

## Critical Thinking and Its Discontents

By Tavish McDonell

They told me students need to take four English classes to graduate. The first three were easy to grasp: intro, genres, themes. Then there was this *other* class, the one with the acronym like a high-tech tennis racquet. It rhymed with sexy yet seemed anything but: rhetoric, composition, critical this, critical that. These must have been leftovers from real courses, repackaged and warmed over for busy students on their way onwards and upwards. I didn't see the point of this course. I never requested it. I kept on teaching sonnets and the magic of Ibsen.

But hey, I was a newbie! Untenured! Low man on the pole! I had to take the courses I was assigned. And before long I saw those three letters on next term's schedule: B, X and E. I asked colleagues what I should do but none of them had even heard what those letters were supposed to stand for. One thing I knew I wanted to have was a course about less-boring things than literature: movies, yes, but even they can get pretty blah blah blah, especially the talky ones they make you watch in school, so I also wanted ads, products, memes, superheroes, mash-ups, internet clips. You know, relatable stuff. This class was going to be far out. I was going to be that hip teacher, opening students' eyes to the gender stereotyping in shampoo commercials.

I couldn't call this new course "Intro to Pop Culture" because, 1) Dawson students need no introduction to pop culture, and 2) I was over 30 and no longer knew which "rappers" topped the charts. My Shorter Oxford, old trusty, was leaving me in the lurch more and more. Then it hit me: language had broken free

of those stuffy old dorks! Starting with “crib” and “foshizzle,” I switched to looking up everything on urbandictionary.com. And I searched for the name of the union of pop culture and critical thinking. Did it really need to be as awkward as “Pop Culture Approached with Critical Thought”? How about “Pop Goes Critical Thinking”? “A Critical Critique of the Post-modern Potpourri”? Why was I scaring away customers before I even opened the store?

And that got me to wonder: What is critical thinking, really? Teachers demand it, students can’t stand it...but what *is* it, you know? Can it be measured and graded for? Like, what’s the metric? For today’s savvy student on the move, is it still as relatable as it was back in the day? Can you explain it to them in a way that helps them write better? Or is asking for more critical thinking like asking for more “flow”...and they nod their heads and go on writing as they always have?

To settle the debate, I turned to my new, up-to-the-minute resource, urbandictionary.com, which defines critical thinking as:

To be able to think outside of the box. To understand both sides of the arguement fully iregardless of which side your arguing from, to give you a full perspective of the whole dispute hence enabling inteligent thinking.

alternate meaning:

The WORST and most POINTLESS subject it could ever be your misfortune to be forced to take as a

qualification at college. Teaches you how to be an argumentative, big-headed fool in life. (and possibly debates)

Well foshizzle. Then again, in *Engaging Ideas*, Michael C. Bean talks about a famous study on critical thinking, bulleting criteria having to do with formulating and approaching problems, assessing sources and readiness to enter alternative systems of thought. All good in the 'hood, Mr. Bean. But it bothers me that these standards, like on UrbanDictionary, really come down to loosey-goosey adjectives: “vital,” “clear,” “precise,” “effective,” “well-reasoned,” “complex” (20). I want something more solid, something I can diagram for a 101 class. The problem is not with Bean’s definition, just that the definition depends on meta-knowledge we use to assess writing—meta-knowledge based mainly on experience and so not teachable in fifteen weeks. But if critical thinking isn’t something that can be taught directly, why bring it up in the classroom? Is there finally a non-contingent, no-nonsense test for critical thinking we can teach our students?

Good question! Well, what do *you* think...? In doing English and probably other subjects I know nothing about, we are in the exasperating realm of soft skills where a question about language begets more language, only with more syllables. The teacher is a broker in words, trading back and forth between the oral and the written, the ivory tower and the black market. He is the living link between the dead author and the half-awake student. Understandably, these endless reformulations across registers and paradigms can seem arbitrary and frustrating for the student taking six other classes who just wants the one right answer. After all, he sees human language as little different from a programming

language: an undifferentiated means of transmitting information, and the more directly, the more efficiently, the better. And between him and the chalk board we put this self-conscious yakker prattling on and on about themes and connotations and what the author *really* means. Well if he meant that, why didn't he just *say* it?

