## პედაგოგიკა Pedagogic

# The Role of Non-Formal Education in Developing Critical Thinking: A Case Study of a Model United Nations Student Club

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*This article examines the role of non-formal education in facilitating the practical application and development of critical thinking, using the Model United Nations (MUN) student club at Montclair State University, USA, as a case study. The aim of the study is to analyze the role critical thinking plays in the club's activities, the extent to which it benefits students, and the opportunities that a non-formal educational environment provides for its practical expression. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach. Empirical data were collected through a group oral interview involving 40 club members, during which each participant had the opportunity to express their individual views, as well as through observation of the club's activities. The study focuses on three main dimensions: the significance of the non-formal educational environment, the relationship between formal and non-formal education, and the practical application of critical thinking. The article presents the MUN club as an educational setting in which students explore international issues, evaluate information, consider different perspectives, formulate arguments, and participate in negotiations and decision-making processes.*

**Keywords:** critical thinking, non-formal education, formal education, student club, higher education.

### Introduction

One of the major challenges facing contemporary education is the development of students who are capable of thinking independently, critically evaluating information, engaging in reasoned argumentation, and making well-founded decisions in complex situations.

Formal education provides students with theoretical knowledge and conceptual foundations, while non-formal educational environments create opportunities to apply this knowledge in practice. Discussions, group

and individual activities, problem analysis, and collaborative decision-making help students use the knowledge acquired through the learning process in real or simulated situations. Such experiences are particularly important in facilitating the practical application and development of the various components of critical thinking.

In this regard, the activities of Model United Nations (MUN) student clubs are of particular interest. Model United Nations simulations provide students with opportunities to explore international issues, understand the interests and political positions of different countries, formulate arguments, and participate in negotiations. In this process, students are required not merely to memorize information, but also to analyze it, assess its reliability, consider different perspectives, and justify their own views. This makes the MUN club an important educational setting for examining the practical application of critical thinking.

The research interest in critical thinking is also informed by previous research conducted in Georgia, including a study on the perception of critical thinking among students at Tbilisi Open Teaching University (Moralishvili, Shevardnadze, & Tkeshelashvili, 2019). Examining the higher education environment in the United States provides an opportunity to focus on how critical thinking is manifested in students' practical activities and on the role of non-formal educational activities in this process.

The aim of this article is to examine the role of non-formal education in facilitating the practical application and development of critical thinking, using the Model United Nations student club at Montclair State University, USA, as a case study. Particular attention is paid to how the club's activities create an environment in which students independently research issues, evaluate information, consider different positions, formulate arguments, and participate in collaborative decision-making.

**Critical Thinking and Non-Formal Education: Theoretical Foundations**

According to Facione (1990), critical thinking is a purposeful and self-regulatory process of judgment that involves interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and the explanation of the reasoning behind one's conclusions. This approach demonstrates that critical thinking involves more than simply possessing information; it requires the thoughtful application of knowledge, the evaluation of evidence, and the analysis of different viewpoints.

The development of critical thinking is not limited to traditional lectures or theoretical instruction. Andreucci-Annunziata et al. (2023) examine various strategies for teaching critical thinking in higher education, emphasizing the importance of active learning, discussion, debate, problem-based approaches, and student engagement.

Non-formal education provides an environment in which students gain experience through active participation and apply acquired knowledge in practical activities. Such an environment

encourages initiative, collaboration, the exchange of ideas, and the discussion of practical problems.

Formal and non-formal education are not alternatives to one another. Formal education provides the theoretical foundation, while non-formal environments offer opportunities to apply this knowledge in practice and enrich it through experience.

**Model United Nations as a Practical Environment for Critical Thinking**

MUN activities involve several important components of critical thinking:

**Information gathering and evaluation.** Students are required to seek information on international issues, assess the reliability of sources, and compare different sets of information and evidence.

**Multiperspective thinking.** Participants represent the positions of different countries, allowing them to examine issues from various political, economic, and social perspectives.

**Reasoned argumentation.** Students must formulate their positions, support them with relevant evidence, and defend them during discussions.

**Discussion and negotiation.** Participants listen to different opinions, evaluate opposing arguments, and seek to develop common positions.

**Decision-making.** When discussing international issues, students must analyze possible solutions and support decisions that take the interests of different parties into account.

The study by Hammond and Albert (2020) examines the educational potential of Model United Nations simulations. The authors investigated how participation in a MUN course relates to students' self-assessments of their critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills. Their research suggests that MUN simulations can serve as an environment for experiential learning and the practical application of skills.

The study by Jesuit and Strachan (2021) focuses on the relationship between student engagement and learning outcomes in Model United Nations. The authors discuss how student engagement relates to the acquisition of knowledge about the United Nations and the activities of student groups.

Ho et al. (2025) highlight the broader educational potential of Model UN, including its contribution to the development of critical thinking, communication, and global citizenship. The authors argue that Model UN experiences can also be valuable for students from a wide range of academic disciplines.

These studies demonstrate the educational potential of Model United Nations. The present study, however, focuses on how the practical components of critical thinking are manifested in the activities of a specific university's MUN club.

Thus, MUN can be understood not only as a simulation of the work of an international organization, but also as a non-formal educational environment in which students apply different components of critical thinking through practical activities.

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach. The case selected for analysis is the Model United Nations student club at Montclair State University, USA. The club's activities are examined to explore the relationship between non-formal education and critical thinking.

The aim of the research is to analyze the role critical thinking plays in the activities of the MUN club, the extent to which it supports students' participation in club activities, and the opportunities that a non-formal educational environment creates for the practical expression of critical thinking.

