

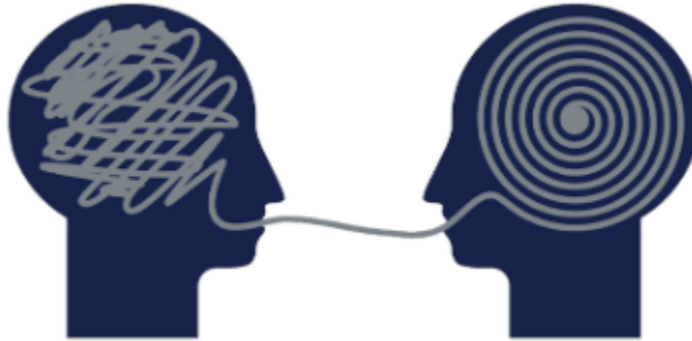


ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students

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Is it Monday Yet? 9/27/24



The Critical Importance of Critical Thinking at Ashbrook School: Part II

Given the upcoming national election, the timing for writing about the importance Ashbrook places on critical thinking as a resource for making informed decisions, seemed convenient.

In an era of rapid technological advancement including a proliferation and liberal use of artificial intelligence to make decisions for us (see my IIMY? Article, 1/23), *anti*-social media influencers, information overload, and increasingly polarized political landscapes, the importance of critical thinking skills cannot be overstated.

Critical thinking (see my IIMY? article, 5/31) is the ability to objectively analyze and evaluate information to form a reasoned judgment. As society grapples with the complexities of a digital world and multifaceted social, political, and economic issues, these skills are essential not only for personal development but also for sustaining a healthy democracy. To be an informed citizen and a responsible voter, one must engage critically with information to discern fact from fiction, weigh arguments, and make decisions grounded in evidence. In this way, there is a strong argument that critical thinking is a cornerstone of a thriving democratic society.

Critical Thinking: A Safeguard Against Misinformation

One of the defining features of modern life is the sometimes overwhelming volume of information available at our fingertips. News articles, social media posts, blogs, videos, and opinion pieces flood our screens daily, presenting us with an overwhelming array of

data and perspectives. This easy access to information has great potential for empowering citizens, but it also carries risks. Misinformation, *disinformation*, self interested half truths, and hate filled propaganda often look very similar to one another and can spread rapidly, sowing confusion and undermining trust in democratic institutions. What was true conceptually when Mark Twain noted that a lie will travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes, is now actually technologically possible in our day and age.

Critical thinking serves as a safeguard against these dangers. It enables individuals to evaluate the credibility of sources, recognize logical fallacies, and distinguish between facts and opinions. Without these skills, people are more susceptible to accepting false or misleading information, which can distort public discourse and ultimately threaten the integrity of elections. The good news for Ashbrook families is that our students are trained in these skills throughout their time as Explorers, carry them into their high school and college years, and employ them in a variety of ways, perhaps most importantly when casting a vote.

After all, an electorate that cannot critically assess the information they receive, is vulnerable to manipulation, and the decisions they make at the ballot box may not reflect their true interests or the reality of the issues at hand. Given the ready access to information presented by the internet, it would be easy for even the most thoughtful among us to fall prey to confirmation bias. Because of this, being trained and willing to engage in critical thinking is more important than it has ever been, which is why it is not only a cornerstone of democracy, but a definitive part of an Ashbrook education.

The Role of Critical Thinking in Democratic Decision-Making

Democracy thrives on the participation of informed citizens who can thoughtfully engage with the issues facing their society. As an Ashbrook graduate, our students will be able to engage as members of a more responsible electorate, able and willing to wrestle with complex policy questions, consider diverse viewpoints, and make decisions that contribute to the common good. Critical thinking is essential to this process because it promotes thoughtful, reasoned discussion rather than emotional or reactionary responses.

This is not to suggest that, through critical thinking, Ashbrook students will all arrive at the same, reasonable conclusions, or that there is a single self-evident right choice to make; nothing could be further from the concept of “critical thinking.” Only that our students, trained in these skills, will take the time to fully examine the information before them and make judgements based, in part, on their values and past experiences,

rather than as a knee jerk reaction, convenience, or because they have surrendered to the firehose of information.

