Critical Thinking Pedagogy in the Age of Conspiracies

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Abstract: The language of critical thinking and free thinking has increasingly been co-opted by people who only oppose established forms of knowledge. As educators, we need to recalibrate our understanding of critical thinking, and how to teach it, to better adapt to the changing media landscape. First, we should investigate how so-called "freethinkers" conceptualize the world. From there, we can develop strategies to revamp our teaching practice. At bottom, critical thinking pedagogy can no longer be ideologically neutral: we need to encourage our students to consider diverse points of view, and to consider ethics and morality when making critical thinking judgements.

In November 2021, the star quarterback for the NFL's Green Bay Packers, Aaron Rodgers, tested positive for COVID-19. Although he was not vaccinated, Rodgers claimed he was not against vaccines. In an interview, he stated, "I'm not, you know, some sort of anti-vax, flat-earther. I am somebody who's a critical thinker" (Belson & Anthes, 2021, paras. 9-11). He went on to argue that he was doing his own "research" to find out the best way to protect himself from COVID-19 (Associated Press, 2021, para. 2).

Aaron Rodgers is not alone. Increasingly, the language of critical thinking has become popularized, but is misused to oppose mainstream beliefs and behaviours. In a MIT study analysing over half a million tweets, researchers noted that many people who argue against public health messaging regarding COVID-19 see themselves as justifiably critical or skeptical of the messaging because they have examined the data themselves (Lee et al., 2021, para. 6). In fact, they see the messaging around COVID-19 as another "appropriation of scientific knowledge by a paternalistic, condescending elite that expects intellectual subservience rather than critical thinking from the lay public" (Lee et al., 2021, para. 32)

From a pedagogical standpoint, the result of critical thinking should not be the wholesale rejection of expertise. If this is what popular understanding of critical thinking is, then there is something wrong with how it is being taught. As educators, we must first investigate how traditional practices of teaching critical thinking have been co-opted to produce people who are hostile to established knowledge. From there, we will be able to recalibrate our approach to critical thinking pedagogy.

The information and media landscape has radically changed since concepts of critical thinking were first developed. In Anne Downey's (2016) *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas*, she notes that thinking critically about information was once a doable task: "In the not too distant past, it was fairly simple to be an informed citizen by watching the evening news and reading the daily newspapers and an occasional book or magazine." (p. 11). But we now live in an age of information overabundance. As information literacy scholar Ilene Rockman (2004) noted, "the issue is no longer one of not having enough information; it is just the opposite—too much information, in various formats and not all of equal value" (p. 1). The low cost of information production has created endless sources on virtually any topic, with many of those sources being unreliable—if not the vast majority.

But current models of critical thinking and media literacy have lagged in adapting to these changes. For instance, schools still teach that Wikipedia is an unreliable source when it is one of the most reliable sources on the Internet (Fister, 2021, para. 18). Students are regularly taught the currency, relevancy, authority, accuracy, and relevance (CRAAP) test to investigate the strengths and weakness of a source, based upon a belief that thorough investigation will determine if it is valid. But consuming

misinformation so that students can critically examine it in-depth could make them vulnerable to manipulation (Fielding, 2019). Even worse, technology researcher Danah Boyd (2018) notes, "when youth are encouraged to be critical of the news media, they come away thinking that the media is lying" (para. 40). When faced with enormous quantities of dubious information to process and judge, many media consumers are defaulting to a stance that views all sources of information as equally bad.

As information literacy scholar Barbara Fister (2021) notes, instead of trusting traditional media, these consumers "take pleasure in claiming expertise for themselves, on their own terms" (para. 13), believing that "their superpower is knowing how the internet works, so they can in turn successfully work the internet" (Fister, 2021, para. 14). These independent experts call themselves many things, including "critical thinkers," but also "skeptics," "classic liberals" and "freethinkers." They range from cannabis-smoking fitness-obsessives like Joe Rogan (Peters, 2019) to mommy bloggers (Petersen, 2021). But they share the same perspective: they trust in their own ability to think critically about the world, and reject traditional expertise as a result.

Once a person believes they are a freethinker who does not need to rely on scholarly expertise, it is difficult to shake. When someone is confronted about their (possibly fringe) opinions, it only reinforces their belief that they are a freethinker who holds "unpopular" ideas (Peters, 2019, para. 11). In essence, this identity lets freethinkers maintain their current views without needing to engage with any challenging conversations. In this context, telling others, for instance, to "do the research" becomes a thought-terminating cliché—it feels thoughtful, but actually stops the conversation in its tracks so that they can avoid the discomfort of engaging with ideas that contradict their current beliefs (Peterson, 2021, paras. 12-13).

Becoming a freethinker is commonly referred to online as being "red pilled." This is a reference to the original *Matrix* film, where taking the red pill eliminated a pacifying illusion and replaced it with an uncomfortable truth that set them free. Becoming "red pilled" in this new usage is the virtuous resistance to "official narratives" (Boyd, 2018, paras. 35-36), in comparison to those who choose ignorance and subservience by taking the "blue pill." Even Elon Musk has told his millions of Twitter followers to "take the red pill" (Musk, 2020).

