

Prof Explains What's Wrong with Today's 'Critical Thinking'

We're all familiar with the term "critical thinking." Read just about any learning objectives for a school at any level and it won't be long before the phrase appears.

But recent research [suggests](#) that neither teachers nor students really understand what critical thinking is.

Rob Jenkins' longtime experience as a professor at Georgia State University Perimeter College leads him to concur with that research. [According to Jenkins](#), the popularity of critical thinking has turned the notion into a "catchphrase" tossed around by educational planners who simply want to sound wise or trendy. As a result, they create two major misconceptions about critical thinking.

The first misconception, Jenkins notes, has to do with actual thinking. As he sees it, critical thinking instruction in schools is conducted in the same way as many other activities: fast, immediate, and on the go. Genuine critical thinking, he suggests, cannot exist when students are fed a variety of quick talking points and then asked to regurgitate them:

"Actual thinking requires deep and protracted exposure to the subject matter – through close reading, for example, or observation. It entails collecting, examining, and evaluating evidence, and then questioning assumptions, making connections, formulating hypotheses, and testing them. It culminates in clear, concise, detailed, and well-reasoned arguments that go beyond theory to practical application."

Jenkins goes on to explain that there's also a wrongheaded

assumption that critical thinking involves negativity and criticism. These two characteristics lead students to [make judgments](#) based on their own emotions, rather than learning to be objectively analytical:

“To be ‘critical,’ then, means to be objective, or as objective as humanly possible. No one is capable of being completely objective – we’re all human, with myriad thoughts, emotions, and subconscious biases we’re not even aware of. Recognizing that fact is a vital first step. Understanding that we’re not objective, by nature, and striving mightily to be objective, anyway, is about as good as most of us can do.

To be critical also means to be analytical, to be able to look at a problem or question and break it down into its component parts – the way a chemist analyzes a compound.”

Today, many students, whether in the classroom or in a campus protest, pride themselves on being critical thinkers. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that most of them have been raised on a diet of emotionalism, and are lacking in a basic knowledge of history, literature, logic, and rational discourse.

If we want students to become genuine critical thinkers, are we going to have to first restore genuine knowledge to classrooms?