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Eating flowers, holding hands: Should critical thinking pedagogy 'go wild'?

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ABSTRACT: This paper responds to Anthony Weston's "What if Teaching Went Wild?" (2004), in which he proposes a radical approach to environmental education, suggesting among other things a stress on "otherness". Comparing Weston's proposal to Richard Paul's (1992) concept of the "strong sense" critical thinker, and to Trudy Govier's (2010) rationale for her pedagogy of argument, I suggest that "going wild" in standalone critical thinking courses could provide a positive, unsettling push, helping students to reconnect through the otherness of alternative argumentation.

KEYWORDS: critical thinking, pedagogy, alternative argument, Weston, Paul, Govier, wild.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explicate the radical pedagogical thesis in Anthony Weston's paper "What if Teaching Went Wild?" (2004), comparing it to Richard Paul's conceptualization of a strong sense critical thinker (1992), and to Trudy Govier's rationale for her approach to teaching the skills of argument analysis and evaluation (2010). I find that these two important philosophical approaches to critical thinking theory and argument pedagogy are congruent with Weston's core claim, which on my reading extends beyond environmental education to other curricular contexts. His claim is that in order for student learning to be successful, we must break through barriers to classroom connection in unexpected and unsettling ways, inspiring a community of inquirers who value their thinking as a socially-situated practice. As such, Weston's push for wildness represents an important contribution to the pedagogical effort to teach students to be better critical thinkers. Theorists and pedagogues alike should take wildness seriously, incorporating it into pre-existing approaches to teaching critical thinking.

2. WESTON'S WILDNESS

Anthony Weston, Professor of Philosophy and Environmental Studies at Elon University, carrier of the pedagogically-subversive torch of Postman and Weingartner (1969), and author of many books, including the popular *A Rulebook for Arguments* (2009, 4th Edition), wonders with a heavy dose of irony in "What if Teaching Went Wild" (2004), whether it is "possible to teach ... even in school" (ibid.: 32)?[1]

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[1] All further citations refer to Weston (2004), unless otherwise noted.

Weston's not-so-ironic (but hopeful) answer is: maybe. Reviving environmental education, and perhaps, "reviv[ing] education as a whole" (p. 36), may be possible, but only if we can help our students to *reconnect* with each other and with the environment, with the world and with themselves, with their bodies and with their lives outside of the classroom. According to Weston, we live in

> "[a] civilization *committed* to disconnection", where if teaching and learning about the environment is to take place, then "the social context of school itself needs to be rethought and rebuilt", so that it might be "possible to unsettle our deeply-felt sense of disconnection with the world, and begin to reconnect" (p. 37).

Since "disconnection is not the root of the environmental crisis but, most fundamentally, *is* the very crisis itself" (p. 33), for Weston, in order for environmental education to facilitate reconnection, it should "go wild": breaking the tamed atmosphere of the classroom community, levelling barriers between the artificial and the natural world, and promoting our common humanity outside of the classroom. In short, to successfully teach environmental education, barriers must be broken, and breaking those barriers means introducing wildness into the classroom. Looking for a definition of "wildness", we can capture the bulk of Weston's notion by saying that it is "that unsettling sense of *otherness*, unexpected and unpredictable" (p. 45). My discussion of Weston's wildness will operate according to this formulation.

So Weston means to unsettle the classroom community through otherness, unpredictably causing a certain amount of physical, psychical, and intellectual discomfort, without of course causing harm. But his tactics to some might seem to skate the edge of propriety, despite this Hippocratic-style caveat, for the otherness Weston has in mind includes having his students eat flowers in a sacramental mode, echoing the Catholic Eucharist; having them study, describe, and even hold, each others' hands; having them pack their bodies into as small a space as possible during the regular course of the class meeting; bringing spiders and other insects into the class and releasing them; brining rocks and other natural artefacts into the class and collecting them in bowls; opening windows and talking about the fresh air outside, and the four walls that keep the stale air in; and holding class outside, not just on the quad but in the woods, away from the charged human atmosphere of campus, creating a community of learning in a literally natural social setting that challenges the senses as well as the mind (pp. 37-44, passim).

