

Critical Thinking as an Educational Ideal: A Philosophical Defence

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Abstract

Higher education aims to pursue knowledge, professional competence, moral development, intellectual autonomy, and democratic participation, but these goals need a principle that makes them cohere. Critical thinking is generally considered a desirable educational goal, but it is not sufficiently justified as a basic educational ideal. Using conceptual and philosophical analysis, this article examines the normative role of critical thinking and distinguishes an educational ideal from a particular learning outcome or cognitive skill. It makes critical thinking a fundamental because it allows students to evaluate knowledge, guide action, analyze values, engage in responsible citizenship, and respond intelligently to changing circumstances. The discussion takes into account issues of psychological transfer, disciplinary specificity, cultural bias, intellectual virtues, and artificial intelligence. It fosters a developmental, virtue-based, socially situated, and culturally open conception of critical thinking. The analysis ends with the conclusion that critical thinking is the normative coherence that is needed to link the various purposes of higher education without making education into a transmission of information or vocational training.

Keywords

Critical thinking; Higher education; Philosophy of education; Educational ideals; Intellectual virtues; Artificial intelligence.

Introduction

Higher education pursues knowledge, professional competence, intellectual autonomy, moral responsibility, creativity, and democratic participation. These aims are individually valuable, yet their coexistence leaves a deeper question unresolved, what makes them educationally coherent? Contemporary discussions of educational quality often move between knowledge, employability, personal development, and civic purposes without identifying a principle capable of relating these aims (Karatsiori, 2023). Philosophical approaches similarly recognise the importance of substantive knowledge and intellectual formation, while differing over what education should ultimately cultivate (Cuthbert, 2024). Critical thinking offers a possible organising principle because it concerns the evaluation of claims, evidence, reasons, assumptions, and conclusions. However, treating critical thinking merely as another learning outcome does not explain why it should occupy a more fundamental position. Existing scholarship has considered critical thinking as a cognitive competence, intellectual practice, metacognitive capacity, and form of criticality, while its relationship with disciplinary knowledge and transfer remains contested (Monteiro et al., 2020). The unresolved issue is therefore normative rather than merely definitional. Using conceptual and philosophical analysis, this article examines whether critical thinking can provide the normative centre required to connect the diverse purposes of higher education. The central thesis is that critical thinking is not merely one educational goal among many, but the fundamental educational ideal that gives coherence and normative direction to the diverse aims of higher education. The argument proceeds by first clarifying the concept of critical thinking, then defending it as the organising educational ideal, addressing major philosophical objections, reconstructing a richer conception, and finally considering implications for higher education.

Critical Thinking and the Idea of Education

Critical thinking is best understood as responsible intellectual judgment. It involves examining whether beliefs and conclusions are supported by adequate reasons, whether evidence is relevant and reliable, whether assumptions are defensible, and whether alternative interpretations deserve consideration. This makes critical thinking different from intelligence or information. A person may possess considerable intellectual ability and extensive

information while still accepting weak arguments or unreliable claims. Critical thinking concerns the quality and responsibility of judgment rather than the quantity of information possessed (Hitchcock, 2022). This distinction is important for understanding an educational ideal. An educational outcome describes something a learner may acquire, such as knowledge, a skill, a qualification, or a measurable competence. An educational ideal is more demanding because it expresses a conception of what education ought ultimately to cultivate. Knowledge is therefore an educational good, but knowledge alone does not determine how it should be understood or used. Professional competence is similarly valuable, but competence does not establish when professional practices should be questioned or revised. Critical thinking can occupy this broader role because it does not compete directly with other educational goods. It provides a basis for their responsible use. Liberal education, for instance, values intellectual freedom and human development, while essentialist approaches emphasise substantive knowledge, discipline, and cultural continuity (Cuthbert, 2024). These commitments need not conflict with critical thinking. Critical judgment depends upon knowledge because meaningful evaluation requires something to evaluate.

This point is particularly important in relation to essentialist approaches. Substantive knowledge gives learners access to accumulated intellectual achievements and cultural resources. Educational perspectives influenced by essentialism similarly connect knowledge with intellectual and moral formation (Faizin, 2020). The difficulty arises only when transmission becomes indistinguishable from education. If learners are expected simply to receive established knowledge without examining its justification, interpretation, limitations, or implications, education becomes vulnerable to intellectual passivity. Critical thinking should also be distinguished from metacognition. Metacognitive strategies enable learners to monitor and regulate their own thinking and can support the development of critical thinking in higher education (Rivas et al., 2022). Yet awareness of one's thinking does not establish whether a conclusion is justified. A learner may recognise how a conclusion was reached while failing to determine whether the evidence supports it. Critical thinking therefore requires reflective awareness together with standards for evaluating reasons and evidence. Nor should critical thinking be reduced to technical skills. Skills concern what a learner can do, while intellectual virtues influence whether those abilities are exercised responsibly. Intellectual humility, curiosity, courage, and fairness affect how individuals respond to uncertainty, disagreement, and correction (Baehr, 2021). This distinction matters because education should cultivate not only competent intellectual performance but also dispositions toward responsible judgment.

