Special Issue
Education and the Challenges for Democracy

education policy analysis archives

A peer-reviewed, independent, open access, multilingual journal

aape epaa

Arizona State University

Volume 31 Number 104 September 19, 2023 ISSN 1068-2341

Critical Thinking and the Conditions of Democracy

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Citation: Burbules, N. C. (2023). Critical thinking and the conditions of democracy. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *31*(104). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.31.8062 This article is part of the special issue, *Education and the Challenges for Democracy*, edited by Fernando M. Reimers.

Abstract: It is often argued, rightly, that critical thinking is a necessary condition for democracy. This essay looks at the other side of that relationship, how certain democratic conditions are necessary for critical thinking to flourish. In turn, this dynamic, interactive account of democratic culture, institutions, and dispositions has implications for how we think about critical thinking itself.
Keywords: democracy; critical thinking; criticality

Pensamiento crítico y las condiciones de la democracia
Resumen: Frecuentemente, se argumenta, con razón, que el pensamiento crítico es una condición necesaria para la democracia. Este ensayo examina el otro lado de esa relación, cómo ciertas condiciones democráticas son necesarias para que el pensamiento crítico florezca. A su vez, esta dinámica interactiva de la cultura democrática, las instituciones y las disposiciones tiene implicaciones en cómo concebimos el pensamiento crítico en sí mismo.
Palabras clave: democracia; pensamiento crítico; criticidad

Pensamento crítico e as condições da democracia

Journal website: http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/
Facebook: /EPAAA
Twitter: @epaa_aape

Manuscript received: 07-03-2022
Revisions received: 11-06-2022
Accepted: 11-06-2023

Resumo: Frequentemente se argumenta, com razão, que o pensamento crítico é uma condição necessária para a democracia. Este ensaio examina o outro lado dessa relação, ou seja, como certas condições democráticas são necessárias para o desenvolvimento do pensamento crítico. Por sua vez, essa abordagem dinâmica e interativa da cultura democrática, instituições e disposições tem implicações para a forma como pensamos sobre o próprio pensamento crítico.
Palavras-chave: democracia; pensamento crítico; criticidade

Critical Thinking and the Conditions of Democracy

One of the main reasons offered in support of critical thinking as an educational aim is that it is a basic condition of democratic citizenship. A clear statement of this rationale is offered by Sharon Bailin and Harvey Siegel (2002):

> To the extent that we value democracy, we must be committed to the fostering of the abilities and dispositions of critical thinking. Democracy can flourish just to the extent that its citizenry is able to reason well regarding political issues and matters of public policy, scrutinize the media, and generally meet the demands of democratic citizenship, many of which require the abilities and dispositions constitutive to critical thinking. (p. 189)

One can add further to this rationale in light of recent political developments in countries around the world, including the United States: the absence of critical thinking skills among a large proportion of citizens leaves democracies vulnerable to demagoguery and outright deception (Samaržija, 2023). Citizens must possess relevant knowledge and the ability to critically evaluate knowledge claims; awareness of, and resistance to, the potential of social media to drive disinformation and distorted political ideologies; and a critical understanding of the power of rhetoric in a media-driven political environment—not only lies per se, but also that broader range of deceptive speech Harry Frankfurt (2005) calls "bullshit."

The literature on teaching critical thinking typically distinguishes two conditions: one includes the *abilities or skills* of analyzing fallacies and other flaws in reasoning; the other is variously termed a *commitment* to critical thinking or a *disposition* to exercise those skills in actual situations. The first condition is relatively empty without the second, but much of the literature neglects the topic of *how* to foster the second, something that is harder to achieve, especially in a time animated by an anti-critical thinking ethos. The commitment to critical thinking, like other civic virtues, requires personal qualities of persistence and sometimes even courage, because sometimes it requires swimming against the tide of popular opinion. Therefore, it requires not only individual fortitude but also networks of social support and encouragement so that when one asks tough questions or challenges orthodoxies, one is not entirely alone.

This essay examines how the conditions of democracy both help and hinder the aim of promoting critical thinking skills and dispositions or commitments. Democracy and critical thinking, I will show, are dynamically and interdependently in relation to each other. It is not just that critical thinking is a condition of democracy; it is also that certain conditions of democracy, properly understood, are necessary for the development *and exercise* of critical thinking. Conversely, threats to each, as we are learning every day, are equally threats to the other.

