8.9: Critical Thinking Defined

I have been talking all around critical thinking, it seems that we should finally define critical thinking. As you might guess, there is no, one simple definition of critical thinking. Below are several definitions that will give us a variety of ways of looking at critical thinking.

Authors Goodwin Watson and Edwin Glaser in their 1937 book, Manual of Directions for Discrimination of Arguments Test, define critical thinking as,

“...a persistent effort to examine any belief or form of knowledge in the light of evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends, as well as the ability to recognize problems, to weigh evidence, to comprehend and use language with accuracy and discrimination, to interpret data, to recognize the existence or nonexistence of logical relationships between propositions, to draw warranted conclusions and generalizations and to test the conclusions by applying them to new situations to which they seem pertinent.”

In the book, Critical Thinking, B. K. Beyer explains that,

Author W. G. Sumner back in 1940 emphasized that importance of critical thinking and that if we are educated in it, we “cannot be stampeded.”

[Critical thinking is] … the examination and test of propositions of any kind which are offered for acceptance, in order to find out whether they correspond to reality or not. The critical faculty is a product of education and training. It is a mental habit and power. It is a prime condition of human welfare that men and women should be trained in it. It is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthly circumstances.

Education is good just so far as it produces well-developed critical faculty . . . A teacher of any subject, who
insists on accuracy and a rational control of all processes and methods, and who holds everything open to
unlimited verification and revision, is cultivating that method as a habit in the pupils. Men educated in it cannot be
stampeded . . . They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without
certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence . . . They can resist appeals to their
dearest prejudices. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes
good citizens. Sumner.  

The Foundation for Critical Thinking founded by the late Richard Paul, offers the following definition for critical thinking:

“Critical thinking is that mod of thinking—about any subject, content, or problem -- in which the thinker improves
the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing it. Critical thinking is self-
directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards
of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem-solving abilities,
as well as a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and socioicentrism.”

Richard Paul argued that critical thinking involves the willingness to question and challenge our deepest beliefs and
prejudices. He felt that critical thinking is a call to think for oneself without prejudice so we may attain a perspective from
which to reflect upon human affairs in a more objective way in order to come to an understanding of how we should act.

Authors Moore and Parker in their book Critical Thinking write,

“Critical thinking is the careful, deliberate determination of whether we should accept, reject or suspend judgment
about a claim and of the degree of confidence with which we accept or reject it. The ability to think critically is
vitally important, in fact, our lives depend on it.”

The wording of the California State University requirement for a course in critical thinking, defines critical thinking as,

Why teach critical thinking? Most of the experts in the critical thinking discipline see students as too often being just
passive receptors of information. Through technology, the amount of information available today is massive. This
information explosion is likely to continue in the future. Students need a guide to sort through information and not just
passively accept it.

Critical thinking involves questioning. It is important to teach students how to ask good questions, to think critically, in
order to continue the advancement of the very fields we are teaching. Richard Paul says, “Every field stays alive only to
the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously.”

Researcher, B. K. Beyer sees the teaching of critical thinking as important to the very state of our nation. He argues that
to live successfully in a democracy, people must be able to think critically in order to make sound decisions about
personal and civic affairs. If students learn to think critically, then they can use good thinking as the guide by which they
live their lives.
One way of realizing the goals of critical thinking is by learning the skills of argumentation and by applying those skills to everyday decision-making and conflict situations in our life. The key to being in charge of our life is the ability to make effective decisions. To be effective critical decision makers, we need to be able to analyze and evaluate the information we receive in order to determine the best course of action to take.

“The main part of intellectual education is not the acquisition of facts, but learning how to make facts live.” --Oliver Wendell Holmes

As Patterson and Zarefsky conclude,

“The view of argumentation as a critical device depends on certain assumptions. The premises that actions should be reasonable, that decisions should be justified through critical inquiry and persuasive explanation of ideas, and that a clash of ideas helps arrive at the probable truth are fundamental to such a view. Argumentation allows people to resolve differences, permits opposing views to be considered before decisions are made, and enhances the quality of social decisions.” (Patterson, 1983)
Reference