

# Students should learn how to think critically and not blindly follow the crowd

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#### TAGS

Leadership

Transforming leadership values is one of the most important ways we can develop Hong Kong for the 21st century. To accomplish this, we need to transform our approach to higher education first.

Business, public, and educational leaders are asking institutions to include competencies (that is, qualities or attributes that comprise knowledge, skills and attitudes) such as self-awareness and management, critical thinking, interpersonal communication, and collaboration, in the academic curriculum.

These are often referred to as "21st century transferable competencies" via "deeper learning". Studies by the National Research Council in the USA have demonstrated the importance of these competencies for positive outcomes in education, work, and other aspects of life.

In a previous column (January 8, 2016), I said that the most important quality of leadership is the possession of effective thinking skills. In fact, any educated and responsible citizen should also be able to think critically. This broad skill includes free, independent, reflective, integrative, creative, and flexible thought.

Unfortunately, in our current educational system, most students only pursue high examination scores. They seldom focus on how to think critically, and they unconsciously go with the flow and follow the crowd. But if they want to become smart citizens in the future, they need to learn how to think critically. They must refuse to be followers who simply do whatever others say or expect.

There has been an apparent conflict between two educational philosophies, especially in Confucian cultures. On one hand, many teachers think that the views of the established mainstream or 'authority' should not be challenged or refuted, especially by students. On the other hand, some other teachers believe they should teach students more about independent and critical thinking. So it is crucial to find a good balance between these two ends.

Furthermore, some teachers think students who have critical modes of thought are more inclined to rebel against authority and the establishment. So it is essential to clarify the concept of critical thinking to avoid misunderstanding.

Independent thinking and critical thinking are similar, but they are not interchangeable concepts. You do need to be independent before you can think critically. There is also a common misunderstanding that being critical means that one must 'criticise', that is, be argumentative and critical of other people. This is not the case. Instead, those who think critically are often more measured in their responses, and are actually less likely to criticise.

Being critical implies a serious person who acts with a careful and open mind, employs rational reasoning, and is creative. Let's break this definition down further. 'Careful' means assessing both the 'for' and the 'against' of any argument, and considering viewpoints from all perspectives, in an objective manner, before making a judgment. 'Open' means you will not insist on your own views as always being right and true. This means accepting that you may be wrong. You must also be cautious and skeptical when something cannot be proved.

'Rational' requires making fair and balanced comments based on analyses of facts and data. Regardless of whether one likes or dislikes a conclusion, the truth must be respected, and judgment should not be based on emotions. Lastly, 'creative' means thinking outside of the box, challenging consensus, and pursuing less popular approaches.

Critical thinking also plays an important role in constructive tasks. We learn to become problem solvers, and can formulate recommendations, or create new solutions.

### **Liberal Arts Education Nurtures Critical Thinking**

A liberal arts education presents students with viewpoints that may contradict their own. It forces them to initiate an in-depth examination and critical distillation of the information they receive. Students must have broad cross-disciplinary knowledge to evaluate the merits and limitations of different claims from different perspectives, before making comments or judgments.

This training can be achieved via inquisitive and adaptive learning. Students are encouraged to raise questions (especially those that start with 'why?') to critically examine existing or authoritative views, to generate new ideas, and to explore new areas of research.

The so-called 'Socratic method' of posing a question and then answering it is a typical way of seeking the truth. This allows a person with critical thinking to look at more than just surface phenomena, as things are always not what they appear. Instead, the critical thinker searches for the deeper realities.

Critical thinking is not only a way to think and learn, it's also a mental attitude. As Socrates says in Plato's *Apology*, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Persons with critical thinking will not blindly follow the latest trend, but will consciously choose whether or not to do certain things. They will choose a school, programme, or career, by means of which they can realise their interests and goals. This way, they discover their own 'why' answers, and gain a sense of purpose, rather than settling for convenient answers. As a result, they will have more authentic and fulfilling lives.

It is therefore important for an academic institution to provide an environment and atmosphere in which faculty and students can debate and learn from each other.