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DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING IN HUMANITIES CLASSROOMS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

Summary. *Contemporary schooling is increasingly concerned not only with content acquisition but also with students' ability to work meaningfully with information, interpret it, and formulate well-reasoned judgments. This article examines critical thinking as a foundational educational capacity that can be most effectively developed within humanities subjects at the secondary school level. Humanities disciplines inherently require analysis, comparison, interpretation, and argumentation, making them a key pedagogical space for cultivating critical thinking. Drawing on educational research and Drawing on educational research and practitioner reflection, the article proposes instructional strategies that can be embedded in everyday teaching of history, literature, and social studies. It is argued that the development of critical thinking requires systematic instructional design and constitutes an essential condition of high-quality humanities education.*

Key words: *critical thinking, humanities education, secondary school, information literacy, dialogic teaching, pedagogical practice.*

Introduction. Students in contemporary schools constantly engage with diverse forms of information, including textbooks, literary texts, historical

documents, teacher explanations, visual materials, and digital sources. Information, however, does not become knowledge automatically; it requires interpretation, contextualization, and reflective judgment.

Educational research consistently emphasizes that the ability to analyze information, construct arguments, and make reasoned decisions is a central goal of modern education (OECD, 2018; Nussbaum, 2010). At the same time, much of the research on critical thinking has focused either on higher education or on assessment and measurement, leaving open the practical question of how critical thinking can be systematically developed within everyday secondary school instruction—particularly in humanities classrooms.

The purpose of this article is to justify the importance of critical thinking as a core aim of humanities education and to present pedagogical strategies that support its development in routine classroom practice.

Research Foundations and Sources. This article draws on research in education, educational psychology, and humanities education. Its theoretical framework is informed by classical conceptions of reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933) as well as by contemporary operational and structural models of critical thinking (Ennis, 1985; Facione, 1990; Halpern, 2014). Methodologically, the article aligns with research emphasizing the contextual and disciplinary nature of critical thinking and its dependence on subject-matter understanding (Kuhn, 1999; Willingham, 2007).

At the practical level, the analysis is informed by studies on dialogic teaching, argumentation, transfer of learning, and evaluation of information sources (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Alexander, 2008; Perkins & Salomon, 1991; Wineburg, 2001; McGrew et al., 2018). The article also incorporates the author's reflective teaching experience in secondary humanities education, allowing theoretical claims to be grounded in classroom realities. Together, these strands of research provide the conceptual foundation for examining how critical thinking can be intentionally cultivated within secondary humanities classrooms.

Critical Thinking in the Educational Context. In educational theory, critical thinking is commonly understood as the capacity to engage with knowledge reflectively and to make reasoned judgments. Dewey (1933) conceptualized thinking as a process of inquiry grounded in reflection, examination of evidence, and evaluation of assumptions. This perspective remains influential in framing critical thinking as a disposition and culture of reasoning rather than a set of isolated techniques.

From a more operational standpoint, critical thinking has been defined as reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or how to act (Ennis, 1985). Contemporary models further elaborate this construct by distinguishing cognitive skills (analysis, evaluation, inference, interpretation) and metacognitive components (self-regulation, monitoring, and willingness to revise one's position) (Facione, 1990; Halpern, 2014).

For school education, it is crucial to recognize that critical thinking is context-dependent. Research shows that students' reasoning quality is strongly linked to disciplinary understanding: without knowledge of subject-specific concepts and practices, students cannot adequately evaluate arguments or sources (Kuhn, 1999; Willingham, 2007). Consequently, critical thinking develops not as a generic skill but through engagement with disciplinary ways of reading, interpreting, comparing, and arguing.

Humanities Subjects as a Space for Critical Thinking and Information Work

Humanities subjects—history, literature, and social studies—are inherently oriented toward meaning, interpretation, and human experience. These disciplines rarely offer a single definitive interpretation; instead, students learn to analyze competing perspectives and justify their conclusions. Humanities education thus contributes not only to knowledge acquisition but also to the development of judgment, ethical awareness, and an understanding of social complexity (Nussbaum, 2010).

Disciplinary practices shape distinctive forms of thinking. Historical reasoning involves sourcing, contextualization, comparison of accounts, and analysis of conflicting interpretations (Wineburg, 2001). Literary studies foster close reading, interpretation of perspective, symbolism, and subtext. Social studies emphasize argumentation, distinction between fact and opinion, and analysis of social processes and consequences. In this sense, critical thinking becomes an integral component of disciplinary literacy.

Working with information in humanities classrooms requires active intellectual engagement rather than passive reception. Students must question sources, examine purposes and assumptions, and form independent judgments. Research indicates that students often rely on superficial cues of credibility—such as authority or tone—rather than evaluating content and context (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017; McGrew et al., 2018). Without systematic instruction, learners remain vulnerable to emotionally persuasive but weakly supported claims (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017).

The teacher's role, therefore, is not merely to transmit ready-made interpretations but to design learning environments in which students habitually question texts, test evidence, and justify conclusions. Through such practices, information is transformed into knowledge—understood, explained, and argued.

Instructional Strategies for Developing Critical Thinking in Secondary School

The development of critical thinking in secondary education is achievable within everyday instruction when work with humanities content is organized systematically and intentionally. Rather than relying on isolated activities, effective pedagogy establishes stable patterns of reasoning that recur across lessons and gradually become part of students' intellectual habits. Research suggests that critical thinking develops through sustained engagement with structured inquiry, guided practice, and opportunities for reflection (Paul & Elder, 2008; Abrami et al., 2015).

