

Does the Common Core Advance a Rigorous Conception of Critical Thinking?

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For those connoisseurs of human folly, the Common Core standards fray is becoming intriguing. Up until recently, when New York educators raised ruckus, we were increasingly being led to believe, through the usual propaganda, that critical thinking is the “hallmark” of the Common Core and of Common Core classes. I had found this view mystifying since, according to research into critical thinking conducted in the past fifty years, there is very little rigorous critical thinking occurring at any level of schooling in the U.S. today, - under any program. The now seminal Arum and Roska study (*Academically Adrift, 2011*) illuminates this fact with all the research bells and whistles with which people are frequently impressed, and without which people often are loath to accept. These sociologists’ conclusions merge with those we found when conducting a state-wide study for the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing almost 20 years ago - that though the vast majority of faculty in both public and private colleges and universities across California believe critical thinking to be of primary importance to instruction, few can articulate a reasonable conception of it.

Naturally, those who fear the core standards are shocked to find that 45 states have now embraced them (minus perhaps NY). People on both sides of the political spectrum have concerns about the standards for better and worse reasons, including the extent to which private agendas are harbored on either side. Teachers are becoming uncomfortable with the idea that they will be assessed on their ability to foster these standards when they have been given little or no professional development in them, or in a rigorous conception of critical thinking. Administrators are scurrying to find ways to assess whether their teachers are fostering these standards, when they themselves have little real understanding of them (or of a rich conception of critical thinking). The usual jaded administrators and teachers consider the core curriculum just another passing fad, thus refusing any real advances in learning that might transpire from the implementation of these - or any other - “new” standards. Politicians are exploiting the standards to gain more prestige and power.

This pattern is beginning to look familiar. In the past few decades alone, we have seen more than 100 trends come and go in K-12 schooling, much of which is serviced by self-affirmed “experts” and “consultants” in the various academic fields and disciplines. Once a trend is established, the door is then thrown open for a given set of “experts” to join in for their piece of the bountiful pie, at least during the 5-7 year lifespan of the fad. These academicians or consultants, know (or learn) something of the theory being “taught” in the curriculum, usually taking one or a few slices of it and then “specializing” in that slice, writing textbooks and creating curriculum materials that can be fed to schools to advance the “learning” of the standards. These “specialists” work closely with big publishing and testing companies, whose goal is to make money through textbooks and assessment tools. Not being members of what we might term the *educational/business/governmental complex*, small educational organizations - with their often freer, more powerful, more truly educational or emancipatory curriculum and assessment materials - are squeezed out.

To make matters worse, missing from the Core Curriculum are the essential ingredients for fostering a substantive, integrated, *fairminded* conception of critical thinking; given our current political/economic/educational climate, these ingredients are likely to continue to be missing for

many years to come. It may help to remember that the National Governor's Association supports these standards, and that big business has been boosting it up and pushing it forward from the beginning. Unabashedly, a primary core curriculum webpage (www.corestandards.org) makes clear the connection between the core standards and our students' ability to *complete economically*. According to this website's homepage, "The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy."

The enlightened person may well be perplexed: *Where, in this mission statement, is the concept of education?* Is "success in college and careers" to be equated with *educating the mind*? Is developing the ability to "compete successfully in the global economy" the same as cultivating minds capable of reasoning in good faith within multiple perspectives? How does this core curriculum integrate critical thinking, education, and the deep learning of content? How will this curriculum help students develop the intellectual virtues that define the ethical, or fairminded, critical thinker – virtues such as intellectual empathy, intellectual integrity, intellectual autonomy, intellectual humility, intellectual perseverance, confidence in reason and fairmindedness? To what extent are these virtues desired (or feared) by the business community, educators, parents? Is the Core Curriculum compatible with emancipating the mind, liberating people, and making the world more just for all humans and other sentient creatures? *Have we so lost our way as to believe that the cultivation of the intellect is to be equated with developing "thinking skills" that simply help people function better as workers?*

To be sure, there has likely never been a time in which schools, on a broad scale, delivered on their promise to educate students. Set within complex social realities, schools fundamentally maintain and propagate broader societal rules, customs, and taboos. These customs are not usually driven by rules of rationality or reasonability, but by tradition - what has always been or what has come before. Most people feel safe maintaining the traditions of society. They are most comfortable within conventional thought in the various dimensions of their lives - academic, business, marriage, parenting, religious, clubs, etc. Those who attempt to think outside of these ideologies, and to live in more *enlightened, progressive, and - yes - liberal ways*, are often seen as menaces.

In short, schools, presumed by some to educate the mind, have from their inception fundamentally been places of indoctrination, socialization and training. We may do well to remember that Socrates was put to death by the government of Athens for corrupting the young and believing in gods not sanctioned by the state; Galileo was forced to give a public apology on his knees, and was placed under house arrest by church authorities for writing that the earth revolved around the sun. During the 1960s and 70s, those who opposed the Vietnam War, those who fought for the civil rights of African Americans, those who stood up for freedom of speech - all were ostracized by mainstream America, and mainstream education, for many years into their respective (and overlapping) struggles.

If we are sincere about educating students and fostering critical thinking in our schools, we may do well to contrast the Core Curriculum's mission (as found at www.corestandards.org) with the various rich treatises on education written by the best minds on the subject. Consider, for instance, this brief articulation, which comes from the extensive thoughts of Cardinal John Henry Newman on the concept of education (1852, *The Idea of a University*):

Truth, of whatever kind, is the proper object of the intellect; its cultivation then lies in fitting it to apprehend and contemplate truth... the intellect in its present state, ...does not discern truth intuitively, or as a whole. We know, not by a direct and simple vision, not at a glance, but, as it were... by a mental process, by going round an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation, of many partial notions, by the employment, concentration, and joint action of many faculties and exercises of mind.

Newman's articulation of the critical mind dovetails with that of the preeminent sociologist William Graham Sumner (1906, *Folkways*):

The critical habit of thought, if usual in society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded by stump orators ... They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence, uninfluenced by the emphasis or confidence with which assertions are made on one side or the other. They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices and all kinds of cajolery. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens.

In the past several decades, at least three US presidents have called for critical thinking in schools – President Bush, Sr., President Clinton, and President Obama. None have supported critical thinking to any significant degree with action. We call upon president Obama, this congress, and indeed all citizens to finally and permanently embrace a rigorous, integrated, fairminded conception of critical thinking, one that offers all students a realistic chance to develop as reasonable, self-disciplined, self-reflective, dialogical, liberated thinkers, as concerned for the well-being of others, and for the planet, as for themselves. This is the vision Socrates suggested to us 2400 years ago; it is a vision we will likely still be ignoring when the Core Curriculum is long gone.

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