What is Critical Thinking?
by
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During this course and others that you will take in the School of Policy, Planning and Development, we will be asking you to improve your skills as a critical thinker. Many students are unclear as to what is meant by critical thinking. This brief synopsis suggests some of the components of critical thinking to give you a better idea of what we are asking you to do. Several of the ideas are taken from a book by Stephen D. Brookfield, Developing Critical Thinkers. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1988. It's a good book if you wish to explore this subject further.

Critical thinking as a concept has been interpreted in a number of ways. Various scholars suggest that it involves logical reasoning; the application of reflective judgment; hunting for assumptions; creating, using and testing meanings; recognizing ambiguity in reasoning, identifying contradictions in arguments, ascertaining the empirical soundness of generalized conclusions. It requires curiosity, flexibility, skepticism and honesty. It requires one to distinguish bias from reason, fact from opinion.

Habermas (Communication and the Evolution of Society, 1979) equates critical thinking with emancipatory learning -- learning which people frees from personal, institutional, or environmental forces that prevent them from seeing new directions, from gaining control of their lives, their society and their world.

Another form of critical thinking is termed dialectical thinking, which focuses on the understanding and resolution of contradictions as a means of learning.

Critical thinking involves more than cognitive activities such as logical reasoning or scrutinizing arguments for assertions unsupported by evidence. It also involves our recognizing the assumptions underlying our beliefs and behaviors. It means we can give justifications for our ideas and actions. Most importantly, we try to judge the rationality of these justifications by comparing them to a range of varying interpretations and perspectives as well as testing them in the world of experience.

Critical thinking is not negative thinking. It is not the same as being critical in the sense of petty faultfinding or belittling. In fact the opposite is true. Critical thinking allows us to become aware of the diversity of values, behaviors and social structures in our world. Through realizing this diversity, our commitments to our own values, actions and social structures are informed by a sense of humility. We gain awareness that others in the world have the same sense of certainty we do, but about ideas, values and actions that are completely contrary to our own.

To be critical is not to belittle; it is to question. Critical thinking is complex and frequently perplexing, since it requires the suspension of belief and the jettisoning of assumptions previously accepted without question.
Although critical thinking means many things to many people, it may be helpful to think of it as having seven major components.

1. **Identifying and challenging assumptions.**

   Try to identify the assumptions that underlie the ideas, beliefs, values, and actions that we take for granted.

   Identify the assumptions made in the arguments of others.

   Once the assumptions are identified, examine their accuracy and validity.

   Ask awkward questions concerning whether taken for granted, common sense ideas fit the realities you experience in your daily life.

   Discover how hidden and uncritically assimilated assumptions are important to shaping our habitual perceptions, understandings, and interpretations of the world. These interpretations influence individual and organizational behaviors, public policies and the quality of our lives.

2. **Becoming aware of the context in which you act -- the culture and time in which you live.**

   Critical thinkers become aware of how all thoughts and actions are influenced by the specific context in which they take place.

   When you become aware of how context shapes what you consider normal and natural ways of thinking and living, you will realize that in other contexts entirely different norms of organizing the workplace, behaving politically, interpreting the media are considered ordinary.

3. **Imagining and exploring alternatives -- new ways of thinking and acting.**

   Critical thinking requires the ability to imagine and explore alternatives to existing ways of thinking and acting -- considering alternative contexts and the assumptions that underlie them.

   Develop a vision of what it might be like to live in the best of all societies and imagine how such a vision might be made practical.

   Imagine the worst that can happen and actions to take to prevent it.
4. Developing reflective skepticism.

Always ask *cui bono*. Who benefits?

When we realize that alternatives to supposedly fixed belief systems, habitual behaviors, and entrenched social structures always exist, we become skeptical of claims to universal truth or to ultimate solutions.

Beware of those who claim *absolute certainty* whether based on science, the word of God, or their own deranged rantings.

This does not imply we believe in nothing, that we become completely cynical about making any commitments in life. It does suggest that commitments are based on examining assumptions, reflectively analyzing our ideas in order to establish the validity of the commitment by examining its congruence with reality, as we perceive it.

Our commitments are no longer slavish and uninformed, the result of successful socialization. Instead, they are arrived at after skeptical scrutiny and after being repeatedly tested against reality, as we understand it. The commitments are all the stronger for having been tested through critical analysis. Such commitments are informed and rational and balanced by recognition of the *possibility* they might still be false.

If asked, we can justify our reasons for our commitments and point to evidence in their support. We can identify our assumptions and recognize the limits of our context while still holding true to hard-won beliefs and commitments.

5. Be wary of those who would predict the future.

Remember, no one can predict the future with precision and accuracy. We can speculate. We can make good guesses. We can suggest what is likely to happen if a present trend or course of action is continued. But we can never know for certain what the future will hold for us.

Nonetheless we must act and make policy based on assumptions about the future. By recognizing these actions and policies are based on assumptions, we will be in a better position to change them as new facts and new contexts emerge.
6. Watch for internal contradictions in an argument.

The famed Professor of Linguistics and Semantics, and peace advocate Noam Chomsky, makes this point well. When asked about the reasons for the war in Iraq, Chomsky said, [the] “reasons we are given can't possibly be the reasons. And we know that, because they are internally contradictory.” “When people give you contradictory reasons every time they speak, all they are saying is: "don't believe a word I say."1

7. Know your sources.

The first source you find under “Google” may not be the original source for the material you need. Many sources have an ideological bias, especially the “think tanks.” You need to read their statements about their philosophy and also check other sources to make sure you are not getting a one-sided point of view.

Go to the original source of the material. Executive summaries may be skewed. Interpretations may be selective. No matter how often you see the same “facts” described in a variety of media, they may still be wrong. Often reporters repeat the conventional wisdom (what is commonly “known” or believed to be true) without ever checking on the original source. If they do check, they do not often question the assumptions and use critical thinking. [They work on short deadlines; you do not, so you can do a much better job.]