

# Think On Your Feet

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DEBATE AS A CRITICAL EXERCISE

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# Creating a Critical Thinking Classroom

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My previous talk, “Think First! Centering ESL classes around Critical Thinking\*” outlined the need to increase the focus on Critical Thinking in the L2 classroom

- Emphasis is usually on language skills, with content and critical thinking a distant 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>
- Textbooks reflect this low status, as do many learning outcomes across curricula
- It’s a small but important step to switch the focus to critical thinking skills rather than just language skills

Critical Thinking prepares Ss for:

- Success in University (Davidson, 1998), and
- Progress in the world (Benesch, 1993; 1999)

*\*MELEd 2014, TESOL 2015*

# Critical Thinking Definition(s)

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## What it IS:

- “The intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information...as a guide to belief and action.” (Scriven & Paul, 1987)

## What it is NOT:

- 1) “the mere acquisition and retention of information alone;
- 2) the mere possession of a set of skills;
- 3) the mere use of those skills ("as an exercise") without acceptance of their results.”
  - (Scriven & Paul, 1987)

**That is, Critical Thinking is a skill and a process for a purpose.**

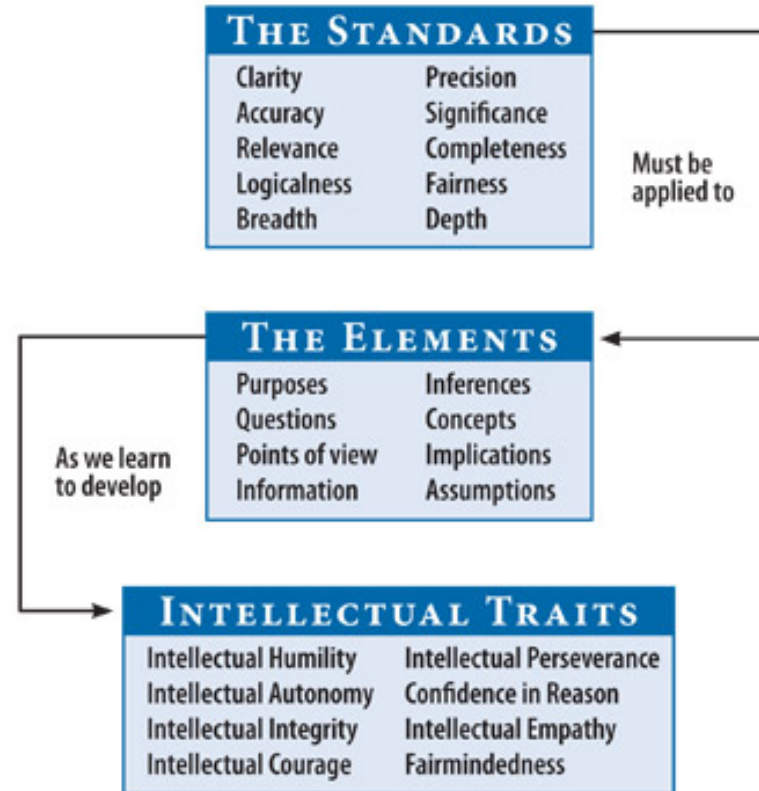
# Critical Thinking Definition(s)

“Thinking that explicitly aims at well-founded judgment and hence utilizes appropriate evaluative standards in the attempt to determine the true worth, merit, or value of something.”

