

Looking to The Future with a Critical Eye: A Message for High School Graduates

by Linda Elder

Graduation from high school is an exciting time. Finally, you will be able to live your own life, make your own decisions, do exactly what you want. At last!

So the good news is that you now are free to make your own choices. The bad news is that, in this highly complex world, it is all too easy to make decisions, which might lead you in a direction you may regret. With every decision that you make, there are choices you accept and choices you reject. With every one you accept, you consequently turn your back on others. How will you know whether you are making the right choices, or the best ones?

The best way to face all problems and decisions in your life is with a critical view. By this I do not mean that you should improve your ability to criticize (most of us know how to do that all too well). Rather I mean that you should think critically about the problems and opportunities that face you. In other words, you will have to make lots and lots of decisions in your life, from deciding whether to pursue a college degree to choosing a spouse and having children (or deciding not to); and you will want to do the best reasoning that you possibly can with respect to those decisions. In other words, you will want to make decisions that result in positive consequences. But to do this, you must understand some very basic things about your mind.

The human mind, without discipline and rigor, is prone to shoddy thinking. Oddly enough, very often it would rather not have to "think." Instead it is frequently impulsive, preferring to go with its first response to a situation or problem rather than probing into the complexities of issues. However, although it is non-reflective by nature, it is fully capable of transforming and improving the way it operates. This fact is a mystery to most people because such thinking involves intellectual discipline; and in our culture disciplined thinking is, for the most part, neither understood nor valued.

But we can learn to take charge of our thinking, to monitor and assess the moves our mind makes if we see the value in doing it, and are willing to consistently practice at it. Despite the fact that becoming highly skilled at good reasoning involves a long, slow process, the basic intellectual moves that the mind must make to do so are assessable to you. By learning these moves, you can learn to approach any subject in college, any course you take with a critical eye. You can learn to ask important questions and can, in essence take charge of your thinking so that you are not simply "doing what the teacher says to get the grade," but continually asking yourself how the content of your college classes relates to the issues in your life in a meaningful way. In other words, you can

use the information you learn in school to do better reasoning if you learn to approach the content in your classes through good reasoning.

To illustrate what I mean, while introducing you to some of the most basic moves the mind must make if it is to do good reasoning, I will focus on an everyday problem that you might face in your life. However, to make the most of your education, you should apply the same ideas to, and be able to make the same intellectual moves in all of your classes and your studies.

Fundamental Critical Thinking Moves

If I am thinking critically, or reasoning well, about a problem in my life or in my coursework, I will begin by determining the precise question I am trying to answer. To a large extent, the quality of my reasoning about any problem will be determined by how well I am able to frame the question that ultimately drives my thinking. Let's say, for example, I am planning to purchase an automobile. My reasoning will be very different if I begin with the question, "What type of car do I want to buy?" than if I begin with the question, "Given my limited available finances and my plans to save money for college, what is the best car purchase I can make?" The first question is unclear, and thus can be interpreted in a number of ways. It does not help to direct my thinking along a clear path. Furthermore, the way the question is put implies that I can "have" any car I "want." On the other hand, the second question is much more precise, and because it narrows the possibilities (due to my limited finances), it serves as a much better guide for my thinking.

The next step in the process of thinking through a problem is to ask: what is my purpose in answering this question? My purpose works hand in hand with my question to guide my thinking. Let us say that my purpose is to purchase a car that is dependable, safe, and inexpensive, which I will use primarily to drive to college each day. Now I have a clear question and a clear purpose, together which tell me the type of information I must have to answer the question. Now, obviously I will ultimately have to make a decision between this car or that, so that the process of thinking critically about an issue does not tell me exactly which car to purchase. Rather, it guides me to the best possible choices.

So now I know that I need to gather information about dependability, safety and cost. Perhaps I should begin by reading consumer reports for information related to all three of these. I will then need to shop around to find the best buy for the money. If I am considering purchasing a used car I should look at the car's maintenance records to see if it has been well cared for (to help determine potential reliability). If I will have a long distance to drive each day, I should consider purchasing only a car that will be reliable traveling long distances. In that case perhaps I should only consider cars that have very low mileage. I might look at any statistics I can gather from automobile companies about the safety of their vehicles.

Once I have gathered the information I need, I will be aware that there is usually more than one way to interpret it. I want to consider only ACCURATE or LOGICAL

interpretations of information. Statistics are often presented in ways that are misleading, or result in our interpreting information incorrectly. Automobile companies exist for one reason, and that is to make money. Therefore, I will guard against simply believing the information they present (and their interpretation of the information) without wondering if there is possibly some other way to interpret it. If I am told, for example, that a particular car is the safest car in the industry (interpretation), based on the fact that fewer people are known to have accidents in this car than in any other car (information), I will question why the accident rate for this car is so low. Perhaps it is that the average person who purchases this type of car is more likely to be a safer driver (perhaps because she is older and more highly educated), rather than that the car itself is safer than other cars on the market.

Furthermore, when I am gathering information I want to make sure I am only considering information that is RELEVANT to the question I am focused on. Therefore, I avoid gathering information about cars that are out of my price range, which I know to be unsafe, and which I am relatively certain are undependable. I determine what information is relevant by keeping my question and purpose in clear view.

To summarize, when making a decision or solving a problem, you should begin with a CLEAR, PRECISE question and purpose which directly relate to the problem. Then you should gather only ACCURATE information, which is RELEVANT to the particular problem you are trying to solve. You should figure out if there are alternate ways to interpret a piece of information, continually questioning the way others interpret information or present "facts."

If you learn to ask these questions as a habit of mind, the decisions you make will be much better, and the consequences more positive than if you respond to problems in an undisciplined, non-reflective, impulsive way. If you learn to ask these questions, you will be able to approach the content of your courses through reasoning, rather than through memorization. Thus, in class, at any given point, you should be able to ask yourself, "What is the key question right now? What information do I need to address the question? How can I make sure the information is relevant and accurate? Is there another way to interpret the information than the instructor or textbook is presenting? How does this content relate to my life in a significant way?"

If you are really interested in becoming a critical thinker, you should understand that developing your mind involves a deliberate, disciplined, committed process, but that its benefits far outweigh its costs.

Elder, L. (2004). Foundation for Critical Thinking.