




Critical thinking: an exploration of the nature and pedagogy



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Aim

- To demonstrate why critical thinking is an elusive concept and to suggest helpful perspectives that further imply pedagogy



What I will cover:

- Some general issues of vocabulary
- Reasons why critical thinking is elusive:
 - approaches to critical thinking
 - different activities of critical thinking
- The significance of epistemological development for critical thinking
- Bringing a depth dimension to critical thinking
- And maybe....
 - Critical thinking and the person
 - Cultural issues and critical thinking
 - A 'definitional statement' on critical thinking



The vocabulary of critical thinking

- Thinking and the representation of thinking
- Thinking and action on the thinking...
- Critical thinking and other words



Critical thinking and other words

The word 'critical' may be added to any of the words below....

understanding
appraisal
analysis
evaluation
management
care
action

reflection
review
interpretation
appreciation
awareness
being
practice



Some different approaches to critical thinking in the literature

Critical thinking is considered:

- in terms of logic
- as a sequence of stages or as components that are usually identified as skills
- in pedagogical terms
- developmentally
- as an acquired disposition towards all knowledge and action



The activities to which critical thinking applies

- Review of someone else's argument
- The evaluation of an object
- The development of an argument
- Critical thinking about the self
- Critical thinking about an incident
- Engage in the constructive response to the arguments of others
- A habit of engagement with the world

Some common sense thinking :

- Critical thinking is close to learning but not learning as such
- It often implies re-processing of something learnt in order to learn more (ie reflection)
- it deals with complex ideas - not simple ones
- it implies taking a deep approach not surface
- we critically think about something and expect an outcome - there is an aim, a sense of direction
- In good quality critical thinking there is reflexivity - it involves consideration of our own processes
- There are other factors to consider – eg creativity, emotion, culture.



However – what of depth, quality and the developmental perspective on critical thinking?:

A diversion to look at research on epistemological development. I draw on:

- Perry (1970)
- Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986)
- King and Kitchener (1994)
- Baxter Magolda (1992 - and her later work)
- Lucas



I generalise on the findings from epistemological studies

- They see epistemological development as occurring in stages
- there are/should be significant changes to a student's quality of thinking during a period of higher education
- there are remarkable similarities between the studies



Implications of epistemological development for critical thinking

- True critical thinking may not be possible for those at stage of absolute knowing - *if a learner can only see facts as facts, then there is no need for justification*
- If critical thinking might parallel epistemological development then we can deal with both together



Shifts that describe the differences between superficial and deep critical thinking (1)

- From description of surface issues to text shaped by the critical thinking process; little focus to focus;
- From absence of argument and comparison to presence of both;
- From dealing with surface characteristics of words/ ideas to deep consideration, including attention to assumptions;
- From no questions, to asking questions to asking and answering questions (or responses implicit in the text);
- From not noticing or dealing with emotional issues to noticing, dealing with and reasoning about emotional aspects;



Shifts that describe the differences between superficial and deep critical thinking (2)

- From the giving of unjustified opinion as conclusion to the presentation of a considered conclusion based on evidence that is provided;
- From one dimension (no account of other possible perspectives) to recognition of other potential perspectives);
- From no recognition of the role of prior experience in influencing the thinking process, to its recognition;
- From a text in which there is drift from idea to idea to one in which there is a deliberated persistence in dealing with relevant issues (a writing style issue);
- From no metacognition/reflexivity to metacognition/reflexivity



To summarise: critical thinking considerations include

- The thinker's recognition of her emotions and relevant prior experiences;
- Her assertiveness (which can mean acknowledgement of mistakes);
- The quality of the reasoning
- The ability to organise thought, argument and evidence in text or language through clear thinking and metacognition;
- The taking account of a sufficiently broad view of the issue



Critical thinking involves

- The person
- Her perception of the requirements of the situation
- Her processes (innate and learnt)
- The ideas brought to the situation or available to it.

This is much broader than any of the individual 'approaches' listed earlier!



The person as a critical thinker

- Emotion and critical thinking
- Academic assertiveness



Emotion and thinking

- Emotion results from thinking
- is a block to thinking
- facilitates thinking
- is the subject matter of thinking
- arises unexpectedly during thinking
- there may be forms of emotional learning that are not accessible to language ('emotional insight')




A tentative definition of academic assertiveness


Academic assertiveness is a set of emotional and psychological orientations and behaviours that enables a learner to manage the challenges to self in progressing in learning, the environment of learning and critical thinking



Academic assertiveness includes:

- The finding of appropriate 'voice' or form of expression through which to engage in critical thinking or debate
- The willingness to challenge, to disagree and to seek or accept a challenge

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- The ability to cope with: the reality or likelihood of not being right sometimes, making an error or failing; effective recovery from these situations. Have an openness to feedback on one's performance (academic or otherwise).
 - Willingness to listen and take account of the viewpoint of others, awareness that others can make a mistake and reasonable tolerance of their failings.

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- **Autonomy** – a willingness to be proactive; to make and justify independent judgements and to act on them
 - **An appropriate level of self esteem.**



There is a cultural dimension to critical thinking: it is a product largely of Western education



Principles for supporting the development of critical thinking/epistemological development

- One person cannot make another think critically
- There are different strategies for support
- The functioning of learners is drawn towards contextual thinking by just challenging them beyond their 'comfort zone'
- Staff knowledge and epistemological development is significant
- The classroom atmosphere is important
- Critical thinking is 'nurtured' (Meyers 1987)