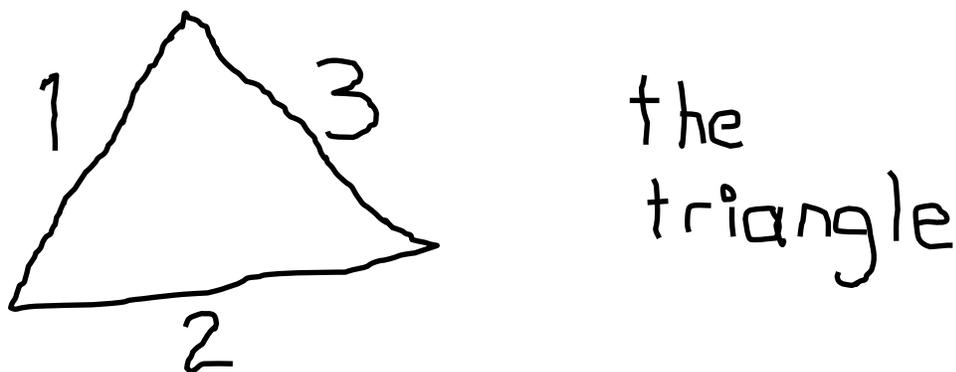
But in fact these circles of language exchange are a chance for the student to learn critical thinking. At a basic level, the teacher is modelling how language (and writing is just the most privileged form of language) gives us tools for thought, and how those tools can be used. It is just like a conversation: a trust-based non-zero-sum game which everyone can win or everyone can lose. This is what's at stake in the non-curved classroom and the source of the teacher's self-consciousness. Even armed with rubrics and scaffolds and online forums, a teacher can't really quantify clarity or complexity of thought, but he can always come up with another way of telling a student that he perceives a problem in one of these areas. And when one explanation clicks, others can click too. The student responds. His skills can improve to the extent that he engages in this game of language exchange.

Or, in Sparknotes-ese, don't worry about defining flashing-neon-sign CRITICAL THINKING for your students, just let them know whether they're doing it or not.

So getting back to our story, it seemed to me that critical thinking was very real and that I could recognize and grade for it, but how to communicate these standards? I decided that even though I'd be telling students critical thinking was a major goal in BXE, it would have to be more of a side-effect. If life is what

happens when you're busy designing courses and grading papers, then maybe critical thinking could be what happens when students are busy solving problems.

However, issue: How can students from different programs tackle the same problems in a program-specific BXE course, now rebranded as Methods of Cultural Analysis? The first half of the course is a survey of five or six "methods of cultural analysis," i.e. flaky cultural-studies-ish approaches, things like capitalism and consumer culture, gender representation, intellectual property and the rhetoric of the image. In the second half of the course, we go through the scaffolded stages of a major project where students choose one "method" and apply it. To make critical thinking an integral part of the course in a way that students from different programs could engage in, I hit on the idea of the triangle (a three-sided polygon well-known to geometers):

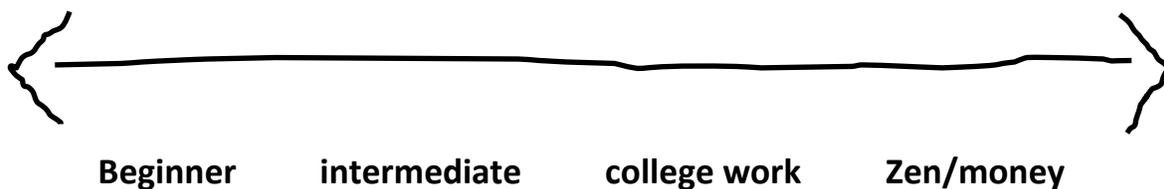


Side 1: program-specific: students must make use of knowledge gained in their program of study or knowledge about the career their program prepares them for.

Side 2: Use of one or more of the “methods of cultural analysis” that we’ve studied, applied to the new context of the student’s project. Students must demonstrate knowledge of and cite at least one core reading.

Side 3: Original research. Students must find their own sources, and there must be diversity in the sources used (scholarly articles, journalism, movies, music, legal cases involving intellectual property, etc.). The sources chosen must relate to the student’s program and the course material.

A successful project has all three sides and the sides, like those of a triangle, must all fit together. And this fitting together is the critical thinking. This requirement can be quite a challenge for students. Just like a triangle’s angles need to add up to approximately 180 degrees, students have to bring their sides of the triangle together within the logic of an argumentative essay. To do so, they must have progressed to the college work stage of **the critical thinking spectrum**.



the spectrum

Beginner level (child): I'm right, everybody else is wrong! I know I'm right, just need to explain why to everybody else and they'll agree. People who disagree with me are just miserable assholes who don't like me. My job is to tell them they're wrong and to get them to adopt my view or shut up.

