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## **Critical thinking: Is it threatened?**

By Steve Bakke  September 20, 2021

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*You can be part of the problem or part of the solution. Frankly, being part of the problem is a lot more fun*

Critical thinking represents rational, skeptical, unbiased analysis, or evaluation of factual evidence. Learning to reach “objective conclusions” has been a valuable goal of education.

A quote from educator Steve Backus led me to his interesting commentary in the Minneapolis StarTribune titled “The dea(r)th of critical thinking.” Backus is Director of the Rose Warner Writing and Critical Thinking Center at Minnesota’s College of Saint Scholastica.

Backus explains: “critical thinking simply means drawing an objective conclusion from a set of facts.....I teach critical thinking. Or try to, anyway. It’s a tough job; most students want nothing to do with it. They think it involves conflict, which is taboo in our culture. They also don’t care if something makes sense or not. We see this happening in our everyday lives and it’s a bit disturbing.....America’s critical thinking skills are toast.”

Following that dramatic sense of finality, Backus adds that he experienced renewed hope when observing students during the George Floyd murder trial. He observed their uncharacteristic laser focus on arriving at objective fact-based conclusions.

Backus is observing what I think is a new attitude among some educators. It’s an attitude that seems to discourage objective analysis. Dedicated Critical Race Theory (CRT) advocate and leader, Ibram X. Kendi wrote this in his book “How to be an antiracist”: “I thought I was stupid, too dumb for college..... intelligence is as subjective as beauty.....I kept using ‘objective’ standards, like test scores and report cards, to judge myself.”

During a recent forum involving Professor Kendi and antiracism leader and journalism scholar William Jalani Cobb, it was pointed out that journalistic objectivity comes from a history of reporting one person’s claims, then reporting the opposing side. During the discussion, budding journalists were encouraged to prioritize “fairness” over “objectivity.”

That instruction is nuanced and difficult to understand or accomplish. It begs some questions: What’s meant by “fairness”? Should reporters be making subjective judgements as to fairness? If not, who should be the ultimate judge and authority?

A 2020 CRT project was a short-lived Smithsonian African American History Museum exhibit. It featured an unflattering series of charts listing “whiteness” characteristics. One stands out: “emphasis on the scientific method,” with its: “Objective, rational linear thinking; Cause and effect relationships; and Quantitative emphasis.” One couldn’t find a more direct, yet subtle attack on objectivity and critical thinking.

Another example of CRT’s resistance to objectivity comes from Oregon’s Department of Education which conducted training for developing teaching tools for improving “equitable” outcomes for minority students.

A course “toolkit” insists “the concept of mathematics being purely objective is unequivocally false.....upholding the idea that there are always right and wrong answers perpetuates objectivity...” Valuing an objective emphasis on accuracy is considered a manifestation of “whiteness” or perhaps even “white supremacy.” Do these educators consider objectivity and critical thinking to be unfortunate cultural constructs?

Education reformer and author Bruce Deitrick Price expressed his concern that “schools are fact averse; they are challenge averse.” I think an example is Oregon’s removal of reading and math proficiency testing requirements prior to graduation. Apparently, they’ve experienced racial inequity in test results. Without measurement, inequity disappears. That’s a new twist on “kill the messenger.” It also “smacks of” lowering the expectation bar for education.

I’m going to risk appearing a bit sophomoric. Is America ready to say “begone Socrates”? He’s the guy who, about 2,500 years ago, introduced and emphasized “seeking evidence, closely examining reasoning and assumptions, analyzing basic concepts, and tracing out implications.....” (quote from *The Foundation of Critical Thinking*). I should add, “while on your way to irrelevance, Mr. Socrates, you might as well bring along your buddies Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas.”

What good comes from the intellectual rejection of the value of objectivity, and by extension, critical thinking? CRT isn’t merely critiquing these ancient fellows and their ideas. Rather, this represents a too frequent habit of “canceling” people or ideas it disagrees with.

Historian Victor Davis Hanson’s recent observation about times past seems to apply here: “In empirical fashion, scientists advised us to examine evidence and data, and.....come to rational hypotheses. The enemies of ‘science’ were politics, superstition, bias, and deduction.”

This foolish new “philosophy” and approach solves nothing while destroying valuable problem-solving tools.