Critical Thinking in Everyday Life

by Winston Sieck - February 26, 2017

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Have you ever been listening to one of your teacher's lessons and thought that it had no relevance to your own life?

You're not alone. Just about every student has felt the same way.

Sure, you use critical thinking skills in the classroom to solve word problems in math, write essays in English, and create hypotheses in science.

But how will you use critical thinking in everyday life?

First, keep in mind that critical thinking is simply a "deliberate thought process."

Basically, it means that you are using reason and logic to come to a conclusion about an issue or decision you are tangling with.

And clear, sound reasoning is something that will help you every day.

To help you make the leap from classroom to real world, here are 3 concrete examples of critical thinking in everyday life.

Fake News vs. Real News

Take a moment to reflect on your media skills. Do you think you have what it takes to sort out a real news source from a piece of clever advertising?

According to a recent study from Stanford University, a whopping 82% of the teens surveyed could not distinguish between an ad labeled “sponsored content” and a legitimate news story.

Part of the problem may come from schools cutting back on formal instruction of critical thinking skills and an assumption that today’s “digital native” teens can automatically tell the difference without practice or instruction.

You are good at lots of things. But, you know, you’ve practiced those things you’re good at. So, how can you practice telling fact from fiction?

One way (outside of school) is to chat with your family and friends about media sources. Find out how they stay informed, and why they choose those outlets. Ask each other routine questions for evaluating sources.
Do your Friends Know Everything?

It's tempting to believe that the world begins and ends with your friends. Don’t get me wrong. Friends are definitely important. However, it pays to reflect a little on how a group influences our lives.

To practice critical thinking in everyday life, take a close look at your group of friends. Are there things that are “forbidden” in your social circle? Are you expected to act a certain way, dress a certain way?

Think a certain way?

It’s natural that when a group defines something as "cool", all the people in the group work to fit into that definition. Regardless of what they individually believe.

The problem is that virtually every situation can be defined in multiple ways. What is "dumb" to one person may be "cool" to another.

Develop your ability to redefine the way you see the world around you. On your own terms.

Find a time when your friend group sees the negative in a situation. Is there a positive way to view it instead? Or at least a way that makes it seem not quite so bad?

You may not be ready to speak up with your independent view. And that’s ok. Just practice thinking differently from the group to strengthen your mind.

Critical Thinking in the Driver’s Seat

One of the core critical thinking skills you need every day is the ability to examine the implications and consequences of a belief or action. In its deepest form, this ability can help you form your own set of beliefs in everything from climate change to religion.

But this skill can also save your life (and your car insurance rate) behind the wheel.

Imagine you are cruising down the freeway when your phone alerts you to an incoming text message. The ability to examine your potential actions and their accompanying consequences will help you make the best choice for how to handle the situation.

Do you look at the text and risk getting into an accident? Do you wait and risk not responding to an urgent matter? Or do you pull over to look at the text and risk being late for your appointment?

The same skill can be applied when you are looking for a place to park, when to pull onto a busy street, or whether to run the yellow light.

Better yet, the more practiced you are at looking at the implications of your driving habits, the faster you can make split second decisions behind the wheel.

Why Critical Thinking in Everyday Life Matters
Literally everyone can benefit from critical thinking because the need for it is all around us.

In a philosophical paper, Peter Facione makes a strong case that critical thinking skills are needed by everyone, in all societies who value safety, justice, and a host of other positive values:

“Considered as a form of thoughtful judgment or reflective decision-making, in a very real sense critical thinking is pervasive. There is hardly a time or a place where it would not seem to be of potential value. As long as people have purposes in mind and wish to judge how to accomplish them, as long as people wonder what is true and what is not, what to believe and what to reject, strong critical thinking is going to be necessary.”

So, in other words, as long as you remain curious, purposeful, and ambitious, no matter what your interests, you’re going to need critical thinking to really own your life.