

The Disciple as **Critical** Thinker

By | Chris Folmsbee

I want young people to be better thinkers.

I want them to use their minds to form and connect ideas, discover opinions and beliefs, and arrive at conclusions before making important decisions. To do that, we need a framework for understanding and developing critical thinking skills in young people.

Critical thinking is reflective and reasonable thinking focused on what to believe or do (Robert Ennis, *Critical Thinking*, Prentice Hall, 1995). It's the process of determining the authenticity, accuracy, and worth of information or knowledge claims (Barry Beyer, *Improving Student Thinking*, Allyn & Bacon, 1997).

Our students don't become critical thinkers just by chance. We can help them reflect and reason so they can develop the ability to arrive at well thought-out convictions and conclusions.

Processes

First, we can help them understand that there are many different thinking processes, and that students arrive at their convictions through any number of them.

The following is partial list:

- * Wondering—to speculate or be curious
- * Grasping—to take hold of firmly and wrestle with
- * Adapting—to change a former thought
- * Shaping—to mold one thought into a deeper thought
- * Theorizing—to conclude based on speculation
- * Calculating—to make alert assessments before concluding
- * Condensing—to bond together various thoughts
- * Abstracting—to extract or separate various thoughts
- * Inventing—to develop a brand-new thought
- * Uncovering—to discover a new thought through an old one
- * Generalizing—to conclude based on a broad array of thoughts

Some students may utilize several of these thinking processes, while others may limit themselves to just one or two types. Regardless of how many they use, it's our responsibility—along with the other influencers in their lives—to help students harness them in the most effective ways so that they can best reach the convictions that will shape the way they live.

Environment

Second, we can help them understand the importance of the atmosphere we create as students discover, reflect, reason, authenticate, etc. The environments best suited for critical thinking are ones in which we make use of experiential learning, service learning, scenario-based learning, peer-based learning, along with the more traditional methods. As you determine the best learning method to use in your teaching, programming, worship leading, mentoring, etc., don't get lost or caught up in (or rigid about) the method itself. Instead keep focusing on the most effective way to get your students to develop their convictions.

Openness

Third, we can create a spirit of openness. It doesn't matter how well you understand thinking processes or methods of learning if you don't actually let them happen in your ministries. Too many faith communities dictate patterns of thinking and learning. I understand why: Those responsible want to help shape the "right" convictions within students.

I contend, however, that your convictions will always be yours—but only yours. Your students won't live out your convictions, no matter how hard you try—they'll eventually arrive at their own convictions one way or another. So isn't a more helpful question, "How can I help my students critically think their way toward conviction?" as opposed to, "How can I help my students critically think their way toward my convictions?"

If you want students to develop convictions that lead to lives deeply connected to the ways of God, then you must design your learning (and all other) environments with a spirit of openness. An environment characterized by openness is one that's:

Personal. You must be involved in the lives of students, and they must be in yours—and that can be hard. Sometimes frustrating. Messy. At times heartbreaking. But it's critical. If you want to be a resource for your students, they must know you're accessible, welcoming, involved, and concerned.

Challenging. You must provide chances for young people to think critically. Don't feed them the answers; feed them the questions and let them use their thinking processes of choice to arrive at answers with conviction. Afraid they won't be the "right" answers? If so, you may have issues with trust.

Trusting. I don't mean trusting others or even the students necessarily, but trusting God. If you're teaching and living as a follower of Jesus—and if you're allowing the Holy Spirit to guide you and the direction of your faith community—then entrust the lives (and thinking and convictions) of your students to God as well.

Humble. You can't have all of the answers, and there can't always be only one right answer. An open environment practices humility and mutual respect.

Non-judgmental. Get rid of unhealthy criticism, disapproval, and negativity; rather foster an open environment that's accommodating and full of tolerance.



As we teach critical thinking skills to young people, we're giving them tools to help them be salt and light in the world rather than just being an indistinguishable part of it. This is how students learn to follow Jesus with all of their hearts, minds, souls, and strength.



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