These suggestions for introducing wildness, for introducing otherness, might seem ironic, especially in North America. In a society so aware of, and at times so sensitive to offence, Weston's suggestion might push people's boundaries so as to potentially, perhaps inevitably, offend them with otherness. It might be unlikely that we can expect our students to "reconnect" when efforts such as Weston's might plausibly just disconnect them further. If someone won't eat a flower, wildness in the classroom is squelched before it has a chance to flourish; if someone is arachnophobic, there will be anxiety and fear ruling the classroom moment, surely two affective states that hinder intellectual community connection, and do not promote it. In other words, going wild sounds risky. Still, Weston is reluctant to propose any structured curriculum to achieve whatever risk the instructor wishes to take; in fact, he describes his wild approach as needing to exist alongside and within the curricular environment of most classrooms (p. 37, 45). The wild change in teaching and learning, to whatever unexpected and

unpredictable and risky extent it might manifest, must also nevertheless come from *within* the social context and structure of school. However risky it might be to go wild, and however the potential for offence comes into play, Weston recognizes that when introducing otherness into classrooms, "rather than abandoning the usual, [we need to] push its envelope" (p. 36). His approach then is not a wholesale rejection of the traditional school situation, or established curriculum, but rather an acknowledgement that that context, if it is to be changed, must be constructively subverted, even if unpredictably so, by those who are actively participating within it. Since "school and society are what they are ... unless we pull out of them entirely, [there] is still the 'everyday practice' within which we must work for change" (p. 36). Weston claims that "there are constructive and indeed enormously appealing ways to revive education as a whole" but that to do this, "the social context of school itself needs to be rethought and rebuilt, so that school's tasks and projects ... join a larger dynamic that gives them purpose and appeal" (ibid). Notice this is a statement that seems to go beyond the environmental education context, that could apply to many humanities courses, perhaps especially critical thinking. Weston's project suggests, in a spirit indebted to Dewey, that we seek for dynamic ways of reconnecting students to existing curriculum so that what is *studied* is genuinely *experienced* as well: the goal being for students to develop an internalized and highly valued connection between experience, curricular content, and community inquiry, leading to deeper understanding and learning.

3. GOING WILD AND CRITICAL THINKING PEDAGOGY

It is one thing to introduce otherness into the classroom when the subject matter is environmental studies, motivating more than merely an intellectual confrontation with the environment being perfectly appropriate when the environment itself, in all its grand otherness, in all its holistic complexity, is the very subject matter under consideration. To really experience the environment is a confrontation that is deeply meaningful for environmental education, because it is deeply felt by the student and instructor, connecting our intellectual appreciation and learning with the tangible and the sensual. Whatever disconnection with the environment we have will arguably hinder our caring and learning about it, so reconnecting is perhaps essential if we wish to become deeply intellectually involved in environmental issues.

How to succeed with wildness, though, in a standalone class in critical thinking? Especially when the dominant paradigm across approaches to such a class is usually argument analysis and evaluation, which is to say a stress on the intellectual skills associated with reason-giving and reason-evaluation? How can we unsettle with *otherness* when we are trying to teach *reasonableness*? How will students benefit from going wild in a critical thinking class? Provocation, unexpectedness, unsettledness: don't these things amount to the antithesis of what it means to be reasonable?

It is at this point that I want to specifically start addressing the problem of "going wild" in critical thinking courses. We would do well to be cautious to some prudent degree in whatever wild risks we take in the classroom, yet I think we ought not to reject Weston's suggestion out of hand when applying his proposal to critical thinking courses, or other courses besides those in environmental education. It might not be a good pedagogical tactic in some classroom contexts (I wonder how one could possibly go wild when teaching

trigonometric functions, for instance) but an analogous approach for critical thinking courses at the College and University level is warranted, despite its potential risks, for whatever the risks, there are some potential benefits to following Weston's lead: it won't involve bringing spiders into the classroom and risking them crawling on our students, and it won't involve our students eating flowers or holding hands; it might not even involve asking them to go outside, which seems harmless enough, but we can usefully go wild in other ways, unsettling through otherness, provoking through the unexpected, even in the teaching of argument, and even in the teaching of critical thinking, if we can connect our students to the otherness of alternative argumentation.

