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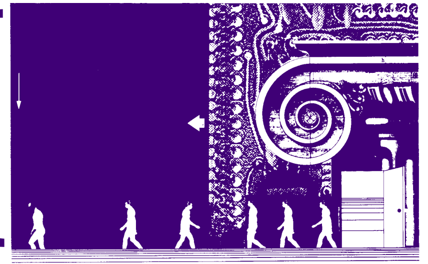

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Critical Thinking as an Exercise in Courage

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What is critical thinking, especially the "critical" half? Dictionaries present a rich variety of nuances in meaning, all of which shape the concept of critical thinking in the literature. Perhaps the plainest is "characterized by careful analysis" and its correlate "distinguished by fine details, discriminating." Definitions often equate "critical" with "important" as in "pertaining to a crisis, decisive, momentous" (e.g., "a critical time") and "important or essential to determining an outcome" (e.g., "a critical post").

Another definition of "critical"—one missing in the critical thinking literature—is "dangerous, perilous, risky, hazardous," as in "a critical undertaking." Yet this is precisely what critical thinking can be both for the students who meet the challenge and the faculty brave enough to offer it. Critical thinking demands that we "question authority," that we trade in our blind, childlike trust in institutions and leaders for the probing skepticism of the investigative reporter and the watchdog alertness of the reformer. We must confront authority with questions like these: "Why did you select this problem to solve over others? What alternative solutions did you consider? What possible solutions did you *not* consider, or discount? Who does and doesn't benefit from the solutions you offer?" And we must demand answers of authority, followed by discussions in which we continue to participate. Sounds radical, even perilous, doesn't it? Real democracy is. To work, it requires a critically thinking as well as courageous populace. It's mildly comforting to think that the growing emphasis on critical thinking is not modish pedagogical chatter, but an expression of enduring concern for the larger purposes of education in a free society.

Critical Thinking Enemy #1: Logical Fallacies

Authorities, would-be's and wanna-be's, including leaders of social change movements and corporate marketeers, don't always play fair and square, however. They may knowingly or unwittingly try to pass off pat answers with slippery statistics and oily arguments. This is why *the* ***first step*** *towards developing critical thinking is to learn and apply the rules of logic—in particular, to uncover the logical fallacies* that underlie so many political, ideological and advertising messages. No doubt you are

familiar with the basic fallacies—*non sequitur, ad hominem, straw man, begging the question, slippery slope, reification, post hoc ergo propter hoc,* and so on—but your students may not be. Introducing them to these terms and concepts can help establish an ethos of critical thinking at the outset. When students discover themselves and their peers falling into one of these fallacies,

> Reassessing beliefs and values demands unparalleled clarity about logical fallacies and *psycho*-logical fallacies.

at least they have a context in which to see their thinking, and this can lessen the fear of being ambushed that can inhibit discussion.

[A student handout listing 22 logical fallacies with brief definitions and another describing 15 psycho-logical fallacies are available to subscribers on the Forum's Web site—**http://www.ntlf.com**—or by calling 800-279-6799.]

Critical Thinking Enemy #2: *Psycho*-logical Fallacies

As perilous as questioning authority can be, it requires no more courage than simply trying to live "the examined life." Reassessing our own beliefs and values by the same logical and evidential yardsticks we apply to those of others demands unparalleled clarity: knowledge of both the logical and *psycho*-logical fallacies that can dampen our courage, distort the data of our everyday living and arrest the flow of our rational thought. We probably first encountered psychological fallacies under the name of "defensive mechanisms" in an introductory psychology course.

A few of these defense mechanisms have become familiar terms in ordinary conversation: *denial, projection, rationalization, repression, sublimation, transference.*

I haven't come across these psychological processes described in the critical thinking literature, but I strongly believe they belong in our understanding of fallacies in critical thinking. After all, they provide the breeding grounds for prejudice, bigotry, ethnocentrism, mindless acquiescence to authority, seemingly reckless, blind-sighted decision-making, an inability to distinguish fact from value, and an attachment to old beliefs, self-concepts and behaviors that don't work anymore. Further, these fallacies maintain the fear of engaging in the kind of critical thinking that might correct such misconceptions as well as other patterns of illogical thinking and feeling.

