Teaching Intellectual Autonomy: The Failure of the Critical Thinking Movement

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INTRODUCTION

The currently popular courses in critical thinking offered at the college level are advertised as courses that prepare students for the intellectual autonomy required for political autonomy. However, according to the criteria set forth by the critical pedagogy movement, the critical thinking course tends to teach political conformity rather than political autonomy. Against the expressed intention of teachers and textbook authors, critical thinking courses may encourage students to accept without question certain political perspectives and discourage students from asking questions about the genesis of these perspectives.

TWO APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING INTELLECTUAL AUTONOMY

The Practice of Teaching Critical Thinking As It Originated in Philosophy Departments

Philosophers in the United States have seized the opportunity to respond simultaneously to two educational trends: the demand for college graduates who can think critically and declining enrollments in philosophy courses. The response has taken the form of a course entitled "critical thinking" offered in philosophy departments across the country, with particular frequency in public universities. In theoretical contexts, i.e., learned journals, defenders of the involvement of philosophers in teaching critical thinking define critical thinking as variously as "proficiency in correctly assessing statements plus the tendency to exercise that proficiency"; "the ability to recognize the world views in which arguments are embedded"; and "being appropriately moved by reasons." Authors argue eloquently about the need for each of these talents in a democracy peopled by intellectually and politically autonomous human beings. In practical contexts, i.e., documents addressed to university administrators and state legislators, philosophers justify their involvement in teaching critical thinking by appealing to their expertise in logic and argumentation and suggesting that a course in logic and argumentation develops the above-listed skills. Consequently, courses in critical thinking taught by philosophers have taken the form of courses in informal logic, i.e., the application of the concepts of logic to the analysis and evaluation of arguments occurring in the English language.

A typical course in critical thinking teaches students two skills: (1) to identify arguments and (2) to evaluate arguments. The first skill is developed through drill and practice in a particular type of textual analysis that may be called "argument analysis."

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2. Ibid., 5-10, describing Paul's theory of critical thinking.
Early in the course students practice reading paragraphs with an eye to identifying arguments. They learn to identify the claim being made (the conclusion of the argument) and the reasons offered in support of the claim (the argument's premises). Later in the course students have the opportunity to apply logical analysis to article-length texts.

The second skill is developed by teaching students rules for evaluating the reasons presented in support of claims. This is a delicate matter, as reasons are contextual. What may be a good reason in a bar room conversation may be a poor reason in a formal labor negotiation. Courses in critical thinking typically simplify the matter by presenting students with a list of reasons that do not adequately support claims in any context. These insufficient reasons are summarized in a list of "informal fallacies." The informal fallacies include such mistakes as "appeal to authority," "appeal to pity," and "inconsistency." Too often, students check arguments against the list of fallacies and immediately reject any argument which contains one.

The critical thinking model now in use aims to teach students valuable skills in logical analysis and, in my opinion, succeeds. However, the actual practice of teaching critical thinking does not fulfill the promise of education for autonomy articulated by the theoretical defenders of teaching critical thinking. Below I attempt to support my claim by revealing some of the beliefs about autonomy, curriculum, and reading that inform the model of teaching critical thinking and that are taught to students along with the skills of logical analysis.

The Basis for a Critique: Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy

My analysis of the critical thinking model now in use is informed by the perspective of the critical pedagogy movement. In order to avoid confusion between the similar names of the two dissimilar movements, I shall distinguish between the use each makes of the word "critical." The adjective "critical" can be related to the noun "critique" or to the noun "criticism." When someone provides a criticism of my work she or he is giving me information about what is wrong with it, perhaps with the aim of helping me to improve it. When someone provides a critique of my work she or he is giving me information on dimensions of meaning in the work of which previously I might not have been aware. She or he gleans this information by reading with a theory of how meaning is encoded in texts. The critical thinking movement teaches students to provide criticism of arguments, while the critical pedagogy movement teaches students to provide critique as a foundation for criticism of the world around them.

