

THE DISCIPLINES (cont. from p. 3)

or they may want to look at psychology in a biological or anthropological perspective;

d. Students need to understand each discipline as a species of inquiry, and this means they must understand the general process of inquiry, both in its theoretical and in its practical applications;

e. in each discipline, students must come to see critical thinking as reflection upon practice. Thus, in writing, critical thinking is reflection upon the practice of writing; in anthropology, critical thinking is reflection upon the practice of anthropology. And practice, in all cases, consists in the judgments that are made and the ways in which they are made, including the development of theory.

Matthew Lipman

TEACHING WELL VS. TEACHING FOR CRITICAL THINKING

A teacher who has clear, manageable objectives for a course, organizes the subject matter into learnable chunks, presents it clearly, with good illustrations and in an organized manner in class, has assignments which illustrate and teach the material effectively, is a better teacher (other things being equal), than one who does none of these things. (Of course, there are many other things a good teacher does). But such a teacher need not teach critical thinking. Good teaching is not equivalent to teaching critical thinking.

A teacher who teaches a critical thinking course by having students memorize lists of critical thinking skills, whose illustrations are muddled, whose practice exercises have ill-defined objectives, who gives no feedback on student practice, who doesn't give students practice in exercising critical thinking skills in developing critical thinking attitudes, and who lectures at the students, is a teacher who is going about critical thinking badly. (There are plenty of other wrong things to do besides these ones.) So teaching critical thinking is not equivalent to teaching well.

A teacher who is trying to teach critical thinking as part of a course on a subject in her/his specialization (history, physics, biology, literature, etc.), and who teaches the critical thinking well, is likely to be teaching the subject well also, but not necessarily. Perhaps s/he devotes so much attention to the critical thinking infusion that s/he neglects other aspects of the course.

And a teacher trying to infuse critical thinking into a course on a subject in her/his specialization may teach the subject matter well, but do a poor job of teaching the critical thinking infusion.

Note: If all of this is true, then it must be possible to give an account of critical thinking and its good teaching, and this account will be distinct from an account of good teaching in general.

The above distinctions should not give the impression that it is necessary in practice to teach a subject, and to infuse critical thinking, separately. Rather, it is likely that it is possible and desirable to do both at the same time. It might even be impos-

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TEACHING (cont. from p. 4)

sible to do the two separately (though I do not believe that). The above distinctions don't carry any implications about how best to infuse critical thinking. Perhaps a fitting analogy is that because teaching a child to swim and teaching him to swim the breast stroke are distinct, it does not follow that one must teach the two separately. On the other hand, the analogy should not be taken to imply that it is impossible to have a distinct general critical thinking course simultaneously with the infusion of critical thinking in courses in the various academic disciplines. A counter-analogy is that one can learn many of the basic skills and principles of clear expository writing independently of learning how to write newspaper stories, company reports, or magazine articles, in particular.

J. Anthony Blair

*This article is part of a report originally prepared for the Institute for Critical Thinking in response to issues arising at a particular meeting of the Round Table by Professor Blair of the University of Ontario, as Consultant to the Institute for Critical Thinking, Fall, 1987.

Notes on the American Philosophic Association

Dr. Mark Weinstein, Coordinator of Research and Fellow of the Institute for Critical Thinking has been elected as President of the Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking (AILACT). AILACT is the official association for philosophers with an interest in critical thinking and informal logic and is registered with the American and Canadian Philosophical Associations. It has a membership of over two hundred professional philosophers including members in many states, in Canada, Australia, Holland, and the United Kingdom. AILACT sponsors a number of critical thinking conferences and is represented at many other national and international professional meetings. The Institute for Critical Thinking looks forward to a productive relationship with AILACT. Requests for information about AILACT should be forwarded to Dr. Weinstein at the Institute.

WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

Critical thinking is a quality as well as a process of thinking that privileges questions over answers. The ability to think critically requires first of all a curiosity to explore, a willingness for uncertainty and challenge, a fundamental dissatisfaction with pat, plugged-in responses. The only security that is truly useful in such a context is the security of knowing that it's ok to be uncertain. This absolutely does not mean that critical thinking never provides closure on any subject. It is, on the contrary, a corrective to the counter-productive headlong rush to "find the right answer" and thus close off all thinking.

In our various meetings we have considered what we might say to colleagues and students in our efforts to explain the work of the Institute, and in part our answer has been something like "What do you want your students (or yourselves) to know about your subject?" I would amend that to "What do you want your students to ask about the subject?"

I think that the most useful approach to develop in the college as a whole is one that creates possibilities, both intellectual and professional, in the minds of students.

Naomi Liebler