

Building Critical Thinking Skills Through Literature

Murali Venugopalan

*Director, Division of Global Affairs
Kennesaw State University, Georgia, USA*

[Abstract] This article examines the numerous challenges university students and adults in the U.S. face regarding reading comprehension. Fewer students read for pleasure, and this affects their ability to comprehend literary novels. As such, American students rank much lower than students from other countries in reading literacy, which in turn leads pupils to lack critical thinking skills. This article tells the story of how the professor used *The Great Gatsby* over a period of five sessions to help students improve their reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. Moreover, the students reported to have increased their interest in reading novels.

[Keywords] critical thinking; literature; reading comprehension

Introduction

Who reads books these days? Numerous studies show a disappointing decline in reading interest, reading comprehension, and critical thinking skills among U.S. college students. One needs to go back several decades to capture moments when young students would be immersed in a novel in between classes or during their free time.

Since the advent of computers, tablets, and smartphones, people of all ages have been spending significantly less time reading. With few exceptions, books have been replaced by screen time, and today's generation of college students have the most to lose from this transformation of focus.

Whether sitting, walking, alone or with friends, it is rare to see a college student who is not busy with his or her smartphone. While it is possible to read e-books on a phone, how often do you see students doing this? More likely, students occupy themselves with games, calling, texting, and/or emailing friends, talking face-to-face via FaceTime, Skype, and/or Zoom, and posting material on Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and other forms of social media.

Many of these ill-advised and unavoidable habits start in secondary school, so this article will in part address reading comprehension among high school-aged students – not only in the U.S., but also worldwide. However, the gist of this article is as follows: if college students are unable to exercise critical thinking skills due to their lack of reading interest and/or poor reading comprehension, they will be at a serious disadvantage after they complete their university studies. As such, this article discusses means by which to engage students and enhance reading comprehension to improve their ability to think critically. Students who can think critically are more likely to possess stronger writing and problem-solving skills, which will further enable them to succeed in their careers.

Literature Review

According to the American Time Use Survey from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of Americans who engage in leisurely reading has dropped more than 30 percent in the past 15 years (Ingraham). Based on a nationally representative sample of approximately 26,000

individuals, the American Time Use Survey estimates on how respondents spent their time the previous day are very precise. While about 28 percent of Americans over the age of 15 read for pleasure on a particular day in 2004, that figure dropped to 19 percent by 2017 (Ingraham). Survey data from the Pew Research Center and Gallup indicate that the percentage of college students not reading any book in a particular year almost tripled from 1978 to 2014 (Ingraham).

According to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in spite of relatively high education levels among adults in the U.S., a greater percentage of U.S. adults than those in other countries possess poor literacy skills (OECD).

Worse yet, the percentage of college-age students with poor problem-solving skills who live in technology-rich countries is above average, including those in the U.S. (OECD). Historian Daniel Boorstin admits that when he socializes in Washington D.C., he chooses to no longer humiliate those with whom he dines by asking what books they have read lately. Instead he tells them, "I assume you don't have much time to read books nowadays" (Stephens). Unfortunately, the same appears to be true among college students in the U.S.

Further, Neil Postman raises the all-important point of the role of technology as related to literacy. According to Postman, the field of education is losing an essential component of seriousness and intellectualism in favor of "show business" to meet the needs of electronic media (Stephens).

Stephens explains that the lack of reading skills leads to diminishing writing and critical thinking skills. According to College Board President Donald M. Stewart, "the ability to read is linked to the ability to process, analyze, and comprehend information. I guess that's called 'thinking'" (Stephens).

Moreover, Michael Silverblatt of "Bookworm" phrases the current plight of diminishing critical thinking skills as such: "Just as people who do not work out can't do certain things with their bodies, people who don't read can't do certain things with their minds." (Stephens).

According to data from July 2018, 33 percent of high school graduates never read another book the rest of their lives. Worse yet, 42% of university graduates never read another book after college (Kozlowski). It is hard to fathom the following statistics: 70% of U.S. adults have not been in a bookstore in the last five years (2013-2018), and only 20% of families in the U.S. purchased or read a book in 2017. (Kozlowski).