Critical pedagogy borrows the word "critical" from "critical theory," a sociological perspective developed largely by German intellectuals in the early to middle part of this century. Critical theory is a synthesis of Marxism, phenomenology and psychoanalysis. From Marxism comes an orientation towards maximizing human freedom from political and economic domination. From phenomenology comes an emphasis on observing and articulating the structures of lived experience. From psychoanalysis comes a push to decode cultural forms. Critical theory provides a critique of lived social and political realities with the aim of changing those realities to allow greater freedom of thought and action.

Critical pedagogy applies the tools of critical theory to a critique of educational institutions, guided by the belief that all education should aim at maximizing human freedom. Maxine Greene suggests that literature be taught as a means of awakening the student's awareness that the world contains unrealized possibilities for thought and action. David Purpel attempts to articulate the structures of lived experience by calling the attention of teachers and students to the "hidden curriculum," i.e., lessons implicit in the organization of school life. Michael Apple attempts to decode cultural

5. David Purpel and Kevin Ryan, "It Comes With the Territory: The Inevitability of Moral Education in the Schools" in Hidden Curriculum, 267-75.
forms which distort the aims of education through a study of the ways in which schools reinforce economic structures by training students to meet the economic needs of large corporations.\textsuperscript{6} Other members of the movement work on a number of levels, attempting to introduce change into educational institutions through the agency of students, teachers and intellectuals. For example, Henry Giroux invites teachers to examine their institutional roles and to redefine themselves as “critical intellectuals.”\textsuperscript{7}

The critical pedagogy movement identifies its roots in the work of Paulo Freire. Freire’s famous book \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed} is a manifesto and guidebook for radical educators who wish to raise the consciousness of members of the working class.\textsuperscript{8} Freire’s basic principle says that education which aims at the creation of autonomous political actors must constitute its students as such throughout the learning process. He defines education for liberation in opposition to what he calls “the banking concept of education,” in which “education . . . becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.”\textsuperscript{9} The banking concept of education is built on an image of students as absolutely ignorant and teachers as absolutely knowledgeable. Teachers are the active subjects of education and students are the passive objects. Because the banking concept of education does not constitute students as autonomous actors, educational programs modelled on the banking concept cannot successfully mold autonomous actors.

Freire notes that radical educators typically fall into the trap of the banking model of education in three ways: by substituting radical slogans for conservative ones; by interpreting the students’ social reality for them; and by presenting students with a menu of possible political actions from which they can choose. Each of these educational activities leaves students free only to classify and organize the information deposited with them. A radical educator who wishes genuinely to raise the consciousness of his or her students should inspire them to examine actively the “themes” that characterize their identity in the world. In order to avoid the pitfalls of the banking concept of education, the radical educator should study her or his students’ social world, present situations drawn from that actual social world for students to analyze and decode, and lead students in a process of shared inquiry that aims at understanding and evaluating their social reality. For the members of the critical pedagogy movement, variations on Freire’s model of education have the potential to prepare students for intellectual and political autonomy.

**Educational Deficiencies of the Critical Thinking Model**

**Critical Thinking’s Failure to Address Intellectual Autonomy**

Some clarification of the ideal of autonomy is in order. The critical thinking movement seeks to prepare students to exercise the most accessible political right guaranteed by the constitution: the right to vote. The critical pedagogy movement seeks to prepare students to access other political rights and expand the freedoms available to citizens.

Philosopher of education Harvey Siegel defines critical thinking as operationalized rationality: demanding, giving and evaluating reasons. Critical thinking, he argues, is essential for citizens in a democracy. Citizens must demand and be able to evaluate reasons given in support of the actions of legislators, judges and executives. Citizens must be able to choose between the competing claims of lobbyists and political candidates.\textsuperscript{10} Unfortunately, choosing between prepackaged claims is the level of political


\textsuperscript{7} Henry A. Giroux, Teachers as Intellectuals (Granby, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1988).


\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 58.

\textsuperscript{10} Siegel, \textit{Educating Reasom}, 60-61
responsibility taken by most citizens in our country. In this sense, courses in critical thinking prepare students to assume the responsibilities of autonomous political actors.

