

Thinking with Concepts

Taking Our Students on a Journey to Personal Freedom

Concepts are to us like the air we breathe. They are everywhere. They are essential to our lives. But we rarely notice them. Yet only when we have conceptualized a thing in some way, only then, can we think about it. Nature does not give us, or anyone else, instructions in how things are to be conceptualized. We must create that conceptualization, alone or with others. Once conceptualized, a thing is integrated by us, into a network of ideas (since no concept or idea ever stands alone). We conceptualize things personally by means of our own ideas. We conceptualize things socially by means of the ideas of others (social groups). We explain one idea by means of other ideas. So, if someone asked us to say what a “friend” is, we might say, as the Webster’s New World does, “a person whom one knows well and is fond of.” If that same person asked us to say what it means to “know someone well,” we would respond by introducing yet further ideas or concepts.

Humans approach virtually everything in experience as something that can be “given meaning” by the power of our minds to create a conceptualization and to make inferences on the basis of it (hence to create further conceptualizations). We do this so routinely and automatically that we don’t typically recognize ourselves as engaged in these processes. In our everyday life we don’t first experience the world in “concept-less” form and then deliberately place what we experience into categories in order to make sense of things. Every act in which we engage is automatically given a social meaning by those around us.

To the uncritical mind, it is as if things are given to us with their “name” inherent in them. All of us fall victim to this illusion to some degree. Thus, we see, not shapes and colors, but “trees,” “clouds,” “grass,” “roads,” “people,” “children,” “sunsets,” and so on and on. Some of these concepts we obtain from our native language. Some are the result of our social conditioning into the mores, folkways, and taboos of particular social groups and a particular society. We then apply these concepts automatically, as if the names belonged to the things by nature, as if we had not created these concepts in our own minds.

If we want to help students develop as critical thinkers, we must help them come to terms with this human power of mind, the power to create concepts through which we, and they, see and experience the world. For it is precisely this capacity they must take charge of if they are to take command of their thinking. To become a proficient critical thinker, they must become the master of their own conceptualizations. They must develop the ability to mentally “remove” this or that concept from the things named by the concept and try out alternative ideas, alternative “names.” As general semanticists often say: “The word is not the thing! The word is not the thing!” If students are trapped

in one set of concepts (ideas, words) — as they often are — then they think of things in one rigid way. Word and thing become one and the same in their minds. They are then unable to act as truly free persons.

Command of Concepts Requires Command of Language Use

To gain command of concepts and ideas, it is important, first, to gain command of the established uses of words (as codified in a good dictionary). For example, if one is proficient in the use of the English language, one recognizes a significant difference in the language between needing and wanting, between having judgment and being judgmental, between having information and gaining knowledge, between being humble and being servile, between stubbornness and having the courage of your convictions. Command of distinctions such as these (and many others) in the language has a significant influence upon the way we interpret our experience. Without this command, we confuse these important discriminations and distort the important realities they help us distinguish. What follows is an activity which you can have students do to begin to test their understanding of basic concepts.

Testing Your Understanding of Basic Concepts

Each word pair below illustrates an important distinction marked by our language. For each set, working with a partner, discuss your understanding of each pair emphasizing the essential and distinguishing difference. Then write down your understanding of the essential difference. After you have done so (for each set of words), look up the words in the dictionary and discuss how close your “ideas” of the essential difference of the word pair was to the actual distinctions stated or implied by the dictionary entries. (By the way, we recommend the Webster’s New World Dictionary)

- 1) clever/cunning
- 2) power/control
- 3) love/romance
- 4) believe/know
- 5) socialize/educate
- 6) selfish/self-motivated
- 7) friend/acquaintance
- 8) anger/rage
- 9) jealousy/envy

From practice in activities such as these, students can begin to become educated speakers of their native language. In learning to speak our native language, we can learn thousands of concepts which, when properly used, enable us to make legitimate inferences about the objects of our experience.

Command of Concepts Requires Insight into Social Conditioning

Unfortunately, overlaid on the logic of language is the logic of the social meanings into which we have been conditioned by the society by which we are raised and from which we take our identity (Italian-American Catholic father, for example). Taking command of these “social” meanings is as large a problem as that of taking command of the logic of educated usage (in our native language). We have a dual problem, then. Our lack of insight into the basic meanings in our native language is compounded by our lack of insight into the social indoctrination we have undergone. Social indoctrination, of course, is a process by which the ideology (or belief system) of a particular group of people is taught to fledgling members of the group in order that they might think as the dominant members of that group do. Education, properly conceived, empowers a person to see-through social indoctrination, freeing them from the shackles of social ideology. They learn to think beyond their culture by learning how to suspend some of the assumptions of thinking within it.