He justifies this as explained in the Introduction: "The smartphone is always in our pocket." As we know all too well, college-age students use them to receive social media updates from friends, families, acquaintances, and even people they do not know. (Kozlowski). While this naturally takes time away from literature and critical thinking, it appears that universities are kowtowing to this generation's students in order to teach them.

One journalism professor at Ohio State University believes it behooves higher education to relate to students on their own terms (Pappano). She uses Twitter to take attendance and holds office hours with students late at night via Zoom. Email is not used in class; however, students are taught how to write a proper email because it is an essential skill (Pappano). Such methodology and topics are taught to students who no doubt will benefit from learning about social media. Unfortunately, if undergraduates in the U.S. do not also receive an education in learning how to think critically, they will be at a severe disadvantage if presented with problem solving challenges in the workplace.

A cynic could easily quip that pupils unable to exercise proper critical thinking skills might ask Google for answers. Such an approach only propagates their problems, for they would need to

think critically about the results they receive.

One recourse for such students would be to use social media to ask friends, family members, acquaintances, and perhaps even consultants or individuals or groups about whom they know nothing for answers. If they do not find answers, students could at least “like” the Instagram and Facebook pages of their departments, professors, and universities. Nevertheless, how can pupils “like” reading comprehension, critical literacy, and the ability to think through problems? Are they provided a disservice given the tuition and fees they pay to learn how to write proper emails?

Moving beyond borders. It is not surprising to learn that U.S. students are failing to compete with international students when it comes to reading literacy. The OECD defines reading literacy as students’ ability to “understand, use, reflect on and engage with written texts in order to achieve one’s goals, develop one’s knowledge and potential, and participate in society” (PISA). According to worldatlas.com, U.S. students ranked 22nd in critical literacy and among countries with students who spend time reading (World Atlas).

Every three years, the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests the competency of 15-year-old students in reading, science, and math. Such assessment is geared toward determining how attuned students are to essential topics in these three subjects in order to be “prepared for real-life situations” in the adult world, including as undergraduates (OECD).

While students in other countries spend a lot of time on social media and smartphones, they also far outperform U.S. students on the PISA tests. Since these students are 15 years of age, one can assume that high schools abroad are doing a better job of preparing students for the challenges they will face in undergraduate studies.

PISA test results paint a bleak picture of how prepared U.S. high school students will compete in the global marketplace. Jon Schnur, executive chair of America Archives, points out that today’s pupils deserve to receive a substantially improved education in order to compete globally (Business Insider).

I surmise that most American high schools and universities would prefer to ignore the most recent PISA test scores of 2015, for the results are nothing short of embarrassing. The following 20 countries/regions – all located in Asia, Europe, and Oceania - scored above the U.S. in reading: Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada, Finland, Ireland, Estonia, Korea, Japan, Norway, New Zealand, Germany, Macao, Poland, Slovenia, Netherlands, Australia, Sweden, Denmark, France, and Belgium (OECD).

Students in the U.S. ranked 24th in PISA reading comprehension scores. It is a safe bet that students in the aforementioned countries have ample access to smartphones, social media, games, and other opportunities for “screen time.” Worse yet, U.S. students ranked 25 in Science and 41 in Math – both subjects in which 15-year-olds will need to improve in order to practice effective critical thinking skills (PISA). Such rankings for U.S. pupils are deplorable; given the U.S. is the wealthiest country in the world. They are even worse when one considers that U.S. universities are forced to offer courses containing skills previously taught in high school, thereby presently watering down the college curriculum. Grant Tilus of Rasmussen College lists the following six critical thinking skills each undergraduate must not only learn, but also apply in order to have a successful career (Tilus):

1. Interpretation: The student must be able to both understand and communicate information with which he or she is presented;
2. Analysis: The student must be able to make connections among several pieces of information to determine the intended meaning it represents;
3. Inference: The student must be able to comprehend elements of the reading in order to develop a hypothesis or calculated conclusion from the information provided;
4. Evaluation: The student must be able to discern the credibility, judgment, and validity of a character based on informed opinion;
5. Explanation: The student must be able to clarify and add his or her own insight about a reading, and to clearly communicate this to classmates as well as the professor;
6. Self-Regulation: The student must be aware of his or her ability to think and analyze elements from a reading in order to determine viable results.

