



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Teaching Students to Think Critically

by Chet Meyers, Metropolitan State Univ.,
Minneapolis.

San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1986, 131 pp.

Reviewed by Victoria Voytko

Professor Meyers bills his book on critical thinking as "A Guide for Faculty in All Disciplines." At first glance, this description is discouraging, as it implies that the author intends to propound a single method for developing students' critical faculties that is indifferent to the idiosyncratic natures of academic disciplines. Any moderately reflective university teacher knows that no such method is either feasible or desirable. Happily, readers who make it past the subtitle of this book will find such trepidation unfounded. Meyers in fact adopts an approach to critical thinking that is not only highly sensitive to the varieties of intellectual culture in contemporary academia, but also mercifully short on jargon.

In *Teaching Students to Think Critically*, Meyers proceeds on the commonsense assumption that critical capacities are content-specific. And, indeed, the intellectual skills needed to solve problems in fluid dynamics are not the same as those required to successfully analyze and critique works of art. Accordingly, Meyers' first task is to debunk the popular and pedagogically sterile notion that the teaching of critical thinking forms an independent discipline in which students are taught to master formal paradigms of reasoning

essentially portable from one discipline to the next. This approach to critical thinking is a direct descendent of medieval curricular practice, which treated a course in formal logic as the indispensable precursor to comprehensive study of the arts and sciences. While admitting the importance of logic and formal patterns of analysis in every academic discipline, Meyers argues that courses in formal and informal reasoning cannot by themselves provide students with the wide range of specific critical skills appropriate to study of the various special sciences and humanities. Thus Meyers recommends that we cease to treat critical thinking as a separate academic subject, and instead incorporate it wholly into the study of individual disciplines.

It therefore becomes the task of every teacher to inculcate habits of critical thinking in his or her students. This involves the conscious transmission of what Meyers calls "discipline-related frameworks for critical thinking"--the distinctive conceptual structures and methodological norms that guide inquiry and shape theory in a given discipline. Professional academics are keenly aware of the variability of analytic styles across disciplines; this much is evidenced by the habitual distrust with which denizens of one academic department view the projects and products of researchers in neighboring fields. (And the closer the neighbors, the more profound may be the suspicion!) Undergraduates, however, are naturally oblivious to such distinctions; hence the frequency with which instructors complain

that their students haven't the least idea how to write a philosophy paper, or analyze a poem, or construct an algebraic proof. Meyers rightly maintains that each of these tasks involves the exercise of special critical skills which must be deliberately taught and assiduously developed through explicit examples and frequent practice. Unfortunately, university instructors, though confident practitioners of these very skills, are often at a loss when it comes to teaching the tricks of their trade to intellectually naive undergraduates.

While denying the existence of either a unified critical methodology or a single practical procedure for imparting critical skills to students, Meyers maintains that university teachers can learn to teach critical thinking by drawing on their collective wisdom and experience. He urges the establishment of ongoing university teaching seminars, which bring small groups of faculty and/or teaching assistants together once a month to discuss common concerns, analyze particular problems, and trade strategies or offer advice related to the inculcation of critical thinking skills. Meyers notes that although critical skills are inevitably discipline-specific, certain general strategies for developing students' analytic capacities are highly adaptive to different intellectual cultures. In a provocative chapter titled "Designing Effective Written Assignments," Meyers argues quite persuasively that the traditional term paper is, contrary to the received view, an effective barrier to the promotion of critical sophistication in undergraduate students. In line with his general advocacy of a "step-wise approach" to the development of analytical skills, Meyers recommends a series of short, carefully targeted and increasingly more complex written assignments spaced throughout the semester. He is generous with illustrations of model written assignments appropriate to courses in history, literature, economics, and sociology.

There is much more of interest in *Teaching Students Critical Thinking*, including a defense of subjectivity, personal opinion and even emotion as aids in (rather than obstacles to) the fostering of critical abilities in undergraduate students. Because Meyers keeps his use of empirical studies and social-scientific models to a minimum, disparate readers looking for practical advice will find much to assist them in this small book. Meyers has written a useful and sensible volume for teachers eager for a guide to effective educational practices.