1. Analytical questioning of sources

A foundational strategy involves structured questioning of sources, focusing on authorship, context, purpose, audience, and evidentiary basis. Such questioning encourages students to view information as situated and perspective-driven rather than as neutral fact. Over time, repeated engagement with these questions promotes epistemic awareness — an understanding that knowledge is constructed and must be evaluated.

Paul and Elder (2008) argue that disciplined questioning lies at the heart of critical thinking because it directs attention to assumptions, implications, and standards of reasoning. When consistently modeled and practiced, analytical questioning helps students internalize intellectual standards such as clarity, accuracy, relevance, and logic.

2. Comparison of sources and interpretations

Juxtaposing texts produced in different historical, cultural, or rhetorical contexts enables students to recognize the relativity of perspectives and the constructed nature of knowledge. Research on historical thinking identifies comparative analysis as essential for developing critical understanding because it challenges students to reconcile conflicting accounts and weigh evidence (Wineburg, 2001).

Such work also supports what Kuhn (1999) describes as evaluative epistemology — the capacity to understand that knowledge claims require justification and are open to critique. By learning to compare interpretations rather than accept single narratives, students develop intellectual flexibility and tolerance for complexity.

3. Argumentation and evidence mapping

Explicitly guiding students from claim to justification — sometimes conceptualized as an "evidence ladder" — strengthens both metacognitive awareness and clarity of reasoning (Facione, 1990; Kuhn, 1999). Bailin et al.

(1999) emphasize that critical thinking entails not only generating arguments but evaluating their coherence, relevance, and contextual adequacy.

Instruction that makes reasoning visible helps students understand that strong arguments depend on credible evidence and logical connections. Over time, this fosters intellectual accountability, as students learn to support assertions rather than rely on intuition or unsupported opinion.

4. Reconstruction of reasoning processes

Tasks requiring students to explain how they reached a conclusion — including consideration of alternative interpretations — promote metacognition and durable analytical skills. Dunlosky et al. (2013) demonstrate that practices involving elaboration and self-explanation significantly enhance long-term learning.

Reconstructing reasoning shifts attention from answers to thought processes, encouraging students to monitor their thinking and revise it when necessary. This aligns with research suggesting that the ability to reflect on one's reasoning is a defining feature of mature critical thought (Halpern, 2014).

5. Dialogic classroom practices

Discussion, collective analysis, and shared meaning-making create opportunities for confronting perspectives and refining arguments. In humanities education, dialogue functions not as a supplementary activity but as a central mode of learning (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Alexander, 2008).

Dialogic teaching supports what Mercer and Littleton describe as "interthinking," where knowledge is co-constructed through talk. Such environments encourage students to justify ideas, respond to counterarguments, and engage respectfully with disagreement — all core practices of critical reasoning.

Importantly, meta-analytic research indicates that critical thinking is most effectively developed when instructional strategies are explicit, sustained, and embedded within subject teaching rather than taught as separate skills (Abrami et

al., 2015). The humanities classroom, therefore, offers a particularly fertile context for cultivating these practices.

The Teacher's Role in Fostering Critical Thinking

Educational research consistently indicates that the development of critical thinking depends substantially on the teacher's professional stance and instructional decision-making. Teachers shape whether learning environments prioritize reproduction of information or inquiry, interpretation, and reasoned judgment.

Brookfield (2012) argues that teaching for critical thinking requires educators to model intellectual curiosity, openness to alternative perspectives, and a willingness to question taken-for-granted assumptions. From this perspective, the teacher is not merely a transmitter of knowledge but a designer of conditions in which thoughtful questioning becomes normative classroom behavior.

Similarly, Paul and Elder (2008) emphasize that critical thinking must be explicitly cultivated through instruction that makes standards of reasoning visible. When teachers consistently ask students to clarify claims, examine evidence, and consider implications, they help establish a classroom culture grounded in intellectual rigor.

Equally important is the creation of a psychologically safe environment in which uncertainty and error are treated as natural components of learning. Hammond (2015) notes that students are more likely to engage in complex cognitive work when classrooms balance intellectual challenge with emotional support. When mistakes are framed as opportunities for refinement rather than failure, learners become more willing to test ideas and revise conclusions.

Assessment practices further reinforce these dispositions. When evaluation criteria value reasoning quality, source use, and justification — rather than correct answers alone — critical thinking becomes embedded within classroom norms instead of positioned as an optional extension of learning.

Ultimately, fostering critical thinking involves a shift from viewing teaching as the delivery of content to understanding it as the orchestration of intellectual engagement. Teachers act as facilitators of disciplined inquiry, guiding students toward increasingly sophisticated forms of reasoning while gradually transferring responsibility for thinking to the learners themselves.

Conclusion. Critical thinking occupies a vital place within humanities education. Its importance derives not only from contemporary information conditions but from the interpretive nature of humanities knowledge itself.

The analysis demonstrates that humanities subjects offer powerful opportunities for developing critical thinking through source analysis, comparison of interpretations, argumentation, and dialogic engagement. However, such development requires deliberate pedagogical organization and cannot be assumed to occur automatically.

The instructional strategies discussed show that critical thinking can be cultivated within ordinary secondary school lessons through systematic use of analytical questioning, comparative work, reasoning reconstruction, and dialogue. As a result, students acquire not only disciplinary knowledge but also durable intellectual practices—analysis, interpretation, and reasoned judgment—making critical thinking an integral component of high-quality humanities education.

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