

Education for Thinking

reviewed by [Gardner Dunnan](#) — January 09, 2006

Title: Education for Thinking

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Periodically, a book comes along that shapes our thinking about education in a profoundly transforming way. Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), Bruner's *Toward a Theory of Instruction* (1966), Silberman's *Crises in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education* (1970), *A Nation at Risk* (1983) by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, Gardner's *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), and Sizer's *Horace's Compromise* (1984) come to mind. It will be a wonderful contribution to American education if *Education for Thinking* joins this elite group of publications that make a difference for our children and our profession. Every parent, educator, and public policy maker will benefit from reading Professor Kuhn's succinct and thought-provoking book.

The book begins with a brief overview of various perspectives on the purposes of education. Professor Kuhn discusses the arguments for "educating to instill knowledge," "to develop skills," "for selection," and "educating for citizenship" She finds value in each of these orientations but ultimately finds fatal flaws in these definitions of the goals of education. She observes that almost all statements of our reasons for sending children to schools have similar general goals:

We seek to produce students who will become "confident, eager, and self-motivated learners" and "responsible and independent thinkers," who will "love learning and value knowledge," who will be "open-minded and compassionate" and "fulfill their creative potential," who will gain "competence, self-reliance and self-knowledge," and who display "self-assurance, curiosity, responsibility, independence and teamwork"—all of these are quotations from current brochures of premier public and independent schools.Who could disagree?

Any sense of widespread agreement rapidly evaporates, however, as soon as we get any more specific, seeking to translate the abstract ideals of mission statements in the particulars of what children should spend their time doing in school. (p. 3)

The solution to this lack of agreement on specifics is to focus on "educating for thinking." The skills necessary to fulfill this goal are the skills of inquiry and argument, to which the majority of this book is devoted to defining and exemplifying.

Professor Kuhn provides brilliant and chilling descriptions of two middle school teachers, one in a “struggling school” and one in a “best practices” public school. Both teachers would endorse the concept that their purpose is to educate for thinking, with all of the platitudinous generalities quoted above.

This is somewhat of a surprise to Kuhn, given the dramatic differences in the student population, culture, and resources of the two schools. She obviously respects the intent, intelligence, and energy of both teachers. These are educators who would receive high praise in any professional evaluation system.

However, neither really achieves the goal of teaching inquiry and argument.

More importantly, Kuhn’s calm, objective, and detailed behavioral descriptions of both teachers and their classes illustrate how far removed media reports and major reform proposals are from the reality of an actual middle school classroom. Every politician and proponent of structural reforms in education should be required to read these descriptions and to test their proposals against the reality of these classrooms. I know of no concrete current suggestions that would fare well in such an assessment: certainly not NCLB; restructuring large urban districts into regions; or the promotion of school choice through charter schools, magnet schools, or vouchers. (The best practice school was a small school with small classes and well-trained teachers.) Kuhn’s proposal that we teach the skills of inquiry and argument, with detailed descriptions of how we might do each, signals an approach to reform that might well transform both the “struggling” and the “best practice” schools of our nation.

The details of how we to teach inquiry and argument, with the philosophy underlying these approaches and the research supporting their effectiveness, will be of more interest to professional educators than to parents and public policy makers. Therefore, when I send copies of this book to my friends who are not in the classroom every school day, I suggest that they may want to just skim chapters 4 and 5 (The Skills of Inquiry and Developing Inquiry Skills) and chapters 6 and 7 (The Skills of Argument and Developing Argument Skills). The dedicated classroom teacher, however, will find these chapters as exciting and powerful as the rest of the book, replete with treasures of specifics to guide classroom practice.

In her concluding chapter, Professor Kuhn reviews her arguments for teaching the skills of inquiry and argument, emphasizing that valuing these skills as something worth knowing is at least as important as mastering these skills. She highlights that the “value and utility of these skills are found in life, not just in school” (p. 178). Concluding that the challenge is for educators to take a fresh look at our basic goals of education, she calls for political action to promote this agenda in the face of the current culture of “higher standards, more rigorous courses and tougher examinations” (p. 194). In addition, as one would expect from a faculty member at Teachers College, Kuhn calls for further designed-based research to refine the understanding of how to help students develop the skills of argument and inquiry. Most encouraging is the fact that

the students in the “struggling-school” classrooms are essentially as successful in mastering these skills as are those in the “best practice” schools. In addition, the teachers in both settings share the generic goals that relate to nurturing these skills, even though they do not grasp how to do this. If all teachers would read this volume and reflect on its suggestions, they would greatly enhance the effectiveness of their work in the classroom.

Absent from the recommendations offered by Professor Kuhn is what seems the most obvious conclusion from her work. In addition to a political will to take a fresh look at our basic goals and to conduct additional research, this book demonstrates the good and bad news of our current teacher training programs at Teachers College and elsewhere. The good news is that our professional education programs have succeeded in developing a teacher corps that shares a philosophy and sense of the purpose of education, whether these teachers work in challenged or privileged settings. This is no small accomplishment, and it will assist in the necessary next step of training our teachers in how to implement their goals. However, it is ironic that there is this absence in the call to action from Teachers College, as the most profound need is for us to reform our preservice and inservice education of professionals to provide them with the insights that Kuhn has identified as the best possible practice for American education. This task will be complicated by the fact that although our schools of education have succeeded in promoting a broadly shared view of how we should approach education, we have failed to convince the general public of the validity of this view. Perhaps this is because, as Professor Kuhn compellingly documents, we have not yet learned how to do what we claim to be the most important aspect of our profession: education for thinking.

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