One way we might take wildness in critical thinking instruction, stressing the otherness of alternative argumentation seriously, is by putting Weston's stress on otherness into perspective with some important voices in critical thinking theory and pedagogy. Focusing on the work of Richard Paul and Trudy Govier, I will try to show how their views of critical thinking and argumentation align plausibly with Weston's push to go wild in the context of critical thinking instruction. While Weston omits any reference to critical thinking theorists in his discussion of going wild in classrooms, it seems to me that his prompt to unsettle through otherness falls in line not only with the views of those whom I have mentioned above and will discuss below, but of many other approaches, as well, such as van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans' 10 rules for a critical discussion (2002), Gilbert's "coalescent" view of argumentation (1997), and perhaps most significantly, the theory that stands behind Lipman's *Philosophy for Children* initiative (2003).[2] While we need not adopt any theorist's particular brand of critical thinking or argumentation to take seriously Weston's pedagogical suggestions, however, comparing those approaches to Weston's wildness would give Weston's project a discipline-specific supportive context, allowing us to see it as being consistent with some other critically valued pedagogical approaches to argumentation and critical thinking. In fact, *contra* what I have been implying thus far, adopting Weston's approach specifically for critical thinking classes might *not* be the most radical pedagogical initiative after all, especially for theoretically informed instructors.

4. WILDNESS AND THE STRONG SENSE CRITICAL THINKER

Relating Weston's project first to the thought of Richard Paul, a prolific and critically discussed scholar of critical thinking, it is simplest to quote Paul's by now classic definition of a "strong sense" critical thinker. Such a thinker is one who has

> 1) an ability to question deeply one's own framework of thought; 2) an ability to reconstruct sympathetically and imaginatively the strongest versions of points of view and frameworks of thought opposed to one's own; and 3) an ability to reason dialectically (multilogically) in such a way as to determine when one's own point of view is at its weakest and when an opposing point of view is at its strongest. (Paul 1992: 666 f.)

This definition of Paul's is in contrast with whom he calls a "weak sense" critical thinker, someone who is basically a sophist, who has his or her opinion or view, and who works

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2   The list of authors here, and of their scholarly work, could go on; I cite these sources as a small sample of views that I think could be aligned with Weston's push to go wild.

backwards to try to support it by any rhetorical means necessary. For such weak sense critical thinkers, the most important thing about reasoning is that personal biases are defended, and the views of others refuted. For a weak sense critical thinker, otherness represents the enemy; it must be overcome, destroyed, thereby making safe passage for whatever prejudicial views the weak sense critical thinker holds. Whereas strong sense critical thinking is directed selflessly, or what Paul calls "fairmindedly", weak sense critical thinking is always selfish. If we return to Weston, now, we can see that Paul's distinction between a strong sense and weak sense critical thinker mirrors the same spirit that Weston stresses with his emphasis on otherness. Each one of the three criterions for a strong sense critical thinker is also a stress on otherness. I will briefly describe and apply those criteria to the question of implementing Weston's wildness.

First, a strong sense critical thinker has "[a]n ability to question deeply one's own framework of thought". In practice, how can we encourage students to deeply question their own frameworks of thought, and in the spirit of Weston's wildness, to do so in unexpected, unpredictable ways? The simplest answer would be to get them to *experience* other frameworks of thought, again in the spirit of Dewey: to invite them to genuinely confront otherness in the form of foreign frameworks. It will take creativity on the part of instructors to find the best way to do this, and the best way to do it without fostering a radical relativism (cf. Siegel, 1997), but some tactics come immediately to mind: have students watch and critically discuss films (from a Hollywood perspective) that stress otherness in the basic framework of people's thought, such as scenes from *The Gods Must be Crazy*, from *Ghostbusters*, or from *Avatar*, a great recent film that would fulfill this purpose quite in the spirit of Weston's ecological-inspired perspective. Moving away from the Hollywood portrayal of otherness, students could compare American films to those produced from other cultures and viewpoints, yet not so physically distant ones, such as Canadian Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. Lest we be too dependent on technology to guide our students to experience otherness, however, students in an immigrant-heavy culture such as Ontario could be encouraged to share their world views, informed as those views are by their ethno- and socio-centric perspectives. By encouraging individuals to take an opportunity to reflect on how their native culture's views compare and contrast with the culture as a whole in Canada, instructors would offer their students an opportunity to appreciate the diversity of world views and frameworks that exist, not abstractly, but right next to them in the classroom, in the form of their peers. Confronting otherness in fellow students' frameworks of thought might help connect those students to the first criterion of Paul's definition of a strong sense critical thinker.

