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Developing Critical Thinking Skills Through Active Learning: Strategies for Higher Secondary and Undergraduate Education

Umme Farwa*[1], Madiha Riaz[2], Asadullah[3]
[1] MPhil Scholar, Department of Education, Ghazi university, Dera Ghazi Khan.
*Corresponding Author: farwaumme112@gmail.com
[2] Department of Psychology, Government College Women University, Sialkot.
madihariaz786786@gmail.com
[3] PhD Scholar, Education, Department of Educational Research & Assessment. University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan. asadullahsial786@gmail.com

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Abstract
Critical thinking defined as purposeful, self-regulatory judgment involving interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation has become an indispensable competency for higher secondary and undergraduate students facing complex, ambiguous, and rapidly evolving socio-economic and technological challenges. Traditional lecture-based, rote-learning models often fail to cultivate these higher-order skills, prompting a global shift toward active learning pedagogies that engage students directly in constructing knowledge through inquiry, collaboration, and reflection. This review synthesizes evidence-based active learning strategies proven effective in fostering critical thinking across disciplines: problem-based learning (PBL), case-based learning, collaborative learning (think-pair-share, jigsaw, team-based learning), inquiry-guided and project-based approaches, flipped classrooms, Socratic seminars, debate and structured controversy, reflective journaling, and metacognitive training. Empirical studies demonstrate consistent gains in critical thinking disposition and skills (measured via CCTST, CCTDI, Watson-Glaser, and rubric-based assessments), with effect sizes ranging from moderate ($d = 0.4–0.7$) to large ($d > 0.8$) when activities are well-designed, scaffolded, and aligned with explicit critical thinking objectives. Benefits are amplified by instructor facilitation, formative feedback, rubrics emphasizing reasoning quality, and integration of real-world problems. Challenges include time constraints, large class sizes, student resistance to discomfort, unequal participation in group work, and assessment validity. Practical recommendations include hybrid models blending active strategies with direct instruction, use of digital tools (collaborative platforms, AI-assisted reflection), and professional development for faculty in active-learning design and facilitation. Active learning emerges as a high-impact, evidence-supported pathway to equip students with the analytical, evaluative, and creative reasoning skills essential for academic success, professional competence, and engaged citizenship in the 21st century.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Active Learning, Higher Education, Problem-Based Learning, Collaborative Learning, Flipped Classroom, Inquiry-Based Learning, Metacognition, Higher-Order Thinking, Pedagogical Strategies

Introduction
The global educational landscape in the twenty-first century is undergoing a paradigm shift, driven by rapid

technological advancements and the increasing complexity of socio-economic challenges (Joynes et al., 2019). In this context, the traditional model of education, which emphasizes the passive absorption of facts and rote memorization, is increasingly viewed as insufficient for preparing students for the demands of the modern workforce and informed citizenship (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). Critical thinking, defined as the ability to engage in purposeful, self-regulatory judgment that results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, has emerged as a fundamental competency across all academic disciplines (Facione, 1990). The promotion of these skills is particularly vital in higher secondary and undergraduate education, where students undergo a pivotal transition from dependent learners to independent, analytical thinkers (Timmis et al., 2022). Active learning a pedagogical approach that places students at the center of the learning process through meaningful activities and reflection provides the theoretical and practical framework necessary to cultivate these higher-order cognitive abilities (Prince, 2004).

1. The Evolution of Critical Thinking as a Pedagogical Priority

The conceptualization of critical thinking has evolved significantly over the past several decades, moving from a narrow focus on logical operations to a multifaceted understanding that incorporates cognitive skills, personal dispositions, and metacognitive awareness (Abrami et al., 2015). This evolution reflects a growing recognition that "good thinking" is not merely a technical skill but a holistic way of interacting with the world (Voogt & Roblin, 2012**).**

1.1 Historical Conceptualizations and Definitions

Initial definitions of critical thinking, such as those established by Ennis in the mid-1980s, focused primarily on the cognitive skills required for the analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information (Ennis, 1985). During this period, critical thinking was largely viewed as a set of logical tools used to identify fallacious arguments and judge the credibility of evidence (Beyer, 1995). However, by the 1990s, scholars added a critical dimension: the disposition to think critically. This perspective argues that possessing the ability to analyze information is insufficient if an individual lacks the inclination to do so. Consequently, critical thinking began to be understood as involving a predisposition to question, ponder, and reflect in a rational and open-minded manner (Hockings et al., 2018).