It is essential to help each student develop the above critical thinking skills and to share ideas with classmates. Below are the methods used and conclusions determined by teaching and using these skills in an undergraduate literature course.

Learning Critical Thinking Skills through Literature

Approximately 50 students read and studied *The Great Gatsby* in five eight-week sessions. Per instructions in the syllabi, the two major goals of the literature course were to increase their reading comprehension as well as to learn and develop critical thinking skills as related to the plot of the novel. The five courses included pupils from numerous national, ethnic, and language backgrounds, so the classes were culturally diverse.

During each eight-week session, the students were required to participate actively in class discussions; to answer discussion questions; to complete two assignments; to take two hour-long essay exams; and to present a final project. While some students were reticent in the first week of the course (this was true in all five sessions), they quickly learned to participate, ask good questions, and to think critically about *Gatsby* with positive encouragement from the professor. Students understood that they could participate and learn without the fear of making mistakes, and bounce ideas off one another to strengthen further class discussions and critical thinking.

The professor used the following 15 statements and questions to motivate pupils to enhance reading comprehension of *The Great Gatsby* and to think critically about its characters, plot, locations, timing, and overall theme. Fitzgerald's plot is open to highly subjective interpretation, so students were encouraged to share a diverse array of the critical thinking skills mentioned by Tilus, including analysis, inference, evaluation, and explanation of the following in class discussions (oral), take-home assignments (writing - short answer), and exams (writing - long answer):

1. *The Great Gatsby* starts with Nick remembering advice his father gave him: "Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone, just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had." Explain what this sentence means to you.
2. How does Fitzgerald introduce conflict, mystery, and sadness in chapter 1? Explain.

3. Explain what Fitzgerald means by the following statement: "...a sense of the fundamental decencies is parceled out unequally at birth."
4. Very few of the people who attend Gatsby's parties have met him, know him, or care to know him. Why?
5. Fitzgerald informs the reader, directly and indirectly, of the insecurity felt by each of the seven major characters through chapter 4. Explain.
6. Near the end of chapter 4, Nick thinks to himself: "There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired." Name four different characters described by these four different adjectives. Explain in your own words why each adjective fits the character you select.
7. A major theme of *The Great Gatsby* is money (or lack thereof). Do you believe money makes you happy? Why or why not?
8. Fitzgerald once said, "It is in our forties that we know our friends will not save us any more than love did." What do you think he means by this, and can you relate this observation to the plot in *The Great Gatsby*?
9. During the big argument at The Plaza, what do we learn about Daisy's personality?
10. Nick is surprised to see someone outside Tom's house. What shocking news does Nick learn? Do you believe it was an accident? Explain.
11. Who really cared deeply about Myrtle's death? Explain using examples from the novel.
12. Explain why you believe Daisy does not leave Tom for Gatsby.
13. Is Gatsby "great"? Why do you think Fitzgerald chose this title?
14. Fitzgerald once said, "Show me a hero, and I'll write you a tragedy." What does this quote mean to you, and how does Fitzgerald express it through *The Great Gatsby*?
15. Imagine Fitzgerald invites you to his home. He is not happy with the ending, and asks you to help him change it. Use your imagination and explain to Fitzgerald how you would create a different ending to the novel. How would you change it, and why?

