Commentary on Thinking Critically About Beliefs it’s Hard to Think Critically About

Benjamin Hamby Ph.D.
Coastal Carolina University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive

Hamby, Benjamin Ph.D., "Commentary on Thinking Critically About Beliefs it's Hard to Think Critically About" (2016). OSSA Conference Archive. 43. https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA11/papersandcommentaries/43

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.
Commentary on “Thinking Critically About Beliefs It’s Hard to Think Critically About”

BENJAMIN HAMBY
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Coastal Carolina University
P.O. Box 261954, Conway, SC 29528-6054
United States of America
bhamby@coastal.edu

1. Introduction

In some sense, every belief is a belief it is hard to think critically about, because that is the nature of belief. But every belief is hard to think critically about, also, because that is the nature of critical thinking: it is hard work; unsettling our settled notions, refusing to let them “stay put” like Daedalus’ statues. Let us grant, then, that while some beliefs are more entrenched than others, harder to think about than others, all beliefs if they are genuinely held present this challenge: let us thus level the pedagogical playing field by assuming that if a student has a belief, it will be hard for that student to think critically about it. The strategies for thinking about entrenched beliefs should thus be no different than the strategies for thinking about any belief. If this is our assumption, then we can proceed to motivate students to want to work hard at this important intellectual undertaking, and think that by addressing such motivation we have a realistic chance of beliefs of whatever stripe being changed on the basis of critical reflection, even if strictly speaking the chances are slim. It is only when this notion is internalized in pedagogues and students alike that there can be hope of changing intellectual orientations in students by more than just one standard deviation on a critical thinking exam (Arum and Roska, 2011): motivation is the key. Kingsbury and Bowell acknowledge this interpretation in their introduction, but their treatment of intransigent beliefs (a redundant phrase, I think, in the context of critical thinking pedagogy), while interesting and thoughtful, left me somewhat unencouraged and unfulfilled.

2. Should critical thinkers seek the truth?

While I found much to agree with in the spirit of pedagogical solidarity when I read a paper such as Kingsbury’s and Bowell’s, there was also much I found I must disagree with strenuously. My biggest complaint comes from their explicitly stated conception of critical thinking, which becomes apparent when they say that “the very point of critical thinking is the forming of true beliefs and the avoidance of false ones.” But this is most surely too high an expectation for a critical thinking course, a college education, or even a lifetime of learning. Critical thinkers should use truth as an orienting ideal, but grounding the point and purpose of critical thinking in such strong epistemological terms throws the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to good reasoning that might produce false beliefs, or poor reasoning that produces true beliefs: of course we should want to avoid those false beliefs and would prefer true ones, but for fallible, reasoning people who are so perniciously prone to bias and fallacious reasoning, isn’t being motivated to think critically, and then managing to adhere to better criteria of good judgment more our aim, especially when instructing 18-24 year olds? We think we will more realistically get at the truth if we reason in such ways, but it is the cogency of the judgment-making that should concern us in
teaching critical thinking, not so much the truth value of the judgements reached. After all, how are we to judge by this standard if a student has been a good critical thinker when deciding who to vote for (or whether to vote at all)? There is no “truth” to the matter, but one might surely make the decision in more or less critical ways (that is to say, more according to appropriate standards of judgment-making).

Allow me to quote at length Harvey Siegel (1989), whose view I regard as definitive in this matter (though contentious among epistemological anti-realists):

So long as critical thinking involves believing on the basis of reasons, and so long as particular claims which students are considering must be assessed in accord with the reasons which students actually have or can get … then the power of reasons to force a conclusion must be seen as always open. Even very powerful reasons for or against some claim q can be wrong, misleading, or overturned by evidence not yet available. In teaching students to be critical thinkers, we do not in the first instance instruct them to believe only what is true. Of course we do think that believing on the basis of reasons is a reliable guide to believing what is true, at least generally. Nevertheless, in teaching students to be critical thinkers, we encourage them to believe (and act) on the basis of reasons which are properly evaluated. In doing so we let the truth fall where it may, and regard the student who justifiably believes q, which is false, despite the evidence in its favor, as a more successful critical thinker than the student who believes not-q, which is true, despite the evidence to the contrary. Critical thinking involves believing rationally, on the basis of reasons; such belief must, from the point of view of our theoretical understanding of critical thinking, be conceived of as independent of truth. (pp. 132-133)

