

# Making Critical Thinking a Classroom Reality

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Critical thinking is core to my teaching. I encourage students to be independent thinkers, who examine assumptions and look at the implications of ideas, both their own and those of others (Brookfield 1987, 7-8). However, I see critical thinking as more than a series of thinking skills. As Richard Paul has pointed out, skills may be used for self-serving ends and in ways that may do ill to the public good (1987, 2). Instead, Paul advocates a strong sense critical thinking (1990, 369-78), which demands that one carefully think about the nature and biases of his or her own thinking and also cultivate certain essential character traits. "If we are interested in cultivating the kind of intellectual independence implied in the concept of strong sense critical thinking, we must recognize the need to foster the intellectual moral virtues essential to that mode of thinking and being. These are intellectual [epistemological] humility, courage, integrity, perseverance, empathy, and fair-mindedness" (Paul 1987, 3). Thus, if we are interested in enhancing our students' critical thinking capabilities, while we must encourage logical analysis, more is required. We must also nurture students' examination of their own thinking as well as the development of the character traits that allow them to engage in such an enterprise.

Part of the art, and the magic, of teaching is creating, choosing, and implementing strategies to move students forward as critical thinkers. While there are no quick fixes or simple formulas we can adopt as teachers, the opportunities to enhance critical thinking are numerous. Below I describe two parts of my American political system course which I consciously structured to develop students' ability and willingness to think critically about politics. The first section focuses on tolerance for expression, in particular the issue of flag burning. The second deals

with the evaluation of American politics and public policy presented by third-party ideologies.

## Political Expression and Flag Burning

I initially introduce students to the flag-burning issue through a debate-format exercise. While confrontation may not appeal to or be appropriate for all students, I believe that it has a place in a multifaceted approach to teaching. However, caution is warranted. Debates can be explosive and therefore must be carefully thought out in advance. For example, the choice of topic is not a simple matter. While the issue to be debated must engage students, certain topics, due to their sensitive and personal nature, should be handled with extreme caution or in some cases avoided. I would not normally select abortion as a topic for a class debate since it is likely that during a free-wheeling debate some students could suffer as a result of their classmates' remarks. At the same time, no topic is totally free of a personal dimension for some participants. Even a discussion of auto seat belts may bring up horrible memories for some students. Recently, during a discussion on capital punishment, one student became visibly upset when revealing that a relative of hers had been murdered and the killer given a relatively short prison term. During debates on flag burning equally sensitive moments could occur. Briefing students in advance to be respectful of others' feelings and reminding them of the personal nature of the issue under discussion should help sensitize participants to their own behavior and contribute to the empathy critical thinking requires.

The basic version of this exercise begins by students expressing their agreement or disagreement with a statement by standing and placing themselves along an agree/disagree

continuum from one side of the room to the other. In this particular case I ask students to divide up based upon how strongly they agree or disagree that flag-burning should be constitutionally protected free speech covered by the First Amendment. The nearer one is to the side, the more intense the response. Those who are uncertain stand toward the middle of the room. The people on the sides try to convince those in the middle to move toward their side. The persons in the middle seek to clarify positions by asking questions of those on the sides. During the course of the exercise anyone may alter their position by moving to a different spot in the room. This phase of the exercise ends after about 20 minutes with those in the middle selecting where they wish to stand.

Following the debate I ask the class to sit down and write for a few moments about why they believe as they do. I emphasize that I am not asking them to discuss the logic of their arguments or the strength or weakness of the particular points they want to make. Instead, I want them to discuss the influences in their lives they feel helped them to arrive at their current position on flag burning. I stress that what they write will not be seen by anyone else. I also tell them to save what they have written because they will refer to it later in the course.

After everyone has completed the writing exercise, I then turn to the content of the arguments given on both sides of the flag-burning issue. I write two headings on the board, "allow flag burning" and "don't allow flag burning," and ask the class to state the arguments that each side presented in support of its particular position. Once the arguments are recorded, I tell the student to copy them down and to save both lists for later in the course. Both the arguments for and against allowing flag burning, as well as the personal influences about which the students

wrote, are later used to elucidate aspects of critical thinking.

The paragraphs the students wrote on the personal influences that affected their views on flag burning are used during the section on political socialization. I believe that political socialization is a particularly important section of the course for purposes of critical thinking. It encourages students to look at both the sources of ideas in their culture as well as their own personal thinking and the sources of their ideas. They see how they are part of a larger social system that has much in common (i.e., consensual values) as well as individuals who may differ among themselves. During class discussions, in addition to discussing the general significance of each agent of socialization (e.g., family, school, media), I ask them to share personal examples of how each agent has played a role in their own lives. To encourage discussion I begin by telling the class how I see each agent affecting my own ideas. After the class has finished discussing each agent, I refer back to flag burning and note how some of them may have mentioned the particular agent we had just finished discussing. Once the entire section on socialization is completed, I ask the students to reread what they had written about the influences on their belief about flag burning and the First Amendment. They can then see what their personal socialization looks like on this particular issue.

