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Comments on Developing Critical Thinking with Rhetorical Pedagogy by Elizabeth Ismail

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Abstract: In her paper, Ismail argues that common approaches to teaching critical thinking based on informal logic are inadequate on a number of grounds and that equating the ability to think critically with the ability to analyze and evaluate arguments is problematic. To remedy these inadequacies, she proposes a pedagogy based in rhetoric. I first examine her critiques of informal logic and then turn to the alternative she proposes.

Keywords: argument analysis, critical thinking education, rhetoric, rhetorical pedagogy,

1. Introduction

In her paper, Ismail argues that common approaches to teaching critical thinking based on informal logic are inadequate on a number of grounds and that equating the ability to think critically with the ability to analyze and evaluate arguments is problematic. To remedy these inadequacies, she proposes a pedagogy based in rhetoric. I shall first examine her critiques of informal logic and then turn to the alternative she proposes.

2. Critiques

Ismail's critique takes a number of specific forms, but there is an underlying idea that unites the individual criticisms: What is generally offered as critical thinking in post-secondary philosophy courses, i.e., argument analysis, is inadequate, and problematic and that such courses should have a broader mandate and content. This criticism takes a number of specific forms.

2.1 From philosophy and education

A number of the criticisms she offers come from the perspective of philosophy and education.

One of these focuses on the inadequacy of informal logic for achieving its expressed purpose, that is, dealing with arguments in natural language. The focus on pre-recorded, usually written discourse is problematic in ignoring the context-dependence of natural language, the contestability of assumptions and principles appealed to in arguments, and the uncertainties and difficulties in the topics people argue about.

Another criticism relates to the limited nature of the subject matter examined by this approach. Ismail claims that there are other phenomena in addition to written arguments that require critical analysis – such things as visual communication (e.g., images, film), interior phenomena not expressed in language, modern communications institutions.

The exclusive focus on written argumentation also omits other important contexts of argumentation and communication, namely auditory and face-to-face contexts. She argues that enhancing the ability to think critically in spontaneous, real-time contexts and to attend to the

social and political contexts of in-person communication and to aspects such as gestures and tone of voice are important components of critical thinking instruction, which are not addressed in the informal logic approach.

Ismail also criticizes the informal logic approach for failing to attend to the affective and social dimensions which are central to critical thinking. Teaching critical thinking needs to develop not just knowledge and cognitive skill but also, and importantly, a “willingness to use such knowledge and skill.” Such skills and dispositions are best developed through an exchange of ideas about real issues in a social context. Research on the effects of various methods of developing critical thinking have found that the best techniques for critical thinking instruction are providing environments for discussion and providing opportunities for solving authentic life problems, neither of which are common features of critical thinking courses.

2.2 From psychology and neuroscience

Another set of criticisms of the informal logic approach is derived from the realms of psychology and of neuroscience. Ismail cites Thagard’s argument that common inference errors are rooted in emotional ‘biases’ rather than in arguments in support of the claim that attending to psychological processes rather than studying logical fallacies is a better way to teach critical thinking.

She also draws on the neurobiological research of Immordino-Yang et al. that emphasizes the role of emotional experiences and social relationships in cognition to argue that education should facilitate active engagement with emotionally based content and socially transmitted ideas, neither of which is emphasized in the teaching of informal logic. Each of these criticisms reinforces points made in the philosophical and educational critiques about the centrality of the emotional and social dimensions of critical thinking.

3. Examining the critiques

Ismail’s project involves a questioning of the relationship between critical thinking and argumentation, a project with which I have considerable sympathy. That critical thinking has become equated with argument analysis in critical thinking courses is, I would argue, a result of the fact that such courses were developed primarily as a response to or replacement for courses in formal logic in philosophy departments. Although the primary focus of these courses has been on informal arguments rather than formal reasoning, their heritage in formal logic is still evident in the emphasis on the structure and evaluation of individual, de-contextualized arguments.

It is important to note, however, that most common conceptions of critical thinking are not focused exclusively or even primarily on the analysis and evaluation of individual arguments; take for example Siegel’s “being appropriately moved by reasons” (1988), Ennis’s “reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (1987), or Lipman’s “*thinking that (1) facilitates judgment because it (2) relies on criteria, (3) is self-correcting, and (4) is sensitive to context*” (2003). All these conceptions have as their core idea that critical thinking involves making reasoned judgments in a variety of contexts and all have a potentially much broader application than the evaluation of individual arguments.

I see two main questions, then, regarding the efficacy and adequacy of argument analysis: 1) is it adequate to the task of fostering critical thinking in the context of argumentation? and, 2) are there other appropriate objects of critical thinking besides individual, usually written arguments?

With respect to argumentation, I would argue (and have argued elsewhere -- Bailin & Battersby, 2009, 2016a) that the analysis of individual, decontextualized arguments, although it can help us to eliminate problematic arguments, cannot get us to the goal of making reasoned judgments. This task is a dialectical one, involving a comparative evaluation of a variety of contending positions and arguments using epistemological norms and a consideration of context. There are, in fact, approaches to critical thinking instruction that take an explicitly dialectical approach (cf. her reference to *dissoi logoi*) (Bailin & Battersby, 2016a).