Dewey, Democracy, and the Social Conditions of Critical Thinking

A good starting point is John Dewey's definition of democracy. For Dewey, the heart of democracy is not just a political system or set of practices (voting, etc.), but a social fabric of interaction defined by egalitarian respect, open communication, and mutual consideration: the institutions and practices of democracy grow out of those underlying social conditions. Conversely, without those social conditions the institutions and practices themselves cannot sustain a true democracy:

> A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 1916, p. 87)

This insight bears further consideration. Where democratic choices are defined simply by self-interest or a desire to defeat an opponent, any consideration of shared purpose or common interest becomes lost. Democracy becomes a contest about winning. The institutions and practices of democracy get distorted into rules of a competitive sport rather than a mechanism of inquiry into the problems besetting society, the available options to address them, and the consequences of those choices. Defeating one's opponents becomes an aim, at all costs, because they are not simply mistaken, but evil and wrong (McCoy, 2019). Political positions become dogma, without room for debate, rather than pragmatic, tentative, and provisional solutions to problems that are subject to reconsideration and revision. Democracy, for Dewey, should be an experimental, learning process in which practical choices are determined collectively and tested against reality. Of course, in debates about what to do one may have strong bonds of sympathy and connection with like-minded political allies, and may have considerable skepticism toward other views. But for Dewey, *both* like-mindedness and difference are essential. He asks, "How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?" (Dewey, 1916, p. 83). We may stand to learn from those who have a different view, and therefore democratic deliberation must be based on a respect for reasons and reasoned debate, even with (perhaps especially with) those with whom we disagree. This is both an epistemic imperative and a part of the basic fabric of what makes democracies work.

This returns us, again, to the theme of critical thinking, and it illuminates one key feature of critical thinking, which is an openness to engaging contrary views and opinions. Often critical thinking is identified with an inclination to argue *against*. It is seen as a form of pervasive epistemic suspicion. It is viewed as a kind of closed-mindedness: a resistance to fallacies, misstatements, and untruths; and a skilled capacity to expose and dissect them. This epistemic dimension is crucial, because critical thinking is always aimed at finding out what is true: respect for evidence, arguments, and clear reasoning are essential skills for the critical thinker.

But there is another important dimension of critical thinking, which I have elsewhere termed "criticality"—the willingness to question one's own presuppositions and to consider the limits of one's abilities to view the world through the lens of others (Burbules & Berk, 1999). This willingness to be self-critical is a kind of intellectual virtue that speaks to dimensions of personal humility and openness to others. It is also key, I believe, to a wider spirit of open-mindedness (Bialystok & Ferkany, 2020). Part of a respect for truth is also a recognition of one's own blind spots and biases; we must be reflective and self-critical about our own limitations. At the same time, however, we can

only become aware of these through interactions with others who are different from us, in which we come to recognize the boundaries of our own assumptions, and so we need to be attentive and respectful to those differences. In some cases, in fact, our blind spots and biases are directly pointed out to us by others, and so we must be prepared to listen to them and take their observations seriously. Here again, critical thinking, or criticality, is the outcome of social interactions, not only individual thought and reflection.

Hence critical thinking needs to be seen across a balance between (proper) closed-mindedness and (prudent) open-mindedness; like many civic virtues, one can have too much or too little of each; judgments need to be made about the appropriate degree of credulity or skepticism one owes to *this* person or group perspective, about *this* issue or controversy, in *this* context or at *this* point in time. These judgments themselves need to grow out of prior experience and a sensitivity to circumstance: there no simple rule or one-size-fits-all criterion that will tell us. In general, today, people are far too eager to seek out confirmation that they are right, and too certain that those with whom they differ or disagree are wrong (Carlson, 2020).

Critical thinking, therefore, requires both skepticism toward *and* openness to other views, and this is a social condition as much as an individual trait. Thus, it is an error to think of open-mindedness solely as a dimension of personal character or an individual disposition; it is also shaped by the kind of social context that Dewey describe—one that recognizes, encourages, and supports engagement with the views of others. In short, critical thinking is not only a condition for democracy; the social conditions of democracy, as Dewey describes them, are necessary for critical thinking.

These dimensions of what it means to think critically—what is often called the "skills" dimension of critical thinking—are supplemented by a second dimension, sometimes called the "critical spirit" or what Siegel (1999) calls the "dispositional" dimension of critical thinking: the actual commitment and willingness to exercise those skills in real contexts. The question here is not simply motivational; in many cases thinking critically entails going against the ideas and attitudes of those around us. It is not the path of least resistance. The educational task of promoting critical thinking, therefore, requires both exercise and practice in a set of cognitive skills, and also a set of values and commitments around the importance of *being* a critical thinker—in full recognition of the potential impediments or disincentives to doing so. Highlighting this second dimension of critical thinking (and, I would argue, in practice these are not entirely two separate factors anyway), moves us even closer to recognizing the importance of a culture, social relationships, and institutional practices that foster the development of, and the actual exercise of, critical thinking.

