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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that traditional skill deficiencies are symptoms of a fundamental inability to reason, to use concepts, and to solve problems, a three-part remedial course was designed by the Philosophy Department at LaGuardia Community College (New York) to teach critical thinking as a basic learning skill. Part I of the course explores the interdependence of language, thought, and action through an examination of: (1) the effect that the common use of racially derogatory language has upon one's attitudes and actions toward members of another race; (2) how language is made imprecise by ambiguity, vagueness, and cliches; (3) the mistaken identification of words with things they represent (a common practice in advertising); and (4) the use of emotive language in the place of descriptive, logical wording. Part II examines, through specific examples drawn from the students' lives, what concepts are and how they function in providing organization and continuity in the human experience. Part III provides students with methods of problem analysis that can be employed in classroom, family, and social settings. Thus, by developing skills in critical thinking, students not only enhance their academic performance, but also take better control of their lives. (JP)

TEACHING CRITICAL THOUGHT SKILLS TO REMEDIAL STUDENTS

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It was the British philosopher Bertrand Russell who once said: "Most people would rather die than think--and most do!" Thinking is a process which is crucial for our survival as individuals and as a species. It is a skill which enables us to understand the past, to make sense of what is happening in the present, and to predict what will happen in the future. The knowledge and insight which results from successful thinking enables us to solve the problems we are constantly confronted with, and thereby aids us in acquiring the things we need in order to survive. Yet as Russell aptly pointed out, the vast majority of human beings do not take full advantage of this skill (or anywhere close to it), and thus often suffer the unpleasant (and sometimes fatal) consequences of this failure.

There is a certain commonplaceness to the concept of "thinking." After all, practically everyone can do it to some extent; and it is so taken for granted by most people that it is rarely thought of or mentioned in any direct fashion. In fact, most people become interested in the idea of "thinking" only if you accuse them of <u>not</u> being able to do it. The reaction provoked by alleging that someone is "dumb," "stupid," or that he "can't think" is often extreme, as if you were denying an essential aspect of their "humanity" (which, of course, you are).

Yet this commonplace and mundane appearance of "thinking" is deceiving, for when we turn our attention to it in order to discover exactly what it is, we find that it is slippery, amorphous, multifaceted, and extremely difficult to get a handle on. It is so imbedded and woven into the fabric of our experience that it is difficult to extricate from its context, to lay it out and dissect in any clear and analytic fashion. To make matters worse, the very process of trying to understand the concept of "thinking" involves the process of thinking. Trying to stand outside of the thinking process is as frustrating as attempting to escape your shadow--it sticks with you no matter how you twist and turn.

If trying to understand how the thinking process works is difficult, trying to teach others how to do it appears to be even more so. And though we are obviously born with certain potentials for thinking, the ability itself is clearly not awarded at birth. It is a skill which, like other skills, is developed through practice and accumulated experience over a period of time. And, like other skills, it is a skill which some people learn to do better than others. The key question facing educators in general is, to what extent can this skill be distilled, packaged, and taught in a classroom situation?

Certainly education in general is thought to have the effect of developing our thinking ability and sharpening our wits. But does it do it efficiently? And can the problem be addressed in a more direct fashion?

The problem is compounded when the students have been educationally deprived in their primary and secondary school educations. At LaGuardia Community College over 70% of the entering students are classified as being in need of remediation, lacking basic skills in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and mathematics. To meet this need, the school has implemented a sophisticated program of placement testing and courses designed to develop these "Basic Skills." The Philosophy Department at LaGuardia became interested in the question of whether these traditional skill deficiencies are in some measure symptoms of a more fundamental problem, of a more basic inability to use concepts, to structure their experience, to reason, to solve problems--in short, the result of an underdeveloped ability to "think." We became convinced that this was indeed the case, and set out to design a course which would address itself to those more fundamental deficiencies. After all, if students can't think clearly, they certainly won't be able to express themselves clearly in their writing and speaking, or be able to comprehend clearly complex readings. If they lack an understanding of how to apply concepts and use them to structure their experience, this will certainly inhibit their remediation in other skills areas. And if they are unfamiliar with the techniques of problem analysis, they will unquestionably be handicapped in their efforts to solve the more complex problems confronting them in every area of their lives.

The course as presently conceived is divided into three sections: 1) Language, Thought and Action

2) Concepts
3) Problem Solving

The first section is designed to demonstrate the interdependency of these three dimensions of human experience--Language, Thought and Action. Thus, if you are clear in your thoughts about a situation, then this clarity will be expressed in your use of language, and reflected in your actions.

Of course, this equation works in other directions as well; for language can mold and shape our thoughts. Francis Bacon made this point when he remarked: "Men imagine that their minds have the command of language, but it often happens that language bears rule over their minds." Thus clarity or confusion in one's use of language will be reflected in one's thoughts and expressed in one's actions. For example, if a person is raised using derogatory language to refer to a group of people, then gradually the negativity of these words will shape his thoughts and attitudes towards these people--they are inferior, deserving of degradation and humiliation, unfair treatment and limited opportunity. These thoughts and attitudes are then naturally reflected in one's behavior, thus completing the circle of racism.

