

REFLECTING ON “THOUGHT”

Critical Thinking

by Paul M. Cox, Ph.D.



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I am often asked the following question at conferences, “What does it mean to think critically?” The skill of thinking critically means that you react with what you hear and read through systematic evaluation. This consists of the ability to ask and answer a series of critical questions. However, there are two approaches to listening and reading.

One approach to information is reacting to it like a sponge does to water: by absorbing. There are certain advantages to this approach. The more information you absorb, the more capable you are of understanding its complexities. Furthermore, the sponge approach is relatively passive, that is, the primary mental effort is concentration and memory. The disadvantage of reading and listening like a sponge is that it provides no method for deciding which information to believe and which to reject. Persons who rely upon the sponge approach all the time, believe whatever they have last read.

An interactional approach with a speaker or writer is called a filter approach. The term “filter” is used to emphasize the actions of the hearer and reader in separating out “impurities,” in seeking to find the essential elements, and ultimately, in determining the worth of the elements. The emphasis of the filter approach is upon asking questions and thinking about material. Whereas the sponge approach emphasizes knowledge acquisition; the filter approach stresses the process of interaction with knowledge.

Thus, to think critically involves asking the right questions which are: (1) What is the issue and what is the conclusion?; (2) What are the reasons given in support of the conclusion?; (3) What words or phrases are ambiguous?; (4) What are the value conflicts and assumptions?; (5) What are the definitional and descriptive assumptions?; (6) Are there any errors in reasoning?; (7) What significant information is omitted?; and (8) What are your value preferences pertaining to this issue?

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