

# IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK: IT'S WHAT YOUR STUDENTS THINK!



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**W**hat is critical thinking? Can critical thinking be taught? If it can, should it be?

The subject of teaching critical thinking in the classroom is a much discussed topic in educational circles today. One day last November some twenty-five Kennesaw faculty and staff members became better informed as they listened to a panel discussion of Chet Meyer's book *Teaching Students to Think Critically*. Participants on this panel, sponsored by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and by Leadership Kennesaw, included Judy Mitchell (Education), Ben Golden (Biology), Cary Turner (English), and Hugh Hunt (Philosophy).

According to Meyers and the panel, when we talk about thinking critically we're talking about putting to use skills and attitudes enabling us to work through a process of self-directed inquiry in a given discipline resulting in our being able to make sense and order of things. We would be able to make inferences, arrive at generalizations, draw concepts, establish priorities, engage in logical argumentation, come to sound judgments, and sometimes reach conclusions.

One of the major points made by Meyers is that methods of critical thinking vary from one discipline to another, that although certain knowledge concerning analysis, logic, argument is common to all thinking, thinking is not done in a vacuum. We think in disciplines. And different disciplines have different requirements, different standards. For example, critical thinking as applied to a literary work could not be approached in the same way as that applied to a chemical experiment.

Hence, skills of critical thinking need to be developed in different ways by teachers in different disciplines. We need to keep in mind, then, the three stages of 1) input, 2) process and 3) output. Input, of course, refers to the content of a specific discipline: basic information, terminology that needs to be defined, methodology that needs to be explained. If one accepts, Meyer's idea that critical thinking varies among disciplines, then one must conclude that teachers in all disciplines should be involved in teaching critical thinking explicitly, that teaching critical thinking should not be reserved just for courses in logic or problem solving.

Let's suppose, now, that I've become convinced that teaching critical thinking in my classroom is both desirable and possible. What next? How do I begin? Well, I probably won't find it easy, perhaps not even comfortable for awhile. But there are some suggestions to help me. And those teachers who have consciously tried to teach critical thinking assure me that the results are rewarding.

The first thing that I may have to do in order to create an environment conducive to critical thinking is to reduce (God forbid!) the content in my syllabus and spend less time lecturing! What I must do is stop and ask myself just what it is I really want my students to know and to do. What are the real issues? Do I really want to do nothing but give out information just to get it back again? I must start with my own attitude, realizing, of course, that this may be just as difficult for the students as it is for me. After all, for twelve years or more they've probably been told what to do and what to learn. Not too many elementary and secondary school teachers encourage a questioning intellectual interaction among students in the classroom.

What I'm really talking about here is opening up the classroom to allow for many student responses, to allow students time to interact among themselves as well as with me. I must become willing not to take the narrow

view, to be open to a variety of ideas, to respond positively (even when the student's response may not be a very good one) so as to enable students to feel comfortable in expressing their ideas. I must make a conscious effort to tolerate a lack of conclusion on occasion, to fight my own ego. Perhaps I can sometimes promote critical thinking by raising certain questions for students to think about before I begin my lecture, by having student dialogue take place in small groups, by having students put their ideas into short analytical papers, by allowing some time for thought. Perhaps every minute in the classroom need not be filled with talk, particularly my talk.

I hope that all readers of this article who have not read Meyers' *Teaching Students to Think Critically* will do so soon. Make it a New Year's resolution! It's short, only 120 pages. And it contains good examples of specific assignments to promote critical thinking, assignments which I've not taken the time to outline here.

Robert Frost, my favorite American poet, once said that he could never plan how to spend an hour in the classroom, that sometimes planning gets in the way of learning. He believed that the purpose of teaching is to evoke an answer from within, that teaching is giving people the freedom of their imaginations. He said that too frequently our minds are so crowded with what they've been told to look for that they have no room for accidental discoveries, that he as a teacher was looking for students who didn't want to be told what to think and what to do. Frost was teaching critical thinking, just as was Socrates in his time. Although many of us may be more involved in the teaching of critical thinking than we realize, it really does take a conscious effort to promote the development of critical thinking in the classroom. And maybe, after all, that is more important than having our students produce a list of novels written by Thomas Hardy or a list of dates of Civil War battles. 🍎