

Article

Investigating the Effectiveness of Case-Based Socio-Legal Pedagogy in Developing Critical Thinking: Evidence from Muslim Women's Legal Experiences in Israel

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Abstract

Developing critical thinking is a central aim of contemporary higher education, yet conventional instructional approaches often underuse authentic, real-world materials that stimulate higher-order reasoning and reflective judgment. The study examines the effectiveness of case-based socio-legal pedagogy in fostering critical thinking within contexts of legal pluralism and social complexity. A quasi-experimental mixed-methods pre–post design was conducted with 62 undergraduate students enrolled in a course on Islamic law and society. Over a four-week intervention, students engaged with six socio-legal cases drawn from Muslim women's legal experiences in Israel, focusing on divorce, maintenance (nafaka), and child custody. Quantitative data were collected using a validated Critical Thinking Rubric assessing argumentation, evaluation of multiple perspectives, and legal reasoning. Results showed significant improvement in overall critical thinking, with gains across all measured dimensions. Qualitative analysis of written assignments and student reflections revealed greater recognition of legal ambiguity, more structured and evidence-based argumentation, and deeper engagement with competing normative and social frameworks. Overall, the findings highlight the pedagogical value of integrating socio-legal complexity into case-based learning as an adaptable model for strengthening critical thinking across disciplines involving interpretive, contested, and context-dependent knowledge in higher education and other fields requiring careful judgment under conditions of uncertainty and change.

Keywords: critical thinking; case-based learning; higher education; innovative pedagogy; Islamic law; legal pluralism; Muslim women; socio-legal pedagogy



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1. Introduction

1.1. Critical Thinking as a Core Aim of Higher Education

The development of critical thinking has become a defining priority in contemporary higher education systems worldwide. Universities are increasingly expected not only to transmit disciplinary knowledge but also to cultivate graduates who can engage meaningfully with complexity, uncertainty, and competing claims. This shift reflects broader transformations in knowledge economies, in which the capacity to interpret information, evaluate evidence, and construct reasoned arguments is often more valuable than the accumulation of static content knowledge. As a result, critical thinking is widely regarded as a central graduate attribute, closely linked to academic success, professional competence,

and informed participation in democratic and pluralistic societies (Facione, 1990; Halpern, 2014; Brookfield, 2012; Davies & Barnett, 2015).

Despite this strong emphasis, the effective teaching of critical thinking remains a persistent challenge. Traditional instructional approaches, particularly those grounded in lecture-based transmission, often prioritize coverage of material over cognitive engagement. While such methods may efficiently convey foundational knowledge, they tend to position students as passive recipients rather than active participants in the learning process. This can reinforce a view of knowledge as fixed and authoritative, limiting students' ability to engage with ambiguity or to apply theoretical concepts in dynamic, real-world contexts (Paul & Elder, 2006; Abrami et al., 2015). Consequently, students may struggle to move beyond surface-level understanding toward the deeper forms of reasoning that characterize critical thinking.

1.2. From Passive Reception to Active Cognitive Engagement

In response to these limitations, there has been a growing shift toward active and student-centered pedagogies that emphasize engagement, inquiry, and reflection (Watted, 2023; Watted & Barak, 2024). These approaches reconceptualize learning as an active process in which students construct understanding through interaction with ideas, peers, and real-world problems. Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that such pedagogies are more effective than passive instructional methods in promoting higher-order thinking, particularly when they involve structured opportunities for discussion, problem-solving, and feedback (Freeman et al., 2014; Prince, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Critical thinking itself is best understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing both cognitive skills and dispositional orientations. It involves the ability to analyze arguments, evaluate evidence, draw reasoned inferences, and articulate coherent explanations. At the same time, it requires intellectual dispositions such as open-mindedness, skepticism, and a willingness to reconsider one's assumptions (Facione, 1990; Halpern, 2014). More recent work has further emphasized the role of epistemic cognition—individuals' beliefs about knowledge and knowing—in shaping how learners engage with complex and uncertain problems (Kuhn, 2016; Greene et al., 2018). From this perspective, fostering critical thinking involves not only teaching analytical skills but also encouraging students to recognize the provisional, contested, and context-dependent nature of knowledge.

1.3. Case-Based Learning and Experiential Pedagogies

Within this broader pedagogical landscape, case-based learning has emerged as a particularly powerful approach for fostering critical thinking. By presenting students with concrete scenarios that reflect real-life complexity, case-based learning situates knowledge within meaningful contexts and requires learners to engage in interpretation, evaluation, and judgment (Herrington & Oliver, 2000; Puri, 2022). Unlike decontextualized exercises, cases typically involve incomplete information, competing interests, and no single correct answer. This structure compels students to move beyond memorization and engage in higher-order cognitive processes, including the weighing of evidence, the comparison of perspectives, and the justification of conclusions (Herreid, 2011; Thistlethwaite et al., 2012).

The pedagogical effectiveness of case-based learning can be understood through its alignment with experiential learning theory. Kolb (1984) conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Case-based instruction operationalizes this cycle by allowing students to encounter realistic scenarios, reflect on their implications, apply theoretical frameworks, and test alternative interpretations. In doing so, it bridges the gap between theory and practice and supports the development of transferable cognitive skills.

In addition, case-based learning resonates with transformative learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of “disorienting dilemmas” in prompting critical reflection and perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1997). When students are confronted with cases that challenge their existing assumptions, they are more likely to engage in deeper forms of reasoning and to reconsider previously held beliefs. This process is particularly powerful when supported by structured discussion and reflective writing, which provide opportunities for students to articulate and refine their thinking.

1.4. Legal Pluralism as a Context for Complex Learning

The potential of case-based learning is especially pronounced in contexts characterized by legal pluralism. Legal pluralism refers to the coexistence of multiple legal and normative systems within a single social field (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988; Tamanaha, 2008). In such contexts, individuals must navigate overlapping frameworks of authority, including state law, religious law, and customary practices. This multiplicity introduces layers of complexity that challenge straightforward legal reasoning and require careful consideration of context, power relations, and practical consequences.

