

What Is 'Critical Thinking' and Why Is It Useful?

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The term: "critical thinking" is employed by speakers and writers in varied ways. I understand the term critical thinking to describe how to more effectively produce (encode) and receive (decode) messages than were done prior to learning critical thinking; these include: (1) to actively listen rather than to listen passively or half heartedly, to suspend making judgments until messages are finished rather than to interject judgment while messages are unfolding, to probe for fuller understanding when a receiver is confused, message intent or content is unfamiliar or obscure, or what the message maker wants the receiver to do with messages is unclear rather than to accept incomplete or unclear messages, and to point out perceived listener difficulties rather than to accept inadequacies or complications due to language use or logical reasoning; and (2) to produce messages assuming others will receive your messages as outlined in (1) above. When one learns to receive messages more effectively, it stands to reason that these skills ought transfer to the message making process as well.

Critical thinking is complex; it has numerous components. Among these components are: (1) questioning a message makers' motives. Motive includes: expected or desired outcome, personal bias, possible conflicts of interest, and ideological ties; and (2) anticipating possible or likely message consequences: short- and long-term as well as personal and collective.

Critical thinking assumes that message receivers expect and

require adequate and credible support for message producers' claims before messages are accepted as valid. Evidence is rated, by the critical thinker, based on: sufficiency -- is there an adequate amount of support for claims? Relevance -- is the evidence pertinent to the issue at hand? Reliability -- does the support for arguments have a good track record? Does evidence originate from expert sources? Consistency -- are supporting elements internally and externally consistent with each other and with what we know from other experiences/observations/sources? Recency -- is offered support current rather than being out of date? Access -- are supporting materials open for receivers' verification? Are anonymous or secret sources avoided? Objectivity -- are supporting materials fair and undistorted? Does support originate from expert sources? All of these considerations may not always be germane to every supporting item; however, a lacking of numerous of these considerations renders support suspect at best.

Additional critical thinking considerations that messages need to include are; Are embedded terms clearly and completely defined? Are inferences labeled as such instead of being passed off as assertions of fact? Are ideas phrased concretely and clearly rather than vaguely, in abstract form, or with equivocation? Are messages coherent; that is, do parts fit smoothly together? Incoherent messages often signal disorganization, a lack of preparedness, and sometimes deception. Are discipline or situation dependencies explained when they occur?

In addition to the above considerations in critical thinking, it is also vital for message producers to avoid using fallacies and for message receivers to detect and point out fallacies in messages. Fallacies are faulty reasoning strategies. Some of the most common fallacies include: (1) attacking message sources rather than messages themselves (ad hominem); (2) allowing the fact that one idea cannot be disproven to require acceptance of another idea (appeal to ignorance); (3) using the reputation/achievement of others rather than the idea at hand to persuade (bandwagon); (4) allowing patterned/repetitive practice to override individual case analysis (appeal to tradition); (5) arguments based on false cause, and (6) claims based on false choices. These are not an exhaustive list of fallacies, but they give readers a sense of how reasoning needs to be analyzed for sloppiness or flaw.

Relationships between phenomena, events, conditions, and states are varied; not all related situations are causal. Cause and effect is one specialized relationship and it is far too frequently misapplied. Other relationships that exist include: co-cause, co-effect, and coincidence,

Critical thinking is a way of thinking for both message producers or as a message receivers. Critical thinkers are less apt to be deceived, conned, or misled. There is no guarantee these circumstances will be avoided by the critical thinker; however, they are measurably minimized by careful message construction and message reception. Critical thinking aids in analysis

because antecedents, processes, and consequences are clearer, better organized, and focused than they would be without critical thinking.

Critical thinking enhances one's credibility; others come to be more trusting of the critical thinker's ideas, they are better able to understand the critical thinkers ideas and train of thought, and they are more likely to accept a critical thinker's questioning and challenges due to attributed positive motives than they are to be accepting non critical thinkers' probing of their ideas.

Critical Thinking Questions

Message Centered

1. Do you have the whole story or only a select part of it?
2. Is the story based upon observation, experience, experiment, research, fabrication, or gossip?
3. Is the message current or dated? Ie: are we discussing this year's average wage or that in 1843?
4. Is the message a local one or a distant one? Ie: are we discussing Aroostook potatoes or Russian spuds?
5. Is the subject a completed act, an ongoing act, or a proposed act?
6. Is the message an obligatory act, an optional act, or a spontaneous act?
7. What options are there -- in terms of action/thought/reaction/response/prevention?
8. Is the message being sent in the appropriate/best channels? Would alternate or added channels work better?

