Cultivating a Critical Thinking Mindset in the Era of "Alternative Facts"

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory research examines the critical thinking skills and mindsets of 35 LIS students as they discuss two case studies in an online management course. Three categories of mindsets were identified: Idealists, Pragmatists, and Skeptics. Findings reveal that 75% of participants used strategic approaches to resolve information accuracy and ethics problems presented in the case studies. This suggests that cultivating critical thinking mindsets in new information professionals is effective in helping them address societal or organizational challenges associated with our contemporary era of "alternative facts". New perspectives are also offered regarding the use of pedagogical case studies as tools for developing these strategic critical thinking skills and mindsets among new information professionals.

TOPICS:

Critical librarianship; Information literacy; Information ethics; Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary rhetoric about "fake news" and "alternative facts" has had a powerful influence with respect to information sources, raising awareness and expectations of information accuracy among users. It is also challenging information professionals to demonstrate new skills that reinforce their positions as credible, reliable sources. Consequently, this so-called "post-truth" era poses challenges for library and information science (LIS) educators in their efforts to prepare new information professionals who can strategically confront "fake news" and "alternative facts".

Against this backdrop, we assert that LIS faculty can begin to pedagogically address these challenges by cultivating strategic, critical thinking mindsets among their students by using problem-based case study discussions in their courses. Despite the popularity of case study teaching methods in LIS, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of case studies is limited (Horava & Curran, 2002; Moniz, 2009). Case studies have been found to enhance students' problem solving, analytical, and decision-making skills, but little is understood about the role of case studies in cultivating LIS students' critical thinking mindsets. This study is an initial foray into this area of inquiry.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This exploratory study aimed to understand the critical-thinking mindsets of 35 graduate students enrolled in two sections of an online LIS management course. One section was delivered in the spring semester of 2016, and the other in the spring of 2017.

The selected case studies were "A Word to the Wise" by A. J. Anderson, and "A Difficult Decision" by Cynthia Thomes. Ample opportunities were given to students to demonstrate a critical thinking mindset as they attempted to resolve the ethical issues, dilemmas, and problems presented in the case studies, which called upon their dispositions toward problem-solving as well as their decision making, communication, and leadership skills.

Specifically, students' case study discussions and responses were assigned points (on a scale of 1-5) for the following criteria: a) demonstrates critical thinking through thoughtful and reflective discussion of ethics case studies; b) provides evidence of leadership skills, managerial decision making, and problem-solving skills by offering thoughtful and strategic solutions; and c) applies relevant management/ethics theories and concepts in resolving the given issues and problems.

The scores for these three evaluation criteria were summed up and placed into three mindset categories: **Idealist** (top 25% score), **Pragmatic** (middle 50% score), and **Skeptic** (lower 25% score). Students' reflections on the effectiveness of the selected case studies in enhancing their learning about management skills were also analyzed based on these mindset categories.

FINDINGS

Findings show that the **Idealists** (8/35) took idealistic positions as they discussed ethical issues put forth by the case studies. Idealists believed in finding the perfect solutions for the problems that drove class discussions. Their responses were detailed, analytical, comprehensive, and demonstrated decision-making and problem-solving skills. Idealists outperformed their counterparts by finding solutions and applying relevant ethics/management theories, concepts, and models. As they delved deeper into discussing ethical challenges, Idealists adopted strategic approaches and relayed experiences and perspectives that they had witnessed in their own workplaces. They approached problems with an attitude of optimism and confidence, and were resolute in wanting to improve a situation. Enthusiasm and appreciation of the case study approach in facilitating management education was clearly evident in their wrap-up reflections.

The **Pragmatics** (19/35) considered the reality of the given case study, and were more inclined to take practical approaches in resolving ethical issues and dilemmas. Although a substantial number of Pragmatics (8/19) also considered idealistic solutions, their ultimate approaches were deemed to be more pragmatic that idealist. Additionally, Pragmatics demonstrated analytical and problem-solving skills, but their responses were less comprehensive and detailed than those of the Idealists. Nevertheless, a majority of Pragmatics (15/19) performed well in finding strategic solutions for case study problems by applying ethics/management

theories, concepts, and models. Finally, Pragmatics' wrap-up reflections emphasized the effectiveness of case study pedagogy in evolving their management perspectives.

The **Skeptics** (8/35) did not fully articulate the ethical issues presented in the case studies. Skeptics' responses merely reflected "common sense" rather than being grounded in relevant management and ethics theories and concepts. Additionally, Skeptics' responses were not comprehensive and they did not reflect strategic insights in resolving the ethical issues presented by the case studies. They seemed to find it difficult to apply relevant ethics/management theories, concepts, and models in their online discussions. Consequently, their responses tended to be incoherent, and they remained skeptical or uncertain about which overall approach to take in resolving ethical issues and challenges. Nevertheless, their wrap-up reflections revealed Skeptics' appreciation for case study pedagogy and how it helped to evolve their management perspectives.

CONCLUSION

Overall, findings reveal that 75% of participants (the Idealists and the Pragmatists) reflected a *critical thinking mindset*, which was evident in their strategic approaches to improve the problematic situations presented by the case studies. Even though the Skeptics underperformed relative to their counterparts, their wrap-up reflections were quite similar to those of the Idealists and the Pragmatics in their appreciation of case study discussions in helping them strengthen their managerial and critical thinking skills. This study demonstrates that cultivating a critical thinking mindset in information professionals would be an effective way to address emerging societal, technological, or organizational issues in the "fake news" and "alternative facts" era. Finally, this study has implications for designing holistic LIS programs that aim to cultivate critical thinking mindsets throughout the curricula.

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