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Commentary on: Tracy Bowell and Justine Kingsbury's "Critical thinking and the argumentational and epistemic virtues"

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1. INTRODUCTION

In their fine paper, Bowell and Kingsbury bring up a number of important issues with respect to critical thinking (CT) theory and pedagogy. First, their paper addresses the relationship between the cognitive skills necessary for effective CT and the dispositions (regulatory and motivational virtues) needed to incline someone to use these skills (see Missimer, 1990; Siegel, 1988, 1997). Second, they address the vexing issue of CT transfer. That is, what can we do to help students see that CT skills are not just something one uses only in a CT class. As they put it, "Why might a student who did well on a CT exam at the end of the semester nevertheless not think critically when it comes time to choose a career, or to decide who to vote for or whether or not to eat meat?" (6). The problem of transfer has a history in the CT literature (Bailin, 1999; Hatcher, 2001), and it seems will not be easily solved. (In fact, I will suggest later that there may not be a solution.) Third, they bring up an issue related to transfer. That is, assuming students were inclined to use their CT skills, "students need to be able to recognize situations in which they ought to use their reasoning skills..." (7). How do we get students in any given situation to see that what they have learned in CT class is useful and applicable in other areas? Bowell and Kingsbury suggest, much like Aristotle's discussion of acquiring a moral virtue, (Aristotle, 952-959), that we should create an environment where (our continent) students practice their CT skills over and over until they are "thoroughly engrained" (7) or become "second nature." They claim that, at least ideally, the goal is analogous to learning long division, where adults "can recognize a situation in which long division is called for and do it, even if years have passed since the last situation arose" (7).

2. COMMENTS

While I generally find Bowell and Kingsbury to be on target, I have a few comments about their treatment of each of these areas. First, I agree that, at least for the most part, critical thinking skills and regulatory virtues or character traits are useless unless one is inclined to use them. Skills without dispositions are useless, and dispositions without skills are comic, if not dangerous. Inductive and deductive logic are tools for inquiry, not decoration. For skills to be of value, the person must have

the appropriate “regulatory virtues” or character traits and be motivated to use them.

The problem of applying the skills to areas beyond a CT class is more perplexing. Transfer requires character traits, or “motivational and regulatory virtues” (6) to apply the skills to areas other than CT assignments. Based on their research of students’ attitudes towards ethical issues, Bowell and Kingsbury claim the needed virtues are lacking. “The troubling refrain: *Everyone is entitled to their beliefs*” (6) is too often heard when students are asked to comment on an ethical issue.

However, while I agree with their conclusion about the lack of transfer, asking students to think critically about ethical issues may not be the most appropriate way to demonstrate the lack. There are other possible explanations for why CT students behave the way they do when asked questions about their ethical beliefs of the ethics of specific practices. First, perhaps the one-semester course in CT did not address the application of skills to ethical issues. One can imagine an entire semester spent on enhancing students’ ability to “reason deductively and inductively” (5), as well as going over a list of informal fallacies, with no mention of applying the skills to ethical issues. Or, maybe the course only focused on critiquing existing arguments and did not focus on students creating arguments to defend their own beliefs. Perhaps the CT course did cover ethics, but students learned that there are indeed strong arguments on both sides of most important ethical issues, e.g., consider the abortion debate. As a result, perhaps these students were reluctant in an interview to take a stand on some issue that they have not properly researched. Perhaps when the students said “everyone is entitled to his or her belief,” they were simply expressing a cultural norm which says “disagreement and argumentation are not conducive to harmonious social living,” so, “let a thousand flowers bloom.” So, while transfer is a problem, I do not think the study necessarily supports it.

However, beyond the question whether ethics is the proper area to demonstrate the lack of skills transfer, any lack may not be the students’ fault. It could be the result of professors throughout academe never asking students to apply the logical skills learned in their CT class. In fact, professors in some courses, those schooled in the post-modern tradition, might discourage the use of reasoned argument. (One can only wonder what reasons they have for holding their position, but they hold it nonetheless.) They might teach that intuitions and feelings are more reliable guides in life. Richard Paul’s research indicates that many college professors who talk about the value of CT neither understand what it is nor possess the logical skills taught in typical CT courses (Paul, Elder, and Bartell). So, is it any wonder transfer is nil.

A final issue brought up by Bowell and Kingsbury is, at least to me, a new area of concern in the CT literature (but I could be wrong). It is the inability of students to recognize situations where the use of their CT skills is appropriate. For example, when should a student challenge a lecturer on his or her claims or inferences? Some time ago, Iris Murdoch pointed out that in ethics there are instances where people both understand the principles, say Kant’s “Respect for Persons,” and are properly inclined to apply the principle to appropriate situations.

Unfortunately, they are simply unable to recognize an ethically questionable policy or practice when it occurs (Murdoch, 1970, p. 65). Now, thanks to Bowell and Kingsbury, we see the same problem applies to CT. CT students can be both willing and able, but blind.

Bowell and Kingsbury suggest that to engrain the disposition to think critically when confronted with appropriate circumstances, we need to think of the analogy between learning critical thinking and long division. They claim that no one forgets how to do long division once it is learned. Unfortunately, I am not sure this analogy is appropriate. Long division involves the algorithmic application of a few simple mathematical tools. CT skills are much more complex. For example, Bob Ennis' well known paper on CT lists 14 dispositions and 12 skills, with 93 subcategories, not counting informal fallacies (Ennis, 1987). Learning and applying these is not a simple matter like learning and doing long division.

3. CONCLUSION

The problem of transfer has been recognized for some time, and I imagine many at this conference have tried their hand at solving it. I know I have. However, what if it will not go away because it turns out that most students are simply not capable of becoming critical thinkers? What if Aristotle was wrong and we are not rational animals, but are instead hard wired to form and retain irrational beliefs and practices? There is a lot of research on this by cognitive psychologists, and their conclusions are not favorable to teaching CT (Ariel; Brafman and Brafman; Burton; Gilovich; Marcus; Tavris and Aronson, to name a few of many). If these psychologists are correct in their assessment of human dispositions and abilities (or lack thereof), what are the consequences for teaching CT and CT transfer? Should we just throw in the towel? What should realistic expectations be?

What if CT is something only a few people in special subcultures become inclined to practice, while most are neither inclined nor able? My wife, who is an RN with many friends of various sorts, often remarks when we are at a social event with a bunch of academics, especially if they are philosophers, that we behave quite differently from other groups of her friends. That is, that we seemingly like to argue, almost about anything. She says, in her experience, most people do not behave like this. So, if her observations are representative, does that mean we academics are indeed anomalies and internalizing CT skills and dispositions is something only a few people are inclined to do? As Garrison Keillor said, "One can teach a bear to ride a bicycle, but that is not what the bear really wants to be doing." They never ride bicycles in the wild. For me, these are troubling thoughts; perhaps others who have taught CT for decades have also had them.

I thank again Tracy and Justine for their insightful discussion of these important and seemingly intransigent issues. Perhaps someone sometime will figure it out.

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