

Helping Students Transition to Critical and Creative Thinking at the Intersection of Communication and Art

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Abstract

*With today's overreliance on credits, attendance, grades, and general "spoon feeding", an infusion of creative and critical thinking is essential. If the goal of college-level general education is to prepare students for generative and productive civic, personal, and professional lives, then few things could be more crucial than the cultivation of critical and creative thinking. This paper offers a philosophical and practical approach to helping students transition to critical and creative thinking through the rhetorical/visual criticism of art. Specifically, visual criticism of a commercial print, *Coffee Cup*, is used as the vehicle for analysis. Students use Socratic circles to generate questions about the artifact. Art history provides careful visual examination in the form of formal and contextual analysis and an analytical approach. This collaboration across disciplines enables students to realize connections that exist not only between disciplines, but between their own experiences and those of others as communicated through art.*

Key words: creativity, critical thinking, communication, art history, visual criticism

Introduction

The 2011 University of Oxford Roundtable on Educational Reform included participants from diverse academic disciplines and the business sector from the United States, Canada, and Australia. The experience served as a reminder of the inter-connectedness of life. This paper emerged from that meeting of minds at Oxford resulting in a re-affirmation of the strength of interdisciplinary education. This kind of collaboration, coupled with the Socratic method, helps students transition to and develop critical and creative thinking. A practical example of an interdisciplinary approach is provided at the intersection of rhetorical/visual criticism and art history.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's personal and civic life. It involves the comprehension and expression of the meaning or significance of a wide variety of experiences, situations, data, events, judgments, conventions, beliefs, rules, procedures, and criteria. A critical thinker is able to interpret, analyze, evaluate and infer. Strong critical thinkers can also effectively explain what they think and how they arrived at that judgment. They can apply their ability to think critically and thereby advance earlier opinions.

Critical thinkers demonstrate:

- concern to become and remain well-informed,
- alertness to opportunities to use critical thinking,
- trust in the processes of reasoned inquiry,
- self-confidence in their own abilities to reason,

- open-mindedness regarding divergent world views,
- flexibility in considering alternatives and opinions,
- understanding of the opinions of other people,
- fair-mindedness in appraising reasoning,
- honesty in facing their own biases, prejudices, stereotypes, or egocentric tendencies,
- prudence in suspending, making or altering judgments,
- willingness to reconsider and revise views when honest reflection suggests warranted change.

Critical thinkers strive to achieve:

- care in focusing attention on the concern at hand,
- clarity in stating a question or concern,
- orderliness in working with complexity,
- diligence in seeking relevant information,
- reasonableness in selecting and applying criteria,
- persistence though difficulties are encountered,
- precision to the degree permitted by the subject and circumstances.

As long as people have deliberate intentions 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 implied (Facione,1990). The ability to think critically is almost always listed as one of the desirable outcomes of an undergraduate education (Facione et al., 2000; Halpern, 1998, 1999). Although there is considerable disagreement over who should teach such courses, whether they should be stand-alone generic courses or incorporated into specific content areas, and what sorts of thinking skills students should be learning in these courses, there is virtually no disagreement over the need to help college students improve how they think (Facione et al., 1995; Halpern, 2001; Perkins & Solomon, 1989; Terenzini, et al., 1995). There is also virtually no disagreement about the types of learning activities that empower students to think critically. Research consistently identifies student participation, encouragement, and peer-to-peer interaction as being significantly and positively related to critical thinking (Smith, 1977). A study of more than 24,000 college freshmen revealed that writing, interdisciplinary courses, and giving a class presentation are positively correlated with self-reported growth in critical thinking (Tsui, 1999).

In the US, Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton both supported the national education goal for higher education that declared that it was a national priority to enhance critical thinking among college students (National Education Goals Panel, 1991). However, this national priority was never funded. In the UK, the now defunct Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) wrote that higher education courses should foster: “the development of students’ intellectual and imaginative powers; their understanding and judgment; their problem-solving skills; their ability to communicate; their ability to see relationships within what they have learned; and to perceive their field of study in a broader perspective” (Quoted in Gibbs, 1992, p.1). Despite all the research, policy statements and good intentions, critical thinking remains a relatively elusive academic outcome. Like many universities both public and private, Alabama State University (ASU) does not make a statement of student learning outcomes or skills students will acquire through their undergraduate educational experience. Queens University of Charlotte (QUC) states that they “value the factors which foster student success: an intimate learning environment, excellence in teaching, intellectual curiosity and an education grounded in the liberal arts tradition which develops *critical thinking*, *creativity*, communication, commitment to ethical behavior and responsible citizenship, and which serves as a foundation for successful and fulfilling lives” (Queens University of Charlotte *Course Catalog 2011-2012*, p.8, emphasis added).