Today's Anti-Critical Trends

Today we are becoming all too aware of a growing anti-critical thinking ethos. Terms like "cognitive bias" and "motivated reasoning" have entered into common discourse to suggest that all of us, at least some of the time, fall short of the ideal of critical thinking:

> It is well established that members of the public rely on heuristics or mental shortcuts that can generate systematic biases in their perceptions of risk and similar facts. They also tend to seek out and assess evidence in biased patterns that reinforce the positions that they, or those who share their ideological predispositions, already hold. (Kahan, 2013)

The growth of ideological market-niche media and online "echo chambers" have made it easier and easier to reassure ourselves that right-thinking people (like us) agree with us, and to shield ourselves from inconvenient contrary information or opinions. The result is a highly fragmented political

environment in which it is becoming harder and harder to even imagine that "those people" (whoever they are) could possibly have anything worthwhile to say, or that we could learn from. This is, of course, exactly opposite to the conditions of democracy that Dewey laid out.

Meanwhile, the three putative pillars of fact-based and reasoned civic deliberation—education, the press, and scientific research—are all under assault. A political climate based on anti-intellectualism, conspiracy mongering, deep-seated resentment, and a suspicion of "elites" creates a cyclically reinforcing brew of self-confirming ignorance. As I wrote elsewhere,

> Especially for groups consumed by resentment, who feel mistreated, misunderstood, and threatened, it can be a very powerful appeal when political figures, characters in the media, or others tell them: "*Those* people have contempt for you. They don't understand you or your grievances. But *I* (or *we*) do." This appeal takes many forms, and is targeted toward many different kinds of groups, but in the context of faux-populist politics the dynamic is invariably anti-elites, anti-establishment, anti-science, and anti-fact-based journalism. . .. This sort of appeal overlaps with the mindset of conspiracy theorizing, and poses an especially difficult challenge for critical thinking interventions: for when you present evidence or arguments against their point of view, this reinforces and feeds into the underlying resentment that you are another of those elites who do not respect or understand them. Indeed, the more compelling the evidence or arguments might be, the more threatening they feel, and so all the more reason to reject them – not because of their content, but because of their source. (Burbules, 2022, p. 9)

At times it appears that creating an anti-intellectual and overly credulous public is seen as politically advantageous to certain parties: a decade ago, the state legislature in Texas actually banned the teaching of critical thinking in schools (though they later reversed the decision; see Loewus, 2012).

The assault on these institutions also means the further erosion of contexts committed to the engagement of different positions and points of view, even in cases of vigorous disagreement. These contexts are each built around the assumption that such engagements support the search for truth, understanding, and workable social policies. *Polarization of the sort we are seeing itself serves certain political groups and ideologies* (Svolik, 2019).

Furthermore, we are also seeing the erosion of other institutions of civil society (neighborhood organizations and voluntary associations or clubs, for example) that bring people together around common interests and activities despite their differences on other matters of politics or social policy: these remind people (in Deweyan terms) of the things that connect them, even as others might divide them (Putnam, 2000). The decline of these institutions of civil society is both cause and effect of the tendency away from engaging diverse opinions from others and retreating into echo chambers of like-mindedness—especially, but not only online (Nivar, 2021; Skocpol, 2013).

The Limits of Democracy

In such a context, there is nothing in the institutions and practices of democratic polity themselves that guarantees democratic outcomes. Authoritarian and antidemocratic leaders have often been democratically elected, we have seen, and have maintained significant popularity (in part by drawing on the politics of resentment described above). In the United States, even those political institutions and practices themselves have anti-democratic elements. Presidents are chosen by the Electoral College, not by popular vote, which gives disproportionate weight to rural and lower-population states—and indeed, two recently elected Republican presidents, George Bush in 2000

and Donald Trump in 2016, lost the popular vote decisively. In the U.S. Senate, the allocation of two senators per state, regardless of population, along with the filibuster rule that allows a minority of senators (41) to block legislation, means that states with 20% of the total national population can have an absolute veto over legislative action (Suhaka, 2022). The Supreme Court can ignore public preferences on matters, such as abortion rights or gun control, when it determines in its judgment that wider constitutional considerations hold sway. The fact is that even in democratic societies there are institutional bulwarks in place to ensure that decision-making doesn't become *too* democratic.