Looking at the source of one's ideas is not always easy and may require personal courage. Indicating how and why one holds certain ideas may serve to seriously undercut unexamined assumptions and lead one to question the basis of long-held beliefs. Therefore, the approach I use for socialization is very different from the more confrontational debate method. Having a noncritical (in the narrow sense) environment makes it much easier for students to examine the sources of beliefs and values. By having students write privately and share their own personal perceptions and experiences, they are given the opportunity to tell their own stories. This may be particularly appropriate for students who shy away from confrontation,

lack trust in their own judgement, or simply do not feel comfortable being challenged in a classroom situation (see Belenky et al. 1986).

Because humility and empathy are part of critical thinking, I close this section of the course by reminding the class that in life they will meet people whose views are different from their own, either persons within our culture or from other cultures. It is easy to wonder why other persons hold certain beliefs and why they simply can't believe the truth as we

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see it. I stress that before wondering how others can believe as they do, we should ask ourselves why each of us believes as we do.

The second source of student-generated ideas from the original flag-burning debate (i.e., the list of pro and con arguments) is used when discussing the logical basis for limits on First Amendment expression. While during the original debate one's own views were paramount and during the socialization discussion the focus was the source of one's own views, I now turn to the official view of the issue as exemplified in Supreme Court decisions. *Texas vs. Johnson* (109 S.Ct. 2533, 1989), the Texas flag-burning case, is one of the cases I cover. I begin by passing out copies of extended excerpts from the Court's *Texas vs. Johnson* judgement and ask the students to read the handout in class (this takes about

20 minutes) taking note of where the views of the justices (majority, concurring, and dissenting) are similar to or different from the arguments given by the class during its recent debate. In case some students had not copied down the class's list, I write it on the board while they are reading the decision.

While having students learn where the Court draws the line in this particular instance is one of my goals, my aims are much broader. First, I believe that critical thinking requires confidence in one's abilities. For virtually all introductory students, this is the first opportunity that they have had to read a Supreme Court opinion. While they may not comprehend every detail or reference, they see that they do possess the ability to read and understand what the Court is saying. It is not some language that is accessible to only an enlightened few.

Second, the students see that intelligent and well-meaning people can and do disagree, that answers aren't always clear, and that disagreement is legitimate. Furthermore, being in the minority does not necessarily mean that one is wrong; it simply means that one's position did not carry in a particular instance. In fact, as the series of court cases on tolerance (e.g., *Schenck vs. U.S.*, *Gitlow vs. New York*, *Herndon vs. Lowry*, *Dennis vs. U.S.*, *Yates vs. U.S.*, *Brandenburg vs. U.S.*) demonstrates, which side dominates may depend on the political context as much as the logic of a given set of arguments. One must not give up a position one believes in simply because it is not held by the current majority.

Third, regardless of which side one supports, a credible case must be developed based on history, the law, and likely implications. One cannot simply state what one believes to be the proper position as if it were some self-evident truth and leave it at that. Furthermore, the students see that the arguments they mustered on either side of the issue were not very different from many of the ideas/arguments given by the members of the Court. While the justices may speak with more depth and eloquence, their basic points are rather straightforward and do not rely on

some logic not possessed by normal mortals.

Finally, arriving at a final judgement is not always an easy task and may require courage. The concurring opinion by Justice Kennedy is particularly poignant as an example of someone reaching a judgement he must intellectually support even though it may be personally painful.

## Policy Options

Frequently, students have not had to deal seriously with ideas significantly different from their own. Not discussing religion and politics is not merely a piece of folk wisdom; it is a reality of the American political culture. By using guest speakers presenting various political ideologies and policy options, one can expose students to differing views and encourage them to examine their own beliefs and values.

In American politics I use three guest speakers during the course of a semester: a Libertarian, a supporter of Lyndon LaRouche, and a Socialist or Communist. I use nonmainstream speakers to expose students to possibilities they may never have imagined, let alone seriously examined, and as a means of emotionally involving students. Even the most passive students find it difficult to not be emotionally aroused and engaged by the speakers.

Prior to each speaker's visit the students have an assigned reading (e.g., party platform, newspaper, short article from an organizational publication) to give them some idea of the person's perspective beforehand. I also ask each student to come to class with two questions to ask the speaker based on the written material. In this way the class is prepared to engage in a discussion with the speaker following the presentation.

I devote one 75-minute period to the speaker's presentation and his or her discussion with the students. At least this much time is required for a more than cursory presentation and discussion. Also, each speaker is encouraged to bring and hand out written materials.

The class period following the presentation is devoted to discussing the speaker's presentation and ideas.

