

Education As If People Matter:

A Call for Critical Thinking and Humanistic Education

Frank Gomez, Jr.

Introduction

"With each passing day," the words of my former professor of philosophy at Spalding University, Dr. Paul Hoyt-O'Connor, ring true, "it seems, we are drawn ever so much more into a technologically sophisticated world in which speedy access to information and the skills to analyze and utilize it are touted as the cornerstone for greater prosperity."¹ Belize, though she lags behind, is no exception. Our society has adapted to these global changes. So too has our educational system. In the process, while due attention has been given to specialization and technological problem-solving, an underdevelopment of social concern for others concomitant with a depressing level of critical consciousness² — thinking that perceives the contradictions of life in an effort to overcome or reconcile them — lingers, perhaps due to a deficiency of dialogical/problem-posing education. Nonetheless, the jaundiced development of the "whole" person is the unhealthy result. Given that learning is a year-round endeavor, now is as good as any time for us to reflect on the state of this critical matter. Fellow educators do take note.

Without any nostalgia, *education* used to be a golden word, but in these Belize times, it seems to have lost some of its luster. Perhaps that's because schools are no longer centered around our most basic convictions — those ideas that really have the power to move us;³ rather, schools foster technical know-how at the expense of human relations. However, "education," as E. F. Schumacher, guru of economics, reminds us, "cannot help us as long as it accords no place to metaphysics [and ethics, and takes place in ivory tower isolation]. Whether the subjects taught are subjects of science or of the humanities, if the teaching does not lead to a clarification of metaphysics (reality and goodness), that is to say, of our fundamental convictions, it cannot educate a [person] and, consequently, cannot be of real value to society ... [so] what is at fault is not specialization, but the lack of depth with which the subjects are usually presented, and the absence of metaphysical awareness;"⁴ in other words, lack of critical thinking. For example, the sciences — natural, social, and behavioral — are being taught without any awareness of presuppositions of science, of the meaning and significance of scientific laws, and of the place occupied by the sciences within the whole cosmos of human thought.⁵ Likewise, professional education courses are being taught without any awareness of the view of human nature that underlies present-day educational theories. In fact, many educators are themselves unaware that such a view is implicit in their teaching and that nearly all their theories would have to change if that view changed. In other words, their modes of instruction — short of critical thinking — lack the fulcrum of reality. No wonder "double talk" is the lingo of the day, and confusion is the state of our affairs. This unhealthy climate must be rescinded at once; if not, sooner rather than later. How? To this we shall turn.

The Pedagogy Of Critical Thinkers

The quality of education offered is more important today than in the past because parents and the general public expect more of schools and educators than ever before. Educators today are expected to teach for *understanding*, not just well enough for students to pass tests (I'll elaborate on this later). Teaching for understanding means helping students "*get the habit* of thinking mathematically, solving problems scientifically, reasoning historically and geographically, seeing artistically, reading critically, writing persuasively, and communicating clearly."⁶ Thus, if these "habits" are to be acquired, educators need to (continue to) incorporate the following into the fabric of their lessons:⁷

1. *Engaging in the Socratic method*

* Is a mode of obtaining and evaluating knowledge by pursuing a series of questions and examining the implications of the answers until there are no further pertinent questions to be asked.

2. *Collecting information*

* Involves noting ideas and information already known about an issue, and carrying out additional research if necessary.⁸

3. *Critically scrutinizing convictions and assumptions*

* Involves the bringing to light and critical examination of worldviews, cherished beliefs, and presuppositions.

4. *Recognizing point of view*

* Involves identifying the factors (beliefs, attitudes, influences, etc.) that color the outlook of a person or group.

5. *Comparing and contrasting*

* Involves examining events, situations, or points of view for similarities and differences.

6. *Identifying cause and effect*

* Is part of interpreting the relationships between events.

7. *Analyzing*

* Is the process of breaking something into its parts and examining the relationships among them.

8. *Distinguishing facts from opinions*

* Means separating the facts about something from what people say about it.

