

By Tavish McDonell

of those stuffy old dorks! Starting with "crib" and "foshizzle," I switched to looking up everything on urbandictionary.com. And I searched for the name of the union

Well foshizzle. Then again, in *Engaging Ideas*, Michael C. Bean talks about a famous study on critical thinking, bulleting criteria having to do with formulating and approaching problems, assessing sources and readiness to enter alternative systems of thought. All good in the 'hood, Mr. Bean. But it bothers me that these standards, like on Urbandictionary, really come down to loosey-goosey adjectives: "vital," "clear," "precise," "effective," "well-reasoned," "complex" (20). I want something more solid, something I can diagram for a 101 class. The problem is not with Bean's definition, just that the definition depends on meta-knowledge we use to assess writing—meta-knowledge based mainly on experience and so not teachable in fifteen weeks. But if critical thinking isn't something that can be taught directly, why bring it up in the classroom? Is there finally a non-contingent, no-nonsense test for critical thinking we can teach our students?

Good question! Well, what do *you* think...? In doing English and probably

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Side 2: Use of one or more of the "methods of cultural analysis" that we've studied, applied to the new context of the student's project. Students must demonstrate knowledge of and cite at least one core reading.

Side 3: Original research. Students must find their own sources, and there must be diversity in the sources used (scholarly articles, journalism, movies, music, legal cases involving intellectual property, etc.). The sources chosen must relate to the student's program and the course material.

A successful project has all three sides and the sides, like those of a triangle, must all fit together. And this fitting together is the critical thinking. This requirement can be quite a challenge for students. Just like a triangle's angles need to add up to approximately 180 degrees, students have to bring their sides of the triangle together within the logic of an argumentative essay. To do so, they must have progressed to the college work stage of



the spectrum

Beginner level (child): I'm right, everybody else is wrong! I know I'm right, just need to explain why to everybody else and they'll agree. People who disagree with me are just miserable assholes who don't like me. My job is to tell them they're wrong and to get them to adopt my view or shut up.

Intermediate level (high-minded teenager): This stage is a coping strategy for two changes the learner begins to perceive: 1) there are even more differences in opinion among informed people than I thought..how can I make sense of all this disagreement? 2) The rhetorical strategies (shouting down, ad hominem) of the child stage aren't effective.. I'm getting called out for being rude and intolerant. What's the solution? Simple: Everybody's right because everyone is entitled to his—or *her!*—opinion! Diversity and tolerance are core values of our society, thus it's very important to be tolerant and polite, accepting other people's ideas because not everyone sees things the way I do. It's rude to call bullshit on someone. Everything's relative anyway: it's all about how you look at it. People who disagree with me are just taking a different perspective: it's all good, dude! My job is to remember the correct information the teacher gives me in class and give it back to him on exams and essays. If there's time, maybe I'll give my opinion too, if that's OK with the teacher (better ask if that's allowed in this class). Doesn't really matter what my opinion is because all opinions are equivalent.

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The college experience ought to be largely about students moving from the middle to the right side of the spectrum. The next problem is that once students accept that some opinions are better than others (or drive better body essays than others, or can get better *grades* than others), they refocus on finding the "right" opinions (typically the teacher's) and reproducing them mechanically in their essays. This becomes frustrating for both sides: for the student who wants to please the teacher by showing that he paid attention and knows what the "right" opinions are, and gets a mediocre grade for not showing enough independent thinking. Psychologically, the student can experience this dynamic as a double-bind dilemma in communication: marked down for not knowing the right answers, or marked down for merely knowing the right answers and not finding others (which probably would have been marked down as wrong answers anyway).

The dynamic is similarly frustrating for the hip teacher who urges students to think independently. Some learners won't even try, and for the ones who do, their own ideas are often absurdly reductive or just indefensible, based on misreadings as they skimp on the stages of the writing process or, more and more, just lack basic reading comprehension skills. The teacher takes a deep breath and a step back from critical thinking to translate what the author "is saying" in terms students can understand. So

background for the issue to be discussed, found in another "all about" source

students' written work, giving students the chance to express ideas verbally to their peers and foregrounding the cognitive stages of learning and ineffective writing models.

But at its heart, critical thinking is based on a renunciation of instinct: its inherent problems can never be resolved, only contained, minimized and substituted for. The more you progress in critical thinking, the more problems you take into account, and the harder it becomes, until you break out in a cold sweat, paralyzed and helpless, with no excuses left to put off your dissertation. Thus spending class time on activities highlighting critical thinking won't in itself improve student writing.

Critical thinking is in the eye of the critic. It is a profoundly annoying thing to be goaded into by anyone who tells you he knows more about it than you do. I get it why students would want to see if they can get by without it, and once they get off the dissertation-bound bus, they probably can. Only those students who have committed themselves and engaged with me one-on-one either in editing workshops, writing labs or office hours have gained anything from the concept. I'm sure they all would have rather been doing something else. But they renounced their instincts and trusted me enough to try. For those intermittent reminders that teaching can be sublime, I am grateful to them.