

The Impact of Liberal Education on the Development of Reflective/Critical Thinking

Purposes of this inquiry

Like other liberal arts colleges and universities, Columbia College Chicago has been actively struggling to assess, in meaningful ways, the holistic outcomes of liberal education – How are we doing in terms of teaching our students to know how to draw reasonable conclusions in the presence of incomplete and even conflicting data, empowering them to know that the world is far more complex than it first appears and that they must make interpretive arguments and decision? In other words, how well are we doing in helping students become mature thinkers?

A secondary purpose of this inquiry was to find an assessment tool that has a sound theoretical foundation and allows for meaningful peer comparisons and ease of administration.

Theoretical model used in this inquiry

King and Kitchener's Reflective Judgment Model (1994) was selected to guide our initial inquiry, since reflective thinking requires the continual evaluation of beliefs, assumptions, and hypotheses against existing data and against other plausible interpretations of the data.

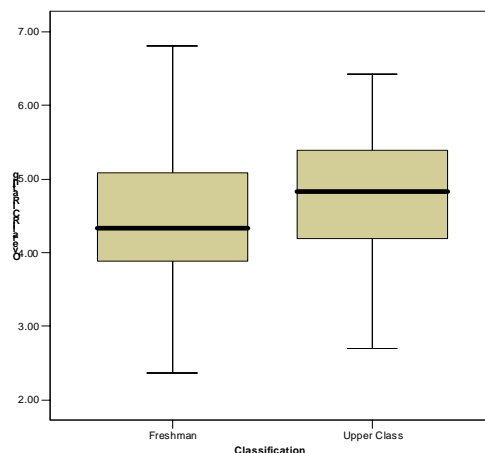
Method and Assessment Tool

An online version of the Reasoning about Current Issues (RCI) questionnaire developed by King and Kitchener was used. This online version is based on King & Kitchener's Reflective Judgment Interview. During fall 2006, 113 freshmen and 91 juniors and seniors (upperclassmen) took the inventory. The students self-identified their academic class and were not asked whether they transferred in any credits from other institutions. The students were recruited through the Student Government Association, departmental outcomes assessment coordinators and word of mouth. Students took about 25 minutes to complete the instrument. The RCI score can range from 2 to 7, and is averaged across the three sections of the questionnaire, each dealing with a specific contemporary issue (a copy of the version of the RCI used is attached). Students' responses were scored at the University of Denver and a converted data file was sent back to the participating institution from the University of Michigan, Center for Reflective Judgment.

Initial Results

Although the mean scores of the two groups are in Quasi-Reflective Thinking phase, the upperclassmen demonstrated a significantly higher level of mature thinking compared to the freshmen. A slight gender difference was observed in the freshman group – freshman females' RCI mean score was 4.57 whereas freshman males' mean score was 4.24. This gender difference was not observed in the upperclassmen.

	RCI Mean	SD	N
Freshman Group	4.48	.87	113
Upper Class Group	4.71	.90	91
Total	4.58	.89	204



	FR Gp.	UC Gp.
Female	4.57	4.82
Male	4.24	4.80

Discussion

Initially we were elated to see the results because our average scores were a full one stage higher than the reflective judgment scores published by King & Kitchener in 1994 based on their national study. While investigating plausible causes for these significantly higher scores, the investigators learned that the online instrument has been producing higher average scores. Unfortunately, age-appropriate comparison data on the online instrument is not yet available. It has been speculated that extensive interviews and the online instrument might be tapping into different aspects of the reflective/critical thinking processes.

Although the investigators were not able to make a peer comparison, many lessons were learned from this initial inquiry.

1. Students were highly receptive to this instrument and did not experience any problems in following the instructions.
2. Several faculty members became interested in the instrument and want to use the RCI tool in their classes as an informal indicator to gauge if students are getting the core learning outcomes.
3. Students and faculty are receptive to a large-scale assessment, if it could be done efficiently (and economically) and the tool is grounded on a solid theoretical model with extensive research.

Future Actions

There is still much more we can learn from replicating this study using a larger population. Could courses that foster critical thinking be provided during the early stages of one's education? Perhaps a comprehensive view of the curriculum and how it fosters critical thinking skills could offer much insight. Equally important, are these skills enhanced in discipline-specific programs found throughout a Media Arts institution? Overwhelmingly, the college classroom is the best environment for providing students with the supportive platforms they need for practicing perspectives of reflective thinking and learning.

References

- Humphreys, D., & Davenport, A. (2005). What really matters in college: How students view and value liberal education. Liberal Education, 91 (3), 36-43.
- King, P.M., & Kitchener, K. S. (1994). Developing reflective judgment: Understanding and promoting intellectual growth and critical thinking in adolescents and adults. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

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