Critical Thinking:
A Necessary Skill in the Age of Spin

The ability to think critically is one skill separating innovators from followers. Critical thinking reduces the power of advertisers, the unscrupulous and the pretentious, and can neutralize the sway of an unsupported argument. This is a skill most students enjoy learning because they see immediately that it gives them more control.

Devastating Consequences
That said, young people -- without significant life experience and anxious to fit in -- are especially vulnerable to surface appeal. Targeted advertising affects their buying and eating habits; choosing friends for the wrong reasons can lead to real heartache. Decisions about joining the military, becoming a parent or choosing a career have indelible effects on a person's life. An inability to think critically at an early age can have devastating consequences.

Every educator is in a position to teach students how to gather information, evaluate it, screen out distractions and think for themselves. Because critical thinking is so important, some believe that every educator has not only the opportunities, but also the obligation to incorporate critical thinking into his or her subject area. This helps students evaluate prepackaged conclusions and clears a path for original thoughts.

A World of Illusions
Seeing beyond superficial appearances is especially important today because we are surrounded by illusions, many of them deliberately created. The effects may be subtle, or they may affect us profoundly. While we seek out and appreciate some illusions such as films and novels, other illusions can make us miserable and even kill us. We need to know if foods that taste perfectly fine can hurt us in the short term (as with Salmonella contamination) or in the long term (cholesterol). A virus might be so dangerous that we should avoid public places, and political candidates promising to clean up government can end up being more corrupt than their predecessors. We want to know if items we purchase are durable or junk, and whether people we are attracted to are truly as considerate as they seem at first. Students are constantly being presented with information not only in the classroom, but also from their friends, parents, the Internet, films, television, radio, newspapers and magazines, and they need tools to analyze all the input.

How False Ideas Creep Into Our Belief Systems
The first step in teaching critical thinking is to help students recognize how easily false ideas can creep into their belief system. For example:

1) People believe stories because they are the ones available.
Most people would identify Thomas Edison as the inventor of the incandescent light bulb. Although Edison perfected a commercially successful design, he was preceded in the experimentation by British inventors Frederick de Moleyns and Joseph Swan, and by American J. W. Starr. Sometimes a belief such as the one about Edison becomes well known for reasons that are difficult to trace. At other times, it is easy to see that a story became available because a mainstream media source determined the story was newsworthy. Sometimes, that editorial decision has more to do with what is sensational, entertaining or popular than with what is of lasting importance. Just because a story is available does not mean it is accurate or important.

2) Beliefs may justify past actions.
In July 2006, half the respondents to a Harris Poll said they believed that when the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003, that country possessed weapons of mass destruction. But in 2004, the CIA had already concluded that Iraq possessed no stockpiles of illicit weapons. Even reliable, available facts had not superseded the mistaken impression that many still held.

3) People may not recognize the significance of their own perceptions.
In November 2005, a suicide bomber struck the Radisson Hotel in Amman, Jordan. On the eighth floor, Ita Martin heard a loud noise. Still, it was not until she turned on CNN that she learned a bomb had gone off. "Oh, my God, I'm in that hotel!" she exclaimed. Had she trusted her own ears and eyes, she may have gotten out of there much more quickly.

Understanding Motivations
Students don't need much convincing that two of the biggest enemies of the truth are people whose job it is to sell us incomplete versions of the available facts, and the simple absence of accurate information. They may need more convincing that a significant problem is their own willingness to believe what they want to believe. Students can be reminded that companies advertising products take advantage of our desires; they do not describe the benefits of their competitors' products any more than a man asking a woman to marry him encourages her to date other men before deciding. It is a social reality that people encourage one another to make important decisions with limited facts.

Fortunately, when students are educated about information-gathering techniques and critical thinking, they have the tools necessary to see through spin and make decisions based on fact, rather than myth or propaganda. Regardless of your subject, critical thinking is one of the most important skills you can teach.

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