Chapter 11
Teaching Critical Thinking and the Role of Team Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking pedagogy is usually conceived as a solo teacher working with multiple students. Yet, if we take seriously the finding that students benefit enormously from seeing their instructors model critical thinking in front of them, and telling them that this is what they are doing, then team teaching represents a missed opportunity in this pedagogy. Instructors teaching as part of a team can show students how to ask questions of each other, how to disagree without condemning a peer, how to open each other up to multiple perspectives, and how to point out assumptions that each other holds. When all members of a teaching participate in all planning, instruction and evaluation, then students can see a critical dialogue unfolding before them. After laying out research on how students learn to think critically this chapter outlines the benefits of team teaching for both students and faculty members.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter goes to the coalface of critical thinking – to exploring how students experience critical thinking viscerally as well as cognitively. My purpose is to explore how critical thinking actually takes place in students' hearts and minds. Its' starting point is with a truism about college level learning. As is the case with most learning, students say they find it easiest to learn how to think critically when that process is sequenced incrementally. It works best when students begin by mastering basic critical thinking protocols, and then over time applying these protocols to their own reasoning and actions. But it is also important to consider the timing of when to move students forward into a primary focus on critical thinking. There are two clear schools of thought on this, and both have validity, so let me review them briefly.

The first school holds that although in the best of all possible worlds it would be desirable for every act of learning to involve critical thinking, this is not how learning happens. Before you can think critically about something you need to have studied that 'something' enough so that you have sufficient information and understanding to begin to make critical judgments about it. This information and understanding is what R.S. Peters

(1973) described as the grammar of a subject. The grammar of a subject is its basic building blocks of content (the minimal information everyone needs to know about a subject) and its' epistemology (the procedures and standards applied in the subject to judge whether knowledge has been legitimately established). To Peters, learning the content and epistemological grammar of a subject is the first step in a project that culminates with students being able to think critically about the subject.

This first school of thought argues that before this grammar is learned it is unrealistic to expect students to be able to think critically about a topic. So most programs which have critical thinking as one of their goals should begin with a fairly traditional process of information transmission, when students are assimilating basic content and learning how to judge what counts as legitimate knowledge in the area. This is why most introductory courses are of the survey type, where students are provided with a map of the subject that helps them understand the intellectual and skill terrain it covers. This first school of thought argues that critical thinking happens only after students learn how to read this map.

The second school of thought argues that it is always possible to incorporate critical thinking into courses introducing students to a new subject area. For example, proponents of teaching basic language skills who draw on the methodology of Paulo Freire (2005) point out that he developed a process whereby peasants could learn to read and write while concurrently becoming aware of power dynamics in their communities, and becoming alert to their own oppression. Ira Shor's (1987) brilliant work on using students' everyday experiences to teach critical thinking falls into this vein, as when he helped students understand the workings of monopoly capitalism by analyzing the burgers they ate in the college cafeteria. In many freshman orientation courses there is a similar opportunity for students to do some basic critical thinking as they clarify a host of assumptions they hold about college life – how important it is to belong to a

fraternity, what they think their teachers expect of them, how many hours of homework per week is realistic, and so on.

Even in more traditional, content-heavy disciplines, this second school argues that some element of critical thinking can be incorporated from the beginning. For example, when students learn the basics of a new language, one of the first things they learn are the rudiments of grammar such as declension, or the presence of masculine and feminine nouns. It is easy to communicate that this are clearly human constructions, reflecting a culture's internal dynamics. When setting up an introductory science experiment, it is simple to teach how the methodology being used reflects assumptions the scientific community has about how to generate reliable knowledge. When teaching trainee nurses how to give an injection, the assumptions about why this is the correct way are usually clarified.

BACKGROUND

My position on integrating critical thinking into one's teaching is that it is always possible to some degree, even if only fleetingly. Just in the act of explaining the first class is arranged the way it is, why the first homework assignment is structured the way it is, or why the syllabus is organized a particular way, you are letting students see that you are working from assumptions you hold about the best way to teach the class. So the question is not whether or not critical thinking can be incorporated into the teaching of introductory courses, but rather the degree to which this is possible.

There are particular times in a course or classroom when critical thinking – clarifying and checking assumptions by viewing material from different perspectives – is particularly important. Some of these are …

* *When Skills or Knowledge Have to be Applied in the Real World* – here students have to determine how to make abstract knowledge, or

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