(Paul, Elder, & Bartell 1997)

For an interactive model explaining these standards, elements, and traits, go to:  
<http://www.criticalthinking.org/ctmodel/logic-model1.htm#>

## Critical Thinkers Routinely Apply Intellectual Standards To The Elements Of Reasoning In Order To Develop Intellectual Traits



# Why Critical Thinking?

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“Human thinking left to itself often gravitates toward **prejudice, over-generalization, common fallacies, self-deception, rigidity, and narrowness...**

“Sound critical thinking maximizes our ability to **solve problems of importance to us** by helping us both to **avoid common mistakes** and to proceed in the **most rational and logical fashion.**”

(Paul, Elder, & Bartell 1997)

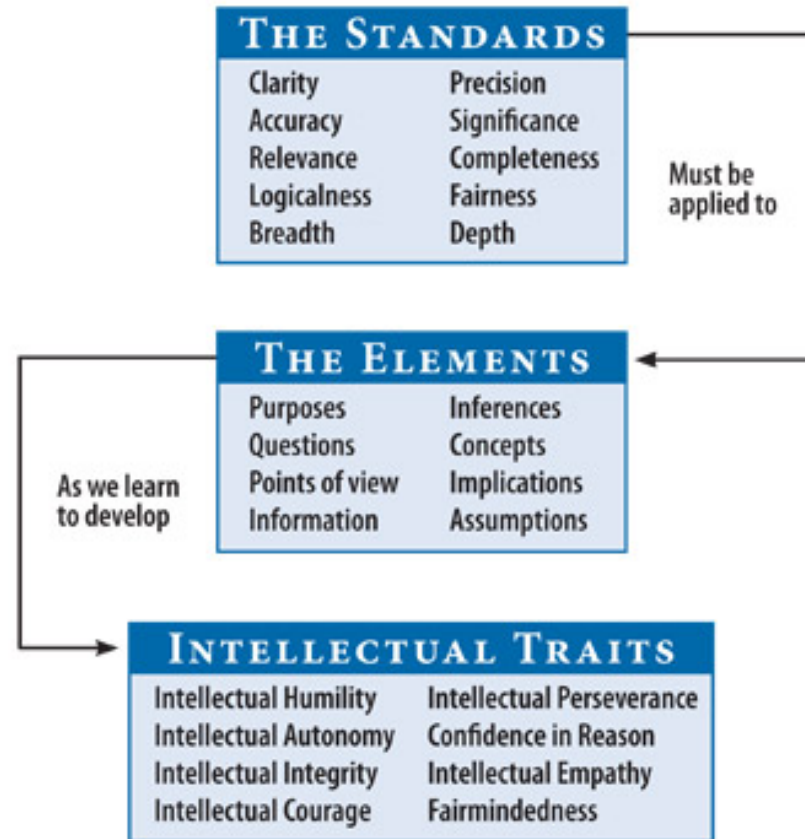


# Why Debate?

“Students participating in debate generally have a higher level of critical thinking than their nondebating counterparts.” (Colbert 1995)

Debate employs a vast majority of the standards, elements, and traits identified by the Foundation for Critical Thinking:

## Critical Thinkers Routinely Apply Intellectual Standards To The Elements Of Reasoning In Order To Develop Intellectual Traits