Table 1. Shifts in the Definition and Focus of Critical Thinking

Era	Focus of Definition	Key Characteristics	Impact on Pedagogy
1950s-1970s	Basic Logic	Mastery of formal logic and syllogisms	Emphasis on deductive reasoning and philosophy
1980s	Cognitive Skills	Analysis, evaluation, and evidence-based inference	Introduction of standardized CT assessments
1990s	Dispositions	Curiosity, skepticism, and open-mindedness	Focus on "critical-mindedness" and attitudes
2000s	Metacognition	Self-regulation and reflection on the thinking process	Emphasis on students' awareness of their own learning
2010s-Present	Contextual/IT	Interdisciplinary application and digital literacy	Integration with technology and real-world problems

1.2 Critical Thinking in the Digital Age

In the current digital age, the importance of critical thinking has been amplified by the sheer volume of information available to students. In fields such as Information Technology (IT) and engineering, technical proficiency alone is no longer enough to ensure success (Adair & Jaeger, 2016). Students must be able to navigate rapidly changing technological landscapes, analyze emerging challenges, and conceive innovative solutions (Cortázar et al., 2021). This requires a transition from "technical proficiency" to becoming "holistic problem solvers" who can integrate diverse areas of knowledge to tackle complex issues in a global market (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). The ability to evaluate the credibility of sources and analyze evidence is essential for navigating contemporary society, where misinformation and biased data are prevalent (Tkáčová, 2025).

2. Theoretical Frameworks Supporting Active Learning

Active learning is not a singular technique but a broad pedagogical philosophy rooted in several key theoretical frameworks. These theories provide the rationale for why engaging students in active construction of knowledge is superior to passive instruction for the development of critical thinking (Dumitru & Halpern, 2023).

2.1 Constructivism: The Architecture of Meaning

Constructivism is the primary learning theory underpinning active learning. It posits that learners are not passive recipients of information but active participants who build their own knowledge through experience and social interaction (Piaget, 1952). According to this view, education should focus on problem-solving and critical thinking, encouraging learners to connect new information with their existing mental frameworks, known as schemas (Anthony, 1996).

The process of learning in a constructivist framework involves two key mechanisms: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation occurs when a student incorporates new information into an existing schema, while accommodation occurs when a student must revise or redevelop a schema because new information conflicts with their prior beliefs (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, through active inquiry and reflection, a student accommodates new understandings, leading to a deeper and more critical grasp of complex methodologies (Thomas et al., 2025).

Table 2. Theoretical Branches of Constructivism

Theoretical Branch	Influential Theorist	Core Concept	Implications for Active Learning
Cognitive Constructivism	Jean Piaget	Stages of development and internal schemas	Focus on individual discovery and "disequilibrium"
Social Constructivism	Lev Vygotsky	Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding	Importance of social interaction and peer dialogue
Experiential Learning	John Dewey	Learning through real-life activities and problems	Rooting education in authentic, practical contexts
Self-Directed Learning	Maria Montessori	Hands-on, purposeful activity in a prepared environment	Promoting independence and intrinsic motivation

2.2 Hierarchical Models of Cognition: Bloom's Taxonomy

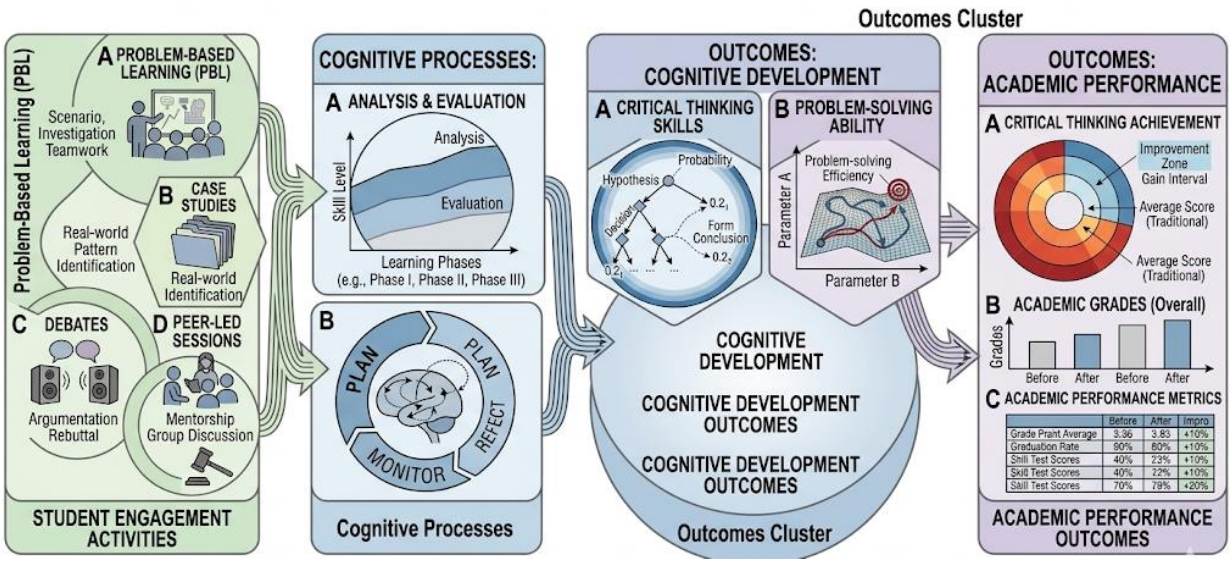
Bloom's Taxonomy provides a widely adopted framework for categorizing educational goals into levels of increasing complexity. In the context of critical thinking, the taxonomy serves as a guide for moving students beyond lower-order thinking skills (LOTS), such as recall and basic comprehension, toward higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), such as analysis, evaluation, and creation (Bloom et al., 1956; Krathwohl, 2002).

