

4-15-2013

CTips, Issue 3: Critical thinking in the liberal education history course

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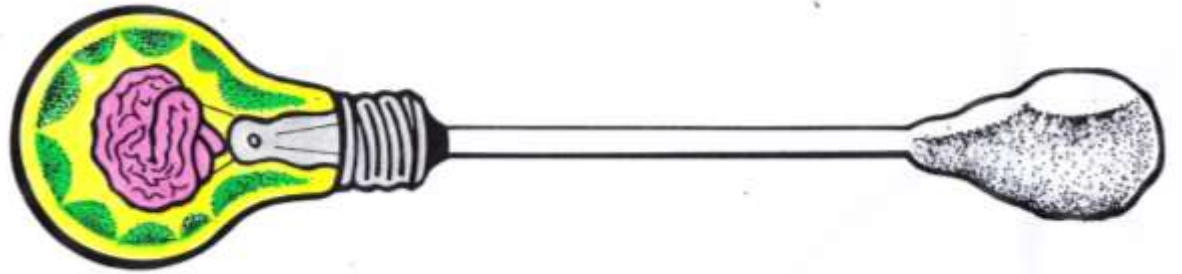
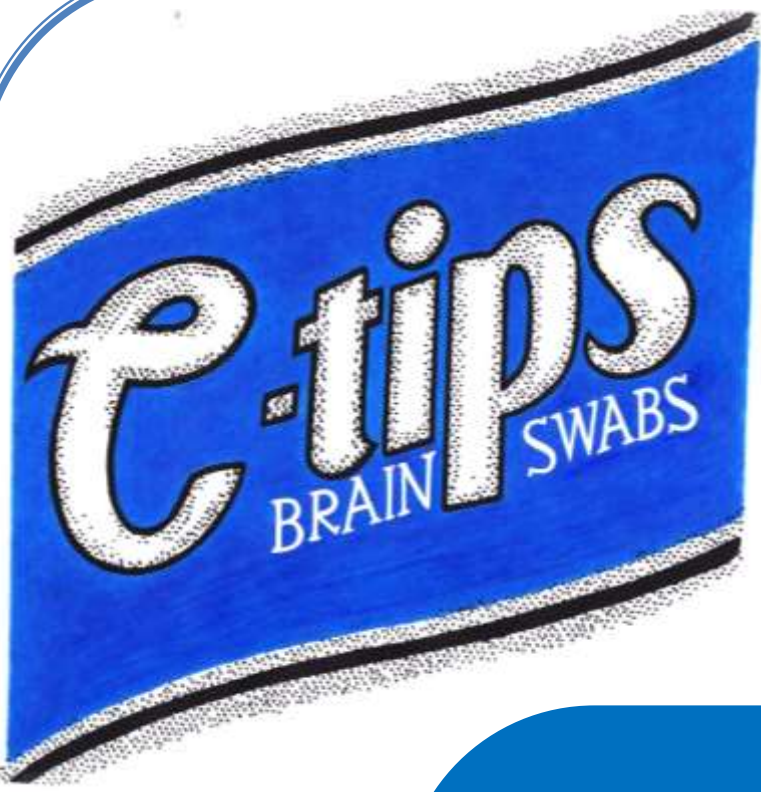
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Recommended Citation

Hartz, Carolyn G., "CTips, Issue 3: Critical thinking in the liberal education history course" (2013). *CTips: Newsletter on Critical Thinking*. Paper 3.

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In this issue of CTips, we present ways some of our colleagues have incorporated critical thinking into courses in their respective disciplines. Although history and English are very different in content and purpose, we see that both require analysis and evaluation of evidence, assumptions, hypotheses and interpretations. Good reasoning is essential whether we're engaged in empirical research or developing imaginative intelligence.

Issue #3,
Spring 2013

CTips is an e-newsletter, produced by the St. Cloud State University Philosophy Department, focused on sharing resources, ideas, and methods for integrating critical thinking into all courses.

This issue was developed by Carolyn Hartz and Paul Neiman.

