Critical Thinking in the Pre-College Classroom
Robert Esformes

Berrie Heesen, visiting scholar from the University of Amsterdam, has been working with us here at Montclair State College since August, studying with the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children. He has also been working on a project for the Institute for Critical Thinking, observing classrooms in local public schools to note and describe critical thinking as it might appear in teaching and learning in the schools. Before returning to Holland at the end of October, Mr. Heesen presented his findings at a session of the Fellows' Forum of the Institute for Critical Thinking on October 27, during an informal luncheon.

He had been working with Matthew Lipman's definition of critical thinking as "reflective thinking that is sensitive to context, reliant on criteria, self-correcting and conducive to judgment." Three of the initial inquiry questions that were the point of departure for Mr. Heesen's work were:

1. What does critical thinking look like in the classroom?
2. How can the Institute's working definition of critical thinking be operationalized in terms of classroom procedures?
3. How can we identify and assess teacher's implicit and explicit use of critical thinking?

Mr. Heesen's informal, preliminary report focused mainly on the ongoing teaching process in general with emphasis on critical thinking within it. The infusion of critical thinking into the schools necessarily raises the complexity of the teaching process, Mr. Heesen noted in starting; teachers who are well-versed in their subject matter and skillful in classroom management are essential. As with all teaching, the attitudes of both teachers and students are pivotal, and Mr. Heesen suggests that the issue of self-esteem is essential in getting students involved in any kind of learning beyond the echoic phenomenon.

The critical thinking teacher must herself be interested in investigation and understanding. This attitude is one Heesen contrasts with what he calls 'crippled critical thinking,' in which only the thinking mechanisms are involved and the underlying criteria for assessing the quality of thought remain unexamined.

The teacher, when teaching for critical thinking, must be aware of the attitudes she brings into the classroom and reflect on its appropriateness in fostering the qualities desirable in such an effort. She must be sensitive to the particulars of informal goings-on in the classroom, for these are often the most potent contexts for critical thinking attitudes to take root. Likewise, humor may be used to foster critical thinking in the classroom. Humor not only creates an atmosphere conducive to community inquiry generally, but it potentially brings the students to the crucial point of sensitivity to context in determining the humorous component in any exchange. Such reflective self- and context-awareness is often most easily communicated through humor.

Motivation is, of course, necessary for critical thinking in the classroom, as elsewhere; we must touch upon the interests of the students at the same time as we suggest that those interests may be the starting point for deeper reflection that challenge the implicit expectations of the student. In turn, the value of peer-group opinions, our concerns about acceptance, respect for world-views not one's own and ambivalence about thinking for oneself may come into question. Mr. Heesen suggests that we should not avoid recognizing this painful side of critical thinking; it simply is not always fun, nor do its moments of insight come without pain either in the work of investigation or the contemplation of its fruit.

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On Writing, from Page 4

Think of how many hours you live with your lamp and then decide how much per hour good lighting is worth to you. Have you removed distractions? Is your chair comfortable and the right height for your writing surface? See the comments on getting the perfect lamp. Does your writing instrument have the right feel and flow? If not, there are many excellent pens and pencils available for a dollar or two. You don't really need a Mont Blanc for $200 or a top-of-the-line IBM. If you are using a new typewriter or computer, have you gotten comfortable with it before sitting down to a serious writing session? Is there someone you can call for help before you get into a closed loop of frustration over a software command? Are you looking up from the paper or screen every few minutes to allow your eyes to relax by changing focus? Do you have an eye-saving filter over the computer screen or tinted glasses? Check with an optician about the right tint.

Change the things you can to promote your comfort; adapt to the others until you can alter them to suit you, but don't compromise when the time comes to replace furniture or equipment.