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## Critical Thinking and the Writing Center: Possibilities

Tracey Baker

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As English instructors, we all recognize a crisis of simplistic and illogical thinking in our students' essays. As writing center directors, we daily confront the additional crisis of handling the red-inked results of this faulty thinking. There is a recent movement to focus our attention on what we now call "critical thinking." What, exactly, is critical thinking, how does it enter into the work we do in writing centers, and what pedagogies can we use to help improve our students' ability to think critically?

One of the difficulties in understanding critical thinking is that there are so many definitions. In an article entitled "Many Professors Now Start at the Beginning by Teaching Their Students How to Think" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Liz McMillen states: "Many professors report that they no longer take it for granted that their students can analyze arguments and reason thoughtfully about issues by the time they reach college" (23). But what do we mean when we say that critical thinking involves analyzing arguments and reasoning thoughtfully? Different people answer that question in different ways. In *Critical Thinking and Education*, John McPeck points out that critical thinking is not just raising questions because many questions are straightforward requests for information, nor is it indiscriminate skepticism, which leads us to regress. Rather, it is the appropriate use of reflective skepticism toward the problem under consideration. Knowing how and when to apply this reflective skepticism effectively requires, among other things, knowing something about the field in question. Thus, while someone may be a critical thinker about "x," it is impossible for her to be a critical thinker about everything (McPeck 7).

Edward M. Glaser's definition in *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking* states that reasoning requires a greater degree of intellectual development than a mere ability to learn; critical or reflective thinking involves a higher order of intellectual development which includes the ability to reason (44). In *Thinking Critically*, John Chaffee states that critical thinking involves

making sense of our world by carefully examining our thinking and the thinking of others in order to clarify and improve our understanding . . . The word *critical* comes from the Greek word *critic*, which means to question, to make sense of, to be able to analyze. It is by questioning, making sense of things and people, and analyzing that we examine our thinking and the thinking of others. These critical activities aid us in reaching the best possible conclusions and decisions. (51)

Edward D'Angelo, in *The Teaching of Critical Thinking*, cites no fewer than sixty qualities that one must satisfy in order to be considered a critical thinker—from something as simple as flexibility to complexities such as recognizing both the etymological fallacy and the fallacy of arguing against the man and judging intuition. Finally, in the introduction to *The Writer's Mind: Writing as a Mode of Thinking*, Janice Hays equates thinking with writing:

. . . it is the act of shaping thought in writing that makes possible the elaboration of ideas, the establishing of relationships among those ideas, and the consequent manipulations of those relationships that we associate with complex thought . . . we do not genuinely "know" a subject until we have written about it, nor can we begin to think it through thoroughly until we have qualified, subordinated, correlated, and synthesized aspects of that subject in the structure of written language. (xi)

In addition to these varying definitions, there are also many different approaches toward the problems our students have with thinking. At the University of Massachusetts in Boston, for instance, Dolares Gallo has devised a model for analyzing literature. She first elicits individual responses from her students and then has them identify what they do and do not understand about what they have read. Next, she asks them to list the features in the text that the entire group should consider, and divides the class into small groups so that they can compare these lists, decide which features are most important, and discuss the text in terms of these features. Finally, the groups reassemble as a class and discuss each group's features and responses.

Institutes such as the Cognitive Strategies and Writing Institute meet each May at The University of Chicago, and the Thinking/Writing Program at The University of California at Irvine has developed 125 demonstration lessons spanning all educational levels from k-college. Studies on cognitive development, mostly based on Piaget, appear with more frequency in our professional journals; work in computer-assisted instruction that

encourages students to investigate their topics throughout the writing stages also address thinking. Books such as D. N. Perkins' *The Mind's Best Work* and John Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry and How We Think* discuss how our thinking processes develop and offer suggestions about how to encourage such development in writing.

In "Integrating Formal Logic and the New Rhetoric: A Four Stage Heuristic," David S. Kaufer and Christine M. Neuwirth provide a paradigm for writing arguments which requires students to construct, evaluate, refine, and reevaluate a logical summary based on the main points of an assigned essay; after having done so, the students prepare summaries of arguments they are writing and test their own logic as they have learned to test that of others. Edward deBono's Cognitive Research Trust "alphabet soup" provides students with acronyms for remembering and listing important data—CAF, for instance, stands for Consider All Facts, EBS for Examine Both Sides, and OPV for Other People's Views. Further, we have the work of, among others, Linda Flower, Andrea Lunsford, Janet Emig, and Janice Hays. Almost everything we read in this area encourages us to keep asking our students the questions "how," "why," "what," and "what if."

