STUDENTNS CRITICALLY ENGAGEMENT ON READING ACTIVITIES

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Annotation. In this article students engagement on reading activities is analysed. Students engagement process are analysed. There are various suggestions for teachers on engaging critically on reading classes.

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How often have you come across the following instruction: “Critically discuss...”? It is a phrase used often, but not always with a clear understanding of what it means to discuss something critically. I once asked my colleagues who had set exam questions starting with “Critically discuss ….” what exactly they were expecting the students to do. After some initial vague responses like “Well, you know, critically discuss”, I pushed them to spell out exactly what they thought this entailed. The responses were widely varied. Each colleague had a specific idea of
what they thought it meant: “Well, obviously, students have to say why they agree or disagree with the author”; “Students must analyse the structure of the argument, assess its the validity and determine the truth of the claims”; “I expect students to highlight the underlying assumptions the author makes”; “Of course, it means they have to contextualise the author’s claim”; “I want my students to develop the author’s main idea further by examining the possible implications of the claim”; “What I am looking for is whether students have analysed the meanings of the concepts used by the author”; “Obviously it means that students must assess the contribution to author makes to the existing understanding of the topic”, and more! Now, each one of these is a pretty sophisticated academic skill. Are you expected to do all these? What does your lecturer or supervisor expect you to do? What is the accepted academic expectation of what critical discussion entails? The following notes are guidelines to help you find some structure to developing a critical discussion.

More often than not, our initial response to the instruction “Critically discuss …” is to think that we must find fault, or highlight the weakness in the argument, or reject certain claims. Although this might at times be part of a critical discussion, it is by no means the only or even most appropriate way to engage with the claims expressed. So, before looking at what critical discussion (or engagement) is, let’s get clarity about what it is not:

What critical engagement is not

• it is not the same as disagreement
• it does not aim to embarrass, humiliate or seek to dominate
• it does not mean nitpicking

So, what does it mean to read, or think or write critically? The following are some pointers to help you both in your reading of others’ texts as well as in constructing your own writing for assignments and your thesis.

What critical engagement is
• it entails giving a clear exposition of the argument;
• it entails determining and assessing the support for a certain claim you or others have made in order to get a clearer understanding of an issue;
• it entails determining the truth of the premises, and the validity of the argument;
• it entails clarifying and analyzing the language used;
• it entails showing how the article or book fits into the academic debates and current literature – to what or whom is the text responding?
• it entails discussing the theoretical and social context in which the ideas are developed;
• it involves a discussion of the possible implications the ideas or claims could have;
• it demands informed thinking and creativity.

We’ve noted that critical engagement (which incorporates critical reading, thinking and writing) is not merely rejecting or finding fault with someone’s argument or position. Rather, it is a rational reflection on one’s own and other’s ideas in order to get a clearer understanding of an issue. One of the main things to remember when engaged in critical reasoning is that you must first have a clear understanding of what the author is saying before you can critically engage with the ideas expressed.

When engaging critically with a text, follow these 4 steps:

Clear exposition of text
1. Describe (i.e. give a clear exposition or summary of) what the author is saying and doing; You do this by pre-reading, reading, re-reading, making notes and summarizing them.

Critical evaluation of text
2. Analyze and interpret what the author is saying and doing;
3. Evaluate the author’s claims, argument and approach;
4. Relate these to other literature or scholarship on the topic (or to your own thesis theme).

How to start to engage critically?

1. Pre-read. One way of getting a quick idea of what the main thrust of the text is that you are going to engage with, is to do some pre-reading before starting on the actual text:
   • read the fly-leaf of the book (what is the main idea the author is developing?, who is the author?, where is s/he located?, when was the text written?),
   • read the preface or introduction of the book (often in an edited collection, there is a short analysis of the various chapters);
   • read the abstract (journal articles have a summary of the article at the beginning)
   • check the reference list (are current, important works listed?)

2. Read and Re-read the text. Don’t expect that you will grasp the ideas in the text on one reading only, this usually involves a number of re-reads.
   • Do you understand the literal meanings of the words used? Keep a dictionary at hand and look up key words whose meanings you’re not sure of.
   • What metaphorical meanings (i.e. meanings through association) does the author develop?
   • Are there cultural terms of idiomatic expressions you’re not familiar with? A good dictionary will spell these out.

3. Make systematic notes
   • In order to help you analyse the content and argument of the text, read each section or paragraph carefully and then do two things: note its main point or idea and its function in the text – or putting it more simply, write down, in one sentence, what each section says and what it does.

4. Examine, categorise and summarise your notes.
Once you have done this, read through your notes and then write down your responses to the following questions. This will help you develop a clear exposition of the text, in other words, to help you describe what the author is saying. Your exposition should be a clear and honest reflection of the author’s text. To sum up, it is necessary to remember, critically engaging with something demands effort, discipline and commitment.

**References:**