The 2001 revision of Bloom's Taxonomy shifted the focus toward active verbs, reflecting the dynamic nature of learning. In this revised model, the hierarchy includes:

1. Remembering: Recalling specific facts and theories.
2. Understanding: Grasping the meaning and interpreting information.
3. Applying: Using learned material in new and concrete situations.
4. Analyzing: Breaking down material into components to understand its structure.
5. Evaluating: Judging the value of material for a given purpose based on criteria.
6. Creating: Putting parts together to form a unique and original whole (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model linking active learning strategies to the development of higher-order cognitive skills, highlighting how specific activities engage students in critical thinking processes that translate into measurable outcomes.

Figure 1: Conceptual Diagram of Critical Thinking Development through Active Learning



3. Active Learning Strategies for Higher Secondary Education

The transition to higher-order thinking often begins in earnest during the higher secondary years. At this stage, students possess the cognitive maturity to engage with complex, abstract ideas but often require structured guidance to develop their analytical faculties (Bano et al., 2025).

3.1 Case-Based and Visual-Organization Activities

Research on secondary students has demonstrated that initial levels of critical thinking are often at a "developing" level of proficiency. However, exposure to active learning strategies leads to significant improvements in both critical and creative thinking (Nam, 2025). Case-based learning involves presenting students with real-world scenarios that require them to apply their knowledge to solve problems. Visual-organization activities, such as concept mapping, allow students to represent the relationships between different concepts visually, facilitating the synthesis of information from multiple sources (Dahal, 2025).

3.2 The Socratic Method in the High School Classroom

The Socratic method fosters intellectual growth through a series of thought-provoking, open-ended questions. Instead of providing direct answers, the teacher acts as a facilitator, guiding students to explore complex ideas and challenge their own assumptions (Hagos, 2026). Key strategies include preparing open-ended questions that invite multiple perspectives and managing "wait time" to allow students the discomfort of the moment required to think through a response (Paul & Elder, 2007).

3.3 Structured Debates and Logical Fallacies

Debates move beyond surface-level opinions and require students to construct logical arguments based on evidence. By teaching students to recognize logical fallacies such as those encountered in social media educators empower them to become discerning citizens capable of recognizing "noise" and focusing on actual issues (Malihah et al., 2025).

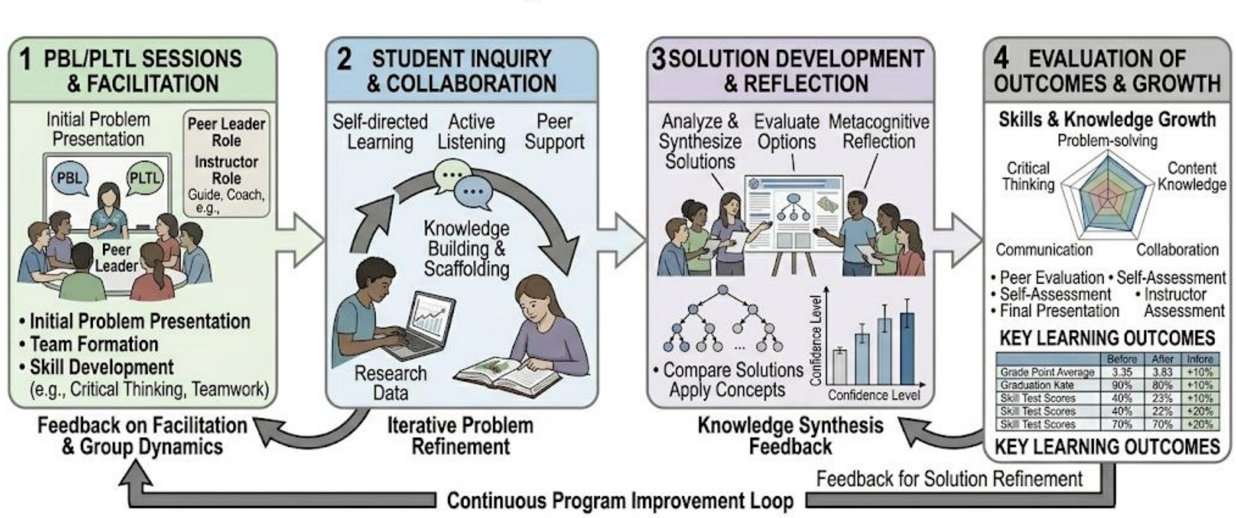
Table 3. Components of Structured Debate for Critical Thinking

