

# Teaching Critical Thinking Skills for the 21st Century: An Advertising Principles Case Study

KEVIN CELUCH  
MARK SLAMA

Illinois State University  
Normal, Illinois

**H**ow can business educators deliver quality education, monitor the outcomes of their teaching efforts, and continuously improve when a great deal of business content becomes obsolete every few years? The difficulty in this task is apparent given businesspeople's poor perceptions of the skill levels of college of business graduates (Chonko & Roberts, 1996; Chonko, 1993; Chonko & Caballero, 1991).

In addressing the problems of business education, Chonko and Roberts (1996) recommended full competence in a business discipline plus a set of lifelong learning skills, including critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills are currently perceived as an important element of university education (Jones et al., 1995; Lipman, 1988; Oliver & Utermohlen, 1995) and are increasingly important to business education.

Paul and Willsen (cited in Paul, 1995) reviewed the work of some leading thinkers on the rapidly changing business environment and came to the conclusion that business educators need to focus on critical thinking skills. For example, Laura Tyson (cited in Paul, 1995), acting as chairperson of the President's Council of Economic Advisors, stated that organizations that deal effec-

**ABSTRACT.** Business educators are being asked to prepare students for a rapidly changing world in which much business content becomes obsolete every few years. How can they prepare students to be lifelong learners capable of facing challenges as yet unspecified? The answer does not lie in a continually changing curriculum, but in one that prepares business graduates to change and to learn the things they need throughout life. An exciting approach to creating such a business graduate focuses on critical thinking skills. This article describes how a critical-thinking-skills approach can be used to teach any business course and illustrates this point with a case study of an advertising principles course.

tively with change will be characterized by workers with superior thinking skills:

High productivity work-place organizations depend on workers who can do more than read, write, and do arithmetic, and who bring more to their jobs than reliability and a good attitude. In such organizations, workers are asked to use judgment and make decisions rather than merely to follow directions. (1993, "Failing Our Youth: America's K-12 Education," p. 53)

Robert Reich, former secretary of labor, emphasized that as corporations become more multinational, the wealth of the nation will be a function of the ability of its citizens to be employed in

high-skill jobs, creating value by solving the unknown problems of the future (Reich, 1992, cited in Paul, 1995). He identified four types of critical thinking that will be necessary: abstraction, systems thinking, experimentation and testing, and collaboration. Further, the implementation of Deming's concept of continuous improvement is dependent on critical reflection (Holt, 1993; cited in Paul, 1995). For example, in a production environment, groups of workers organized in quality control circles need to assess the production process critically and use judgment to improve it (Paul & Willsen, cited in Paul, 1995).

By concentrating on critical thinking, business educators emphasize the timeless qualities of rational thinking that transcend today's content and technology. In this way they can create a business graduate who is capable of succeeding in an environment of continuous change. Such a graduate will be able to obtain and effectively use the information needed to solve future problems regardless of the prevailing technological environment.

## What Is Critical Thinking?

The Foundation for Critical Thinking (1997) has developed an approach for

teaching critical thinking in any college course. Building on its many "definitions," the foundation conceives of critical thinking as an essential set of reasoning and communication skills required to operate effectively in society. Proficiency in critical thinking is essential to lifelong learning and to dealing effectively with a world of accelerating change. Specifically, the practice of critical thinking is associated with the following elements of reasoning: purpose of the thinking, key issue or question being considered, assumptions, point of view, evidence, concepts and ideas, inferences or interpretations, and implications or consequences.

A key feature of the process of learning to be a competent critical thinker is the ability to self-assess and continually improve one's thinking. When a person communicates his or her critical thinking through speech or writing, each element of reasoning can be evaluated in the ways shown in Table 1. In addition to evaluating the individual elements of a critical thinking effort, an overall evaluation of the quality of critical thinking can be made according to universal standards that apply to all forms of thinking, including clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, and significance. Examples of how these standards are used to assess critical thinking are shown in Table 2.

