The development of student critical thinking (CT) skills has become an increasingly important goal across university curricula. As a result, there has been significant academic discussion aimed at identifying its components as well as the best pedagogical strategies for imparting it. For example, in 1990, an interdisciplinary panel of 46 scholars deliberated on the major skills that make up CT and issued The Delphi Report, defining CT as “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment” arrived at via “a core set of cognitive skills—analysis, interpretation, inference, explanation, and evaluation” (Facione et al., 1995). Other relevant cognitive skills have been identified, including problem solving, hypothesis formation, and calculating likelihoods (Halpern, 2003). Robert Ennis (1993) has identified ten characteristics that go with effective critical thinking, many of which are unmentioned in the previous accounts, such as asking appropriate questions, planning experiments, defining terms, and being open-minded.

Although there is no complete consensus on which cognitive skills, character traits, or behaviours should be included in our understanding of CT, we all work with our own implicit understandings of what it is and can recognise it when demonstrated by students in the classroom. Put simply, students with strong CT skills have a better understanding of the information that they receive and are more likely to consider its quality and assumptions (Facione, 2013, p. 5). They are capable of making judgments and grounding them in good reasons (Halpern, 2003, p. 138). They are flexible in their thinking and capable of revising their own judgments when confronted with new ideas and information (Facione, 2013, p. 7). As a result, they are better able to succeed when faced with problems that have complex causes or debatable solutions (Halpern, 2003, p. 350).

Curricular strategies for providing students with CT skills have generally taken one of two tacks: either a stand-alone approach, in which principles of logic, reasoning, and argumentation are taught as the sole course learning objective, or an integrated approach, in which CT is taught as part of a subject course in which the acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge is also a major learning objective (Renaud & Murray, 2008; Hatcher, 2010). Integrated courses first instruct students in CT skills and then ask students to deploy them to deepen intellectual engagement with course materials.

In this article, I propose that there are important benefits of taking an integrated approach to CT instruction. Specifically, I hope to show that an integrated approach to CT instruction facilitates student development of new literacies appropriate to modern communication environments.
Much academic work has investigated the “new” literacies required of today’s citizens: information literacy, computer literacy, (new) media literacy, and visual literacy (The New London Group, 1996; Kellner, 1998). These have been added to the more traditional print literacy concerns of reading and writing. These new literacies are often referred to as multimodal literacies because they require that students understand how to interpret, evaluate, and produce documents that are visual, aural, textual, or a hybrid of these distinct communicative modes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2008). In what follows, I will discuss one of these new multimodal literacies—media literacy—and show how it can be encouraged in the integrated CT classroom.

Media literacy entails “approaches that make us aware of how the media construct meanings, influence and educate audiences, and impose their messages and values” (Kellner & Share, 2007). It thus requires class readings or lectures that provide knowledge of media genres, production contexts, and case studies so that students have a set of facts, concepts, and theories that they can draw on as they practice critical interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and explanation. These CT skills then allow students to make their own inferences, develop their own arguments, and participate in the academic conversations to which they are exposed.

Teaching critical media literacy is especially important in college classrooms because students, as media consumers, are influenced in subtle but far-reaching ways by the media they encounter. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share suggest that the media provide a kind of “public pedagogy” that teaches “proper and improper behavior, gender roles, and knowledge of the world” (2007, p. 4). Art Silverblatt concurs, claiming that “media presentations convey cumulative messages that shape, reflect, and reinforce attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, and myths that define a culture” (2001, p. 5). This occurs in part because media consumers, who have limited time and attention, automatically process the bulk of the messages that they encounter rather than expending the effort that would be required to evaluate them (Potter, 2004). However, because the possible danger of such public pedagogies rests in a simple lack of reflection on the part of media consumers, critical thinking education aimed at developing media literacy offers a solution. The value of an integrated approach to CT instruction in this context is that it enables consideration of the varied contexts, genres, and communicative modes relevant to the deconstruction and reevaluation of media texts.