The difference between ability and disposition can be illustrated by a simple case. A student may be able to identify weaknesses in another person's reasoning while refusing to recognise equivalent weaknesses in personal beliefs. The student demonstrates a cognitive skill but not necessarily good intellectual judgment. Critical thinking therefore requires a willingness to apply standards of evaluation consistently, including to one's own conclusions (Baehr, 2023). Critical thinking is also socially developed. Reasoning takes place through engagement with teachers, peers, texts, traditions, and competing positions. Dialogue exposes assumptions that solitary reflection may conceal and creates opportunities for revision. Critical thinking understood as discourse therefore places intellectual challenge and response at the centre of development (Kuhn, 2019). A defensible conception of critical thinking is consequently evaluative, self-corrective, knowledge-dependent, socially situated, and intellectually responsible. It enables learners to acquire knowledge without merely accumulating information, engage traditions without surrendering judgment, and encounter disagreement without treating disagreement itself as sufficient reason for rejecting a position. These characteristics make critical thinking a plausible educational ideal rather than merely another academic skill.

Why Critical Thinking is the Fundamental Educational Ideal

The claim that critical thinking is fundamental does not diminish the importance of knowledge, creativity, professional competence, moral development, or democratic participation. Its importance is relational. These educational goods require responsible judgment if they are to fulfil their purposes. The epistemic case is straightforward. Human beings are fallible reasoners. They interpret incomplete evidence, rely upon testimony, inherit assumptions, and sometimes mistake familiarity for truth. Higher education cannot eliminate these vulnerabilities, but it can cultivate the capacity to recognise and respond to them. Critical thinking requires learners to ask why a claim should be accepted, what evidence supports it, what assumptions it depends upon, and what might count against it (Hitchcock, 2022). Education that increases information without developing such judgment risks producing informed dependence rather than intellectual autonomy.

This does not mean that critical thinking is a context-free reasoning mechanism. One of the strongest challenges to broad conceptions of critical thinking is that reasoning depends heavily upon prior knowledge and disciplinary context. Research on cognitive biases and dual processing provides reason to reject the assumption that a general reasoning skill automatically transfers from one domain to another (Monteiro et al., 2020). The appropriate response is not to abandon critical thinking but to understand its development differently. Students require substantive knowledge in order to reason well, while the disposition to examine reasons, evidence, assumptions, and alternatives remains relevant across contexts. The moral case follows from the connection between judgment and action. Human conduct depends upon beliefs concerning other people, circumstances, values, and consequences. Poor reasoning can therefore contribute to harmful decisions even where harmful intentions are absent. Critical thinking does not provide a complete moral theory, but it supports responsible deliberation by encouraging attention to reasons, evidence, consequences, and alternative perspectives.

Intellectual virtues strengthen this dimension. Intellectual humility restrains unjustified certainty, while intellectual courage makes it possible to confront evidence that challenges preferred conclusions. Intellectual fairness encourages consistent treatment of competing positions (Baehr, 2019). Conversely, intellectual vices can distort judgment by making individuals resistant to correction or selectively attentive to evidence (Clemente, 2024). The educational significance of critical thinking therefore extends beyond cognitive performance to the formation of responsible intellectual character. The democratic case is equally important. Democratic participation requires citizens who can evaluate competing claims, identify weak reasoning, interpret evidence, and engage disagreement responsibly. Critical thinking understood through discourse is particularly relevant because public judgment develops through challenge, response, and revision (Kuhn, 2019). This does not require political neutrality in the sense of ignoring ideology and power. Educational institutions themselves influence which forms of knowledge receive authority. Critical thinking should therefore include the capacity to examine those conditions rather than accepting them as intellectually neutral (Leś, 2024).

The educational case provides the deepest justification for the thesis. Education differs from training because it should transform the learner's capacity for judgment rather than merely produce successful performance of predetermined procedures. A professionally competent graduate who cannot question an inappropriate procedure remains dependent upon external authority. A knowledgeable graduate who cannot distinguish reliable evidence from unsupported assertion remains vulnerable to intellectual manipulation. Critical thinking is therefore closely connected with intellectual autonomy. Autonomy does not require individuals to reject expertise or construct all knowledge independently. Intellectual autonomy means being capable of assessing reasons for oneself while recognising that one's judgments remain open to correction. It allows graduates to depend upon experts without

becoming blindly dependent upon authority. The same principle explains why critical thinking is compatible with tradition. Students enter higher education with inherited languages, histories, beliefs, cultural assumptions, and intellectual traditions. The educational task is not to erase these inheritances but to make reflective engagement with them possible. Critical thinking allows learners to preserve valuable traditions while asking whether particular interpretations remain defensible.