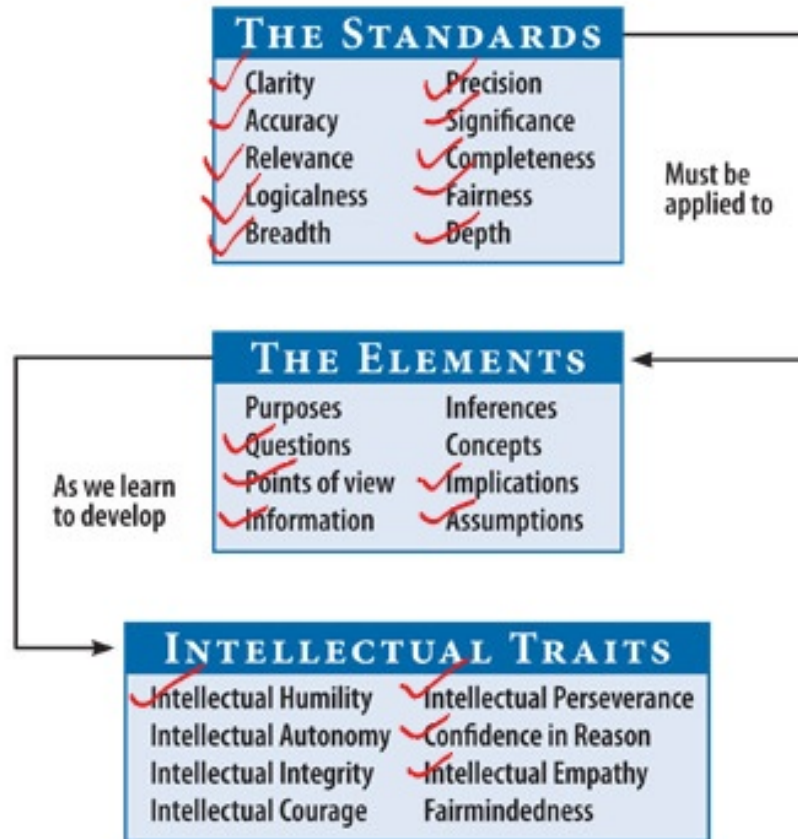


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# Chicken or the Egg?

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Is debate a cause or a result of critical thinking?

Colbert 1995:

“Do critical thinkers migrate toward academic debating or does academic debating enhance critical thinking? The two seem intrinsically related. Whether the chicken or the egg came first may not be as important as considering **whether one could develop without the other.**”

“The key issue is not whether debating causes critical thinking, but to discover **how debating can cultivate it** for those with varying levels of critical thinking ability.”

**Bottom Line? It can and does:**

“The preponderance of defensible evidence suggests *competitive debate experience can indeed improve critical thinking skills.*”



# The University Culture is Debate

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- Many of my international students (studying ESL) come from educational systems that don't teach, use, or even value critical thinking. They are taught to **memorize and recite**.
- In contrast, the US classroom is always forcing them to **form opinions, evaluate evidence, question assumptions, and engage in discussion** with a diverse set of classmates.
- In a word, our University Culture IS a debate!
- Debate is even being integrated into courses that may surprise you!
  - Ex: BIOL 1010- *Human Biology: Concepts and Current Ethical Issues*

## ***So, WHY DEBATE?***

Performing **high-order academic thinking** in a **second language** is clearly a goal of University language programs. How can we prepare our students to do more than count to ten?

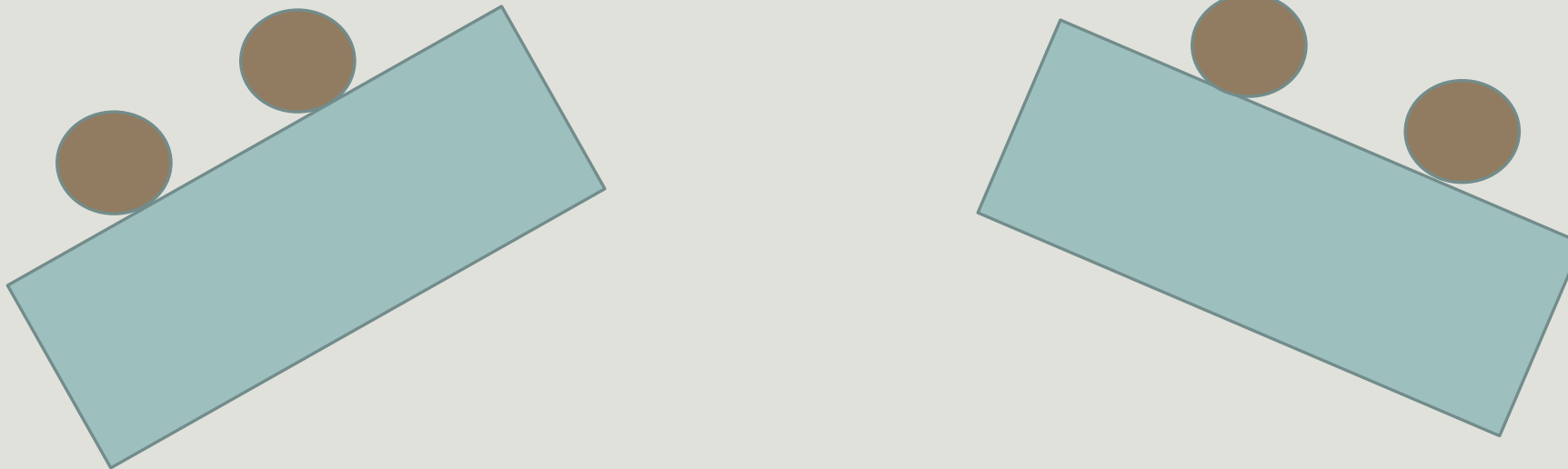
# The Setup (see handout)

