

Critical Thinking: Not all that critical

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Critical Thinking, unless you are a snarling pit bull of irrationality, is an infinitely glorious thing. Well, that's what our public schools are telling kids and parents. Critical Thinking is said to be synonymous with fairness, impartiality, science, logic, maturity, rationality, independence, enlightenment, and Being Like Al (Einstein).

If you read some of the literature on Critical Thinking, you will have the sense that you are being welcomed into a new religion. All pains and problems will be vanquished by this new and unique faith called Critical Thinking. In truth, that is a fairly accurate description of this highly popular and much promoted pedagogy.

Now, let's start looking at Critical Thinking as if we, in fact, are critical thinkers.

The first thing that would need to be stated is that Critical Thinking, after all is said and done, is merely endorsing the age-old values of being open-minded and willing to consider all the evidence. Pretty much, that's it.

But nobody disputes those virtues. So what are all the high-level educators going on about? What is all this hype and hoopla? When supposedly smart, enlightened people carry on as if they are tipsy on something, you should be on guard. Real critical thinking would dictate that, wouldn't it?

Critical Thinking basically says to be suspicious of everything, except the fad known as Critical Thinking. It is perhaps best understood as a new and watered-down version of an earlier fad called Deconstruction. That was just a fancy word for debunking. Basically, Deconstruction told college students to dismantle everything, everything except Deconstruction.

Yes, that's what we've got here, another oh-so-clever and highly selective way to encourage students to *épatez les bourgeois* and to tell Mom and Dad to take a hike.

After you strip away all the high-minded rhetoric, Critical Thinking is typically used to tell students that they should not trust conventional wisdom, tradition, religion, parents, and all that irrelevant, old-fashioned stuff.

Critical Thinking, somewhat surprisingly, also turns out to be highly contemptuous of facts and knowledge. The formulation in public schools goes like this: children must learn how to think, not what to think. WHAT is, of course, all the academic content and scholarly knowledge that schools used to teach.

Ahhh, now you may be having a glimmer of where this thing leads. "What" is out, excluded, delegitimized. Students exist in a perpetual state of "how." They evaluate information, they juggle information, they do just about every imaginable thing with information except know it, that is, make it their own.

Critical Thinking is very clear on this matter. Most facts are obsolete, they're in a state of flux, or they are readily available on the Internet. It all adds up to the same thing: students need not bother knowing any facts. You discuss them. You don't know them.

To the Education Establishment, knowledge is the perennial enemy for almost a century. To fight it, our top educators come up with one sophistry after another. Critical Thinking is the latest and perhaps slickest. Who will dare to say they are against Critical Thinking?

Critical Thinking, we are told, is mankind's highest activity. Critical Thinkers, it's repeated again and again, are a new and higher breed. They exist in a rarefied, perpetual state of HOW. They don't bother with WHAT.

Problem is, basic facts such as "Paris is the capital of France" are neither obsolete nor in the process of change. They are old reliables and need to be acquired. Facts are things you have in your head so you can discuss the evening news, European politics, or history. Critical Thinking says hell no to all that.

Critical Thinking is another of those alleged breakthroughs to enlightenment that sweep through our schools every few years. Textbooks must be thrown out, teachers must forget what they know,

education schools must be revamped, classrooms must be rearranged and restructured. Everything starts over in Year Zero, and everyone must serve the all-devouring needs of Critical Thinking. First step: don't bother teaching anything.

Critical Thinking, which claims to increase a child's intellectual sophistication, is actually used to keep the child in a state of perpetual ignorance and shallowness. They play with knowledge. They don't master it or acquire it.

Let's take the simplest examples. You want to learn to play the piano, to fly a plane, or to be a bartender. In every case, you have to start acquiring the facts and skills that go with these jobs. You can't sit around talking about the job in some abstract realm, or discussing how it must feel to be a pianist or a bartender.

The point is, you have to get your hands dirty in the actual knowledge of the world, of the field, of the discipline. It's only when you know a lot of basic information that you could actually engage in genuine critical thinking.

Take something as complex as a war or as simple as a poem. It's only when you know lots of specifics about several wars or a group of poems that you can start making smart comments. You can compare and contrast. You can rank. You can play armchair general or be a literary critic. At this point you are actually engaged in real critical thinking. But Critical Thinking forecloses this possibility because students are told not to learn the basic facts.

Do you think I exaggerate? Consider what a schoolteacher wrote of his experiences in California's public schools:

"It seemed that memorization of the times tables damaged a child's ability to do critical thinking in math, that, for older kids, concepts like measuring one's distance from a celestial object using parallax should never be taught, rather children should 'discover' or 'construct' it for themselves (an approach called 'constructivism'), again to preserve 'critical thinking skills'....