The application of critical thinking skills to practical problems within a discipline and the improvement in critical thinking skills that comes from self-evaluation are helpful in developing a number of valuable intellectual traits that contribute to the lifelong pursuit of knowledge and the capacity to solve future problems. These valuable traits include intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual empathy, intellectual integrity, intellectual perseverance, intellectual faith in reason, and intellectual fair-mindedness. Descriptions of these traits appear in Table 3.

### How Can Critical Thinking Be Used to Teach Business?

The methods described by the Foundation for Critical Thinking were used to revise an advertising principles class at a major Midwestern university. To

**TABLE 1. How to Assess Elements of Critical Thinking**

1. All reasoning has a **PURPOSE**.
  - Take time to state your purpose clearly.
  - Distinguish your purpose from related purposes.
  - Check periodically to be sure you are still on target.
  - Choose significant and realistic purposes.
2. All reasoning is an attempt to **FIGURE** something out, to settle some **QUESTION**, solve some **PROBLEM**.
  - Take time to clearly and precisely state the question at issue.
  - Express the question in several ways to clarify its meanings and scope.
  - Break the question into subquestions.
  - Identify if the question has one right answer, is a matter of mere opinion, or requires reasoning from more than one point of view.
3. All reasoning is based on **ASSUMPTIONS**.
  - Clearly identify your assumptions and determine whether they are justifiable.
  - Consider how your assumptions are shaping your point of view.
4. All reasoning is done from some **POINT OF VIEW**.
  - Identify your point of view.
  - Seek other points of view and identify their strengths as well as their weaknesses.
  - Strive to be fair-minded in evaluating all points of view.
5. All reasoning is based on **DATA, INFORMATION, AND EVIDENCE**.
  - Restrict your claims to those supported by the data you have.
  - Search for information that opposes your position as well as information that supports it.
  - Make sure that all information used is clear, accurate, and relevant to the question at issue.
  - Make sure you have gathered sufficient information.
6. All reasoning is expressed through, and shaped by, **CONCEPTS** and **IDEAS**.
  - Identify key concepts and explain them clearly.
  - Consider alternative concepts or alternative definitions to concepts.
  - Make sure you are using concepts with care and precision.
7. All reasoning contains **INFERENCES** or **INTERPRETATIONS** by which we draw **CONCLUSIONS** and give meaning to data.
  - Infer only what the evidence implies.
  - Check inferences for their consistency with each other.
  - Identify assumptions that lead you to your inferences.
8. All reasoning leads somewhere or has **IMPLICATIONS** and **CONSEQUENCES**.
  - Trace the implications and consequences that follow from your reasoning.
  - Search for negative as well as positive implications.
  - Consider all possible consequences.

*Source:* Foundation for Critical Thinking. (1997). *Critical Thinking: Basic Theory & Instructional Structures* (pp. 3–10). Wye Mills, MD: Author.

teach a course using critical thinking methods, the course must be reconceptualized *not as a set of content areas*, but as a method of thinking applicable to solving the problems posed within a particular discipline. The student must master not only the language and concepts currently used within a discipline but also modes of thinking associated with problem solving in that area of study. *The focus is not on answering the*

*question, What does a marketer need to know? Instead one asks, how does a marketer need to think?*

Although it might seem that content is given less importance than problem solving in this approach, the content is in fact learned more deeply as a result of being part of and relevant to an involving thought process. Content comes alive in the form of thinking and dies when one tries to learn it without think-

**TABLE 2. Standards for Judging Critical Thinking**

Clarity

- Could you elaborate further?
- Could you illustrate what you mean?
- Could you give me an example?

Accuracy

- How could we check on that?
- How could we find out if that was true?
- How could we verify or test that?

Precision

- Could you be more specific?
- Could you give me more details?
- Could you be more exact?

Relevance

- How does that relate to the problem?
- How does that bear on the question?
- How does that help us with the issue?

Depth

- What factors make this a difficult problem?
- What are some of the complexities of this question?
- What are some of the difficulties we need to deal with?

Breadth

- Do we need to look at this from another perspective?
- Do we need to consider another point of view?
- Do we need to look at this in other ways?

Logic

- Does all this make sense together?
- Does your first paragraph fit in with your last?
- Does what you say follow from the evidence?

