

Accentuating the Positive in Critical Thinking

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In his interesting and stimulating paper, Peter Carbone argues that political empowerment of parents, which is a goal for both conservatives and many in the new left, is incompatible with the goal of critical thinking, which also is a goal at least for many in the new left. In order to sustain this point, he takes a strong sense of critical thinking, to use Richard Paul's term, and cites a number of instances of parental opposition to the reason-seeking, open-to-alternatives, self-and-other-examination kind of thinking urged by Paul and many others, including Harvey Seigel, John McPeck, and me.

That some conflicts and incompatibilities exist is clear. That they are as serious as Carbone seems to believe is dubious. I shall follow two lines in arguing that he overaccentuates the negative.

TYPICALITY

First, I wonder how typical is the sort of parent who wants to censor *Catcher in the Rye*, *Snow White*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*. On the other side, I can produce quotes from members of the American Civil Liberties Union and many other organizations that exhibit support for the free and open distribution of those works. The statements of educational goals endorsed by the most recent United States presidents from each of its major political parties (President Bush and President Clinton) included a statement to the effect that by the year 2000, college graduates will have demonstrated significant improvement in their critical thinking abilities (Goal 5.5 of *America 2000* and *Goals 2000*). The fact is that the governments under which most of us live are basically committed to freedom of speech, press, and religion, and those governments by and large enjoy the support of their citizens. Even though there are many deviations, the central tendency appears to me to be in favor of openness.

It is difficult to prove what I believe about the central tendency of public opinion, but to make his case for incompatibility, Carbone needs to show that I am wrong. His citation of the set of examples that he cited does not do the job.

In any society, we can expect a range of opinions. Parental empowerment requires that the empowered parents make accommodation among themselves. Will this accommodation go against strong critical thinking?

I am reminded of an incident at Evanston Township High School in the mid-fifties when I was a research assistant working for the Project for the Improvement of Thinking at the University of Illinois supported by the State of Illinois, and led by Bunnie Smith (a former president of PES) and Kenneth Henderson. Mary Anne Raywid (another former president of PES) worked with me as a research assistant on the project.

We were exploring ways to embed critical thinking instruction in standard subject matter area instruction. Some local groups organized and objected to our

operation. Their view was that it is the school's job to teach students the facts, and the parents' job to teach them how to think with these facts. The Council for Basic Education was in part behind this effort.

Lloyd Michaels, the canny Superintendent of Schools, had organized a lay advisory committee, consisting of about fifty leading citizens of Evanston. He arranged for us to present our goals and plans to this committee. We did, and the committee voted a resounding endorsement of the operation. As a result, we were able to proceed with this critical thinking project without further problems of this sort.

You might say that Evanston is unique. Of course it is. But part of its uniqueness lies in the type of parents you find among its citizens — opinion influencers, people good at working on committees and in groups, people who are leaders in parental empowerment.

You might say that this example is out of date. But remember. This was at the height of the McCarthy era. Criticism of the sort that intimidates Carbone was much stronger then. But it was overcome.

This case of course does not settle the issue. But it does give us pause. I have always found a lot of support out there in the woodwork for my efforts in critical thinking. Accordingly, I am still optimistic that parental empowerment will generally produce parental support, if all parents are empowered, and there is a full and free exchange of information.

DEGREES OF STRENGTH OF CRITICAL THINKING

My second concern lies in Carbone's dichotomy between strong critical thinking and technical or instrumental rationality. There is a whole range of strengths and aggressiveness of critical thinking in between.

I suspect that Carbone is probably right in thinking that continual challenging of everything in sight will not be tolerated by parents. It will not be tolerated by employers or peers either. But there is no reason to teach students to be confrontational, to be "in your face." There are many discreet ways to seek reasons, be open to alternatives, wonder about credibility of sources, secure greater clarity, wonder what someone's point is, seek information, wonder about the adequacy of the evidence, grasp the total situation, identify others assumptions, and formulate and offer one's hypotheses.

What I have just done is to offer in paragraph form the high points of the conceptualization of critical thinking¹ that I have been formulating over the years since that experience as a research assistant I mentioned earlier. We do not even need to push all of these things all at once for every student. Rather we can do the best we can, starting where they are, and taking them as far as we can. That is basic strategy for good teaching, and a formula for non-violent change. Improving the critical thinking prowess and dispositions of the members of the population will take time. We can not expect to get there all at once.

Here are some sample questions that might arise in a separate critical thinking course or in another course in which critical thinking instruction is embedded. These

questions do not require confrontation, nor do they require that one be adept in all aspects of critical thinking at once. No doubt you can imagine many more:

1. Who fired the first shot in the Revolutionary War (colonies vs. Britain), the colonists or the redcoats?
2. Did Napoleon die of arsenic poisoning, or of cancer (as generally believed until recently)?
3. Should Polonius (in *Hamlet*) be played as a silly old man or an elder statesman?
4. Which of the engine oils that students in this (chemistry) class use is best at eliminating the acids developed in the kind of driving done by members of this class?
5. All things considered, do motorcycle helmets actually protect motorcyclists?
6. Who should be responsible for (and receive the profits from) the soft drink machine in school, the student council or the senior class?
7. Accepting the limits placed by the municipal authorities, what should be the parking policies for the use of the student parking lot?
8. Does cutting trees deplete the oxygen supply?
9. What is the (actual, not just idealized) optimal angle for launching an arrow from a bow?
10. Using a given frying pan on a given burner on a given stove, what is the optimal way to prepare an omelette?

Each of these questions needs refinement for the situation, and some might be locally sensitive, calling for discretion, but the set shows some specific sorts of things that can be investigated by students with a teacher's leadership. Such investigations, if handled well, can promote students' critical thinking abilities and dispositions at various levels. Furthermore, they can challenge the students' own beliefs — generally without being confrontational toward parents.

SUMMARY

In sum, although Peter Carbone has pointed out an important problem, I feel that he has exaggerated it by pointing only to extremes. At least, he has not shown that his outspoken critics are typical, and he has neglected a number of possibilities that lie along the continuum between strong and outspoken critical thinking for everyone at once and technical or instrumental rationality. Teaching and change take time.

1. For elaboration, see Robert H. Ennis, *Critical Thinking* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1996), and Robert H. Ennis, "Critical Thinking: A Streamlined Conception," *Teaching Philosophy* 14, (1991): 5-25.