

**ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH PROBLEM-BASED  
LEARNING**

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***Abstract:*** *Critical thinking is essential to effective learning and productive living. Since critical thinking can be defined in a number of different ways consistent with each other, we should not put a lot of weight on any one definition. Definitions are at best scaffolding for the mind. Critical thinking is thinking about humans thinking while they are thinking in order to make thinking better. Two things are crucial: critical thinking is not just thinking, but thinking which entails self-improvement; this improvement comes from skill in using standards by which one appropriately assesses thinking.*

***Key words:*** *Critical thinking, enhancing, task based learning, tool, aspects, goals.*

Critical thinking is the study of clear and unclear thinking. It is primarily used in the field of education, and not in psychology, because it does not refer to a theory of thinking. Benjamin Bloom's contribution for the development of Critical Thinking for academic purposes was grate. Bloom's taxonomy was first developed in 1956 by a group of educational psychologists headed by Benjamin Bloom. Since that time it has been utilized by teachers in the presentation of curriculum. In 2001, Bloom's taxonomy underwent some modifications by educators, L.W. Anderson and D.R. Krathwohl. Although these educators changed the vocabulary, the underlying intent remains the same and is still used by teachers to encourage critical thinking and learning in the classroom. Researchers Teresa, Annie and Grahamster say that our thinking can only be effective if it is based on reality. Reality is objective it exists independently of your desires, wishes, whims, and objectives. Your thinking will be productive to the extent



that you are able to accurately perceive and interpret this reality. This requires objectivity—the ability to separate "what is" from what you might want to believe or what might be more comforting to believe. A closed mind is cut off from reality. The closed mind thinker can easily be recognized; he or she has a rigid set of opinions and attitudes that are not open to discussion. Such a thinker cannot be reasoned with, since this process involves processing new input. If you feel as if you are talking to a brick wall, you are probably dealing with a closed mind thinker. However, being open minded does not mean that you should not stand by the truth as you know it, or that you must accept every point of view. Truth will withstand questioning; only illusion is threatened by the exchange of thought.

An entrepreneur and veteran journalist Jen Saunders writes that if one hasn't developed any critical thinking skills, he or she won't get too far in college. Academics orchestrate the way in which people research and write at the college and university levels. Critical thinking skills help to promote respect for truth and knowledge within the folds of scholarship. Critical thinking skills not only stand behind a set of principles, they also make people successful in their ability to grasp and comprehend academic subjects at higher levels. Flynn (1989) describes an instructional model for problem solving which promotes analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of ideas. She states that, "when we ask students to analyze we expect them to clarify information by examining the component parts. Beck (1989) adopts a similar perspective, using the term "reasoning" to imply higher order thinking skills.

To put it briefly, it is self-improvement (in thinking) through standards (that assess thinking). To think well is to impose discipline and restraint on our thinking-by means of intellectual standards — in order to raise our thinking to a level of "perfection" or quality that is not natural or likely in undisciplined, spontaneous thought. The dimension of critical thinking least understood is that of "intellectual standards." Most teachers were not taught how to assess thinking through standards; indeed, often the thinking of teachers themselves is very "undisciplined" and reflects a lack of internalized intellectual standards. One of the most important distinctions that teachers need to routinely make, and which takes disciplined thinking to make, is that



between reasoning and subjective reaction. If we are trying to foster quality thinking, we don't want students simply to assert things; we want them to try to reason things out on the basis of evidence and good reasons. Often, teachers are unclear about this basic difference. Many teachers are apt to take student writing or speech which is fluent and witty or glib and amusing as good thinking. They are often unclear about the constituents of good reasoning. Hence, even though a student may just be asserting things, not reasoning things out at all, if she is doing so with vivacity and flamboyance, teachers are apt to take this to be equivalent to good reasoning.

