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Commentary on: Robert H. Ennis' "Critical thinking across the curriculum (CTAC)"

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1. INTRODUCTION

I was honored to be asked to comment on Bob Ennis's paper. I have long seen Bob Ennis is one of the fathers of the whole critical thinking movement. I greatly respect his ongoing effort and work in this field. My comments on Bob Ennis's paper are not particularly critical but are more in the way of friendly amendments.

Bob sketches a utopian plan for critical thinking being infused across a whole curriculum. I hope that Bob's paper is widely circulated. The proposal seems to me largely uncontroversial, however challenging to implement. If an institution or Faculty really wishes to take seriously the notion of developing and enhancing their students' critical thinking skills, Bob's paper provides a clear and credible model.

Sensitive to the "dialectical tier," Bob anticipates objections and addresses them with as much credible evidence as he can muster. He argues plausibly for his definition of critical thinking which I support and personally use when doing CT workshops. He also argues patiently against John McPeck's (and others') argument that it is a mistake to teach generic critical thinking courses--an argument that I believe is now largely dismissed. At the same time he acknowledges that only having stand-alone critical thinking courses is undoubtedly not adequate to really enhance students' critical thinking abilities.

Turning to bringing critical thinking into subject content courses, Bob distinguishes between infusion and immersion of critical thinking into courses, the key difference being that explicit instruction (infusing critical thinking) is crucial to students learning to think critically. I also accept his point that what is crucial here is teaching for transfer – the ability to apply the concepts of critical thinking to a variety of academic and non academic situations. I also accept his point that the time given to critical thinking instruction is likely to increase retention of the material which should make up for whatever time is lost from coverage.¹ As Bob's anecdote reminds us, one of the dark secrets of education is just how much of what is learned is forgotten.

¹ I am surprised that Bob does not reference the literature on problem-based learning which faces the same objection, but for which there is extensive evidence that enduring learning is better produced with such methods and more than makes up for the loss of time for coverage that is devoted to the problem solving pedagogy.

2. TRANSITION

A key unanswered question though is how we get there from here. In my role at Capilano University as a faculty member promoting learning outcomes assessment and on the steering committee of a new liberal studies degree, I have given considerable thought to how to encourage faculty to promote critical thinking instruction in their classes.

At Capilano we have well-established critical thinking courses although not the two-term model that Bob recommends. But I think that Bob is right that we need a two-term model. Sharon Bailin and I have written a textbook (*Reason in the Balance*) that in many ways implements Bob's model. The first chapters aim to develop basic critical thinking skills and the later chapters require the students to apply what they have learned about critical thinking to a variety of subject areas including: the physical sciences, social sciences, philosophy and art. We knew that faculty would not be able to use the whole textbook in a standard one term course. But we believed that faculty could select from these application chapters those that they wish to utilize. If they were to utilize all the application chapters, there would need to be a second course.

Despite the construction of our text, it may be that the appropriate time for a course which looks at how to think critically in a variety of courses is not in the second semester as anticipated by Bob. Perhaps it would be best to wait until students have had a few semesters of exposure to academic courses before taking a second critical thinking course which focuses on the disciplines. Perhaps a course in the fourth semester would be most useful.

As Bob rightly notes, the real challenge is getting faculty across the institution or even just across a faculty like Arts and Science to seriously sign-on to infusing critical thinking in the courses. I currently have release sections to promote a learning outcomes approach to curriculum and assessment. This approach is considerably more popular among administrators than faculty. But I have promoted the notion of learning outcomes as a key concept for curriculum development for many years. My idea is simple: ask yourself what are the enduring learning outcomes (understanding, abilities, knowledge, attitudes) that students should take from your course and be able to make use of in their life, in their work and in their subsequent academic career. Then ask yourself how you can shape your curriculum and instruction to make it likely that students will acquire this knowledge and understanding. And finally, and quite crucially, ask how you can assess the students' learning so that you and your students can tell whether they have acquired the relevant understanding, abilities, knowledge, attitudes.

3. ASSESSMENT

In another context, Bob has reviewed a popular assessment tool: the CLA, which, in my opinion, provides the most plausible tool for assessing whether students are acquiring an appropriate level of critical thinking. He has written a brilliant critique of this test focusing on the fact that it is provided without transparency and relies on computer grading despite being an essay based test. The result is that we cannot tell

whether the evaluation process is credible. Despite these objections, the CLA concept of a “performance task” which asks students to evaluate and synthesize a variety of information sources seems the most credible model we have for assessing critical thinking competency. But the goal of this test, even if it were more transparent, is to assess the overall success of the institution in educating students. The results provide no guidance to individual instructors.²

Institutional level results may delight or disappoint administration but they will not inform instruction. What we need is a method to encourage and illuminate critical thinking instruction at the course level. As a result, I am working with individual instructors on modifying the assessment model used in the CLA test so that they can tell within their course whether students are indeed acquiring appropriate critical thinking skills and understanding. I have just started the experiment but the most interesting outcome has been the anxiety that faculty members experienced as they constructed their final exam, wondering whether they had indeed taught these critical thinking skills which they were now about to assess. The results of this early experiment revealed what might be anticipated--the evidence such as it was indicated that the instructors needed to do more to explicit infuse critical thinking into their course.

4. IMPLEMENTATION

My suggestion of how we might “get from there from here” is that faculty should be required to 1. indicate in their course outlines the critical thinking skills that they intend students to acquire, have enhanced, or utilized, and 2. indicate how they plan to assess (both formative and summative) the quality of critical thinking in their course. While some faculty bemoan the notion that exams should drive curriculum, in this case, the choice of assessment methods helps to ensure that the curriculum explicitly references critical thinking skills and develop them in class. A critical thinking advisor could quickly tell from the assessment methods chosen whether an instructor was really assessing for and teaching for critical thinking outcomes.

My ideal would be to have a common critical thinking rubric used by instructors in all classes to identify the success of students in critical thinking. The part of the assessment that is focused on critical thinking would in principle be separable from the overall grade so that in that way departments or Faculties could create a credible aggregate notion of how well students are doing generally at thinking critically. Obviously there are formidable difficulties to being able to do that, but it is one method to get faculty to work together and to self-consciously infuse critical thinking in their courses.

5. CONCLUSION

I take these suggestions to be entirely supportive of Bob’s program. One looks

² Recently the makers of the CLA test have produced version (CLA+) that could be used by individual instructors since they are designed to test all students, not just a sample. But neither Bob nor I have had an opportunity to review these new tests.

forward to finding an institution that would commit itself to becoming a “Wisdom” university and engage in the cross curriculum commitment to critical thinking as outlined in Bob Ennis’ paper.