Paul's second criterion for a strong sense critical thinker is for a person to have "an ability to reconstruct sympathetically and imaginatively the strongest versions of points of view and frameworks of thought opposed to one's own". The idea of otherness is incorporated into this second criterion as well. The difference is that instead of merely stressing *that* there are other frameworks of thought, *that* there are other views out there, and *that* whatever view an individual possesses is part of some socio- and entho-centric framework of thought that can be contrasted and compared with other frameworks in non-relativistic ways, this second criterion stresses the specifics of other ideas in comparison to the specifics of one's own views. To reconstruct in an imaginative way the strongest versions of ideas that are at odds with one's own is to do more than simply to notice there are other views out there: it is to inhabit those views in detail, for the

purposes of subjecting one's own views to scrutiny. Otherness in the context of Paul's second criterion for a strong sense critical thinker means otherness with an aim towards dialogical reasoning: a genuine back and forth of reason-giving and reason-evaluation, not for the purposes of refuting the views of others, but for the purposes of indicating where the most problematic elements of one's own thought lie.

This otherness that is an essential component of dialogical inquiry can be introduced in the classroom in any number of potentially effective, though potentially risky ways, which are in line with Weston's stress on wildness. One method is to divide classrooms according to views that are opposed to one another, and to get students to publicly articulate those views; then, in an exercise that tests student's listening abilities, requiring students to paraphrase the views that they have heard their classmates express, to the satisfaction of those whose views they are paraphrasing, and only *then* to allow students with opposing views to express their retorts. In a way this reflects a sort of debate-style of give and take between viewpoints, but the stress is placed on *listening* to the views of others in order to understand them, as opposed to jumping to a critical reaction to the views that are at first blush heard. It is unlike typical debate in classrooms in that there is a de-emphasis on winning, and an extra-emphasis on understanding the different avenues of reasoning one could take to support a conclusion. With weak sense critical thinkers the views of others are distorted or boiled down to straw-person like simplicity, so that opposing arguments are attempted to be disposed of quickly, and not well understood as a result. But Paul's second criterion indicates that a strong sense critical thinker is able to generate genuinely strong criticisms of his or her own views. By exposing students to criticisms from other students' perspectives, the kind of inhabiting of other perspectives that a thinker must do to genuinely critique her *own* perspective is modeled for her in the form of another, actual person, with another, actually opposed view. This allows students to experience what genuine opposition is about, and so if approached not from the perspective of adversarial contest but from the perspective of inquiry driven understanding, such an exercise could help to encourage a student's willingness and ability to independently discover arguments and viewpoints that are opposed to the ones that that individual is actually committed to.

Finally, Paul's third criterion for a strong sense critical thinker is for that person to have "an ability to reason dialectically (multi-logically) in such a way as to determine when one's own point of view is at its weakest and when an opposing point of view is at its strongest". This too is no less than an injunction to confront otherness in the most charitable, honest, fair-minded, and rigorous way possible. And such a push might indeed be unsettling for students, in the spirit of Weston's agenda. Not only must a strong sense critical thinker be aware of his or her own framework of ideas and that other frameworks are operative in other people's views, and not only must a strong sense critical thinker be vividly and charitably aware of the strong aspects of views opposed to one's own, but a strong sense critical thinker must also recognize how his or her own views stack up against those other views. Being a strong sense critical thinker means being able to honestly *evaluate* other views in relation to one's own views and to acknowledge when those other views are better supported, and when and how one's own views could (or could not) be better supported. A classroom exercise that attempts to fulfill this third criterion is to divide students according to their views, then require them to argue the opposite views. Those who actually hold those opposite views then evaluate the

articulation of them by those who do not hold them, and evaluate how well argued those views were according to their own commitments. This sort of practice of actually attempting to find the strongest arguments of opposing views is the one that might challenge students the most, but it also has the greatest potential for illumination, because it forces a confrontation with the otherness of alternative argument in a way that genuinely brackets one's own views, and *connects* students with the strongest ideas that are opposed to their own.

