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## THE BLOG

### Teaching the Greeks and Critical Thinking - Part 9: Teaching How to Think, Not What to Think

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#### Getting Used to Thinking for Oneself

Over the decades, students were surprised that they were being taught *how* to think, not *what* to think. No theory was ever presented as either true or false, nor were the questions raised ever resolved. Instead, from the [first day of class](#), students had to learn to think for themselves in a sink-or-swim effort without help from their teacher. By having to figure things out on their own, students become accustomed to the uncertainty of being an adult with no answer key to the big questions of life.

After the initial novelty had worn off, most students continued to thrive in their newfound ability to do their own thinking. They were intrigued by their daily encounters with questions, which they came to see as a series of detective stories with themselves as Sherlock Holmes, trying to decide for themselves which theory was the best answer. Others were uneasy at not being given “the answers,” an unease which lasted until January, when virtually everyone had become accustomed to the non-committal nature of the course.

A few, however, never became reconciled to not having the questions answered for them. I can still recall one student dropping by my classroom after school thirty years ago and entreating me to tell him the answers to the questions posed by the *Bible as Literature* unit, which followed our study of Classical Greece. I told him that there *weren't* any answers but only *opinions*, although those who offered these opinions believed that they *were* “the answers,” despite the fact that these answers contradicted “the answers” of others.

All I could do as a public-school teacher in teaching about the Bible, the Greeks, Modernism, Shakespeare, and the other six units of the course was to explain the various theories that over the centuries claimed to answer the questions explored by the course. I suggested that he see his clergyman, who would be more than happy to answer his questions and be no doubt impressed by his interest in them.

#### Students Can Say Whatever They Want

At the outset of the course, students were told that they could say whatever they wanted as long as they supported it. This freedom of speech had a galvanizing effect on their willingness to share their opinions, so unaccustomed were they to ever having been asked their views that would become the heart of the course. They saw at once that this would be a serious class about serious matters, one that placed them and their views at the center of things since others would be reacting to whatever they said.

They understood that the success of these discussions depended solely on them, and that the quality of their responses was crucial to having an interesting class. As the year wore on, they came to realize that they were part of [the Great Conversation](#), a centuries-old tradition of inquiry into hundreds of questions and answers that began with the Greeks, with themselves the judges as to which answer was right.

These were curious and fair-minded high-school seniors with the courage to listen to all sides of a question. More to the point, they were at just the right age to learn critical thinking, since they weren't as yet

irreparably socialized into a particular viewpoint before age, habit, and vested interests would disincline them to doubt and to question. A few girls even brought their knitting to class, an infallible sign that students were listening and deeply absorbed.

## **No Right or Wrong Answers**

The question of which student is right or wrong is the end of free inquiry, and the presumption, either stated or implied, that one view is “right” and the remaining ones “wrong” should be anathema in any institution of learning with pretensions of educating, rather than indoctrinating, the young. The year-long regimen of dealing with question after question without “right” or “wrong” answers gave students insight into the infinite yearning of the Greeks and their revolutionary achievement in the ancient world. This was a fearless culture driven by the audacity to look upon the face of Medusa and not be turned into stone by assailing questions too important to be settled by anyone other than those who would have to live with the consequences of those answers themselves.

Students were encouraged to use their most valuable, yet often overlooked and underutilized, asset of youthful skepticism to confront the timeless questions that every human being must ask in leading an examined life. The sole task of the teacher was to facilitate this process by helping them experience both the challenge and dignity of this rite of passage as had the Greeks, at whose coming something new and exciting had entered the world, which from that moment on was transformed forever.

## **Truth Can Defend Itself**

High-school seniors intuitively understand that if something is true it can defend itself by withstanding the most withering scrutiny. Conversely, if a viewpoint is protected by excluding other views from the classroom, students lose respect for the course, which they simply dismiss as propaganda. The more theories taught that answer a question, the more intellectually dangerous and interesting a course will become. This is the only way for students to learn to trust their own judgment, rather than being spoon-fed “answers” from talking dispensing machines.

While studying the Greeks, students also received an enhancement of their already considerable skeptical instincts by a technical introduction to critical thinking, listening, and reading. These skills were necessary for students to appreciate what exactly the Greeks were experiencing in exploring the nature of untrammelled thought as a means toward living a more humanized life.

Continual exposure to questions taught them that there was *more than one plausible answer* to questions, not simply the ones they had been socialized into believing; that an education consisted of learning *as many competing answers* to a question as possible rather than only those officially sanctioned; and that once they succumbed to letting any philosophy, institution, or party dictate their thinking, they ceased to be autonomous persons.

