

October, 1992 - William McKenna, S.J., Philosophy

The answer to the question can thinking be taught, e.g., like reading or writing or arithmetic is maybe. The evidence is ambiguous. Teachers of all subjects (and at all levels) report innovative programs of instruction where students were more active, but research programs conducted by cognitive scientists indicate that there are no proven techniques. The conclusion is not despair, but rather that the teacher is critical. There are a few simple (to state, but not to implement) guidelines. (1) There is a positive correlation between student activity in the classroom and student learning. However, not any activity will do: students must know what they are (supposed) to be doing. From that guideline follow guidelines 2, 3 and 4. (2) You must know where students are so that the course can be structured to build on what they already know, what skills they possess. (3) Students must have clear goals. However, clear goals are not enough. (4) Students must be made to monitor their own work in progress. The last rule is do not do for the students what they can do for themselves. I make rather extensive use of debates. I find that the students are better reasoners than readers (alas). And they actually like to debate. But debates are really only productive as tools for teaching thinking to the extent that the students review, analyze, and evaluate their own performances. For this, televising debates is a help because then students have a record that they can study, and seeing themselves on TV probably acts as an incentive. The moment that students become aware of what they are doing is the moment that they can become self-learners or thinkers. However, I also have to admit from my own experience, and so warn you, that (4) getting students to evaluate their own work in terms of appropriate criteria (the rules of evidence of the discipline), is the most difficult task. But without such imposed, self-discipline, at least at the beginning, lumping and heaping and retaining for tests pass as learning for many students.