"I was directed in no uncertain terms to immediately cease all instruction in phonics, spelling and grammar, as these would -- you guessed it -- destroy all hope of reading with critical thinking skills."

That's what I meant by the all-devouring needs of Critical Thinking. Note that anything the child actually learns or knows will get in the way of the true goal, Critical Thinking. Students must essentially be ignorant primitives, as they struggle to reinvent language and math for themselves. (Here you see that Critical Thinking aligns perfectly with the other big fad, Constructivism.)

Here's some puffery from a site devoted to the techniques of Critical Thinking:

"Socrates established the fact that one cannot depend upon those in 'authority' to have sound knowledge and insight. He demonstrated that persons may have power and high position and yet be deeply confused and irrational. He established the importance of asking deep questions that probe profoundly into thinking before we accept ideas as worthy of belief."

For me, that's priceless. These poor sophists, unable to think critically, don't see that their pretext for Critical Thinking should first be applied to themselves. Are they not persons with power and high position who may well be deeply confused and irrational? Have they really asked the deeper questions and probed profoundly?

No. That's why they keep coming up with cynical education ideas that sabotage education.

Sure, I'm prejudiced. But I suspect this essay is a better example of critical thinking than Critical Thinking is.

You don't need to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. The Education Establishment wants to create content-light, always politically correct, almost fact-free schools. Then they'll jury-rig "alternative assessment techniques" that give nearly every student a high grade. They'll do that with big, impressive-sounding but ultimately not very substantial "projects." Parents will be told that their children are learning the "critical thinking skills" vital for "success in the 21st century." For example, what should students do if they see pollution in a nearby lake? Report it the proper authorities. Use the internet to find out more about the factory on this lake. Start a pollution awareness campaign. Support the Green candidate in the

next election. That's good "critical thinking," so the students get an A. Which is not to say the students are educated.

The Bigger Picture

The greatest enemy of real critical thinking has not been mentioned. Our public schools have embraced an ethos of imprecision. Close answers count. Sometimes correct answers don't count (students are graded on explaining the process). In many situations, students are encouraged to guess. Correct grammar and spelling are not considered important. Throughout the system, under one pretext or another, FUZZINESS is the name of the game. Fuzzy anything is the opposite of critical anything. That the same people who accept all this fuzziness would turn around and embrace genuine critical thinking seems unlikely. (On the contrary, we would anticipate their coming up with a half-hearted, ultimately fake attempt.) QED: if you want students to be capable of critical thinking, we would first throw out the sloppy-fuzzy-mushy mentality. From the earliest grades, children would learn to be precise and to enjoy this. That's the normal approach, since the beginning of history, in every good school.

ADDENDA

Notes from the Real World

"I'm a 7th grade teacher in Los Angeles, and we are constantly under pressure to teach the kids 'not what to think but how to think.' Sure, but they need some material to start with, and most of them right now have nothing in their heads but Lady Gaga, Family Guy, and YouTube videos of kids falling off skateboards or beating each other up."

The pretentiousness is a giveaway

From the web:

"The intellectual roots of critical thinking are as ancient as its etymology, traceable, ultimately, to the teaching practice and vision of Socrates 2,500 years ago who discovered by a method of probing questioning that people could not rationally justify their confident claims to knowledge. Confused meanings, inadequate evidence, or

self-contradictory beliefs often lurked beneath smooth but largely empty rhetoric....

"Socrates set the agenda for the tradition of critical thinking, namely, to reflectively question common beliefs and explanations, carefully distinguishing those beliefs that are reasonable and logical from those which — however appealing they may be to our native egocentrism, however much they serve our vested interests, however comfortable or comforting they may be — lack adequate evidence or rational foundation to warrant our belief."

No logic, no reasoning

It seems to me that if you really wanted to teach someone critical thinking, the first thing you would do is to teach them basic logic and elementary reasoning. You would read Aesop's fables. You would have fun with riddles. You would discuss mazes, optical illusions, paradoxes, the simplest syllogisms. The most elementary stuff could be used to warm up these young minds and get them used to the idea that there is a better way to go from A to B. Little by little, you could introduce the idea of the hypothesis, the thought experiment, the scientific method, the concept of evidence, and the notion of proof.

Another fruitful area is maxims and clichés, albeit often sneered at. Why does a rolling stone gather no moss? What does it mean to say a stitch in time saves nine? Or, that a fool and his money are soon parted? This stuff is the collected wisdom of the human race. It is philosophy being born.