## **“Negative Capability”**

Making one’s peace with uncertainty was another motif that reappeared later in our unit on Romanticism. In a famous letter to his brothers, the 22-year-old English poet John Keats refers to “[Negative Capability](#),” the state of mind when someone “is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any reaching after fact or reason.” When encountering something which transcends understanding, we can only accept the limits of reason and admit that there are things which can never be known. Students were profoundly affected by this unusual letter in which one of England’s greatest poets, not much older than themselves, opens his soul and speaks of the presence of mystery in human existence and the poet’s attempt at capturing it.

They were reminded of what they had learned from the pre-Socratics and Skeptics about the unknown, the medieval scholastics' "Everything ends in mystery," Pascal's "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing," Faust's lament "that nothing can be known," Wittgenstein's "What we cannot speak of we must pass over in silence," and Nietzsche's enigmatic "Supposing truth is a woman - what then?" Develop the mind, they all seem to be saying, but do not make it your god. Welcome the unexplainable into your life. Remember Icarus and human limitation, and Pindar's "man is but a shadow's dream!"

## Critical Thinking

What one would like to see students coming away with at the end of their high-school years is an awareness that everything they have ever been taught is only one set of theories among many; that entire libraries are filled with books written both to prove and to disprove their most cherished beliefs; and that an education is simply the ability to listen calmly to views that draw into question the very ground on which one stands while not losing one's temper or self-confidence. Critical thinking should permeate the entire high-school curriculum, so that students are both intellectually and emotionally prepared for all manner of controversies in a college classroom. Practically speaking, this would mean the ability to evaluate critically whatever a professor is saying before giving or withholding their assent.

## To High-School Seniors Reading this Article

To test their college readiness, high-school seniors reading this article may want to ask themselves whether they would be able to make the following assessments when listening to a lecture by a college professor:

Are there inconsistencies in what the speaker is saying?

Do any of the statements contradict known facts?

Could another theory explain the facts equally well? If so, why is the speaker's theory preferred?

Is the theory certain, probable, or only possible? Is the speaker claiming that the theory is certain or probable when it is only possible? Is the case being overstated by claiming more than the evidence allows?

Are the arguments convincing? What other arguments might support the case? Why aren't they mentioned?

Does the speaker think that merely stating a theory is proving it?

If the case were true, what would be the implications? Are these implications dealt with? If not, why not?

Does the speaker have a hidden agenda?

Who would profit if the theory were true?

Are fallacies present, especially appeals to the man, authority, fear, antiquity, novelty, pity, crowd, ignorance, self-interest, the fallacy of origins, vicious circle, self-evident truth, tautology, question-begging epithets, irrelevant conclusion, false cause, false generalization, false analogy, unqualified generalization, insufficient options, or complex question?

Are the facts presented actually facts or disguised opinions, value judgments, debatable explanatory theories, unprovable metaphysical hypotheses, prejudice, bigotry, intolerance, or fear-mongering dressed

up as “facts”?

Can the proofs advanced themselves be proven, or do they presuppose as true the very thing the speaker is trying to prove? Are the so-called “proofs” even relevant to the theory advanced? Are they simply the theory expressed in different words?

Is anything being said between the lines?

What are the objections against this theory? Does the speaker state them fairly or misrepresent them? Are they being refuted convincingly? Are only the easy ones refuted, but the hard ones ignored?

Are the questions put to the speaker being persuasively answered or evaded by creating the impression that they *are* being answered?

Does the speaker flit from point to point without offering proof for what’s being claimed?

Is the presentation rushed, confused, or disorganized?

Does the speaker appeal to evidence or emotion? Is the choice of words manipulative by describing the issues in emotional terms?

Is the speaker trying to win listeners over by flattering them, wanting to be liked or to be accepted by them, or suggesting that they’re all in this together to distract them from the fact that no proof is being offered for what has been claimed?

Is the speaker trying to frighten listeners so that they won’t be able to think calmly?

## **Concluding Reflections**

Regrettably, not every high-school graduate entering college would be able to make these critical assessments. The question is *shouldn’t they be able to* in order to get the most out of college?

If they don’t possess these critical skills, where can they learn them if not in high school?

And if they aren’t learning them, isn’t it reasonable to assume that they’ll have a rocky road ahead of them in college?

Don’t high schools have an obligation to teach these skills before sending their graduates to college?

If they do, why haven’t they done it?

And why haven’t parents insisted on it?