Component of Structured Debate	Educational Mechanism	Critical Thinking Skill Developed
Random Side Assignment	Students argue for a position they may personally disagree with	Reduction of bias and perspective-taking
Instruction on Fallacies	Using media to identify poor reasoning	Analytical scrutiny and discernment of arguments
Assigned Roles	Roles like "Rebuttal" or "Closing" assigned within groups	Collaboration and focused argumentation
Reflection and Feedback	Post-debate analysis of the logic and evidence used	Metacognition and self-assessment

4. Undergraduate Strategies: Towards Professional Mastery

In undergraduate education, the focus of critical thinking shifts toward professional application and research-informed paradigms (Yuan et al., 2020). Figure 2 illustrates the workflow of peer-led and problem-based learning in undergraduate settings, highlighting the cyclical process of engagement, reflection, and assessment that enhances professional critical thinking skills.

Figure 2: Peer-Led and Problem-Based Learning Workflow in Undergraduate Education



4.1 Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) in the Sciences

PLTL employs "peer leaders" undergraduate students who have previously succeeded in the course to lead small groups through sessions of structured group work. Research has shown that students participating in PLTL workshops demonstrate significantly higher gains in critical thinking compared to those in traditional lecture settings (Wilson et al., 2016). Figure 2 illustrates the workflow of peer-led and problem-based learning in undergraduate settings, highlighting the cyclical process of engagement, reflection, and assessment that enhances professional critical thinking skills.

4.2 Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Design-Based Learning (DBL)

PBL is a cornerstone of undergraduate education in technical fields. Students learn through the investigation and resolution of complex, open-ended problems that simulate professional challenges (Gosser et al., 2001). Similarly, Design-Based Learning (DBL) integrates multi-perspective thinking by requiring students to design innovative solutions to emerging technological challenges (Nam, 2025). These methodologies significantly enhance analytical and evaluative capabilities, as students must articulate reasoned decisions based on evidence (Sindhushree et al., 2025).

4.3 Blended Learning and Agricultural Management

The effectiveness of active learning is evident in specialized fields such as agricultural project management. A comparative study found that students taught using a blended learning model combining traditional theory with active, student-centric approaches achieved significantly higher examination scores than those in traditional classrooms (Ramesh, 2025).

Table 4. Instructional Approach vs. Performance Indicators

Instructional Approach	Mean Examination Score	Performance Indicators
Traditional Theory	64.82%	Rote recall, limited application
Blended Learning	72.66%	Analytical depth, effective group presentations

5. The Crucible of Transition: Secondary to Undergraduate Education

The movement from higher secondary education to university is characterized by a shift in pedagogical mentality from a schooling-taught environment to a research-informed environment (Morris & Glazzard, 2025).

5.1 The Psychological Experience of Transition

Transition is an internal process occurring when students pass from the familiar to the unknown. For most students, this period represents a state of "disequilibrium" (Cheng et al., 2023). The Student Adjustment Model outlines phases including the Neutral Zone, where students are still attached to old learning habits while trying to adapt to new demands, and the Adjustment Phase, where they develop new learning routines and a sense of community (Jackson, 2010).

5.2 Bridging the Gap through Storytelling and Cognitive Methods

Universities provide support for this shift through tools like storytelling, which helps students explore new theoretical concepts and bridge the "transitional gap" (Dumitru & Halpern, 2023). Additionally, cognitive methods such as reductionism (analyzing parts) and holism (analyzing the whole) assist students in understanding the correlations between different courses and conducting deeper research (Hockings et al., 2018).

