TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH AMERICAN HISTORY

If the increasingly complicated problems of the world are to be solved, young people will have to be trained in problem solving. The need for more complex thinking skills indicates that school children must be taught to think critically. Because the growing demand for critical thinking results from the social tensions of our day, many educators believe that the area of social science should bear significant responsibility in the development of these cognitive skills. How to go about providing this program, has, however, been the subject of much controversy.

Curriculum experts seem to be in agreement that history can be useful. We are told that the reason for history's important place in the high school curriculum is that it is the story of mankind's problems and solutions. Ingesting information about the problems of mankind's past is a very different process from thinking critically about those problems. The purpose of this article is to describe an essential element involved in teaching critical thinking.

Critical thinking is the ability to recognize a problem and strive to generate a satisfactory solution. So defined, critical thinking has been engaged in by almost all children before they ever entered a classroom. The problem for the schools, then, is not to get students to think critically but to get them to think critically in the classroom about the subject matter they are studying. The assumption here is that such subject matter will direct critical thinking towards the needs of society.

Too often a student who excels at solving the problems of the basketball court or the football field may sit mute and thoughtless in the classroom. What is it about the classroom that somehow kills the ability to think critically?

In the abstract, the difficulty may be said to exist because the thinking skills employed in "real" situations are not used when the student is involved in academic situations. A device which will permit a student to address an academic situation as though it were a real situation is obviously a key to this problem. Is there such a large bridge between that which is real and that which merely exists in the mind? Can the mind fool itself and act as though the academic situation is a "real" situation? If this is possible, students will be able to think as critically about abstract problems as they are able to think about problems in which they are personally involved.

The student who understands history best is the one who experiences it as a story, drama, or by other methods in which he is personally involved. What is actually only an intellectual involvement in a historical situation takes on the appearance of a present situation.

Let us not forget, however, that we are concerned here with only one of the major steps in the process of learning to think critically. First, students must react to the subject matter of the classroom as though it were the substance of a real situation. Then, students must be given experience in the most efficient means of dealing with real or pseudo-real situations. Perhaps the second of these steps is the more valuable in terms of solving problems. However, the first step is certainly essential if we are to have problems formulated from a starting point.

PROCEDURES FOR USING CRITICAL THINKING SITUATION

The following procedures indicate how specific situations may be constructed. It is not intended that a particular order of activities is necessary, but it is felt that some patterns of activity are more efficient than others.

1. Presentation of subject matter by the teacher. The teacher selects a block of subject matter and delivers a lecture relating the subjects and events of that subject to elements in the students' experience. This involves comparing similarities and differences between the historic period with the student's present environment and experience. The actions of historical people in his experience. For instance, in a high school classroom, Washington's crossing of the Delaware to win Trenton may be likened to a "sleeper" play in football.

The teacher then relates the values of the student to the values implicit in the subject matter. This aspect is essential. For instance, Washington crossed the Delaware to defeat the British in part to prevent foreign soldiers from being quartered in the homes of American families. Such a historical aim, goal or value decision generally corresponds to similar values held by students.

2. Acquisition of historical facts by the students. Students read material dealing with the facts of history and answer personal-opinion questions on the factual materials read. As they read, they should take notes: (a) on an event or action not understood; (b) on an event or action with which they disagree: (c) on those ideas felt to be most important; and (d) on something in their experience similar to what they are reading.

Critical thinking cannot exist without facts. It will be up to the instructor to emphasize and provide the personalized kind of factual information which will make critical thinking possible and desirable. For example, the student's ability to effect critical thinking into a battle scene will depend not on a historian's analysis of the tactical strength but rather on the immediate surroundings and the student's ability to identify with the feelings of the soldiers on the battlefield. Initial facts are the props and scenery of the critical thinking situation. The stage must be elaborately set if the student is to experience a real role against its backdrop.

Most important, old habits of reading for the purpose of learning categorized or isolated facts must be set aside. Facts must start from a single point of focus and progressively broaden and give depth to a scene so that the student forms a Gestalt. Further, the student must experience the scenario in their own terms, not in the teachers. The class reads, notates, clarifies, and exchanges ideas. The teacher then tests the students assimilation of those facts considered to be important to critical thinking.

3. Discovering problem situations. The students identify human problems found in the readings. They then explore the reasons for the problems by asking the following questions: (a) What was the goal of the person or group in the historical situation? (b) What were their goals? (c) What were local, national, and international factors that influenced the formation of the problem?

4. Evaluation of the actual historical situation. The class has the opportunity to express opinions on the adequacy of the solution (if any) to the historical problem and explore alternative solutions to the problem. Individual class members then write out or act out the "book" solution to the problems found in the reading material.