Knowledge without judgment can become accumulation. Professional competence without judgment can become mechanical performance. Creativity without judgment can become novelty without discernment. Moral conviction without judgment can become dogmatism. Democratic participation without judgment can leave citizens vulnerable to manipulation. Critical thinking supplies the reflective capacity through which these educational goods can be directed responsibly. Its fundamental status therefore rests on more than usefulness. Critical thinking provides the connection between knowledge and justified belief, competence and responsible action, conviction and reflection, and participation and reasoned judgment. It is fundamental because it gives direction to what higher education teaches and to the kind of intellectual agency graduates are expected to develop.

Philosophical Objections and Responses

The strongest objection arises from psychology. If reasoning depends substantially upon context, knowledge, and cognitive biases, critical thinking may appear too fragmented to serve as a general educational ideal. Evidence concerning the limited transferability of reasoning skills provides good reason to reject simplistic accounts of general critical-thinking abilities (Monteiro et al., 2020). Yet this objection succeeds only against a narrow conception of critical thinking as a context-free technique. What can extend across contexts is not an identical procedure but a disposition toward justification, evidence, alternative explanations, and self-correction. Historical inquiry and scientific investigation employ different forms of evidence, but both require responsible judgment within their respective contexts. Rationality is therefore embedded within disciplinary and social practices rather than detached from them (McGuirk, 2022).

A second concern involves critical pedagogy and cultural power. Educational institutions decide which knowledge is taught, which voices receive authority, and which traditions are treated as legitimate. A supposedly neutral critical-thinking curriculum may therefore reproduce existing structures of power. This concern strengthens the need for reflexivity. Critical thinking should enable learners to examine not only individual claims but also the institutional and ideological conditions under which claims acquire authority (Leś, 2024). Yet reflexivity should not become the rejection of rational standards. If every claim is treated merely as an expression of power, critical inquiry loses the capacity to distinguish stronger explanations from weaker ones. A defensible conception therefore combines awareness of power with continued attention to reasons and evidence. Cultural diversity presents a related challenge. A universal educational ideal can become problematic if it assumes that one tradition possesses the only legitimate conception of rationality or intellectual development. Critical thinking should instead remain open to diverse intellectual traditions. Islamic educational thought, for example, connects knowledge with moral and intellectual formation (Faizin, 2020). Buddhist approaches to intellectual practice likewise raise important questions about reflection and critical inquiry (Vaidya, 2020). Cultural openness does not mean that every intellectual practice is beyond criticism. The point is to allow different traditions to contribute to educational understanding while maintaining the possibility of reasoned evaluation. Universality should therefore refer to the commitment to responsible and self-corrective judgment rather than to the imposition of one cultural model.

The role of intellectual virtues creates another challenge. If critical thinking requires humility, courage, fairness, and curiosity, it might appear that intellectual virtue rather than critical thinking should be the fundamental ideal. The distinction between skills and virtues suggests otherwise. Skills make evaluation possible, while virtues influence whether evaluation is honest, consistent, and open to correction (Baehr, 2023). They are therefore complementary dimensions of responsible intellectual judgment. Artificial intelligence presents a contemporary challenge. Generative systems can now produce coherent explanations, arguments, and apparently authoritative information with considerable speed. This could encourage students to outsource intellectual work. Yet the development of such systems makes judgment more important rather than less important. Students must determine whether machine-generated information is accurate, whether its sources are reliable, whether its reasoning is sound, and whether its conclusions fit the context (Manousou, 2025). AI can therefore change how intellectual work is performed without removing human responsibility for judgment. The educational issue is not simply whether students use AI but whether their use of it strengthens or weakens intellectual agency. These objections do not require abandoning critical thinking. They require a conception that is sensitive to knowledge and context, aware of power, open to diverse traditions, supported by intellectual virtues, and capable of responding to technological change.

Reconstructing Critical Thinking

Critical thinking should be understood as developmental, virtue-based, socially situated, context-sensitive, and open to diverse intellectual traditions. This conception avoids the limitations of treating critical thinking as a fixed collection of transferable skills. It is developmental because intellectual judgment improves through exposure to uncertainty, disagreement, error, evidence, and revision. Metacognitive strategies can support this development by helping students monitor their reasoning and recognise areas requiring improvement (Rivas et al., 2022). Critical thinking is therefore a capacity cultivated through sustained educational experience rather than acquired through a single lesson or course. It is virtue-based because responsible reasoning requires dispositions as well as abilities. A learner may identify a weakness in an argument while remaining unwilling to recognise a weakness in personal beliefs. Intellectual humility, courage, curiosity, and fairness help close this gap between cognitive ability and responsible judgment (Baehr, 2021).