To the degree that we are unfamiliar with these fallacies, unaware of them in ourselves and unwilling to transcend them, we are incapable of sound self-examination. We face invisible blockades at every new turn. We may wallow in the cowardice of our unexamined convictions, never rising to the challenge of *self*-challenge and internal revision. If we do—if we allow our students to—we accept the unexamined life as worth living, something thinking souls have been unwilling to do at least since the time of Socrates.

Teachers of the Next Steps

*The **second step** towards developing critical thinking, then*—and one even more basic than the first—*is to strive for emotional health,* for freedom from our own defensive demons. This step is easier to describe than to take, to be sure. But we don't all need heavy therapy. We can take some time- and money-saving hints from writing-across-the-curriculum researchers, cooperative learning proponents and the vast array of self-help groups (e.g., AA, Emotions Anonymous, Eaters Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, AlAnon, etc.). These three resources offer tried-and-true formats and techniques for small classroom and even large lecture use.

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Editor's Note

The best sermon I've heard in my adult life drew on the passage in Luke where Jesus heals the ten lepers. Usually, clerics preach a simple lesson from the story: Count your blessings; remember to say thank you. But this day at Christ Presbyterian, the Rev. Stew Coffman turned that lesson inside out. What reasons might those nine have had for not pausing to say thank you? Of the nine imagined stories, I still remember the mother so long separated from her family that she could not contain her joy at the prospect of being reunited with them once more, could not tarry even to thank her healer.

I think of this sermon when I survey this issue. We learn a great deal when we try to see things from the other person's point of view. We see that we have made their errors and that they have insights we had not imagined. We see the likeness to ourselves and know that we can connect because, in fact, we are already connected. This is the hopeful view, of course, but it is what I see between the lines of this issue. I see it in **Linda Nilson's** fresh review of the pitfalls in critical thinking. They are not just deficiencies of the thinking mind, but of the feeling mind as well. Likewise, **Patricia Cranton's** suggestion that critical thinking works differently within less logical mind-sets less opens —to receptive teachers—the power of new tolerance and broader horizons.

If students resist our teaching, as we recall in revisiting **Stephen Brookfield's** thoughts on the subject in *The Skillful Teacher*, we also resist meeting students on their own terms. **John Downey's** report on his own practice suggests that even when we seem to loosen our grip in the classroom, our expert's experience can help us lead students into their own learning.

Lion Gardiner's ERIC Tracks column reports on 30 years of research showing where we really stand with regard to what we think we're doing and how we might begin to live up to our own aspirations. Lion's column is sober reading, but if you know him, you know that Lion is optimistic, believing that accumulated research makes the pathways of reform clear to the courageous and creative.

And finally, on a more homely note, I review two excellent videos on teaching large classes. When you look at these videos, you remember how very different communities can be even though they are in the same business and share many of the same ideas. Bloomington, Indiana and Provo, Utah both emerge as caring places to study, but we learn quite different lessons from the contrasts between the way they understand a common challenge.

The new look of this issue of ***The National Teaching and Learning Forum*** marks a rededication to expanded service for subscribers. We think putting the table of contents on the front page will help you survey new issues and locate material of particular interest more easily. But the new look is only the beginning. Subscribers will find expanded resources connected to three of the articles in this issue on the *Forum's* Web site (**www.ntlf.com**). Handouts from Linda Nilson, a copy of Patricia Cranton's learning profile inventory, and a variety of quick assessment tools from Lion Gardiner based on his exhaustive literature review. In time we hope to make the *Forum's* Web site into one of the most valuable resources on college teaching and learning on the Internet. Subscribers will always find added benefits, expansions of the newsletter for those who want and need them. I urge you to visit the site and send me your thoughts on what you'd like to find there. Enjoy your visit, post a message to the discussion forum, and remember, you don't always have to say thank you.

— James Rhem

Writing Across the Curriculum

Scholars of the writing process and writing across the curriculum tell us that writing focuses and sharpens thinking. If we want to know what we really believe and value, and what justifications we rely on, we should write them down, preferably in a "free write" so we can concentrate on honest content rather than style, grammar and the like. (Some popular beliefs emerging from academics—myself included—in such exercises are "Education enriches life" and "We can all transcend our negative socialization.") If we want *our students* to know what they really believe and value, and why, we should ask them to freely confront their own words. (Of course, free writes should never be subject to grades.)

Most people find this kind of free write tremendously informative. Some become aware of what they believe and value *for the first time*. Others question their beliefs as they write them down. A few discover they have no rationale for a belief at all, except the authority of a parent, teacher or childhood idol.

