

Critical Thinking and Communities of Inquiry

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An old Zen Master once said, "It really doesn't matter where I begin to inquire, To understand I always have to come round full circle."

If one means by critical thinking the ability to think well, to think creatively and autonomously within and about a myriad of disciplines, then certainly it is a most important educational goal. It's the essence of what we mean by a liberal education.

I do not see critical thinking, however, as a mandated course in itself, but rather as a set of intellectual and social skills, capacities and dispositions to be fostered in the teaching of all disciplines, including philosophy, the discipline that pays attention to the criteria of good critical thinking. I am well aware that one can offer courses in argument analysis, assumption finding, drawing of valid inferences, distinguishing good from poor reasons, recognizing faulty reasoning, distinguishing part-whole and end-mean relationships and the forming of good analogies. Whether such courses transfer into the ability to study a discipline in a critical, autonomous, questioning, self-corrective manner, I doubt very much.

I have a bias: I happen to think that critical thinking can best be fostered by engaging students in doing philosophy within the context of a community of inquiry. Such a course would aim to inculcate certain habits of mind, certain procedures, while discussing the metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of human experience. I have two reasons for saying this. First, I have seen young people become adept at thinking critically and creatively in a highly self-conscious manner while engaged in such discourse and then be able to transfer their skills and insights to other disciplines. Second, since all disciplines have metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions, why not be sure that students can

recognize these dimensions in a general mode before proceeding to the discipline-specific? Certainly one would argue that only to the extent that the student is able to recognize these dimensions and understand the various ways these dimensions have shaped the "facts" in the various disciplines—to that extent they will be able to think critically in and about the discipline.

There is no sufficient reason to hold that critical thinking cannot be fostered in the teaching of all disciplines, provided the subject matter is presented in a reflective manner. However, to teach one's discipline in such a way that the students can actively appropriate it for themselves in a critical manner assumes certain things. Such teaching necessitates being able not only to think well in the discipline but to be capable of evaluating critically the procedures, together with their philosophical assumptions, that one uses in the field. Reflective professors are scholars who have a good grasp of the controversial and fundamental issues and concepts in their field. They understand how these concepts and issues have shaped the history of the thinking in that discipline and constantly reflect on how the context of the discipline might have hindered or furthered the inquiry. Such professors have a dynamic understanding of the relationship of the "content" of their discipline to the central and controversial issues. They ponder about the relationship of their discipline to the other disciplines and are not reluctant to use another discipline to shed light on the procedures in their own field.

Such reflectiveness (or to use another word, "self-consciousness") can become manifest and most effective in the teaching of the discipline on the introductory level. Given their understanding of the field, such professors can reorganize their subject matter for the novice by making the fundamental and problematic issues

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