In sum, I interpret Weston's push to go wild to be consistent with Paul's notion of a strong sense critical thinker, and believe it could be successfully incorporated into classroom instruction while keeping Paul's theory in mind.

5. WILDNESS AND GOVIER'S PEDAGOGY OF ARGUMENT

Trudy Govier's *A Practical Study of Argument* (2010) has become a mainstay of critical thinking instruction, even considering her persuasive arguments elsewhere, which show that critical thinking is not synonymous with argument analysis.[3] The core tactic of ARG analysis (analyzing an argument's premises according to their acceptability, relevance, and grounds, or sufficiency, for establishing the argument's conclusion) is inspired in part by Johnson and Blair's influential method[4] in *Logical Self-Defense* (1994), and is the outgrowth of Govier's significant scholarship in theory of argument.[5]

Govier's introductory comments in her Preface and in Chapter 1, "What Is An Argument (And What Is Not?)", consist of some interesting claims regarding the importance of arguments, offering to the students and instructors who read her book reasons why they should be interested in studying and teaching it. Govier argues why argument is important, providing her readers with a persuasive rationale for why they should take it seriously. That argument of hers is heavily dependent on the idea that there is a personal, as well as social value to being a thinker who understands and employs the "processes of justification and rational persuasion" (p.8). Becoming skilled in the process of argumentation, "in written or spoken material" (p.xi), thus has instrumental value for those who engage in it, in individual study, or in interaction with other people. Furthermore, Govier indicates that disagreement offers an opportunity for increased understanding for those who disagree, "giv[ing] us reason to rethink our own position" (ibid). If all parties attend to their argumentation in careful ways, honestly reflecting on alternative positions, then they might begin to question and rethink their own beliefs, discovering errors they had not before seen, and correcting their considered opinions to accommodate the most reasonable rejoinders (ibid). When resolution to disagreement fails, the value of argumentation comes from the potential for increased understanding between people (p. 9), surely a laudable outcome of community inquiry.

Govier's underlying rationale for why the study of argument is important is consistent with Weston's push to go wild, because her acknowledgement that the practical value of argumentation has a social dimension aligns with Weston's stress on the experience of otherness. Furthermore, she indicates that spoken argumentation in

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[3] See Govier (1989).

[4] See Johnson (2006).

[5] See Govier (1987; 1999).

dialogue is especially important, which straightforwardly suggests the otherness that is involved in argumentative speech acts with interlocutors. Therefore a stress on the otherness of alternative argumentation, and class work spent departing from purely written argumentation, would presumably be a tactic Govier would endorse, especially if it was introduced in conjunction with the ARG curriculum she proposes in her book.

For instance, going back to pedagogical techniques that utilize technology, the innumerable programs on cable news networks that are dedicated to pundits going back and forth on issues of great social importance offers a significant opportunity to facilitate student practice with identifying arguments from non-arguments in people's speech acts, and then standardizing and evaluating those arguments as a group. The wildness in such an exercise might not be so pronounced, since the "other" involved in the exercise is projected onto a screen and is not sitting in person amongst the class, but the discussions regarding those opinions expressed on television would indeed come between students physically present in the class, and therefore offer an experience of the otherness of alternative argumentation. Furthermore, disagreement about how to interpret and analyze the pundit interchanges could involve a bit of wildness, especially if the classroom is divided into students who side to one degree or another with the different perspectives being considered, or if students were encouraged to role-play the pundits in the televised debate, rehashing argumentative interchanges from the inhabited perspective of the people who had them.[6]

Another wild classroom tactic, less dependent on technology, would involve teaching Govier's ARG material in the context of discussions of controversial issues in applied ethics, such as abortion, gay marriage, or euthanasia, that the students have amongst themselves. Beginning with a significant argument-laden text such as Thomson (1977), students can be encouraged to identify the arguments they think are the strongest. When students express their opinions regarding these arguments, the stress on the otherness of argumentation would come when other members of the class would identify the conclusions they heard (if any), and the premises that were used (if any) to support those conclusions. People's opinions, if they are expressed through their speech as arguments, can then be "standardized" according to Govier's curriculum (i.e. shown how the reasons and conclusion hang together) and then evaluated according to the ARG conditions to determine just how strong those arguments stand after analysis. Approaching the interpretation and analysis of argumentation from Govier's curriculum is possible while stressing otherness, merely by couching the practice of Govier's material in a social-setting, where assent to spoken argumentation occurs and the communal aspects of inquiry come into play.

