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Author(s): Thomas G. Devine

Source: *Peabody Journal of Education*, Vol. 39, No. 6 (May, 1962), pp. 359-365

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1490093>

Accessed: 29-09-2015 18:53 UTC

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Critical Thinking in the English Class

THOMAS G. DEVINE
Rhode Island College, Providence

The teaching of critical thinking has been in- and out-of-vogue for several decades. Through the years, many English teachers have accepted instruction in critical thinking as a legitimate component of the English program; they have attempted—by a variety of strategies—to induce their students to think “more clearly” or “more effectively” or, simply, “critically.” Some have designed skillful composition lessons which focused student attention upon certain aspects of problem-solving or critical thinking; some have created ingenious “thought-provoking” questions to accompany reading selections; some have cleverly structured class discussions in order to force students to react intelligently to significant issues. Other English teachers have attacked critical thinking more directly by constructing units around such topics as “Faulty Argumentation,” “Propaganda,” or “Straight and Crooked Thinking.” Others have prepared activities within units which were calculated to further student growth in specific critical thinking abilities. A few English teachers have set up rather elaborate programs in elementary logic and in semantics.

Much of the interest in critical thinking has been stimulated by curriculum guides and statements of educational objectives which make reference to “the development of clear and effective thinking.” The recent publication of the Educational Policies Commission of the National Education Association, *The Central Purpose of American Education*, has tended to generate considerable new interest in critical thinking, because “The central purpose of American education is,” according to the Commission, “the development of the ability to think.”¹

¹ Educational Policies Commission, National Education Association, *The Central Purpose of American Education* (National Education Association, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N. W., Washington, D. C., 1961).

Many English teachers, influenced by this important publication and by their own desire to encourage critical thinking in their students, are asking provocative questions about this stimulating and potentially rewarding area. Some ask, "Can we really teach critical thinking in the English class?" Others—who believe that critical thinking can be taught and that they have an obligation to teach it—ask, "Which of the many skills and abilities associated with critical thinking should we try to develop in our classes?" and "How can we fit lessons in critical thinking into an already over-crowded English program?"

It is the general intention of the present paper to point toward answers to these questions. Specifically, the paper has a three-fold purpose: (1) to suggest that it may not be possible to teach critical thinking directly; (2) to report the results of a survey made by the writer to discover which critical thinking skills and abilities are most significant and which could probably be taught most effectively in his junior high school English classes; and (3) to recommend a feasible approach to critical thinking which grew out of his attempts to teach critical thinking in his classes at the Winchester, Massachusetts, Junior High School.

Can We Teach Critical Thinking?

Before teachers plan exercises, lessons, units, or programs in critical thinking, they should be reminded that *critical thinking abilities are only postulates*. Investigators have, for purposes of discussion and analysis, isolated, defined, and listed as many as thirty, separate abilities, skills, and higher mental processes which seem to be associated with critical thinking.² Examples of such abilities are: (1) recognizing inferences; (2) evaluating the reliability of evidence; (3) distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant evidence; (4) recognizing insufficient evidence; (5) distinguishing between weak and strong arguments; (6) distinguishing between fact and opinion; (7) distinguishing between the affective and informative connotations of language; and (8) recognizing the assumptions implied by a statement.

It should be noted that these abilities, *as they stand*, are "mental

² Harold L. Herber, *An Inquiry into the Effect of Instruction in Critical Thinking upon Students in Grades 10, 11 and 12*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, 1959.

constructs,” postulated for the convenience of the investigator or researcher. The teacher can teach *about* these critical thinking abilities, but he cannot directly provide for growth in them. In summarizing the present state of investigation of the critical thinking process, it may be said that the process seems to be a composite of as many as thirty, separate abilities, that these abilities remain, at the present time, postulates or mental constructs, and that they are affected in operation by attitudes.

Fortunately, it is very often possible to see these abilities function, because almost all of the postulated critical thinking abilities function in a verbal setting, and most of them can be taught as language abilities. It may only be possible to postulate a critical thinking ability, but it is possible to teach a corresponding critical *reading* or critical *listening* ability. For example, “the ability to recognize an inference” is a mental construct, postulated by investigators, but “the ability to recognize a *writer’s* inferences” is a teachable critical reading ability just as “the ability to recognize a *speaker’s* inferences” is a teachable critical listening ability.

“Can we teach critical thinking in the *English* class?” teachers have asked. If one accepts the point of view suggested here, the answer would be negative. The English teacher may teach *about* critical thinking, to be sure, but there is no evidence that teaching about critical thinking will make students think critically. However, most of the critical thinking abilities which investigators have isolated for purposes of analysis and research do have counterparts in the areas of critical reading and critical listening, so that a teacher who wishes to develop critical thinking abilities in his students may, with some confidence, proceed to develop corresponding critical reading and critical listening abilities.

Which Abilities Shall We Teach?

If there are approximately thirty different critical thinking skills and abilities, then the teacher who wants to provide instruction in critical thinking-reading-listening must ask two basic questions before planning a program of instruction: (1) Which of these abilities are the most important? and (2) Which can be developed with the greatest

success in the English class? In an effort to select only those skills and abilities which are of the highest significance and only those which could be developed effectively in his junior high school English classes, the writer made a survey of expert opinion.

