BOOK REVIEW

Sharon Bailin and Mark Battersby: Reason in the Balance: An Inquiry Approach to Critical Thinking

2nd Edition, Hackett Publishing Company, March 2016, 488 pp

Haixia Zhong[1]

My experience with *Reason in the Balance* (hereafter referred to as RITB) dates back to 2011, when I co-taught a critical thinking course with Dr. David Hitchcock at McMaster University. The text we chose was the first edition of RITB. I was then contacted by China Renmin University Press to translate the text into Chinese, which was published in 2014. Recently, I conducted a workshop in China to train K-12 teachers on how to infuse critical thinking in their classes. The textbook we adopted was the Chinese translation of RITB.

Teaching critical thinking is different from teaching other subjects. This is because teaching critical thinking is not just to teach a certain kind of knowledge, rather, it is mainly about cultivating students' mind. A good critical thinking textbook (or course) should aim to (A) motivate students to think actively; (B) teach them the principles, methods and tools on how to think critically; and (C) facilitate the transference of critical thinking skills to all the parts of their lives where it's appropriate.

The inquiry approach to critical thinking, as proposed by Bailin and Battersby in RITB, is heading in the right direction. It is structured around 6 guiding questions[1]:

1. What is the issue?
2. What kinds of claims or judgments are at issue?
3. What is the context of the issue?

---

[1] *Reason in the Balance*, 2nd ed., p. 26. Note that in the book there are only 5 steps. This 6-step version is from Mark Battersby's keynote speech addressed to the 7th China Conference on Critical Thinking & Creativity, Chengdu, China, 2017. Step 5 as listed here is implicit in the textbook's version. I think the 6-step version is clearer and would like to base my discussion on this version.

✉ Haixia Zhong
  Haixia.zhong@gmail.com

[1] 2047 Buckhorn Ave., Oakville, ON L6M3V5, Canada

4. What are the relevant reasons and arguments on various sides of the issue?
5. How strong is each of the arguments?
6. Weighing and balancing the evaluated arguments, what judgment should we come to?

Most critical thinking texts focus primarily on Step 5, i.e. the analysis and evaluation of individual arguments. Such an approach tries to teach students a stock of critical thinking tools (Phase B), without putting too much effort in motivating students to think (Phase A) or facilitating the transference afterwards (Phase C). Bailin and Battersby's inquiry approach is different, which I shall discuss below.

1 Thought-Provoking Character

Teaching critical thinking is to train students to think in a certain way. Thus, a prerequisite is to make them think in the first place. A good critical thinking textbook (and course) should try to engage students as much as possible. However, too often CT texts stress on symbolic logic, fallacy detection and/or analysis of small de-contextualized arguments. Symbols are far from students' experience, so do de-contextualized examples. Even when a real example is used (e.g. an article from a local newspaper), the case is usually not fully described and what students know is just what provided to them in the passage. The argument is isolated and out of its original context. Students are then asked to analyze and evaluate such arguments. Such way of teaching lacks thought-provoking character as the case is 'out of' the students and they can't see relevance.

In his book *The Child and the Curriculum*, Dewey (1956) pointed out that three typical evils result from a curriculum that is 'out of' students' experience: (i) the lack of any organic connection with what the child has already seen and felt and loved makes the material purely formal and symbolic; (ii) the students lack motivation to learn the material; (iii) by presenting only an abbreviated or 'lite' version of the original material, the really thought-provoking character is obscured (Dewey 1956: 24–26).

The inquiry approach to critical thinking avoids such problems by utilizing the whole process of inquiring into a complex issue. Its thought-provoking character is especially manifested on Step 3, 4, and 6.

A unique feature of the inquiry approach is its emphasis on the importance of understanding the context of an issue (Step 3). It asks the inquirer to investigate into the context of an issue from the following three aspects: the state of practice; the debate; and the intellectual, political, social, and historical contexts. The first two points require one to search for all the relevant evidence and arguments of the issue. It thus enables one to view the issue comprehensively. The third point provides the opportunity for in-depth understanding, which is necessary for one to construct meaning out of the context. The more one dives into an issue, the better that she can see the connections and relevance. The information and arguments are then *psychologized*, and able to stimulate further reflection and thinking. Instead of scratching

the surface and constantly changing topics, RITB strives to research one issue thoroughly (e.g. Chapters 8–10 are dedicatedly to only one topic: capital punishment). From my teaching experience, I found that this step is really important in bridging the students and the material. Once students see relevance and become engaged, we can avoid the three 'evils' that Dewey pointed out half a century ago.

Following the approach, the inquirer is not only asked to search for arguments and evidences supporting the side that she favors, but also the arguments or views that she may not necessarily agree with (Step 4). Again, it provokes the inquirer's thoughts: given the opposing arguments and/or evidence, how she can justify the judgement that she makes (Step 6).

2 Sophistication in Conceptualizing Critical Thinking

Now let's consider what a critical thinking concept we want to teach our students. As Blair (2006) said, many people treat introductory logic courses or informal logic courses as identical as critical thinking courses. However, if we understand critical thinking in a broad sense as a kind of evaluative thinking that uses appropriate criteria to assess candidates for belief or action, then 'it becomes evident that the logic of arguments, formal *or* informal, hardly exhausts the criteria, procedures and strategies needed for informed critical thinking' (Blair 2006: 265).

