

Some Thoughts on Thinking and Teaching Styles

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Why do we think? What are the sources of thought? Do some sources produce more thoughts than others? For that matter, precisely what is this process that we call thinking? These are only a few of the fundamental questions that underly many of the contributions in the burgeoning field of critical thinking. And unless these issues are addressed, the discussions that presuppose answers to these philosophical questions will rest on suspect, if not flawed foundations. Judy Downs-Lombardi's recent article, "Teaching Styles That Encourage (and Discourage) Thinking Skills" (*Inquiry* Vol XV, No 2 pp.67-71) is a case in point.

Downs-Lombardi paints a rather stark portrait of the predicament facing educators. As she sees it, teachers must choose between two options—they either cement relationships in class, or resort to obstructionist and dictatorial techniques in the classroom. For convenience, I shall refer to this as Thesis 1. In her words,

Thesis 1: Instructors have a clear choice when they teach, to promote classroom interchange and thinking skills or to hinder spontaneity and control all learning. (p.71)

Not especially sympathetic to standard lecturing techniques, Downs-Lombardi suggests that the most effective teaching style stresses interaction between all members of the class. As she sees it, "certain teaching styles and strategies engage students ... while other styles serve to discourage thinking" (p.67). While Downs-Lombardi's discussion raises a host of questions, many, if not most of them center around Thesis 1. Should we accept this assertion as true? Why? What argument has Downs-Lombardi given for her Thesis 1? Is her argument sound? While these are all important issues that merit careful consideration, my task here is more restrictive: to explore the conception of thinking that underlies Thesis 1, and Downs-Lombardi's overall discussion. For unless one understands what Downs-Lombardi means by 'thinking,' her central thesis will be difficult, if not impossible to verify. This, in turn, would be a serious shortcoming for her ideas on teaching styles and the accompanying

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advice that relies on this term. However, before we look at Downs-Lombardi's conception of thinking, we need to revisit briefly the views and arguments of a leading contributor on thinking: Rene Descartes. As we shall see, Descartes' writings suggest an invaluable framework for thinkers on critical thinking, such as Downs-Lombardi. For his views on personhood can serve both as a justification for attempts to promote critical thinking and as a means to sharpen some of the concepts central to these programs. As I shall also demonstrate, a critical consideration of his views points to some of the shortcomings of Downs-Lombardi's contribution on issues pertaining to teaching styles.

Descartes on thinking

Descartes opens his second meditation, in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, on a discordant, if not paradoxical note: the world of uncertainty that appears to entrap him still does not preclude the possibility that he can be certain of one thing: "there is nothing in the world that is certain" (Kaufmann and Baird 1994: 28). As it turns out, this paradox spurs Descartes on in his search for a belief that is certain and indubitable. Eventually he finds what he has been looking for: namely, a belief, or thesis, that becomes the bedrock of his subsequent philosophical investigations. For the scepticism that undermines Descartes' confidence in his senses, and leads him to the possibility there is an evil genius controlling his thoughts, now compels him to acknowledge that he at least exists. Irrespective of the nature or intensity of the doubts he has, and despite the (possible) deception of the evil genius, Descartes needs to exist in order to have these doubts or to be deceived. From this it follows, infers Descartes, that

...we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it. (Kaufmann and Baird: 29, 1994)

A vital conclusion for Descartes! The importance of this proposition notwithstanding, what is especially significant for us is the next step in his investigation. For Descartes now goes on to argue for a specific view of himself. Having established that he exists, he proceeds to show that he is necessarily a thinking existent. That is to say, he concludes that he is an entity that has various capabilities, the exercise of which collectively and individually constitute thinking. In the process, Descartes lists nine of these essential thinking characteristics:

But what then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which thinks? It is a thing which doubts, understands, [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels. *Certainly it is no small matter if all these things pertain to my nature.* (Kaufmann and Baird: 30, 1994, my emphasis)

instance, continues Locke, consider someone asleep. On Descartes' view—assuming that sleep does not transform me as a person—the thinking that occurs when one is awake must, presumably, be the same sort as that that occurs when one is asleep.⁵ Otherwise, it would be logically impossible for us to assert that it is the same person that is thinking in these different situations.⁶ But Locke goes on to point out that the mind, or soul, of a person asleep exists in a state significantly different to that experienced (perceived) by the soul when that person is awake. Yet we are not inclined to accept that the person awake is not the same person asleep. This leads Locke to suggest that, notwithstanding the radical differences in the mental activities in question—thinking when awake and asleep—Descartes and his followers are still not entitled to imply that the person awake is not the same person/entity asleep later. So the consideration of 'sleep contexts' reveals a serious flaw in the Cartesian (monolithic) view of thinking. Hence Locke's wry observation, "methinks every drowsy nod shakes their doctrine, who teach that the soul is always thinking" (*Essay* Bk II, ch 1, s 13).

