

The Importance of Critical Thinking Skills in Research

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Why is Critical Thinking Important: A Disruptive Force

Research anxiety seems to be taking an increasingly dominant role in the world of academic research. The pressure to [publish or perish](#) can warp your focus into thinking that the only [good research](#) is publishable research!

Today, your role as the researcher appears to take a back seat to the perceived value of the topic and the extent to which the results of the study will be cited around the world. Due to financial pressures and a growing tendency of risk aversion, studies are increasingly going down the path of applied research rather than [basic or pure research](#). The potential for breakthroughs is being deliberately limited to incremental

contributions from researchers who are forced to worry more about job security and pleasing their paymasters than about making a significant contribution to their field.

A Slow Decline

So what lead the researchers to their love of science and scientific research in the first place? The answer is critical thinking skills. The more that academic research becomes governed by policies outside of the research process, the less opportunity there will be for researchers to exercise such skills.

[True research demands new ideas](#), perspectives, and arguments based on willingness and confidence to revisit and directly challenge existing schools of thought and established positions on theories and accepted codes of practice. Success comes from a recursive approach to the research question with an iterative refinement based on constant reflection and revision.

The importance of critical thinking skills in research is therefore huge, without which researchers may even lack the confidence to challenge their own assumptions.

A Misunderstood Skill

Critical thinking is widely recognized as a core competency and as a precursor to research. Employers value it as a requirement for every position they post, and every survey of potential employers for graduates in local markets rate the skill as their number one concern.

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When asked to clarify what critical thinking means to them, employers will use such phrases as “the ability to think independently,” or “the ability to think on their feet,” or “to show some initiative and resolve a problem without direct supervision.” These are all valuable skills, but how do you teach them?

For higher education institutions in particular, when you are being assessed against dropout, graduation, and job placement rates, where does a course in critical thinking skills fit into the mix? Student Success courses as a precursor to your first undergraduate course will help students to navigate the campus and whatever online resources are available to them (including the tutoring center), but that doesn’t equate to raising critical thinking competencies.

The Dependent Generation

As education becomes increasingly commoditized and broken-down into components that can be delivered online for maximum productivity and profitability, we run the risk of

devaluing academic discourse and independent thought. Larger class sizes preclude substantive debate, and the more that content is broken into sound bites that can be tested in multiple-choice questions, the less requirement there will be for original thought.

[Academic journals value citation](#) above all else, and so content is steered towards the type of articles that will achieve high citation volume. As such, students and researchers will perpetuate such misuse by ensuring that their papers include only highly cited works. And the objective of high citation volume is achieved.

We expand the body of knowledge in any field by challenging the status quo. Denying the veracity of commonly accepted “facts” or playing devil’s advocate with established rules supports a necessary insurgency that drives future research. If we do not continue to emphasize the need for critical thinking skills to preserve such rebellion, academic research may begin to slowly fade away.

Cite this article

Enago Academy, The Importance of Critical Thinking Skills in Research. Enago Academy. 2015/07/26. <https://www.enago.com/academy/importance-critical-thinking-skills-research/>