This is why so many so-called freethinkers believe society is inherently evil. If modern technological reality is a constructed dream like the *Matrix*, it must be perpetuated by someone who wants to keep us sedated. The QAnon/Pizzagate belief that satanic pedophile elites control much of society (Donegan, 2020) is an extreme example, but the general idea is popular. Jewish organizations have pointed out how anti-vaxxers have repeatedly compared their suffering from mandates (even for simple mask requirements) to the suffering of the Jews under Hitler (Steele, 2021). It is also why the personal choice to refuse a vaccine is often seen as comparable to being Black in the Jim Crow South (Skolnik, 2021).

Freethinking is seen as a fixed identity, so opposition to this identity is seen as repressive.

Furthermore, when someone believes that they live in an oppressive state, facts are not perceived as "facts" in the traditional scientific sense, as ideas that have been tested through experimentation and found to be true. Instead, "facts" from a fact-checker or traditional source are marks of power or control from an elite (Doctorow, 2017, paras. 6-7). As opposed to this, the "facts" that a freethinker finds—ones that contravene the mainstream narrative—are like marks of revelation, pulling back the curtain to show the elites pulling the strings. It's not surprising that many have evangelical Christian beliefs: they read the world like it is a Bible (Tripodi, 2018), where even seemingly insignificant details can reveal a larger plan. Consequently, interpreting data becomes a matter of faith. As Cory Doctorow (2017) notes, whether you believe facts is about whether you trust the person delivering those facts, and about what your "guts" are telling you (para. 7).

When emotions drive decisions about who to trust, freethinkers are inevitably led to trust sources that present shocking or upsetting information. Danah Boyd (2018) notes that after the Parkland shootings, the term "crisis actor" became a popular search term on Google. The term refers to the conspiracy theory that mass shootings are staged, and that the victims of these shootings are actors. She notes that even though the idea of "crisis actors" is completely fictional, it was such an outrageous idea that it garnered attention. And once there was enough attention around it, it became something reputable sources had to debunk as if it was even worthy of considering: "When teenage witnesses of the mass shooting in Parkland speak to journalists these days, they have to now say that they are not crisis actors. They must negate a conspiracy theory that was created to dismiss them" (Boyd, 2018, para. 45). At a recent QAnon convention, one of the speakers explicitly stated that if something went viral, it is more likely to be true (Cincotta, 2021). When there is no longer trust in traditional authority, attention and emotion become the determinants of truth.

It is also why debate has become important to freethinkers. For Ben Shapiro, a popular advocate of this position, debate is not a process of finding truth, but a process of domination, where all sorts of rhetorical tricks—including just talking rapidly—are used to overcome resistance (Some More News, 2019). "Debate me on Twitch" has also become a rallying cry for many freethinkers (Quirk, 2020). Playing video games while arguing about abortion makes sense in this context: truth is attack and defense; the streamer who captures the most attention is the one who is most correct. What the freethinkers implicitly argue is that the law of the land has been, and always will be, the domination of the weak by the strong, and that rhetoric and debate are not just one of the most powerful ways to achieve this domination, but that being a strong debater is an important mark of power.

Knowing that our students are engaging with an online environment where the practice of critical thinking has been weaponized in this way to

disrupt trust in traditional sources of knowledge and expertise, what are we to do with our critical thinking pedagogy?

First, I believe we need to update our traditional tools to better cope with the current information landscape. For instance, instead of the standard CRAAP test, Mike Caulfield has developed the stop, investigate, find and trace (SIFT) method: Stop, investigate the source, find better or other coverage, and trace claims to the original context. Unlike the CRAAP test, which emphasizes investigating a source in isolation, the SIFT method recognizes that information moves through an ecosystem, and that the further information travels from an original source, the more likely it is to be distorted, manipulated, or misused (Caulfield, 2019).

Beyond this, we need to recognize that opposition is over-valued in traditional critical thinking pedagogy. Debate, for instance, is a common way to engage students in a critical thinking activity (Hays, 2015, p. 320). Furthermore, in a study by Halx and Reybold (2005) where instructors were asked to describe their critical thinking pedagogy, the instructors reported feeling that students were generally unable to engage critically with material until forced: "seven of the eight used the term *force* when describing their pedagogical approach to teaching students to think critically; the remaining participant used the term *aggressive*" (p. 303). It's no wonder students perceive opposition to received ideas to be a foundational aspect of critical thinking.

Philosophy and literature professor David Hayes (2015) believes that skepticism toward texts and sources isn't something he has to teach to students, but rather "seems to be the natural or default position" (p. 324). Instead, the challenge in his classrooms is to get students to engage wholly and fully with texts that are in front of them: "In fact, it takes more work to find plausibility, especially in relation to objects that are most 'other,' than it does to find grounds for skepticism." (p. 322) What we need to be developing in our students is the capacity to listen to other people, to see others as equally deserving of respect.

Overall, we need to rethink the practice of teaching critical thinking as an ideologically neutral process where thinking and opinions are divorced from ethics and morality. These ideologically neutral critical thinking processes have been effectively weaponized to lure people into believing conspiracy theories and rejecting established expertise. If we want our students to use critical thinking to become better people, we should be explicitly teaching them the values of good citizenship. We need to make it clear that critical thinking is only effective when it helps bring about a just world for everyone – not just a few free-thinkers.

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