This objection to the view that the mind is always engaged in the same type of mental activity, and the concomitant injunction that we attend to the contexts in which we think—to better grasp the nature of the diverse activities the mind is capable of—has a direct bearing on the views of Downs-Lombardi and others reflecting on issues in critical thinking. It is time to turn to these reflections.

Downs-Lombardi on thinking

In her argument for the promotion of critical thinking techniques in the classroom, Downs-Lombardi relies on the premise that I identified earlier as Thesis 1: namely, the view that we either "promote classroom interchange and thinking skills," or we "hinder spontaneity and control all learning" (p.71). While her initial remarks suggest that this is a hyperbolic statement, typifying "extremes of teaching behavior," her subsequent discussion treats this as a categorical assertion, free of qualifications. And when Downs-Lombardi later summarizes her view, no cautionary notes are brought in either. All of which strongly suggests that she views the setting facing the teacher in especially stark terms: two, and only two courses of action present themselves to the teacher.

Should we accept this bold picture that is articulated by Thesis 1? As I see it, this account faces at least three prime problems:

- Are the two options referred to by Downs-Lombardi mutually exclusive? Are some so-called 'interactive group activities' not a failure because some domineering student, or even insensitive teacher, keeps imposing their views on the proceedings, thereby hindering independent thinking by the students? If so, then the promotion of "classroom interchange" may well "hinder spontaneity and control all learning," contrary to Downs-Lombardi's

So Descartes exists as a thinking thing, capable of engaging in different types of thinking. To be even more specific, he *identifies* himself with a specific mental or immaterial substance that can perform different mental activities. To suggest then that he is, is thus to assert that this immaterial substance is engaging in at least one of these mental activities—which suggests that the elimination of the thinking immaterial substance named 'Descartes' would constitute the elimination of Descartes himself. But this particular thinking substance exists only by virtue of its thinking activity. This suggests the following possibility for Descartes: if the thinking activity that is Descartes had to cease, he would cease to exist as well. This inference has been anticipated in the *Meditations*:

...thought is an attribute that belongs to me, it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I cease entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist. (Kaufmann and Baird: 30, 1994, my emphasis)

What we have here, quite clearly, is a definition of a person. As thinking is allegedly essential to you and me, as persons, any attempt to influence or modify this set of mental activities constitutes an attempt to alter my personhood. For instance, consider my ability to doubt. If you encourage me to think sceptically—as some good teachers might—other things being equal, you enhance my personhood.¹ By the same token, if you hinder my creative thinking capabilities, other things being equal, you diminish my standing as a person, or human being.

All this suggests that advocates of techniques that promote critical thinking have, with Descartes' view of a person, a compelling justification for their programs. For who would not endorse attempts to enhance one's own personhood, or that of another? The justification for these teaching techniques, from this perspective, thus appears self-evident.

Unfortunately, this argument for the implementation of critical thinking techniques is not as watertight as the discussion here might suggest. A significant shortcoming concerns the basis of this argument—namely, Descartes' identification of thinking with personhood. Consider the following:²

As we have seen, Descartes suggests that if the thinking substance that is a person had to stop thinking, he or she would cease to exist. But what is this thinking activity that Descartes views as essential to us? Some, stressing the reflective nature of the mental activity called doubting or thinking, suggest that this characteristic is central to Descartes' notion as well.³ Adopting this interpretation, critics have gone on to argue that Descartes' view is false. For there are occasions where persons do not think (reflectively), yet they continue to exist as persons. John Locke, to take one example, argues that persons undergo a variety of thinking experiences, and they do not all involve self-conscious thinking. Thinking is not a monolithic experience, that always involves a reflective activity, as has allegedly been assumed by Descartes.⁴ For

thesis. Furthermore, participatory sessions can be very intimidating for some students, for various reasons. As a result, students who otherwise have a positive self-image, possibly regarding themselves as 'sources of ideas,' clam up and learn little, if anything. To suggest then that control of the learning process is the preserve of formal lectures alone, thereby implying that only interaction promotes learning, thus seems in need of further argumentation.

- Are there other options available for the teacher, not encompassed by Thesis 1? In the first place, suppose a student is asked to give a lecture. Is the preparation for the session not a learning experience? Many would say 'Yes.' Secondly, what about the lecture itself—can this not be an (intense) learning experience, both about teaching and about the content of the material being lectured on? As many can attest, it is not unusual for a lecturer, even in the middle of the presentation, to discover insights into the material not previously realized! A third option: could the course of lectures not run itself, with absolutely no involvement at all from the instructor, other than an initial meeting with the students to discuss the format and the assignment requirements?

- What is the relationship between the promotion of classroom interaction and thinking skills? By the same token, what is the link between hindering spontaneity and controlling all learning? If I encourage students to interact in class—for instance, by placing them in groups—am I necessarily promoting thinking skills, or merely enhancing the social skills of the members in the group? Experience suggests that while group exchanges might further social relationships—and we know that this need not be so—they often do so at the expense of independent critical enquiry. Downs-Lombardi appears to assume that the promotion of class exchanges automatically encourages thinking skills, but this assumption may well be false. Clearly, more needs to be said on the relationship between these two conjuncts of Thesis 1.