Intermediate level (high-minded teenager): This stage is a coping strategy for two changes the learner begins to perceive: 1) there are even more differences in opinion among informed people than I thought...how can I make sense of all this disagreement? 2) The rhetorical strategies (shouting down, ad hominem) of the child stage aren't effective...I'm getting called out for being rude and intolerant. What's the solution? Simple: Everybody's right because everyone is entitled to his—or *her!*—opinion! Diversity and tolerance are core values of our society, thus it's very important to be tolerant and polite, accepting other people's ideas because not everyone sees things the way I do. It's rude to call bullshit on someone. Everything's relative anyway: it's all about how you look at it. People who disagree with me are just taking a different perspective: it's all good, dude! My job is to remember the correct information the teacher gives me in class and give it back to him on exams and essays. If there's time, maybe I'll give my opinion too, if that's OK with the teacher (better ask if that's allowed in this class). Doesn't really matter what my opinion is because all opinions are equivalent.

In my incredible teaching, I draw students' attention to problems with the intermediate/teenager approach:

- Doesn't give us a way to evaluate new ideas or make progress towards possible solutions
- Lowers the stakes: readers of work generated within this paradigm will always be asking: So what? Why does this matter? Why doesn't the writer care about the issue in question?
- At best, this is the lazy way out: don't need to think critically because in this air-conditioned nightmare all ideas are equal (equally pointless). In fact students may be confusing critical ideas with preferences.
- At worst, excuse for cynicism: English class is just the art of bullshitting anyway; I'm only here because this is a required class and I need this grade to graduate/get into Concordia/stay on the team/continue to live rent-free. These poems aren't even relatable. Nobody cares what I think anyway, so why go to the trouble of developing a critical perspective, whatever that means?

Critical thinking (college-level work): Need to show awareness of problems/issues that matter and articulate them. There are opportunities for multiple interpretations, but since I have a stake in the outcome of the clash of ideas, I'll do all I can to find the best interpretation possible and defend it. Need to read intensively and with an open mind. In short, what we talk about when we talk about thesis. This is what Bean is defining in his criteria.

The college experience oughtta be largely about students moving from the middle to the right side of the spectrum. The next problem is that once students accept that some opinions are better than others (or drive better body essays than others, or can get better *grades* than others), they refocus on finding the “right” opinions (typically the teacher’s) and reproducing them mechanically in their essays. This becomes frustrating for both sides: for the student who wants to please the teacher by showing that he paid attention and knows what the “right” opinions are, and gets a mediocre grade for not showing enough independent thinking. Psychologically, the student can experience this dynamic as a double-bind dilemma in communication: marked down for not knowing the right answers, or marked down for merely knowing the right answers and not finding others (which probably would have been marked down as wrong answers anyway).

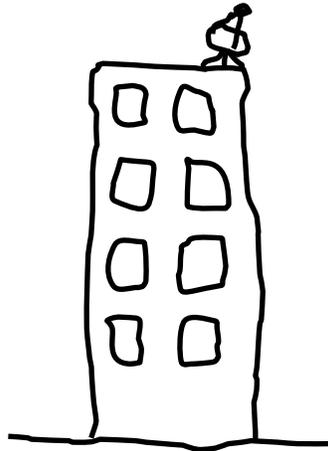
The dynamic is similarly frustrating for the hip teacher who urges students to think independently. Some learners won’t even try, and for the ones who do, their own ideas are often absurdly reductive or just indefensible, based on misreadings as they skimp on the stages of the writing process or, more and more, just lack basic reading comprehension skills. The teacher takes a deep breath and a step back from critical thinking to translate what the author “is saying” in terms students can understand. So like, why didn’t he just say *that*?

Scaffolding assignments can help here: students hand in outlines or drafts that give teachers a chance to tell them that they need to think more about their ideas before handing in a major paper.

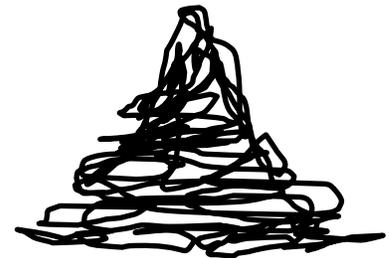
As a way out of this impasse, lotsa students get seduced by the siren song of what Bean calls “cognitively immature essay structures” (24-27).



