Using a ‘case album’ approach to enhance critical thinking and daily-life application in a psychology course

Leung, J.P., Chan, Darius K.S., Tang, Catherine S.K.
Psychology Department, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Introduction

The teaching of psychology

Psychology is a discipline that fascinates many students who have an interest in understanding the behavior of oneself and other people. However, the teaching of psychology at the college level is not without challenges (c.f. King, 1982). For instance, some courses within psychology (e.g., statistics, research methodology, etc.) are not as attractive as other courses (e.g., social psychology, personality, etc.) for various reasons. Teachers often need to use their imagination and ingenuity in designing a course, including the preparation of stimulating materials and activities for their classes (Elliot, 1993). The professional journal ‘Teaching of Psychology’ has provided a good platform for teachers to exchange ideas, innovations, and insights of teaching psychology.

Apart from the subject matter, other challenges for psychology teachers include promoting critical thinking in students and ensuring application of psychological knowledge learned to real-life situations. Indeed, critical thinking is so important for success and survival in a modern society that educators has often included it as one of the major educational goals. In terms of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives, critical thinking includes the ability of the learner to analyse, synthesize, and evaluate. Teachers must find out effective ways of fostering these useful and important skill of their students. The pressing need to promote critical thinking skills has been witnessed by a special section devoted to this topic in a recent issue of ‘Teaching of Psychology’ (No. 1, Vol. 22). Entitled ‘Designing the instructional process to enhance critical thinking across the curriculum,’ this section put together a collection of related articles written by experienced teachers in the discipline. Various approaches for achieving the goal were discussed, including the use of questioning (A. King, 1995), conference style learning (Underwood & Wald, 1995), case study pedagogy (McDade, 1995), and others (e.g., Jaboubek, 1995) were proposed. They delineated the advantages and practicality of the methods and often furnished brief outcome results to demonstrate the utility of these approaches. However, the data reported often consisted of informal observations rather than systematic research evidence.

To promote application of course materials to daily-life settings requires strategies that encourage linking classroom learning with the outside world. Some psychologists (e.g., Lawson, 1994; Rider, 1992; Sorensen, 1976; Ward, 1985)) found that students can learn to apply knowledge of psychology from