9. Is the message being sent to the right source(s)? Would alternate or added sources work better?
10. Is the message clear; were terms unambiguous, consistent, relevant, coherent, orderly, complete, logical, and purposeful?
11. What ideas, previous action, or advice was used to prepare for the action/message? Was such aid acknowledged?
12. What special symbols [ie: technical language, slang, logos, gestures, inside language] is needed to completely understand the message/act?
13. Is anyone, any group, any act, or any idea being demonized? If so, what are the demonizing symbols?
14. Did action/statements go beyond accepted/normative/usual limits? Did they fall short of typical limits? If so, by how much, why, and with what effects?
15. Were decisions/actions determined openly or in secret?
16. What criteria for statement/action were used? Whose criteria are these? Why were these criteria chosen?

Messenger Centered

1. Is the messenger honest? Is message verification/corroboration possible?
2. Is the messenger trustworthy? What is the messenger's track record?
3. Is the messenger an expert in the field of discussion or is the subject general enough not to require specialized expertise?
4. What are the messenger's biases? Are these known/admitted to? Do such biases raise doubts about the message or conclusions reasonably drawn from them?
5. If the message is a repeat of observation, experience, or what others told the messenger, how reliable is the messenger's memory?
6. What are the messenger's motives? Are these honorable or ignoble? Are these disclosed or hidden?

7. Is the message recorded/transcribed to facilitate accuracy checks? Is there a transcript/video?
8. What amount and/or type of preparation went into message/action? Was preparation insufficient, adequate, superb? What standards for that decision were used?
9. What qualitative measure of preparation went into planning for action/message?
10. Did the messenger act ethically? Were established standards of behavior met?
11. Were there unintended or ambient audiences/witnesses to acts/events/ideas? Could these have been avoided/ If so, why were they not avoided?
12. Was the act done or utterance stated overtly, covertly, or spontaneously?
13. Does the messenger/actor get to take credit for a well done job or to be blamed for a poor job? If not, why and who did/could get praised/blamed?
14. Are individuals, groups, organizations, or institutions dominating others [hegemony], withdrawing from others [avoidance], seeking to join/merge with others?
15. Is rank, position, hierarchy a factor in decisions/action? If so, what is the "pecking order" and who determined it?
16. Were alternatives to decisions/actions openly discussed/debated? What were these alternatives?
17. Were decisions/actions made out of convenience, fear, safety, obligation [legal/moral], greed, spite, hate, retaliation, affiliation, loyalty, honor, love, or revenge?

Occasion/Circumstance Centered

1. Was action taken prematurely or too late? Could bad timing be anticipated?
2. Was action required or optional? If required, why and by whom?
3. What limitations on options did the occasion/situation pose? How much did such limitations affect the outcome?

4. What opportunities [taken or missed] did the situation/occasion offer? How did these opportunities affect the outcomes?
5. Was the occasion/situation forced, predictable, traditional, natural, or serendipitous?
6. What options for action/statements were available? Why was this one chosen? Is this choice one in a recognizable pattern of choices?
7. Is this occasion/event a stand alone situation or one in a finite or infinite series?
8. Is this occasion expected to be of finite, infinite, or unknown duration?
9. Is the occasion individually, group, organizationally, or institutionally governed?
10. Did the occasion/situation dominate the act/utterance or was it the other way around?

Effect/Consequences Centered

1. Are desired results best for the persuader, the one being persuaded, or others?
2. Are short-term, intermediate-term, or long-term effects desired?
3. What unintended consequences have emerged or are reasonably anticipated?
4. What were/are/will be the costs of decisions/actions? Costs here include: time, energy, embarrassment, opportunity cost, allegiance, raw material, relationship, and reputation.
5. Is this situation/action causal/co-causal to others; an effect/co-effect of others; coincidental to others, or seemingly unrelated to other circumstances?
6. Were negative consequences avoidable? If so how? Why were these not avoided?
7. Were positive consequences enhanceable? If so, why were they not so enhanced?

8. Did/could perceived negative outcomes affect strategies/choices/tactics? If so, how?
9. Did/could anticipated positive outcomes curtail rational decision making? If so, how?
10. Were tangible, social, political consequences/effects dominant in issue consideration?