Creative thinking

Critical thinking in formal education emphasizes the skills of analysis – teaching students how to understand claims, follow or create a logical argument, figure out the answer. Creative thinking focuses on exploring ideas, generating possibilities, looking for many right answers, rather than just one. Both of these kinds of thinking are vital to a successful working life, yet creative thinking has traditionally been ignored until after college. Creative thinking stems from the right brain and is generative, lateral, and associative, involves possibility, suspended judgment, is diffuse, subjective, novel, visual.

Critical thinking stems from the left-brain and is analytical, vertical, and linear, involves probability, judgment, is focused, objective, reasoned, and verbal. In problem-solving, both methods of thinking are critical as we must analyze the problem and then find solutions, implement them, and evaluate them. A constant interplay between critical and creative thinking is needed. Both are mutually dependent.

Creative thinkers demonstrate:

- propensity for new ideas,
- acceptance of change,
- flexibility of outlook,
- curiosity about life,
- enjoyment of challenge,
- optimism in finding solutions,
- acceptance of failure as a learning tool,
- interpretation of problems as opportunities,
- willingness to challenge assumptions,
- ability to construct ideas with multiple solutions,
- suspension of judgment,
- perseverance and diligence.

Creative thinkers strive to:

- improve ideas and solutions,
- evolve from the past,
- advance on old ideas,
- question life,
- identify and challenge assumptions behind ideas,
- interpret problems as challenges.

In a world in which entire industries can disappear overnight and highly trained workers are made redundant by new technology and outsourcing, an arts education is not merely a helpful addition to a well-rounded curriculum, it is essential for employment in fields of the future. Pink argues that we are moving into a Conceptual Age in which right-brain qualities—empathy, inventiveness, and creative thinking—will be more valued by society. IBM's study of more than 1,500 CEOs pointed to creativity as the essential attribute of an employee ("Capitalizing", 2010). Unlike a lot of technology systems, the arts are constantly evolving without becoming outdated. A person can learn to think creatively and not have to worry about their creativity becoming redundant in six months. Everyone has substantial creative ability. Children are a manifestation of this. In adults, creativity is too often suppressed through education, but it can and should be reawakened.

Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind* (2005) and *Drive* (2009), is at the forefront of a movement that promotes the importance of an arts education in forming a well-rounded, competitive job-force: "The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers and meaning makers. These people... artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers... will now reap society's richest rewards and share its greatest joys" (Pink, 2005, p.2). In this climate of educational, intellectual and professional change, a liberal arts education is essential. Business schools are turning to the arts for creative thinking, even setting up art studios to encourage creativity in students. Medical schools are turning to drawing and poetry to encourage greater empathy and creative thinking in the medical field. Pink indicates how important it is that educational institutions help reverse the decline in creativity, but that not enough teachers pose problems to their students that require reflective solutions and they are not asking enough questions in school that prompt creative endeavor. Creativity is problem solving, finding unrecognized connections.

Similarly, communication skills are regarded both as essential for employability and career advancement. Because of the changing nature of today's employment picture, employers want and need creative, flexible workers who have a broad range of communication skills. Included among these skills is the ability to read nonverbal communication messages. Knowing the processes and effects of the major visual communication media of our time is now part of the essential knowledge repertoire of an educated person.