At the same time, legal pluralism is not used here as a loose synonym for every instance of normative diversity. Following Vanderlinden’s (1989) individualized account, legally plural situations can be understood from the standpoint of persons who must orient their conduct among several normative orders that make claims on them, rather than only from the standpoint of institutions or formal legal hierarchies. This individualized perspective is pedagogically important because it directs attention to how litigants experience, interpret, and strategically navigate overlapping forms of authority. However, the concept also requires analytical discipline. As von Benda-Beckmann (2002) cautions, legal pluralism becomes theoretically weak if every normative expectation is treated as law. Thus, practices such as online shopping, platform rules, or consumer choice may involve regulatory norms, but they do not necessarily amount to legal pluralism unless they carry the institutional authority, enforceability, and social legitimacy normally associated with legal ordering. In this study, therefore, legal pluralism refers more specifically to the interaction between state civil law, state-recognized religious jurisdiction, Islamic legal doctrine, and socially embedded normative expectations in matters of Muslim personal status in Israel.

From an educational perspective, legally plural contexts offer uniquely rich opportunities for developing critical thinking. They resist reduction to simple rules or definitive answers and instead demand interpretive judgment, comparative analysis, and evaluation of competing norms. Students must consider how different legal systems interact, where they converge or conflict, and how these dynamics shape individuals’ lived experiences. This process fosters analytical flexibility, perspective-taking, and epistemological awareness—core components of critical thinking.

The Israeli context provides a particularly compelling setting in which to explore these dynamics. In matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, maintenance, and child custody, religious communities operate under their respective legal systems alongside state civil law. For Muslim women, this creates a complex socio-legal environment in which rights and obligations are shaped by the interaction between Islamic law (Sharia), state institutions, and broader social norms. These interactions are further mediated by gendered inequalities and institutional constraints, which can influence both access to justice and legal outcomes (Shachar, 2001; Hallaq, 2009).

This framing is supported by scholarship on Muslim family law and religious jurisdiction in Israel. For instance, Abou Ramadan’s (2008, 2014) analyses of the Israeli Shari’a courts show that Islamic legal practice in Israel has been shaped by institutional anomaly, legal hybridity, and pressure from the civil family-law system, rather than by a simple

application of classical doctrine. [Shahar's \(2015\)](#) subsequent institutional study of Jerusalem demonstrates further that forum shopping and court dynamics are central to how litigants and institutions navigate legal pluralism. Likewise, [Sezgin's \(2013\)](#) comparative work on state-enforced religious family laws highlights how states, courts, and litigants renegotiate rights and duties within religious family-law regimes. Such studies strengthen the rationale for using socio-legal cases as pedagogical materials: they shed light on pluralism as an institutional and experiential condition that requires interpretation, comparison, and critical judgment.

Cases drawn from Muslim women's legal experiences in Israel thus provide rich and multifaceted material for teaching and learning. They illuminate tensions between formal legal doctrine and lived reality, demonstrating how legal principles are interpreted, negotiated, and sometimes contested in practice. Engaging with such cases forces students to move beyond the application of abstract rules and instead consider context, power, and consequence. In doing so, they are compelled to engage in the kinds of analytical and interpretive processes that underpin critical thinking.

For the purposes of the present study, legal reasoning refers to students' ability to connect relevant legal concepts to concrete case facts, compare plausible normative interpretations, evaluate consequences, and justify a conclusion through evidence-based argumentation. Legal ambiguity refers not merely to confusion or lack of information, but to situations in which more than one legally or normatively defensible interpretation may be available because different institutions, doctrines, and social expectations overlap. In this sense, ambiguity is an analytically productive feature of legally plural contexts: it prompts students to explain why one interpretation is more persuasive, equitable, or institutionally plausible than another.

Moreover, centering Muslim women's experiences within the curriculum carries significant pedagogical and ethical implications. It foregrounds perspectives that are often marginalized in legal and educational discourse, thereby broadening students' understanding of how law operates across diverse social contexts. At the same time, it encourages students to consider the ethical dimensions of legal reasoning, including issues of equity, agency, and structural constraint. This integration of cognitive and ethical reflection aligns with contemporary arguments that higher education should promote not only intellectual development but also social responsibility and civic engagement ([Nussbaum, 2010](#); [Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016](#)).

This focus also situates the study within feminist critiques of multicultural and religious accommodation. [Shachar \(2001\)](#), for example, argues that multicultural jurisdiction can create tensions between collective cultural autonomy and women's individual rights, while [Okin \(1999\)](#), [Phillips \(2007\)](#), and [Song \(2007\)](#) caution against treating minority cultures as internally homogeneous or allowing appeals to culture to obscure gendered power relations. The cases used in this module therefore do not present Muslim women merely as subjects of legal rules; rather, they invite students to examine how gender, minority status, institutional access, and interpretive authority intersect. This orientation also supports intercultural dialogue by encouraging students to engage with religious and cultural norms critically without reducing them to stereotypes or treating them as insulated from questions of justice and accountability.

1.5. Research Goal and Questions

Despite the growing body of research on active learning and critical thinking, relatively limited attention has been paid to the specific contribution of socio-legal case analysis grounded in legal pluralism. Much of the existing literature focuses on case-based learning in professional education contexts, such as medicine or business, where the emphasis is

often on applied decision-making rather than broader cognitive development (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2021). Similarly, studies of critical thinking frequently examine general instructional strategies without considering the distinctive affordances of legally and socially complex contexts (Andreucci-Annunziata et al., 2023). This gap highlights the need for research that integrates these domains and examines how they can jointly contribute to higher-order learning in higher education.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the effectiveness of a case-based socio-legal pedagogical module embedded within an undergraduate course on Islamic law and society. The study is grounded in the premise that engaging with legally plural, socially embedded cases can provide a powerful stimulus for critical thinking by requiring students to navigate ambiguity, evaluate competing perspectives, and construct reasoned arguments. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the study seeks to capture both measurable changes in students' performance and the underlying processes through which learning occurs.

