

Development of Critical Thinking - Interview with Dr. Adam Mastandrea



This is an interview with Dr. Adam Mastandrea who is currently an assistant professor in the Vilnius University Faculty of Philology and a former US State Department English Language Fellow in Lithuania. He holds degrees in Philosophy, Applied Linguistics, and Educational Psychology.

By dr. Roma Kriaučiūnienė, professor at Vilnius University

Roma: Dear Adam, before coming to Lithuania you taught in Poland, Japan, Montana, and Hawai'i. Could you tell us more about this experience? What courses have you delivered and how much attention did you pay to critical thinking development in them?

Adam: When I first started teaching English abroad in Japan and Poland, I didn't focus much on critical thinking and just tried to teach language skills and usually followed whatever textbook I was given. While I was getting my MA in Applied Linguistics I started teaching university level ESL writing courses and was introduced to teaching approaches that focused on exploring different topics and themes in depth as a way to teach language. Once I started going more in-depth into content, I also began designing classroom activities that had more depth and encouraged students to communicate, discuss, debate and reflect.

Roma: Why did you decide to come to Lithuania?

Adam: I was given the opportunity to come to Lithuania as an English Language Fellow in 2019. The fellow selection process does not allow you to choose your placement so I got lucky to be placed in Vilnius.

Roma: What has been your experience of teaching in Lithuania? How is this teaching experience different or similar to your work in other countries in terms of critical thinking development? Have you found any cultural differences in the approach of critical thinking development in different countries?

Adam: I think critical thinking development in the classroom takes a lot of planning and when teaching in different countries and cultures you also have to tailor your instruction somewhat to cultural norms and student expectations. For example, I think whole class discussions are a great way to explore topics and raise questions, but I have found in Lithuania that students are less comfortable than American students in expressing their opinions in front of the class and disagreeing with others' opinions. Modifying a classroom discussion into a more structured classroom debate with set times and order of speakers has been a great way to keep students contributing and discussing in my classes.

Roma: Before coming to Lithuania, you served as assistant professor and director of field experience in the Education department at the University of Montana Western. Could you describe the responsibilities that these positions entailed?

Adam: At UMW I taught in a teacher education program focused on preparing teachers for the K-12 public school system. My doctorate is in educational psychology, so I taught mostly foundation courses on learner development and educational philosophy. I was also responsible for conducting seminars for student teachers and coordinating supervision and evaluation of student teachers during their semester long field experiences in K-12 schools.

Roma: You have had experience in teacher development programs. Could you tell if there is enough attention paid to critical development of teachers in these programs and in reality?

Adam: I don't think critical thinking is given enough emphasis in teacher development programs. In my experience beginning teachers often don't think it's important and are more focused on what they perceive as the skills necessary to survive as a new teacher, such as classroom management and assessment. The textbooks that teachers are assigned also don't usually provide much in the way of critical thinking skills practice so even experienced teachers might not be familiar with the idea and its importance. Providing professional

development programs for in-service teachers to update their practice and incorporate activities and content that promote critical thinking is also a good idea.

Roma: While working in Lithuania you have been involved in the project New Methodological Approaches to Teaching about Disinformation Discourses in Lithuanian High Schools and Universities. What is this project about and how much attention is paid to critical thinking development of schoolchildren and students within this project?

Adam: We are working with high school students and teachers on using their English language skills to examine disinformation in the mainstream media and on social media and give them the tools to categorize and examine the language used. Through the processes of reading, discussing, categorizing, and then presenting their ideas we hope students will be able to develop critical thinking habits and apply them when reading and reacting to stories, posts and comments online.

Roma: Having this wide experience could you advise what teachers should know about critical thinking development of students?

Adam: I think the most important aspect of designing lessons that aim to develop critical thinking is that the topics must be interesting and engaging for students. If they can apply the skills we are teaching in their own lives and daily interactions, then students will be more invested in learning.

Roma: Thank you very much for your answers!