9. *Assessing consequences*

* Means studying an action, event, or trend to predict or determine its long-term effects and to judge its desirability.

10. *Identifying values and recognizing value judgments*

* Involves recognizing the core beliefs held by a person or group.

11. *Hypothesizing*

* Is forming a possible explanation for an event, a situation, or a problem.

12. *Synthesizing*

* Involves combining information and ideas from sources to gain a new understanding of a topic or an event.

13. *Evaluating*

* Involves assessing the significance, accuracy, or overall importance of something.

14. *Problem-solving*

* Is the process of reviewing a situation (after it is identified), determining its troublesome elements, and then making recommendations for improving or correcting them.

15. *Studying contemporary issues*

* Involves identifying a current topic frequently discussed in the media, reading several sources of information on the topic, and evaluating that information.

16. *Reading against the grain*⁹

* Is a method that aims to deconstruct the text, by going beyond the text's apparent contexts and intentions, to uncover repressed doubts or hidden agendas.

17. *Thinking outside the box*

* Is a method of inquiry that requires one to think beyond the 'given' (i.e., the box of ready-made 'facts' and conventionalities) as a means to recognize, address, and (possibly) correct those elements that are misleading, inaccurate or repressed.

18. *Engaging in reflection practice*¹⁰

* Is a process, predicated upon critically analyzing one's experience, whereby there is fusion of thought (reflection) with action (practice), which allows one to understand and (possibly) transform one's world.

19. *Applying a model*

* Involves depicting something in its ideal state and evaluating how well a specific example matches the ideal.

20. *Taking a stand*

* Means identifying an issue, deciding what you think about it, and persuasively expressing your position on it.

21. *Being open-minded and curious*¹¹

* Is the ability to adapt to the ongoing process to acquire and amend our beliefs and values — in light of the best reasoned evidence — as part of our understanding of phenomena (things and events).¹²

As the aforementioned habits suggest, Critical thinkers ask (themselves and others) not only "Is this a fact?" or "How do we know this is so?" but also "What do we not yet know?" and "How can we find out?"¹³ (as suggested by habit no. 1 above). Thus, through these habits, the expectation will be for students to develop a critical faculty for examining evidence and assessing its worth (as supported by habits nos. 7 and 13, among others, above) and identifying problems and problem solve (as advocated by habits nos. 1, 14, and 18, among others, above), rather than accepting ready-made "facts" and conventionalities (as denounced by habit no. 17 above).

The Critical State Of Critical Thinking

At this point, it is worth noting (in case you did not infer) that the previously mentioned critical thinking skills are predicated on the presence of data — information and ideas. Hey, you got to be informed — *sine qua non!* Critical thinking is "the reasoned judgment of information and ideas."¹⁴ Subsequently, people who wish to think critically must (a) study information to determine its accuracy; (b) evaluate arguments; and (c) analyze conclusions before accepting their validity.¹⁵ Accordingly, critical thinkers do not worship knowledge, but rather they question it, search for new ideas, challenge old ones, and wrestle riddles. Thus, they are not prepared to accept the first available answer that comes to mind — except of course if critical analysis confirms so. By doing so, critical thinkers are able to recognize and define problems and develop strategies for resolving them.¹⁶ So, is the future promising? Unfortunately, the current state of critical thinking is critical. The Primary School Exam (PSE) 2000 (like the 2001 results in the next paragraph) exemplified this reality — which is an all-too-common occurrence at all levels of education in Belize — when its results showed that 60% of the 5500 students who sat the exam in 2000 passed the English Exam (where a pass is considered to be a score of 50% or higher), about 50% of the students passed the science exam while less than 40% passed the mathematics exam,¹⁷ of which the national averages for the PSE subtests are 52.7%, 51.2%, and 44%, respectively.¹⁸ As you might know, the PSE and the new National Comprehensive Curriculum (NCC) were introduced into the educational system under the auspices of the Ministry of Education in 1999; the latter (NCC) continues to be phased in, whereas the former — which replaced the Belize National Selection Examination (BNSE)¹⁹ — is the instrument designed under the NCC to provide an evaluation of each candidate's general development in the content areas tested.²⁰ Concomitantly, like

