and the difficulty that manager's face when taking decisions. Pedagogically speaking, "Case Method refers to instruction that utilizes descriptions of actual situations to provide a basis for discussion among students and instructor. (...) The underlying intent of the case method is to narrow the gap between theory and practice by placing students in the midst of a real situation they are likely to encounter, then to press them to analyze the situation, make a decision regarding a course of action to take, and then defend that decision in the midst of their peers" (Clawson, 2006; Clawson and Hasking, 2006). So, if we ask students to work by groups in order to solve the case we are going to help them develop their critical thinking competence, because we are thinking that, finally, as they have to perfectly understand the situation, analyze it and propose a solution we are appealing to their assimilation competency.

It should be noted that the aim of the methodology taken as starting point is different from the current goal. It had not been

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designed to assess any kind of competence as in this case. However, it is true that pursuant to its approach, it helped to develop students' critical reasoning. Since we find ourselves in an online environment, with a different profile of students, and a more ambitious objective (the development and evaluation of a specific competency) it seems obvious that the work methodology, the resources that we are going to use would be different.

(Clabaugh, Forbes, & Clabaugh, 1995) Works et to 1995; (Smith, 2003) show the success of the methodology of the case study as a basis for the development and measurement of critical competition thinking. But beyond this, the characteristics of our environment lead us to consider the use of new teaching resources adapted to the reality of the moment (Huitt, 1999, 2007). Traditionally, the most dominant form of cases available is the paper version, being Harvard Business School the largest single producer of business cases and its managers training programs in the beginning of last century where the origins of this methodology goes back to. However, undergraduates of today find difficult to work with such long written cases and, what is most important, to analyze and see its applicability. That is why, audiovisual means is so important today, and the reason for what some professors in our field start working with audiovisual resources (Gallardo, 2010).

This paper adopts the following structure. Firstly, we proceed to define the concept of critical thinking, noting its importance in the field of business, and identifying some of the teaching practices that favor their correct learning by students. Then, in point three we are going to contextualize the teaching innovating project that we have defined in order to develop a methodology for the development and measurement of critical thinking competition. We conclude this point, exposing the conclusions that we think to obtain and the limitation that implies the experience we will take as a reference. We finish the work by establishing the references.

2. Setting in a context

2.1. The critical thinking competence

The term "critical thinking" has its roots in the mid-late 20th century, and during the past several decades, it has become a ubiquitous presence in educational programs at all levels of instruction. Perhaps this fact, together with the complexity of the concept, makes possible to find some definitions about what critical thinking means.

For instance, (Moore & Parker, 2006) argue that, "Critical thinking is simply the careful, deliberate determination of whether we should accept, reject, or suspend judgment about a claim and of the degree of confidence with which we accept or reject it". For these authors the ability to think critically is vitally important; in fact, our lives depend on it, because the way we conduct our lives depends on what we believe on what claims we accept. The more carefully we evaluate a claim, and the more fully we separate issues that are relevant to it from those that are not, the more critical is our thinking. In sync, (Siegel, 1990) defines critical thinking as a form of higher-order thinking-consciously controlled reflective thought that draws on, but can be distinguished from lower-order cognitive processes like perception, attention and memory. Likewise, (Cederblom & Paulsen, 2011; Ennis, 1991), define critical thinking as a "reasonably reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do".

In general terms, critical thinking may be described as a higher-order thinking skill that consists of evaluating arguments or propositions, and making judgments that can guide the development of beliefs and taking action. It is a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment that results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanations of the evidential, conceptual,

methodological, or contextual considerations upon which the judgment is based. This conceptualization is supported by Scriven and Paul 1992 and (Chaffee, 1992; Paul, 1989), who defined critical thinking as "an intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication as a guide to belief and action". In its exemplary form, critical thinking it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.

Moreover, these authors show two important features of this concept. On the one hand, critical thinking varies according to the motivation underlying it. When grounded in selfish motives, it is often manifested in the skillful manipulation of ideas in service of one's own, or one's groups', vested interest. As such it is typically intellectually flawed, however pragmatically successful it might be. When grounded in fair-mindedness and intellectual integrity, it is typically of a higher order intellectually, though subject to the charge of "idealism" by those habituated to its selfish use. On the other hand, any kind of critical thinking is never universal in each individual; everyone is subject to episodes of undisciplined or irrational thought. Therefore, its quality is typically a matter of degree and dependent on, among other things, the quality and depth of experience in a given domain of thinking or with respect to a particular class of questions.

2.2. Critical thinking in business area

If a competence is highly valued in the field of business, this is critical thinking. Critical effective thinking is key to management success, being implicated in virtually every task or function manager's performance (Smith, 2003). Indeed, thinking is especially important to management, an organizational role that requires incumbents to deal with exceptional cases, incidents that cannot be handled by established procedures and situations that necessitate deliberative, and often innovative, thought.

As (McEwen, 1994) shows, critical thinking in business may be defined as the capacity to make timely, effective and well reasoned decisions. It is absolutely essential for executive leadership and managerial success. Strong critical thinking, at every organizational level, results in accurate problem identification and sensible problem resolution that translate into better customer service, greater productivity, and a healthier bottom line.

Whether working in teams or individually, employees who are willing and able to analyze (interpret, explain, infer and evaluate) information, proposals, ideas, plans and options, are vital assets to their organizations. Without these talented people at every level, businesses flounder and fail.

Literature shows that critical thinking has both cognitive and attitudinal dimensions. Nevertheless, (Huitt, 1998) proposes an alternative model where there are affective, co-native and behavioral aspects that must be considered in addition to the cognitive process involved into critical thinking. Knowing dimension involves possession of certain skills (as for analyzing arguments) and related knowledge of strategies, methods, heuristics, concepts, and principles. The attitudinal side of critical thinking is referenced by (Siegel, 1990) notion of the "critical spirit". It also is expressed in claims that critical thinkers exhibit certain mental dispositions (Ennis, 1996) or "perfections of thought" (Moore & Parker, 2006), that move them to be reflective and evaluative.

Taking into account this last idea, we can consider a great critical thinker is one who possesses rationality, self-awareness, honesty, open mindedness, discipline, and judgment. However, critical thinking encompasses only some of the knowledge about thinking that managers require. It does not address many important think-

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