Significance

- Is this the most important problem to consider?
- Is this the central idea to focus on?
- Which of these facts are most important?

Source: Foundation for Critical Thinking. (1997). *Critical Thinking: Basic Theory & Instructional Structures* (pp. 3-10). Wye Mills, MD: Author.

**TABLE 3. Intellectual Traits**

Intellectual Humility

Having a consciousness of the limits of one's knowledge, including a sensitivity to circumstances in which one's native egocentrism is likely to function self-deceptively; sensitivity to bias, prejudice, and limitations of one's viewpoint. Intellectual humility depends on recognizing that one should not claim more than one actually knows. It does not imply spinelessness or submissiveness. It implies the lack of intellectual pretentiousness, boastfulness, or conceit, combined with insight into the logical foundations, or lack of such foundations, of one's beliefs.

Intellectual Courage

Having a consciousness of the need to face and fairly address ideas, beliefs, or viewpoints toward which we have strong negative emotions and to which we have not given a serious hearing. This courage is connected with the recognition that ideas considered dangerous or absurd are sometimes rationally justified (in whole or in part) and that conclusions and beliefs inculcated in us are sometimes false or misleading. To determine for ourselves which is which, we must not passively and uncritically "accept" what we have "learned." Intellectual courage comes into play here, because inevitably we will come to see some truth in some ideas considered dangerous and absurd, and distortion or falsity in some ideas strongly held in our social group. We need courage to be true to our own thinking in such circumstances. The penalties for nonconformity can be severe.

Intellectual Empathy

Having a consciousness of the need to imaginatively put oneself in the place of others in order to genuinely understand them, which requires the consciousness of our egocentric tendency to identify truth with our immediate perceptions of long-standing thought or belief. This trait correlates with the ability to reconstruct accurately the viewpoints and reasoning of others and to reason from premises, assumptions, and ideas other than our own. This trait also correlates with the willingness to remember occasions when we were wrong in the past despite an intense conviction that we were right, and with the ability to imagine our being similarly deceived in a case-at-hand.

Intellectual Integrity

Recognition of the need to be true to one's own thinking; to be consistent in the intellectual standards one applies, to hold one's self to the same rigorous standards of evidence and proof to which one holds one's antagonists; to practice what one advocates for others; and to honestly admit discrepancies and inconsistencies in one's own thought and action.

Intellectual Perseverance

Having a consciousness of the need to use intellectual insights and truths in spite of difficulties, obstacles, and frustrations; firm adherence to rational principles despite the irrational opposition of others; a sense of the need to struggle with confusion and unsettled questions over an extended period of time to achieve deeper understanding or insight.

Faith in Reason

Confidence that, in the long run, one's own higher interests and those of humankind at large will be best served by giving the freest play to reason, by encouraging people to come to their own conclusions by developing their own rational faculties; faith that, with proper encouragement and cultivation, people can learn to think for themselves, to form rational viewpoints, draw reasonable conclusions, think coherently and logically, persuade each other by reason and become reasonable persons, despite the deep-seated obstacles in the native character of the human mind and in society as we know it.

Fair-Mindedness

Having a consciousness of the need to treat all viewpoints alike, without reference to one's own feelings or vested interests, or the feelings or vested interests of one's friends, community, or nation; implies adherence to intellectual standards without reference to one's own advantage or the advantage of one's group.

Source: Foundation for Critical Thinking. (1997). *Critical Thinking: Basic Theory & Instructional Structures* (pp. 3-19). Wye Mills, MD: Author.

ing, as shown in Table 4. Therefore, active learning and problem-solving exercises are a key part of any course based on critical thinking skills.

To design a course based on critical thinking skills, the Foundation recommends developing the following:

- one's individual concept of the course
- the general plan for implementing that concept
- the requirements the students must meet
- the grading policies in the course
- performance profiles that correlate with grade levels

The concept of the course will be for the students to learn how to employ the critical thinking skills required of, for example, a marketer, a financial analyst, a manager, an accountant, or an advertiser. To achieve the goal, the course will be thinking-skills oriented and require active participation. It is crucial that the students understand and appreciate the general plan of action early in the course—why attendance and active participation in learning exercises are required. Similarly, clear explanations of grading policies early in the course, and performance profiles (associated with grade levels) are particularly important, given that students are not being asked simply to get “right” an-

swers but to demonstrate high-quality critical thinking that will be judged according to intellectual standards.