the BNSE, the PSE serves as the entrance exam for admission to secondary school. This latter exam proclaims to evaluate *comprehension*, language mechanics, letter, and composition in English; concepts, computation, and *problem solving* in math; and knowledge and *understanding*, and skills and processes in science.²¹ Inherently, then, the PSE assesses elements of critical thinking as italicized heretofore. The present performance according to the PSE 2001 Report is as follows:²²

Performance in English indicates an overall increase of .2% when compared to PSE 2000. The national mean performance on the math test shows a mean score of 46.5%, an increase of 2.5% over PSE 2000. This indicates that candidates were unable to master more than one half [of] the material tested on the math assessment. Even though performance on the multiple-choice sections of the math and English tests were above 50% (51% and 62% respectively), *overall scores in both of these subtests were significantly affected by performance on the writing and problem solving components....* Science results represent an increase of 7% when compared to the PSE 2000.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to note that the PSE is an indirect or *de facto* evaluator of the NCC *per se* since it is the instrument designed to test the content areas of the said curriculum. However, the performance reported above is *not* necessary a knock against the said curriculum since the students who will sit the PSE after being schooled completely under the NCC will not do so until 2007. Thus, it is not the intention of this paper to evaluate the soundness of the NCC *per se* and/or the effectiveness of its implementation (that is a subject for another paper), but conversely the state of critical thinking vis-à-vis our schools. As such, we need not wait six or so years to make the following assertion and concomitant judgment: What those results unequivocally depict (especially when one employs the PSE grading scale²³) is the current state of critical thinking in our schools, which is *critical but not hopeless* (if the small increase in scores is any indication).

Evidently, there is much room for critical thinking skills to be incorporated into the *unwritten* curriculum; such must be done to guide students to think and observe deeply — intuitively, systematically, philosophically, and rhetorically. This is important for understanding reality and one's world, and in adapting our beliefs and values in the presence of continuing changes and developments, especially in our age of science and technology (whose continuous knowledge explosion makes the bits of information we learn by rote as outdated as last week's newspapers).²⁴ Education should thus ensure that the learner *learns how to learn* — which is the "first principle" of critical thinking — and be able to cope in a changing world.²⁵ For this reason, education needs to be less about training and more of an adventure in ideas (the underdevelopment of which *significantly affected candidates' performance on the writing and problem solving components* of the PSE 2001), promoting humanization and greater human solidarity in order to overcome the evil of oppression and dehumanization. Education then, is the process of learning, whereas critical thinking is the means to that process's end (and part of that end is the sense of fuller humanization), especially in education such as ours, which aims at the transferal of democratic values of equality, respect, tolerance, freedom, liberty, individual happiness, and so forth.²⁶

In short, the importance of critical thinking can hardly be overstated (nor should its presence in the educational system be taken for granted or undermined). Yet, with all its upside potential and power to transform the way we look at ourselves and live in society, critical thinking as implied above is often ignored in (practice, though its elements are solemnly espoused in the *written* curriculum²⁷ of) the educational process. Undoubtedly, its importance is affirmed by its very negation. To this we shall turn.

The Primacy of Critical Thinking & Humanistic Education

The preceding begs the question, which is central to this paper, "what is good education?" One Thomas Green pointedly stated, "We must keep in mind that at the heart of education is the effort to enhance the human capacity to think... Education that attempts only to inculcate good behavior without developing good thinking about behavior cannot be good education."²⁸ Get the idea? Indeed, the aim of education, as John Dewey aptly stressed, should be to teach the student to think, not what to think, and the development of the individuals to the utmost of their potentialities.²⁹ After all, as Mortimer J. Adler reminds us, "Everyone is called to one common human vocation — that of being a good citizen and a thoughtful human being — and that, to discharge the obligation common to all human beings, schooling should be essentially humanistic..."³⁰ In other words, as Parker Palmer boldly puts it, "To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful [not to mention fruitful] ways of seeing and being in the world."³¹ Accordingly, school — the center of interactive learning — involves not only thinking but also living. "Critical thinking" as an educational objective thus cannot continue to be taken at face value and tossed around left, right, and center in the educational milieu without manifestation of its fullness. As educators, we must insist on being *hypercritical*, and desist from being hypocritical, period. Paying lip service,