The integrated CT classroom is a good space to teach such critical analyses of media texts. Take, as an example, teaching Steve McCurry’s iconic “Afghan Girl” photograph, published in National Geographic magazine’s June 1985 issue, in an integrated CT classroom aimed at introducing students to (1) CT skills and (2) knowledge of photojournalism history and theories. I have taught (and will continue to teach) this image and its history in my Ideas and Exposition module, IEM1201K “Photography and Society”, for the University Town College Programme (UTCP). The goal of the lesson is for students to understand how the context of circulation impacts the meaning and social value of a photograph. This requires students to consider the image and its placement in relation to text, in relation to other images, and in relation to larger cultural or political contexts that may influence its meaning. Put simply, the image has a different function framed on a gallery wall of the Singapore ArtScience Museum, on display in the National Geographic retail store, on the cover of a coffee table book, on a souvenir postcard, or on a political blog arguing for the continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

In class I divide students into groups, give each group a different example of the photograph’s use, and ask them to work together to figure out how the context shapes the meaning of the image. To accomplish this task, students have to practice critical thinking skills associated with critical media literacy. They start with a commonsense or naïve view of the image—it is “striking,” “beautiful,” “haunting,” etc.—and then they have to reflect on their previous view...
and question their own assumptions based on their analysis of the surrounding context (Facione et al., 1995). This leads to the development of an interpretation that can be argued for with appropriate evidence drawn from that context. The result is the identification of a deeper level of meaning to the text, which is a key recognition according to advocates of critical media literacy because it allows students to explain who might benefit from and who might be harmed by the publication and circulation of the image (Kellner & Share, 2007).

Students have demonstrated their development of these skills in a variety of ways. Quantitative data from my teaching evaluations shows that students believe that the course as a whole has enhanced their own thinking ability, and these results were above the mean for department and faculty teaching (4.609/5). Qualitative student feedback supports this as well, with students commenting on the value of critical thinking skills imparted during instruction (e.g., “does not spoonfeed answers but promotes individual critical thinking,” “readings are difficult but also prompt further thoughts about the issue at hand, which compels us to explore more about the topic outside of class”). More concretely, final papers produced by my students consistently show their ability to critically examine media images that we have not discussed in class. They have demonstrated this ability on topics as varied as gendered representational conventions in fashion advertising, representations of war and disaster in the news, and controversies over photo-manipulation.

Teaching critical thinking together with media literacy may further aid students because it shows them that they can practice their critical thinking skills in their daily lives and even use them to help others. One group of students did just this, employing their media literacy skills outside of the classroom to inform public advocacy work. They started the University Town Project to Humanize Foreign Workers and held a photo exhibition, displayed at the University Town Plaza, raising awareness of the hopes, aspirations, and struggles of foreign domestic workers in Singapore. They used classroom knowledge to create a sensitive, thought-provoking exhibit that avoided common problems of stereotyping and speaking for others that so often plague (and secretly undermine) such advocacy campaigns.

The approach to integrated CT instruction and media literacy suggested here could be employed in courses across a wide range of disciplines. Although disciplines traditionally associated with media studies such as journalism or communication studies might be the most obvious examples, CT and media literacy have been successfully integrated into curricula in the sciences (Sperry, 2012), cultural studies (Radeloff & Bergman, 2009), psychology (King, 1995), and sociology (Malcolm, 2006; Daniels, 2012). An advantage of this approach is that it does not assume that a single, stand-alone course is sufficient to teach students to be appropriately critical, and rather that CT instruction and the development of new literacies can and should be actively pursued across the curriculum and throughout students’ education.

**About the Author**

Dr. Walter Patrick Wade currently teaches Ideas and Exposition modules at the University Town residential colleges for the Centre for English Language Communication. He believes that adopting critical thinking and media literacy pedagogies goes a long way in enriching his students’ in-class learning as well as transfer of skills outside of the classroom.
Endnote

This project was funded in part by a Teaching Enhancement Grant (TEG) from CDTL.

References