### A Critical Thinking Approach to Advertising Principles

The teaching/learning orientation is based on the premise that good thinking is a fundamental life skill. As a student, businessperson, and citizen—in every realm and circumstance of life, good thinking creates value, whereas poor thinking causes problems, wastes time and energy, and leads to frustration (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 1997). Therefore, students' learning is enhanced when they are *actively involved in improving their thinking*, that is, becoming more effective critics of their thinking. Within this *high-involvement/critical thinking* philosophy, there are teaching goals and learning goals.

Teaching goals relating to *high-involvement/critical thinking* focus on the creation of intellectual excitement and building interpersonal rapport. Intellectual excitement involves moving beyond clarity of exposition, rigor in expectations, and the expression of enthusiasm for a subject to having students regularly experience quality improvement in thinking for a content area. Interpersonal rapport development consists of stimulating positive student emotions as a means of encouraging the best thinking students are capable of and promoting an atmosphere conveying respect for students as individuals.

Goals for the students relating to *high-involvement/critical thinking* focus on learning how thinking works and how to improve it within a content area. Because thinking is unobservable, in contrast to other performance domains such as tennis and ballet, learning priorities relate to developing students' awareness of how they are using their thoughts, and then providing regular opportunities for practice in improving their thinking. When students improve their thinking, they improve their learning; significant course content is better internalized and available for later use when it has been taught as a mode of thinking. Further, the current business environment demands effective communicators and problem solvers who can

work effectively with others. Critical thinking proficiency directly translates into more effective reading, writing, speaking, and listening abilities as well. Given improved communication and problem-solving modalities, enhancement of the ability to work productively with others is a natural by-product of more effective thinking.

### Teaching Methods, Materials, and Student Work

Methods and materials employed in achieving teaching/learning goals, although varied in form, consistently relate to thinking improvement. The primary objective of the course is to introduce students to the field of advertising by having them think critically about important concepts, issues, and their application in the field. An important focus of the first day of class is the syllabus. The syllabus communicates the course's intent and scope as well as relevant expectations. Further, students are asked to read and sign a “Student Understandings” sheet, which reiterates key issues/requirements of the class. At the first meeting, it is also important to generate participation, which serves as an important reference point for the remainder of the semester. A special effort is made to stress the relevance of critical thinking and the course to students. That is, given a rapidly changing world of increasing complexity, critical thinking ability will be requisite to “add value” to professional and personal lives. Further, although the majority of the students will not work directly in advertising, many will interface with aspects of advertising/promotion through other areas of business—personal selling, retailing, services, and/or not-for-profit organizations.

Early in the course, students are introduced to critical thinking. The approach involves a comprehensive, disciplined system based on the *elements of thinking* (purpose, question, point of view, information, interpretation, concept, conclusion, assumption, implication, and consequence), guided and evaluated by *intellectual standards/criteria* (clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, and significance), for the purpose of ultimately

**TABLE 4. Content and Critical Thinking**

- All content “lives” in the form of thinking.
- Only those who can “think” through the content have it.
- All content “dies” when one tries to learn it without thinking it through.
- Only through thinking can students “take possession” of content and make it theirs.
- Only to the extent that a student asks genuine questions and seeks answers to them, is a student taking content seriously and thinking it through!

Source: Foundation for Critical Thinking. (1997). *Critical Thinking: Basic Theory & Instructional Structures* (pp. 2–6). Wye Mills, MD: Author.

developing *intellectual virtues* (intellectual autonomy, empathy, integrity, humility, perseverance, justice, confidence, and courage). As the course progresses, the process involves modeling critical thinking, engaging students in critical thinking, and holding them responsible for improving it.

Consistent with class objectives, assignments involve regular opportunities to practice critical thinking within the context of advertising/marketing communication. Following are brief summaries of assignments/projects that illustrate how content is reconceptualized into thinking episodes.