As we have seen from the six steps listed above, Bailin and Battersby's inquiry approach doesn't limit itself in argument analysis and evaluation. It brings various kind of information that one can encounter in real life under scrutiny. For example, Chapter 6 is dedicated to evaluating information from authority and information found on the Web. Furthermore, it's not limited in the analysis and evaluation of textual arguments. As the book shows to us, the inquiry approach is very flexible and enables us to think critically about a movie (Chap. 2) or a piece of art (Chap. 14), which are typically not included in a critical thinking textbook. It's not hard to imagine applying the same method to many other artifacts such as literature, advertisements, or political campaigns. This conception of critical thinking stretches it out of the traditional 'zone' and inspires the infusion of CT to new areas.

RITB's sophistication in conceptualizing critical thinking is also reflected in the dialectical tier of argumentation (Step 4 and 6). Although the examples in the book have been criticized as usually ending with only two sides—pro and con, it does consider the objections seriously and show us how to weigh the evidence and arguments. More importantly, it doesn't shy away from the hardest part: making a reasoned judgement, a step that is so important in real life but often missing from critical thinking textbooks.

3 The Transferability Problem

Talking about 'real life', I would like to divert to the third phase of successfully teaching critical thinking: facilitating the transference of CT skills. As the authors said, they want to 'teach critical thinking in such a way as to provide students with

the understanding and skills to be able to make reasoned judgements in real-life contexts' (p. xvii). It takes *real* issues as case studies, and it demonstrates how to work through the six steps to solve that problem. The problems that students solve in the classroom and the process they use to solve such problems are not different from the problems they encounter in their daily life. Furthermore, the framework is well organized, and thus easy to remember and apply. Mental availability is very important here, as to facilitate the transference, a CT textbook or course needs to make the approach easy to access and use. When the learner encounters a real problem in her life, the method can come right off the top of her head. Such mental availability is one of the keys to tackle the transferability problem.

On the other hand, the inquiry approach provides a good model to infuse critical thinking into the teaching of different subjects. In the last five chapters, the authors apply the inquiry approach in the natural sciences, the social sciences, the arts, ethics, and the extraordinary and paranormal. Although this textbook is aimed at college students, it can be easily adapted to K-12 level as well. To successfully transfer CT skills is essentially to cultivate students' mind so that they are prone to use critical thinking skills when it's appropriate. There is no shortcut to this. The best we can do is to adopt an approach that is widely applicable both in school subjects and personal lives. Through immersion in such environment day after day, it becomes their second nature. To me, the inquiry approach to critical thinking is a good candidate.

4 Revisions

There are some welcome changes in the revised version as well. Bailin and Battersby are diligent in absorbing new developments from multiple disciplines. For example, new materials on cognitive biases are added to the revised addition (Chap. 11). In Chapter 4, a new argument type, Probative Argument, is added to the traditional deductive/inductive dichotomy (where 'inductive' means generalizing from individual cases to the whole). Probative Argument is defined as 'any non-statistical inductive argument, whether good or bad' (p. 77), which shows the influence of the new theories of inference and argument types in informal logic.

Another improvement of the second edition is that the authors have included an appendix on elementary logic. The first edition has been criticized as treating formal logic too briefly. When I taught with the first edition of RITB, I had to write a supplementary material on logic. From my teaching experience (both in Canada and in China), introducing some basic logic concepts (using at least 1 or 2 instruction hours) proves to be necessary. Thus, I'm happy to see that the authors supplied the additional material on logic.

5 What can be Improved: How to Define an Issue?

In chapter 7, the authors lay out the criteria that an issue for inquiry should satisfy: focused, stated as a question, still controversial, stated in precise and neutral language. Must an issue be controversial? It depends. We can distinguish 'relatively

controversial' from 'absolutely controversial'. From a historic point of view, when an issue first emerged, it must be controversial. But for a young student, many settled issues according to current understanding could still be perplexing. For example, the authors write: 'questions such as … "Is smoking bad for your health?" are not appropriate issues for inquiry as these are not "live" questions but are considered settled according to current consensus (although the first two were controversial at one time)' (p. 165). However, if a teenage is tempted to smoking the first cigarette for his life, but still wondering whether what he has heard from media or people around him is true, shouldn't he inquire it a little further to decide for himself whether he should take the step to smoke? To me, this is a totally legitimate issue for inquiry. And this is a perfect case to show critical thinking as well: we don't accept something as fact simply because everybody around us says so.

Understood in this way, an issue is not just those 'live', unsettled questions. Instead, it can be a settled question but still interesting to a particular individual (or a group), i.e. being relatively controversial. From my point of view, any question that can arouse genuine intellectual curiosity of the inquirer can be a good issue.

Under this broader view, I found the inquiry approach has an even wider range of application. Say a student is trying to understand a poem and there is one widely accepted theory nearly consensus regarding that poem. Then, can this be a legitimate issue for inquiry? Of course, it can! The student can challenge this theory no matter how widely accepted it is, or double check the reasons listed to see whether they make sense. She may end up with confirming that it is the best theory based on the evidence available. But this is *her own* reasoned judgement. Critical thinking in such an inquiry process is shown in full-blown: we don't simply accept a popular theory or a consensus. Instead, we dig into it, try to really understand the complexity behind it and make our own reasoned judgement about it.

Overall, if what we care is cultivating students' mind rather than just passing them a stock of thinking skills or tools, then the inquiry approach as shown in RITB is worth a try. Although some aspects of it need to be fine-tuned, the framework is robust and well-organized. In 2011 when I read its first edition, I made a strong case for the benefits of the book's inquiry approach and persuaded my co-instructor to adopt it. Seven years have passed, and now I want to maintain the original judgement on the second edition of the book.

References

Blair, J. Anthony. 2006. Informal Logic's Influence on Philosophy Instruction. *Informal Logic* 26(3): 259–286.
Dewey, John. 1956. *The Child and the Curriculum*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.