An interdisciplinary approach

With an ever-increasing vocational emphasis in higher education and declining enrollments in liberal arts programs, faculty in the arts and humanities are showing renewed interest in interdisciplinary approaches to teaching. The contours of the disciplines themselves are changing. Out of academic necessity, new investigative links are being drawn and old ones re-drawn. Scholars at all levels are seeking to strengthen the connections between diverse disciplines. Nearly seven decades ago, Mark Van Doren wrote in *Liberal Education*: “The connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity...The student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected, even if he revises his view with every succeeding year, has begun the life of learning” (Van Doren, 1943, p.115). These shifts represent an important change in the way we think about the way we think. Collaboration among disciplines is not only the key to academic viability; it effectively communicates the connectedness of things which is foundational to learning. With repeated exposure to interdisciplinary thought, learners develop enhanced critical thinking ability and metacognitive skills, and an understanding of the relations among perspectives derived from different disciplines (Ivanitskaya, Clark, & Primeau, 2002; Smith & McCann, 2001). This paper explores one such collaboration between communication’s rhetorical/visual criticism and art history.

In a commentary published in the *Art Bulletin*, Mitchell (1995) contends that art history has always engaged issues of spectatorship, social relations, and the interests of cultural studies. Communication, and in particular, rhetorical/visual criticism explores the messages and values of art and images. It taps in to history, art, sociology, and other disciplines to uncover the messages and meaning of visual images. The positive outcome of this interdisciplinarity is that “visual culture is...a site of convergence and conversation across disciplinary lines” (Mitchell, 1995, p.540). This is not, as some critics contend, a purely academic exercise with no practical “real world” value or application. Queens University of Charlotte (QUC) and Alabama State University (ASU) believe very strongly that the visual arts and communication lie at the heart of a liberal arts education. Classes at QUC reflect an inter-disciplinary approach, as every student – whether aspiring artist or biologist – experiences the arts through a Cultural Arts class requirement. Likewise, classes at ASU embrace a liberal arts education. Every ASU student must complete at least one fine arts course and most complete at least one communication course as part of their general education curriculum.

Rhetorical/Visual criticism

One area of communication study is rhetorical criticism, one aspect of which is visual criticism. Visual criticism can be distinguished from other modes of criticism by its emphasis on the intended affect of the object of criticism, and by its emphasis on the interrelationships that exist between the artifact and its source or the artifact and its audience. Rhetoric involves symbols rather than signs. Symbols are things that represent other things by virtue of relationship, association, or convention. Signs are direct indications of the presence or existence of a thing. Symbols are distinguished from signs in that symbols have no direct relationship with the thing they represent. The relationship is a human construction connected only indirectly to its referent. Rhetoric is not exclusively a study of public speaking or persuasion; its concern encompasses symbols, and particularly symbols of inducement, whether they are expressed as speeches, essays, in films, drama, novels, poems or visual art. Visual criticism explores the meaning of these symbolic images.

Aesthete Theodore Green identifies three constituents of general criticism: the historical, the re-creative, and the judicial (Green, 1947), with each relating to a corresponding aspect of a work of art. Historical criticism focuses on the work’s historical character and orientation; re-creative criticism focuses on the unique artistic individuality of the work; and judicial criticism focuses on the work’s artistic value. Green states: “the special task of historical criticism is that of determining the nature and expressive intent of works of art in their historical context;...of re-creative criticism...what the artist has actually succeeded in expressing; of judicial criticism...of estimating the value of a work of art in relation to other works of art and to other human values” (Green, 1947, p.370).

There are two general approaches to visual criticism -- re-creation or reconstruction. The difference is whether visual explanations depend on the viewer or the image (Helmets, 2001). Re-creation depends on the viewer; reconstruction depends on the image. Re-creation of an artifact involves the undistracted and unmediated confrontation of the critic with the work. The aim is to see the object as it really is, to make an estimate of the affects of the work itself.

The critic's own sensitivity or personal reaction is integral to this type of criticism. Critical re-creation is an act of personal perception and appreciation; it comprehends an object in the immediate present. Reconstruction views a work of art as a product of the period in which it was produced. It explores the influence of political, cultural, societal forces that influence the art. An example of this is the influence the French and American Revolutions had on English Romanticism. Reconstruction of an artifact is historiography; the present vitality of the work is an irrelevance, perhaps even an impediment to understanding the work of art. Reconstruction insists upon an interpretation in terms of what the artist intended to communicate in and through the artwork. While both re-creation and reconstruction are useful exercises, only reconstruction seeks to discover and preserve the intended meaning of the message.

