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A Participatory Approach to the Teaching of Critical Reasoning

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For those of us who teach critical reasoning, our task of presenting its tools in an interesting way has been facilitated by a number of relatively easy to understand textbooks that include "fragments" of political, social, and economic issues of

our day (albeit sometimes contrived and artificial), as well as a chapter or two on the analysis of extended arguments, such as those found in essays, editorials, and letters to newspaper and magazine editors. Generally speaking, authors of these texts have made a concerted effort to arouse students' interest in learning critical thinking skills by inserting issues and reasoning situations into their texts that are more like those that students confront in the world.

If part of our task is to motivate students to learn methods of argument construction and evaluation, the latest trend in textbooks does a fine job in doing just that. But simply using essays and editorials that address issues with which students are likely to be familiar may not be enough to engage them. Indeed, many textbook exercises can be categorized in one of two ways: either they lack sufficient complexity to deter the student from offering superficial solutions or they are so complex that the student's reaction to them is one of bewildering silence. Even bright students can fail to work through an exercise and appreciate the relevance of the lesson. So involving students in trivial pursuits or getting them bogged down in exercises in futility do not serve any useful purpose. They do not provide the optimal conditions for learning. That is why it helps if the exercises we use in the classroom are as interesting, as challenging, and as accessible as we can possibly make them. After all, it is not just a matter of having students memorize a set of techniques, of having students master the material for as long as it takes them to complete a test, but the more important achievements of long-term skill retention and skill usage. The key, however, is skill usage, for retention is enhanced or diminished depending upon, among other things, whether the skills are used. Critical reasoning skills, like so many other skills, atrophy unless they are used, and they are not likely to be used unless students find some practical benefit from their use. So the question that needs to be addressed is: What pedagogical steps can we take to persuade students of the utility in using critical reasoning skills?

Simply using exercises that expose students to issues concerning, for example, medical ethics and foreign policy, may not be enough to underscore the value of these skills. This is especially true if students associate these skills with "the kind of thing that one only does in class." Falling prey to the compartmentalization of their lives, students tend to separate their "life inside the classroom" from their "life outside of school," and without much crossover between the two. It is no wonder, then, that classroom exercises are sometimes done from a "matter of fact" attitude: "It's an exercise that I need to finish in order to pass the course and graduate, so I'll get it out of the way." What preoccupies them is immediate: taking care of business. As a result, they may not realize the benefits of acquiring such skills as a way to take more control of their lives, benefits that go well beyond their use as a means by which their progress will be evaluated in the classroom. It should be our concern to mute this compartmentalization by promoting crossover through underscoring the benefits of using critical reasoning skills.

One benefit, which I strongly emphasize in my class, is that the practitioners of these skills may become less vulnerable to blindly adopting the views of others, views the adoption of which may have a direct negative impact on their lives, as well as become more capable of providing a cogent response to those who are trying to "sell them an idea."

Taken in this way, it is to their advantage to think for themselves and to speak their minds; to become rational consumers as well as rational producers in the marketplace of ideas. And what better way to underscore this than to introduce exercises that involve the student in expressing themselves in some form of public discourse in which opposition is potentially or actually present. This places them in an encounter in which the selling and buying of ideas is what counts, an encounter that is likely to be dissensual in nature. So to ensure that these skills become part and parcel of students' repertoire of things to use, the teaching of these skills would be much improved if it underscored the benefits of reconstructing and evaluating arguments.

To capture this benefit, I have adopted an enlivening approach that extends a direction already determined effective by teachers of, and writers about, critical reasoning. It involves much of what textbook exercises require of students (in my case, Jerry Cederblom and David W. Paulsen's textbook, *Critical Reasoning*, 3rd ed.), except that I take my students one step further: I invite my students to participate in the public domain by having them submit their work for publication in a magazine or newspaper. (A variation of this idea would be to have them submit their work to those politicians and bureaucrats who set government policy.) So instead of the traditional "teacher-to-student-to-teacher-to-student" flow of assignments, I redefine the flow so as to include one more component—the public. The point is that I am not the last person to view their work; there will be at least one other reader, the editor, and there may be many more depending on whether it is published.

