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ABSTRACT

Noting that college-level critical thinking instruction is now an interdisciplinary movement coordinating such fields as English, rhetoric, philosophy, and developmental psychology, this digest surveys the history of critical thinking studies in these converging disciplines and argues that literature study preeminently encompasses the mental traits that comprise critical thinking. Following an introduction to the critical thinking movement, the digest assesses the impact of critical-thinking inflected developmental psychology on composition studies. The digest notes the increasing attention paid in composition textbooks and rhetorical theories to mental attitudes and emotional dispositions that foster or impede critical thinking and to the application of stage-developmental criteria of critical thinking (such as the progression from egocentricity to reciprocity and from conventional to autonomous thought, and the acquisition of the ability to reason back and forth between concrete and abstract, personal and impersonal, literal and hypothetical). The digest builds the case that literature study--because it relies on the capacities of criticism, dialogue, perception of multiple viewpoints, synthesis and reasoning--has always developed and facilitated the mental dispositions currently emphasized in critical thinking circles. Finally, to attest to the educational importance of humanistic letters, the digest cites research concluding that cognitive development requires a substantial body of specific knowledge and suggests that in this light critical thinking can rejuvenate the English profession. (Twenty references are included.) (JG)

ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

ERIC Digest

Critical Thinking in College English Studies

The Critical Thinking Movement

A key event in the phenomenal growth of the critical thinking movement in American higher education was Chancellor Glenn Dumke's Executive Order 338 (1980) announcing the requirement of formal instruction in critical thinking throughout the nineteen California State University campuses, serving some 300,000 students. Similar requirements quickly followed in California community colleges and high schools.

The pertinent section of Executive Order 338 reads as follows:

> Instruction in critical thinking is to be designed to achieve an understanding of the relationship of language to logic, which should lead to the ability to analyze, criticize, and advocate ideas, to reason inductively and deductively, and to reach factual or judgmental conclusions based on sound inferences drawn from unambiguous statements of knowledge or belief. The minimal competence to be expected at the successful conclusion of instruction in critical thinking should be the ability to distinguish fact from judgment, belief from knowledge, and skills in elementary inductive and deductive processes, including an understanding of the formal and informal fallacies of language and thought.

In California and elsewhere, college-level critical thinking instruction has largely been assumed to be the realm of philosophy departments. Within the discipline of philosophy, however, the critical thinking movement has turned from an emphasis on formal logic and linguistic analysis, and toward informal logic, or the application of principles of reasoning to everyday situations. The movement has also seen a growing attention to the mental attitudes and emotional "dispositions" that foster or impede critical thinking within the broader context of psychological, cultural, social, and political influences. This changing emphasis within philosophy has promoted interdisciplinary coordination of critical thinking studies with English and rhetoric along with many other fields—preeminently developmental psychology.

The stage-developmental schemas of psychologists like Piaget, Kohlberg, Gilligan, Perry, and Bloom have suggested supplementary criteria of critical thinking. (Applications of such criteria have been somewhat speculative and disputable to date, to be sure, as are stage-developmental theories in general.) These criteria include the ability to reason back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, the personal and the impersonal, the literal and the hypothetical or figurative; facility in perceiving irony, ambiguity, and multiplicity of meanings or points of view; and the development of open-mindedness, reciprocity (Piaget's term for ability to empathize with other individuals, social groups, ideologies, etc.); and autonomous thought.

Critical Thinking in Composition Studies

The incorporation of developmental psychology into critical thinking studies converges with its recent incorporation into composition research and instruction. Several reports of the National Assessment of Educational Progress have indicated that student writers' main weakness occurs in the progression from narrative and descriptive modes to modes directly requiring critical thinking—analysis, synthesis, argumentation, and evaluation of sources and ideas. Researchers in collegiate basic writing have addressed problems impeding this progression and have explored pedagogical strategies for overcoming them.