“And then”



“All about”



“Data dump”

## immature structures

“‘And Then’ writing or chronological structure,” such as a summary or a “process essay” outlining the temporal development of the writer’s thinking (like this essay). Instead of building an argument, the writer structures the essay according to the chronology of the text in question or of his own thought process in considering the text.

“‘All About’ Writing or Encyclopedic Order,” such as a wiki, organized into simple topics and telling the reader “a little bit of everything” without advancing an argument. I regularly see in my BXE’s that a student possessed by “all about” demons will pad out such an essay with much too much of the historical

background for the issue to be discussed, found in another “all about” source such as Wikipedia, from Ancient Mesopotamia and so on through the ages, devoting barely any time to real discussion of the contemporary issue before the repetitive conclusion.

I’d add to Bean’s discussion that this type of structure can appeal to otherwise strong and attentive students who listen closely to their teacher’s presentations, which often feature “all about” organization as we provide the basic context needed to approach a text or issue. Then students go wrong by thinking that their task is to write as the expert spoke—which leads to a lot of “you need to focus more!” and “where’s the thesis, chump?” red-penned onto “all about” essays. Probably teachers could be clearer to students that the infotainment formerly known as lecturing is not intended to structure written responses.

In my amazing teaching, above and beyond my “all about” shticks, I also share with students writing I’ve done that applies critical thinking in a more focussed way. When I do this, I like to draw students’ attention to two things: 1) the fact that I move back and forth freely through the chronology of the text I’m writing about, and 2) a section where my close reading of a passage is longer than the passage being read. These are both examples that the critical writer, like Marty McFly, has the power to go anywhere in the chronology and to stay there for as long as he likes. I also include in my manuals, with their permission, essays by former students which can stand, in the court of critical thinking, as model citizens or scared straight spokesmen.

Finally, Bean gives us the infamous “Data dump writing, or Random Organization,” which “has no discernable structure. It reveals a student

overwhelmed with information and uncertain what to do with it.” The student abandons authorship and remixes sources without plan or rhetorical purpose. This structure differs from “all about” in that information is not even grouped into convenient topics. Taking a data dump has also been called “patchwriting” or “cut-and-paste,” with all the p-word panic that entails.

Bean’s discussion of immature essay structures—*oh why don’t you just grow up?*—is valuable for teachers and students alike. This is not just meta-knowledge for graders. Having employed them, students quickly recognize these inferior structures and come to realize that there’s a higher standard to reach for with critical thinking. In my BXE Methods of Cultural Analysis course, I draw students’ attention to these issues.

I also include a colloquium stage where students present their work-in-progress informally to a small group of other students. Where individual full-class presentations take too long and can prove intimidating, all students can present at a colloquium within three class meetings, without the pressure of a plenary session. The requirement to present ideas verbally and informally helps the development of students’ critical thinking, as they learn to eschew obfuscation and the useless definitions they often include for the reader they have trouble conceptualizing and respecting. After the colloquium, I urge students to write more in the way they spoke, using the first person and with natural language, if you know what I mean.

In conclusion, when it comes to critical thinking, we can only square the circle by guiding students along the spectrum and around the structures as they make their way to the triangle. Praxis has shown some helpful ideas with course planning and assignment design: Scaffolding, discussion of the teacher’s and past

students' written work, giving students the chance to express ideas verbally to their peers and foregrounding the cognitive stages of learning and ineffective writing models.

But at its heart, critical thinking is based on a renunciation of instinct: its inherent problems can never be resolved, only contained, minimized and substituted for. The more you progress in critical thinking, the more problems you take into account, and the harder it becomes, until you break out in a cold sweat, paralyzed and helpless, with no excuses left to put off your dissertation. Thus spending class time on activities highlighting critical thinking won't in itself improve student writing.

Critical thinking is in the eye of the critic. It is a profoundly annoying thing to be goaded into by anyone who tells you he knows more about it than you do. I get it why students would want to see if they can get by without it, and once they get off the dissertation-bound bus, they probably can. Only those students who have committed themselves and engaged with me one-on-one either in editing workshops, writing labs or office hours have gained anything from the concept. I'm sure they all would have rather been doing something else. But they renounced their instincts and trusted me enough to try. For those intermittent reminders that teaching can be sublime, I am grateful to them.