



WHY DO STUDENTS AVOID CRITICAL THINKING?

What New Research Says About Building Cultures of Thinking

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WHAT RESEARCH FOUND

Critical thinking is often described as an essential educational goal. Yet many students hesitate to engage in it, especially when problems lack clear answers. Researchers studying an active-learning university course found that students could use critical-thinking skills successfully when solving complex, ill-structured problems. However, many felt uncomfortable with uncertainty and worried about making mistakes.

Students frequently preferred familiar classroom routines where teachers provided clear guidance and correct answers. Fear of error, concern about grades, and deeply established habits of “being a student” often limited the development of critical-thinking dispositions. The researchers argue that teaching critical-thinking skills alone is insufficient. Students also need classroom environments that encourage questioning, exploration, and intellectual risk-taking.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Many teachers ask students to think critically but unintentionally reward compliance and correct answers more than thoughtful reasoning.

Developing critical thinkers requires classroom cultures where uncertainty is accepted and productive struggle is valued.

CLASSROOM REALITY

Schools Want	Students Often Experience
Critical thinkers	Answer seekers
Inquiry	Fear of mistakes
Deep reasoning	Grade anxiety
Intellectual risk-taking	Preference for certainty



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Research interpreted for real classroom

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TRY TOMORROW

1. Present a problem with multiple solutions.
 2. Ask students to justify their thinking.
 3. Celebrate useful mistakes.
 4. Discuss how experts handle uncertainty.
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CAUTION

Critical thinking develops slowly. One isolated activity is unlikely to change long-established learning habits.

ONE KEY TAKEAWAY

Students think more critically when classrooms make curiosity safer than simply being correct.

Keywords: critical thinking, active learning, uncertainty, thinking dispositions

Reference:

Darcie, I., Gray, R., & Vander Kloet, M. (2025). *Sustaining critical minds: How classroom learning cultures shape student thinking dispositions and practices.*