Critical pedagogues would argue that an educational program which aims to reproduce this level of responsibility rests on a narrow interpretation of political freedom. In a free society, political actors ought to be able to create alternatives, not merely to choose between them. Political actors ought to share leadership, not merely ask for convincing reasons from leaders. Critical thinking courses fail to introduce students to autonomy at this level.

An analysis of the introductory sections of three widely used college-level critical thinking texts shows that each text falls into one of the traps of the banking model of education that Freire says radical educators must avoid. The banking model of education constitutes students as relatively passive, allowing them to contribute to their education by storing and organizing information. By making use of the banking model, the teaching of critical thinking communicates to students a limited picture of what it means to be an active participant in a significant social institution. The first text I examine defines critical thinking as the ability to select rationally among competing options. A course based on this text conveys the message that citizens who make an informed choice between options outlined by authorities have fully exercised their critical capacities. The second text implicitly defines the critical thinker as a political liberal who has rejected conservative attempts at domination. A course based on this text conveys the message that the acceptance of the right slogans is an adequate substitute for the critical analysis of those slogans. The third text defines a critical thinker as one who can argue appropriately (i.e., as shown in the text) in the different social settings of courtroom, classroom and business. A course based on this text conveys the message that critical thinking is primarily valuable as a means of adapting to situations rather than as a means of changing them.

The Model of Rational Selection Between Alternatives. Most of David Kelley's *The Art of Reasoning* introduces traditional concepts of logic and applies them to the analysis of brief texts written in English. Because Kelley has the weight of tradition behind his approach, it is not surprising that he is unequivocal about the purpose of his book. He states, "this is a book about thinking. It's a book about how to think." And he tells the reader, also unequivocally, about the characteristics of thinking: thinking is distinct from "our emotional responses to things" and thinking "aims at a goal." "It differs from activities such as daydreaming and fantasizing, in which we simply let our minds wander where they will." Thinking, then, is dispassionate inquiry aimed at a goal.

Students may wonder in what situations they would aim at goals about which they are dispassionate. Therefore Kelley presents examples of such situations: discussing free will and determinism in a philosophy class; interpreting Hamlet in a literature class; understanding a scientific theory. In these situations, students are presented with competing ideas or theories and asked to discuss them critically. If critical thinking is confined to discussing the relative merits of options presented by a teacher, it is easy to see why Kelley describes thinking as "dispassionate."

Kelley tries to make it clear that critical thinking has a place outside of the classroom:

> In our own personal lives, finally, we all have choices to make, major ones or minor, and here too we need to weigh the reasons on each side and try to consider all the relevant issues."

Kelley interprets the word "choice" narrowly, as a selection made from a small number

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12. Ibid., 1
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 3
16. Ibid.
of competing options. Unfortunately most major and many minor life choices do not present themselves as opportunities to select among clear-cut options. More frequently there is no clear option and we are forced to create one. An adult's personal life is not modeled on the typical classroom where a higher authority presents clear-cut options to be accepted or rejected. The skills we have learned in Kelley's critical thinking text will not help us here.

A perspective offered by the critical theorist Friedrich Pollock leads to the observation that Kelley's conception of critical thinking reinforces citizen passivity. An analogy between Kelley's notion of choosing between competing ideas in the classroom and Pollack's analysis of choosing between items on a public opinion poll may help to clarify this claim. In an age where enormous amounts of information are disseminated through printed and electronic media, the average citizen has "neither the time, the energy nor the education to put together the data necessary to form a personal opinion" on many topics.17 The pressure to inform oneself on issues is relieved when the citizen has the opportunity to choose between a small set of stereotyped opinions. Kelley's course reinforces the illusion that informed choice between options presented by an authority is an adequate substitute for an analysis of the issue which aims at understanding the genesis of the choices offered. Kelley's critical thinkers could fall prey to what Pollock identifies as the domination of citizens by public opinion polls. By presenting respondents with a list of "acceptable" beliefs from which to choose, public opinion polls tend to create rather than to measure public opinion.18

The Model of Political Liberalism. Kahane, author of Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric, wants to avoid precisely this sort of indoctrination but fails.19 In the preface to his text, Kahane celebrates "citizens who can think critically" as the "foundation of any society that wants to remain truly free."20 Kahane does not define explicitly the term "critical thinking," but his book suggests that it involves the full-scale rejection of conservative slogans. Unfortunately, it seems not to involve the parallel examination of liberal slogans.

