

## Chapter 8

# Using Argumentation to Develop Critical Thinking About Social Issues in the Classroom: A Dialogic Model of Critical Thinking Education

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### ABSTRACT

*Thanks to the polarized nature of politics in the world today, students need to learn how to think critically about social issues. Argumentation can be both a type of critical thinking and a tool with which to teach students to think critically about social issues. This chapter lays out a framework for teaching students how to develop critical thinking about real world issues through the use of dialogic argumentation. The impact of dialogic argumentative activities in the classroom are discussed, particularly as they relate to the development of metacognition and theory of mind, as well as how they help students develop an “inner-locutor” that allows them to evaluate both their position and opposing positions. Finally, a model for how these elements contribute to students’ value-loaded critical thinking about social issues is outlined.*

### INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly polarized world with multiple streams of false or biased information, critical thinking and argumentation in the arena of social justice and social issues are important. Adolescents are tuned in and plugged in around the clock, resulting in near-constant exposure to sources of information that can be misleading. And unlike their parents and grandparents, today’s teens have the ability to (and in some ways are required to) receive information that aligns with their interests and confirms their positions. Adolescents self-tailor their news by getting it online and picking what stories they want to see, a phe-

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nomenon aided by the algorithms that shape web use. They are also more likely to get news from social media and satiric news shows like the *Daily Show* rather than traditional news outlets (Marchi, 2012).

At the same time, the internet offers a platform for extreme voices. When social issues are raised online, it is often the most extreme ends of the spectrum whose ideas are “heard” by adolescents and others. So, how can students make sense of the information and issues they are exposed to everyday?

One way of helping students make sense of information and social issues is via critical thinking. Critical thinking is not a new concept, nor is it only applicable to dealing with current social issues. Frijters, ten Dam, & Rijlaarsdam (2008) point out that when analytic thought is combined with the development of values, the resulting “value-loaded critical thinking” builds a stronger citizenry. In addition, studies show that having critical thinking skills helps people differentiate between fake news and real news stories (Beavers, 2011; Hobbs, 2010; Pennycook & Rand, 2017). Thus, aside from the importance of critical thinking in general, it is imperative for students to learn this skill if they are to make sense of the world around them and generate solutions to some of the world’s problems.

If it is important for students to learn this type of critical thinking, it is important for teachers to provide training that helps them do so. There are many ways of approaching critical thinking skills in the classroom. In this chapter, the ways that dialogic argumentation can be a tool to help students develop critical thinking about social issues will be examined. First, the multiple ways to define critical thinking and the ways argumentation can serve as a key critical thinking skill will be discussed. Then the literature on how dialogue and argumentation work in the classroom will be presented, followed by the ways in which dialogic argumentation leads students to flexible thinking, including understanding of multiple viewpoints and development of values, which is a cornerstone of critical thinking about social justice issues outside the classroom. Finally, suggestions for future research directions will be presented.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Defining Critical Thinking**

Following the industrial revolution, education of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was focused on teaching students the acquisition of skills and facts. This made sense for that era, as this type of learning prepared students for the types of jobs available to them. However, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has become more important for students to learn how to sort through information to find what is important and to make value judgments about issues than to simply memorize facts. That is, critical thinking skills have become crucial and educators increasingly understand that it is better to teach the skills associated with acquiring knowledge and understanding than to teach knowledge itself (Kuhn, 2007).

As part of the process of acquiring knowledge and understanding, students need to be taught how to evaluate the information in front of them. They need to learn how to figure out what’s true and what’s not; what is important and what is not; what is just and what is not. This is part of the task of critical thinking: to help students evaluate sources, information, and ideas.

There are many different definitions of critical thinking, though most include higher-order thinking as part of that skill. A surprisingly good definition comes from the Wikipedia page for critical thinking. There, critical thinking is defined as “the objective analysis of facts to form a judgment,” with a note that it is “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking” (Wikipedia.org,

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