This was made clear in a recent state-wide writing assessment in which teachers and testers applauded a student essay, which they said illustrated "exceptional achievement" in reasoned evaluation, an essay that contained no reasoning at all, that was nothing more than one subjective reaction after another. The assessing teachers and testers did not notice that the student failed to respond to the directions, did not support his judgment with reasons and evidence, did not consider possible criteria on which to base his judgment, did not analyze the subject in the light of the criteria, and did not select evidence that clearly supported his judgment. Instead the student: described an emotional exchange; asserted-without evidence-some questionable claims; expressed a variety of subjective preferences. The assessing teachers were apparently not clear enough about the nature of evaluative reasoning or the basic notions of criteria, evidence, reasons, and well-supported judgment to notice the discrepancy. The result was, by the way, that a flagrantly mis-graded student essay was showcased nationally, systematically misleading the 150,000 or so teachers who read the publication. If a teachers are familiar with any thinking skills programs, they should ask someone knowledgeable about it the "Where's the beef?" question. Namely, "What intellectual standards does the program articulate and teach?" we think you will first find that the person is puzzled about what you mean. And then when you explain what you mean, we think you will find that the person is not able to articulate any such standards. Thinking skills programs without intellectual standards are tailor-made for mis-instruction. For example, one of the major programs asks teachers to encourage students to make inferences and use analogies, but is silent about how to teach students





to assess the inferences they make and the strengths and weaknesses of the analogies they use. This misses the point. The idea is not to help students to make more inferences but to make sound ones, not to help students to come up with more analogies but with more useful and insightful ones. Only with quality long-term staff development that helps the teachers, over an extended period of time, over years not months, to work on their own thinking and come to terms with what intellectual standards are, why they are essential, and how to teach for them. There are many areas of concern in instruction, not just one, not just critical thinking, but communication skills, problem solving, creative thinking, collaborative learning, self-esteem, and so forth. Everything essential to education supports everything else essential to education. It is only when good things in education are viewed superficially and wrongly that they seem disconnected, a bunch of separate goals, a conglomeration of separate problems, like so many bee-bees in a bag. In fact, any well-conceived program in critical thinking requires the integration of all of the skills and abilities you mentioned above. Hence, critical thinking is not a set of skills separable from excellence in communication, problem solving, creative thinking, or collaborative learning, nor is it indifferent to one's sense of self-worth. We think critically when we have at least one problem to solve. One is not doing good critical thinking, therefore, if one is not solving any problems. If there is no problem there is no point in thinking critically. The "opposite" is also true. Uncritical problem solving is unintelligible. There is no way to solve problems effectively unless one thinks critically about the nature of the problems and of how to go about solving them. Thinking our way through a problem to a solution, then, is critical thinking, not something else. Furthermore, critical thinking, because it involves our working out afresh our own thinking on a subject, and because our own thinking is always a unique product of our self-structured experience, ideas, and reasoning, is intrinsically a new "creation", a new "making", a new set of cognitive and affective structures of some kind. All thinking, in short, is a creation of the mind's work, and when it is disciplined so as to be well-integrated into our experience, it is a new creation precisely because of the inevitable novelty of that integration. And when it helps us to solve problems that we could not solve before, it is surely properly called "creative".



The "making" and the "testing of that making" are intimately interconnected. In critical thinking we make and shape ideas and experiences so that they may be used to structure and solve problems, frame decisions, and, as the case may be, effectively communicate with others. The making, shaping, testing, structuring, solving, and communicating are not different activities of a fragmented mind but the same seamless whole viewed from different perspectives. Some communication is surface communication, trivial communication -surface and trivial communication don't really require education. All of us can engage in small talk, can share gossip. And we don't require any intricate skills to do that fairly well. Where communication becomes part of our educational goal is in reading, writing, speaking and listening. These are the four modalities of communication which are essential to education and each of them is a mode of reasoning. Each of them involves problems. Each of them is shot through with critical thinking needs. Take the apparently simple matter of reading a book worth reading. The author has developed her thinking in the book, has taken some ideas and in some way represented those ideas in extended form. Our job as a reader is to translate the meaning of the author into meanings that we can understand. This is a complicated process requiring critical thinking every step along the way.

What is the purpose for the book?

What is the author trying to accomplish?

What issues or problems are raised?

How is the author thinking about the world?

What data, what experiences, what evidence are given?

What concepts are used to organize this data, these experiences?

Is her thinking justified as far as we can see from our perspective?

And how does she justify it from her perspective?

How can we enter her perspective to appreciate what she has to say?