Historically, images have played an important role in developing consciousness and the relationship of self to its surroundings. We learn who we are by seeing ourselves reflected in images, and we learn who we can become by transporting ourselves into images (Hill & Helmers, 2004). Images have been influencing people for millennia. Images and the pictorial world are powerful communicators and creators of culture. Literate societies have been surrounded by visual rhetoric, overt or subliminal, since before the dawn of the "optical age." Most people are overwhelmed by the flood of images in this digital world. And the often quoted phrase is true: a picture is worth a thousand words. Leonhard Nelson stated: "the processes of reception and interpretation cannot be separated, they are completely interdependent" (Quoted in Geissner, 2008, p.28). This view agrees with that of Ed Black (1979) who, speaking from the perspective of rhetorical criticism, said: "Beyond perception is appraisal; beyond seeing a thing is attaching value to it. These two acts – perception and evaluation – ...are generally experienced as inseparable phases of the same process" (p. 5). If art is an expedition to the truth, then critical analysis and communication provide the path, and it would be both frustrating and frivolous to approach art without the necessary training and intellectual equipment.

Robert Fulghum, in his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, stated that the biggest word of all is "look". "Everything you need to know is in there somewhere" (Fulgham, 2003, p.2). Looking indicates a curious inquisitive mind and some degree of attentiveness, but understanding requires a grasp of the context.

The importance of context

Most basic models of communication present communication as a dynamic, process-oriented activity wherein the participants are sending and receiving messages simultaneously. The goal of this transactional view is to develop and share meaning; in other words, to gain an understanding. This model also acknowledges the process of communication by joining the participants in a relationship that is more than the sum of its parts. It also includes the verbal and non-verbal elements as factors that influence the transaction. The unique feature of this model is the presence of the field of experience of the participants and the negotiated meanings of the message. Overlapping fields represent participants' common knowledge or experiences. These shared experiences can influence the content of the message as well as its meaning. Further, the transactional model views behavior as potentially meaningful to others whether it is intended or not. Central to the model and process of communication is context. The context of any communicative act affects all other aspects of the process: who the potential participants might be, the nature of the messages, the available channels, and so on. Meanings occur in context. For example, a red light in and of itself holds little or no meaning. But a red light at a traffic intersection communicates a clear message. A red light flashing in a fire station has a different meaning and a red light atop a buoy in a river channel has yet a different meaning. The red light takes on meaning depending on its context.

Thus, an adequate understanding of context is essential to extract accurate meaning in a communicative situation. It provides what the late radio news commentator Paul Harvey used to call "the rest of the story. However, this microwave, instant-messaging society of sound-bites and snippets often overlooks or altogether disregards context often with deleterious effect. Shirley Sherrod was forced out of her job with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for something she said at an NAACP function in March 2010. One sound bite taken from a more than 40-minute speech made it appear that she was a racist who discriminated against a white farmer. When the full context of her speech became known, USDA and White House officials learned that Sherrod's speech was one of reconciliation and a plea to move beyond the racial prejudice of the past. They also learned the hard way that jumping to conclusions can put a strain on one's credibility and others' integrity. The American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist Langston Hughes (1902-1967), in one of his longest poems – *Let America be America Again* (originally published in 1938 during the Great Depression) – used the recurring line "America was never America to me" (Rampersad & Roessel, 1994, p.189).

On the face of it, this line could and has infuriated many patriotic Americans. But it is helpful to know that Hughes was not speaking as a lone voice, but for many desperate and dispossessed people in the country at the time: the poor white, the Negro, the red man, the immigrant. The following verse provides context for his statement: “O, let my land be a land where liberty is crowned with no false patriotic wreath, but opportunity is real, and life is free, equality is in the air we breathe” (Rampersad & Roessel, 1994, p.189). Taking something out of context or failing to take account of the context does not always have a dramatic or harmful effect on the original message or intent. At best, however, it results in an incomplete picture. Context enlightens ignorance, tempers prejudice, and provides meaning.

