

Critical Thinking Research: A Response to Stephen Norris

Many disciplines other than psychology can help us understand critical thinking; educators need to draw upon these sources as they design programs for teaching reasoning.

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Norris has done well at an exceedingly difficult task. Nevertheless, he insufficiently highlights two important points.

The first concerns the scope of research relevant to critical thinking. Recently, by means of an ERIC computer search, I identified 1,894 articles written about critical thinking in the last seven years. Just to read the abstracts of these articles, without attempting to synthesize their results, is a major task. Even then we but scratch the surface. There is a wide array of scholarly projects, cutting across a variety of disciplines, that can potentially contribute to critical thinking instruction (Benderson, 1984).

Research in the fields of sociology and anthropology has revealed a variety of ways in which our thoughts, actions, and perceptions reflect provincial, in-group, or ethnocentric commitments and biases. From research into social perception we learn that individuals unconsciously operate with implicit theories about people that bias their judgments in identifiable directions (Toch and Smith, 1968). Insights from this research can be useful in devising pedagogical strategies in critical thinking instruction.

In psychology, there are a variety of relevant research traditions in addition to those of cognitive and developmental psychology. Think, for example, of the many illuminating studies dealing with the nature and function of fear, prejudice, and self-deception in human thought. Students need ex-

ercises that will help them discover their own self-deceptive strategies.

Results from studies of the effects of the media and propaganda on values and beliefs can also be used to devise exercises and to nurture media listening and viewing skills and propaganda detection sensitivities (Postman, 1985).

The second point that Norris fails to emphasize is the importance of dialectical thinking. We must not allow our models of critical thinking to be principally drawn from the kind of specialized, compartmentalized thinking that is dominant in the technical disciplines. This tendency is strong, for example, among cognitive psychologists (Paul, 1984; Habermas, 1982). Most everyday thinking about pressing real-life problems crosses disciplinary categories and domains and involves opposing points of view and contradictory lines of reasoning (Blair, 1984; Scriven, 1985). We need to ensure, therefore, that students receive a substantial amount of practice in reasoning dialogically or dialectically, so that they become comfortable with and skilled in weighing, reconciling, and assessing contradictory points of view through rational dialogue, discussion, and debate.

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To properly design critical thinking instruction, we must cast our nets widely when we define research and scholarly work relevant to it. And we must focus our attention on the kinds of problems and thinking that are most common and vexing in our everyday lives, as well as on the substantial sociological and psychological obstacles to rational thought. Only then will we nurture critical thought in the *strong sense* required for a society that aspires to democratic values and institutions (Paul, 1984; Benderson, 1984; Scriven, 1985) □

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