Critical thinking in the liberal education history course Jeff Mullins

Early in my career, I discovered, as so many of us do, that many introductory-level students do not substantially improve their writing either by being told what to do or through peer review. I therefore redesigned my introductory courses with the express purpose of getting students to regularly practice executing the precise skills of argument that are most crucial to their future university work. Each week, students were required to write not essays but argument outlines. Each chapter of the history textbook supplied a set research question demanding engagement with the material. Students created an outline that stated the question, provided a thesis statement asserting an answer to that question, and then listed five or more pieces of evidence from the materials in the chapter. For each piece of evidence the outline would have to contain a short paragraph explaining how the evidence connected to and supported the thesis point. This new course design had several advantages: making thinking compulsory; giving the students an understanding of how to choose and support what would be most important in their own arguments—and recognize that prioritizing in accounts of history; engaging the students directly with the materials of history in an argumentative way, so that history would no longer be understood as a static collection of facts. Additionally, it avoided the phenomenon of “I wrote ten pages on the Civil War—I must have an argument in there somewhere.” By having only the core steps of creating an argument (and nothing more), it became nearly impossible for students to fail to see when they had (or did not have) the requisite elements of making a case for their position.

Critical thinking and the literary imagination Judy Dorn

One thing that amazes me as I teach first-year writing (English 191) is that about half the students have a lot of trouble just setting criteria for how they evaluate or define something. That is, if you are going to label something, can you list the criteria you use so you aren't just name-calling? Can you explain how something fits or doesn't fit the criteria for that label?

Thinking back, I realize how well high school literature prepared me for critical thinking. For example, we all had to write the essay “Is there a tragic hero in *Julius Caesar*? By what criteria do we recognize a tragic hero?” Here are some additional ways literature courses teach critical thinking:

- English courses generally make students aware of how words shape what we know of the world; students learn to feel empowered to work with words, but also to see through problems, such as conflicts between people, that come from people attributing different meanings to terms or just confusing meanings.
- Stories demand from us highly integrated practices of critical thinking by providing us with analytic models. Engagement with literature “virtually” requires that we imagine the points of view of others and integrate them as at least examples in the repertoire of our mind's experiences. Readers contain multitudes of characters in their minds, in an inner dialogue. If you internalize these perspectives, you also develop at least the beginnings of empathy.
- Readers of stories do the critical thinking task of unearthing the sources of problems: the motives, assumptions, and values that underlie a character's perspective, and how those lead to “real” consequences for characters. Literature therefore provokes complex cause and effect analysis by describing a host of indirect as well as direct causes, and so demonstrates how careful one must be in placing responsibility and blame when shown or given hints about (in the story) all the forces at play in an event.
- To offer an interpretation of literature gets students used to testing validity in a complex way. After learning how to make connections across a long text, which class discussion encourages them to hold in their memories, and to assemble a hypothesis, students start to recognize and become comfortable with the difficulty of insisting on a generalization about human experience. They must come to the maturity of accepting that ambiguities and unknowns remain—as do competing theories put forward by their classmates. In fact, multiple hypotheses may fit. One risk for novice social science students is that, encouraged by our culture of polling, they may put faith in the language of reductively simple experiments and survey instruments, and in the results from the handful of people who agree to participate.
- Interpreting constructs if...then reasoning, but typically generates multiple “then” results—and multiple concepts can be plugged into the if--then format: “If the drowned man is a symbol and represents poetry (or represents a scapegoat, or the past), then what do his qualities say about poetry, scapegoats, or the past”?
- One crucial approach to literature is to notice where a text does not give any information, leaving a gap. One obvious example: what happens after the story ends? Discussing how we project interpretations into those gaps creates self-awareness about our own storylines that we assume represent how the world works, and about the stereotypes we think with and project on to the gaps.

(Notice that everything I have listed so far also fits with interpreting poetry, since we see in the cryptic gaps of poems not only unstated ideas but we also try to read poems as whole stories.)

As literature students are faced with analyzing the pieces of evidence on which interpretations have been based, they should eventually move past the easy “everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion” to have respect for how vast and uncontrollable is the amount of evidence in a novel or any other book. This should ideally teach both skepticism about interpretation and respect for the interpretations that really fit or which make effective contributions to human thought. At the very least, perhaps they will begin to see how much more there is to know, and that more lies beyond their own first ideas, perhaps even more ideas to be discovered inside their own heads.