In his preface, Kahane comments on the apolitical intention behind his book:

The intent is not to move students to the right or left on the social/political spectrum but to help them move up on the scale of rational sophistication.21

Yet nearly all of Kahane's examples of fallacies come from the mouths of conservative Republican politicians and most of the cartoons he reprints are by liberal political cartoonists such as Garry Trudeau and Jules Feiffer. In this way, the book implies that conservative political slogans should be scrutinized with the tool of fallacy identification while liberal political slogans are immune. Acceptance of this implication is dangerous to clear thinking in politics even if one is committed to liberal ideals. In real-world political discourse conservative programs are often packaged in the language of liberalism. For at least this reason, students should be encouraged to analyze critically all political slogans.

Although Kahane explicitly says that critical thinkers must reject indoctrination,22 in many places he clearly does tell students what critical thinkers should believe. I will present two examples. At one point, he tells students that they should desire to visit the country from which their great-grandparents came, and would be able to afford it if they didn't spend so much money on the marginal needs pushed by advertisers.23 At another point, he explains that old United States history texts "gave you a distorted

18. Ibid.
20. Ibid., xv.
21. Ibid., xiii.
22. Ibid., xv.
23. Ibid., 216.
view of history, your country and the world." Now, "because of changing American
atitudes towards blacks and other minority groups," our texts:

slant history and how our system works much less than they used to. . . . some
of the recent public school history and social studies texts are the best of
their kind in history, anywhere.24

We may evaluate Kahane's claim using the questions he teaches students to ask
of conservative politicians. Is the achievement of the goal of pluralism, currently an
urgent need in the United States, the only criterion for a good textbook? Has Kahane
read history texts from other countries and other eras? If not, his statement seems
like "puffery" (which he explicitly says it is not),25 crass provincialism, or — worse —
propaganda.

The Model of Situational Accommodation. Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rieke and Allan
Janik, authors of An Introduction to Reasoning, introduce reasoning as a social practice.

Evidently reasoning — or at least the giving of reasons — is pervasive in our
society. The practice of providing reasons for what we do, or think, or tell
others we believe is built firmly into our accepted patterns of behavior.26

Reinforcing the point that engaging in reasoning is a matter of conforming to social
norms, the authors write:

there are plenty of situations in which that demand is set aside. And there are
familiar and accepted ways of brushing aside the demand for reasons in such
cases, with a noncommittal response — with a "I can't say" or "I don't know"
a "No special reason," or whatever.27

We learn that this book is designed to teach students how to assess the demand
for reasons in a particular context and how to supply reasons in a variety of contexts.

The trains of reasoning that it is appropriate to use vary from situation to
situation. As we move from the lunch counter to the executive conference
table, from the science laboratory to the law courts, the "forum" of discussion
changes profoundly.28

This book teaches reasoning in the sense that we say the Sophists in ancient
Athens taught reasoning. The Sophists taught young citizens the social skill of how to
get along in law courts and other public forums. Implicit in this type of tuition is an
interpretation of and an attitude towards the socially acceptable: what is socially
acceptable is the foundation of human behavior and therefore of human education.
One should learn how to conform and how to get the better of the situation.

But this approach to critical thinking does not encourage students to submit the
social context to any type of critical analysis. For example, students preparing to be
managers must learn to justify their hiring decisions. Toulmin's course in critical thinking
will help them in this regard. They will sharpen their skills in assessing a regional and
organizational climate to determine what can be stated publicly as justifications for
hiring decisions. In some northern U.S. cities one may be able to say "I hired him
because he is black," affirming a commitment to affirmative action. In those cities it
may well be unacceptable to say "I chose not to hire him because he is black." In
some Southern U.S. cities it may be acceptable to say "When I found out he was black
I decided not to hire him," thereby espousing a commitment to give whites first choice
at certain jobs. The "critical thinker" trained by Toulmin, et al., will not be encouraged

24. Ibid., 275.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 5.
28. Ibid.
to ask why certain chains of reasoning are taboo — particularly if it is a subject, such as race relations in the Southern United States, on which there is a strong social pressure to brush aside any demand for reasons.