There are a variety of ways in which confused, imprecise and unclear language can cause problems in other dimensions of our experience:

1) AMBIGUITY--when an expression has more than one distinct meaning ("I hope you get what you deserve.")

2) VAGUENESS--when an expres[illegible]'s meaning is unclear and indefinite (When does one become "middle-aged"?)

3) CLICHES--trite expressions that seem apt and supposedly contain some "truth." However, not only are they empty of real

content; they are in fact dangerous, because they encourage thoughtlessness, disguise complexities, and are used to justify wrongheaded decisions.

4) THE MISTAKEN IDENTITY OF WORDS WITH THE THINGS THEY REPRESENT--This is illustrated in magical incantations (Abracadabra), religious liturgy (Hail Mary, Hare Krishna), and superstitions ("break a leg," "knock on wood"). In each of these situations, the mere repetition of a word is thought to invoke a special power. Thomas Hobbes warned of the danger implicit in taking words themselves too seriously when he said: "Words are wise men's counters; they do but reckon with them, but they are the money of fools." Advertising in our culture has raised this confusion to the level of a science, as it seeks to associate product labels with pleasant or unpleasant associations, often far removed from the product itself. Thus, Coke "adds life," Pepsi makes you "feel free," and "ring around the collar" leads to social humiliation and embarassment.

5) DESCRIPTIVE VS. EMOTIVE USE OF LANGUAGE--Under the guise of giving us factual, descriptive information, people often introduce emotionally charged terms designed to influence our thoughts and behavior. An example is the defiant assertion by George Wallace: "I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."

The second section of the course explores the role of "concepts" as they function to organize our experience, aid in our understanding of the world, and lay the groundwork for

solving problems in our lives. Concepts are general ideas which enable us to categorize, organize, and structure the world around us. As one of the fundamental dimensions of human thinking, we could not survive without them, for a world without concepts would be a world of chaos and total unpredictability. For example, imagine life without concepts like space, time, person or even "self." Concepts thus perform many crucial functions for us. They help us organize the world around us, give it meaning, and help us make sense of it. They provide continuity in our experience, permitting us to "fill in the blanks" in our lives, since we are actually presented with a very small amount of direct sensory information. Concepts enable us to create expectations about our world, to make predictions, and to help us figure out what we have to do in order to get the things we need.

Using numerous specific and concrete examples, drawn in many cases from the students' lives, we teach students in step-by-step fashion what concepts are and how they function--how to select the proper concept, to look for additional information when necessary, to correctly apply concepts, to discover or create new concepts when appropriate, and to decide between alternative concepts. We stress that our lives should be a constant process of conceptual clarification, as we continually evaluate our present situation and our future needs by selecting and applying the most appropriate concepts. Those people who are able to develop this conceptual facility are those who will best be able to make sense of their experience, to meet the challenges and

solve the problems which they encounter, and to exert meaningful control over their lives.

The third section of the course deals directly with the skill of problem solving. The purpose of this section is to enable students to develop a method of problem analysis which will aid them in gaining a clear understanding of their problems and in making rational choices. The techniques are applied to a variety of specific problems in the lives of LaGuardia students--school, classroom, internship, family, social and personal problems. Some of the problems which students tackled and analyzed exhaustively included:

1) A student with an emotionally disturbed sister who disrupts the family.

2) A woman with two children who wants to stay in school, but whose husband does not earn enough to support the family.

3) A student who is concerned about being accepted and understood by other people.

4) A student who is chafing under the domination of her father.

5) A student with an adopted baby brother who became very sick and eventually died.

It should be clear from this brief description of the course that we conceive of "thinking" as being not merely a cerebral or an intellectual process, but rather see it as the overall attempt to understand all the dimensions of our experience, and to make intelligent choices based on that understanding. The course is

designed to develop and sharpen those thinking skills which aid in this process of understanding and decision making, whether we're deciding the direction of our lives or how much to bet on the poker hand we've been dealt. The other philosophy courses at LaGuardia expand and amplify this experiential idea of critical thinking, as we explore other fundamental dimensions of human experience: human nature, personal freedom, ethics and morality, spirituality and religiousness, love and sexuality, and the sociopolitical sphere. Our immediate goals for the Critical Thought Skills course at LaGuardia include integration with the other components of the Basic Skills Program, and an evaluation of the effects that the course has had on the students' academic experience and performance. To this end, questionaires were designed, and completed by the first class of students, assessing the goals of the course and the effectiveness of the course in meeting these goals.

To sum up, we at LaGuardia are committed to the importance of a course which addresses itself directly to developing skills in thinking, for it is our firm belief, shared by all educators, that if you decide <u>not</u> to develop your ability to think critically and effectively, then you are destined to be controlled by people who <u>have</u> developed this skill in thinking.