What is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking is frequently marketed as one of the most desirable outcomes of education. However, despite its exalted status within educational discourse, and notwithstanding the fact that it is a central tenet to the subject, most educationalists still struggle with the question of (i) what it is, and (ii) what desirable outcomes for students education should aim to achieve.

This is what we mean by the principle of spirality. In other words, if I say believing there are fairies at the end of my garden, a critical thinker ought to seek out and forensically question the reasons for my belief. If my reasons are not strong enough to support this case, a lot of evidence, a critical thinker will conclude that my belief is mistaken.

There are two distinct steps in the critical thinking process. First, a critical thinker must be able to detect and carefully sift through the reasons someone employs to justify their beliefs or actions.

Secondly, a critical thinker must skillfully subject these reasons to a rigorous test of their validity. This is what we mean by the principle of spirality. In other words, if I say believing there are fairies at the end of my garden, a critical thinker ought to seek out and forensically question the reasons for my belief. If my reasons are not strong enough to support this case, a lot of evidence, a critical thinker will conclude that my belief is mistaken.

The simplest definition of critical thinking therefore can be characterized as, "the ability to reason in a logical and systematic manner to determine whether an advice or solution is valid or not."

A critical thinker is like an engineer who works hard to determine whether a bridge can hold the weight of a car. Imagine the car is what a person believes or does, and the bridge is the reasons on which they base their judgment. The task of the critical thinker is to determine whether the bridge (reasons) are strong enough to stop the car in case of danger. If the bridge of reasons is not strong enough, the bridge will collapse and the car will fall into the sea below. This is how a critical thinker approaches the world. As educators, this is a fundamental skill that we desperately need to cultivate, nurture, and develop in our students, right across the educational spectrum.

1. The University of Oxford's department of education has a free online course introducing people to critical thinking. It can be accessed via www.astrobilistic.co.uk/uk/critical/reasoning/
2. Some tricky logic games guaranteed to get you thinking http://www.expredymin.com/ logic/playlogic logic problems.sh/ games
3. Some educational thought experiments designed to test your critical thinking skills via www.philosophyincontext.com/exercises.php
4. List of several informative short animations on an introduction to philosophy via www.opencultural.com

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