This legacy can be traced back to Plato and Socrates: a deep distrust of democracy, based on an assumption that a large part of the population—even perhaps the majority—lack the knowledge, expertise, and wisdom to be entrusted with large matters of policy. Hence the preference for representative democracy, where people's choice is limited to choosing those to make decisions on their behalf—and for the existence of counter-majoritarian institutions and practices that can override the public will as it may be expressed at any point in time. Despite the rhetoric of democracy ("we the people") this structural ambivalence toward actual democracy is being intentionally exploited to advance certain partisan and minoritarian positions.

Today this mistrust of democracy is reinforced by concerns in white majority countries that immigration and higher birth rates within communities of color is producing a non-white voting majority. Often that mistrust has racist overtones, echoing the Platonic assumption that this new majority will be less informed and less trustworthy (Farr, 2021). Neo-nationalist movements hearken back to an (imagined) past of shared purpose, cultural homogeneity, and patriotic unity, threatened now by groups who are assumed not to share those values. Here again anti-democratic practices like voting restrictions and gerrymandering seek to minimize the voting impact of these growing non-white populations. Commitment to democratic processes, and an acceptance of their results whatever they might be, is subsumed by selectively using or abandoning those "democratic" processes in the service of gaining and holding political power—even if by an unrepresentative minority.

Maintaining a Democratic Ethos

Drawing these threads together, we are returned to Dewey's original insight: Democracy cannot be sustained only by specific political practices and institutions, but by a more fundamental ethos of equality, inclusion, and mutual respect. Without those conditions, the mere forms of democracy can and often do yield starkly undemocratic outcomes. Here I want to highlight four key dimensions of how to preserve the underlying conditions that make a truly democratic polity possible.

Durable Fact-Finding Institutions

There is little point in facilitating the critical and truth-seeking skills and dispositions of citizens if there is not at the same time a ready supply of reliable, fact-based information for them to consider and work with. Rigorous, evidence-based research from the sciences and other disciplines; carefully curated lessons from knowledgeable instructors at all levels of education; a press that cares about the pursuit of truth, and not only the spread of opinions, are all essential to creating not only the content of reliable beliefs, but also to maintaining a culture that believes in the value of inquiry and honest debate. None of these institutions is flawless, but they are committed to admitting and correcting their errors when they do occur. In this, too, they set a certain model for a public that is susceptible to all the cognitive biases recounted earlier, one that highlights the importance of confronting "inconvenient truths" even when they challenge conventional belief, admitting error, and persistently pursuing lines of inquiry through systematic and falsifiable methodologies. I have

stressed here that these critical capabilities comprise both intellectual skills as well as underlying values and attitudes; in large part because their formation and exercise happen only within social contexts that value and encourage them. Educational institutions, at all levels, are our last best hope of fostering these critical skills, values, and attitudes; and so here too we have found in recent years that these institutions themselves have been sites of struggle been pro-critical and anti-critical political movements. Educators themselves who are committed to this ethos of open inquiry and debate increasingly find themselves working against the headwinds of political rhetoric, legislative interference, and community and parental resistance to the very values of critical thinking.

More broadly, all of these knowledge institutions are under assault in a "post-truth" culture and, in some contexts, being actively replaced with alternate versions of those institutions that do not share the epistemic commitments just described. Rigorous research is being replaced by "pick your own expert," a growing marketplace where you can find plausible-sounding authorities to defend almost any fabrication or prejudice (Winstanley, 2012). Schools and universities are being told what they can and cannot teach, especially where their curricula challenge popular orthodoxies; and school choice models make it easier for parents to find schools for their children that will conform to and reinforce their own worldviews (Chait, 2023; Gambino, 2023). The proliferation of news and opinion channels, in television and a host of social media, allow anyone to find commentary tailored to their preferences. This isn't just an accidental "bubble" that happens to people, but often an "echo chamber" resulting from their active choices (Baumgaertner & Justwan, 2022). The result of all this is not just a selective absorption of information; it is a growing skepticism about whether there can ever be a commonly shared basis of fact for adjudicating disagreements. Without that basis, perceived adversaries in such disagreements are no longer regarded as fellow citizens who have come to different but understandable conclusions about important matters of public concern; rather, they are regarded as idiots (and enemies) whose positions cannot possibly be defended in good faith. Here, too, the erosion of institutions dedicated to maintaining the conditions of shared debate have become an intentional political strategy.