A perspective on education taken from the critical pedagogue Svi Shapiro provides an economic interpretation of the significance of training students to meet the social demand for reasons.29 Shapiro presents the thesis articulated by Nicos Poulantzas that American schooling sorts those who are destined to do manual labor from those who are destined to engage in mental labor. Those who are channeled into manual labor learn little in the way of job skills at school. Instead they learn discipline and respect for authority. Those who are channeled into mental labor are taught "a series of rituals, secrets and symbolisms"30 which are not so much identified with any particular technical skill but rather qualify one to enter the "culture" of mental labor.31

Shapiro identifies those who engage in manual labor as the working class and those who engage in mental labor as the: (In the vernacular, members of this group are called "yuppies."). However, Shapiro notes that this group engages not so much in mental labor, but in professions that make use of many of the symbols of mental labor, including "paperwork," emphasis on the ability "to write and to present ideas," and "a certain use of speech."32

A course in critical thinking may provide some initiation into the "rituals, secrets and symbolisms" of mental labor including information on speaking and writing in ritual ways. The terse logical style taught in critical thinking classes is the standard for contemporary business writing. The names of fallacies are symbolic tokens which declare that their pronouncers are well-educated people. Critical thinking may be, as Toulmin suggests, a social ritual; it involves knowing what sorts of reasons to provide and to demand for every situation. One must know how to behave in the courtroom, the health spa, the realtor’s office, and the office party in order to be accepted as a member of the petty bourgeoisie. On this interpretation, the critical thinking model now in use is a step in the creation of well-behaved white collar workers.

From the perspective of critical theory, Kelley’s emphasis on critically evaluating competing options is a piece in the creation of a passive electorate. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, Toulmin’s emphasis on learning to satisfy the social demand for reasons is a step in the creation of, or at least the maintenance of, yuppie culture. Popular opinion evaluates yuppies as politically passive, content to choose between the platforms offered by Republican and Democratic candidates. The critical thinking model now appears as a piece of an educational program that creates and maintains many facets of a particular social class.

Critical Thinking and Reading

In the practice of teaching critical thinking, logical analysis often is used as a model of college-level reading. Below I argue that this model of reading may preclude the asking of certain types of politically significant questions about a text. Maxine Greene identifies two approaches to reading championed by two sets of

31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 33.
33. Ibid.
literary theorists. The first approach has been articulated by British and American literary critics. These theorists understand a text:

in relative isolation from the writer's personal biography and undistorted by associations brought to the work from the reader's own daily life.34

A text may bring up associations for each of its readers but readers must carefully distinguish their lives from what the text actually says. The text may inspire readers to change ideas or institutions, but, again, that inspiration is a part of the reader's life, not the text. An approach to reading that isolates a text from its readers' conscious experience has the virtue of inviting a certain kind of "close reading:"35 However, Greene says the danger of such an approach is the tendency to see the text "as a language game insulated from life and essential human concerns.'

The second approach to reading, which Greene favors, has been articulated by continental literary critics. For these theorists:

Literature is viewed as a genesis, a conscious effort on the part of an individual artist to understand his own experience by framing it in language. The reader who encounters the work must recreate it in terms of his consciousness.36

On this view, a text is not distorted by a reader's experience. Instead, it is illuminated by a reader's experience. Greene quotes Sartre's statement that a text is "only a collection of signs" until it is lent meaning by the experiences of a reader.37 A text is viewed in relation to human thought and action, rather than in isolation from them. The writer's activity has given her or him occasion to write. The reader's activity gives her or him the tools to breathe life into a text. The text mediates between the two, stimulating the reader to participate in the experience of the writer. In so doing, the reader will reframe both the writer's experience and her or his own.

Of the two approaches to reading, the critical thinking model now in use favors the first. A prerequisite for careful argument analysis is the student's ability to separate her or his preconceptions and reactions to the text from what is written in the text. But if argument analysis becomes an end in itself, attempts to understand the writer's experience that can genuinely illuminate the meaning of a text may be excluded.