3. Pedagogical strategies

Another major complaint I want to register is that while obviously well intentioned, the pedagogical strategies Bowell and Kingsbury briefly suggest at the end of each theoretical discussion are to my mind the most substantive and important questions, but are unfortunately the most undeveloped aspect of their paper. Furthermore, at first blush I think they have not much prospect of success (on their own) in achieving what the authors desire: namely the mitigation of bias with the result of true beliefs. That standard for success is too high, and we should set our sights differently, by not focusing on the belief so much as on the character of students, and motivational tactics to influence the virtues that are so central to becoming a critical thinker. And in this respect their interventional strategies need much more development.

I make the skeptical claim elsewhere (Hamby 2016) that in light of recent meta-analyses of critical thinking instruction as well as the recent evidence that suggest cognitive biases are mostly intractable, it is a dubious proposition to think that widespread efforts at critical thinking will ever have the effect they desire. What Kingsbury and Bowell have in effect proposed in their paper is that some already tried but not always so true classroom strategies that may or may not have the effect that they intend them to have, but that sound fair and plausible enough, and are worth a try. By way of illustrating what I think is important in an approach to influencing the way students think, allow me now to quote at length the penultimate chapter of my doctoral thesis (Hamby 2014, pp. 123-155, 170-174, passim), where I both motivate and then articulate some
pedagogical strategies aimed at fostering the willingness to inquire, what I argue is the central critical thinking virtue.

[A] fundamental aspect of becoming a critical thinker is to be able to recognize the need for reflection in the first place—to realize that something more than an automatic response is required. My position is that this kind of issue awareness should be the default attitude in a critical thinking class, permeating all instructional efforts. Out in the world, relying on heuristics for decisions that need to be made expeditiously is less problematic than when there is time for reflection in the classroom. Transferring this classroom attitude out into the world, however, is a problem that I will not pretend to solve. What we can do in our classroom activities is stress that our default attitude when confronting significant issues in our lives should be to pause to reflect, as opposed to making a snap judgment: it is not always so pressing to make an immediate decision that we should feel justified in failing to carefully reflect on an issue at hand.

So it is not just any motivation we seek to foster, but the special motivation that is willingness to inquire: the motivation that drives a person to seek out reasoned judgment through critical inquiry, and that orients them towards recognizing controversial issues that deserve reflection. And we cannot hope to foster this in our students with the aim of educating critical thinkers who approach the ideal if we coerce, indoctrinate, or otherwise seek to foster the virtue with only external rewards. How else then should we seek to foster them? Like the moral virtues, critical thinking virtues are only properly acquired, if they are acquired at all, through practice and imitation; in this way the formula for critical thinking virtue-acquisition is analogous to the formula for critical thinking skill-acquisition, since we want students to emulate and adopt the kinds of attitudes required to be critical thinkers, and this will require feedback when instructors notice failures of proper attitudes. Whereas the “practice” part is not like skill acquisition, where some discrete task is attempted, still, instructors must put students in situations where their attitudes and values become manifest in dialectic with peers, and then those aspects are made explicit to the participants, when comments made could be made more open-mindedly, fair-mindedly, respectfully, etc. One important aspect of fostering willingness to inquire is thus for instructors to diligently manifest that virtue in our own thinking when interacting with students, inside or outside of class. Of course, if a critical thinking instructor is to be a true critical thinker herself, then she must already characteristically manifest willingness to inquire. But as an instructor, she must do so more conscientiously, and certainly more explicitly. In addition to conscientiously modeling willingness to inquire in classroom practice, instructors can design classroom activities that explicitly point to the virtues, and willingness to inquire in particular. The goal of such activities would be to impress upon students the instrumental and intrinsic importance of the proper motivation to be a critical thinker. Below, I explore the conscientious techniques of modeling willingness to inquire, and the classroom activities that through practice and repetition I argue will help to foster that virtue, and work to mitigate the tendency to be motivated to defend an unexamined view from alternatives, even when those alternatives should be compelling. The hope is that, as with skill transfer, the sorts
of attitudes and values that contribute to a person seeking reasoned judgment on the occasion of a classroom or take home assignment will transfer across contexts to their lives apart from their duties as a student. This hope can be maintained even in the light of criticisms like that of Leave (1988), who casts into doubt the idea of skills transfer by pointing to evidence which suggests that, even if skills sometimes transfer across educational contexts, such as from one class or subject to another, they do not always transfer to the world at large, outside of educational contexts (p. 71). But while this may be true of skill transfer, and as critical thinking pedagogues we would hope there is more chance of “real world” transfer than Leave suggests, we need not be so pessimistic regarding the critical thinking virtues on this basis. For a virtue is not a skill, and is not used the way a skill is used. Indeed, part of the reason why skill transfer is not seen outside of educational contexts may be that the proper attitudes and motivation have not been properly fostered. Perhaps the solution to real-world transfer is an explicit focus on being the kind of person who seeks to engage in inquiry and uses her skills appropriately.