In sum, I interpret Weston's push to go wild to be consistent with Govier's rationale for argument pedagogy, and believe it could be successfully incorporated into instruction of the ARG curriculum in critical thinking courses.

6. CONCLUSION

It might be, after relating Weston's approach to Paul's theory of the critical thinker and Govier's underlying rationale of argumentation pedagogy, that such merging of approaches might not sound too wild; however I wish to suggest two things: first, that

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[6] Thanks to Anthony Weston for suggesting this pedagogical tactic (private correspondence).

encouraging students to genuinely confront the otherness of alternative argumentation from the perspective of an inquiry driven approach is indeed unsettling and unusual, when compared to the typically adversarial, winner take all intellectual individualism that is found in many academic settings and that does not stress the social connectedness (otherness) of thinking; and second, that the wildness of such inquiry-driven tactics of argumentation in critical thinking classes could provocatively be heightened, for instance, by the willingness of the instructor to hold those dialogical argumentative exchanges in public places, other than the classroom, coaxing argument into a social context without the boundaries of classroom walls. Indeed this is the kind of suggestion that is more obviously in line with Weston's prompt to unsettle through otherness and make our instruction wild: it certainly promises to be provocative and challenging for students and instructors alike, but it also might give all concerned a chance to connect with alternative argumentation in unexpected ways. Such an approach could be employed in a consistent way both with Paul's theory of a strong sense critical thinker and with Govier's curricular approach, standing as it does on the assumption that the value, at least in part, of studying argumentation is found in its social utility for the arguer and for the community of thinkers.

To unsettle through otherness, to go wild in the context of argumentation and in the context of a critical thinking course, is to introduce alternative argumentation not as an individual intellectual exercise, but as a social one: to require students to own their arguments, and to own their interactions with others in argumentative situations. Introducing wildness in a critical thinking class will mean introducing students to argumentation that is intimately tied to actual people with actual beliefs; it will mean removing the distance between opinions and the people who hold them; it will mean vividly stressing the ego-centric nature of belief and justification; it will mean breaking barriers of intellectual disconnection through experience, by fostering an empathy and recognition of just how connected people are to what they believe, and how our diverse views can be analyzed and understood from non-relativistic perspectives.

In conclusion, my interpretation might still sound to some to be "wild" only in a metaphorical way, as the otherness I have been talking about is not the otherness of non-human life, of ecosystems and our environment, but the otherness of other people and other values, of other beliefs and other commitments. But this is still in line with Weston's approach, since otherness is incorporated into the very definition of what constitutes a strong sense critical thinker, and an argumentative inquirer; it therefore seems perfectly appropriate to explore ways to foster awareness of and connection to that otherness, because in doing so, at least on Paul's definition, and on Govier's pedagogical rationale, we will be addressing the context of our own thoughts in terms of the thoughts of others, subjecting those thoughts to contrast and comparison in charitable and illuminating ways, and honestly admitting when other arguments are stronger than our own. In a word, by attempting to teach for critical thinking in line with Paul's and Govier's conceptions, one could naturally apply Weston's push for wildness: unsettling our students in unpredictable ways through the inherent otherness of alternative argumentation, and through that experience of otherness, connecting with them, making it possible to teach, even in school.

