

Conversations with Critical Thinkers

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Introduction

More and more leaders in education, business, and other fields are saying that our ability to think critically is key to meeting the demands of modern life. They cite the rapid pace of technological change, a global economy, increasing cultural diversity, and the complexities of today's world as compelling reasons why critical thinking must be placed at the top of the nation's education and training agenda.

What *is* critical thinking? As you read, you'll see that each person interviewed offers a different definition. Taken together, however, these conversations offer rich, multifaceted glimpses into a process which, once learned, can deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world, improve our ability to communicate with friends and adversaries, and enrich the quality of our individual and collective lives.

Although the philosophical underpinnings of critical thinking go back to Socrates and ancient Greece, it wasn't until the 1980s that a national movement to link this process with educational reform and market demands began to pick up steam. Today, publications, workshops, and conferences on critical thinking abound, centers and institutes devoted to the study of critical thinking are operating across the country, and many colleges and universities require critical thinking courses as part of the core curriculum.

Once the exclusive province of philosophy departments, critical thinking courses typically focused on the rules of logic, modes of reasoning, and argument analysis. Today, leaders in other fields – psychology, economics, computer sciences, English, adult education – are incorporating the principles of critical thinking into their work. Carol Tavis says, “To many philosophers, thinking and reasoning processes exist in an elegant little bubble, uncontaminated by real life ... but any psychologist knows that what people think they should do and what they actually do are entirely different things.” Michael Scriven puts it another way. “Critical thinking can get stuck in the mud when it is taught in philosophy departments because they don't emphasize the payoff end, the practical aspects of critical thinking.”

The problem is bigger than that: for many students, critical thinking is seen as an academic exercise limited to the classroom. Stuart Keeley says, “Students need something to link their experience in our critical thinking class with their experience in other components of their lives.” Richard Paul goes a step further. “Any one class in school is but a very small part of a life ... That is why we need to change the whole educational system. That is why we need to bring critical thinking into industry and everyday life.”

How, then, to promote critical thinking outside of the classroom? “That question,” says Marlys Mayfield, “provokes some thinking we really need to do. I think the world’s need for critical thinking is so urgent that those of us who are trained teachers should offer to roll up our sleeves, find some huge warehouse, and advertise free community classes.” As for moving critical thinking into the mainstream, Neil Browne poses the question, “When we recognize that critical thinking is something that is not broadly practiced, we have some obligation to think in terms of ‘Why isn’t it?’”

If the voices captured here sound a common theme that it will take interdisciplinary approaches to move critical thinking into the mainstream – a key concern of The Whitman Institute – they also speak as one in recognizing the many obstacles that stand in the way. A major source of resistance is our very culture, which not only fails to promote critical thinking but in many ways tacitly discourages it. Besides the social, political, and economic pressures to which most of us unwittingly succumb, on another, more personal, level is the fact that thinking critically frequently demands that we confront ourselves in ways that are not comfortable, and that we give up patterns of thinking and behavior left over from childhood.

Improving how critical thinking is taught is a central concern of all of the educators we interviewed. Carole Wade advocates that instructors not just focus on teaching reasoning but that they “warn people about how the mind works, the tricks it plays.” We know that critical thinking confronts the student but we forget that it also confronts the teacher. John Chaffee says, “When I explain why I believe that teaching people how to think critically involves becoming engaged with people’s minds and emotions, I think that’s a very personally threatening proposal to some faculty.” Stephen Brookfield seems to concur. Commenting that, while most critical thinking courses may teach people how to read books and analyze arguments, what they fail to do is not present critical thinking, as “a deeply felt process with a lot of implications for how we behave in our personal and political lives.”

We hope this volume is a step in that direction. Educating the public about the value and benefits of critical thinking requires presenting it in lively and compelling ways. Above all, it requires building numerous bridges between academia and the broader public. The Whitman Institute sees this publication as one such bridge.