While the beginning of the discussion is similar to a bull session in which students normally agree or disagree with the speaker (see Taylor 1991, 3), my goal is to move students beyond simple support or rejection. In particular, I want the class to take three major points away from the discussion. First, according to the speaker, what are the major problems that our country is now facing? Second, why do these problems exist? In other words, what is the speaker's underlying belief system? Finally, what solutions (based on the above basic beliefs and values) does the speaker propose? In order to prepare students, it is best to let them know prior to the speaker's arrival that

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these three points will form an important part of the discussion the following class period. In this way they have something specific to look for when reading the material or listening to the speaker. In addition, I brief each speaker beforehand and explain to them that in addition to policy positions, I want them to discuss basic beliefs and values. Thus, both the students and the speakers are keyed to the same basic questions.

Good questions are the core of any good discussion (Andrews 1980, 129-63; Taylor 1991, 1-4) as well as the key to nurturing critical thinking. Of my three basic questions, the second is the most important in terms of critical thinking. One's beliefs and values underlie the rest of a person's thinking. What we see as a problem, how we define the nature of the problem and its solution, are based on a system of underlying beliefs and values, a system that ultimately ends at our belief about human nature. If discussions are limited to examining problems and solutions, one misses an important

opportunity to look at the assumptions that underpin ideas. Once the students begin examining the speakers' assumptions, they also begin to examine their own and to see the foundation upon which their own ideas are built.

At the end of the course the students write a paper in which all three speakers are compared on the basic questions. As part of the assignment, they are asked to state with which speaker they most agree. In addition, they are asked which of the three perspectives they feel is most likely to be successful in the American political context. While most would prefer not to side with one of the three nonmainstream views, most can choose the perspective with which they most agree and explain why they choose as they do. They do know where they stand. In other words, they do comprehend that their underlying beliefs, values, and attitudes are closer to one ideology than to the others. In this way, students not only are exposed to divergent ways of looking at the world, they also look at themselves.

Furthermore, when students are asked to say which group would be the most successful in the American political context they must be able to see that this is not the same thing as agreeing with a particular party or ideology. Thus, one may agree with the Libertarian more than the other speakers, but, after seriously examining the American political context, reluctantly conclude that it is the Socialists who would have the best shot at success. For many of them, this is not a simple task. For example, in a course on the 1988 elections I asked the class to discuss which presidential candidate would likely win. Over and over again students explained why they favored a particular candidate. They were unable to clearly differentiate between what they preferred to happen and what was likely to happen.

Critical thinking involves hard work and some degree of personal discomfort. It is not simply checking a box or filling in a word. It involves thinking things through where linkages may not be clear nor the path well laid. It requires a dedication to the realm of ideas, a realm in which many of our students may not feel

comfortable. Even more disconcerting is confronting one's own ideas and beliefs. This is not an easy task for any of us (Brookfield 1990, 12-13). It may be even more difficult for our students who come to us as dualistic thinkers (Perry 1970, 59-71) and may lack confidence in their own academic abilities (Brookfield 1990, 44).

Our task is to help students along the path of critical thinking. We do this by being supportive when they venture out and take the risks that critical thinking involves. We let them know that while we place demands on them, we will also be there to provide support if need be (Elbow 1986, 153-59). We understand the process they are going through. Each of us went through our own initial reaching out, and, as role models, we continue to reach out. While as a teacher I can model critical thinking and help guide students, I cannot really do the thinking for them. Ultimately, each of them must make the learning their own.

## Collaborative Education in Taft Seminars Energizes Political Science Education of Teachers

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“I am amazed at the amount I have learned about our system and the depth to which I now can explore this topic. I'm now curious and excited to learn more. I'm also more confident about the system than I was before,” wrote a North Carolina teacher who in the summer of 1992 had attended a Taft Seminar. This teacher's reaction to the intensive two-week course on American politics and government is but one of thousands of enthusiastic, affirmative evaluations of Taft Seminars for Teachers in the 32 years that they have been offered.

Professors who direct and teach in the seminars, which are conducted on college campuses around the country, are similarly enthusiastic

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### About the Author

Mel Cohen is an associate professor at Miami University Middletown, where he teaches in a number of fields, including American politics, public administration, and comparative politics.

about this special course for teachers. A political scientist reviewing the summer seminar on his northeastern college campus recently wrote, “The opportunity to interact with highly qualified and dedicated professionals from the public sector provides the Seminar participants with learning opportunities unmatched in other programs.” Another professor reviewing the Taft Seminar approach wrote, “I know of no other teacher program that provides this rich blend of the theoretical and practical. I have heard many teachers praise the experience as the best teacher education course they have ever taken.”

The Taft Seminars are by design educational collaboratives, bringing together professionals representing

diverse educational and political institutions to examine political processes and contemplate how to better educate students about these processes. The seminars were initiated by the Taft Institute, a leading national civic education organization, as a means to improve the academic background of social studies teachers in American government and politics. Through grants to co-sponsoring institutions, the Institute covers almost all of the teachers' expenses for the program, including tuition for graduate credit. The Institute also provides room and board for teachers who do not live within commuting range of the host institution.

School boards, parents, and the society at large generally assign