

Thinking Critically About Critical Thinking

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In July 2004, I attended a workshop in North Carolina on “Teaching Thinking Skills.” In many ways it was an exciting experience. I was able to hear educators from the United States, England, and Asia describe their own experiences as they sought to help their students develop as critical thinkers. In addition, I was privileged to listen to a number of leaders in the field, including Bob Ennis, David Perkins, and the chief facilitators of the workshop, Robert Swartz and Art Costa, talk about their areas of expertise—the nature of critical thinking, the most effective strategies for helping students develop as critical thinkers, and the most effective techniques for assessing critical thinking.

I emerged with two strong convictions. One was that this area holds considerable promise for education here in the Caribbean. Teachers and curriculum officers at the workshop spoke repeatedly about how greatly students benefited from thinking skills instruction. Not only were their students able to select appropriately from among the strategies they had been taught, but also in applying thinking skills, they often showed that they had acquired a surer grasp of concepts from the fields of study in which their thinking skills instruction had been infused. Moreover, students often developed what Costa terms the dispositions, or habits of mind, that support sound thinking and enable students to take charge of their own learning—they became “self managing, self monitoring and self modifying.”

I was pleased, therefore, to recall that in addition to the work already being done by individual teachers and teacher educators to promote instruction in thinking skills, and especially in skills of critical thinking, many of our own curriculum documents and examination syllabuses here in the Caribbean have begun to reflect a concern that critical thinking should be taught and assessed within the curriculum.

My second conviction was that our adoption of critical thinking instruction must be accompanied by more careful reflection and inquiry as to why and how we propose to include it in our curricula. If it is to take root in the curriculum, we must understand not only the promise it holds, but also its limitations, given what we now know of the field. We must also identify what our own cultural practices have to offer as we plan instruction that students will perceive as relevant and transferable to their lives outside the school compounds.

We must acknowledge, first, that many basic issues still remain to be addressed by researchers and practitioners. The very question of what constitutes effective critical thinking is still open to discussion. For instance, David Perkins has suggested that critical thinking requires a discrete set of cognitive skills from creative thinking, while others in the field seem to suggest that both types of thinking can be developed in the same way, and through similar processes.

In addition, there is still much to be learned about the dispositions and strategies that critical thinkers habitually exhibit. One prime example is the role of metacognition in the

process. It is generally agreed that metacognitive strategies—for monitoring our thinking and planning processes—are essential for effective critical thinking. Yet even the nature of metacognition itself is still open to debate. Consequently, as one researcher has noted, many practitioners make claims about students' use of metacognitive strategies when little evidence sometimes exists to suggest that such strategies are, in fact, being used. Educators at the workshop in North Carolina repeatedly expressed concern that while they had introduced instruction in critical thinking at all levels of the curriculum, they were not always sure that they were really helping their students to develop and use metacognitive strategies, especially when those students were unable to articulate how they were thinking. Teachers of younger students, in particular, voiced this concern.

What was interesting was that the facilitators of the workshop, and presenters like Bob Ennis who has made a career of developing techniques for assessing critical thinking, also seemed unsure as to how this issue might be addressed. Ennis admitted that the techniques he has developed cater heavily to students with high levels of linguistic intelligence, and less so to students who are stronger in other intelligences. One of the facilitators of the workshop, Bob Swartz, argued that as far as he was concerned, if a student couldn't articulate the strategies he or she had used, he would not consider that the student had developed the ability to use metacognitive strategies at all. Many teachers attending the workshop agreed that their students seemed to be capable of critical thinking, including using metacognitive strategies, even from a very early age. However, if these students could not articulate their thought processes verbally, teachers had no means of knowing whether or not these students were actually using such strategies. It is an area that clearly needs to be researched further, especially if we propose to assess students' mastery of critical thinking skills.

In deciding to adopt critical thinking instruction, we in the Caribbean must also consider how we might use our students' existing cultural capital to scaffold the process by which they develop skills and strategies in critical thinking. Josiane Hudicourt-Barnes has described, for instance, the Haitian discourse practice of *bas odyans* and, in particular, one form called *diskysyon* or argument, in which one speaker takes on the role of theoretician and makes a statement that she is expected to defend, using evidence or logic. In the meantime, a challenger also uses evidence or logic to dispute the arguments presented. Hudicourt-Barnes describes the practice as a form of theatre, in which the proponent of the idea "has the burden of remaining calm...the challenger's role is often more theatrical, and is directed both towards the theoretician and the audience."

Ian Robertson, Dean of UWI's Faculty of Humanities and Education, has suggested that West Indian proverbs and riddles also often reflect a critically analytical approach to the problems we face in our personal lives and in our social relationships, and may be used to support critical thinking instruction.

These practices constitute potentially powerful tools to ensure that our students maintain the ability to think critically outside the classroom, and this, after all, must be the most desired outcome of any decision to adopt formal instruction in critical thinking. Even as we embrace critical thinking instruction, however, we must make provision for research

to address the issues that still present challenges to persons interested in the field. We must, in short, temper our enthusiasm with a wholesome dose of critical thought about it.

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