One classroom exercise that can be repeated with slight variations involves students articulating “gut reactions” to certain news stories, narratives from history, interchanges between politicians on legislative floors, or even fictional dialogues. The phrase “gut reaction” is suggestive for students being introduced to the idea of willingness to inquire, because the very idea that one undertakes a critical stance in a process of inquiry is precluded if one hastily decides on a judgment before any such inquiry takes place. “Gut reaction” is also a fortunate phrase in this regard because if one is to think critically one must do so with one’s head, not with one’s gut. This allows instructors to introduce the idea of System-I thinking (“reactive, instinctive, quick, holistic”) versus System-II thinking (“reflective, deliberative, analytical, procedural”) (Facione & Gittens, 2012, p. 183), which is an instructive bit of knowledge that should help students become more cognizant of the need to approach some issues relying more on heuristics and training, but to approach others with a more reflective stance. So the very set-up of this classroom exercise tips off students that such thinking is not typical of a critical thinker.

Part of that set-up should include the following quote from Stephen Colbert, which he made as the keynote speaker at the White House Press Club Dinner in 2006. The tradition at these dinners is that the keynote speaker lampoons the President, who is always in attendance. At this event Colbert is lampooning then-President George W. Bush, who is sitting a few seats away from him when the speech is delivered; however, the purpose of this set-up is not to make a political point. Rather it is to use irony to hit home the idea that gut reactions to things are very seldom productive of truth and certainly tend to produce something other than a reasoned judgment. To then defend such gut reactions at any cost is to add salt to the wound of an already injurious intellectual motivation. Below is the transcription of the relevant part of the speech:

[T]onight it is my privilege to celebrate this president, ’cause we're not so different, he and I. We both get it. Guys like us, we’re not some brainiacs on the nerd patrol. We’re not members of the factinista. We go straight from the gut. Right, sir? That’s where the
truth lies, right down here in the gut. Do you know you have more nerve endings in your gut than you have in your head? You can look it up. Now, I know some of you are going to say, “I did look it up, and that's not true.” That's 'cause you looked it up in a book. Next time, look it up in your gut. I did. My gut tells me that’s how our nervous system works. Every night on my show, The Colbert Report, I speak straight from the gut, okay? I give people the truth, unfiltered by rational argument. I call it the "No Fact Zone”.

