CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS: CONTENT, ESSENCE, HISTORY, AND COMPONENTS

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Abstract: This article discusses the scientific and theoretical foundations of critical thinking, its formation, and definitions provided by various scholars. Thinking is a cognitive activity inherent to humans that develops in stages over time. Critical thinking is viewed as a process of analyzing, evaluating, and solving problems. The article explores different approaches to critical thinking, from ancient Greek philosophers to contemporary scholars. Researchers such as Siegel, Halpern, Walsh, and Paul define critical thinking through elements like skills, tendencies, and systematic analysis. Additionally, the necessity of introducing and systematically mastering critical thinking in education is emphasized. This article provides a detailed discussion on the theoretical foundations and methodological approaches to critical thinking.

Keywords: Critical thinking, analysis, reflection, cognitive skills, educational theory, intellectual development.

Introduction

Critical thinking is a type of cognitive activity used in analyzing information, evaluating it, and solving problems. It is not only about acquiring knowledge but also about critically assessing existing knowledge and generating new ideas. This form of thinking has been reflected in philosophical views, scientific analyses, and educational methodologies throughout history. From ancient Greek philosophers to modern scholars, the meaning and approaches to critical thinking have evolved, adapting to the needs of each era.

Before exploring critical thinking as a subject of scientific inquiry, it is necessary to define its components. The terms "criticism" and "thinking" have broad meanings and are interpreted differently by various local and international scholars.

The Nature and Evolution of Thinking

Thinking is a historical phenomenon and a cognitive function unique to humans. According to John Dewey (1909), "a being incapable of reasoning operates purely on instinct and appetite." Thinking enables humans to acquire continuous knowledge, study their surroundings, and pass knowledge down through generations. For example, children possess natural cognitive functions such as perception, memory, and problem-solving, which help transfer knowledge from one generation to the next, from parents and teachers to students. Thinking predates language and speech development and forms the foundation for cognitive structures. As Slobin (1996) noted, "Each language's mandatory grammatical categories develop from general cognitive concepts, i.e., from thought."

Thinking follows a sequence of stages, beginning with forming hypotheses. During relaxation or free association, random and unconnected thoughts flow through the mind—this is considered accidental thinking (Dewey, 1909). Thinking is not always directly connected to sensory perception, as thoughts can emerge independently of external stimuli. However, for thoughts to gain meaning and structure, they must undergo reflection, a stage where each idea is logically connected to the preceding and following ones (Vygotsky, 2012).

The Concept of Criticism

The word "criticism" originates from the Greek word "kripro," meaning "to separate, judge, or analyze." Over time, this term has acquired broader meanings in various contexts. The **Uzbek National Encyclopedia** defines criticism as:

1.   The act of analyzing and evaluating something to provide an assessment (e.g., literary criticism);
2.   Expressing a negative opinion about something;
3.   A comprehensive evaluation aimed at identifying and addressing shortcomings.

The **Explanatory Dictionary of the Uzbek Language** provides multiple definitions for criticism, including evaluating achievements and shortcomings in a work or concept and scientifically analyzing and verifying the validity of ideas.

Defining Critical Thinking

Having examined the individual meanings of "thinking" and "criticism," we can now define the comcept of "critical thinking". Critical thinking is the process of questioning, analyzing, and evaluating information. It plays a vital role in problem-solving, decision-making, and intellectual development (Brookfield, 2012).

Throughout history, many philosophers have discussed the concept of critical thinking. Paul, Elder, and Bartell (2018) provide a historical perspective on critical thinking in their work, detailing various philosophical approaches. The table below outlines major philosophical perspectives on critical thinking:

Era	Philosophers	Years	Views on Critical Thinking
Ancient Greece	Socrates	Around 400 BCE	Critical thinking involves logical reasoning, questioning, and examining assumptions.
	Plato	428–348 BCE	Moving beyond superficial agreements to discover deep truths is the foundation of critical thinking.
	Aristotle	384–322 BCE	Developed logical systems as tools for critical analysis.
Middle Ages	St. Thomas Aquinas	1225–1274	Promoted systematic reasoning in *Summa Theologica*, emphasizing that critical thinking is not just rejecting beliefs but logically proving them.
Renaissance	Francis Bacon	1561–1626	Considered empirical observation and evidence-based reasoning as the core of critical thinking.
	René Descartes	1596–1650	Introduced systematic doubt in *Meditations*, questioning all knowledge and valuing logical precision.

Age of Enlightenment	Voltaire	1694–1778	Advocated for logical thinking and intellectual analysis in understanding society, while criticizing religious and political authorities.
	Montesquieu	1689–1755	Emphasized the need to critically analyze political systems and evaluate laws and governance logically.
	Denis Diderot	1713–1784	Promoted logical reasoning in analyzing society and politics, being part of the Enlightenment movement.
	Pierre Bayle	1647–1706	Focused on intellectual skepticism, advocating for a critical approach to existing beliefs and systems.
Early Modern Era	Thomas Hobbes	1588–1679	Critically analyzed traditional political systems, emphasizing the need for governance based on logical reasoning and social contracts.
Modern Era	John Locke	1632–1704	Criticized traditional political structures and advocated for rational governance.
Industrial Era	Karl Marx	1818–1883	Critically analyzed economic systems, identifying them as sources of social injustice.
	Charles Darwin	1809–1882	Applied evidence-based reasoning in developing the theory of evolution and understanding human nature.
20th Century	Sigmund Freud	1856–1939	Applied critical thinking in psychology, studying the unconscious mind and challenging traditional psychological theories.

Critical thinking has evolved from questioning authority to systematic reasoning, empirical analysis, and intellectual skepticism. This intellectual tradition continues to influence modern scientific inquiry, political philosophy, and individual cognitive development.

Contemporary Perspectives on Critical Thinking

Despite historical insights, modern scholars continue to offer various interpretations of critical thinking. Halpern (2000) defines it as a type of controlled, reasoned, and purposeful thinking used for problem-solving, making inferences, evaluating, and finding solutions.

Brookfield (2012) emphasizes that critical thinking is not only about problem-solving but also about analyzing ideological structures in society. It helps individuals understand and critically evaluate societal ideologies transmitted through schools, media, families, and workplaces. Thus, critical thinking promotes both logical decision-making and critical engagement with social and cultural systems.

Siegel (1988) identifies two approaches to developing critical thinking:

1.   **Pure Skills Approach** – Evaluating real-life situations outside the classroom.

2.   **Skills and Dispositions Approach** – Involves cognitive skills, values, and moral reasoning.

Walsh & Paul (1994) propose a three-stage approach to critical thinking:

1.   Reflection on beliefs and assumptions.

2.   Analyzing and interpreting ideas.
3.   Evaluating and applying knowledge.

Karrigus (2002) suggests a two-stage model:
1.   Reviewing the information.
2.   Analyzing, summarizing, and evaluating it.

Huijie (2010) proposes a four-stage framework:
1.   Systematic analysis,
2.   Rhetorical analysis,
3.   Assessing social relevance,
4.   Holistic evaluation.

Conclusion

Critical thinking is an essential component of intellectual development and knowledge acquisition. Throughout history, philosophers and scholars have explored different perspectives on this concept, continuously refining its definition and application. Modern researchers link critical thinking not only to cognitive skills but also to ethical values and education. As a result, critical thinking is crucial not only for individual intellectual growth but also for analyzing social and political systems.

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