Empirical data were collected through oral interviews conducted in small groups with 40 members of the MUN student club during one of the club's meetings. The interviews took place within the club's non-formal educational environment. Participants had the opportunity to express shared views, while each individual was also given the opportunity to formulate and communicate their own position. The

interviews addressed the role of critical thinking in the club's activities, its practical significance, the opportunities for its expression in a non-formal environment, and the benefits perceived by students.

The study also involved observation of the club's activities, focusing on student engagement, the formats used to discuss issues, the consideration of different perspectives, and the process of reasoned argumentation.

Additional information about the club's activities and materials relevant to the research were provided by the club president, Keso Mumladze, who is also a co-author of this article.

The collected material was analyzed according to three main dimensions: the significance of the non-formal educational environment, the relationship between formal and non-formal education, and the practical application of critical thinking. These dimensions provided a framework for examining the role of critical thinking in the club's activities and the importance of the non-formal environment in creating opportunities for students' practical engagement.

**The Significance of the Non-Formal Educational Environment**

The research findings showed that students unanimously recognize the importance of a non-formal educational environment. In their view, such an environment is not only important but also essential and decisive for students' development. A common perspective emerged in participants' responses: non-formal education creates a space in which students can freely express their views, exchange ideas, listen to different opinions, and actively engage in the learning process. Thus, the non-formal environment is not merely an additional opportunity for students but an important condition for a comprehensive educational experience.

**The Relationship Between Formal and Non-Formal Education**

Regarding the second dimension, students' responses clearly demonstrated a shared understanding that formal and non-formal education are not opposing or mutually exclusive processes. On the contrary, they complement each other and are interdependent. According to students' assessments, formal education provides the theoretical foundation, while non-formal education offers opportunities to apply this knowledge in practice. Thus, both forms of education play an important role in the learning process, and their complementary relationship enables students to understand and apply knowledge more comprehensively.

**The Practical Application and Significance of Critical Thinking in the MUN Club**

The third dimension of the research showed that critical thinking is clearly manifested in the activities of the MUN club and represents an essential skill for students. According to participants' views, critical thinking is necessary for finding and analyzing information, evaluating different positions, formulating arguments, and making well-reasoned decisions.

Participants' discussions also revealed that, for students, critical thinking is not merely a means of carrying out practical activities. It also plays an important role in forming their own views, understanding personal values, and developing an individual philosophy. Therefore, participation in the MUN club provides students with opportunities to apply critical thinking not only when discussing specific issues but also in the process of developing their own intellectual and personal positions.

**Summary of the Research Findings**

The analysis of students' responses across all three dimensions revealed a common tendency: the non-formal educational environment is an essential and important space for them; formal and non-formal education are complementary processes; and critical thinking is an integral part of the MUN club's activities, playing an important role in developing both practical skills and individual thinking and in shaping a personal philosophy.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research findings confirm the important role of non-formal education in the practical application and development of critical thinking. The case of the Model United Nations student club at Montclair State University demonstrates that a non-formal educational environment provides an essential space for students' active engagement and practical learning.

The study also shows that formal and non-formal education are complementary and interconnected processes: formal education provides the theoretical foundation, while the non-formal environment creates opportunities to apply acquired knowledge in practice.

Furthermore, critical thinking is an important component of the MUN club's activities. It is manifested in the processes of information analysis, evaluation of different positions, argumentation, and reasoned decision-making. Accordingly, the activities of the MUN club represent an important educational setting that supports the development of students' practical critical thinking skills.

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# არაფორმალური განათლების როლი კრიტიკული აზროვნების განვითარებაში: გაერთიანებული ერების ორგანიზაციის მოდელირების სტუდენტური კლუბის მაგალითზე

## აბსტრაქტი

სტატიაში განხილულია არაფორმალური განათლების როლი კრიტიკული აზროვნების განვითარებაში, აშშ-ის მონტკლერის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტის გაერთიანებული ერების ორგანიზაციის მოდელირების (Model United Nations – MUN) სტუდენტური კლუბის მაგალითზე.

ნაშრომის მიზანია, გააანალიზოს, რა როლს ასრულებს კრიტიკული აზროვნება კლუბის საქმიანობაში, რამდენად ეხმარება იგი სტუდენტებს და რა შესაძლებლობებს ქმნის არაფორმალური საგანმანათლებლო გარემო მისი პრაქტიკული გამოვლენისთვის. კვლევა ეფუძნება თვისებრივი შემთხვევის შესწავლის მიდგომას. ემპირიული მასალის შესაგროვებლად გამოყენებულია კლუბის 40 წევრთან ჯგუფური ზეპირი გასაუბრება, რომლის ფარგლებშიც თითოეულ მონაწილეს საკუთარი მოსაზრების გამოხატვის შესაძლებლობა ჰქონდა, აგრეთვე კლუბის საქმიანობაზე დაკვირვება. კვლევა განიხილავს სამ ძირითად მიმართულებას: არაფორმალური საგანმანათლებლო გარემოს მნიშვნელობას, ფორმალური და არაფორმალური განათლების ურთიერთკავშირს და კრიტიკული აზროვნების პრაქტიკულ გამოყენებას. ნაშრომი წარმოაჩენს MUN-ის კლუბს, როგორც საგანმანათლებლო სივრცეს, რომელშიც სტუდენტები იკვლევენ საერთაშორისო საკითხებს, აფასებენ ინფორმაციას, განიხილავენ განსხვავებულ პოზიციებს, აყალიბებენ არგუმენტებს და მონაწილეობენ მოლაპარაკებებსა და გადაწყვეტილებების შემუშავებაში.

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**რეცენზენტი:** პროფესორი მაია ახვლედიანი