as a tribute to that two-word phrase, will not only demean its (critical thinking) intrinsic worth and reconciliatory value to society, but also retard the development of our common human vocation (stated above).

For this reason, and to paraphrase the outstanding Brazilian educator and liberator Paulo Freire, education cannot be reduced to mere information processing, sorting knowledge into categories, or depositing of information, mere transferals of data.³² Its objective is to help learners construct meanings, not simply to manage information or to serve as receptors of information,³³ which is best accomplished through dialogical/problem-posing education. Indeed, educators today (and perhaps this has always been the case) are asked to educate students for *understanding*, not just well enough to get by (such as, to pass tests — the kind of learning whereby students learn that answer A goes with question A, and answer B goes with question B, and the like). To put it another way, and borrowing from the Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan, "As every schoolboy [or schoolgirl] knows, a circle is a locus of co-planar points equidistant from a center. What every schoolboy [or schoolgirl] does not know is the difference between repeating that definition, as a parrot might, and uttering it intelligently."³⁴ When a schoolboy or a schoolgirl grasps the fundamentals behind the latter then s/he has earned a grade of true significance; for the former leads to inculcation or indoctrination, the latter to true education.

Now, this is not to say the former does not occur; however, the latter is the goal of educators, for the *raison d'être* of teaching is learning (indeed, if genuine learning does not take place the purpose of teaching is defeated), and true learning consists of *understanding*. Friedrich Nietzsche is provocative, if not prophetic on this issue, when he says, "Many a man has failed to get a proper education because his memory was too good."³⁵ Get it? Thus, unless education goes beyond the intake of information, students have not learned all that is needed to enable them to function productively in the globally connected villages of this world. *Understanding and utilization of knowledge*, on that account, should be focalized and emphasized as central to all learning models (or heuristic structures); as such, it should be second to none, with memorization (though a worthwhile and necessary educational practice) coming in at a distant second. It is thus paramount that all students, not just a few, acquire these skills and habits of mind if they are to participate fully as adults in a knowledge-based economy and a self-governing society in which dialogue or discourse (barring the recent flares of uprising) is the conversant means — the social lubricant — to the perpetuation of our democracy.

Consequentially, the degree to which schooling is done well with these goals in mind will in large measure determine the future progress and direction of society. In fact, "Education," as former US President Bill Clinton pointedly said, "is the fault line — the great continental divide — between those who will prosper and those who will not in the new [global] economy."³⁶ Specialization thus has its role. However, if schools continue to foster only that then our educational system will not be developing the "whole" person; rather it will continue to produce self-consumed technocrats, thereby negating the best interests of society. "To educate a man in mind and not in morals," as the old cliché goes, "is to create a menace to society." That seems to be an all-too-common occurrence. So, why should you and I care? One must remember education is an entity of *noblesse oblige* — if you're able, you're obliged to do it, to teach it; each one teach one. Granted, to mitigate that all-too-common occurrence (stated above) and to enhance the latter, the theory and practice of education cannot exist in mutual exclusivity; both must converge, be incorporated, and integrated, in our daily lives (as advocated by Dewey,³⁷ Freire,³⁸ and Addams³⁹). To the extent this is done well, a dialogue of diversity will be precipitated, coupled with a sense of human solidarity, which in turn will promote a spirit of camaraderie. So, let's not (continue to) use education as a crutch to foster artificialities that divide us, especially for prima-facie reasons. Hey, you're tempted to reply, "Knowledge is power!" True. Just not to oppress and dehumanize; it is the power to interpret, understand, reflect, learn, and transform our little Belize. Education (including its element of specialization) is thus an entity of humanization and a social machine for critical thinking.