While these are important questions that call for careful consideration, and further empirical investigation, there is an even more pressing issue raised by Thesis 1, namely, the question on the nature of the thinking deemed desirable by Downs-Lombardi. So, what is the conception of thinking that underlies this thesis?

The term 'thinking' has much currency in Downs-Lombardi's discussion. We are told that some teaching styles "discourage thinking" (p.67), that instructors can "encourage thinking" (p.67), that there are methods "for evoking a range of thinking skills" (p.68), that teachers "can foster thinking" (p.69), that students can discover "that thinking has a practical framework" (p.70), and that teachers can "include more opportunities for thinking" (p.71). Assuming that Downs-Lombardi has a single conception in mind in these different contexts, precisely what is meant here by the term 'thinking'? Unfortunately, Downs-Lombardi gives us no explanation of this term, only a cursory hint. After suggesting that instructors can foster thinking skills, she extolls the

virtue of applying the linguistic framework that is apparently associated with thinking.⁷

Using the vocabulary of thinking ("What can you infer from this definition? What can you conclude about this description?") teaches students that thinking has a practical framework and a way to describe what is occurring. (p.70)

Now, while this is certainly not an explanation of the term 'thinking' as it stands, this extract does suggest that Downs-Lombardi has the terminology of logic in mind when talking about thinking. In encouraging students to determine what the conclusion, or likely inferences are from a piece of discourse, we presumably are encouraging them to think (logically). That is to say, we are teaching students how to apply the terms 'infer,' 'conclude' and others from the arsenal (apparently) favoured by logicians. But is this the only context in which the term 'thinking' is applicable? Of course not. This term is used in diverse contexts, many of which do not involve the application of any logical apparatus. To take but one example. When you ask me about my toothache, I think about your question, think about my well-being, and answer you. At no point in the proceedings do I draw inferences, or generally reason on what has been said or felt by me. So not all thinking is logical thinking, i.e. thinking where logical terminology is appropriate. How then does one distinguish between the thinking where this logical terminology is appropriate, and the thinking that calls for other terminology? Without an explanation of the differences between the thinking that Downs-Lombardi is interested in, and the many other forms of thinking that can be engaged in, Thesis 1 appears to be incomplete, if not unverifiable. In that case, her contribution that draws on this thesis also seems incomplete, if not of little use.

Notes

- ¹ This phrase, "to enhance one's personhood" is admittedly opaque. It might mean that what is potential can be actualized. For all his criticisms of the 'old order' and his attempts to establish a new, modern science, Descartes does rely on the (discredited) scholastic conceptual scheme in his writings. This may well be an instance of this lingering influence of the past.
- ² There are many other problems with Descartes' account of a person, but it is inappropriate to discuss them here. For two lucid investigations of these difficulties, and the development of (competing) alternative views, see Gilbert Ryle *The Concept of Mind*, London 1949, and David Armstrong *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*. London 1968.
- ³ In his influential text on the mind and its thought processes, Daniel Dennett suggests that the "powers of reflection have often been claimed to be at the heart of consciousness, with good reason." (*Consciousness Explained*, Little, Brown and Company: Boston 1991, pg 320).

- ⁴ That Locke believes that Descartes assumes that thinking is always a reflective activity comes out clearly in the following remarks:
The soul, during sound sleep, thinks, say these men. Whilst it thinks and perceives, it is capable certainly of those of delight or trouble, as well as any other perceptions; and it must necessarily be conscious of its own perceptions. But it has all this apart: the sleeping man, it is plain, is conscious of nothing of all this (*Essay* Book II, chap 1, sec 12.).
- ⁵ Many thinkers deny that consciousness is the homogenous activity that appears to be assumed here by Locke. Indian philosophers who defend Advaitic monism, for instance, argue that there are three distinct states of consciousness: waking consciousness, dreaming consciousness and dreamless sleep consciousness. And the world presented to the self in each of these states is as real as any other world: "Even waking reality is a relative one. It has no permanent existence, being only a correlate of the waking state." (S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* OUP, 1993, pg 32).
- ⁶ Of course, one might object that it is not the same person in both contexts, contrary to Locke's implicit assumption. This possibility would clearly undercut Locke's criticisms of Descartes' views. While this is an important issue, I shall resist the temptation to explore it further here.
- ⁷ If I have understood Downs-Lombardi correctly here, there are severe difficulties ahead. The assumption that there is a single linguistic framework associated with thinking (i.e. logic) is false. For instance, the contributions of Aristotle and Frege to theories on logic diverge in many crucial respects, yet both of these frameworks offer us "a way to describe what is occurring"—a requirement stipulated by Downs-Lombardi.

References

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