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My specific example comes from a **mixed-upper-level** (advanced to high-advanced), **content-based ESL integrated skills class**, “Current Issues in the Media”

Currently we are doing Pair-vs.-Pair debates every 3 weeks

Each pair sits or stands at a desk and faces the audience:



# Preparation and Delivery

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## **PREPARATION:**

Choose a **topic** and take sides (choose as a foursome)

**Research** the topic for valuable evidence

- Plan **argumentation** (with their partner)
- Predict necessary **counterarguments**
- Prepare an **outline** and/or notecards for their turn
- Write a formal, **written argument essay** (turned in before debate begins)

## **DELIVERY:**

- **Deliver** the debate (5-5-3-3-1-1: this 18-minute format to be described below)
- **Notes** are taken during the debate and used for counterargument (rebuttal)

## **HAND IN:**

- Written essay with sources; outline/notecards; handwritten notes

# Elements of a Debate: Required

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## **NECESSARY SCAFFOLDING:**

- **Argumentation** – claims, appeals, language
- **Counterargument** – concession, prediction, co-opting, rebuttal, refutation
- **Logical Fallacies** – strawman, ad hominem, anecdotal evidence, etc.
- **Evidence** – support, logic
- **Research** – reliability, key words, source use, citations (written and oral)
- **Model** – it's important to see an example of a formal debate first

# Elements of a Debate: Required

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## **FORMAL FORMAT:**

- **PROPOSITION** (5 minutes each)
  - – prepared main argument (may NOT read their essay – work from outline/notecard)
- **REBUTTAL** (3 minutes each)
  - – impromptu from notes taken during proposition
  - – some counterargument can be prepared ahead of time; no guarantee it will be used
- **CONCLUSION** (1 minute each)
  - Summary of both proposition and gist of rebuttal
  - Synthesis of prepared and impromptu material

# Elements of a Debate: Required

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## **MODEL MOCK DEBATE** (done solo by the teacher, or by video)

- Helps students unfamiliar with formal debate see the format
- Can focus on relevant oral skills, nonverbal
- Can be tailored to whatever you want to focus on (more on that later)
- Shows how positions can be taken regardless of personal opinion:



# Elements of a Debate: Required

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## **INTEGRATED SKILLS** (to some degree)

- My design is very much an integrated skills version
- Even if yours is for a different class, there will be some mixing of skills needed to pull off an effective debate
- Even if you don't assess skills you're not focused on, it still builds a more balanced use of Critical Thinking when the L2 is being used for all of these varied tasks

# Elements of a Debate: Optional Formats

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## Individual (1-on-1)

**Pros:** Ensures that each debater is getting the full range of prepared and impromptu experience

**Cons:** More work for each person; absence on debate day; multi-level considerations (more later)

## Pair/Team (2+ vs 2+)

**Pros:** Teamwork; Roles (in both prep and delivery) can be distributed; Teams and roles can be mixed and matched for subsequent debates