Simply stated, when citizens practice critical thinking, they are better equipped to evaluate the merits of political arguments and policy proposals. This means moving beyond emotions, prior biases, surface-level rhetoric, or partisan slogans to consider the underlying evidence and implications of different positions. In doing so, voters can make more informed choices that align with their values and the best interests of their community. Furthermore, critical thinking fosters open-mindedness and tolerance, sometimes in short supply via the social media feeds available to our children, so individuals are more likely to engage through civil discourse with opposing viewpoints and consider alternative perspectives when they approach issues analytically.

The Educational (and Moral!) Imperative: Teaching Critical Thinking Skills

Given its significance of fully engaged and informed democratic participation, the development of critical thinking skills should be a central aim of education systems worldwide, but often it is not. Schools and universities must prioritize teaching students how to analyze information, question assumptions, and solve problems, though many are focussed more on the exclusive teaching of content (teaching kids WHAT to think vs. HOW to think).

At Ashbrook School, teaching goes beyond rote memorization or learning for the sake of passing exams (arguably necessary, but far from sufficient). Instead, an Ashbrook education focuses on fostering curiosity, encouraging skepticism in the face of claims made by others, and equipping students with the tools to engage with the world as informed and thoughtful individuals.

In the end, teaching critical thinking is not just about individual success—it is a matter of public interest. Informed citizens, able to think critically, contribute to the stability and effectiveness of democratic systems. By cultivating these skills in future generations, Ashbrook School is doing its part to ensure that democracy will continue to evolve and meet the challenges of the future.

Encouraging Accountability and Civic Responsibility

A fully-functioning democracy relies not only on the wisdom of voters, but also on the accountability of *elected officials*. Critical thinking also plays a vital role in holding these leaders accountable for their actions and decisions. Informed citizens trained to think critically are more likely to ask probing questions, scrutinize policy decisions, and demand transparency from their representatives. This, in turn, creates a political culture

where leaders are incentivized to act in the public interest rather than for personal or partisan gain.

Moreover, critical thinking encourages a sense of civic responsibility. In a democratic society, every individual has a role to play in shaping the future, and making thoughtful, informed decisions is a key part of that responsibility. By honing their critical thinking skills in this way, Ashbrook students are better able to contribute to the health of our democracy, participating in meaningful debates, and ensuring that their voices are heard in the political process, rather than fall prey to the loudest voices or the most emotional appeals. This, ultimately, will render Ashbrook students immune to the forces that sometimes turn people into *sheep-le*.

A Collective Responsibility

Critical thinking is not solely the responsibility of schools and universities, however. Society as a whole must promote a culture of intellectual curiosity and rigorous debate. Media organizations, social institutions, and communities must also play their part in encouraging critical engagement with information. For example, by working with others, modeling critical thinking skills, Ashbrook graduates are able to encourage this type of thinking among their peers, many of whom did not attend a school that spent the time to teach these skills.

Provided with an awareness of the value and power of this kind of thinking, as shared with them by Explorers, more and more citizens will be better able to take personal responsibility for their intellectual development, seek out reliable information, and question what they encounter, rather than passively accepting what is presented to them.

Critical Thinking as Democracy's Lifeblood

Thomas Jefferson believed deeply in the power of education as a prerequisite for both individual freedom and the success of the American republic. He viewed education as essential for the development of an informed and responsible citizenry capable of self-governance. In Jefferson's view, a democratic society required citizens who were educated enough to think critically and participate in civic life, a bulwark against the abuses of power.

At its core, democracy is a system of government that relies not only on the consent of the governed, but on the INFORMED consent of the governed. For this system to function effectively, citizens must be able to think critically about the issues and choices before them. Critical thinking empowers individuals to be discerning consumers of information, active participants in democratic deliberation, and vigilant defenders of

democratic values. As we face the challenges of the 21st century, these skills are more important than ever, not just for individual success but for the continued health and vitality of our democratic institutions.

In short, critical thinking is democracy's lifeblood. Without it, we risk the erosion of informed decision-making, responsible governance, and the very principles that uphold our freedom. As graduates of Ashbrook School, it is good to know that our Explorers will be well equipped to play a responsible and influential role in ensuring a healthy and truly representative democratic process.