

**Critical Thinking:
The Need for It Today**

Gloria C. Kismadi

Abstract

Critical thinking is not a new concept but one that goes all the way back to more than two thousand years ago when Socrates developed a way of questioning to look into the rationality of how people thought, learned and examined issues that needed answers and solutions. The development of civilization throughout the ages, however, has always influenced the way people are educated and learn the skills needed in order to understand and deal with questions that come up within contexts that are new and may still be unfamiliar. In the process of such developments, views with regard to the way people think and reason out issues change to suit the needs and demands of the time. It is in this manner that critical thinking became ignored in the education of young people.

Today, however, critical thinking has been brought back into education, and the reason could very well be that current demands on students make it necessary for them to learn to understand and function rationally in today's fast-changing world with its varied and multi-complex problems.

Developments in technology have brought about unprecedented amounts of information at speeds never before anticipated. What happens in one small corner of the world is known globally the instant it occurs. Education that continues to focus only on the teaching of "reading, writing and 'rithmetic" would be straying off course from the directions that should be taken in order to cope with today's as well as future needs. It is for this reason that training in critical thinking should be a vital part of the educational curriculum today.

Keywords:

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1. The Origins of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is generally thought of as having its beginnings with Socrates, a classical Greek philosopher, who lived from 469 to 399 B. C. Even in his time, Socrates was already well known for his contributions to ethics and to what has become known as the Socratic method of questioning, or "dialectic method of

inquiry”. Socrates’ questioning was a way of asking questions that did not look for specific answers, but examined the basic insights into specific issues. In Socrates’ time, this method meant that in solving a problem, it would first have to be broken down into a series of questions that would look deeply into the essence and its parts, gradually bringing up the fundamental bases of what was being questioned. This method, still known today as the Scientific Method, begins with the hypothesis as its beginning stage. It is this method, which is considered Socrates’ greatest contribution to Western Philosophy.

Socrates’ way of questioning was a way of probing into the very essence of a particular problem. His view was that even those in authority, or those who claimed they had a knowledge of something, did not necessarily possess sound reasoning. Many gave responses that were only confusing and often irrational or colored by their own vested interests. Socrates insisted on the importance of asking questions that would look deeply into thinking before ideas and answers could be accepted and believed. Thus, his type of questioning demanded looking for evidence, examining reasoning, analyzing concepts that lay behind such reasoning, and looking into the implications of what was said and done.

By doing this, Socrates, set the agenda for the tradition of thinking critically, namely, to question and reflect on common beliefs and explanations, which are reasonable and logical. Some of the reasons he brought up for being meticulous, and which bear consideration, is, that people, while arguing, are often not free of their own egocentric views or personal motivations. This makes their reasoning insufficient bases for others to believe what they say. According to Socrates, only the mind that is trained in looking for the essence of issues at hand could see through the surface of what lay behind the way people thought.

Socrates manner of insisting on the need for critical thinking in searching for answers did not cease with his followers, Plato and Aristotle, but became the foothold of thinkers for centuries. St. Thomas Aquinas, in writing his *Summa Theologica*, systematically questioned and sought answers to his own ideas,

criticizing them himself as he developed them. He felt the need to ascertain that his reasoning was systematic, cross-examining them not for the purpose of rejecting beliefs that were already established, but to examine those that might have lacked reasonable foundations.

Throughout the 15th, 16th and 17th and all the way to the 20th Centuries, others such as Erasmus, Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Thomas Dewey to name only a few, felt the necessity to follow up on Socrates' questioning and examined other issues that they considered as needing to be tested before they could be accepted. Years later, Descartes came out with Rules for the Direction of the Mind in which he stated that every part of thinking should be questioned, doubted and tested. Critical thinking by that time was already being applied to different subjects and domains that touched on human social life: politics, sociology, psychology, including linguistics. The general belief held among scientists and thinkers was that people, having focused for some time on similar problems, tend to get caught up in conventional systems of thought and follow rules blindly. Thus, the need to probe in order to find the truths was necessary.

In the meantime, civilization had grown and populations were increasing in every direction, making new discoveries and becoming exposed to previously unknown problems to which there still were no clear answers. In such a situation, the education of a country's citizens became a priority. A strong middle class had come up and the young needed to be educated. At the start, it was enough that the young be schooled in the essential subjects of reading, writing and arithmetic, but as the importance of education had become necessary for the growth and progress of any country, and new developments came about, education had to consider issues that were more relevant to current contexts and conditions.

By the 18th Century, secondary schooling was generally established in most countries as were institutes of higher learning. Universities, that were already established, and known for their high scholarship, continued the traditions of

critical thinking, but to a large extent, general standards required looking into other priorities. Educational concerns thus sought answers to an understanding of government and politics, business and economics; science and technology; health and welfare. Education was hard-pressed for finding ways to pass on knowledge that would answer these needs and demands of a modern world and it is perhaps under such conditions that Socrates' questioning, found itself relegated to the back burner.

