Open Forum

What Are We Doing?

There is some need for a term that refers to the common area, or emphasis, of contemporary work in "critical thinking/informal logic/argumentation/values critique/rehetroic/discourse analysis/media analysis/evaluation..." It seems to me that the following considerations are widely accepted. (i) There has been a major expansion of consciousness in the CT/IL community which has led us to believe that all of these semi-independent traditions have developed something of value for teaching in most of the sub-areas. (ii) Of course, each of these names makes perfectly good sense as a title for a course or publication which is focussing on the particular perspective to which it refers; nevertheless, there are times when we need to refer to the general area to which they all relate (e.g. for framing course descriptions and legislation or grant applications). (iii) "Critical thinking" is the oldest term (of the modern era) and perhaps deserves to be considered first. It's important because it stresses the notion of the critical stance rather than the passive one. On the other hand, it is unattractive to many because it sounds as if the only focus is critical rather than partly creative and explicative. (iv) The term "informal logic" is good because it stresses the rejection of the formal logic approach, but people worry at the slight hint of a contradiction in terms, or that it is still too suggestive of formalism. (v) "Argumentation" is obviously a bit narrow, but (Tony Blair points out) also too wide because it includes e.g. non-logical studies of dispute. (vi) "Thinking skills" is becoming more common in the schools, but also casts the net more widely than appeals to many people, including e.g. the problem-solving and decision-making areas. (vii) "Reasoning skills" retains the normative element that most of us think of as the inheritance from logic, but may seem too narrow. (viii) Introducing a neologism is a last resort, but should be considered. 'Infologic' is the only candidate I have to offer. The 'info' part of it is meant to convey the idea that we are looking at all forms of *information* (and its presentation) as well as its processing in the throes of argumentation and exploration. And of course the 'info' is also to remind us of our *informal* approach, the discarding of the effort to convert everything to formalism. Someone will be able to do better than 'infologic'; and may have other existing entries to canvas in these or other columns.

Personally, I find myself attracted by 'thinking skills and 'reasoning skills' to about the same extent. I favor the latter by a small margin because there is some slight problem about whether *teaching* the former makes sense in the purely creative area. I'm not worried about the inclusion of problem-solving/decision-making because I think those are properly conceived as part of reasoning. I am more worried about the way the term fails to include training in "critical observing" i.e. critical perceptual skills, for example in the identification of misleading portrayals in television or print advertisements. But nobody's perfect, and we can simply insist on the inclusion of *some* non-obviously subsumed material by fiat. Can't we? Better suggestions? Reactions to these ones? (The Editors can sometimes fit in short reactions ahead of the articles queue.)

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