

# Teaching Thinking Needn't Put Able Thinkers at Risk: A Response to John Baer

The chances are greater that educators may retreat from teaching thinking than that able thinkers will be harmed by our efforts to help them.

Snow dome courtesy The Christmas Attic, Alexandria, Virginia. Photograph by Dennis Johnson.



One relic of my youth is a souvenir of a trip to the White Mountains in New Hampshire—a snowstorm in a sphere of glass. Give it a shake, and you'll see a swirl of flakes surround the Old Man of the Mountain, who stolidly bears up through this imaginary trial, as his stone visage does through winter after real winter. I remember how I loved the beauty of that half-real world—a blizzard in a bottle.

Likewise, I can resonate with the concerns John Baer expresses so artfully. I can project myself into the world that he pictures. Therein able thinkers are at risk from being over-anointed with the snake oils of better thinking. At the same time, though, I have the uneasy feeling that his concerns may only be half-real and that his warnings might even do more mischief than the dangers of which he warns.

*Is it broke?* At the center of John Baer's position lies the venerable principle: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." But how often is it broke? Although he carefully acknowledges that shortfalls in students' thinking are frequent, the general tone of his title and text suggests that a sizable fraction of students are able thinkers. However, in some respects almost *all* students, however gifted, think poorly. For example, my own research of informal reasoning shows biased one-sided reasoning to

be nearly universal, even in quite educated and talented populations (Perkins 1985). Also, thinking is many-sided, and a student able in one sort of thinking is likely to be weak in some other. For example, we know that a student may be academically sharp but not very creative, or vice versa—a well-established result concerning the relationship between creativity and academic skills (e.g., Wallach 1985).

In sum, *all-round* able thinkers are rare. Most able thinkers would gain from an intervention of some sort.

*If it ain't broke, will fixes do harm?* The metaphor of "fixing" seems too harsh. Many thinking strategies aim not at fixing but extending and amplifying. Samantha may be pretty inventive, but timely use of "brainstorming" or some other strategy might help to make her a bit more so. Derek may be a natural critical thinker, but knowing about begging the question or the power of counterexamples could sharpen his native skills.

But might not a taught strategy sometimes prove more belabored and yield poorer results than an able thinker's natural tendency? Yes, just as John Baer says, and we should certainly watch out for rigid teachers demanding compliance and ingraining ineffective strategies. But, having had considerable experience in the thinking skills movement, I'm glad to say that I have rarely encountered such rigidity; indeed, underselling thinking strategies to students is more common than overselling them. And, in the absence of such rigidity, when students see a shorter way, they seem to take it, skipping the strategy.

Let me offer a personal testimonial: I'm an enthusiastic user of strategies and employ extensively the sorts of strategies my colleagues and I and others discuss (e.g., Baron and Sternberg 1986, Perkins 1986). But, when a sound shortcut suggests itself, I take it reflexively. I don't have to ask myself permission to put strategies aside, because the mind naturally flows toward emergent opportunities. Moreover, the same strategy I skip today may be the very one that helps me tomorrow, when a natural path doesn't open up.

**"Underselling thinking strategies to students is more common than overselling them."**

*Broke or not, will students' thinking mislead them in their efforts to articulate its unconscious components?*

John Baer points to a controversy about how much of thinking is unconscious and fears that, when students reflect upon and revise their thinking, they may deceive themselves about its nature and go awry. The controversy is not really acute: most psychologists believe that the larger part of moment-to-moment thinking occurs unconsciously. My own position is misrepresented, for I argue only against the rather special case of problem-solving-like unconscious thinking over extended periods, not unconscious thinking in general (Perkins 1981). Baer's fear of self-deception seems amiss also, because, although a great deal of thinking may occur unconsciously, the control processes that constitute and lead to fresh patterns of thought appear to be consciously accessible, as argued in detail by Ericsson and Simon (1984). It is just these control processes that most efforts to develop students' thinking address.

John Baer's articulate and concerned article certainly deserves praise for its reasonable and carefully hedged arguments. My caution is that what's a reasonable concern isn't al-

ways a real one. It's reasonable that there might be many students who are all-round able thinkers, but research argues that most students could benefit from some thinking instruction. It's reasonable to think of thinking strategies as "fixes," but they are more like extenders and amplifiers that begin wherever students are and help them to go further. It's reasonable that rigid teachers might enforce round-about ways of thinking, but teachers usually are too sensible, and our thinking too inclined to directness, for that to be a serious problem. It's also reasonable that people might deceive themselves about how they think, but the control processes addressed by most efforts to improve thinking are quite accessible.

Consequently, my fear becomes less that able thinkers will run afoul of efforts to teach thinking than that educators uncertain about the importance and possibility of teaching thinking will find reasons in John Baer's article to hang back. Nicely bottled though his blizzard is, we can still get stuck in it. □

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