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Commentary on "EATING FLOWERS, HOLDING HANDS: SHOULD CRITICAL THINKING PEDAGOGY 'GO WILD'"? by Benjamin Hamby

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1. INTRODUCTION

As I understand it, the core of Hamby's proposal is that to teach students to think critically, they need to be able to develop the skills that Richard Paul associates with strong-sense critical thinking, paramount of which is the ability to see the weaknesses in one's own positions and the real strengths in opposed or alternative views. To look at this from the other direction: the natural tendency is to see only the strengths in one's own position, and only the weaknesses in the views of those with whom one disagrees. The strong sense critical thinker takes steps to overcome this tendency. In Hamby's paper, we are encouraged to teach students argument analysis in the mode presented by Govier which emphasizes assessing strengths and weaknesses. The context in which Hamby makes these observation is Weston's proposal to 'go wild' which Weston made in the context of teaching students about the environment, and which Hamby has transposed to the teaching of critical thinking.

Hamby has done, I think, a nice job of showing the fit between Weston's proposal and Paul's approach to critical thinking and Govier's approach to argument analysis. In my commentary, I offer some thoughts on two questions. First, is this an appropriate proposal for teaching critical thinking? Second, is the proposal to go wild *pedagogically appropriate*? What are the possible risks and how are they to be dealt with?

2. THE SETTING: TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING

First, a few observations about the idea of critical thinking. Almost everyone favours it and most universities either explicitly or implicitly pledge allegiance to it. Lots of teachers think that this is what they do. If you ask a philosopher, are you teaching students to think critically, they will say "Of course!". When people say that what is needed is more critical thinking, often what they mean is that if you really were thinking critically, you would see things my way![1]

Such thoughts lead me to want always to have some sort of clarification of this crucial, widely-endorsed concept.

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[1] My mentor and late colleague, Harry Nielsen, used to say that: "By 'think', most people mean: 'Massage my cliché'."

For, and this is my second observation, I do not think we can hope to succeed in the task of teaching critical thinking unless we give our students a clear understanding of what it is we want them to do. One way to do this is to provide them with a definition. For this purpose, Hamby has leaned on Richard Paul's views about critical thinking. But the material taken from Richard Paul does not provide a definition of critical thinking, though some conception of critical thinking is built into the material, particularly the distinction between strong and weak sense critical thinking.[2] There are other and later statements about critical thinking offered by Paul on his website: the 1988 Paul and Scriven definition, the antecedent to the 1997 definition of Fisher and Scriven.

Not that there is any paucity of attempts to define "critical thinking." Indeed, there are many other definitions of critical thinking: Ennis (1987), McPeck (1981), Lipman (1988), Siegel (1987), Hatcher and Spencer (2000), Nosich (2006), to name just a few. And almost every critical thinking textbook author has/his or her own definition. The problem is that it is not at all clear to me that they are all, as it were, defining the same thing, nor that all definitions are equally good. Richard Paul once observed –about this plethora of definition—that we should let a thousand flowers bloom. My rejoinder: I think there are maybe a few weeds in there.

I have argued (1992) that there are problems with the definitions offered by the Group of Five: Ennis, Paul, McPeck, Siegel and Lipman. And the matter seems to me important because students will rightly want to know (especially if they are thinking critically) just what is meant by critical thinking. Moreover, different conceptions have different implications for teaching. If one takes McPeck's view, then one can teach critical thinking only in connection with a particular subject matter, because critical thinking is or involves the epistemology of the subject matter. If one takes Paul's view, a freestanding critical thinking course is not only possible but desirable.[3]

Third, as regards the Govier section, Hamby notes that Govier's text is not a critical thinking text, and good on him for marking the distinction. There is still a good deal of sloppiness in the air regarding the relationship between informal logic and critical thinking. You can still find people who will juxtapose the terms 'informal logic' and 'critical thinking' as if they were more or less the same thing. They are not. Critical thinking is an intellectual orientation; logic is a discipline, an inquiry of which Informal Logic is one branch. I happen to agree with those who believe that informal logic has an important contribution to make to the development of critical thinking, particularly because of its work on argument analysis (à la Govier). And that is a splendid way to encourage critical thinking.