Critical thinking is also socially situated. Learners develop judgments through interaction with teachers, peers, texts, disciplines, and communities. Dialogue makes reasoning public and therefore open to challenge. Revising a position in response to better reasons becomes a sign of intellectual growth rather than failure (Kuhn, 2019). Its context-sensitive character follows from the dependence of reasoning upon knowledge. A student cannot critically evaluate a scientific claim without understanding the relevant concepts and evidence. Similarly, historical judgment requires familiarity with sources and context. Critical thinking therefore requires disciplinary knowledge while remaining broader than any particular discipline (McGuirk, 2022).

Critical thinking should be culturally open. The universality claimed here is normative rather than cultural. It concerns the commitment to reason-responsive and self-corrective judgment rather than the imposition of one intellectual tradition. Different traditions can contribute resources for understanding knowledge, reflection, and intellectual formation. This conception preserves both unity and plurality. The intellectual resources through which critical thinking is cultivated may differ across disciplines and cultures, but the commitment to responsible judgment remains. Critical thinking can therefore provide a shared educational orientation without demanding intellectual uniformity.

Implications for Higher Education

If critical thinking is fundamental, its implications extend across curriculum, teaching, assessment, teacher education, AI-assisted learning, and educational policy. Curricula should combine substantive knowledge with opportunities for evaluation, inquiry, interpretation, application, and revision. Students cannot reason well about subjects they barely understand, but knowledge becomes educationally incomplete when students are expected only to reproduce it. Essentialist approaches can therefore contribute to critical education when established knowledge becomes the basis for inquiry rather than the endpoint of learning (Ekawati et al., 2023). Teaching should expose students to competing explanations, difficult questions, evidence, objections, and opportunities for revision. The teacher's authority remains important, but its educational purpose should include modelling how knowledge is examined rather than presenting authority as beyond question. Assessment should make judgment visible. Conventional examinations remain useful for establishing knowledge, but they cannot by themselves demonstrate whether students can evaluate evidence or construct defensible conclusions. Argumentative writing, case analysis, problem-solving, evidence evaluation, oral defence, and reflective revision provide stronger opportunities to assess higher-order thinking (Sobocan et al., 2022).

Teacher education should prepare educators to cultivate intellectual virtues and manage disagreement constructively. Teachers influence not only what students learn but also how they relate to knowledge, uncertainty, authority, and correction. A classroom that punishes intellectual disagreement may produce compliance, but it is poorly suited to developing independent judgment. AI-assisted learning should be incorporated within this framework rather than treated simply as either a threat or a solution. Students should learn to verify AI-generated information, inspect references, compare sources, identify unsupported assumptions, and take responsibility for final judgments. The purpose of AI use should be to support intellectual activity without displacing human responsibility (Manousou, 2025). Educational policy should likewise resist reducing higher education to employability. Analytical and complex problem-solving capacities are increasingly valuable in changing labour markets (World Economic Forum, 2020). Yet the educational purpose of critical thinking is broader. Universities also prepare citizens, professionals, researchers, and intellectuals who must judge competing claims and respond responsibly to uncertainty. The resulting policy orientation is a university culture in which knowledge and judgment remain inseparable. Each discipline should cultivate its own standards of inquiry while contributing to the wider development of reflective intellectual agency.

Conclusion

Critical thinking is more than a useful academic skill. Its fundamental educational significance arises from the fact that higher education requires learners to exercise judgment over knowledge, action, values, traditions, and technological possibilities. Knowledge must be evaluated, professional competence responsibly directed, moral judgments examined, and democratic claims assessed through reasons and evidence. The case developed here does not depend on treating critical thinking as a universal technique detached from knowledge, culture, or context. Its defensible form is developmental, virtue-based, socially situated, context-sensitive, and culturally open. These features do not weaken its educational status. They make the ideal more realistic and more capable of addressing the complexities of contemporary higher education. The deeper issue is what universities should ultimately cultivate. A university that produces graduates who know more but cannot judge what deserves belief has achieved information without full intellectual formation. A university that develops professional competence without reflective judgment risks producing efficient practitioners who cannot recognise when established practices require revision. Education reaches beyond such outcomes because it should form persons capable of examining reasons, questioning assumptions, responding to evidence, and revising conclusions when better grounds emerge.

Critical thinking therefore provides the normative connection among the principal aims of higher education. It does not replace knowledge, morality, professional competence, creativity, or democratic participation. It gives them direction. For this reason, critical thinking should be understood not simply as one desirable outcome of higher education, but as the educational ideal that gives coherence to what higher education is for.

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