Two research questions guide the investigation:

Q1: To what extent does participation in a structured case-based socio-legal module enhance students' critical thinking performance, particularly in relation to argumentation, evaluation of multiple perspectives, and legal reasoning?

Q2: How do students' written analyses and reflective responses illuminate the cognitive and interpretive processes activated by this pedagogical approach?

Together, these questions aim to provide a comprehensive account of both the outcomes and mechanisms of learning.

In addressing these questions, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about innovative pedagogy in higher education. It advances the argument that the effectiveness of instructional approaches depends not only on their level of student engagement but also on the nature of the intellectual challenges they present. Pedagogies that incorporate complexity, ambiguity, and real-world relevance are more likely to foster the kinds of reasoning skills required in contemporary academic and professional contexts. By situating case-based learning within the framework of legal pluralism and socio-legal analysis, this study offers a theoretically grounded and empirically informed model for cultivating critical thinking in higher education.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study employed a quasi-experimental mixed-methods pre-post design to investigate the effectiveness of a case-based socio-legal pedagogical intervention in developing undergraduate students' critical thinking skills (Creswell, 2022). The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches enabled a comprehensive examination of both learning outcomes and the processes through which those outcomes were achieved. Such designs are widely recommended in educational research, particularly when studying complex constructs such as critical thinking, which encompass both measurable performance and underlying cognitive development (Creswell, 2022; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

The quantitative component consisted of a one-group pre-test/post-test design, in which students' performance was assessed before and after the intervention. This design allowed for the measurement of within-subject change over time and is commonly used in classroom-based research where random assignment and control groups are not feasible (Shadish et al., 2002). Although the absence of a control group limits the ability to draw strong causal inferences, the design is appropriate for exploratory pedagogical studies conducted in authentic educational settings and provides valuable evidence of instructional impact.

The qualitative component complemented the quantitative analysis by examining students' written assignments and reflective responses. This enabled a deeper exploration of how students engaged with the learning tasks, how their reasoning evolved over the course of the intervention, and how they interpreted the challenges posed by socio-legal cases. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data facilitated methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the validity and interpretive depth of the findings (Denzin, 1978; Creswell, 2022).

2.2. Participants and Educational Context

The study involved 62 undergraduate students enrolled in a course on Islamic law and society at an Israeli higher education institution. The course examined the relationship between legal doctrine, social practice, and lived experience, making it particularly well-suited for the integration of a socio-legal case analysis. The intervention was embedded within the regular curriculum, ensuring that the study reflected a naturalistic instructional environment rather than an artificially constructed research setting.

As such, the study prioritized ecological validity over extensive demographic stratification. For better or worse, detailed variables such as students' religious identification, level of religiosity, political orientation, socioeconomic background, prior exposure to Arab culture, prior familiarity with Islamic law, and prior coursework in law or jurisprudence were not systematically collected. No claim is made, therefore, that the observed gains were independent of these background characteristics. Rather, the results should be interpreted as evidence of improvement within this specific instructional setting, with demographic influences identified as an important issue for future research.

While virtually all participants had prior exposure to foundational concepts in law and society, enabling them to engage meaningfully with the analytical demands of the case-based module, the course did not assume advanced legal training, allowing for observable development in higher-order thinking skills. All data were collected from routine course activities, and student work was anonymized prior to analysis to ensure confidentiality.

The instructor's role should also be noted here. As the module depended on structured guidance, moderated discussion, and explicit scaffolding of legal and social concepts, the findings are inevitably vulnerable to the effects of a designed pedagogical intervention as opposed to unsupported exposure to complex legal cases. Future replications thus should report instructor background and pedagogical training in greater detail, taking into account that instructor expertise may shape how students engage with sensitive issues of gender, religion, law, and minority accommodation.

Ethical considerations were addressed in accordance with institutional guidelines. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and students were assured that their decision to participate or not would have no impact on their academic evaluation. The study thus adhered to established ethical standards for educational research involving human participants.

2.3. Instructional Intervention

The instructional intervention consisted of a four-week case-based socio-legal module structured around six case studies derived from Muslim women's legal experiences in Israel. The cases focused on three central domains—divorce, maintenance (nafaka), and child custody—in which the interaction between Islamic law (Sharia) and state civil law is particularly pronounced. These domains were selected because they foreground issues of legal pluralism, gender, and institutional complexity, thereby providing fertile ground for the development of critical thinking.

The pedagogical design of the module followed a scaffolded progression from guided analysis to independent reasoning. In the initial phase, the instructor modeled analytical processes, demonstrating how to identify relevant facts, formulate legal questions, and connect case details to broader normative frameworks. As the module progressed, students engaged in increasingly autonomous activities, including small-group discussions, whole-class debates, and independent written analyses.

The structure of the module is summarized in Table 1, which outlines the weekly progression of case topics, instructional activities, and targeted dimensions of critical thinking. As shown in Table 1, early sessions emphasized foundational skills such as issue identification and argument mapping, while later sessions focused on more complex tasks, including the evaluation of competing perspectives and the construction of independent legal arguments.

Table 1. Structure of the Four-Week Case-Based Socio-Legal Module.

Week	Case Focus	Main Learning Activities	Primary Critical Thinking Focus
Week 1	Cases 1–2: Divorce disputes involving Muslim women	Instructor modeling, guided questions, initial written analysis	Issue identification and argument mapping
Week 2	Cases 3–4: Maintenance (nafaka) claims involving Muslim women	Small-group debate, comparison of legal considerations, short reflection	Evaluation of competing perspectives
Week 3	Case 5: Child custody dispute involving a Muslim mother	Whole-class discussion, comparative reasoning, analytical memo	Weighing norms, consequences, and evidence
Week 4	Case 6 and post-test: Integrated case on Muslim women’s legal experiences	Synthesis discussion, reflective writing, parallel post-test	Independent legal reasoning and justified conclusions

Throughout the module, students were required to engage with multiple dimensions of critical thinking. Each case analysis involved identifying key facts, comparing legal frameworks, evaluating alternative interpretations, and justifying conclusions with reference to both legal principles and contextual considerations. Instructional activities were deliberately varied to support different modes of engagement, combining oral discussion, written analysis, and reflective writing. This multimodal approach is consistent with research suggesting that critical thinking develops most effectively when students are given repeated opportunities to practice and apply related skills across different contexts (Halpern, 2014; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

2.4. Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected from three complementary sources in order to capture both changes in performance and the processes underlying those changes.