All of these are the kinds of questions that a critical reader raises. And a critical reader in this sense is simply someone trying to come to terms with the text. So if one is an uncritical reader, writer, speaker, or listener, one is not a good reader, writer, speaker, or listener at all. To do any of these well is to think critically while doing so



and, at one and the same time, to solve specific problems of communication, hence to effectively communicate. Communication, in short, is always a transaction between at least two logics. In reading, as we have said, there is the logic of the thinking of the author and the logic of the thinking of the reader. The critical reader reconstructs (and so translates) the logic of the writer into the logic of the reader's thinking and experience. This entails disciplined intellectual work. The end result is a new creation; the writer's thinking for the first time now exists within the reader's mind. Healthy self-esteem emerges from a justified sense of self-worth, just as self-worth emerges from competence, ability, and genuine success. If one simply feels good about oneself for no good reason, then one is either arrogant (which is surely not desirable) or, alternatively, has a dangerous sense of misplaced confidence. Teenagers, for example, sometimes think so well of themselves that they operate under the illusion that they can safely drive while drunk or safely take drugs. They often feel much too highly of their own competence and powers and are much too unaware of their limitations. To accurately sort out genuine self-worth from a false sense of self-esteem requires, yes you guessed it, critical thinking. Collaborative learning is desirable only if grounded in disciplined critical thinking. Without critical thinking, collaborative learning is likely to become collaborative mis-learning. It is collective bad thinking in which the bad thinking being shared becomes validated. Remember, gossip is a form of collaborative learning; peer group indoctrination is a form of collaborative learning; mass hysteria is a form of speed collaborative learning (mass learning of a most undesirable kind). We learn prejudices collaboratively, social hates and fears collaboratively, stereotypes and narrowness of mind, collaboratively. If we don't put disciplined critical thinking into the heart and soul of the collaboration, we get the mode of collaboration which is antithetical to education, knowledge, and insight. So there are a lot of important educational goals deeply tied into critical thinking just as critical thinking is deeply tied into them. To reach these ends, the mind must be more than curious, it must be willing to work, willing to suffer through confusion and frustration, willing to face limitations and overcome obstacles, open to the views of others, and willing to entertain ideas that many people find threatening. That is, there is no point in our trying to model and





encourage curiosity, if we are not willing to foster an environment in which the minds of our students can learn the value and pain of hard intellectual work. We do our students a disservice if we imply that all we need is unbridled curiosity, that with it alone knowledge comes to us with blissful ease in an atmosphere of fun, fun, fun. What good is curiosity if we don't know what to do next or how to satisfy it? We can create the environment necessary to the discipline, power, joy, and work of critical thinking only by modeling it before and with our students. They must see our minds at work. Our minds must stimulate theirs with questions and yet further question; questions that probe information and experience; questions that call for reasons and evidence; questions that lead students to examine interpretations and conclusions, pursuing their basis in fact and experience; questions that help students to discover their assumptions, questions that stimulate students to follow out the implications of their thought, to test their ideas, to take their ideas apart, to challenge their ideas, to take their ideas seriously. It is in the totality of this intellectually rigorous atmosphere that natural curiosity thrives. The fundamental characteristic of the world students now enter is ever-accelerating change; a world in which information is multiplying even as it is swiftly becoming obsolete and out of date; a world in which ideas are continually restructured, retested, and rethought; where one cannot survive with simply one way of thinking; where one must continually adapt one's thinking to the thinking of others; where one must respect the need for accuracy and precision and meticulousness; a world in which job skills must continually be upgraded and perfected — even transformed. We have never had to face such a world before.

In Conclusion education has never before had to prepare students for such dynamic flux, unpredictability, and complexity for such ferment, tumult, and disarray. We as educators are now on the firing line. These are profound challenges to the profession. They call upon us to do what no previous generation of teachers was ever called upon to do. Those of us willing to pay the price will yet have to teach side by side with teachers unwilling to pay the price. This will make our job even more difficult, but not less exciting, not less important, not less rewarding. Critical thinking is the heart of well-conceived educational reform and restructuring, because it is at the



heart of the changes of the 21st Century. Let us hope that enough of us will have the fortitude and vision to grasp this reality and transform our lives and our schools accordingly.

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