The Journey to Personal Freedom

To move toward personal freedom, we must develop the ability to distinguish the concepts and ideas implicit in our social conditioning from the concepts and ideas implicit in the natural language we speak. We must understand the divergent basis for both. For example, people from many different countries and cultures may speak the same natural language. The peoples of Canada, Ireland, Scotland, England, Australia, Canada, and the United States all speak English. By and large they implicitly share (to the extent to which they are proficient in the language) a similar set of basic concepts (that are codified in the 23 volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary). Nevertheless, though sharing this linguistic heritage, these various peoples do not share the same social conditioning. What is more, a person from China or Tibet could learn to speak the English language fluently without in any sense taking in our social indoctrination.

Unfortunately, very few students have sufficient insight into the differences between a natural language and the various cultures that might all use it. They fail to see, therefore, that natural languages — French, German, English, Swahili, or Hindi — are repositories of concepts that, by and large, are not “ideological.” They are not to be equated with the concepts implicit in the social indoctrination fostered by particular social or cultural groups. Indeed, we can use concepts from our native language to critique social indoctrination, just as this article is doing. Command of language makes social critique possible.

In the United States, for example, most people are raised to believe that the U.S. form of economic system (capitalism) is superior to all others. When we are speaking in ideological ways, we call it “free enterprise.” We also often assume (ideologically) that no country can be truly democratic unless it uses an economic system similar to ours. Furthermore, we assume that the major alternative economic systems are either “wrong” or “enslaving” or “evil” (the “evil empire”). We are encouraged to think of the world in this simplistic way by movies, the news, schooling, political speeches, and a

thousand other social rituals. Raised in the United States, we internalize different concepts, beliefs, and assumptions about ourselves and the world than we would had we been raised in China or Iran (for example). Nevertheless, no lexicographer would confuse these ideological meanings with the foundational meanings of the words in a bona fide dictionary of the English language. The word "communism" would never be given the gloss of an economic system that enslaves the people. The word "capitalism" would never be given the gloss of an economic system essential to a democratic society.

However, because we are socially conditioned into a self-serving conception of our country, many of our social contradictions or inconsistencies are hidden and go largely unquestioned. Leaving social self-deception undisturbed is incompatible with developing the critical thinking of students. Command of concepts cannot be separated, then, from recognition of when they are, and when they are not, ideologically biased.

The Challenge We Face

If we are committed to helping students think well with concepts, we must teach them how to strip off surface language and consider alternative ways to talk and think about things. This includes teaching them how to closely examine the concepts they have personally formed as well as those into which they have been socially indoctrinated. It means helping students understand that, being fundamentally egocentric, humans tend to be trapped in "private" meanings. Thinking sociocentrically we are trapped in the world-view of our peer group and that of the broader society.

Both set of binders make it hard to rationally decide upon alternative ways to conceptualize situations, persons, and events. Being so trapped, most students are unable to identify or evaluate either meanings in a dictionary or the social rituals, pomp, and glitter of social authority and prestige. Students live their lives, then, on the surface of meaning. They do not know how to plumb the depths.

When we are teaching well, students go beneath the surface. They learn how to identify and evaluate concepts based in natural languages, on the one hand, and those implicit in social rituals and taboos, on the other. They become articulate about what concepts are and how they shape our experience. They can, then, identify key concepts implicit in a communication. They begin to practice taking charge of their ideas and therefore of the life-decisions that those ideas shape and control. Crazy and superficial ideas exist in our society because crazy and superficial thinking has created them. They exist for mass consumption in movies, on television, in the highly marketed "news," and in the double-speak of the ideological world of "law and order." They do damage every day to the lives of people.

The challenge to teaching with this end in view is a significant one. It is one we must pursue with a keen sense of the long-term nature of the project and of its importance in the lives of students. We may begin in modest ways for example, with the proper use of the dictionary or how to identify the mores and taboos of one's peer group — but begin

we must, for the quality of the thinking of the students of today determines the quality of the world they shall create tomorrow.

Adapted from the book, *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*, by Richard Paul and Linda Elder.