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President's column

I dare you to try this at home (or at work)
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At the end of every one of Evel Knievel's spectacular jumps, TV viewers were shown this ominous warning: "Don't try this at home." Well, here's something scary I want you to try at home: It's scary because it will require you to focus on the use of critical thinking in everyday contexts, and the results may be as frightening as an airborne Evel Knievel flying on a motorcycle over a flaming row of old cars. (If you are under 40 and probably have never heard of Evel Knievel, substitute "Wild Boy" or "Jackass," and you'll get the same idea.)

At your next group lunch or class discussion, strike up a conversation about a contemporary and somewhat controversial topic. Be sure to pick one about which most people will have some opinion. For example, ask "Is day care bad for young children?" Then, listen carefully to the discussion that follows and keep track of the kind of thinking that underlies the exchange of ideas.

Flaws in thinking

If you can do this without anyone noticing, keep track of the time and see how long it takes until someone:

* **Tells an anecdote**--a personal story to support or refute a general point. (Little Johnny has been in day care since he was 2, and he is a perfect angel.)

* **Refers to "instinct" or "laws of nature" or "what everyone knows."** (Everyone knows young children do best with their mothers.)

* Uses correlational data as causal, regardless of whether the data are factual. (There has been a huge increase in crime since mothers starting working and using day care, so if mothers would stay home, children would not become criminals.)

* Uses emotional language instead of providing reasons and evidence. (Dumping little babies in child care warehouses to be cared for by strangers has to be harmful.)

* Fails to notice the assumption of harm in the way the question is asked. (Why don't you also ask if day care is good for children?)

* Sees the alternatives in terms of black or white or good or bad, without considering "shades of gray" or possible covariates that might determine conditions when day care might have more or less positive or negative effects. (Day care is always good--period.)

This is a short list of ways that thinking about how a common controversy often becomes derailed. Most readers will recognize the flaws in thinking as they are isolated and labeled above, but it is more difficult to spot them in the spontaneous ebb and flow of everyday conversations, especially when the topic is emotionally charged and the speaker is committed to a particular conclusion. Notice, I said "more difficult," but not impossible.

A critical educational issue

How do you think your discussion partners will do when you pose questions like this one to them? What about college students who have already taken research methods classes? Do you think they will answer questions like this one better than those who haven't? How well do you think you would have done if you didn't have the answers in front of you?

These are critically important questions about critical thinking--questions that are at the heart of education in psychology and essential for a skilled and thinking work force. Almost every discussion about the desired outcomes of higher education includes the enhancement of critical-thinking skills as an essential component. More than ever, educated adults need to be able to select what is credible from the deluge of information available at their fingertips (literally), recognize and defend against propaganda, reason effectively, and recognize and solve new problems.

Critical-thinking instruction briefly assumed center stage on our national education agenda when the commission that wrote the 2000 U.S.

educational goals established the goal of increasing the proportion of college graduates who can demonstrate advanced critical thinking.

The good news is that research shows better thinking can be an outcome of education. Numerous studies indicate that transfer of thinking skills across contexts occurs best when general skills are learned and then practiced across domains, spaced out over time and used with different types of ill-structured problems (where there are multiple possible goals and solutions).

I urge educators and thinking citizens concerned with education at all levels to make teaching for thinking a central part of the curriculum. Thinking is not a fad or "add-on" that cannot fit in a curriculum too crowded with important subject matter. Thinking (cognition) is a core concept in psychology and essential for the complexities of modern citizenship and the constantly changing demands of a skilled work force.