6. The Technological Renaissance: Digital Tools for Active Learning

Digital tools serve distinct pedagogical purposes, ranging from visual brainstorming to interactive assessment (Sindhushree et al., 2025).

Table 5. Categorization of Educational Technologies

Tool Category	Example Platforms	Pedagogical Purpose	Impact on Critical Thinking
Collaboration Boards	Padlet, Jamboard	Real-time, visual brainstorming	Makes thinking visible and synthesis possible
Interactive Presentations	Nearpod, Pear Deck	Embedding polls and questions in lectures	Transforms passive listening into active dialogue
Gamified Assessment	Kahoot, Quizlet, Quizizz	Competitive quizzes and knowledge checks	Increases engagement and identifies misconceptions
Video Discussion	Flipgrid, Edpuzzle	Video-based assignments and commentary	Promotes oracy and self-expression

7. Empirical Evidence: The Abrami Meta-Analyses

The efficacy of active learning is supported by robust meta-analytical evidence. In a seminal meta-analysis involving over 20,000 participants, researchers found an average effect size g+ of 0.341, indicating a moderate positive impact of instructional interventions on critical thinking skills (Tkáčová, 2025).

7.1 Effect Sizes and Statistical Heterogeneity

Findings indicate that critical thinking does not occur by accident; it must be intentionally taught. Type of intervention and pedagogical grounding account for 32% of the variance in effect sizes. Effective strategies identified include dialogue, exposure to authentic problems, and mentoring (Abrami et al., 2015).

7.2 The Impact on Failure Rates

Active learning not only improves performance on standardized tests but also dramatically reduces failure rates in science, engineering, and mathematics courses. By construction and iteration of knowledge, active learning fosters long-term memory retention and deep understanding (Thomas et al., 2025).

8. Barriers to the Implementation of Active Learning

Implementation faces hurdles at the instructor, student, and institutional levels (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012).

8.1 Institutional and Systemic Obstacles

A major barrier is the trend toward "managerialism" in higher education, where students are viewed as customers and teaching as selling a product. This can stifle the "Socratic spirit" of inquiry, as educators are forced to adhere to prescribed formulas for curricula. Structural barriers include time constraints, large class sizes, and technical complexity (Joynes et al., 2019).

8.2 Psychological Resistance and Risk

Instructors often experience anxiety regarding the loss of control in an active classroom. Students may also resist, as they find the move to independent inquiry to be time-consuming or confusing. Overcoming these barriers involves a "start small" approach, using activities like the "One-Minute Paper" or "Think-Pair-Share" (Timmis et al., 2022).

9. Future Directions and Emerging Themes

Instructional designs are placing an increased emphasis on metacognition thinking about thinking (Beyer, 2025). This includes teaching students to recognize cognitive biases and the limitations of their mental models.

Furthermore, the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a "thinking partner" is an area of intense research, providing the immediate feedback necessary for complex inquiry-based projects (Sindhushree et al., 2025).

10. Conclusions

The cultivation of critical thinking skills in higher secondary and undergraduate education is no longer an optional enhancement but a core institutional responsibility in an era defined by information overload, rapid technological change, and multifaceted global challenges. The accumulated evidence unequivocally demonstrates that active learning strategies when intentionally designed, scaffolded, and aligned with explicit critical thinking goals consistently outperform traditional didactic methods in developing students' ability to analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and apply knowledge across disciplines. PBL, collaborative group work, case studies, flipped classrooms, reflective practices, and structured inquiry activities create the cognitive dissonance, social negotiation, and metacognitive engagement necessary for deep, transferable reasoning skills. These approaches not only improve performance on validated critical thinking assessments but also enhance motivation, retention, self-efficacy, and preparation for real-world problem-solving. While barriers such as large class sizes, time limitations, faculty unfamiliarity, and student resistance to discomfort remain real, they are surmountable through targeted professional development, institutional support (smaller discussion sections, teaching assistants, digital tools), and incremental implementation. The most successful programs embed critical thinking explicitly in course outcomes, provide continuous formative feedback, and use authentic, ill-structured tasks that mirror professional or civic challenges. As higher education institutions strive to produce graduates capable of navigating ambiguity, questioning assumptions, and making evidence-based decisions, prioritizing active learning represents a high-leverage investment. Scaling these evidence-based practices through curriculum redesign, faculty training, and policy incentives will be essential to equip the next generation with the intellectual agility and reasoned judgment required to thrive in and contribute to a complex, uncertain world.

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