After watching this video clip as part of the initial set up to the exercise, students are then prompted to defend gut reactions to issues by any rhetorical means necessary, ignoring or unreflectively downplaying alternative views. In effect, students are encouraged to be the most (intellectually) viciously motivated thinkers they can be in terms of maintaining their original gut reaction. In this way, students get to experience the contrary of willingness to inquire in a conscious, visceral way. They also get to see their peers engage in the artificially adopted error tendency, so have a firsthand view of how this cognitive bias can lead us all astray in our intellectual endeavours. This can yield dividends in impressing upon students the importance of being motivated to seek a reasoned judgment because a gut reaction will tend not to be the most defensible position on an issue compared to a judgment reached carefully through an examination of a wide array of evidence and arguments.

The point of an exercise such as this is to reinforce the importance of seeking a reasoned judgment even in the face of a view one already holds. But it is also a warning against using a snap judgment in a context where one is not appropriate. This too is a way of illustrating willingness to inquire, because to be the kind of person who characteristically seeks a reasoned judgment means to be the kind of person who does not rely too heavily on heuristics unless they are warranted. As such, this kind of exercise is appropriate for introducing students to the heuristic strategies that are sometimes effective, but that do not represent the kind of reflective thinking that critical inquiry represents.

Another classroom intervention that has the potential to get students into the habit of looking at questions through a critical lens with the aim of reaching a reasoned judgment is to design written in class assignments so that they are done in groups rather than individually. Assignments that require students to submit work individually perpetuates the idea that critical thinking is a solo intellectual exercise. But critical thinking is properly seen as more than just an internal mental process that people undertake without regard to their external environment. This is especially true when one considers that other people, other thinking people, make up a good part of our external environment. Respect for dialectical partners has already been shown to be an important virtue that is necessary for a person to have if she is to be a critical thinker approaching the ideal. So too, as mentioned above, is valuing the criticisms that others might legitimately make in response to our arguments and cases. This can be assured to be undertaken by students if peer evaluation is part of the assignment, to mitigate the potential for some students in groups to do the minimum work possible and allow others to do the work. Therefore
written assignments should at least in part be undertaken in groups, where students must work together to meet a common goal of reaching a judgment on balance.

This can help to foster willingness to inquire as well, in the following way: by organizing the group inquiry process methodically, requiring students to share the intellectual burden of discovering the evidence and arguments on various sides of the issue, by an intelligent division of labour in the inquiry process. As an illustration, see the following excerpt from an assignment for a final group inquiry essay in a second year undergraduate business ethics course. This assignment is more than a group assignment, in that it asks students to go through a full blown process of inquiry as a group.

You will need to consider plausible objections to your position, rejoinders to those objections, implications of your position, and alternatives with their supporting arguments—in effect, considering carefully the strongest responses to your core argument or arguments that a supporter of some other position could make. This is part of the role different group members with different ideas will play in contributing to the report: everyone with alternative perspectives should contribute those perspectives to the group’s process of balancing different arguments in order to come to a reasoned judgment on the issue you determine the case prompts. If there is a uniformity of perspectives among group members, then group members should undertake a concerted effort to think of the strongest alternatives, dividing the intellectual labour of the group to gather the various perspectives that must be considered in order to come to a reasoned judgment on balance.

The assignment from which the above was taken is based on a case study. The assignment asks students to formulate the various issues the case brings to the fore; it asks them to contemplate the various sides of the major issue they decide is operative in the case; and it asks them to balance the considerations against one another in a process of reasoning that leads to a reasoned judgment about the major moral issue involved in the case. It specifically asks them to divide these various components amongst themselves, so that each group member is responsible for at least one line of argumentative thought that they must then incorporate into a dialectical exchange with their other group members in an attempt to reach a reasoned judgment.

