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## Teaching for Critical Thinking

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## Teaching for Critical Thinking

Two women were talking, and talking, and talking, and talking, and talking..... over the back fence. An observer observed, "They'll never agree, because they are arguing from different premises." I'm not sure who was doing the critical thinking, the women, the observer.....or you as you struggled to find the point of the joke.

Critical thinking is the kind of thinking that bears critically upon the processes by which the problems involved in worthy and fruitful living are brought to satisfactory solutions. Critically means importantly, significantly, meaningfully. Members of the panel have in the past two meetings, stressed the importance of identifying central issues, establishing relevance between these issues and pertinent facts, and overcoming or at least recognizing biases and prejudices in our attitudes toward both. Thus, they have pointed up the framework of educational problems and the frame of reference within which problem-solving activities may be carried on.

It may properly be questioned as to whether or not critical thinking can be taught. Surely, however, it may be fostered, cultivated, encouraged and guided. If we are to do this as teachers, a prime requisite is that we ourselves first engage in critical thinking. The degree of our proficiency in this respect is reflected to our students in the organization of our courses, the daily preparation for our classwork, the methods of presentation we use, and the general impact of how we solve our own problems.

A second requisite is that we teach so as to involve our students in problem-solving. Problem situations may be presented in the classroom or identified outside the classroom. In either case the students must recognize them as such and must be motivated to analyze the conditions, assemble the facts, evaluate them, and attempt solutions. Varying degrees of involvement may be achieved in different subject matter fields, and certain areas probably lend themselves more readily than others to this approach in the development of critical thinking.

A third suggestion toward teaching for this kind of thinking is the use of devices and techniques that make it necessary. Comparison and contrast of ideas, of people, of points of view, and of conclusions that others have written into the literature of the field will challenge the students to think like this. I often lead students to make a comparative study as a term paper or project rather than an analysis of one idea or person or subject. I help them select the topic and insist that this be done by the end of the 7th or 8th week of the semester. Then a bibliography is due two weeks later, a detailed outline of the paper two or three weeks after this, and about five weeks are left for the writing of the paper or for work on the project. I refuse to read a "term paper" that was thought up, thought out, and written up all in one night. When students report on collateral reading, it is not in terms of number of pages or of outlines of material read, but rather in the form of critical summaries. I explain at the beginning of the course that a critical summary is not necessarily a destructive criticism of the source read, but a somewhat evaluative and explanatory statement indicating that the reader understands what he has read and why he finds it helpful or otherwise and how he agrees or disagrees with it. The students find this difficult at first, but improve with about the sixth or eighth report.



A fourth suggestion is that in our testing we devise comprehensive questions. A comprehensive test has little to do with length or number of questions. Comprehensiveness is something about the nature of the questions. They are of a problem-solving type which make it necessary for the student to draw upon many aspects of the material covered by the course in order to answer the question satisfactorily. A comprehensive test may be limited in time to one period or a half-hour. Example:

You have the same opportunity that Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu had, but for you the curtain between the prologue and the rest of the book of Job has been raised and you have had the revelation of the entire book. You have one-half hour to talk to the sufferer. What will you say?

A fifth and last proposal is that students be led, or forced if necessary, to think in a given frame of reference. Most of life's problems are set within a frame of reference, and intelligent solutions are achieved within this set of bounds or limits. An example might be the current discussion of the class "cut" system and our attendance regulations. Some insist upon thinking of this in the larger framework of whether or not it is right to tell them what they must do and when, thus hampering them and transgressing their freedom. I insist that a frame of reference has already been set for our thinking about this matter and that we must recognize it, acknowledge it and bring our conclusions to bear upon it; this is what makes the thinking critical. Some aspects of this frame of reference are: (a) Colleges have found in the main, "that instructor and student can most efficiently pursue a course of study by exchanging questions, answers, and information in organized classes; (b) students have applied for admission to a program which provides the pattern for the achievement of a college education; (c) they have by this action implied that they have confidence in the pattern provided by this college and that they are willing to follow it; (d) they have been admitted in good faith with this agreement; (e) they have paid the fees for the privileges and benefits which are available to them through the program and facilities of the college...etc. Critical thinking is thinking which bears critically upon the considerations that constitute this frame of reference and leads to conclusions that are consistent with the goals which have now become our cooperative aims, theirs and ours.

Dr. Milo A. Rediger