

Letters

Little Evidence of Teaching for Thinking

The September and November 1984 issues on thinking skills were comprehensive and insightful. At a recent Northwest Regional Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (Seattle, April 1985), I found that I was not alone in this assessment. Other professors have found the information a gold mine for their classes, directors of instruction are using the ideas to enrich and broaden their basic skills curriculum, and teachers of English are interested in ways to incorporate these ideas. In my visits to secondary schools as a field supervisor, I see little evidence of teaching for thinking. Perhaps the focus you provided may be the step needed to make educators aware and willing to encourage their students to think. I hope such groups as the network you suggest will keep us informed.

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Publishers Should Integrate Thinking in Standard Courses

Until curriculum designers aiming at the public schools get the attention of commercial publishers with their basic texts, workbooks, and ditto masters, critical thinking will not make an impact in American schools. Critical thinking processes should be directed toward influencing standard courses in science and social studies from grade 5 through 8, before the elective phenomenon takes over in high school.

"Free-standing" approaches like

Lipman's *Philosophy for Children* (September 1984) are working well in the middle grades. Fortunately, they are being offered to all students, not just the academically gifted.

What happens next? Unless a way is found to affect standard courses in science, social studies, health, and perhaps literature, special courses in thinking will remain only a memorable experience for one marking period.

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Unfair to Critical Thinking

Were I to accept Edward de Bono's notion of critical or "evaluative" thinking (September 1984), and were I to practice it in the manner he does, I'm sure that I, too, would find it sorely wanting. But I doubt that I would turn to "lateral" thinking, because if I followed his example, I would be forced to caricature it as grossly as he caricatures critical thinking.

Taking my lead from his choice of that sense of the word "critical"—which means fault-finding, negative, and carping—I would select that meaning of "lateral" that denotes a sidetrack off the main branch. I would then argue that we shouldn't be teaching children to chase trivial and misleading side-issues that they haphazardly dream up. Of course, I would be ignoring any other meaning of lateral as de Bono ignores the positive sense of "critical," or the skilled judgment of truth and merit. Should I continue to follow his lead, I would be obligated to tidily, if inaccurately, sum up lateral thinking as the reliance on accidental

and random intuitions and schemes and then issue the stern warning that this is not all there is to thinking. I believe this faithfully follows the precedent set by de Bono's warning, just in the nick of time, that critical thinking, or "point-scoring, debate, argument, ... error spotting" and "just [supporting] an opinion," are not all there is to thinking.

I do not share this shallow concept of critical thinking nor do I accept de Bono's vague distinction between "reactive" thinking and "operacy" (what he calls "the skills of 'doing'"). One's actions are based on one's beliefs, values, and desires, and if these are inaccurate or unjust then the actions that follow from them must be ineffective, counter-productive, or unjust. And I do not believe that sound critical thinking courses ignore the need to examine one's own thoughts and beliefs, as opposed to simply "reacting" to the reasoning of others. Thus, the "deciding, choosing, taking initiative, constructing, and planning" that de Bono feels a critical thinker can't do are exactly the thing that good critical thinking courses require.

Strong critical thinking courses emphasize the need to guard against rigid faithfulness to one set pattern of thinking and stress the need to sympathetically enter into alternate, even radically different, points of view. They accomplish precisely what de Bono claims is unique to "lateral" thinking.

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Knowing What You Want Is Not Enough

In your April issue Connie Muther said that "the process of textbook selection

can actually be an easier task than it currently is" if evaluators just know what they want.

I found the opposite to be the case when I tried to select a high school world history text. I wanted a moderately priced book that consistently demonstrated high scholarship and was not overwhelmingly biased toward western Europe.

I went through book after lavish book with increasing frustration. The texts seemed to copycat one another. Most were highly biased toward western Europe. And when the authors tried to comment on the rest of the world, their scholarship often seemed questionable.

Connie Muther said that "The more specific the description, the easier the task of finding a textbook program that most closely matches it—or is easiest to fix." I found this not to be true.

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Understanding the Cold War

I am delighted to see curriculum people taking an interest in how the Cold War is taught. Dennis Carlson (May 1985) made some excellent points and I applaud his search for "a new interpretive framework." Carlson rightly mentions "broader political, social, and cultural issues and debates," and Dianne Jones gets at some of those in her excellent article in the same issue.

My explanation of the Cold War based on my own research in and teaching of this important topic, begins with the two cultures—American and Russian—because cultural conflict and misunderstanding go even deeper than ideology. Consider Russian (not merely Soviet) paranoia because of a

thousand years of invasions by Vikings, Mongols, Turks, and many others, including Germans in two world wars, with a Western intervention at the end of the first one. At minimum, this has led to pessimism and a desperate search for security—including creation of the "satellites" in eastern Europe at the end of World War II.

One could even—very carefully—delve into "psychohistory" in raising the question of Russians having manic-depressive tendencies because of the centuries-long need to endure long, harsh winters and use the brief summers in bursts of activity.

Compare all this with Americans' reactions to our vastly different situation: safety from invasion and occupation, plentiful natural resources, and a generally milder climate, permitting easier exploitation of those resources. All of this has resulted not merely in prosperity but also in optimism rather than pessimism, economic development rather than a search for security, and finally the inability to understand the Russian mentality.

Add to that deep American antipathy toward communism as anti-religious, undemocratic, and without a free economy. Note, too, the general impact of "Marxist-Leninism" in assuring Russians of inevitable conflict with the capitalist West.

Throw in the fact of isolationism in *both* peoples, meaning ignorance of the outside world and a readiness to be suspicious of people who are "different."

Finally, there is the matter of leadership, which generally sets the tone of public reactions. Consider Soviet leadership, noting the forecast of 150 years ago by poet Mikhail Lermontov of the emergence of the "man of iron" who would impose total tyranny, and grasp-

ing the fact that the Tsarist regime had in it the roots of Stalinism. Contrast that with American leadership, which must emerge with the consent of public opinion in a very different culture.

Here is at least the beginning of that new framework.

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Hope for Intellectual Freedom

There is hope for intellectual and academic freedom as long as there are educators like Richard Paul shooting arrows from their ivory towers. "Bloom's Taxonomy and Critical Thinking Instruction" (May 1985) should be read by educators everywhere. Maybe it's not too late to stop the Bloom-Skinner mastery learning tidal wave from engulfing what little intellectual freedom is left in American classrooms. Paul's article should be read immediately by all educators who are presently involved in putting the final touches on their K-12 comprehensive "basic" (?) skills curriculums with their highly objectionable competencies. What is being recommended and implemented in our schools has nothing to do with critical thinking. How could it when it is, in so many instances, based on Bloom's Taxonomy?

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