Chapter 2
Critical Thinking and Character

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ABSTRACT

This chapter advances the view that critical thinking and character must be redefined as mutually reinforcing capabilities, and taught in the light of this redefinition. After an analysis of how critical thought and character came to be separated into independent skill sets, the chapter surveys the limited efficacy of skills-based, character-neutral education in critical thinking. Next, the chapter presents rationales and methods for uniting critical thinking and character in higher education, drawing upon philosophical, sociological, and pedagogical evidence in support of this unification. Educational recommendations and directions for future research round out the chapter. Included among these recommendations is an emphasis on relationship-building as an instructional model to integrate education in character and critical thinking. Ultimately, the chapter makes the case that critical thinking cannot be taught effectively to students who have not developed the character necessary to face the consequences of critical thought.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions of critical thinking often begin by invoking the philosopher Socrates (Bloom, 1987; Emerson, 2013; Lai, 2011; LaPoint-O'Brien, 2013; Vaughn, 2013). This chapter will be no exception, since Socrates embodies the relentless questioning, consideration of evidence, and logical search for truth that defines critical thought (Vaughn, 2013). It is worth pointing out, however, that Athens executed Socrates in 399 BC, in large measure because his critical thought exposed the defects of some powerful people (Plato, 1989a). Death, imprisonment, or ostracism awaited others who thought critically, from Sir Thomas More to

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn. The willingness to think critically is always a risky business, even when lethal only to our own cherished prejudices and myths. Critical thinking thus demands courage, honesty, resolve, and restraint —a catalog of virtues summed up since ancient times as *character* (Aristotle, 1941). To learn to think critically, young adults must have, or must develop, the character required to take the risks imposed by critical thought. Critical thinking, in turn, allows students to reason morally, furthering character development. Thus, critical thought and character work together in an ascending spiral that reinforces both.

Educators, government leaders, and business executives currently support initiatives to boost

critical thinking at every educational level (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Kanter, 2010; Lai, 2011; Moore, 2010; Taylor, 2010; Vaughn, 2013). Experts have called for improved critical thinking among college students since the 1980s (Bloom, 1987; Kurfiss, 1988), a time when, interestingly enough, other commentators began to champion character education (Lickona, 1991; Morrill, 1980). Despite these efforts, those of us concerned with young learners have observed a dual, generational decline in both critical thinking and character. What we have missed is that we cannot teach one without the other. In approaching the problem, educators—the author of this chapter included—have treated critical thinking as a unified, tactical skill set that can be taught in eponymous courses or integrated into the curricula of various disciplines. However, ample evidence suggests that critical thinking cannot be taught effectively to students who have not developed the character necessary to face the *consequences* of critical thought.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF CRITICAL THOUGHT AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Separated at Birth: Reasoning and Virtue in Modern Education

The belief that young adults lack an adequate ability to think critically is based on a large and growing body of research and expert consensus. The burgeoning of this literature has been accompanied by an ever-growing literature on character education, much of which has expressed a belief that young people lack adequate character. As a result, school-based programs to develop critical thinking abound at every level, from the new Common Core State Standards Initiative (2014) to workshops to enable post-secondary educators to train students in critical thought (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2014). Also proliferating are programs in character education; examples

include 'blended' programs of positive behavior support and character education (Sugai & Homer, 2006) and, at the college level, the development of consortia and institutes to create courses promoting classic moral virtues (Maryland Center for Character Education, 2014).

If this history is any guide, young people's need to improve critical thinking skills has paralleled a need to improve character, suggesting a link between the two. Indeed, one of the opening salvoes in the critical-thinking movement, Bloom's (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind*, specifically linked reasoning to the development of virtues, blaming the loss of both on an emotionally charged combination of German Nihilism and 'the Sixties.' Bloom's bombast aside, he did identify an important relationship between critical thinking and character; he called his exploration of critical thought "a meditation on the state of our souls," (p. 19) and claimed that replacement of traditional virtues (like industriousness and honesty) by permissiveness and moral relativism both resulted from and nourished a decline in our powers of reasoning.

Despite observations that critical thinking and character have a shared trajectory, educational efforts to foster critical thinking tend to proceed on a different track from educational efforts to promote character. Each set of efforts has been mechanistic, focused on the memorization and practice of skill sets particular either to analytic thought or to behavior that displays character. The educational needs for critical thinking and character development were born at the same time, but were separated at birth for the purpose of pedagogy.

The tone was set early on, in a 1988 higher-education report developed for the United States Department of Education (USDE) by Kurfiss. The report, entitled *Critical Thinking: Theory, Research, Practice, and Possibilities*, gave a nod to Bloom but effectively ignored his concern for virtue, focusing instead on the need to build "argument skills, cognitive processes, and intellectual

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