This commitment to making one's work available to public scrutiny—the essence of participating in a dialogue—may open up other possibilities as well. More illuminating, perhaps, than having a newspaper's editor or its readers as the final judges of their work, is getting students involved in collaborative projects in writing and reading. Peer review is a case in point. The students in a class could be divided into several peer editorial boards, each with the task of assisting their fellow classmates in improving their work for presentation to the class and/or to the instructor. Of course, students would need some guidance in assessing each others' work, but that would not be too difficult a task. This project, and others like it, would provide that much needed person-to-person dialogue which some students find lacking in the more traditional setting of turning in a paper and receiving the instructor's comments at the same time that he or she receives a grade. And if one wanted to take collaboration further, such projects may even include students and the instructor as co-authors of an editorial. This would, among other things, diffuse the traditional relationship of power that exists between the instructor and the student, for it would make the instructor and students something akin to colleagues. (Unfortunately this sort of relationship is seldom found at the graduate level and is almost unknown at the undergraduate level.) The relative merits of these approaches need not be discussed here, however, for it should be obvious that if enhancing student learning is our ultimate goal, then many of these approaches contribute to this enhancement in a variety of ways.

Allowing others to read their work, whether it be as part of a classroom collaborative effort or as a submission for publication, involves a certain amount of risk taking on the

part of students. Remember, the participation in a dialogue is a commitment in principle to submit one's position on a particular issue to another's critical eye. So in order to better prepare my students for what they will face, I distribute copies of editorials and letters to editors from both national and local newspapers (including campus newspapers). At first we examine them to see if they contain statements that could be used as premises and conclusions. These first attempts are kept as simple as possible. I do this for several weeks, and confine my newspaper and magazine "clippings" to those that have been recently published. This makes it more likely that students will have some knowledge of the issues discussed in the article. This is extremely important because, as Theodore A. Gracyk notes, "How well one thinks about any specific topic is primarily a function of one's grasp of that specific subject."[1] And so as not to cater to my own interests, I invite students to submit editorials that they themselves find interesting. (This has the added benefit of stimulating classroom discussion.) As the course progresses, however, the analysis and reconstruction become much more detailed and substantive, so that they are gradually led to using the same ensemble of skills that they will need in completing the participatory component of the course.

The details of this component, which I refer to as the "Media Project," are quite simple. It requires the students to find an editorial, a political column by a syndicated columnist (e.g., Thomas Sowell), or a featured article that offers an argument that he or she agrees (or disagrees) with and to write a letter to a newspaper or magazine editor (250-350 words) or an open editorial (400-600 words) as a response. (The final draft, placed in a stamped addressed envelope, is given to me to mail along with a copy to be graded. The grade, to be sure, is not dependent on whether the work is published!) This exercise provides students with an opportunity to exercise their critical reasoning skills concerning a topic of their choosing, as well as a way to break the cycle of "classroom bound" assignments, assignments that usually have a readership of no more than two—the student and the instructor—by having them present their reasoned position to the larger community of which they are members. My experience has been that students are more inclined to learn how to reconstruct and evaluate arguments by a "public demonstration" of their learning, a demonstration that asks them to "voice their opinion" or partisanship on a particular topic by calling forth arguments supporting their own position, than by working on exercises that have a less extensive audience, and therefore give the students less of a stake in the presentation of their position.

To make this a fruitful endeavor, however, the instructor must make it clear to students that the formal aspects of writing, like punctuation, grammar, and the arrangement of material, must be attended to in order for their work to be taken seriously by an editor. This can be done by showing the student a well-crafted letter to an editor or political column that lacks mechanical errors (spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, and diction) and that does not neglect other facets of an argumentative piece such as logic, coherence and structure of the text, and content. This can also be done by means of a multiple-draft assignment involving student or instructor comments. There are advantages and disadvantages to either approach. Of course, there is the problem that some students will be at a loss for comments. But this can be dealt with in the same way as was the problem facing peer editorial boards. On the other hand, the work load for the instructor is greatly increased. This is especially true of those instructors who go out of their way to correct students' spelling, grammar, and usage, as well as more substantive comments concerning the premises and conclusion of an argument.[2] However, the time it takes to work on these drafts is time well spent, since it gives students a way to treat their finished product with the seriousness that it deserves. In addition to the formal and substantive features, there is the issue of promptness. The piece should be submitted to a newspaper or magazine as soon as the final draft is complete. Generally speaking, the longer students wait before submitting their work, the more likely the discussion contained within the piece will be "old news," thereby reducing the likelihood of its being published.

Of course, not every submission is selected for publication. In fact, very few of them are earmarked for print. Nevertheless, this pedagogical approach is often well received by students, an indication that this way of teaching raises the reception of these skills one notch. The use of such an approach may thereby enhance our prospects for providing our students with something that they will take with them and use long after they leave our classrooms.

Endnotes

1. Theodore A. Gracyk, "Critical Thinking Portfolio," *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy* 90:3 (Fall 1991): 65.

2. Although comments are quite important for students, instructors must be careful not to be excessive in their marginalia. Too much "red lining" may suggest to the student that his or her work has little, if any, merit, thereby lessening their interest in reading what their instructor has to say about their work.