First, an investigation of the literature was made in order to locate, describe, and list all the skills and abilities which are associated with critical thinking. A list was then compiled³ and presented to a jury of experts (an expert was defined as one who was or recently had been engaged in research in critical thinking, the thinking process, semantics, logic, propaganda analysis, *etc.*) The jury included: Mary Austin, John B. Carroll, George W. Goethals, Donald Oliver, and Edwin Sauer from the Harvard Graduate School of Education; James Baker, Ralph Garry, William Perry, and Glenn Wilcox from Boston University; Daniel Marshall and C. B. Wellington from Tufts University; George Aherne from Boston State College; Frank Marsh from Northeastern University; and Stuart Chase.

Members of the jury were requested to delete from the list any skill or ability which, in their judgment, did not conform to the following criteria: (1) the skill or ability is an important component of the critical thinking process, and (2) it can probably be taught in a ninth-grade English class.

A skill or ability was selected for inclusion in the junior high school English program in critical thinking-reading-listening only if seventy-five percent or more of those polled concurred that it was important and that it probably could be developed effectively at the ninth-grade level. The following five abilities were selected by means of this survey of expert opinion:

- (1) The ability to evaluate the reliability of evidence.
- (2) The ability to distinguish between statements of fact and statements of opinion.
- (3) The ability to distinguish between the affective and the informative connotations of words.
- (4) The ability to recognize the bias of the writer (or speaker).
- (5) The ability to recognize a writer's (or speaker's) inferences.

Here, then, are five abilities which are important and teachable.

³ One section of the writer's list can be found in Edwin Sauer, *English in the Secondary School* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1961) p. 126.

However, three comments about the selection process need to be made. First, this was an opinion poll, and it is possible that another group of experts would have selected a different set of abilities. Second, the instructions to the jury were so structured that only abilities which could be taught in an *English* class were chosen; it is conceivable—and very probable—that the same jury would have selected other abilities if it had been asked to pick those which might be developed in a ninth-grade science class. Third, statistical researchers, using factor analysis, might be able to discover those abilities which are of the highest significance to the total critical thinking process and justify their selection statistically.

Despite the limitations inherent in any survey of expert opinion, the list presented here does provide a reasonable and authoritative—though tentative—answer to the question, “What critical thinking abilities shall we try to teach?”

How Shall We Go About It?

The question has been raised, “How can we fit lessons in critical thinking into an already over-crowded English program?” The English teacher who wishes to turn his students into critical thinkers may not need—according to the point of view of this paper—to make drastic changes in his English program. He may not need to plan special lessons and units in critical thinking; such planning may actually be a waste of time and effort. By refocusing and revising existing lessons and units, the English teacher may be able to provide for more significant growth in the postulated critical thinking abilities.

While it may be impossible to directly teach critical thinking abilities, it is possible to promote growth in corresponding critical reading and critical listening abilities. Consequently, the English teacher may not be able to teach “the ability to recognize inferences,” but he can provide practice in “the ability to recognize a writer’s inferences” as part of regular class work in reading skills and he can promote growth in “the ability to recognize a speaker’s inferences” as part of a unit in listening or critical listening.

For purposes of explanation, the following hypothetical classroom situation is presented.

Mr. A has decided to “do something about critical thinking” in his ninth-grade English class. He has selected three critical thinking abilities which he would like to develop in his students: (1) recognizing inferences, (2) distinguishing between fact and opinion, and (3) recognizing bias. Rather than attempt to teach these three abilities directly, he has chosen to work with the corresponding critical reading and critical listening abilities.

As part of his weekly work in reading skills, he has prepared a series of reading exercises designed to provide practice in: (1) recognizing a writer’s inferences, (2) distinguishing between printed statements of fact and statements of opinion, and (3) recognizing a writer’s bias. Each week, following a brief lesson, students read passages that Mr. A has had duplicated from magazines and newspapers. They then identify inferences the writers have made, label underlined statements as “Fact” or “Opinion,” and indicate possible bias in the printed materials. The exercises and accompanying answer keys, arranged in sequence from relatively simple examples of fact and opinion, inference, and bias to much more difficult examples, permit Mr. A’s students to develop these three important critical reading abilities over a period of several weeks.

As part of a unit in listening in the same ninth-grade class, Mr. A has included a variety of listening activities which he has designed to encourage growth in: (1) recognizing a speaker’s inferences, (2) distinguishing between oral statements of fact and opinion, and (3) recognizing a speaker’s bias. Students listen to taped reproductions of political speeches, television and radio commercials, and conversations recorded in and around the school. They indicate on separate Response Sheets examples of fact and opinion, bias, and inference.

A program in critical reading and critical listening such as the hypothetical Mr. A has established has the advantage of achieving certain specific objectives in critical reading and critical listening. It is suggested here that such a program may be more effective in producing critical thinkers than a program which provided definite lessons and units in critical thinking.

English teachers are in a unique position to assist students in becoming critical thinkers. Students are not going to learn to think critically by having discussions about the importance of critical thinking; they are going to learn to think critically by having practice in using important critical thinking skills and abilities. It is the basic assumption of the present paper, however, that these skills and abilities are mental constructs postulated for the convenience of the investigator

and that they cannot be taught directly. Many of the critical thinking skills and abilities, fortunately, can be seen in operation in reading and listening. Therefore, the English teacher who wishes to make his students think critically should concentrate upon developing certain critical reading and critical listening abilities which correspond to the postulated critical thinking abilities.

The English teacher who chooses this approach to critical thinking will have the comforting knowledge that he is doing something tangible to develop important critical reading and critical listening abilities and that he is probably doing more to develop the corresponding critical thinking abilities than he would if he chose merely to teach *about* these abilities.

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