First, students completed a baseline (pre-test) case analysis prior to the intervention and a parallel (post-test) case analysis at its conclusion. Both tasks were designed to be comparable in structure and level of complexity, ensuring that differences in performance could be attributed to learning rather than task variation.

Student responses were evaluated using a Critical Thinking Rubric (CTR), the dimensions of which are presented in Table 2. The rubric assessed three key domains: argumentation, evaluation of multiple perspectives, and legal reasoning. Each dimension was scored on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (basic) to 4 (advanced), with detailed descriptors guiding the assessment process. The use of analytic rubrics is well established in the assessment of higher-order thinking, as it allows for systematic evaluation of multiple components of performance (Brookhart, 2013; Reddy & Andrade, 2010).

Table 2. Critical Thinking Rubric Dimensions and Analytical Focus.

Dimension	Analytical Focus	Performance Range
Argumentation	Constructs a clear claim, uses relevant evidence, and develops a logically coherent line of reasoning.	1 = basic to 4 = advanced
Evaluation of Multiple Perspectives	Recognizes competing legal and social viewpoints, addresses counter-arguments, and compares alternative interpretations.	1 = basic to 4 = advanced
Legal Reasoning	Applies relevant legal concepts to case facts, recognizes plausible alternative interpretations, and justifies conclusions within the limits of introductory socio-legal analysis.	1 = basic to 4 = advanced

The legal reasoning dimension was operationalized at an introductory socio-legal level rather than as professional legal expertise. Students were assessed on whether they could identify relevant legal principles, relate them to facts, recognize alternative interpretations, and justify a reasoned conclusion. They were not expected to provide a comprehensive doctrinal analysis equivalent to that of law students or legal practitioners. This distinction is important because the intervention used law as a context for cultivating critical thinking, not as a substitute for formal legal education.

To ensure reliability, the rubric was piloted on a subset of student responses prior to full implementation. Two independent raters scored the pilot data, and inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa. The resulting coefficient ($\kappa = 0.82$) indicates

strong agreement, consistent with accepted standards for educational assessment. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, leading to minor refinements in rubric descriptors.

Second, students' written assignments produced during the intervention were collected and analyzed. These assignments provided longitudinal insight into the development of students' reasoning, capturing how their analytical approaches evolved across multiple cases. Unlike the pre- and post-tests, which offered discrete measurement points, these texts reflected the ongoing process of learning and skill acquisition.

Third, students completed short reflective responses during the module. These reflections invited students to articulate their experiences of the learning process, including perceived challenges, moments of insight, and changes in their approach to problem-solving. Reflective writing is widely recognized as a valuable tool for accessing metacognitive processes and supporting deeper learning (Moon, 2004).

The combination of these data sources enabled triangulation, strengthening the validity of the study by linking quantitative measures of improvement with qualitative evidence of cognitive and reflective development.

2.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-samples t-tests to compare pre-test and post-test scores across each dimension of the CTR, as well as for the total score. This statistical method is appropriate for repeated-measures designs in which the same participants are assessed at multiple time points (Field, 2018). Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < 0.001$, reflecting a conservative threshold.

In addition to statistical significance, effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d in order to assess the magnitude of observed changes. Reporting effect sizes is considered best practice in educational research, as it provides a more meaningful indication of practical significance (Lakens, 2013).

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involves an iterative process of familiarization, coding, theme development, and refinement. Student texts were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns related to key dimensions of critical thinking, including argumentation, perspective-taking, evidence use, and engagement with ambiguity.

Themes were developed inductively from the data and then refined through comparison across cases and participants. To enhance analytic rigor, the qualitative findings were interpreted in relation to the quantitative results, allowing for an integrated understanding of both outcomes and processes. This approach aligns with best practices in mixed-methods research, where the goal is not merely to combine data types but to generate deeper insights through their integration (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3. Results

3.1. Overview of Analytical Strategy

The analysis of results combined quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to capture both measurable changes in students' critical thinking performance and the underlying cognitive processes associated with those changes. Quantitative data derived from pre-test and post-test assessments were analyzed first to determine whether statistically significant improvements occurred across the three CTR dimensions (argumentation, evaluation of multiple perspectives, and legal reasoning), as well as in overall performance. These results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Pre-test and Post-test Scores Across Critical Thinking Dimensions.

Dimension	Pre-Test Mean Score	Post-Test Mean Score	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Argumentation	2.02	3.21	11.05	<0.001	1.40
Evaluation of Multiple Perspectives	1.79	3.08	11.88	<0.001	1.51
Legal Reasoning	2.27	3.46	12.14	<0.001	1.54
Total	2.03	3.25	14.72	<0.001	1.87

Qualitative data from written assignments and reflective responses were then analyzed to contextualize and interpret the quantitative findings. Rather than treating the two strands of data separately, the analysis adopted an integrated interpretive approach in which qualitative patterns were used to explain and deepen understanding of the observed quantitative changes. This integration is consistent with best practices in mixed-methods research, which emphasize complementarity between datasets rather than parallel reporting (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2. Quantitative Results: Overall Gains in Critical Thinking Performance

The quantitative findings indicate substantial and statistically significant improvements in students' critical thinking performance following participation in the case-based socio-legal intervention.

As shown in Table 3, the overall mean score increased from ($M = 2.03$; $SD = 0.49$) at pre-test to ($M = 3.25$; $SD = 0.44$) at post-test. This difference was statistically significant, $t(61) = 14.72$, $p < 0.001$, with a very large effect size ($d = 1.87$), indicating a substantial magnitude of change in performance over the four-week intervention period.