Art history

Why is art history important to context? Many undergraduate students take art history to fulfill a general education requirement, others to become more cultivated, but more importantly art history teaches us to think differently, to ask interesting questions, to reject standard answers, to see the nuances of things. It is in Belgian painter René Magritte’s (1898-1967) words, “the art of thinking” (Geissner, 2008). It gives us access to our past through an emotional and intellectual experience that helps us develop a visual language. In 20th Century artist Jean Dubuffet’s words: “Art is a language, an instrument of knowledge, an instrument of communication” (Roth & Roth, 1998, p.14).

Our culture is so bombarded with visual images from the television to the Internet that we develop lazy looking. Careful visual examination in the form of contextual and formal analysis constitutes art history. Formal analysis includes the visual and physical aspects of a work. Formal elements include: color, line, space/mass, scale, and composition. Contextual analysis involves going outside the work and includes the writings and experiences of the artist. It involves understanding a work of art in a particular cultural moment. To get at the content or meanings of a work we need to interpret the following:

- Subject matter,
- Material and form (size, shape, texture, color),
- Socio-historic context (including our own),
- Artist’s intentions (if known).

Context enlarges our view by looking at the social, political, spiritual and economic significance of a work. As artist Eliel Saarinen stated: “Always design a thing by considering it in its context – a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan” (Quoted in Ashton, 1985, p.123).

A practical application

Studying a cultural artifact provides students an opportunity to put things in context and to practice critical thinking. For example, students in a rhetorical criticism class or similar communication class are given an assignment in which they are to analyze a work of art. The instructor usually chooses the artifact and asks students to begin their own detailed study of it by brainstorming questions about it. Students then meet in class to discuss their questions in Socratic circles. Once a relatively exhaustive list of questions has been generated, students embark on group and individual research and discussion aimed at addressing the questions.

Typically, Socratic circles consist of two concentric circles of students — one circle focusing on exploring the meaning expressed in the artifact, and a second circle observing the conversation (Copeland, 2005, p.9). In the case of visual criticism, the inner circle begins by posing questions about the artifact. The outer circle observes. After about ten minutes the students switch circles. The new inner circle then adds to, deletes, and/or refines the questions provided by the previous inner circle. The circles continue to alternate as they take turns posing and then answering questions (Copeland, 2005; See also: Foss, 2009, 1992, 1989). Some example questions might be:

- Who is the artist?
- Who is/are the intended audience(s)?
- What is the artist trying to communicate?
- What do I need to know in order to better understand how this was created and what it might mean?
- What assumptions can I (or do I) make about this (message) image?
- What does the artist want me to think/feel?
- What cultural values are being communicated here?

- What other shapes/objects could have been used?
- When was this created?
- Where was this created?
- How did the artist decide on this subject?
- How might others see this same (message) image differently?

The purpose is not simply generating questions and seeking answers, but rather the judging of whether there *is* an answer and, if so, whether or not it is relevant (Faigley et al., 2004). The process is one of exploration. After all, the mark of an educated person is not that they have all the answers, but that they pose important questions.

At the intersection

To demonstrate how this might play out, a locally produced art print is used as the artifact. A critical analysis of *Coffee Cup*, a commercial print created in 2008 as a local collaboration between African/Jewish photographer Wayne St. John and Jewish attorney Mark Farbman, starts with a formal analysis of the bright colors of Pop Art that first arrest the viewer's attention. The print is rendered in a garish pink to an optimistic blue and edgy orange. Then the analysis evolves to a contextual question. Why coffee cups? Is this print another Pop Art image, an icon of our obsessive coffee culture, a Warhol copy, a mass produced print from another Factory? Why anonymous coffee cups and not Starbucks – the commensurate embodiment of our hectic lives resting on moments of escapism in coffee? On closer observation, these cups have more texture than Warhol's Coke bottles or soup cans. In some ways, they are less polished, more expressive – their texture appears somewhat tarnished, damaged by age. The lettering is personal, almost hand-written. There is history implied. The formal and contextual analyses merge to disclose that these vivid yet textured coffee cups are not icons of the present, but reminders of the past. The *Coffee Cup* print has a link to and is symbolic of a historic landmark.