**Cons:** Unreliable partners; miscommunications

## 3-way

**Pros:** Helps manage with odd-numbered classes; more perspectives heard; more nuance

**Cons:** Logistics of rebuttals and timing; limits topics to ones that have more than 2 sides; dangers of the middle ground



# Elements of a Debate: Optional Products

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## CREATED MATERIALS

### **For my project, students turn in:**

- A written argumentative essay (approx. 1 page) that summarizes their main points, includes counterargument/concession, and cites specific evidence and sources
- Their outline/notecards that they use during the debate (they may NOT read their essay)
- Their written notes taken during the other team's proposition
- During the debate, I take notes and/or video record them

### **Exactly what you require your students to produce can vary greatly**

- How much research should they do?
- What skills are most important for my class?
- What materials can they reasonably produce?
- What will help me assess their critical thinking?

# Make It Your Own: Tailoring & Scaffolding

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## LEVEL-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- **Lower levels:**
  - Easier topics (they should still be relevant)
  - More vocab available (existing or scaffolded)
  - Shorter turns (3-2-1 is just as good as 5-3-1, for example)
- **Multi-level classes**
  - Pair lower with lower, higher with higher, OR
  - Pair high with low in teams, giving higher students the harder tasks (such as rebuttal)
  - Adjust weight of language skills lower than content and task outcomes (ARGUMENT > DELIVERY)

# Make It Your Own: Tailoring & Scaffolding

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## **SKILL-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS**

- **INTEGRATED SKILLS:** Weight most elements relatively equally (see my rubrics)
- **ORAL SKILLS FOCUS:**
  - Scaffold and weight delivery, enunciation of key terms, oral citations, argumentation language, expression of emotion, audience involvement, note-taking for rebuttal prep
  - Written element: weight smaller, reduce, or eliminate it
- **WRITTEN FOCUS:**
  - Weight the written portion more heavily
  - Give specific requirements for the outline and/or notecards
  - The paper's counterargument section: evidence of whether they considered the other side before the debate
  - Follow up on source use, source reliability, etc.

# Make It Your Own: Tailoring & Scaffolding

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## **POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS**

- Educational background and experience with debate
- Cultural or personal value of debate
- Triggers for sensitive topics (this can also be an upside)

## **CONTEXT-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS**

- Course intent (content, specific purposes)
- Could be used as a major final project, regular medium projects, or streamlined into smaller HW projects
- Impromptu debate is harder, but can be useful for high-level practice
- Students with high ability/ambition can be challenged to defend positions they disagree with

# Recommendations & Expansion

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**Debates could lead to (or be complemented with) full-class discussion, Socratic dialogues, etc.**

- Peterson (2009) suggests using the Socratic Method in class discussions for many reasons, including deeper understanding due to critical thinking

**Having debates regularly builds a culture of critical thinking**

- In my course, students may learn about “humans’ need to explore,” but this is then expanded when we use debate to visualize what can happen (good and bad) when we do
- Giving them the chance to discover these things for themselves breaks them out of the passive and receptive learning they may be more comfortable in, and results will stick with them longer

**Encourage topics that are relevant to both class content and students**

- Topics that are academic, important, and personally relevant

# Selected topics we've debated:

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Does globalization cause more poverty or less poverty?

Should US immigration policies be more or less strict?

Is genetic engineering ethical?

Who should care for the elderly?

As a species, is mankind more destructive or creative?

Should space exploration be privately or publicly funded?

Should health care be free?

Is tradition an obstacle to progress?

Should machines replace humans in the workforce?

Is it important to preserve historical places and artifacts?

Who should be allowed to carry guns?

Should we use animals for testing?

What limits should there be on abortion?

Is nuclear technology good for the future?

Does religion lead to terrorism?

## Conclusion



Debate is not the only way to bring critical thinking into your class...but it's a surefire one!

Debate IS a critical exercise!

Cultivating a culture of regular debate (formal and informal) builds a classroom that will be equipped with HOW to think, not just WHAT to think.

# References

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