5. Exploration and evaluation of alternative solutions. Individual class members write out or act out the solutions to a historical problem that might have been undertaken by different historical figures. For example, students could present the way in which persons other than President Wilson might have handled the

neutrality problem before World War I. Jefferson and Madison or a German patriot, if any of them could have been consulted, might have had very different solutions to the problem. In order to engage in this activity, the students must place themselves "into the shoes" of each of these men. They base their judgment of alternative solutions on the anticipated consequences of a given action in the given historical situation.

6. Introduction of hypothetical problems into the given situations. The teacher creates a hypothetical problem adding a new factor to the situation and asks students for solutions. He also may then place a value held by the entire class into the same problem situation as a new goal and ask class members to suggest or act out the best solution to this problem. The class alone decides on the adequacy of the responses to these new problem situations.

7. Use of problem situations to develop generalizations. The teacher may skillfully arrange critical thinking situations in which recurrent themes on the same types of data make possible the induction of concepts by the class. Group discussion can be directed toward finding such generalizations.

The teacher may deliberately introduce the viewpoint of the historian as that of a person who seeks to find generalizations about the conduct of men or nations. The student assumes the historian's role and the historian's problem of finding generalizations. Further, the switching of roles and the objectivity gained by "stepping out of character" should facilitate the formation of social science concepts.

8. Testing for critical thinking. For the purpose of testing, the teacher will find it convenient to construct an essay examination of hypothetical problem situations based on historical fact. The original problem situations, however, should come from the class rather than from the teacher or the textbook.

PRINCIPLES TO DIRECT PUPILS TOWARD CRITICAL THINKING

The following principles should be employed in order to direct the student toward critical thinking:

1. A clearly defined problem is an essential element of a critical thinking situation. In a problem situation, the subject is prevented from reaching something valued.
2. Critical thinking opportunities are increased when the problem situation has potential value for the student.
3. It is best to use relative situations in which most of the kinds of people, objects, and events are already familiar to the student.
4. Problems implying threat to a person or a group should be used. Such problems should be left unanswered in the situation so that the student who desires a solution must supply it himself. The old story, The Lady or the Tiger, is a good example of this kind of learning situation.
5. Initially it is best to use situations with patterns of actions similar to those already experienced in reality by the students.
6. Students should be given freedom to clarify and build up situations through the selection of facts of their own choosing.
7. Students should be given the freedom to restructure situations in accordance with a particular value system which they may hold.

8. The historical setting of critical thinking should be more inviting than the classroom situation.

9. Since different students think critically in different ways, there is no right or wrong way to think critically. Only the facts which make up the historical setting may be accurate or inaccurate.

10. Further, there is no right or wrong answer to an imaginary problem. There is only opinion as to what might work and what might not work. It is important that initial problem solving efforts of students be encouraged so that confidence is instilled for further effort.

11. Many of the procedures described above seem to indicate the use of the class discussion method for making decisions. It is important to note, however, that group discussion should be used only where group decisions are desired. Many of the suggested activities call for individual decisions. In these cases, individuals should be given the opportunity to think for themselves. Each critical thinking situation should be unique and individualized.

12. The teacher should set an example in the use of imaginary situations. Frequent use of the hypothetical case and the analogy should be practiced by the teacher and encouraged in others.

13. Role-playing in sociodrama should develop a student's confidence in his ability to deal with stimuli of historical configurations. For some, identification with a particular person in the past will be the easiest way to learn to relate to configurations.

14. In theory, a study of social roles found in history might be preferable to the usual historical chronology. For example, a study of such roles as those of politicians, soldiers, or businessmen in different periods of American history would permit continuity of critical thinking.

CONCLUSION

Since all problems are related through time, current subject matter ideally relates to preceding units of study. This is in accordance with John Dewey's concept of the continuum of learning. The limited textbook resources of the usual history class are restrictive. Since critical thinking experiences become past experiences of the students, situations may be planned so that the experiences of the students are gradually broadened and are cumulative, as Dewey suggests.

Most important, critical thinking becomes a self-willed tool that can be applied in nonhistorical situations. Eventually, when a student who has been trained in the use of critical thinking has become familiar with the facts of an academic or intellectual situation, he can be expected to determine his values in the situation and interact with the situation even if it is far removed from any of this past experiences.

The extent to which he will then successfully solve the problem will depend on his critical thinking skills. The same level of problem solving ability evident on a basketball court and the football field should then be present in the classroom. When there is a positive correlation between the development of critical thinking skills in our youth and the application of those skills in the problems of human existence our world can expect vast changes toward the improvement of the human social condition.

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