This overall improvement suggests that structured engagement with socio-legal case analysis may be associated with meaningful gains in students' ability to construct arguments, evaluate competing perspectives, and apply legal reasoning in complex contexts. However, given the quasi-experimental design, these findings should be interpreted as evidence of a strong association rather than definitive causal attribution.

3.3. Dimension-Level Quantitative Findings

A more fine-grained analysis of the three dimensions of the Critical Thinking Rubric reveals consistent improvement across all measured areas, as detailed above in Table 3.

3.3.1. Argumentation

Students demonstrated significant improvement in argumentation, with mean scores increasing from ($M = 2.02$; $SD = 0.51$) at pre-test to ($M = 3.21$; $SD = 0.46$) at post-test, $t(61) = 11.05$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.40$. This suggests that students became more capable of constructing coherent claims supported by relevant evidence and of organizing their reasoning into logically structured arguments.

Qualitative findings (Section 3.5) suggest that this improvement was closely linked to repeated exposure to structured case analysis, which required students to justify conclusions explicitly rather than rely on descriptive or intuitive responses.

3.3.2. Evaluation of Multiple Perspectives

The largest relative gain was observed in the evaluation of multiple perspectives, where scores increased from ($M = 1.79$; $SD = 0.55$) to ($M = 3.08$; $SD = 0.48$), $t(61) = 11.88$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.51$.

This finding is particularly significant, as it suggests that exposure to legally plural socio-legal cases may be especially effective in prompting students to engage with competing normative frameworks rather than privileging a single interpretive lens. The magnitude

of this improvement indicates a substantial shift in students' epistemic orientation toward complexity, ambiguity, and interpretive plurality.

3.3.3. Legal Reasoning

Students also showed strong gains in legal reasoning, increasing from ($M = 2.27$; $SD = 0.47$) to ($M = 3.46$; $SD = 0.42$), $t(61) = 12.14$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.54$.

This improvement indicates enhanced ability to apply relevant legal concepts to case facts and to justify conclusions within a context of overlapping normative systems. Importantly, this dimension reflects not only procedural application of knowledge but also interpretive reasoning across legal frameworks, which is central to socio-legal analysis.

3.4. Integrated Interpretation of Quantitative Trends

Taken together, the quantitative findings demonstrate consistent and substantial improvement across all dimensions of critical thinking. The pattern of gains is particularly notable in the dimension of evaluating multiple perspectives, suggesting that the pedagogical intervention may have been especially effective in fostering epistemic flexibility.

Rather than viewing these improvements as isolated skill gains, they can be interpreted as part of a broader shift in students' approach to complex problem-solving. The movement from lower baseline scores toward more advanced post-test performance suggests increased capacity to engage with ambiguity, construct structured arguments, and integrate multiple forms of reasoning.

However, quantitative results alone cannot explain how these changes occurred. For this reason, qualitative findings are used to illuminate the cognitive processes underlying these observed improvements.

3.5. Qualitative Results: Cognitive Development and Interpretive Shifts

The thematic analysis of students' written assignments and reflective responses revealed three interrelated patterns that help explain the quantitative gains. These themes are not independent categories but mutually reinforcing dimensions of students' developing critical thinking.

3.5.1. Emergence of Legal and Normative Ambiguity Awareness

One of the most prominent changes observed in students' writing was an increased recognition of legal ambiguity. In early assignments, students frequently approached cases as if they could be resolved through the application of a single correct rule or framework. By contrast, in later assignments, students increasingly acknowledged the coexistence of multiple legal and normative systems, particularly the interaction between Islamic law and civil law.

In interpreting this theme, legal ambiguity should be understood as disciplined interpretive plurality rather than indeterminacy without standards. Students' later responses revealed a greater capacity to identify why a Sharia-based interpretation, a civil-law consideration, and a social or institutional constraint might each be relevant to the same case. This development addresses the educational aim of helping students reason under conditions of uncertainty while still requiring them to support claims with case facts and explicit justification.

This shift reflects a transition from rule-based reasoning to interpretive reasoning, in which students began to understand legal outcomes as contingent on competing frameworks rather than fixed determinations. This development closely aligns with the quantitative gains observed in the evaluation of multiple perspectives.

3.5.2. Development of Structured and Evidence-Based Argumentation

A second major theme concerns the development of more structured and evidence-based forms of argumentation. Early student responses tended to be descriptive, summarizing case facts without clearly articulated claims or justification. Over time, however, students increasingly constructed explicit arguments supported by case-specific evidence.

This evolution suggests that repeated engagement with structured case analysis encouraged students to move toward more formalized reasoning patterns. The requirement to justify interpretations appears to have strengthened their ability to organize ideas coherently and to distinguish between description, interpretation, and evaluation.

This qualitative pattern closely mirrors the quantitative improvement in argumentation scores reported in Table 3, providing convergent evidence of skill development.

3.5.3. Deepening of Perspective-Taking and Social Awareness

The third theme concerns a marked deepening of perspective-taking, particularly regarding Muslim women navigating complex legal systems. Students increasingly demonstrated sensitivity to the constraints, vulnerabilities, and strategic choices faced by individuals within legally plural environments.

Rather than treating legal cases as abstract exercises, students began to incorporate consideration of lived experience into their reasoning. Reflective responses indicated that many students experienced cognitive tension when confronting the gap between formal legal doctrine and social reality. This tension appears to have functioned as a productive catalyst for deeper engagement and more nuanced analysis.

This development provides qualitative support for the quantitative gains observed in the evaluation of multiple perspectives and legal reasoning dimensions. For a summary of qualitative themes identified in student writing and reflections, see Table 4 below.

Table 4. Summary of Qualitative Themes Identified in Student Writing and Reflections.

Theme	Description	Representative Indicator in Student Work
Recognition of legal ambiguity	Students increasingly identified tensions between formal rules, institutional practice, and Muslim women's lived realities.	Students compared more than one legal pathway shaping Muslim women's options.
Stronger evidence-based argumentation	Students moved from descriptive summaries toward claims supported with case facts and explicit justification.	Written responses linked conclusions to specific evidence rather than to general opinion.
Deeper perspective-taking	Students more consistently considered the positions of Muslim women, family members, and legal institutions.	Reflections showed greater willingness to weigh Muslim women's legal constraints alongside competing viewpoints.