Critical Educational Institutions

At all levels of education, but especially as students get older, schools need to be one place where conventional and popular assumptions get questioned. Questioning them does not necessarily mean rejecting them: from a fallibilist standpoint, even a persisting belief is improved and deepened by encountering contrary and critical points of view. What I called earlier "criticality" is not just the exercise of critical thinking against other points of view (seeking fallacies, etc.): it is also the inclination and willingness to subject *one's own* beliefs and assumptions to question. As such, criticality does not operate in favor of or against any particular political position or point of view. "Critical" is often a term associated with progressive or left-liberal attitudes (most famously, in critical theory, critical pedagogy, or critical race theory); but these positions themselves must be open to questioning, modification, or rejection. Tremendous damage has been done to the idea of "critical thinking" to think that it only operates in one political direction, from the left toward the right, and that progressive or left-liberal positions are shielded from the very same kind of pull-up-from-the-roots critical examination (the assumption that "critical" pedagogies are selective and politically partisan was clearly behind the hostility toward critical thinking in Texas, described earlier: Marcotte, 2021).

There are developmental issues here, to be sure. But every parent knows that skeptical questions like, "Why?" arise very early in the life of children—and even when the subject of the skepticism might need to be approached carefully, the underlying willingness to question is something to be encouraged. As students grow and mature, they should be willing to subject more

and more of their cherished assumptions to questioning; indeed, one could almost define the importance of a liberal education at the university level around the core idea of fostering and exercising that willingness to question (and to be questioned). Here, again, we are witnessing an assault on just this capacity of teaching at the university level, precisely in order to shield certain positions and assumptions from challenge. Unfortunately in this regard, we can find examples from different ends of the political spectrum.

The Dangers of Religion in Public Life

Religious belief is oriented around a personal, spiritual relationship with a presumed metaphysical order that gives meaning to human existence. In this sense, the idea of "religion" is broader than just organized, formal religions—but rather a belief system that gives one, and one's group, a special access to fundamental truths about the world. Such belief systems are a recurrent feature of human culture, across all of human history and around the globe of human societies.

Whatever value religion has to individuals, and to groups, it poses two crucial threats when it becomes part of the fabric of public life and collective decision-making. The first grows out of the specialness an individual, or group, feels as members of a religious community; the beliefs that are shared within the group mark them as different from (and often superior to) non-believers. However much a religious group avows tolerance toward other religious traditions, it is inevitably accompanied by an attitude that those other beliefs are, at best, incomplete or, at worst, deluded and inferior. Therefore, when religious advocates bring their beliefs and commitments into their public roles and identities—as political leaders, administrators, judges, or policy makers—it becomes almost impossible for them not to color their judgments and actions with religiously-derived norms, and for them to resist implicit biases against those who do not share them. Certainly, whatever openly religious public leaders do or say, members of other religious (and also non-religious) traditions will always feel disadvantaged and misunderstood. The same judgments operate in both directions; others will perceive bias and suspect a deeper agenda of discrimination.

The other problem, echoing a theme throughout this paper, is that it is the nature of religious beliefs (in the broad sense) to resist fallibilism: such beliefs are resistant to counterevidence and questioning, they emphasize faith over reason (in religious matters), and most seriously of all they color political, legal, or policy judgments with the aura of religious certainty. Now, suddenly, disagreement or debate about those judgments becomes also partly about the undercarriage of belief and faith that inspires them—and resolving such disagreements becomes impossible (the debate over abortion is a good example of this). To the extent that belief and faith resist fallibilism, now matters of public policy do too; and here again we see a fundamental threat to democracy, which *must* be built around the willingness to subject *all* positions to broader re-examination and debate. Finally, to echo the point, "religious belief" here can extend to other belief systems that are secular in nature, but also based on we/they ontologies and assumptions about the world that are not susceptible to question.

Diversity, and Diversities

A commitment to "diversity" (often along with its allied principles equity and inclusion, or DEI) has very quickly become a widespread commitment across the institutions of society, especially in education. DEI policies, DEI officers, and DEI assessments and reviews reflect a broadly shared assumption that these institutions are too homogenous and unrepresentative, and need reforming (Burbules, 2021). Beyond that concern, however, positions begin to diverge, and this is happening in part because people mean different things by "diversity" as an aim. For some, it means advancing the representation of specific groups who have been historically disadvantaged; here "diversity" is a shorthand for affirmative action policies and targeted recruitment and hiring. It

means, along with the principles of equity and inclusion, creating an environment in which these members of these particular groups can feel a sense of belonging and thrive (hence, it requires those institutions to recruit a critical mass of new members and not just tokens). It means creating a culture that is attuned to subtle dynamics of stereotyping and discrimination, and to overcoming those. "Diversity" therefore is not just about demographic statistics but about a broader process of institutional reform and culture change.