The following excerpt from a letter to the editor, which appeared in the Charlotte Observer on July 15, 1990, will serve as an example.

Harvey Gantt's credentials don't make him the perfect candidate for anything... Gantt also spoke at a National Abortion Rights Action League rally in Raleigh on July 3. NARAL supports legalized child-killing for any reason — from convenience to sex selection.38

The author's argument may be summarized as follows. The conclusion or claim is, "Harvey Gantt is not a good candidate." The premise or reason offered in support of the conclusion is, "Gantt speaks to groups who advocate child-killing." The argument is fairly easy to discredit by referring to the list of fallacies typically taught in critical thinking courses. The adequacy of the premise that supports the conclusion could be challenged. The author rejects Gant as a viable political candidate because she rejects some of the political views of the groups who invited Gant to speak. She could be charged with committing the fallacy of "guilt by association." The logic that led the author to formulate her premise could also be challenged. From the fact that NARAL supports abortion, she draws the conclusion that NARAL would support any kind of

34. Maxine Greene, "Curriculum and Consciousness" in Hidden Curriculum, 169.
35. Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 45.
child-killing. The author could be charged with committing the fallacy of "slippery slope."

In most critical thinking classes, the analysis of the argument would end in the identification of the fallacies and the rejection of the argument. In keeping with what Greene calls the British and American approach to literary criticism, the text's message is revealed plainly in the argument. The reader's only task is to reject or accept the message. Some teachers would push their students farther, and require them to strengthen the argument by correcting the author's mistakes. But because of their emphasis on teaching logical skills, few teachers would hint that the most interesting dimensions of the editorial are revealed in the places where the author's logic fails. Few students would be encouraged to ask why the author's logic breaks down. At these points the argument's message becomes unclear. In order to understand it, students must bring in information about the writer's biography or, if it is not available, their own associations.

If the above letter to the editor were analyzed in a typical critical thinking course, it is unlikely that the identification of the fallacy would lead the class to consider the question, "What or who makes the abortion issue so powerful that this writer would base her entire voting decision on it alone?" This sort of question could lead to a critique of the letter, enabling the reader to analyze some of the forces that have shaped the author's experience and to explore some of the forces shaping her or his own political views. The class would also be unlikely to try to understand why the author commits the fallacy of "guilt by association" by asking, "Why does Gantt's appearance before pro-choice groups appear to the author as sufficient grounds for her inferences about his views?" Exploration of this question could reveal some of the forces that have shaped the author's ways of reasoning about political issues and could enable the reader to reflect on the forces that have shaped her or his reasoning patterns.

The latter question is dangerous to the entire list of fallacies. Another way of asking it is, "If 'guilt by association' is a fallacy, why do we usually use it successfully to make decisions?" This question leads to further questions. Why is an inference that works in everyday life labelled "irrational" in the critical thinking course? Why is critical thinking defined in opposition to common sense? Henry Giroux and Roger Simon provide part of an answer in their conclusion to Popular Culture, Schooling and Everyday Life. Educational policymakers identify popular culture with lower class culture, while the American educational system is designed to elevate and perpetuate bourgeois culture. Critical thinking is part of this educational program. Earlier I applied Shapiro's discussion of schooling's role in the development of a culture of mental labor to the critical thinking model. Here again, I suggest that the critical thinking course plays a role in the development of class consciousness. In this case, the development of class consciousness involves the development of a trained unconsciousness to certain aspects of experience.

CONCLUSION

It should be clear that my aim is not to discredit the ideal of critical thinking. Rather, I question whether the practice of teaching critical thinking at the college level as it has evolved into the practice of teaching informal logic is sufficient for actualizing the ideal. I have argued that it is not sufficient, if "critical thinking" includes the ability to decode the political nature of events and institutions, and if it includes the ability to envision alternative events and institutions. Speaking broadly, I have offered two sorts of reasons for my thesis. First, the raising of certain critical questions may escape the
net of strict logical analysis. Second, recognizing who is being educated in a college
critical thinking course, and why, help explain why certain critical questions fail to be
raised.