3.6. Integrated Qualitative–Quantitative Synthesis

When considered together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest not only that students improved in measurable performance terms, but also that their underlying approach to socio-legal reasoning underwent a substantive transformation.

The quantitative results demonstrate statistically significant and practically large gains across all dimensions of critical thinking. They explain these gains by showing how students increasingly:

- Recognized ambiguity in legal systems;
- Constructed structured, evidence-based arguments;
- Integrated multiple perspectives, including social and institutional viewpoints.

This convergence strengthens the overall interpretation of the intervention as effective in promoting higher-order thinking. Importantly, the data suggest that improvement was not limited to surface-level skill acquisition but also extended to epistemological shifts in how students conceptualized legal and social problems.

Nevertheless, given the quasi-experimental design, these findings should be interpreted as evidence of strong pedagogical impact rather than definitive causal proof.

3.7. Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the results demonstrate substantial improvement in students' critical thinking performance following participation in the case-based socio-legal module. The most pronounced gains were observed in the evaluation of multiple perspectives, suggesting that legally plural case environments may be particularly effective in fostering epistemic flexibility.

Qualitative analysis further indicates that these gains were accompanied by meaningful changes in students' reasoning processes, including increased awareness of ambiguity, stronger argumentation structure, and deeper engagement with the socio-legal context.

4. Discussion

4.1. Overview of Key Findings and Interpretive Framing

The findings of the study indicate that case-based socio-legal pedagogy can serve as a powerful mechanism for fostering critical thinking in higher education. Across a four-week instructional intervention, students demonstrated substantial and statistically significant improvements in argumentation, evaluation of multiple perspectives, and legal reasoning. These quantitative gains were supported and elaborated by qualitative evidence showing shifts in how students approached ambiguity, constructed arguments, and engaged with competing normative frameworks.

4.2. Case-Based Learning as a Mechanism for Cognitive Development

The results align strongly with established literature on case-based and experiential learning, which emphasizes the role of situated problem-solving in developing higher-order thinking skills (Kolb, 1984; Herreid, 2011; Thistlethwaite et al., 2012). In the present study, cases were not simply illustrative tools but functioned as structured cognitive environments that required students to engage in sustained interpretive reasoning.

The improvement observed across all dimensions of the Critical Thinking Rubric suggests that case-based learning supports multiple aspects of cognitive development simultaneously. Argumentation improved as students were required to justify claims using case-specific evidence; perspective evaluation improved as they were repeatedly exposed to competing interpretations; and legal reasoning improved as they had to apply and reconcile multiple normative frameworks.

Importantly, these findings extend prior research by demonstrating the pedagogical value of case-based learning in a legally plural context, where complexity is not incidental

but structurally embedded in the learning material. This reinforces arguments that cognitive development is enhanced not merely by active learning in general but by engagement with structured complexity that resists simplistic resolution.

Rather than viewing these outcomes as isolated skill improvements, the results suggest a more fundamental transformation in students' epistemic orientation toward knowledge and reasoning. Students increasingly moved from rule-recall and descriptive responses toward interpretive, comparative, and justificatory forms of reasoning. This shift is particularly significant in the context of socio-legal education, where the capacity to navigate uncertainty and plural normative systems is central to analytical competence.

4.3. Legal Pluralism as a Pedagogical Resource for Critical Thinking

A central theoretical contribution of the present study lies in its demonstration that legal pluralism can function as an active pedagogical resource for developing critical thinking. Rather than treating legal pluralism as a contextual background condition, the findings suggest that it operates as a cognitive catalyst that stimulates interpretive reasoning.

The findings also contribute to feminist and multicultural debates by showing how legal pluralism can be taught without romanticizing cultural autonomy or assuming that state law is automatically emancipatory. In the cases examined, Muslim women's options were shaped by the interaction of religious adjudication, civil legal structures, family expectations, and institutional access. This supports Shachar's (2001) argument that jurisdictional arrangements can distribute power unevenly within minority communities and aligns with feminist critiques that warn against treating culture as a unified explanation for women's legal positions (Okin, 1999; Phillips, 2007; Song, 2007). These overlapping legal and social forces create tensions between gender equality and communal authority, religious legitimacy and civil legal protection, formal legal rights and practical access to justice, and cultural autonomy and intra-community power. Pedagogically, such tensions can support intercultural dialogue because they require students to compare how different normative frameworks shape Muslim women's legal options. This comparison remains an educational exercise: it does not authorize students to determine the validity of actual court decisions, decide which legal system should prevail, or replace judicial and professional legal reasoning with classroom opinion.

Legal pluralism, defined as the coexistence of multiple normative systems within a single social field (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988; Tamanaha, 2008), inherently generates interpretive tension. In this study, the interaction between Islamic law (Sharia) and state civil law created classroom cases in which more than one normative framework was relevant, and no single framework, taken alone, provided a complete socio-legal account of the issues presented. This structural feature required learners to compare systems, evaluate trade-offs, and justify interpretive choices within a supervised educational setting, rather than to adjudicate actual disputes or substitute their conclusions for those of courts.

The particularly strong gains observed in the evaluation of the multiple perspectives dimension support the aforementioned interpretation. Students were not simply learning to identify different viewpoints; they were learning to navigate structurally embedded normative plurality. This finding suggests that legal pluralism may be especially effective in cultivating epistemic flexibility, a core component of advanced critical thinking (Kuhn, 2016; Greene et al., 2018).

4.4. Socio-Legal Case Design and the Development of Epistemic Sophistication

The qualitative findings provide important insight into how students' epistemic reasoning evolved throughout the intervention. Early in the module, many students approached cases as problems with implicit correct answers, reflecting what epistemological research

describes as a more absolutist conception of knowledge. Over time, however, students increasingly recognized that legal and social outcomes are contingent, interpretive, and context-dependent.

