

Engaging Students in Critical Thinking

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After many years of teaching we sometimes become bored in our own classrooms. Times change, students' needs evolve; we find ourselves griping in the hallways about students' lack of interest and lack of skills, and their work overload. We, too, are overloaded with classroom preparation, scholarly endeavors, professional and community responsibilities, family life. Although teaching and learning are apparently what spending one's life in an academic setting is all about, what happens in the

(Petty, from p. 2)

In that task we have coherent procedures, we have consistent standards, and we provide models for every kind of critical thinking. And in connection with this task most of us have learned to avoid racism, sexism, or elitism simply because they prevent successful instruction.

Every day, in every class, we spend time demonstrating how to separate, in Toulmin's terms, "grounds" from "claims," how to provide appropriate "warrants" to link the two, and how to be conscious of the "backgrounds" which condition the "claims" proposed and the "warrants" offered. We probably don't use Toulmin's language, but that's what we do.

We are fortunate at this college because our English faculty is unusually skilled in the production of texts. We have published critics, novelists, and poets, a dramatist, several practicing journalists, and many regular contributors to literary publications.

In this part of our discipline we provide models of all kinds of critical thinking. Perhaps in the future, the heart of our discipline will lie in this activity, rather than in the traditional function of literary criticism, the interpretation of texts.

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classroom drops to the bottom of our priorities because of institutional and personal prerogatives. Publish or perish, serve on committees, pay the mortgage, attend to children, parents, house, car, garden; these immediate needs and imperatives supercede our desire to have more stimulating, satisfying classroom experiences.

The first task of the Institute for Critical Thinking was to introduce Fellows to the field of critical thinking, which has been developed by educators mainly in the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and teacher education. The concepts of critical thinking, including its definitions, are useful for higher education. The goals for critical thinking at the college level also require student understanding of knowledge construction, transmission and evaluation in the disciplines, and student reflection and assessment of values, perspectives and criteria employed in different disciplines.

Introduction to the field of critical thinking, while extremely attractive in its concepts, created conflict for some of the Institute Fellows. For example, we perceived that teaching of critical thinking would necessitate cutting back subject content, since critical thinking teaching strategies often require taking the time to allow students to "discover" for themselves concepts that we used to teach by lecture and rote. In addition, several of us were uncomfortable with the idea of allowing (or training) undergraduates to be critical of the disciplines before they had a full grasp of what the disciplines represent. For some of us, our commitment to our disciplinary subject matter and methodologies appeared to be threatened by a commitment to teaching critical thinking skills.

Nevertheless, considering myself a critical thinker, I was intrigued by the possibility of engaging students more in the learning process. I was tired of students sitting passively in my classes "hoping for something to stick," and

(Cont. on p. 9)