Conclusion

In closing, I hope you have inferred that the problems of education in Belize — and, for totality's sake, in life — go beyond social ills; in fact, they are merely reflections of our deepest societal reality. As such, government, educational organizations and administrations, or expenditure of money cannot solve them (one need only to look at history), even though the importance of all is certainly not denied.⁴⁰ We are suffering from a metaphysical disease, and the cure must therefore be *metaphysical*.⁴¹ Belizeans are a people high on opinions (though terse in front of TV cameras), which often times are polar. For this reasons, we (Belizeans) are said to be of two minds. The true problems of living then — in politics, economics, education, relationships, and the like — are problems of reconciling poles or overcoming opposites.⁴² Hence, education that fails to clarify our central convictions is mere training or inculcation or perhaps an expensive indulgence. For it is our central convictions that are in disorder,

and, as long as the present anti-metaphysical temper persists, the disorder will grow worse. Consequentially, more education and more "educated" people can help us only if both produce more wisdom⁴⁴ — thinking grounded in the metaphysical.

Indeed, specialization or technical "know-how" is nothing by itself; it is a means without an end, a mere potentiality, an unfinished sentence.⁴⁵ Troubled? Don't be! Critical thinking and clarification of metaphysics can help us to finish this sentence, and turn its potentiality of benefiting humanity into reality; if critical thinking and clarification of metaphysics cannot do the latter, they will at least render the conflict intelligent and profitable to know. Thus, until society and the aforementioned stakeholders of education inject themselves with a dosage of the metaphysical potion, formal education will continue to be as it is — a double-edged sword that acts as an agent of specialization on the one hand, and a medium of destruction (via mass disillusionment) on the other. Think about it? Many of the people who live in accordance with the principle of "corruption of the worst is best" went to our so-called best schools (I say "so called" because schools that do not address our most basic convictions can hardly be called best). You "*betta* Belize it!" It's for real. Let's adapt a unified philosophy of education (grounded in the metaphysical, of course, rather than the ideologues of politics) and systematically implement our collective vision. Let's educate our people without the fear of being displaced, let's educate our people to be critical thinkers, **let's educate our people as if they matter**, and — perhaps by doing so they will learn — to respect and appreciate (not tolerate) each other. Let's educate our people to thrive *beyond walls*! You dig? Dig it.

End notes

1 Hoyt-O'Connor, Paul E. Progress Without End: Rationality and the Good in Descartes's *Discourse* and in Hobbes's *Leviathan*. *International Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. XXXVIII, No. 4 Issue No. 152 (December 1998), p. 394.

2 See, for example, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: New Revised 20th- Anniversary Edition (1970. Trans. M. B. Ramos. New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Co., 1993), which is on liberation and *conscientizaçao* (critical consciousness) — *par excellence*.

3 Schumacher, E. F. *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1973, p. 99.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99

5 *Ibid.*

6 National Teacher Forum. Why Teacher Leadership is Needed. *Teachers Leading the Way: Voices from the National Teacher Forum*, April 1998, p. 1. [On-line]. Available: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/TeachersLead/whylead.html>. [1998, September 28].

7 For list and brief explanations of these critical thinking skills (except nos. 1, 2, 3, 16, 17, 18, & 21), see *Holt American Government*, pp. xxi-xxiii.

8 Accordingly, be reminded of my maxim (adapted from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*), "Seek truth for yourself, for my own part I only promise you sincerity." This ought to be the critical thinker's guiding principle or *modus vivendi*. Emphasis added.

9 McKenzie, S. L., & Haynes, S. R. *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 246.

10 See, for example, Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983), which explains the reflective praxis in depth — *par excellence*.