Writing center tutors must, obviously, deal with students' lack of critical thinking skills, for they are the ones who attempt to help students compensate for their inabilities. But does a new focus on critical thinking add a completely different set of tasks tutors must learn how to teach? As we all know, each student who comes into a writing center enters with problems specific to that particular assignment at that particular moment in time. Indeed, students who make repeated visits very often return with different and unique difficulties with each new assignment. So it is often hard to generalize about how to work with "students" as a class of people who have concrete, finite, definable problems. We usually diagnose students, however, by deciding whether their problems belong within the realm of grammar and editing or involve organizing and developing the topic. If tutors are responsible for these two broad areas, are they now also responsible for a third area, critical thinking? The best answer to that question is, I think, no. In fact, programs that consider thinking as a skill separate from writing frequently develop elaborate courses in formal logic. As a result, students become more concerned with trying to memorize the Latinate terminology that formal logic involves than with learning how to do the kinds of analysis that these terms represent. How can students possibly learn what they need to know about thinking when their time is absorbed by memorizing and recalling words and concepts so foreign to them?

If critical thinking does not create a new area of expertise tutors need to learn, then how does it fit into the two general areas in which tutors already work? I would suggest that several strategies already used in writing centers

involve critical thinking skills. First, we encourage critical thinking in teaching grammar when we use the kinds of exercises developed by Andrea Lunsford. Her work engages students in inferential reasoning in contrast to the traditional kinds of drill exercises that are error-based and which, as we have discovered, are both confusing to students and ineffective in helping them recognize problems in their own writing. Lunsford's exercises on recognizing verbs, for instance, are structured so that students must supply verbs by filling in blanks in sentences where verbs should appear. After they have completed this task, they are asked to formulate a definition which describes what verbs do. In another kind of exercise, characteristics of verbs, Lunsford lists three columns of verbs, each in different tenses. Again, after students have studied the groups, they are asked to formulate the characteristics of each. By having our students formulate rules in their own words, we are certainly asking our students to think. The students, themselves, devise rules in terms that they understand and, more importantly, they actually learn how a particular concept works.

Second, when we use exercises based on controlled composition, we are also encouraging our students to think critically. Like Lunsford's exercises, controlled composition encourages students to formulate their own explanations for why English grammar works as it does. For example, one way that students learn how to conjugate verbs is by imitating—by copying passages in which the verb forms are all correct. Another way students learn about verb tense is by reading a paragraph in which all the verb tenses are in present-tense, and then going back through the paragraph changing each present-tense verb into another specified tense. This particular kind of exercise encourages students to think about how verb tenses determine the appropriate forms of nouns, pronouns, and so on in each sentence. Once again, the emphasis is not on error, and students are not asked to memorize a set of rules. Rather, everything students study is already correct; they are asked to determine what might account for this correctness by using their own language. Most importantly, they are asked to observe, to think, to analyze, and to reason inductively.

A third way that we can encourage students to think is to have them work with sentence combining. These exercises ask students to combine two or more sentences into one, and again, the sentences are grammatically correct. Of course, there are various solutions—all equally effective—in any given set of sentences. So, when a student is asked to combine five sentences, he has the option of combining those sentences any number of ways to come up with any number of appropriate answers. Students learn from noting the various options available and then from analyzing the pros and cons of different combinations. When we ask students to learn grammar through sentence combining, controlled composition, and formulating their own

rules based on a set of correct sentences, we can measure what our students actually know, not merely what they have memorized and can recall.

There are also readily available ways for writing center tutors to encourage thinking when working with content. One of the best, and oldest, methods of getting students to discover what they know about their topics is to ask them questions. Depending upon what information results from these questions, the tutor can help the student either rethink the topic or recognize that the topic needs to be refined and, perhaps, changed. Another way to devote a tutorial to thinking is to have students analyze their intended audience. Then, they can analyze an audience who does not share their interests and figure out how these differences would affect what they write. Students can also analyze a commercial to decide its primary audience from the advertiser's point of view and then defend their analyses. Or, a tutor can use an editorial or letter to the editor from the student newspaper as the basis for a discussion of logic, analysis, and clear thinking.

Because thinking is inseparable from writing, we already teach students how to think, and we already have successful methodologies at our disposal which we can use to encourage our students to learn, not just to memorize. There are no quick, foolproof solutions to this complex issue. Of course, we cannot possibly teach students how to think in one tutorial, one quarter, one semester, or even one year. However, like our students, we can identify exactly what these issues are and begin to solve them.

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