
THE CASE AGAINST “CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS”:
IN PURSUIT OF A HUMANIZING PEDAGOGY

Morgan Anderson
Georgia State University

Current educational discourse is rife with the phrase “critical thinking skills.” The term is wielded with such indiscretion among educators, reformers, and education policy makers that it has become commonsensical to believe that imparting critical thinking skills is an indispensable aspect of education. For example, according to the Common Core State Standards Initiative website, one of the primary goals of the core standards is “developing critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills students will need to be successful.”¹ I wonder, have current conceptions of “critical thinking skills” coupled with our repeated attempts to reduce learning to a set of transferable skills impacted the teaching and learning process?² More specifically, how might the rise of the era of Common Core Learning Standards and its conception of “critical thinking skills,” or lack thereof, contribute to creating learning environments that are antithetical to critical thinking?

Interestingly, despite an increasing focus on the fostering of critical thinking skills, a close reading of the Common Core State Standards for “English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects,” Grades K–12, reveals that nowhere in the sixty-six page document do the literacy standards define or address what “critical thinking” is, or what a “skill” is.³ Perhaps this should not be surprising, as those such as Deron Boyles have illustrated that the term “skill,” through its unrelenting use as a qualifier for nearly every human activity (e.g. “reading skills,” “writing skills,” “interpersonal communication skills,” and lately, “critical thinking skills”), has become completely devoid of meaning.⁴ I argue that this trend—a myopic focus on allegedly measureable skill sets—is symptomatic of the larger

¹ “What Parents Should Know,” *Common Core State Standards Initiative*, accessed April 27, 2015, <http://www.corestandards.org/what-parents-should-know/>.

² For an in depth treatment of this topic see Deron Boyles, “An Argument for the Deletion of the Word ‘Skills’ from the English Language,” *Journal of Thought* 28, no. 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 1993), 95–100.

³ “What Parents Should Know.” For the purpose of this paper, I chose to do only a close reading of the Common Core State Standards for “English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects.” My background in high school English education positions me to be able to critique this document with greater confidence than I would have otherwise been able to review the standards for “Mathematics.” However, the problems I’ve detected in the Literacy Standards also seem prevalent in the standards for mathematics.

⁴ Boyles, “Argument for the Deletion,” 95.

educational climate that Dewey would critique as a misguided “quest for certainty.”⁵ Rather than engaging with and embracing the messiness and uncertainty that is characteristic of human growth and inquiry, current proponents of reforms such as the Common Core would have us believe that it is possible—and desirable—to reduce complex human activities to a tidy set of definable and measurable skills. As Dewey observed, “in the absence of actual certainty in the midst of a precarious and hazardous world, men cultivated all sorts of things that would give them the *feeling* of certainty.”⁶ The worry is that the Common Core’s treatment of “critical thinking” as reducible to a set of transferable skills is merely providing us a “feeling” of certainty—in Dewey’s sense—and in fact precluding serious engagement with the process of cultivating critical students and citizens. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, through a close reading of the standards, I seek to critique the Common Core on its own terms by arguing that the failure to define terms such as “critical thinking” and “skills” reveals a deeper conceptual problem with the standards themselves. Namely, it underscores the inevitability of arriving at superficial, vague outcomes when we attempt to reduce complex endeavors to discrete, measurable outcomes. I will then argue instead for a reconsideration of our understanding of “critical thinking” that promotes a humanizing pedagogy and embraces the decidedly untidy nature of teaching and learning, instead of one that assumes that students are receptacles for teachers to equip with mere “skills.”⁷

“SKILLS” ACCORDING TO THE STANDARDS

The goal of developing critical thinking skills—among other skill sets—lies at the heart of the Common Core State Standards. According to the “Frequently Asked Questions” portion of the Common Core Standards Initiative website, “In particular, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills are interwoven into the standards.”⁸ In a recent statement from Arne Duncan entitled “A Back-to-School Conversation with Teachers and School Leaders,” Duncan assured teachers that recent reform efforts are aimed at preparing “kids to succeed in an age when the ability to think critically and creatively, communicate skillfully, and

⁵ See John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷ For Freire’s notion of “problem posing” versus the “banking concept” of education see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 43–69.

⁸ “Frequently Asked Questions,” *Common Core State Standards Initiative*, accessed April 27, 2015, <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/frequently-asked-questions/>.

manipulate ideas is vital.”⁹ The Secretary of Education continues his attempt to comfort us by saying, “We’ve committed a third of a billion dollars to two consortia of states working to create new assessments that get beyond the bubble test, and do a better job of measuring critical thinking and writing.”¹⁰ Here, we see that both the core documents and surrounding discourse from proponents of the standards are consistent in the message that the core standards are meant to foster measurable skill sets aimed at promoting critical thinking and problem solving, which will lead to further success both in school and beyond.