I would also agree that there is a case to be made for broadening the scope of critical thinking instruction. There are, as Ismail argues, many phenomena in need of critical scrutiny and contexts where the making of reasoned judgments is vitally important. The need for a broader focus has, in fact, been recognized in some theorizing about and educational approaches to critical thinking. Ennis's detailed list of critical thinking abilities does, in fact, include many abilities beyond those directly related to analysing individual arguments, for example evaluating sources, judging observation reports, drawing generalizations and causal explanations from data, making and judging value judgments (Ennis, 2011). Theorists are also giving attention to the context of argumentation (cf. her reference *kairos*) (Battersby & Bailin, 2011), to visual argumentation (Dove, 2016, Groarke, 1996), and to in-person argumentation (Stevens 2016, 2019; van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2007), including how to respond to fallacies (Bailin and Battersby 2016a). And there are pedagogical approaches, particularly at the K – 12 level, which focus on making judgments based in criteria across a range of areas and subject matters and with respect to a diversity of phenomena, including works of literature, tasks of construction and creation, and practical and moral decisions (Case & Daniels, 2016).

The importance of the affective dimension of critical thinking and the centrality of a commitment to reasoned judgment and its concomitant virtues have been widely recognized by critical thinking theorists (Ennis, 1996, 2011; Siegel, 1988, 1999). Nonetheless, I do agree with Ismael that most traditional approaches to teaching critical thinking do very little to promote them.

One exception is the community of inquiry approach (Bailin & Battersby, 2016b; Dewey, 1938; Lipman, 2003). Critical thinking virtues are fostered through the creation of a community which instantiates the norms of critical inquiry and in which students deliberate and exchange ideas in a group context. There is, in fact, considerable research supporting the value of group deliberation for developing critical thinking (e.g., Mercier 2017, Mercier et al., 2017).

4. Rhetorical Pedagogy

One question I have, then, is whether any of these types of approaches address the concerns that Ismail raises. Would any of them fall under her notion of rhetorical pedagogy? And what can rhetorical pedagogy add that is not included in these approaches? Responding to these questions requires a clarification of how she understands rhetoric, rhetorical pedagogy, and the relationship between rhetorical pedagogy and critical thinking. She cites numerous theorists offering differing, and sometimes conflicting, views, but it is not clear what exactly her own conception is nor is it clear the nature of the pedagogical alternative she is proposing.

She does say that rhetoric can be an effective tool for critical literacy, helping us to understand how human communication functions and how different positions are rhetorically situated, and aiding us in defending against manipulation and in using communication responsibly. What is not clear, however, is what she believes the relationship is between

rhetorical pedagogy and critical thinking. Numerous different possibilities are suggested in the paper. Are they distinctive practices which have overlapping themes and purposes, both aiming to foster rational decision-making? Are they intertwined and jointly reinforcing, rhetorical skill aiding in the development of critical thinking and critical thinking enhancing rhetorical skill? Is rhetoric intended to add to the tool-kit of critical thinking? Is there no difference between them, critical thinking being basically just rhetorical pedagogy?

Moreover, what is she suggesting in the name of rhetorical pedagogy? Should courses in rhetoric replace courses in critical thinking? Should critical thinking be taught through a rhetorical pedagogy? Should rhetoric be included in the teaching of critical thinking? Should critical thinking courses still focus on argument analysis but with a rhetorical dimension included? Should courses in critical thinking change to focus less on argument analysis and be restructured to address her concerns? The fact that she recommends “an instructional approach to educating for critical thinking which includes a consideration of context and encourages social and emotional competencies” suggests that she holds the last of these positions. And I would argue that this is precisely what some of the approaches to critical thinking cited previously are designed to accomplish, although generally they do not explicitly invoke rhetoric as an inspiration or justification.

What, then, might a pedagogy that explicitly calls on rhetoric add? I suggest that it might involve more of a focus on the communicative aspects of discourse and argumentation. More attention would be paid to the medium and manner of expression, to the intended audiences as well as to the communicator, and to the background assumptions underlying rhetorical choices. It would also attend to the contexts of communication, including the social and political dimensions related to media and to our communication institutions. Some current critical thinking approaches do incorporate explicit rhetorical elements, for example Ennis’ advocating employing appropriate rhetorical strategies in discussions and presentations (2011); Bailin and Battersby’s focus on making a case (2016a) and also on identifying the persuasive power of fallacies (2015), Groarke and Tindale’s focus on the principles of communication (2012). Nonetheless, they tend not to be a major focus of most approaches.

What needs to be strongly maintained and emphasized in this relationship, however, is the focus of critical thinking on epistemic criteria of evaluation and the making of reasoned judgments. To the extent that rhetorical methods can contribute to or add to this project, they should be welcomed.

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