The CATESOL Journal

CATESOL EXCHANGE

Critical Thinking and The Process of Critical Inquiry

ROBIN MOLLICA
City College of San Francisco

What We Teach as *Critical Thinking*

Open any writing text and you will see that critical thinking is taught as a skill devoted to the operations of logic and rooting out the mistakes in one's own and other's logic. We ask students to search for what may reduce the credibility of arguments, such as logical fallacies, hidden premises, or assumptions. We teach our students to construct arguments that avoid fallacious appeals and build refutations of their arguments.

Along with logical operations, I have tried to foster a critical spirit and an appreciation of the values underlying critical thinking. For example, to encourage open-mindedness, fairness, and objectivity, I have students read material that expresses multiple viewpoints, ambiguity, and disagreement among authorities. For intellectual honesty, they must look for points which they can concede and I ask them to refrain from drawing conclusions until they have read many sides of an issue.

However, in reading students' written drafts and conferencing with them throughout their writing and research process, I have found that only a few adopt these values, while others use critical thinking skills as a tool to argue for the validity of their opinions, not necessarily to find some truth or think deeply about a topic.

For example, in an advanced composition class in ESL I taught at City College of San Francisco last semester, the students were asked to write a research paper on a current controversial topic. One student wrote an essay arguing that China should be granted Most Favored Nation status because it was establishing better human rights practices. In it, he supported his opinion only by discussing the improvements that China was making, failing to acknowledge other more serious violations that were presented in the sources he used. (Although it may seem that he had simply done inadequate

research and/or taken inadequate consideration of known materials or arguments, I believe other factors were at work.)

This student's thesis statement (and the research question which initially guided his research) remained the same throughout the research process. However, another student who began this writing assignment with the same thesis found herself confused in the course of her research by the complexity of the subject. Concerned about the various views she encountered, she wondered whether she had to stand firm with her original thesis or whether she could acknowledge the complexity of the problem in the essay.

Critical Inquiry and Its Implications for Writing

The reasonableness of an argument is the sense you get as a reader that the author is fair and sincere. The reasonable writer does not conceal or distort facts. Fair arguments always avoid logical fallacies and acknowledge opposition. If the opposition is dismissed too quickly, the reader is justified in questioning the honesty, fairness, and validity of the argument.

Unlike the first student, who used persuasive argumentation to justify his point, the second student was involved in the process of critical inquiry by questioning her assumptions, not just by looking for information that would support her belief. Although the process of critical inquiry alone does not seem to make for better argumentative essays, the second student's final draft was noticeably better for several reasons. First, the writer's voice seemed more authentic and the writing less formulaic since it revealed a personal perspective based on the evidence reviewed. Furthermore, the thesis was more developed due to the synthesis of examples from many sides of the issue. As a result, the argument was more credible, reflecting the writer considerations and conceding the complexity of the problem. The suggestions the writer proposed seemed more realistic in their application and more convincing because of her objectivity and fairness in examining the facts. To me, she had questioned her assumptions and found herself not just looking for support for her opinions, but looking for something that rang true for her.

Some Factors to Consider

I have often wondered what makes some students embark on critical inquiry and others not. At first glance, it does not appear that the language ability of those who do is necessarily more sophisticated than that of others, although this may play some part in their ability to tolerate ambiguity and express their opinions. Many students say that they do not have enough time to fully engage themselves in the research process or that they have other responsibilities in their lives, such as family and jobs, which take precedence over school work. Those that seem to be engaged, however, have an intention to discover what is most true for themselves, a willingness to let go of the preconceived notions, a desire to apply critical thinking values, and a personal interest in reaching the most reasonable conclusion or solution. (Students gave these answers when asked what made their research successful, meaningful, and valuable to them.) Other factors may also be involved, such as an individual's age, intellectual capacity, or ethical approach to life as well as teacher expectations and methodology.

All of the above could be considerations for both native and nonnative speakers of English, but what distinguishes ESL students from others is their multicultural backgrounds, and so we must also take into consideration the different cultural expectations and practices that students bring into our classrooms which have an influence on their approach to writing and critical thinking.

An example of how culture affects the conventions of writing was illustrated by a student I had from China who, in his research paper, had not only copied phrases from another text without using quotation marks, but conceded that his opinion was not important since he had very little expertise in the area he had researched. Since we had discussed thesis statements, source citations, and the use of quotation marks throughout the semester, I assumed that he knew he must assert his opinion in a thesis statement and that copying another writer's words without using quotation marks is plagiarism. However, when I asked him about this, he failed to comprehend that it was unacceptable. He said, "Knowing whose words to copy is a sign of a literate and educated person in China. My opinions will convince no one." In China he was taught that good writing must include the words of others who are respected by that society and that their opinions are more desirable than his own, while in my classroom he was encouraged to assert his own opinions and use expert opinion only as support for his own. If the concept of plagiarism and rhetorical conventions in writing are determined in part by culture, acceptable ways of thinking critically could be, too.

Pedagogy

One thing I have found helpful in encouraging critical inquiry is to have students keep a log of their research process. In the log, students both summarize what they have done in their research during a given week and answer questions I assign. The questions are intended to focus the students' attention on their own critical thinking (reasoning) process and the underlying values of critical thinking, to give them permission to change their minds, and to make them aware of different ways of knowing (e.g., intu-

ition). A few of the questions they answer are:

1. Did your research question change over the course of the research? If so, what questions did you begin with, what changes did you make, and why?
2. Do you believe you deliberately left out arguments and/or factual information that proved your position wrong? If so, why?
3. How would your position have changed if you had considered information that was contrary to your position?
4. Was there anything that you believed was true at some point in your research process that was changed or verified with further research?

At some point during the semester, I have an individual conference with all students to discuss their research process, using both their summaries and the above questions as a springboard for discussion.

Conclusion

The way we perceive or define critical thinking determines the way we teach it and what we expect from our students. If as educators we believe that the application of critical thinking leads to intellectual development and personal transformation, we have to demonstrate to students that effective argumentation is not merely using critical concepts and techniques to maintain our prejudices. Assuming that such development and transformation is desirable and valuable, we may need to teach critical thinking by modeling the process one undergoes in thinking critically, just as in most composition courses we model the writing process. Further research in various fields such as sociolinguistics, English, philosophy, and education may help us understand how knowledge and thought processes are culturally constructed and how rhetoric plays a role cross-culturally in the construction of thinking and writing. We need to clarify what it is we are teaching when we teach critical thinking. Further, we need to delineate the stages involved in critical inquiry, determine our expectations in teaching critical thinking, and utilize both our students' knowledge – that is, what they have to say about critical thinking – and our findings through classroom research in designing classroom practices that will encourage the process of critical inquiry. ■