What is Critical Thinking?

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Critical reading and critical thinking are intertwined; one cannot quite do one without the other. Kurland (2000) noted that critical reading is about discovering information whereas critical thinking is about evaluating it. Various authors have offered different definitions of the critical thinking process. Among the most useful definitions is the one provided by Scriven and Paul (1987) who defined it as

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 universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness. (para. 1)

Another useful definition was provided by Elder (2007) who defined it as “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It requires rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem solving abilities and a commitment to overcoming our native egocentrism and sociocentrism” (para. 2). Because graduate students are moving beyond being simply consumers of knowledge to learning how to make meaningful contributions to that knowledge, it is particularly important that they cultivate strong critical thinking skills.

Like critical reading, critical thinking is an active process and with practice one can develop the skills needed to do it more effectively. According to Kurland (2000), there are six
key characteristics of critical thinking: rationality, self-awareness, honesty, open-mindedness, discipline, and judgment. Rationality has to do with exercising good judgment based on logic, self-awareness with knowing one’s individuality, biases, and so forth; honesty has to do with integrity and being able to be truthful about one’s biases; open-mindedness is about being able to appreciate differing viewpoints; discipline is about being self-controlled and being objective; and judgment is about being able to form an opinion about something based on the information presented. Each of these characteristics can be developed. According to The Critical Thinking Community (2009), critical thinking occurs when certain standards of intellectual life are applied to “the elements of reasoning.” For instance, one might apply the standard of clarity to the element of purpose, the standard of significance to concepts, logicalness to points of view, accuracy to information, and so forth.

By consistently applying these standards, a reader is able to develop some of the most important characteristics of a critical thinker, which include intellectual honesty, integrity, and a sense of fair-mindedness. According to Facione (1990), a critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit. (p. 10)

Although developing the various characteristics of a critical thinker can appear overwhelming and unattainable, the skills can be learned and even those with strong critical
thinking skills can yet improve. Some of the benefits of critical thinking include the enhanced ability in self-reflection, the promotion of creativity, better expression of ideas, and the cultivation of flexible intellectual skills that one can apply to different areas of life.
References