With such large populations looking for this kind of learning, the place of Socrates' questioning gradually shifted from the refinements of looking for rationality and reasoning to the simpler consideration of whether answers were right or wrong. Thus, the knowledge that an individual learned and had succeeded in obtaining was no longer measured by how well he could reason out the answers to particular problems, but by whether he could give the right answers on a test. In terms of evaluation, therefore, test scores became the criteria by which the individual's intellectual ability was determined.

By the 1960s educators began to deplore the passive attitudes and study habits of students towards learning, which by that time depended primarily on memorization. Reading through lessons and assignments was no guarantee that students understood and absorbed what they read, much less, be capable of discussing them. While many universities had, in their curriculum, subjects such as Thinking Skills, Logic, Epistemology and the like, these were largely fragmented from content and were quite removed from analysis, comparison and evaluation which are key elements in critical thinking.

2. What Is Critical Thinking and Why Should It Be Taught

With critical thinking an important issue in education today, it is imperative that all involved in educating and teaching the young be aware of what it is, if thinking critically is once again, to determine the extent to which they eventually develop

their intellectual capacities. Originally confined to the study of cognitive psychologists and philosophers, critical thinking has now become a matter of concern to educators who believe that students today are not being given the training they should be getting to bring their mental capacities to their greatest potential. For too long, schools had trained students to fall into a recognizable and acceptable pattern but the demands of the world today, the speeds at which information is spreading and the way problems are seen from different perspectives based on the contexts and the various cultural conditions in which they occur, require the formation of mental habits that can test common opinions and propositions instead of readily accepting them without question.

A definition given by Chance, in 1986, states that critical thinking is “the ability to analyze facts, generate and organize ideas, defend opinions, make comparisons, draw inferences, evaluate arguments and solve problems.” Some years later, Scriven and Paul gave critical thinking a broader, more defined explanation as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication as a guide to belief and action.” (<http://www.criticalthinking.org>.)

Looking at these definitions, it is clear that thinking critically begins with responding to a variety of subject matter, issues, and goals and examining these on the basis of concepts, assumptions, and reasoning which have been learned or derived from experience, and observable data, until a conclusion is reached. Thus, a critical thinker is someone who has been given information and is skilled in generating and processing the information further. More important, however, is that a critical thinker possesses the habit based on an intellectual commitment, of using those skills to guide the way they think and act.

Another definition which goes beyond that is given by Linda Elder (2007) “Critical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way. People who think

critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably, and empathically. They are keenly aware of the inherently flawed nature of human thinking when left unchecked.” In Elder’s view, critical thinkers are always aware that critical thinking can contribute to a more rational, civilized society as they strive to consider the rights and needs that are as relevant to others as it is to themselves. (The Critical Thinking Community <http://www.criticalthinking.org>).

The quality of most people’s lives is dependent on the quality of their thinking. If it is true, as most people believe, that only one out of every five persons is born a natural thinker, then there is much work to be done to turn people of all societies into critical thinkers for the purpose of creating “a more rationalized, civilized society that considers and respects the needs and rights of all.” (Elder)

3. Characteristics of Critical Thinkers

Critical thinkers are people who constantly search for reasons—why one thing is the way it is and unlike another although similarities may exist. They do not readily accept or admit reasons that are given to them unless they know what these reasons are about and where they are coming from. They look for the evidence that would legitimize those reasons and will follow the evidence presented to where it leads before they can accept it. They constantly question and are concerned with looking for the best explanations rather than answers that are thought to be right. Anything that may seem confusing has to be cleared before the critical thinker will accept it.

In addition, the critical thinker will look into possible motives or personal biases on the part of the individual giving reasons. At the same time, however, realizes that he himself may have his own assumptions and prejudices or points of view. The critical thinker recognizes that people engaged in an argument may have motives that are selfish and emotional, or may have vested interests in reasoning out his argument. He is, however, willing to consider all possibilities

and viewpoints and is open and ready to accept new explanations or paradigms that would explain evidence better. He does not easily dismiss unpopular views but is willing to look at all points of view.

Critical thinkers are not prone to making snap judgments but are precise and meticulous. This is perhaps one reason why they are often considered skeptical, but there is no skepticism in the critical thinker. He is merely examining the different views presented to him to find out their validity. Contrary to what others might think, the critical thinker is open to new ideas and perspectives. It is in his nature to accept reasons based on evidence which has been examined and found to be valid, true, and relevant.

Becoming a critical thinker may seem to be demanding, but when all these attitudes are given and taught at the start of the individual's education and training, the attitudes which are learned and become ingrained at an early age may become habits an individual will carry with him throughout his life.

If critical thinking is brought into the curriculum from early education on, we may look forward to communities where people are not only willing but also able to think and function more effectively for a better world.

References

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