The rationale for this approach is that requiring students to go through a process of reasoning that is clearly only one element in an undertaking that involves a total balance of considerations judgment has the potential to reinforce in students’ minds the totality of lines of reasoning that are required for such a reasoned judgment to be reached. In other words students get to experience the process of reaching a reasoned judgment in such a methodical way that it slows down that process and breaks it into its constituent lines of reasoning, each of which deserves its own careful attention. This argument-building towards a conclusion, when it happens at all, is often the last step in an undergraduate’s reasoning. To attempt to
support a claim with an argument or a series of arguments is not enough, however, to reach a reasoned judgment. For the argumentation that is involved when the dialectical obligations of the arguer are taken seriously is what this assignment tries to stress. As such, a student will be reminded at every stage of this assignment that her own approach to the issue for the sake of the assignment is only one of a few potential approaches, and that whether some approach is better justified will only become clear as the arguments are compared to each other and as the dialectical space between them is made explicit.

Since critical thinking is directed towards reasoned judgment, willingness to inquire should be fostered in a way that pays attention to that end. Fostering willingness to inquire thus is about instilling a value for reasoned judgment as the primary end of critical inquiry, especially relative to other ends to which our intellectual efforts could be put. Classroom interventions thus should all pay explicit attention to other intellectual ends that instructors might witness students pursuing other than reasoned judgment. Not only can instructors be on the lookout for other such motivations in the classroom, but students themselves should be encouraged to self-monitor and peer-monitor for the end-directed activities that do not fall in line with reaching a reasoned judgment or that might otherwise tend to work against such a process.

Another strategy that could be employed to foster willingness to inquire stands opposed to the typical inclination of critical thinking instructors to organize some kind of “debate” as a project. While requiring a debate as an aspect of class design might be appropriate in a debate or public speaking course, in a critical thinking course it might turn out to be antithetical to the goals of instruction, especially if my conceptualization of critical thinking is granted. For debate scenarios are naturally adversarial, but critical thinking should be seen as cooperative; debate is furthermore a matter of persuasion rather than of justification, whereas critical thinking is about reaching a conclusion on a balance of considerations; dialectic disappears in debate and concessions and revisions are failings and weaknesses, at least when debate is pursued in a dominantly eristic fashion, but in critical thinking, and in a critical thinking class, an eristic approach and debate framed by opposition is not the best approach if we want to foster people’s attitudes and values so that they will be the kind of people who seek a judgment reached on balance. Since that judgment cannot be foretold, and to revise one’s views appropriately in light of new evidence is one of the greatest successes a critical thinker can have, an eristic approach to debate will tend to foster attitudes antithetical to the critical thinking virtues.

This is all to say that debate as an eristic pursuit is not the proper activity for a critical thinking class. But this is not to say that people cannot disagree, or dispute different positions, or that people should not be encouraged to actively engage each other on the points which they do disagree. It is not to say framing some issues pro and con is not legitimate. Rather, it is to say that the purpose and organization of debate must change. First, debate can no longer be about defending an entrenched view at all costs, with the expectation that at the end of the communicative exchange, something will necessarily be resolved. This stands directly opposed not only to debate as it is traditionally instructed in the United
States, but also to an alternative approach to argumentation from Europe, found in the pragma-dialecticians Van Eemeren and Grootendorst. For them, argumentation is about resolving a difference of opinion, and in the extended pragma-dialectical theory that allows for strategic manoeuvring, there are the goals of the participants: of the protagonist to justify their standpoint and of the antagonist to prevent the protagonist from doing so.

But in a critical thinking class, what kind of resolution can we hope to expect when 1) the disagreement concerns issues of real and contemporary controversy that are actively debated and 2) most students are being introduced to the explicit skills of critical thinking and the dispositions of critical thinkers for the first time? The answer is that we should not expect or even trouble to spend too much effort on making the resolution of disagreement our goal of critical thinking. Therefore, while we should be realistic and assume that students come to an introductory critical thinking course with strong beliefs and complicated ways of understanding those beliefs, we should not expect that those beliefs will change too drastically as a result of instruction. Rather, the expectation of the reality of student disagreement should be that the basis of that disagreement be made more clear, that it be articulated as fairly and as clearly as possible so that it is understood, and that it is examined in as fair a light as possible. The end sought is not resolution of disagreement based on agreed upon starting points and rules of inference, but some judgment that is known only when inquiry pauses to assess all the relevant information and arguments and evidence, to find that, for this moment at least, the cases for the various sides have been made and the verdict can be rendered provisionally, until new evidence or argument can be brought to bear on the process.

