

International Critical Thinking Manifesto

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History and Philosophy of Critical Thinking¹

Critical thinking is integral to education and rationality and, as an idea, is traceable, ultimately, to the teaching practices and educational ideals of Socrates. Criticality has played a seminal role in the emergence of academic disciplines and the questions that have given rise to them. Knowledge, in other words, has been discovered and verified by the distinguished critical thinkers of intellectual, scientific, and technological history. For the majority of the idea's history, however, critical thinking has been "buried", a conception in practice without an explicit name. In the past forty years, however, critical thinking has undergone something of an awakening, a coming-out, a first major social expression, which could, if taken seriously, signal a turning-point in its history and the future of the human species.

This awakening is correlated with a growing awareness that if education is to produce critical thinkers *en masse*, if it is to globally cultivate nations of skilled thinkers and innovators rather than a dearth of thinkers amid an army of intellectually unskilled, undisciplined, and uncreative followers, then a renaissance and re-emergence of the idea of critical thinking as integral to the advancement of the human species is necessary. Such a reawakening and recognition began in the later 1930's and then surfaced in various forms in the 50's, 60's, and 70's, reaching its most public expression in the 1980's and into the present. Nevertheless, despite growing scholarship in critical thinking, and perhaps largely due to the disjointed and fragmented efforts to embody it in educational practice, the educational and social acceptance of critical thinking is still in its infancy, still largely misunderstood, still existing more in stereotype than in substance, more in appearance than reality.

Those who support this critical thinking manifesto are committed to the highest standards of excellence in critical thinking instruction across the curriculum at all levels of education. They are therefore concerned with the proliferation of poorly conceived "thinking skills" programs with their simplistic — often slick — approaches to both thinking and instruction. If critical thinking is ever to genuinely take root in education and among human societies, it is essential that the formidable obstacles to its embodiment be recognized and addressed — namely the problem of egocentric and sociocentric thinking found in all academic fields, every profession, and all parts of human life.

¹ This manifesto was adapted from the *original statement and defining articles of the National Council on Excellence in Critical Thinking, 1987*, which has yet to become realized in the U.S. or abroad.

To this end, sound standards of critical thinking must be made accessible by clear articulation and the means set up for large-scale dissemination of that articulation. The nature and challenge of authentic critical thinking as an educational ideal must not be allowed to sink into the murky background of educational reform, while superficial or ambiguous ideas become its substitute. Critical thinking must assume its proper place at the hub of educational reform and restructuring. Critical thinking — and intellectual and social development generally — are not well-served when educational discussion is inundated with superficial conceptions of critical thinking and facile merchandising of "thinking skills" programs while substantial — and necessarily more challenging conceptions and programs — are thrust aside, obscured, or ignored.

Goals of the International Critical Thinking Manifesto:

The goals of the *International Critical Thinking Manifesto* are as follows:

- 1) to articulate, preserve, and foster the highest standards of research, scholarship, and instruction in critical thinking,
- 2) to articulate the standards upon which "quality" thinking is based and the criteria by means of which thinking, and instruction for thinking, can be appropriately cultivated and assessed,
- 3) to provide the intellectual underpinnings needed to assess programs which claim to foster higher order, critical thinking,

Founding Principles of the International Critical Thinking Manifesto:

- 1) There is an intimate interrelation between knowledge and thinking.
- 2) Knowing that something is so is not simply a matter of believing that it is so, it also entails being justified in that belief. (Definition: knowledge is **justified** true belief.)
- 3) There are general as well as domain-specific standards for the assessment of thinking.
- 4) To achieve knowledge in any domain, it is essential to think critically.
- 5) Proper criteria for assessing thinking in all domains are based on general standards such as: *clarity, precision, accuracy, relevance, significance, fairness, logic, depth, and breadth, and sufficiency*. These standards, and others, re embedded not only in the history of the intellectual and scientific communities but also in the self-assessing behavior of reasonable persons in everyday life. It is

possible to teach all subjects in such a way as to encourage the use of these intellectual standards in both professional and personal life.