Shaughnessy's seminal *Errors and Expectations* not only pinpointed some of these cognitive impediments but also identified elements that can be considered prerequisites to critical thinking. These include the ability to concentrate, to retain material studied, to sustain an extended line of reasoning in reading or writing, and to reason back and forth among the past, present, and future. Shaughnessy further delineated students' difficulties with "the vocabulary of general literacy" (1977, 216-221), her term for the codes of academic discourse which encompass the language both of critical thinking and of what Hirsch has called "cultural literacy." Lunsford (1980), in "The Content of Basic Writers' Essays," explicitly applied Piaget and Kohlberg to the designing and evaluation of writing assignments fostering development from egocentric to reciprocal and from conventional to autonomous moral reasoning.

Composition textbooks and courses can best incorporate critical thinking—and in some cases have done so—not only in units on logic and persuasion, but in those in diction and semantics, tone, audience, and writing from sources. Several recent textbooks are expressly devoted to logic in writing, while a growing number of others combine this approach with critical reading. There is some indication that rhetorics and anthologies are moving away from a structure based on modes of exposition toward a developmental sequence of modes of reasoning designed to build critical thinking skills. Sternglass (1983) and Kytle (1986) have written textbooks and Olson (1984) and Lazere (1986) have published course descriptions structured in this way.

Kytle's *Clear Thinking for Composition,* first published nearly twenty years ago, anticipated the current emphasis on attitudes or dispositions in critical thinking instruction. Its chapter "Blocks to Logical Thinking" considers culturally conditioned assumptions, prejudice, ethnocentrism, primary certitude (absolutism), authoritarianism, and unconcretized abstractions. Other forerunners emphasizing psychological dispositions include Altick, whose *Preface to Critical Reading* first appeared in 1946, and Hayakawa, whose *Language in Thought and Action* was first published in 1941. Hayakawa's general semantics approach has been perpetuated by the journal

et cetera, especially under Neil Postman's editorship, and the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak.

A political approach to critical thinking in composition courses is provided in teachers' guides by Shor (1980) and Lazere (1986). This approach generates writing assignments out of Frankfurt School critical theory, emphasizing critical consciousness toward mass culture, and out of Paulo Freire's notion of liberatory literacy.

Critical Thinking in Literary Studies

A strong case can be made that literature—properly reunified with rhetoric and composition—is the single academic discipline that can come closest to encompassing the full range of mental traits currently considered to comprise critical thinking. The mental dispositions increasingly emphasized within critical thinking circles have a familiar ring to teachers of literature and literary criticism—the capacities: to unify and make connections in one's experience; to follow an extended line of thought through propositional, thematic, or symbolic development; to engage in mature moral reasoning and to form judgments of quality and taste; to be attuned to skepticism and irony; and to be perceptive of ambiguity, relativity of viewpoint, and multiple dimensions of form and meaning (literal and figurative language, syntactic and structural complexity, etc.).

Paul (cited in Walsh and Paul 1985, 11-12) asserts that a setting that facilitates the exchange of free dialogue between opposing views is essential to any authentic exercise of critical thinking. The tradition of humanistic and creative literature is preeminently a tradition of dialogue from Socrates and Greek tragedy to Albert Camus's "civilization of dialogue." Every great work of literature engages the reader in critical dialogue with its author, language, and characters, and in the dynamic interaction that Emerson characterized as *Man Thinking*.

Moreover, a growing body of research in both English and psychology strongly indicates that neither critical thinking nor cognitive development can effectively advance except in dialectical interaction with a substantial body of domain-specific knowledge (see McPeck 1981; Hirsch 1987). Clearly, that particular body of knowledge contained in literature, in its broad sense of humanistic "letters," is eminently congenial in its subject matter and in the qualities of mind it reflects, to the essential traits of critical thinking. Nearly every other discipline has come forth to claim that it too has been fostering critical thinking all along, but in none of these is the very concept of "criticism" central as it is in literature.

No more powerful case could present itself to persuade the public of the value of reemphasizing the study of literature at all levels. Ironically, however, although many courses, textbooks, and research projects have emerged in composition for critical thinking, there are very few to date in literature. (Scholars, including Kohlberg 1981, Gilligan 1982, Meyers 1986, and Bergstrom 1983, *have* applied principles of cognitive development to the study of literary works.) What is called for is perhaps no more than a minimal rethinking of the discipline to bring the tacit component of critical thinking in literary study to the surface. The explicit effort to make critical thinking the primary reason for being of literary scholarship might well provide the rejuvenating force the profession has long been missing.

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