On week eight, students were required to submit a Final Project consisting of a 10-minute individual oral presentation to the class. This was the culmination of everything they had studied in *The Great Gatsby* and of a very strong focus both in and out of class of critical thinking of Fitzgerald's masterpiece. There were two items on the Final Project:

1. Creative Reading: Review the circumstances leading to Myrtle's death. Explain, in detail, whether you believe her death was an accident or caused by something else. Support your creative

interpretation of specific events with examples from the plot provided by Fitzgerald – including *indirect* information you infer from the novel. Presentation: 5 minutes.

2. **Critical Analysis:** In only 180 pages, Fitzgerald tells a simple, complex story. Provide your own critical analysis of the following: First, describe three specific lessons you learned from this novel. What did each teach you, and why? Second, what crucial messages in chapters eight and nine does Fitzgerald communicate to the reader, and how do these affect your perspective on human nature? Presentation: 5 minutes.

Conclusions

Through creating a dynamic classroom atmosphere and motivating students to succeed, thereby establishing a positive learning environment, the following conclusions were reached as a result of (1) observing student behavior and participation, (2) assessment of short assignments and longer exams, (3) assessment of student performance on the Final Project, and (4) student feedback:

1. Student interest in *The Great Gatsby* and (as they reported) reading other literary novels increased.
2. Student reading comprehension improved.
3. Student interest in developing critical thinking skills increased.
4. Student ability to engage in critical thinking skills in discussions with the professor increased.
5. Student ability to engage in critical thinking skills among classmates increased.
6. Student interest in exercising critical thinking skills toward further understanding the content of the novels increased.
7. Student interest in continuing to improve reading comprehension and critical thinking skills increased.
8. Overall student creativity regarding analysis and interpretation of the novel increased.

Future Research

Given that this is a preliminary study, students and professors would benefit from future research on both reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. Regardless of opinion, leaders in higher education have an obligation to better prepare pupils for success in advanced studies and/or careers. This article focuses on improving reading comprehension and critical thinking skills through Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Future research could focus on a novel from a different genre, e.g. a literary mystery/thriller in which students need to act out a creative classroom role play to demonstrate critical thinking skills from enhanced reading comprehension. Another research idea would be to study student ability to practice and improve critical thinking skills by reading nonfiction books and/or articles. Furthermore, assessing a larger sample group over a longer period of time may produce more accurate results. Finally, using different assessment tools, for example requiring a long term paper instead of an oral presentation as the Final Project, would be useful.

References

- Business Insider: <https://www.businessinsider.com/pisa-worldwide-ranking-of-math-science-reading-skills-2016-12>
- Crain, Caleb. (2018). Why We Don't Read, Revisited." *The New Yorker*. June 14, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/why-we-dont-read-revisited>

- Ingraham, Christopher. (2018). Leisure reading in the U.S. is at an All-Time low. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/06/29/leisure-reading-in-the-u-s-is-at-an-all-time-low/?utm_term=.5eb205fa604f
- Kozlowski, Michael. (2018). Reading books is on the decline. *Good E-Reader*. Retrieved from <https://goodereader.com/blog/bookselling/reading-books-is-on-the-decline>
- OECD. Survey of Adult Skills: First Results. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20United%20States.pdf>
- Pappano, Laura. (2018). The iGen shift: Colleges are changing to reach the next generation. *The New York Times*. August 2, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/02/education/learning/generationz-igen-students-colleges.html>
- PISA: Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA-2015-Results-Students-Well-being-Volume-III-Overview.pdf>
- PISA: Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA-2015-United-States.pdf>
- Stephens, Mitchell. (1991). The death of reading: Will a Nation That Stops Reading Eventually Stop Thinking?" *Los Angeles Times Magazine*. September 22, 1991. Retrieved from <https://www.nyu.edu/classes/stephens/Death%20of%20Reading%20page.htm>
- Tilus, Grant. (2012). 6 Critical thinking skills you need to master now. Rasmussen College. December 11, 2012. Retrieved from <https://www.rasmussen.edu/student-experience/college-life/critical-thinking-skills-you-need-to-master-now/>
- World Atlas. Which countries read the most? Retrieved from <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-countries-that-read-the-most.html>