

Introduction to Critical Thinking

What is Critical Thinking?

This introduction gives you the opportunity to learn more about critical thinking and the skills you will acquire as you use this series. Introducing you to the meaning of critical thinking and how you can develop the necessary skills to read and research effectively towards a critical approach to learning and analysis.

It is a necessary and wholly beneficial position to be starting with questions and finishing your journey with more questions.

Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers

(François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire))

If you are already a professional within the early year's sector, maybe as a teacher in a reception class, or maybe as an early year's educator in a private day-care setting, you will no doubt have faced many challenging debates, discussions at training events and your own personal questioning of the policies faced by the sector as a whole. We want you to ask these questions. More importantly we believe it an essential and crucial part of your professional development. You will no doubt be required to implement the policies that might at first seem so detached from your day to day teaching and practice. It is critical that you question these policies, that you understand their purpose, and moreover that you understand how they have come to being.

Often students are faced with complex definitions of critical thinking that require them to deconstruct the concept before they fully understand just how to 'do' the critical thinking in the first place. For example,

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.

(Scriven & Paul 1989)

Rather than confusing you with expressive academic definitions, it is our hope that as you read further and begin to understand this topic more, you will be encouraged to ask contemplative questions. Alison King emphasises the importance of students acquiring and cultivating ‘a habit of inquiry’ (1995:13) to enable them to ‘learn to ask thoughtful questions’ (King 1995). Contrary to the standard methods of ‘instruction’ that leaves the student as a passive recipient of information, King argues that where a student has developed the skills of critical thinking they become an ‘autonomous’ learners:

Such a habit of inquiry learned and practiced in class can be applied also to their everyday lives: to what they see on television, read in the newspaper observe in popular culture and hear during interaction with friends and colleagues, as well as to decisions they make about personal relationships, consumer purchases, political choices, and business transactions.

(King 1995:13)

Consider the subject matter that you are now researching; you may have been tasked with the question ‘How has policy changed over the past 25 years?’ This is what King would suggest is a ‘factual’ question, one that may well have a limited answer. Once you have this answer, there is a tendency to stop there, making the inquiry fact based rather than critical. If you were to follow this first question up with a critical question, King would argue that you are beginning to ‘introduce high level cognitive processes such as analysis of ideas, comparison and contrast, inference, prediction [and] evaluation’ (1995:140).

Example:

Factual Question	Critical Question
How has policy changed over the past 25 years?	What has been the impact of policy change over the past 25 years?
Which policies have been introduced to support childcare and early education initiatives recently?	How has childcare and early education been influenced by recent policy?

Critical thinking has been described by Diane Halpern (1996) as

Thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed—the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions when the thinker is using skills that are thoughtful and effective.

(Halpern 1996)

The emphasis is on ‘thinking’ which alludes to the student pausing and considering not only the topic or subject in hand, but the questions generated from taking an opportunity to ask those critical rather than factual questions.

To think critically signifies the ability to use ‘a higher order skill’ that enables professionals to act in a rational and reasonable manner, using empathy and understanding of others in a

specific context, such as an Early Years setting. The rights and needs of others are always the priority, rather than blindly following established procedures.

A critical thinker can:

- *raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely; gather and assess relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively*
- *reaches well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;*
- *thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences;*
- *Communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.*

(Taken from Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2008))

Alec Fisher (2001) examines the description given by John Dewey of what he termed ‘reflective thinking’ as ‘active, persistent and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and further conclusions to which it tends.’ (Fisher 2001). Rather than rushing to discover what you believe to be ‘the answer’, consider disentangling the question and the ‘right answer’ before stating your conclusion. Could there be more to find by turning your factual question into a critical question?

Below there is an example of a student who is discussing their recent visit to another early years setting. The first question that is asked is what King (1995) describes as a factual question, and you can see where we have highlighted exactly where the facts are in the answer. The second question is a critical question (King 1995), and again we have highlighted in the answer where the critical elements are.

Question (Factual)

What did you see in the new setting that is different to your setting?

The equipment that was out didn't seem a lot [FCT], in my setting we have everything out [FCT] so the children can access it all, you know like continuous provision. In the other setting they had bare shelves [FC] and they told me that new equipment was only brought out when the children had mastered those already out [FCT]. They didn't seem to be bothered about the EYFS either, like nothing in the planning was linked to the EYFS [FCT].

(Early childhood studies student, 2013)

Question (Critical)

Consider the two different approaches, your setting and the one that you visited what impact do you think they have on the children's learning and developing?

I suppose I can see that when we put so much toys and materials out, that there are always children who get things out but don't have a clue how to use it. I guess it would be better if there was less and that the things they did get out were right for the developmental level of each child [CRIT]. I suppose is how we interpret continuous provision [CRIT]. I think as well that the other setting were using the EYFS to measure the development and learning of each child [CRIT], but they knew framework and

the children well enough not to have to write it all down all the time [CRIT]. They spend most of their time with the children where as we spend a lot of time sitting writing.

(Early childhood studies student, 2013)

Another example of how you can become a critical thinker might be in asking yourself critical questions as you read and research a topic.

Thought provoking or critical questions require students to go beyond the facts to think about them in ways that are different from what is presented explicitly in class or in the text.

(King, 1995, p 14)

Stella Cottrell (2005) suggests that one must know what we think about a subject and then be able to justify why we think in a certain way *'having reasons for what we believe...critically evaluation our own beliefs...[and be] able to present to others the reasons for our beliefs and actions'* (Cottrell, 2005, p 3).

Five Questions towards Critical Thinking

1. Do I understand what I am reading?
2. Can I explain what I have read (factually)? For example, what is this author telling me about this subject
3. What do I think? For example, what is my standpoint, what do I believe is right?
4. Why do I think that way (critically)? For example, I think that way because I have seen this concept work in practice.
5. Can I justify to another person my way of thinking?

All that we ask is that you take the time to stop, and consider for a short time, that which you are reading

What a sad comment on modern educational systems that most learners neither value nor practise active, critical reflection. They are too busy studying to stop and think.

(Hammond and Collins, 1991, p 163)

We encourage you to take time to ask yourself, your peers and your tutors inquisitive and exploratory questions about the topic explored herein, and to stop for a while to move on from the surface level factual questioning for which you will no doubt only find factual answers, and to ponder the wider concepts, the implications to practice and to ask the searching questions to which you may not find such a concrete answer.

For as Van Gelder so eloquently suggests, learning about it is no as useful as doing it:

For students to improve, they must engage in critical thinking itself. It is not enough to learn about critical thinking. These strategies are about as effective as working on your tennis game by watching Wimbledon. Unless the students are actively doing the thinking themselves, they will never improve.

(Van Gelder, 2005, p. 43)