

From the Editor's Desk

Frank Fair

Ralph Johnson opens this issue with a reflection piece “When Informal Logic Met Critical Thinking” that I can easily identify with. Ralph describes how his dissatisfaction with teaching a traditional logic course, coupled with the stimulus provided by Howard Kahane’s *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric*, led him to innovate with a course entitled “Applied Logic.” Shortly after teaching the course for the first time, Ralph enlisted his colleague Tony Blair to teach a section of the course, and thus began their long-running collaboration in the area of informal logic and critical thinking. While informal logic and critical thinking are often closely associated in the minds of many, Ralph gives a salutary caution against conflating the two. Furthermore, he warns that we face, in his words, the “Network Problem” of showing how constructs such as critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making, informal logic, argumentation, reasoning, and others are interrelated. After giving specifics to credit a number of critical thinking pioneers such as Perry Weddle, Richard Paul, Michael Scriven, Alec Fisher, and Bob Ennis for their influence, Ralph concludes with “the most important question” which is whether students’ “experience with critical thinking lasts beyond the course and plays a role in their subsequent cognitive development.” Those of us who have been teaching critical thinking courses can supply anecdotes from former students to attest to the impact of the courses on them, but, as Ralph points out, he knows of “no attempt to discover whether such effects have occurred” and the absence of such attempts may rightly give us pause.

Then we have “Computer-Aided Argument Mapping and the Teaching of Critical Thinking: Part II by Martin Davies. Part I of this article which gave an extensive survey of argument diagramming as a valuable way to teach the argument analysis portion of critical thinking appeared in the previous issue. In this issue Part II is devoted to presenting the case for Computer-Aided Argument Mapping (CAAM) by developing the practical justifications and the empirical studies that contrast the relative lack of success of traditional methods with the evidence that classes employing CAAM produce significant critical thinking gains.

Next, we have two offerings that consider conductive arguments. I personally am very interested in this topic since it seemed to me when I was teaching that conductive arguments involving the weighing of pros and cons were both important and ubiquitous, and yet I had very little to give students by way of concepts that might help them evaluate such reasoning. Kevin Possin’s “The Myth of Conductive Arguments” wears its conclusion in its title, and Paul Wagner’s review of a recent volume *Conductive Argument: An Overlooked Type of Defeasible Reasoning*, edited by J. Anthony Blair and Ralph Johnson, has a similarly skeptical tone. Given my interest in the topic, I’d hope that Possin’s and Wagner’s pieces will stimulate a fruitful exchange on the topic.

Finally, from Alhasan Allamnakhrah, of King Abdul Aziz University, Saudi Arabia, and the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, we have a report of a study of “Critical Thinking Implementation by Lecturers at Two Secondary Pre-service Teacher Education Programs in Saudi Arabia.” Needless to say, for many of us the provenance of the study piques our curiosity. See what you think when you read it.

Dan Dennett on where reasons come from:

How could reason ever find a foothold in a material, mechanical universe? In the beginning, there were no reasons; there were only causes. Nothing had a purpose, nothing had so much as a function; there was no teleology in the world at all. The explanation for this is simple: there was nothing that had interests. But after millennia there happened to emerge simple replicators, and while they had no inkling of their interests, and perhaps properly speaking had no interests, we, peering back from our Godlike vantage point at their early days, can nonarbitrarily assign them certain interests—generated by their defining “interest” in self-replication. . . . In what way did the interests of replicators take on a life of their own? Just this: the replicators began to turn into crude guardians of their own interests. . . . The day that the universe contained entities that could take some rudimentary steps toward defending their own interests was the day that interests were born. . . . When an entity arrives on the scene capable of behavior that staves off, however primitively, its own dissolution and decomposition, it brings into the world its “good.” That is to say it creates a point of view from which the world’s events can be roughly partitioned into the favorable, the unfavorable, and the neutral. And its own innate proclivities to seek the first, shun the second, and ignore the third contribute essentially to the definition of the three classes. As the creature thus comes to have interests, the world and its events begin creating reasons for it—whether or not the creature can fully recognize them.

(From *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*, MIT Press, 1984, pp. 21-23.)