#### *Course Introduction*

1. What are qualities of effective advertising? Why? (This is an example of an essential idea that provides “leverage” throughout the course.)
2. Create an ad for yourself, following the criteria identified in assignment #1. Evaluate one another’s ads based on the criteria.
3. Of the Rolex and Noblia watch ads, which one is more effective? Why?

#### *Advertising History*

4. Based on advertising’s history, what will be significant issues for advertising’s future? Why?
5. What one event is the most significant in advertising’s history? Provide your reasoning.
6. Find and document evidence that the “big ideas” of Leo Burnett, Rosser Reeves, David Ogilvy, and William Bernbach are alive today.

#### *Advertising’s Environment*

7. Develop three significant questions—one each for the social, economic, and legal domains of advertising’s environment. Provide your reasoning.
8. Evaluate three direct mail pieces in terms of criteria related to advertising deception and unfairness. Provide your reasoning.

#### *Client-Agency Relationships*

9. In the Francis, Berther, and Allfreed Case, what problems were in exis-

tence? Document evidence of problems. Provide specific recommendations to address problems. Based on your recommendations, discuss broader implications that might apply to client-agency relationships in general. (The instructor also had the students role play and discuss aspects of this case.)

#### *Advertising-Marketing Relationship*

10. How is effective integrated marketing communication like an effective personal relationship? Provide your reasoning.

#### *Consumer Behavior*

11. Select three or four of the most significant consumer behavior variables for understanding the product/service provided. Why are these important? What do they imply for marketing communication related to the product/service?

#### *Segmentation and Positioning*

12. Choose a product/service that each visual (provided to students) could help advertise. Profile the target audience for the product/service in terms of psychographics. Justify your product/service selection and target audience profile.
13. The Frank W. Horner Case: Develop recommendations related to specific segments and positioning strategies to identified segments for the product. Provide your reasoning.

#### *Advertising Budgeting*

14. Read “Advertising’s Holy Grail.” Summarize the formula’s strengths and weaknesses. Given your analysis and your knowledge of ad budgeting, would you adopt the approach? Provide your reasoning.

#### *Advertising Strategy*

15. Develop a product ad based on the assigned FCB (Foote, Cone, and Belding) grid position and criteria of effective advertising. Justify the ad in terms of the grid classification, and evaluate one another’s ads in terms of grid position and criteria.

16. “Explode the dot”: Develop an alternative FCB grid position for your product/service and then develop an ad that uses unexpected verbal and visual metaphors to convey the new position.

#### *Creative Strategy*

17. Develop an ad for smoking prevention that uses unique/unexpected verbal and visual metaphors to convey the message, and evaluate one another’s ads in terms of unique/unexpected elements.

18. Copywriting exercise (students are provided with a two-page ad): Edit the ad and justify changes.

#### *Media Strategy*

19. Media allocation exercise: Match each company with a media allocation profile. Provide your reasoning.
20. Target audience weighting and frequency assumption exercise (students are provided with weighting and frequency information for a brand): Evaluate the weighting and frequency assumptions and provide your reasoning.

In this case study, some of these assignments were completed individually or in small groups outside of class, but the majority were completed in small groups in class. Thus, students experienced much less lecture and more continuous thinking, talking, and writing than in a typical class. The teacher would circulate around the room while students were engaged in the assignments and, through monitoring the dialogical process, could develop a much better feel for student thinking compared with the more passive, didactic approach. Students received timely and continuous feedback on each assignment according to the standards/criteria applied to the elements of critical thinking described earlier in this article. They also participated in evaluating projects and completed a formal end-of-semester self-evaluation based on their portfolio of work. At midterm, students had an informal opportunity to practice a self-assessment. Both assessing others’ work and the self-evaluation further enhanced and reinforced critical thinking ability

and prepared them for such necessary evaluations in their future business lives. Finally, as a control against “free-riding” in outside group projects, students were provided with the opportunity to evaluate group member performance.