Coffee Cup, printed 2008
 Wayne St. John (artist)
 Mark Farbman (artistic director)
 Carson Tredgett Serigraphics, Inc. (master printer)
 15-color screen print on paper
 34 x 40 in. (overall 42 x 46 in.)
 25 Limited Edition, \$1,200

The Coffee Cup Soda Grill was built and opened in 1948 on the corner of South Clarkson and Dunbar Streets in Charlotte, North Carolina. This food stand (vs. fast-food restaurant), featuring traditional Southern style African American cooking, catered to workers in the surrounding industrial and warehouse district (Survey, 2006). In its early years, White patrons could dine in while Black patrons were allowed to order and pick up meals at the pick-up window, but had to sit on the curb or at a picnic table to eat. It was one of the first Charlotte businesses to embrace diversity by welcoming Black patrons to dine in.

By 1980 an African American former waitress at the Coffee Cup was its co-owner. The Coffee Cup was the sole surviving example in Charlotte's central business district of a roadside food stand that appeared in cities throughout the United States in the 1940s with the advent of the automobile age and the onset of widespread industrialization. The building also served as part of the city's architectural history as an example of the Art Moderne style. This architectural style, popular immediately before and after World War II, featured a sleek cube-like or rectangular shape building with smooth white walls, little ornamentation, and a flat roof. The Coffee Cup was a street level, one-story, masonry building on a treeless lot with a gravel parking area. Its most distinctive features were the three octagonal windows, two on the right side of the building and one on the front. Above the windowless front door was a sign shaped like a coffee cup which read "COFFEE CUP". The cup was colored a light earth tone brown or mocha and the lettering was rust red. The coffee in the cup was black.

The Coffee Cup Soda Grill became an icon of racial equality, diversity, and harmony in Charlotte and a symbol of African American cuisine. The building was appraised at \$3,000 and the 1.17 acres of land on which it sat was appraised at \$814,800 (Survey, 2006). In 2005 Atlanta developer Beazer Homes, Inc. bought the property. That same year the Coffee Cup was recommended for designation as a historic landmark, which it received. The Coffee Cup closed some time in 2007. In May 2008, Beazer Homes petitioned to demolish the Coffee Cup. On or about June 4, 2008 the Coffee Cup sign was stolen. And, despite community opposition and petitions, the Coffee Cup Soda Grill was demolished on September 24, 2009.

The *Coffee Cup* print recalls the history of the Coffee Cup Soda Grill, an African American business that was closed under controversy – a local landmark torn down. *Coffee Cup* now becomes symbolic of that building, a place of community lost, yet not forgotten. In the bright colors and clear simplistic imagery of Pop Art, this print celebrates the Coffee Cup food stand, which has become a poignant icon of the past.

A critique of *Coffee Cup* involves art, history, economics, politics, critical thinking and research. The process provides a conduit for connecting African American students at Alabama State University with the struggle for civil rights in other parts of the South. Awakened by the role one restaurant played in promoting racial harmony, they are less likely to take for granted, and more likely to appreciate, the civil rights landmarks that have been preserved in their own community. They have, through one brief academic exercise, explored and uncovered the often hidden messages and meanings of symbols. Their understanding of and appreciation for *Coffee Cup* has been enriched and deepened. And they have not only connected with a piece of their history, but they have engaged themselves in the process of critical thinking. As poet Robert Frost suggested, they have taken the road less traveled by, and that has made (and will continue to make) all the difference.

Conclusion

With today's overreliance on course texts, memorization, credits, attendance, grades, course outlines and general "spoon feeding", creative and critical thinking is essential. If the goal of college-level general education is to prepare students for generative and productive civic, personal, and professional lives, then few things could be more crucial to a successful college curriculum than the cultivation of critical and creative thinking. Facione et al. (1995), in their study of students' disposition toward critical thinking, found that students "are not inclined toward focus, diligence, and persistence in inquiry" (p.14). As educators assess their own teaching and student learning, emphasis must be placed on the experience, not just on the result. Creative thinking must be as valued as facts, and critical thinking must be as valued as answers. Interdisciplinary classes focusing on the creative process must be reinforced to foster independent thought. Students must be challenged and allowed to take risks, make mistakes, to fail, to realize their full potential. Educators must challenge students to take responsibility for their own education. Central to this process is providing students with experiences in which both creative and critical thinking can develop and mature.

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