

On Thinking Skills

A Symposium Proposal

Stephen Johnson

Stephen.g.johnson@btinternet.com

Harvey Siegel

hsiegel@miami.edu

Christopher Winch

Christopher.winch@kcl.ac.uk

"On Thinking Skills"

The existence of thinking skills and the possibility of teaching them has been a recurring theme in education in England and Wales, culminating in their adoption as cross-curricular themes ten years ago. However, the nature of thinking skills, if indeed there are such things, is poorly understood. The possibility, let alone the efficacy, of teaching them rests on a good understanding of whether they exist and what they might be. Problems rest with both the terms 'thinking' and 'skills'. In this symposium, Stephen Johnson questions their existence and, *a fortiori* the possibility of teaching them. Harvey Siegel replies and offers a defence of the existence of thinking skills and of their place in the curriculum. The debate promises to bring clarity to a topic that has long been understood to be of the greatest importance for education, while at the same time being shrouded in obscurity and ambiguity, due in no small part to the difficulties in establishing what is at issue and which parts of the discussion are apt for resolution through philosophical methods and which through empirical investigation. Chris Winch will chair the discussion and engage with Johnson and Siegel over points that need further development during the course of the discussion. The symposium coincides with the launch of the first of the volumes in Continuum's 'Key Debates' series in which Johnson and Siegel debate with each other over thinking skills. Winch provides an introduction and lengthy afterword.

Stephen Johnson

The present Schools Standards Site states that 'Since the review by Carol McGuinness in 1998 [*From Thinking Skills to Thinking Classroom*] and the explicit inclusion of thinking skills in the National Curriculum, interest in the teaching of thinking skills has burgeoned in the UK.' The influence of this review is beyond doubt, not only on the National Curriculum but also in the boost it has given to Critical Thinking courses. I believe that the notion of thinking that the review promotes, and which is now pervasive, is seriously misconceived and educationally damaging. It is this notion of thinking that I critique on the following grounds.

1. The appeal of thinking skills rests largely on the view that they are generally transferable. This view is mistaken.
2. The myth of general transferability rests upon a number of fallacies and conceptual errors.
3. The direct approach to teaching thinking can lead to knowledge playing a subsidiary role and even being seen as an impediment.
4. 'Mental processes' are dubious entities and access to them is highly problematic. They support the myth of general transferability and encourage a checklist approach to thinking.
5. Suggested examples of general thinking skills do not stand up to examination.

6. Thinking skills present numerous dangers: the disparagement of knowledge, the impersonalizing and neutralizing of thought, the neglect of truth, and the computerization of thought.

I conclude that the inclusion of thinking skills in the National Curriculum is thus hasty and ill-considered. I therefore recommend a thorough grounding in curriculum areas of knowledge, together with the development of certain habits of mind.

Harvey Siegel

Stephen Johnson's well-known critical analysis of the UK government's understanding of thinking skills as manifested in the English National Curriculum and its supporting documents is as acute and timely now as it was when it was first published. I agree with much of Johnson's critique of that understanding, including his trenchant criticisms of both the language used in its articulation and the policies flowing from it. But I think that Johnson's critique of thinking skills in some ways goes too far. In this presentation I review the central components of his critique, including those concerning matters metaphysical (there are no thinking skills; whatever thinking is, it's not a skill or set of skills) and pedagogical (even if there were such a thing as thinking skills, it would be a pedagogical mistake to teach for them). Particularly noteworthy is Johnson's critique of the idea of *general* or *generalizable* thinking skills; his arguments here are complex and will be a central focus of my discussion.

In the course of examining Johnson's critique, I will briefly defend my own positive view - which I think falls between the enthusiastic embrace of general thinking skills in the National Curriculum that Johnson effectively criticizes, and Johnson's strong rejection of such skills - according to which there are indeed some educationally important thinking/reasoning skills or abilities, that admit of normative evaluation in terms of appropriate criteria, and that are general in the sense that they can be applied to many diverse situations and subject matters.