

## ***Critical Thinking Reaches Out***

We are pleased to report that many colleges in the Northern New Jersey area have requested the participation of members of the Institute in their own faculty and curriculum development activities for critical thinking. In future newsletter issues, we are planning to offer examples of agendas, handouts, and other materials for use in planning one-day activities to develop faculty awareness of critical thinking based on our experiences. We welcome contributions from others.

During January, 1989, Matthew Lipman was keynote speaker on *Critical Thinking* at Felician College. Mark Weinstein and Wendy Oxman keynoted the faculty development day on *Critical Thinking* at County College of Morris; Tina Jacobowitz and Lesley Karjohn also participated. John Barell was keynote speaker and Mark Weinstein presented two workshops on *Thinking Skills in the Curriculum* sponsored by the Educational Exchange Center at Brookdale Community College.

In addition, Nicholas Michelli, Dean of the School of Professional Studies at MSC, Wendy Oxman, and Mark Weinstein have begun a series of discussions with faculty and administrators at the New Jersey School of Dentistry, toward the design of a collaborative effort in planning for a new comprehensive program incorporating the teaching of critical thinking within the professional preparation of dentists.



### ***Recent Activities at MSC***

#### ***November 3 Faculty Inquiry Panel***

***Amy Gilman Srebnick***

The first *Inquiry in the Disciplines* panel for 1988-89 was sponsored by the Institute for Critical Thinking on November 3, 1988. Panelists from four academic disciplines at MSC, Peter Freund, Sociology; Amy Gilman Srebnick, History; Vickie Tietze, Classics; and Richard Wolfson, Industrial Studies, were asked to consider how professionals in their respective disciplines identify and resolve disciplinary problems. Naomi Liebler, English, served as moderator and organized the discussion around several significant issues in critical thinking within (and outside of) the academy.

The discussion began with some autobiography as the panelists considered their own career decisions to enter a particular discipline and the reasons why their work took a particular direction. A lively discussion among the panelists centered on how the important problems or questions for study are determined, what kinds of critical approaches are brought to solve those problems or inquiries and what are the ethical and moral implications of those decisions and procedures. The audience participated enthusiastically in what was a very sophisticated and animated discussion of intellectual and moral concerns in today's world.

**Amy Gilman Srebnick teaches History at MSC**

#### ***November 23 Faculty Inquiry Panel***

***Lesley Karjohn***

Critical inquiry in the disciplines was the focus of the second interdisciplinary faculty seminar, moderated by Naomi Liebler of the English Department on 23rd November, 1988.

The seminar addressed three major questions. Initially the panel, comprised of representatives of the Economics, Anthropology, English and Physical Education departments, were asked to share thoughts on the interests and events in their lives that led them to pursue a career in their particular disciplines. The autobiographical responses were illuminating in the diverse, often unexpected and amusing journeys we were told of that had led each of the participants to their chosen field.

The second question the panel was asked to address concerned what constituted a problem in their particular disciplines and, in addition, how problems were identified. Philip LeBel (Economics) stressed the importance of the use of scientific method, the identification of causes and the problem of causation in his response to this question. In addition, he pointed out that the economist is engaged in looking at the world, asking how certain events

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## November 22 Inquiry Panel, Continued from p. 3

happen and what reasons there can be for different interpretations. The panel were unanimous in emphasizing the importance of interpretation and analysis; the consensus being that these were at the heart of their disciplines. In the course of the discussion the importance of critical thinking skills and dispositions at a fundamental level in all the disciplines became apparent.

Given commonalities already noted, the discussion moved on to consider how the disciplines could be differentiated. It was felt that the motivation to study disciplines seemingly as diverse as Economics and English could be the same, given that both disciplines are concerned with social justice. However, a distinction between these two particular disciplines could be made in that whereas English is concerned with the particular, Economics addresses itself to the universal. Within this discussion the issue of values was raised, with positions on what was variously perceived as either the striving to free the discipline of value laden concepts, or the attempt to deal with the value-laden nature of the discipline, being aired.



The final major question addressed again concerned the identification of problems in the disciplines, this time from the point of view of what questions faculty want their students to be able to ask.

The responses to this final question revealed commitment to the aims of critical thinking as well as differences in interpretation. Thus, Phil LeBel stressed the importance of students calling into question underlying assumptions. In other words, the emphasis should be not so much on "facts" but on thinking. Ken Brooks (Anthropology) reemphasized the connection between knowledge and action, stressing that knowledge must lead to action. Given this emphasis, the aim would be to enable students to generate questions concerned with the determination of relevance, how judgments are made, and importantly, decisions on how to act. The importance of the knowledge base for decision making was stressed by most of the participants at this stage in the discussion. Murray Prosky (English) focused on the "living nature of the text" in his response, leading the other panelists to consider his claim that students should be enabled to ask questions which "get to the heart of the performance," as represented by the text itself.

Although there was considerable consensus on what each of the disciplines considered to be the dispositions and skills required, a lively disagreement ensued on the importance of theory and its relation to practice, with Rob Gilbert (Physical Education, Recreation and Leisure Studies) putting up a spirited case for the prominence of practice.

One of the themes that recurred throughout the discussion was the relevance of autobiography in the process of reflecting on one's discipline. Self-reflection is recognized as a vital part of critical thinking: its importance being ably exhibited during the Inquiry Panel. The initial explicit stress on aspects of autobiography provoked thoughts on the connections among the disciplines as well as fundamental issues of motivation, the empowerment of students, and underlying critical thinking skills we wish to develop through the various disciplines.

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