11 On this point, John Stuart Mill (a 19th century British philosopher) stressed, believing what happens to be true, if you are dogmatic and closed minded about it, is worse than believing what happens to be false, as long as you are open minded and willing to discuss your beliefs and change them in light of evidence, discussion, and criticism. Emphasis added.

12 Being open-minded does not mean being empty-minded. While both of them are sensitive and receptive to other's viewpoints, only the former evaluates them before accepting (*vis-à-vis* closed-minded people who reject before evaluating). Hence, open-minded people "Seek first to understand then to be understood."

13 For an application of critical thinking to the teaching of Belizean History, see Lawrence Vernon's article entitled "Teaching Belizean History" as published in the *Amandala* of Sunday, September 30, 2001, p. 28.

14 Holt, op cit., p. xxi.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*

17 As reported by the CEO of the Ministry of Education, Dr. Dorian Barrow, in his article entitled "How good are our schools doing?" as published in the *Amandala* of Sunday, April 22, 2001.

18 See the *Primary School Examination 2000 Report* (Belize: Ministry of Education, 2000), p. 2.

19 Unlike the PSE, the BNSE reported candidates' performance as a percentile rank.

20 The PSE cautions, "No one examination can hope to measure totally what students know, understand and can do regardless of how efficiently the items and tests have been developed." Thus, this examination provides a summary of performance on the general strengths and weaknesses in the broad areas tested. See the *Primary School Examination 2000 Report*, op cit., p. 2.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

22 See the *Primary School Examination 2001 Report* (Belize: Ministry of Education, 2001), p. 13.

23 Under the PSE (see the *Primary School Examination 2000 Report*, op cit., p. 2), grades were awarded to candidates based on the following criteria:

80% and above	A	Excellent	Content mastered
79% — 70%	B	Competent	Content partially mastered
69% — 60%	C	Satisfactory	Content partially mastered
59% — 50%	D	Developing	Content not mastered
49% and below	E	Inadequate	Content not mastered

24 This is the first of four fundamental principles (in accordance with Education Rules, 2000) of the National Comprehensive Curriculum as cited in the *Handbook of Policies and Procedures for School Services* (Ministry of Education, Belize, August 2000), see p. 177. Emphasis added.

25 For a brief, yet apt, explication of the consequences of failing to develop critical thinking in our age of science and technology, see *Philosophy: The Basic Issues* (edited by E. D. Klemke, A. D. Kline, & R. Hollinger. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1982), pp. 5-6. Emphasis added.

26 The Fundamental Principles (especially nos. 2, 3, & 4) of the National Comprehensive Curriculum (*op. cit.*, pp. 177-178) require educators to educate the learner through modes of instruction that promote, and in atmospheres congruous, to these values that are integral to democratic life.

27 See, for example, the *National Comprehensive Curriculum* (*op. cit.*, pp. 175-178), which recognizes the fact that the quality of education is not guaranteed by the unwritten curriculum. Thus, its policies speak to such issues as processes at the school and system levels, resources, and quality assurance. The difficulties however lie in the effectiveness of their execution (which stem from the discrepancy of interpretations of the written curriculum).

28 Thompson, L. J. *Habits of the Mind: Critical Thinking in the Classroom*. New York, NY: University Press of America, Inc., 1995, p. 39.

29 Dewey, John. *John Dewey on Education: Selected Writings*. 1934. Ed. Reginald D. Archambault. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp. 12, 430.

30 Adler, Mortimer J. *Six Great Ideas*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 1981, p. 21.

31 Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1998, p. 6.

32 Freire, P., *op. cit.*, p. 53.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Lonergan, Bernard, J., F. *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1978, p. 7.

35 Thompson, L. J., *op. cit.*, p. 4.

36 As quoted from an ITT Technical Institute TV ad in 1998.

37 See John Dewey, *op. cit.*

38 See Paulo Freire, *op. cit.*

39 See Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York, NY: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1910/1981).

40 Schumacker, E. F., *op. cit.*, p. 107.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

44 Schumacker, E. F., *op. cit.*, p. 86. Emphasis added.

45 *Ibid.*

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