- 6) Instruction in critical thinking should increasingly enable students to assess both their own thought and action and that of others by reference, ultimately, to essential intellectual standards. Instruction based on critical thinking should lead progressively to a disciplining of the mind and a self-chosen commitment to a life of intellectual and moral integrity.
- 7) Instruction in all subjects and fields should result in advancing students' capacities and dispositions to think critically within that domain. Hence, instruction in science should lead to disciplined scientific thinking; instruction in mathematics should lead to disciplined mathematical thinking; instruction in history should lead to disciplined historical thinking; and in a parallel manner in every discipline and domain of learning.
- 8) Disciplined thinking within any subject entails the capacity on the part of the thinker to recognize, analyze, and assess the basic elements of thought: the *purpose* or goal of the thinking; the problem or *question* at issue; the frame of reference or *points of view* involved; the *assumptions* that give rise to the thinking; central *concepts*, ideas, and principles underlying the thinking; evidence, data, or *information* advanced in support of the reasoning; *inferences* and conclusions drawn from the information and assumptions; and *implications* and consequences that follow from the reasoning.
- 9) Reasoning at the highest level entails embracing, actively working toward, and eventually embodying intellectual virtues such as *intellectual humility*, *intellectual empathy*, *intellectual integrity*, *intellectual perseverance*, *intellectual courage*, *fairmindedness* and *confidence in reason*.
- 10) Critical reading, writing, speaking, and listening are essential modes of learning in all academic fields. To be developed they must be systematically cultivated in a variety of subject domains as well as across disciplines. Each of these modes of learning are successful only to the extent that they are disciplined and guided through critical thought and reflection.
- 11) The earlier that children develop sensitivity to the standards of sound thought and the intellectual virtues of the fairminded person, the more likely they will develop desirable intellectual habits and become openminded persons responsive to reasonable persuasion.
- 12) *Education* — in contrast to *training*, *socialization*, and *indoctrination* — implies a process conducive to critical thought and judgment. It is intrinsically committed to the cultivation of reasonability and rationality.

Defining Critical Thinking²

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on intellectual standards that transcend subject matter divisions: *clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, depth, breadth, fairness and sufficiency*. Critical thinking entails the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning: *purpose, question-at-issue; assumptions; concepts; information; inferences and conclusions; implications and consequences; and the point of view* from which the reasoning occurs. Critical thinking is incorporated in a family of interwoven modes of thinking, among them: scientific thinking, mathematical thinking, historical thinking, anthropological thinking, economic thinking, ethical thinking, and philosophical thinking.

The level of critical thinking of any kind is never wholly consistent in any individual; everyone is subject to episodes of undisciplined or irrational thought. Its quality is therefore typically a matter of degree and dependent on, among other things, the quality and depth of experience in a given domain of thinking or with respect to a particular class of questions. No one is a critical thinker through-and-through, but only to such-and-such a degree, with such-and-such insights and blind spots, subject to such-and-such tendencies towards self-delusion. For this reason, the development of critical thinking skills and dispositions is a life-long endeavor.

Properly conceived, then, critical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking that attempts to reason fairmindedly at the highest level of quality. People who consistently think critically attempt to live rationally, reasonably, empathetically. They are keenly aware of the inherently flawed nature of human thinking when left unchecked. They strive to diminish the power of their egocentric and sociocentric tendencies. They routinely use critical thinking concepts and principles that enable them to analyze, assess, and improve thinking. They work diligently to embody, throughout all areas of their lives, intellectual virtues such. They realize that no matter how skilled they are as thinkers, they can always improve their reasoning abilities and will at times fall prey to mistakes in reasoning, irrationalities, prejudices, biases, distortions, uncritically accepted social rules and taboos, self-interest, and vested interest. They strive to improve the world in whatever ways they can, thereby contributing to a more rational, egalitarian, society. At the same time, they recognize the complexities inherent in doing so. They avoid thinking simplistically about complicated issues and strive to

² This definition was adapted from the 1987 definition of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking by Richard Paul and Michael Scriven and presented at the 8th Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking and Education Reform, summer 1987, as well as the brief conceptualization of critical thinking by Linda Elder – both of which can be found at <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/766>)

appropriately consider the rights and needs of relevant others. They recognize the difficulties in developing as thinkers and commit themselves to life-long practice toward self-improvement. They embody the Socratic principle: *The unexamined life is not worth living.*