

Critical Thinking in the Secondary Curriculum

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"Most people," Oscar Wilde tells us, "are other people, their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation."

If Oscar Wilde were talking about high school students, the "other people" would be parents. Many high school students mimic the opinions and biases of their parents without any real understanding of their parents' beliefs. After voting for the first time in November, I cannot say for certain whether I voted for Barack Obama because my father is a staunch Democrat or because I had independently evaluated the candidate's positions and judged Mr. Obama to have the most promising ideas. Too many of my high school friends went to the polls this year without sufficient knowledge of the candidates. If we want our youth to be free thinkers and not just copies of their parents, it is imperative that we introduce them to a variety of viewpoints and give them time for reflection.

Students are not taught to develop original thoughts. Controversial topics are avoided in my home and in my school. My brother and I are expected to defend the positions held by our father. As an attorney, my father benefits from the fact that medical malpractice suits in Pennsylvania do not have monetary caps for pain and suffering. While doctors in Pennsylvania who save thousands of lives have been forced to stop practicing because of law suits brought about by attorneys like my father, we never discuss the consequences of Pennsylvania law on medical care because my father doesn't want to hear criticisms of his views from his children.

Too many high schools avoid controversial issues as well. If a discussion is likely to lead to a parental complaint, teachers avoid it. This leaves high school students little room for free thought. The problem is that our next generation of leaders will confront our most vexing problems. High school students must be introduced to modern philosophical debates on abortion, assisted suicide, cloning, genetic manipulation, and assisted reproduction. Our "bioethics" class has forced us to do just that: to think about these difficult problems, to come to conclusions, and to defend why we believe in what we do. When children are permitted to simply regurgitate their parents' beliefs rather than struggling with the issues and forming their own opinions, they do not develop the skills needed to adapt to change.

We are all philosophers, whether we recognize it or not. We all decide whether or not to go to church and whether or not to support socialized medicine. If we are to be good philosophers, we need time to reflect, time to consider the traditional viewpoints with which we have grown up. Many past thoughts have been founded on reasoning that was good for the time, but only the most complacent thinkers today would claim that present knowledge is as far as it goes. To advance we must build upon and criticize the beliefs of those who came before.

Those whose beliefs are nothing more than quotations from the past will not be good philosophers. I am afraid we have let our high school students become merely mimics. They are philosophers in the weakest sense of the word. If children simply adopt their parents' beliefs, they will be incapable of adapting to the rapidly changing technological world. High school students need time to consider the issues of the day and they need courses that encourage them to develop their analytical skills. Understanding is always a journey. That journey must begin in high school.