The introduction to the core standards for English Language Arts & Literacy explain that the purpose of the standards is to “specify the literacy skills and understandings required for college and career readiness,” and that these “skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace.”¹¹ The document explains that the College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards, which began as a prior initiative by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governor’s Association (NGA), serve as the “backbone” for the present Common Core State Standards.¹² These backbone standards, referred to as “anchor standards” in the current document, are broad standards listed at the beginning of each literacy section (“reading,” “writing,” “speaking and listening,” and “language”), which are then further detailed according to grade level. According to the document, “The CCR and grade-specific standards are necessary complements—the former providing broad standards, the latter providing additional specificity—that together define the skills and understandings that all students must demonstrate.”¹³ For example, under the “College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading,” anchor standard number four under “craft and structure” requires that students “interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.”¹⁴ This is meant to be clarified, then, by the

⁹ Arne Duncan, “A Back to School Conversation with Teachers and School Leaders,” *Homeroom* (blog), U.S. Department of Education, August 21, 2014, <http://www.ed.gov/blog/2014/08/a-back-to-school-conversation-with-teachers-and-school-leaders/>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Washington, D.C.: Author, 2010), 3.

¹² For more information on the College and Career Readiness Standards see U.S. Department of Education, “College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards for Adult Education,” last updated August 21, 2013, <http://www.ed.gov/edblogs/ovae/2013/04/22/college-and-career-readiness-ccr-standards-for-adult-education/>

¹³ National Governor’s Association, *Common Core State Standards*, 18, 25, 35, 48, 51, 60, 63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

corresponding grade-specific standard, which for Grade 6 reads, “determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.”¹⁵ Here, the word “interpret” from the anchor standards is meant to be clarified by the phrase “determine words and phrases” in the grade-specific standard. Additionally, the grade-specific standard omits “technical,” only requiring students to determine “figurative” and “connotative” meanings, leaving the anchor standard and grade-specific standard otherwise identical. For the same anchor standard above, the grade-specific anchor standard for Grade 3 reads, “determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from nonliteral language.”¹⁶ Here, we simply see the second half of the anchor standard specified for third graders as being able to “distinguish literal from nonliteral language.”

In addition to describing how the anchor standards and grade-specific standards work in tandem to define the skills students are required to demonstrate, the introduction to the core standards explains that the focus ought to be on “results rather than means.”¹⁷ In the section entitled “A focus on results rather than means” we learn that by “emphasizing required achievements” over the process required for students to reach these outcomes, teachers are free to use “whatever tools and knowledge” at their disposal, so long as the standards—defined by the anchor and grade-specific standards in tandem—are met by the end of each year.¹⁸

AN ANALYSIS OF “SKILLS” IN THE STANDARDS

An initial close reading of the literacy standards reveals that—despite the emphasis placed on the acquisition of specific skills—nowhere in the document is there a definition or explanation of what a “skill” is. As demonstrated by the example above, specific “skills” are only defined by the anchor standard in combination with the grade-specific standard. This often results in the ambiguous term “skill” being defined only in terms of other ambiguous terms such “analyze,” “demonstrate,” or “integrate” in the specific standard strands for each grade. In the case of the anchor standard for reading mentioned above, merely synonyms for the same idea are given for specific grades. For example, “interpret” in the anchor standard is changed to “determine meanings of words or phrases” for Grade 6, and “figurative” and “technical language” in the anchor standard are changed to “literal and nonliteral language” for Grade 3. While the introduction to the core standards claim that the anchor standards in conjunction with the grade-specific standards “together define the skills,” these attempts to further clarify the expectations of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

the standards for the teacher seem to only result in the grade-specific standards being adapted to grade-specific language, leaving the standard itself still vague. In other words, instead of the grade-specific standards clarifying the “skill” for the instructor, they seem merely to have been adapted in order to be understood by a student in that grade level.

I am not critiquing the idea that expectations ought to be clear for students to understand, nor am I calling for a “better” definition of what a “skill” is. Instead, I seek to illustrate the rabbit hole of opaque skill language we quickly tumble down as we attempt to reduce large concepts to finite, measurable units. Engaging in a spirited debate is reduced to “initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussion (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grades 9-10 topics, texts and issues*, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.”¹⁹ Finding a book that sparks an interest, voraciously reading it through lunchtime and bragging to someone at home about what was learned is reduced to “cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.”²⁰ Composing a poem to cope with heartache or celebrate joy is reduced to “produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.”²¹ This point is further articulated by Deron Boyles in his essay “An Argument for the Deletion of the Word ‘Skills’ from the English Language”: “While over-use is an understatement, the result of the over-use of ‘skills’ is, at best, the generation of platitudes and, at worst, the destruction of intellectual clarity.”²² By attempting to truncate a human experience into easily digestible and measurable units, we actually forsake clarity and limit possibilities for teaching and learning.