This shift aligns with research on epistemic cognition, which emphasizes the importance of helping learners understand knowledge as constructed, evolving, and subject to competing interpretations (Kuhn, 2016; Greene et al., 2018). The structured exposure to socio-legal cases appears to have created conditions in which students were repeatedly required to confront uncertainty and justify interpretive decisions.

The integration of Muslim women's lived legal experiences further strengthened this epistemic shift. By situating abstract legal principles within real social contexts, the cases required students to consider the relationship between doctrine and lived reality. This not only deepened analytical reasoning but also introduced an ethical dimension to critical thinking, as students were prompted to consider the implications of legal structures on marginalized individuals (Shachar, 2001; Ahmed, 1992).

To avoid a possible misunderstanding, the study uses terms such as judgment, interpretation, and decision in a strictly educational and analytical sense. The intervention did not ask students to sit in review of actual judgments, decide legal rights, pronounce which court or legal system should prevail, or determine the legality of specific outcomes. Students analyzed pedagogically adapted case materials to practice source-based interpretation, recognition of ambiguity, and justification of claims while also recognizing the limits of their legal expertise.

4.5. *The Role of Scaffolded Progression in Skill Development*

The instructional design of the intervention also appears to have played a significant role in shaping outcomes. The scaffolded progression from guided analysis to independent reasoning reflects established principles of cognitive apprenticeship and structured learning development (Collins et al., 1989). Early modeling of analytical processes helped students internalize expectations for argument structure and evidence use, while later phases encouraged independent application and synthesis.

This gradual release of responsibility likely contributed to the observed improvements in argumentation and legal reasoning. Rather than being expected to perform complex reasoning immediately, students were given repeated opportunities to practice and refine their skills across multiple cases. The iterative nature of the module may therefore be understood as a key mechanism through which cognitive development was supported.

In this sense, the findings suggest that it is not case-based learning alone that drives improvement, but rather also the structured sequencing of cognitive demands over time.

Similarly, independent reasoning in the module means analytically supported autonomy within a supervised learning task. It does not mean that students acquire institutional authority to overrule courts or to resolve contested questions of family law. The scaffolded progression is intended to prevent lay adjudication by anchoring discussion in evidence, relevant legal concepts, instructor guidance, and explicit acknowledgment of what a short undergraduate module cannot settle.

4.6. *Pedagogical Implications for Higher Education*

The results of the study have several implications for teaching and curriculum design in higher education. First, they suggest that integrating legally and socially complex cases into coursework can significantly enhance students' ability to engage in higher-order reasoning. This is particularly relevant for disciplines such as law, education, political science, sociology, and ethics, where students are regularly required to evaluate competing interpretations and navigate ambiguity.

These implications must be stated carefully. The study does not suggest that non-law students can acquire advanced legal competence through a short intervention, nor that complex questions of marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody, and minority accommodation can be fully resolved in a general undergraduate course. It also does not invite students to rehear, reverse, or morally invalidate actual judicial decisions. Rather, the findings indicate that carefully selected and scaffolded socio-legal cases can help students practice transferable forms of critical thinking: identifying issues, comparing frameworks, recognizing ambiguity, weighing evidence, and justifying conclusions. The educational value of the module therefore lies in its contribution to interpretive judgment and civic-ethical reasoning, not in replacing doctrinal legal education, professional legal judgment, or judicial authority.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of structured scaffolding in case-based instruction. Simply presenting students with complex cases is not sufficient; instructional design must include guided modeling, progressive complexity, and opportunities for reflection in order to maximize learning outcomes.

Third, the study suggests that incorporating real-world socio-legal contexts—particularly those involving marginalized groups—can deepen both cognitive engagement and ethical awareness. This aligns with broader arguments in higher education literature that emphasize the role of socially relevant content in fostering meaningful and transformative learning experiences (Mezirow, 1997; Nussbaum, 2010).

4.7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the promising findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study employed a one-group pre-test/post-test design without a control group, which limits the ability to attribute observed gains exclusively to the intervention. External factors, including concurrent coursework or maturation effects, cannot be fully ruled out, although the relatively short duration of the intervention mitigates this concern to some extent.

A further caution concerns the politically and normatively sensitive character of the subject matter. Cases involving gender, religion, minority accommodation, and family law can invite ideological overgeneralization if they are not carefully framed. The module therefore requires explicit instructor guidance, attention to evidence, and safeguards against stereotyping Muslim women, Islamic law, or minority communities. Future studies should examine how different facilitation strategies affect students' ability to engage critically without reproducing cultural essentialism or politicized simplification.

Additionally, the sample was drawn from a single course within a specific institutional and cultural context. This limits generalizability and suggests the need for replication in diverse educational settings. Future research should consider employing controlled or randomized designs where feasible, as well as larger and more heterogeneous samples.

The absence of systematic demographic data is a related limitation. Students' prior exposure to Arab culture, familiarity with religious law, political orientation, religiosity, socioeconomic background, gender, and linguistic background may all affect how they interpret legally plural cases. Because these variables were not measured, the study cannot determine whether particular subgroups benefited more strongly from the intervention or whether some forms of prior knowledge influenced baseline performance. Future research should collect and report these variables and, where sample size permits, examine their relationship to changes in critical thinking performance.

Another limitation relates to the duration of the intervention. The study captured short-term gains over four weeks, but it remains unclear whether these improvements in critical thinking are sustained over time. Longitudinal studies with delayed post-tests would be valuable in addressing this question.

Finally, future research should seek to isolate which specific components of case-based socio-legal pedagogy—such as case complexity, discussion structure, or reflective writing—contribute most strongly to different dimensions of critical thinking.

4.8. Summary of Theoretical Contribution

In sum, the present study contributes to the literature on critical thinking and higher education by demonstrating that socio-legal case-based pedagogy, particularly in contexts of legal pluralism, can significantly enhance students' higher-order reasoning skills. The findings extend existing research by showing that complexity and normative plurality are not obstacles to learning but rather essential conditions for cognitive development when supported by appropriate instructional design.