### Teaching Assessment Approaches and Summaries

In an exploratory attempt to assess the quality of the teaching/learning in the advertising principles course, according to the critical thinking orientation, multiple approaches were used. These measures are not meant to be taken as scientific (hypothesis testing) evidence of the superiority of the critical thinking approach. For that type of evidence further research would be required; however, they do provide some assessment information regarding this case study. Periodic formal assessments (at 2-, 4-, and 6-week intervals, encompassing both closed-ended and the more open-ended question “What is your understanding of the approach used in this class?”) provided specific feedback on student perceptions of the critical thinking approach.

Student self-assessment scores were as follows: For familiarity with critical thinking, students’ self-scored mean was 3.7 before the class, and 8.6 after the class. For ability in critical thinking, preclass course mean was 5.2, and post-class it was 8.2. (Means were based on a scale ranging from 1 to 10, with lower scores indicating lower perceived familiarity/poorer performance.)

Perceived strengths of the class were learning through thinking, group activities/interaction, and exposure to different people/viewpoints. The need for better integration of the book, more individual work, and more time for in-class projects represented perceived weaknesses.

In Table 5, we provide selective information from 1995–1997 year-end departmental evaluations, for a compari-

**TABLE 5. Year-End Departmental Course Evaluations for 1995–1997: Student Perceptions of Advertising Principles Courses**

| Category            | M         |             |                                          |
|---------------------|-----------|-------------|------------------------------------------|
|                     | Fall 1995 | Spring 1996 | Summer 1997<br>(Critical Thinking pilot) |
| Rate the course     | 1.89      | 1.97        | 1.79                                     |
| Rate the instructor | 1.70      | 1.61        | 1.29                                     |

son of student perceptions of a “typical” (lecture and projects) class and of a “critical thinking”-oriented class, with the same instructor.

### Conclusions

According to this pilot study, the critical thinking approach to teaching business seems to be worthy of further consideration. Students rated their critical thinking skills higher after the course and gave higher ratings to both the course and instructor in the critical thinking approach as compared with the ordinary, content-oriented method.

A potential problem in deciding whether to employ a critical thinking approach is the need for time to perform the in-class exercises. The students listed lack of time for the in-class assignments and the need for more individual work as disadvantages of the critical thinking approach. But more time assigned for in-class assignments may take away from lecture time devoted to content, which could force the instructor to make an uncomfortable decision between presenting important additional content and adding important critical exercises. Similarly, more individual work may have to compete with the delivery of content and/or group learning experiences and may also require more grading time for the professor.

However, these potential disadvantages seem small in comparison with the advantages of producing students who can reason, communicate, work in

groups, determine what information is relevant to specific problems, and make wise decisions. The critical thinking approach emphasizes practicing all of these skills—the lifelong learning/thinking skills—which will help to make business graduates successful in the 21st century.

### REFERENCES

- Chonko, L. B. (1993). Business school education: Some thoughts and recommendations. *Marketing Education Review*, Spring, 1–9.
- Chonko, L. B., & Caballero, M. J. (1991). Marketing madness, or how marketing departments think they’re in two places at once when they’re not anywhere at all (according to some). *Journal of Marketing Education*, Spring, 14–25.
- Chonko, L. B., & Roberts, J. A. (1996). An innovative introduction to business course: Marketing the skills that marketing majors (and others) as business majors will need for success. *Marketing Education Review*, Fall, 53–72.
- Foundation for Critical Thinking. (1997). *Critical thinking: Basic theory and instructional structures*. Wye Mills, MD: Author.
- Jones, E. A., Hoffman, S., Moore, L. M., Ratcliff, G., Tibbetts, S., & Alcllick, B. (1995). *National assessment of college student learning: Identifying college graduates’ essential skills in writing, speech and listening, and critical thinking. Final Project Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Lipman, M. (1988). *Critical thinking: What can it be?* (Resource Publication, Series 1, No. 1). Upper Montclair, NJ: Montclair State College, Institute for Critical Thinking.
- Oliver, H., & Utermohlen, R. (1995). *An innovative teaching strategy: Using critical thinking to give students a guide to the future*. Holly Springs, MS: Rust College.
- Paul, R. W. (1995). *How to prepare students for a rapidly changing world*. (J. Willen & A. J. A. Binker, Eds.). Wye Mills, MD: Foundation for Critical Thinking.