Of course, we who make a career out of writing know firsthand that we learn what we really want to say as we are attempting to write it. As we write, our minds stumble over new, unforeseen insights and implications. We suddenly see the need to digress and qualify along the road of our reasoning.

The great power of writing as a self-teaching device suggests *a* ***third step*** *towards developing critical thinking: to write down our thoughts and the reasoning behind them.* You will recall that this is a major step on our way to emotional health as well. After all, you can't diagnose, correct or improve what you don't know is there.

The Power of the Group

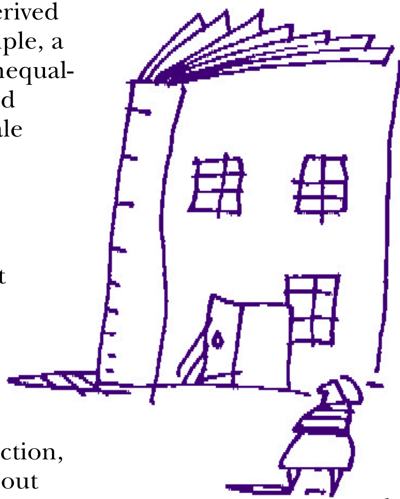
Still, once we learn what we think, we may not be emotionally or mentally ready to take it apart, at least not alone. Here, cooperative learning and self-help groups lead us over the hump and to *the* ***fourth step*** *towards developing critical thinking: Share your thoughts because others can*

help correct and enrich them. Or more generally put, two (or three or four) heads are better than one.

This is especially true when the other heads *care* that you progress, as they do in self-help and learning groups, in which members must work interdependently to achieve individual success.

Critical Thinking Enemy #3: Ideology and Relativism

In addition to logical and *psycho*-logical fallacies, critical thinking has two other enemies: ideology and relativism. To have an ideology (especially Ayn Rand's or Karl Marx's) was very fashionable in the late sixties and early seventies. It implied your thinking had internal consistency. Generally, however, ideology discourages, if not forbids, examining the component assumptions and derived positions. For example, a person who views inequality in class terms and endorses a large-scale redistribution of power, wealth and income might be predisposed to support other leftist ideological components—prohibition of capital punishment, gun control, abortion rights, affirmative action, speech codes—without analyzing these specific issues. In essence, ideological conformity can obscure the need for critical thinking.



From the other side, relativism undermines any reason for critical thinking. After all, if all philosophies or cultures are equally valid, any form of evaluation is elitist, racist, sexist and everything else that political correctness proscribes. Granted that undergraduates normally pass through a relativistic stage in their cognitive development, it is our job to help them step up to the next level. Our mission is more urgent than ever because certain brands of relativism are very fashionable on many campuses today.

We need to help students realize that not all cultures and philosophies present equally original, valid or useful insights. Not all promote justice, meritocracy, species survival, human resource development and utilization, mental health or quality of life. We must let students know that it's okay to evaluate, to judge. We must show them that what distinguishes critical thinking is that its analyses and evaluations are made with an open mind. In contrast, ideology and relativism appear to seek "the last word" on the subject.

The Rewards for Courage

When all is said and done, critical thinking pays off most handsomely in the way people lead their everyday lives. If life is a series of lessons, critical thinking helps us learn each lesson the first time around so we can more quickly progress to the next, often deeper, one. The rules of logic and evidence that we use to evaluate a political speech or a research paper are not much different from those we can and should use to analyze our own experience.

Turning to an example often familiar to emotionally turbulent undergraduates, let's say we are ending an intimate relationship. Our pain supplies the motivation to make sense out of it so we can learn to avoid a rerun. So we array all the possible reasons why things went wrong, drawing our data from our memory of feelings, statements our former partner made and the comments of trustworthy others. Then we categorize by responsibility: "mine," "his/hers," "nobody's—conditions changed." Under "mine" are our errors in judgment, well within our control not to repeat. "His/hers" are his/her problems, but we may be able to detect them in new people we meet before we get involved. And, yes, conditions do change, but perhaps we can learn to foresee and prepare for changes before they loom in our lives.

When we ask students to think critically, we must do nothing to foster the delusion that critical thinking is a useful trick to learn for school. We need to remember—and acknowledge to our students—that we are asking them to do more than merely exist. We are challenging them—in their lives and in their learning—to find the courage to be.

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