Before concluding, I would like to call Hamby's attention to one definition of 'critical thinking' that I believe would fit nicely with his proposal: the Hatcher-Spencer definition (2000) according to which critical thinking is "thinking that attempts to arrive

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[2] About Paul's contrast: can weak sense critical thinking really be critical thinking at all? How could such thinking possibly be critical? More importantly, how do we prevent ourselves as supposed critical thinkers (after all we are those teaching) from lapsing into the very sorts of uncriticality we criticize? Much that is described as weak sense seems regularly to characterize the behaviour of those who believe they are critical thinkers (strong sense). This is not a problem for Hamby but it is for Paul, and it has potential ramifications for Hamby's suggestions

[3] See the Delphi Report authored by Facione (1990).

at a conclusion through honestly evaluating the position and its alternatives with respect to the available evidence and arguments" (p. 20).

3. IS THE RECOMMENDATION TO GO WILD PEDAGOGICALLY SOUND?

Hamby says: "An analogous approach for critical thinking courses is warranted, despite its potential risks, for whatever the risk is, there are some potential benefits to following Weston's lead" (pp. 3 f.). I think we need to pose the following questions:

(A)   What are the potential risks of going wild?
(B)   What are the potential benefits of going wild?
(C)   What are the grounds for the implicit assumption in Hamby's proposal which appears to be that the potential benefits outweigh potential risks? (We cannot answer that question until we know what the risks are and what the benefits are.)

A. *What are the potential risks of going wild?*

One risk Hamby mentions is that confronting alternative views may be unsettling for the student. The term "wild" connotes being out of control. We know of course that the cash value of "going wild" is that the student will be confronted with the challenge of taking seriously points of view with which he or she disagrees (sometimes vehemently), but they do not know this and talk of 'going wild' can be upsetting, unless the stage is set properly.

My main concern is that adequate preparations and provisions are in place to support the student in this risk-taking venture. Hamby signals this when he says (p. 3): "We would do well to be cautious to some prudent degree in whatever wild risks we take in the classroom." What I am about to say assumes a certain understanding of what university students are like. But I have not been in the classroom for some 5 years and it is quite possible that my read on students is out of date.

We should take seriously the possibility that our students are extremely threatened by the prospect of thinking for themselves. Fear plays a major part in their lives. I discovered this some years ago when I was giving a seminar on reasoning for a consortium of six Virginia colleges. One of the other seminar leaders told us that he had his class of seniors to write a letter to their professor, telling him what they wanted that professor to know. The dominant theme in those letters, the continuing refrain, was fear. "I'm scared that I won't make it." They live with a great deal of fear:

- fear of what teacher will think if I say this;
- fear of what others will think of me, if I say this;
- fear that they will think I'm a browner, if I take this work seriously
- fear of making mistakes
- fear of being shamed or ridiculed
- fear of failure....
- fear of success....
- fear!

Learning to think critically is taxing in the best of circumstances and can scarcely be expected to occur when the student is terrified. Hence if we wish to promote critical thinking, we must see to it that the environment, the classroom, is an appropriate and encouraging one.

The teacher has the primary responsibility for shaping an environment in which students will begin to become comfortable with the *increased cognitive load* that we will be asking them to bear, in which they will begin to develop confidence in their own minds and thereby begin to assume responsibility for their beliefs and become aware of and exercise some control over cognitive processes that got them there--in short, to help them develop confidence in their intellectual capacities, among which is the capacity to think critically.

The classroom is supposed to be a learning environment. The teacher's responsibility is to see to it that his or her classroom is a nourishing environment, at both the physical and the emotional level or tone. Safe enough to take risks; supportive enough. So much for the risks.

B. What are the benefits?

The benefits are that the student will learn to deal with alternative points of view respectfully and intellectually and will be well on his road to becoming a critical thinker. To achieve this the student will have to master certain skills but also it seems to me that they will have to learn how to cope with different views—and this is not a skill so much as an affect or disposition: fair-mindedness. And the student will have to gather knowledge and information about the issues—so this proposal seems to me to cover all the aspects of skills: the skills, the affective dimension, and knowledge/information.

C. Do the benefits outweigh the risks?

That is the tough question that each teacher must ask and answer for himself or herself.

4. CONCLUSION

At bottom Hamby's proposal is a thoughtful one, worth taking seriously. It's risky business we are about. Consider the chilling words of Don Marquis: "If you teach students to think they are thinking, they will love you; if you teach them to think, they will hate you." I think the only consolation I can offer is to suggest that if we are successful they may hate us in the short run, but thank us in the long run.

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