How to have contrary arguments, then, allowing students to express their ideas and their beliefs and their disagreements, while emphasizing the special ends of critical thinking? If some way can be devised, then willingness to inquire can be fostered, because positive experiences aiming towards something other than winning or persuading might lead students to want to have more of those experiences more often, and will thereby be a motivational factor when out in the real world where disagreements arise.

My answer to the problem of reconceiving the critical thinking debate activity is a simple pedagogical plan that involves the whole class, but as in a debate, spotlights two people and their opposing views. The set up is simple: two chairs at the front of the classroom, so the participating students can see one another. The rules of the exchange are simple as well: there is a question at issue, the question phrased according to the criteria of a well-stated issue. The participants are to address the question, with the only caveat being that they disagree either in their “gut response” to the issue if it is something they have not reflected about, or about their current judgment on the issue, whatever it happens to be. Then the procedure is as follows: they each give their reasons for their belief, whatever it is. This involves stating not just their reasons but also their belief. Once each participant has stated their belief and their reasons for their belief, each participant gets a chance to respond to the other person. Before a response can be given, however, the position being responded to must be articulated to the satisfaction of
the person who first articulated it. Only when an alternative view is articulated to
the satisfaction of the person whose view it is can that view than be responded to.

This serves a number of purposes, all of which work towards fostering
willingness to inquire, in addition to other virtues, and other skills for that matter.
Since paraphrasing is such an important academic and intellectual skill, for
instance, this experience is important in that it requires students to put into their
own words the positions of others. This is made more challenging by the fact that
these views are at odds with a student’s own view, and that the person is sitting in
front of them, and that the disagreement is occurring in a public place with
onlookers. But this is just the sort of realistic skill we expect students to be able to
apply across a wide range of texts and other communicative messages, whether face
to face or through interpreting mass media. But willingness to inquire is specifically
fostered in such an activity for the following reason: “success” in this “debate” is
not a matter of winning, but of following the paraphrasing rule well. Ideally, the
way practiced critical thinkers would behave in such a situation is to very rarely
have to be corrected by their “opponent” in the debate. So that the giving and
exchanging of reasons would flow with a minimum of correction, or at a least a
maximum of sensitive, conscientious, fair, and open-minded correction, all with the
immediate end of articulating well the other person’s position. Now onto some
other take home pedagogical content.

This content is inspired by and borrows from Battaly (2006), an important
paper that argues for a theoretical understanding of the intellectual virtues from the
perspective of virtue epistemology, and that attempts to answer the question of how
we can “cultivate intellectual virtue in our students” (p. 191). Battaly helpfully
articulates some plausible classroom interventions and take-home assignments
meant to foster such intellectual virtues as open-mindedness, a motivation for the
truth, and a respect for evidence (pp. 210-218 passim). As such, Battaly’s effort
anticipates my aims, providing an important account of the kinds of pedagogical
interventions that an instructor who recognizes the importance of the intellectual
to use in her classroom practice.

Battaly’s discussion is situated in the virtue epistemology debate of the
virtues, a debate that I have sought to avoid, because addressing relevant
epistemological concerns would take me far afield. Still, Battaly’s efforts to
theoretically elucidate the concept of an intellectual virtue, and to provide
classroom tactics to instruct for the intellectual virtues, are evidence that
recognizing cognitive virtues in the classroom, as opposed to strictly moral virtues,
can be taken seriously by pedagogues. Critical thinking instructors thus need not
immerse themselves in the debate among virtue epistemologists to take the critical
thinking virtues seriously, but the upshot of Battaly’s article can still be
appropriated by them. This is to say that, following Battaly, while instructing for
the intellectual virtues is a fallible endeavour, we should nevertheless proceed with
confidence in our instruction, believing that giving students an opportunity to
practice the virtues is better than giving them no opportunities at all, and that these
opportunities will help to foster in them a desire to put their skills into practice as a
part of their routine and characteristic way of interacting in the world (p. 218). In
this way Battaly rightly expresses optimism about explicitly teaching the
intellectual virtues, modeling them in classroom practice, and most importantly, allowing students various curricular ways to practice the virtues. Such efforts attempt to give students an opportunity to consciously aim for the virtues, and to notice them and be more cognizant of them in various real-life discourses. My approach to the instruction of the critical thinking virtues takes this optimism as a constructive starting point for what I take to be plausible programmatic suggestions with some implications.