"Diversity" is also used in a different sense, especially but not only in educational contexts: here diversity is a broader principle based on the assumption that different perspectives, voices, and experiences produce a more creative and dynamic environment for learning, problem-solving, and discovery. Whether in scientific laboratories or in classrooms, promoting diversity is a way of ensuring that different points of view engage one another in order to diversify approaches and to avoid homogeneous "group think" of any sort. Furthermore, especially in educational settings, it is believed that learning to acknowledge, respect, and deal with such differences is itself a valuable learning goal, one that can only be achieved by working through the difficulties of coping with such differences (misunderstanding, disagreement, value conflicts, and so on). The democratic virtues of openmindedness, pluralism, and tolerance are expected to grow out of these engagements.

Certainly, diversity in the first sense (advancing the representation of specific groups) and diversity in the second sense (creating conditions for learning from and with people who are not like you) overlap: the first can support the second. But diversity in the second sense is a broader concept, because it includes other kinds of diversity: international diversity, linguistic diversity, religious (and non-religious) diversity, political and ideological diversity, urban/rural diversity, differently abled diversity, and others—hence "diversities." All of these can create conditions for learning from and with people who are not like you, along multiple dimensions.

As noted, these two approaches to diversity can support and reinforce each other, but at the level of policy they can also clash. Given limited student or faculty slots, which groups are a priority for filling them to achieve "diversity"? How do we value the *educational* contribution of having, say, more students from some particular racial and ethnic group, with having more international students, more rural students, or more students from a socially conservative point of view? (Similarly, of course, with faculty. Maybe even more so.) This potential clash has led some to argue that only the first approach to diversity is truly "moral," and that the latter conception and rationale are merely "instrumental." In other words, some argue that the imperative to correct an historical legacy of injustice and exclusion for specific groups overrides the potential benefits of other kinds of diversity. Indeed, they regard the second view as a distraction from the imperative of the first—a way of co-opting "diversity" into a more comfortable institutional policy (Jaschik, 2021).

Conclusion

These four conditions constitute the elements of a democratic culture and way of life that are necessary for a critically thinking citizenry to flourish. Fact-finding institutions both provide the raw material out of which informed public reasoning can take place, and help maintain the respect for serious, careful fact-finding processes. Educational institutions must actively promote both the skills of thinking critically, and the underlying commitment, called here "criticality," to exercise those skills both in engaging with and evaluating other points of view, and in questioning one's own. Religion has a central role to play in many human cultures, but it threatens democracy and critical thinking when it seeks to determine matters of public policy, because it imports unquestionable commitments into a space where *all* positions must be subject to question. Diversity both in the more narrow and broader sense laid out here is a condition for providing the range of views, voices, and perspectives necessary to recognize and challenge the limits and blind spots of dominant,

conventional ways of thinking, and for creating the social conditions in which the democratic virtues of openmindedness, pluralism, and tolerance get exercised and tested.

In all these ways, it is not just that critical thinking is an essential condition of democracy; it is also that certain institutional and social conditions that are essential to democracy are necessary for critical thinking—especially the dispositional elements or aspects of character that make us willing and able *to be critical*. Each is constitutive for the other. Moreover, this framework changes the way we think about critical thinking itself: not just an educational aim to be fostered in school curricula, but a way of life that is inseparable from the social conditions and personal relationships that sustain it. Critical thinking is not just a cognitive skill in detecting fallacious arguments and falsehoods, but a broader attitude of questioning all views, including one's own and including those that might be popular and shared by those around us. That broader attitude only grows out of a culture and environment that embraces uncertainty and the provisionality of all truths. Schools have a role to play in this, but so do families, churches, the media (including social media), and our wider political discourse. To be truly critically minded, we need to allow ourselves to be encountered and challenged by other views, even those we might find objectionable; but this ethos is also, reciprocally, a challenge to those other views to participate in a public sphere defined by openmindedness, pluralism, and tolerance. And those conditions, I have argued here, are under active assault in the United States and many other countries around the world. Democracy in any meaningful sense cannot survive without them.

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Special Issue
Education and the Challenges for Democracy

archivos analíticos de políticas educativas

Volume 31 Number 104 September 19, 2023 ISSN 1068-2341