Additionally, I believe it is necessary to draw attention to the section of the introduction to the standards entitled “A focus on results rather than means.” While it seems as though the sentiment of this message ought to be comforting for teachers—they have “freedom” so long as they ensure each student meets the required standard at the end of the year—the philosophical underpinnings are quite jarring. What I take to be the site of educative experiences—the teaching and learning *process*—are essentially disregarded by the authors of the document as irrelevant, so long as they are able to get students to demonstrate a “skill.” My point here is not that we ought to standardize the process of teaching and learning as well as the intended outcome. Instead, I argue that the privileging of measureable results over means reflects the broader philosophy behind the “skills” ideology: Learning is reduced to skill acquisition, as teachers are meant to focus on their students’

¹⁹ Ibid., 50.

²⁰ Ibid., 38.

²¹ Ibid., 21.

²² Boyles, “Argument for the Deletion,” 98.

ability to perform a skill set, by which teachers are also ultimately assessed themselves.

IMPLICATIONS FOR “CRITICAL THINKING”

At the heart of Common Core discourse lies the idea that with the successful implementation of this national set of “high expectations” and standards, students will become equipped with the critical thinking skills they will need to be successful. Setting the polemics of what it means, or should mean, to be “successful” aside, I believe we have reason to approach this idea with grave suspicion.²³

Under the guise of preparing students for college and career by imparting to them a collection of skills, we are meant to believe that our students will become critical thinkers. “Critical thinking” itself never appears in any of the standards, leaving us to assume that by attempting to demonstrate an ability to “analyze,” “synthesize,” “determine,” and “interpret”—skills that seem indeterminate and impossibly difficult to measure—students will absorb a sense of criticality of the world around them. One is left to wonder, amidst the project of ceaselessly attempting to get students to “demonstrate” the appropriate skills, when or how can we foster a robust sense of criticality? A series of skill driven standards seems more likely to result in students discovering how to routinely perform—and I use “perform” here pejoratively—the skill they know is being expected of them. Students are dehumanized in the process by having no control over the expectations for their learning, and by it being presumed that they require skill sets to be “dumped” into them. This environment and these standards are antithetical to criticality for students, and the teachers who are expected to unthinkingly enact them. We must abandon any educational program that privileges reductionistic standards, rather than the process of teaching and learning.

Harvey Siegel assists us in conceiving of a rich understanding of critical thinking through his notion of the “critical spirit.”²⁴ A critical spirit can be characterized as a “complex of dispositions, attitudes, habits of mind, and character traits.”²⁵ Siegel argues that even if we are successful in fostering

²³ While I think an attempt to define “critical thinking” would only engage in the reductionistic thinking I argue against, others have made attempts to define the term explicitly, and how “critical thinking skills” are best taught. For a treatment of this topic see Thomas Rabak, “Beyond Theory: The Art and Practice of Critical Thinking,” *Journal of Correctional Education* 39, no. 2 (June 1988), 54–57.

²⁴ Harvey Siegel, “Neither Humean Nor (Fully) Kantian Be: Reply to Cuypers,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39, No. 3 (2005), 537. While it would be a mistake to characterize Siegel as a Deweyan, I believe his notion of a “critical spirit” is helpful in capturing the complexity of the project of working with students to engage in genuine critical thought.

²⁵ Stefaan E. Cuypers and Haji Ishtiyaque, “Education for Critical Thinking: Can it be Non-indoctrinative?,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 38, No. 6 (2006), 725.

student dispositions toward critical thought, there is no guarantee that this can affect their behavior in the world. He helps to point out that the cultivation of critical thoughts among our students is an imprecise, untidy, unscientific, and ongoing project. In this sense, Dewey would be in agreement; there is no discrete point of arrival in the fostering of critical thinking.

Instead of accepting the reductionistic thinking offered in the Common Core Standards, I argue we must seek a humanizing pedagogy that values the maximizing of educative experiences for students and teachers alike. If we cannot reduce complex human activity to finite measureable units, as I have argued that we also should not do, I believe we ought to focus our efforts on enhancing the quality and quantity of the learning experiences themselves. As Dewey would argue, there is no better preparation than this: “We always live at the time we live and not some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience we are prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything.”²⁶

If the authors of these standards are true to their word when they predicate, “The Standards are intended to be a living work; as new and better evidence emerges, the Standards will be revised accordingly,”²⁷ I call for sound philosophical objection to be considered as “evidence” that demonstrates the necessity of revision, or abandonment, of the Common Core State Standards.

²⁶ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 51.

²⁷ National Governor’s Association, *Common Core State Standards*, 3.