The first implication is that critical thinking education is a kind of character education. This is problematic for a number of reasons, perhaps most of all for political reasons: if critical thinking is about educating for character, then it has a strong moral dimension that some would surely claim should be kept out of our educational efforts. Education, especially public education, should not be about instilling morals, but about teaching skills that will lead to professional and intellectual development.

However... abstracting a person’s skills from the kind of person they need to be to employ them consistently and aptly is a mistake. If we want students not just to be able to do certain things, but to be the kind of people who actually do them of their own accord, then education should be about more than instruction in the techniques that allow a person to engage in a process or procedure. If we think that a process or procedure is valuable enough to teach, we should want to encourage our students to value it too, in such a way that they will want to learn it and eventually apply it in their lives as a regular part of their experience in the world.

To this end, critical thinking pedagogues should be aware of current scholarship in critical thinking pedagogy. In light of a recent meta-analysis of studies evaluating instructional efforts at critical thinking, undertaken by Abrami, et al (2008), pedagogues should understand that if they wish to foster critical thinking in their students, they must do so explicitly as an additional part of their curricular instruction “as an independent track within a specific content course” (2008, p. 1121). This strategy, according to Abrami’s meta-analysis, has a better chance of fostering the skills and virtues of students than does the “immersion” method of using already existing curriculum and expecting students to learn critical thinking “as a by-product of instruction” (2008, p. 1121). It also has a better chance of good outcomes than the “general” approach, where critical thinking skills “are the explicit course objective”, and the “infusion” approach, where critical thinking skills “are embedded into course content and explicitly stated as a course objective” (2008, p. 1121).

The upshot regarding the instruction of the virtues is analogous to Abrami’s conclusion regarding the instruction of critical thinking more generally: to recognize the importance of the virtues is not enough, if in our instruction we do not pay explicit attention to them. Recognition of the pedagogical value of the virtues brings me to a second major implication: just as pedagogues might wish to instil critical thinking skills into their students but will tend to fail to do so unless that instruction is made explicit as an independent track of content within a curriculum, so I surmise will the critical thinking virtues fail to develop in our students if we as instructors are merely aware of them, and seek to “infuse” them
into our already existing curriculum without paying explicit attention to them in separate lectures and in specifically tailored assignments we require our students to complete.

Critical thinking virtues thus deserve their own place among the standard curricular topics in a critical thinking course, which tend to stress the skills of critical thinking. Just as there are commonly units on using language unambiguously, analyzing arguments, and evaluating sources, so there should be units on open-mindedness, valuing fallacious-free reasoning, charity, and willingness to inquire. These need not be full-blown lessons taking up one or more entire 50-minute class periods, or full chapters in textbooks. Mini-lessons and lectures of 15 to 20 minutes, coupled with in-class assignments, take-home assignments, and other reading assignments, could be sufficient. They would do more than what is now typical, which is to neglect any mention of the virtues at all. So my conclusion is to urge instructors that to pursue critical thinking virtues in the classroom they must work to make them a clearly defined and separate aspect of their course, so that the ideas and the activities are delineated for students as those that concern what it takes to have the right character of a critical thinker.

4. Conclusion

In sum, I agree with the Kingsbury’s and Bowell’s project: we should try to get students to think critically about beliefs it is hard to think critically about. In other words, we should get students to think critically. The strategies for the one are the same for the other, and fostering student motivation to do so in light of obstacles should be seen as a priority.

References