



## Critical literacy

### Thinking critically: What does it mean?

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We live in an information-rich world. This information is accessible from many and varied sources: from mass media to casual conversation; from the web to the local library; in databases, in books and newsprint. Information is produced in a variety of text types, such as: Government white papers, letters, cartoons, video-tape, reports, argumentative and explanatory essays, etc. The ability to focus critical thought on different arguments from different sources and to apply different credibility ratings to them is an essential skill you will need to develop during your university studies.

#### What critical thinking is

The purpose of critical thinking is 'to achieve understanding, evaluate view points, and solve problems'. Since 'all three areas involve the asking of questions, we can say that critical thinking is the questioning or inquiry we engage in when we seek to understand, evaluate, or resolve' (Maiorana, 1992).

Facione (1990) describes the ideal critical thinker as one who is:

*...habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit.*

You recognise critical thinking in yourself by the following characteristics (Ferrett 1996):

- asking pertinent questions;
- assessing statements and arguments;
- the ability to admit a lack of understanding or information;
- a sense of curiosity;
- interested in finding new solutions;
- the ability to clearly define a set of criteria for analysing ideas;
- willing to examine beliefs, assumptions, and opinions and weigh them against facts;
- listening carefully to others and is able to give feedback;
- accepting that critical thinking is a lifelong process of self-assessment;
- suspending judgment until all facts have been gathered and considered;
- looking for evidence to support assumption and beliefs;
- the ability to adjust opinions when new facts are found;
- looking for proof;
- examining problems closely; and
- the ability to reject information that is incorrect or irrelevant.

## Critical thinking at university

Within a university learning environment, differing points of view are accepted as equal in value. Ideas and theories are open to challenge, so there is need to put forward both evidence and rational argument to either sustain or dispute opinions. To think critically, students must be willing to consider and evaluate ideas and theories that are new to them, rather than accept them simply because they are part of course content. Learner self-reliance is demonstrated through maintaining intellectual curiosity, and the capacity to show independence of judgment within learning experiences.

Making judgements involves ‘distinguishing between fact and opinion or evaluating the validity of information sources or the validity of particular theories and/ or their application to particular situations. These judgements need to be well grounded in research, wide reading, and consideration of all possible viewpoints. Critical thinking in this sense is based on a synthesis of a number of factors, and is not just uninformed personal opinion’ (Critical Thinking, 2000).

To think critically requires you to adopt an inquiry approach in all aspects of your university learning (“Critical Thinking”, 2000). In practical terms this will mean:

- critically reading different texts, and using the information to gain new understanding and insights on a topic or issue;
- using note making skills to summarise and evaluate readings, identifying meaningful relationships or connections that reach across texts;
- in your writing assignments, initially posing questions for exploration and then considering differing perspectives on controversial issues objectively and in a balanced manner;
- in tutorial presentations, using creativity in exploring possibilities, analysing conflicting views, and synthesising ideas; and
- during your professional placements/practice, exploring moral dimensions of conflicting positions and analysing value-laden issues.

## References

Facione, P.A. (1990). *Critical thinking: A statement of expert consensus for purposes of educational assessment and instruction*. Retrieved January 20, 2004, from [http://www.insightassessment.com/pdf\\_files/DEXadobe.pdf](http://www.insightassessment.com/pdf_files/DEXadobe.pdf)

Ferrett, S. (1996). *Peak performance: Success in college and beyond*. McGraw-Hill Education.

Maiorana, V. (1992). *Critical thinking across the curriculum: building the analytical classroom*. Blommington, Ind: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills: EDINFO Press.

*Critical thinking*. (2000). Retrieved December 15, 2003, from University of Wollongong, Uni Learning Web site: <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/critical/1a-2.html>

## Additional web resources

The following websites provide further helpful information. You can google other sites by using suitable search terms, *but try to ensure the sites you use are reliable sites*.

Critical Thinking

<http://unilearning.uow.edu.au>

Critical Thinking Skills:

Paul, Binker, Jensen and Kreklau's '35 Dimensions of Critical Thought' elaborate what critical thinking is about and the skills involved.

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/drugfree/sa3crit.htm>

The Good, The Bad & The Ugly: or, Why It's a Good Idea to Evaluate Web Sources

<http://lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/evalcrit.html>