Critical Thinking, as hailed in public schools, does not bother with any of this material, much of which is totally fascinating to people of all ages. Critical Thinking, as hailed in public schools, is much more shallow and superficial. It's sort of a checklist for polite discussion and good study practices.

Consider these injunctions from a Critical Thinking website:

"Students should be routinely called upon to: Summarize or put into their own words what the teacher or another student has said. Relate the issue or content to their own knowledge and experience. Give examples to clarify or support what they have said. Make connections between related concepts. Restate the instructions or assignment in their own words. State the question at issue.

Describe to what extent their point of view on the issue is different from or similar to the point of view of the instructor, other students, the author, etc. Take a few minutes to write down any of the above. Write down the most pressing question on their mind at this point. The instructor then uses the above tactics to help students reason through the questions. Discuss any of the above with a partner and then participate in a group discussion facilitated by the instructor."

This is all good stuff but sort of basic, wouldn't you say? You could keep kids busy all day, all week, all year, talking about some story in the newspaper, carefully following these guidelines, and at the end, they wouldn't necessarily know anything more about the world than at the beginning.

That, as well as I can say it, is my main grievance against so-called Critical Thinking. It seems to be not a way to acquire knowledge but a substitute for acquiring knowledge.

Critical Thinking, by Moore and Parker

This is one of many books with similar titles competing for the college market. This is a vast tome with almost 500 pages, and the first thing a real critical thinker would think is: OVERKILL.

Here are the two most relevant paragraphs from my review on Amazon:

"My first thought is that anyone smart enough to grasp all this commentary does not need this book. The people who do need this book first need a 40-page summary of the main points. (This book practices what Reform Math calls "spiraling," a vicious little idea that says if you cover something 18 times from different directions, at the end you will finally have mastered it. No, often you're just more confused than ever.)

"My second thought is that I want to know what this book is displacing--what course, what foreign language, what body of knowledge. I have grown to distrust the motives behind so-called 'critical thinking.' In lower grades, kids are told to think deeply about things they know nothing about. In college, a scatter-shot course like this steers students away from learning some more solid subject, such as history, philosophy, science, or anthropology. The smartest thing in the book is on page 11: 'having a reservoir of

information in your head helps to avoid being misled.' Well, that's my big theme. Isn't it obvious that spending time on this course will guarantee that no such reservoir is ever accumulated?"

I see that I suggested a "40-page summary." Truth is, that's still way too much. Even on the college level, it would be better to have 20 pages of really distilled wisdom. Younger kids, on the first pass, should start with five pages. The essence of real critical thinking is to cut to the heart and core of things, to immediately put your finger on the word or phrase that is unclear or untrue. But this phony Critical Thinking is more like people discussing a chef's skill as they enjoy a good meal. Oh, they're conspicuously busy and talkative but probably at the end no better at cooking than at the start.

Ideas for the classroom

1) LIES, DAMNED LIES, AND STATISTICS. The way our media use polls is an endless assault on truth, justice, and common sense. Polls are rigged ("weighted") to get certain results, and then the desired result is turned into a media story. If you want a poll to show support for your candidate, go to neighborhoods that tend to have the sort of people who support him/her. Such shenanigans should be subjected to real critical thinking. (This device is called messing with the sampling pool. Not explaining it to students is called dumbing down.)

2) WHAT DO THE RESULTS EVEN MEAN? We've seen it a hundred times. 40% support the president's handling of X, perhaps a war, while 60% DISAPPROVE, which is trumpeted. Let's break it down. What do the 60% disapprove of?? Typically, a big group will be mad because the president is doing TOO MUCH, but another big group might be mad because the president is NOT DOING ENOUGH. They might almost cancel each other out, but the media will make it seem that 60% are AGAINST X. Which is just a damned lie. You can often manipulate the results you get by the questions you ask, and how you choose to interpret the answers that people give. (This is called rigging the poll.)

3) WHAT'S UP WITH THAT? For several years, the president said he didn't have the document that most people called a birth certificate (it lists height, weight, a doctor, etc.), and even if it was in Hawaii somewhere, state laws prevented his getting it. But most Americans have obtained copies of their birth certificate, easily, routinely. The president has travelled a great deal for decades; he must have a passport--how did he get that without a birth certificate? A real media

would ask. Then in 2011, he magically presented the document that he said didn't exist. Why would he stall for three years and hurt himself in the polls if he had it all along? Any teacher claiming to teach critical thinking would want to discuss the president's odd cover stories. Were there any such teachers? My impression is that Critical Thinking is normally used with great care to target non-PC views. If this is true, then Critical Thinking is not an actual pedagogy; it's simply another small branch of Social Studies, which is usually pushing an agenda.