

Running head: CRITICAL THINKING: A PERSONAL RESPONSE ASSIGNMENT

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Throughout higher education, the need to analyze information and think critically is indispensable. According to McBride and Reed, “An important goal of higher education is to develop and to enhance critical thinking skills” (cited in Onwuegbuzie, 2001, p. 477). For the doctoral student pursuing a degree in educational leadership, the need to engage in this type of thinking has become more essential. However, before one is able to think critically, one must be able to precisely identify the components of critical thinking. To do so, it is necessary to research various discussions on the topic and then to synthesize that information into a cohesive definition, including common elements from each source. Following a literature review focused on critical thinking, the researched information will be presented in an attempt to evaluate the effects of cognitive development, logic, and emotionality on a doctoral student’s personal critical thinking abilities.

A University of Phoenix article entitled “What is Critical Thinking?” introduces some current definitions of critical thinking, which include the ability to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant and to compare one’s thinking to the thinking of others to establish a greater understanding of the thinking process (Tice, n.d.). Tice also discusses the ability to recognize fallacies and to differentiate premises from conclusions. Further, the article lists three common elements of critical thinking. These include “(a) the importance of a good foundation in formal and informal logic, (b) the willingness to ask questions, and (c) the ability to see the relevant answers, even if they do not coincide with our pre-existing beliefs” (p. 2). Another definition of critical thinking is “the process by which we test claims and arguments and determine which have merit and which do not. In other words, critical thinking is a search for answers, a *quest*” (Ruggiero, 2004, p. 17). It is also important to keep in mind that an inclusive analysis of critical

thinking should include cognition, motivation, behavior, and ideals (Cheung, Rudowicz, Kwan, & Yue, 2002). Furthermore, “Thinking logically and identifying reasoning fallacies in one’s own and in others’ thinking is the heart of critical thinking” (Kirby & Goodpaster, 2002, p. 141).

In addition to the various descriptions of critical thinking, the literature presents a number of characteristics common to critical thinkers. A critical thinker has been defined as a “rational person . . . who is open to [a] continuous dialogue . . . between [herself] and [her] friends and the dialogue between [herself] and the world . . . who understands why this openness is important, and who is continually testing [her] systems of beliefs against experience” (Schwarze & Lape, 2001, p. 31). Additionally, “a critical thinker can see the underlying cultural assumptions in every day happenings” (Tice, n.d., p. 3). The critical thinker is also one who employs the Socratic method of questioning and thinking and whose “beliefs and actions should be based on accurate information” (Carroll, 2004, p. 3). Finally, “One who thinks critically is always questioning and willing to be questioned. The critical thinker strives to understand and is accountable for presenting positions so that they are understood” (Mandel School of Case Western Reserve University [MSASS], n.d.).

There also seems to exist an assortment of qualities that are inherent in the critical thinking process. These qualities include the need to interpret, analyze, and evaluate information; make inferences and draw conclusions from that information; state results and present arguments found within the information; self-examine and self-correct one’s thinking; form hypotheses and engage in deductive reasoning (Cheung et al., 2002). Finally, there may be an inherent ability to establish and maintain the “critical spirit” or “the driving force in the engagement of critical thinking,” further defined as “the inclination, or disposition, to think critically on a regular basis

in a wide range of circumstances. This spirit cannot be defined by a cluster of skills, for it is in part a way of life” (Hemming, 2000, p. 176).

Personal Reflection

Kirby and Goodpaster (2002) stated, “Who we are is how we think Our upbringing shapes our fears, which keep us from facing thoughts. It shapes our self-concept, which moves us to defend our thoughts. And it shapes our emotions, which can distort our thinking to an exceptional degree” (p. 13). The formative years, according to Piaget and other cognitive theorists, determine one’s ability to think critically, further suggesting that “only in the highest levels of cognitive development can critical thinking take place” (Tice, n.d., p. 2).

Being reared in an environment in which thinking and cognition are highly desired and encouraged fosters the ability to think critically, which may begin to emerge in early adolescence. During that time, teachers, friends, and family begin to challenge beliefs, fundamental concepts, and ideals. The teachers in advanced placement and college-preparatory courses in high school continually challenge one’s ability to think. They frequently engage their students in metacognition activities, or those that foster the ability to think about one’s personal thinking process, which is then greatly encouraged and oftentimes required. The various religious and philosophical discussions that may be common during high school and undergraduate college years challenge ideals and beliefs in a way that encourages the formulation of a person’s individual faith and establishes a greater confidence in that belief system. Family members may further challenge one’s ability to think critically by encouraging logical thinking and questioning those ideals that may have previously been unquestioned in earlier years.

One's belief system, ideals, and faith may only grow through such experiences, and there may exist a greater appreciation for them than was realized before such challenges to critically analyze and justify such beliefs were encountered. Indeed, one may begin to "even enjoy conflict and contradictions in values and possible courses of action because sorting out these conflicts forces them to grow intellectually" (Dworetzky & Davis, cited in Tice, n.d., p. 2). This may continue into the adult years and one should become better able to "see the world from another's perspective" (p. 3) as a result of such experiences.

Although emotionality may sometimes play a part in the level of critical thinking that one is able to employ, one should become increasingly able to set aside personal emotions and think rationally and logically in critical situations. It has been said that "Effective thinkers exert control over their mental life, direct their thoughts rather than being directed by them, and withhold their endorsement of any idea—even their own—until they have tested and confirmed it" (Ruggiero, 2004, p. 20). According to this statement, a person who strives to be in control of her thoughts, does not allow emotion to rule her decisions, and consistently assesses and validates her ideas and those of others before allowing them to become a part of her personal philosophy or professional practices should be considered a critical thinker.

The need to think critically and to employ the various strategies, processes, and characteristics associated with critical thinking is becoming increasingly important to the doctoral student. Doing so requires the need to review current literature on critical thinking, to compare a variety of thoughts and ideas on the characteristics of critical thinking, and to consider the implications of those thoughts and ideas on one's personal critical thinking abilities. Studying the effects of cognitive development and emotionality on one's ability to think analytically and being able to engage in logical thought are also essential steps in developing critical thinking

skills. “Fostering students' critical thinking has been an increasingly important goal for university education” (Cheung et al., 2002, p. 504). Therefore, analyzing existing literature to synthesize information into a cohesive definition of critical thought, while also conducting a personal reflection on one's ability to think critically, is beneficial to any student in a doctoral-level program. The doctoral student pursuing a degree in educational leadership should realize the need to engage in this type of thinking and its effects on scholarship, leadership, and practice.

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