

The Stages of Development in Critical Thinking

These stages in the intellectual development of the critical thinker are paraphrased from the article “Critical Thinking Development: A Stage Theory” by Linda Paul and Richard Elder, available at www.criticalthinking.org.

Stage One: The Unreflective Thinker

Defining Features: These thinkers are basically unaware of the role of thinking in their lives and of potential problems with their own reasoning – they lack the ability to be metacognitive. They do not identify concepts or assumptions behind ideas, and they rarely assess the logic of their opinions or conclusions. They may have developed some skills in thinking (compare and contrast, analyze, conclude, etc.), but these skills are inconsistently applied and these thinkers tend to retain biases and prejudices. Though these thinkers may be highly educated, they tend to be unable to “fix” problems in thinking or adopt new strategies to solve problems.

Stage Two: The Challenged Thinker

Defining Features: These thinkers have become aware of the role thinking plays in their lives. They have begun to understand that problems in thinking and logic can cause significant trouble for them, and they recognize that productive thinking requires effort and deliberate attention. They have an understanding of the basic elements of reasoning (concepts, assumptions, questions at issue, purpose, point of view, information, implications and consequences, etc.) and standards for the assessment of thinking (clarity, accuracy, relevance, etc.), but they have only a superficial understanding of these concepts. They find it hard to apply these concepts consistently and deliberately in their reasoning. They may believe that they have critical thinking abilities, but they may not recognize that they apply these critical thinking abilities inconsistently in their lives, thus making it harder for them to improve their thinking skills.

Stage Three: The Beginning Thinker

Defining Features: These thinkers are actively trying to take control of the quality of their thinking in several areas of their lives. Because they realize that they sometimes experience difficulty in their reasoning or problem solving, they take deliberate measures to monitor and improve their thinking. They are aware of the need to assess and improve their thinking, but they “lack a systematic plan for improving their thinking, hence their efforts are hit and miss.” These thinkers are aware of the elements of reasoning and the standards for assessing reasoning, and they understand the need to internalize these and begin using them consistently. They also have an understanding of the role of egocentrism and can identify times when they are responding egocentrically. They welcome critiques of their own thinking and know that their thinking needs to be self-monitored, though they are sporadic at this self-monitoring.

Stage Four: The Practicing Thinker

Defining Features: These thinkers have an awareness of how our thinking tends to be flawed, have an understanding of the basic elements of reasoning and standards for assessing reasoning, know that our thinking needs to be monitored and corrected, and understand that we are basically egocentric if we do not challenge our own assumptions. They actively analyze their thinking across many areas of their lives, but are only beginning to assess their thinking in a systematic way. They understand that the human mind tends to be self-deceptive, and they attempt to assess and critique their own conclusions, beliefs, and opinions. However, they still have “limited insight into deeper levels of thought, and thus into deeper levels of the problems embedded in thinking.”

Stage Five: The Advanced Thinker

Defining Features: These thinkers have “established good habits of thought which are ‘paying off’.” They actively analyze, assess, and critique their own thinking in the significant areas of their lives, and they also have insight and understanding of problems at deeper levels of thought. While they are able to think well (apply

elements and standards) across many areas of their lives, they may not do this at a consistently high level across all areas at all times. These thinkers have a well-developed sense of their own egocentric nature, and they strive to be fair-minded. If they “catch” themselves displaying bias or applying a double standard, they quickly correct their thinking in an attempt to be intellectually fair. They have a developed understanding of the relationships between thoughts, desires, emotional needs, and feelings. These thinkers sometimes lapse into egocentrism and reason in a one-sided way. Though they understand that egocentrism will always play a role in their thinking, they are able to control the extent of their egocentrism through careful monitoring of their thoughts.

Stage Six: The Accomplished Thinker

Defining Features: These thinkers have established a systematic plan to assess and correct their own thinking, and are also continually critiquing this plan in order to improve their thinking. They have almost completely internalized the elements of reasoning and the standards for assessing reasoning, so that the application of the elements and standards is both conscious and deeply intuitive for them – metacognitive application of the elements and standards has just become “how they think” and how they make sense of the world around them. They “regularly raise their thinking to the level of conscious realization,” assessing and critiquing their own thoughts, conclusions, and opinions to uncover bias, egocentrism, and logical fallacies. They have extensively practiced critical thinking traits and skills, and are able to develop new insight into deeper levels of thought. Accomplished thinkers are deeply invested in fair-mindedness, and regularly recognize and control their own egocentric nature. They systematically monitor the logic, relevance, accuracy, precision, clarity, sufficiency, depth, and breadth of their claims and thoughts, and have “deep insights into the systematic internalization of critical thinking into their habits.” They understand and can recognize the relationships between thoughts, desires, feelings, and emotional needs, and can correct their thinking when they are motivated by irrelevant emotions. They can think through complex issues with exemplary judgment, insight, and intellectual depth. The intellectual character traits of the critical thinker are deeply integrated into the accomplished thinker, and they are known to display intellectual fairness, empathy, humility, perseverance, and strength. They are problem solvers who bring people together, seek out alternatives, display sound judgment, and lead through example.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. Consider the features and characteristics of each stage of critical thinking development. What stage describes how you reasoned when you were in high school? Share specific experiences from your life which reflect that stage of thinking.**
- 2. Did you begin to change or develop as a critical thinker in college? How? Share specific experiences which demonstrate these changes.**
- 3. Assess your own recent development as a critical thinker. Do you think you’ve advanced through any of these stages this semester? Why or why not?**
- 4. If you have not, what are some barriers to advancing and moving through these stages? If you have, what has enabled you to advance in or develop your skills as a critical thinker?**
- 5. What are your personal goals for yourself in the area of critical thinking? Be specific.**