More broadly, the study suggests that critical thinking is most effectively developed not through abstraction alone, but through engagement with structured, real-world complexity that requires interpretation, comparison, and justification. Legal pluralism, in this sense, is not only a subject of study but also a pedagogical condition that actively shapes how students learn to think.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Summary of Core Findings

The study set out to examine the effectiveness of case-based socio-legal pedagogy in developing undergraduate students' critical thinking skills within a context of legal pluralism. Across a four-week instructional intervention, students demonstrated substantial and statistically significant improvements in argumentation, evaluation of multiple perspectives, and legal reasoning. These quantitative findings were supported by qualitative evidence indicating that students developed more structured argumentation, greater sensitivity to legal and normative ambiguity, and deeper engagement with competing interpretive frameworks.

Taken together, the results suggest that students did not merely improve in discrete skill areas but underwent a broader shift in how they approached complex socio-legal problems. Their reasoning evolved from descriptive and rule-recall approaches toward more interpretive, comparative, and justificatory modes of thinking. This transformation is particularly significant in higher education contexts where the ability to engage with uncertainty and complexity is a central learning outcome.

5.2. Contribution to Theory: Critical Thinking in Contexts of Complexity

The findings make a conceptual contribution to the literature on critical thinking by demonstrating that epistemic development is closely linked to engagement with structured complexity. Rather than treating critical thinking as a generic or decontextualized skill, the present study shows that it is most effectively cultivated when students are placed in learning environments that require them to navigate competing frameworks, ambiguous evidence, and multiple interpretive possibilities.

In this regard, the study extends existing scholarship by highlighting the role of legal pluralism as a pedagogical condition that actively supports cognitive development. The coexistence of Islamic law and civil law in the cases used created structured epistemic tension that required students to engage in comparison, evaluation, and justification. This suggests that plural normative environments may serve as particularly fertile contexts for fostering higher-order thinking, especially when combined with appropriate instructional scaffolding.

5.3. Recommendations for Teaching and Curriculum Development

The findings suggest several practical recommendations for educators seeking to strengthen critical thinking through case-based instruction. First, cases should be selected not only for their topical relevance but also for their capacity to expose students to ambiguity, competing perspectives, and socially embedded complexity. In this study, Muslim women's legal experiences in Israel served this function by linking abstract legal concepts to lived realities and requiring students to evaluate more than one normative framework.

Second, case-based pedagogy should be deliberately scaffolded. The progression from instructor-guided analysis to more independent reasoning appears to have helped students internalize analytical procedures before applying them autonomously. This suggests that complex cases are most pedagogically effective when accompanied by modeling, guided questioning, structured discussion, and opportunities for revision.

Third, reflective writing and dialogic engagement should be treated as integral components of the learning design rather than supplementary activities. By requiring students to articulate, compare, and justify their interpretations, these practices can support metacognitive awareness and deepen engagement with legal ambiguity.

These recommendations should be understood as relating to structured educational analysis, not to professional legal training, legal advice, or judicial decision-making. The value of the module lies in strengthening students' capacity for evidence-based reasoning, perspective-taking, and interpretive judgment under conditions of complexity.

5.4. Methodological Contributions and Implications

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of integrating quasi-experimental design with qualitative thematic analysis in order to capture both learning outcomes and cognitive processes. The combination of pre-test/post-test measurement with analysis of written and reflective work enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how learning occurred, not only whether it occurred.

The use of an analytic rubric with demonstrated inter-rater reliability further strengthens the study's contribution by illustrating a practical approach to assessing complex cognitive constructs such as critical thinking. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of triangulation in educational research, particularly when examining constructs that involve both performance and epistemic development.

5.5. Limitations and Cautions in Interpretation

While the findings are robust and consistent across quantitative and qualitative measures, several limitations must be acknowledged. The quasi-experimental design without a control group limits the ability to draw definitive causal conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the intervention. Although the magnitude of observed gains is substantial, alternative explanations such as maturation effects or concurrent learning experiences cannot be entirely excluded.

In addition, the study was conducted within a single course in a specific institutional and cultural context. This limits the generalizability of the findings and suggests the need for replication across different disciplines, institutions, and student populations. The relatively short duration of the intervention also limits conclusions regarding the long-term retention of critical thinking gains.

Future research should address these limitations by employing controlled or randomized designs where possible, extending the duration of interventions, and incorporating longitudinal follow-up assessments to determine the persistence of observed effects.

5.6. Directions for Future Research

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, there is a need to further investigate which specific components of case-based socio-legal pedagogy contribute most strongly to different dimensions of critical thinking. For example, future studies could isolate the effects of case complexity, peer discussion, reflective writing, and instructor scaffolding.

Second, future studies should also compare versions of the intervention that vary in the degree of legal complexity, amount of instructor scaffolding, and use of reflective writing. Such designs would help determine whether the observed gains are primarily attributable to case complexity, dialogic discussion, written reflection, or the interaction among these components.

Third, comparative studies across different disciplinary contexts would help determine whether the effects observed here are specific to socio-legal education or generalizable to other domains characterized by complexity and interpretive reasoning, such as ethics, education, or political science.

Fourth, longitudinal research designs would be valuable in assessing whether gains in critical thinking persist over time and whether they transfer to new contexts beyond the immediate instructional setting.

Finally, future work could further explore the ethical and civic dimensions of socio-legal pedagogy, particularly in relation to how engagement with marginalized groups' lived experiences shapes students' sense of responsibility and interpretive awareness.

5.7. Final Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the foregoing study demonstrates that case-based socio-legal pedagogy grounded in contexts of legal pluralism can play a significant role in fostering critical thinking in higher education. By engaging students with structured, real-world complexity drawn from Muslim women's legal experiences, the intervention created conditions in which higher-order reasoning skills could develop in a meaningful and measurable way.

More broadly, the findings suggest that critical thinking is not simply a transferable skill acquired through abstract instruction but a form of reasoning that is cultivated through sustained engagement with ambiguity, competing perspectives, and socially embedded problems. When supported by thoughtful instructional design, such engagement can transform how students understand knowledge, argumentation, and interpretation.

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