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"What Is Critical Thinking?"

John Black


In a number of workshops I've done recently on critical thinking across the curriculum, I've been confronted by this question and a lot of confusion about its answer. This is primarily because the territory of CTAC is the subject of various landgrabs by disparate groups. Those of us who share a philosophical approach to CT are competing with proponents of Creative Thinking (de Bono etc.), problem-solving, thinking skills development and so on. Because "critical thinking" is the current buzzword in educational PR, these various players are trying to appropriate the term for their own brands of enlightenment. It is vital therefore that ACTIR come to and propagate its own understanding of what CT is in a cross-curriculum context.

I don't want to deny that other approaches to thinking have merit, nor that they are less than relevant to CT. However, I believe there are essential elements in CT which can become lost in the process-orientated alternatives.

When I talk to educators outside philosophy about CT, I emphasise the central role played in it by the goal of Rational Evaluation. The skills, habits, attitudes of CT are those of the rational evaluator of factual claims, hypotheses, value judgments, actions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions. The presumption is that the best way to develop these, and so become a Critical Thinker, is by practising them and by learning about them in a self-conscious way. The notion that CT instruction involves practice links with the educational concept of Active Learning, and the self-conscious aspect with that of Metacognition. Putting the initial letters of the important ideas together we get the REALM of CT instruction.

As I conceive the goal of CT instruction, it is to enable the student to become an autonomous thinker within a community of thinkers. Independence of thought is essential both to deep understanding and novel discovery, but the correctness of one's thought is constrained by the intersubjective nature of inquiry. There is a danger that in encouraging autonomy, we allow idiosyncrasy and produce idiocy. I see Reason, embodied in the canons of rationality, as the mediator between Autonomy and Community. This is the ARC of CT instruction.