

CASE STUDY

INFORMATION LITERACY

In order to illustrate how information-literacy concepts are central to critical thought, I decided to pick an example where critical thinking itself was part of a political controversy: a 2012 hubbub over the Texas Republican party's alleged attempt to ban critical thinking from the school curriculum.

In addition to providing a topic that we can unpack using the information-literacy tools you've already read about: locating information, evaluating information, and the like, it's also a useful example to demonstrate how biases can interfere with our attempt to find and qualify the information needed to achieve understanding.

And that's because these biases can come from more than one place. For example, since this issue involves one of the major political parties, there will be an obvious desire by partisans from the other major party to portray this story in a way that makes their rivals come off as badly as possible.

But there are other potential biases at work here as well, notably the bias of people who, like me (and, I expect, you) attach great importance to the teaching of critical thinking and might thus react poorly to any attempt to marginalize or stigmatize the field.

So let's see how this plays out as we try to figure out exactly what went on in Texas in 2012.

To start with, before we type a single word into a single search engine, we need to form our goal into a question. So, in this case, my question is going to be "did the Texas Republican party attempt to ban the teaching of critical thinking in the public schools?"

Armed with this question, I can now step up to the keyboard and perform a Google search based on the most obvious key words associated with this subject: Texas Republicans Critical Thinking.

This search brings up a tidy 15.9 million results from the Open Web, and there must be something in these close to sixteen million Web documents I can make use of, right? Probably, but enough to achieve sufficiency, that is, enough information that passes our various quality tests to ensure our question gets answered? Let's see.

To begin with, if you look over the first several pages of links that come up in this search, you can immediately see that Google has ranked sources with high authority (such as well-known newspapers and magazines) and strong opinions. For the most part, these come from harsh critics of the Texas GOP, which means we should be on the lookout for the bias I just mentioned.

"Texas GOP Rejects Critical Thinking—Really" announces *The Washington Post*. "No More Critical Thinking in Schools!" pronounces a blog on *Education Week*. "The Terrifying Republican Platform" denounces *Forbes* magazine. (I'll skip over what Stephen Colbert and other political comics had to say on the matter since those are clearly subject to the bias of wanting to entertain an audience by mocking the powerful.)

The first page also includes links to some stories where the chairperson of the Texas GOP explains this controversial measure and a couple of stories that characterize this decision as an "accident."

But rather than beginning by reading condemnations or defenses, it might be better to find out what this decision consisted of. And so I've chosen a link to *The Austin Chronicle*, a newspaper that probably gives more coverage to Texas party politics than *Education Week*, *Forbes*, or *The Colbert Report*. While this story also criticizes the party for its decision, it does so while spelling out what the Texas Republicans actually did.

As it turns out, the GOP did not propose legislation to ban critical thinking or take any other sort of legislative action targeting critical thinking or any other subject. Rather it included a plank in its party platform regarding the matter.

Since that party maintains its own site on the Open Web, my next search is for the actual text of the 2012 Texas Republican platform which, interestingly enough, doesn't appear until page 2 of a Google search for those words after a host of the same critiques I found in my first search. One quick "Find" command later, I've located the information I was looking for, a platform statement amidst a host of others relating to education that reads as follows:

"Knowledge-Based Education—We oppose the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (values clarification), critical-thinking skills, and similar programs that are simply a relabeling of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) (mastery learning), which focus on behavior modification and have the purpose of challenging the student's fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority."

OK. So now we've got something to work with. For one thing, we're dealing with a plank in a party platform. And, if you have some background knowledge on how party platforms are created, you know that platform creation has devolved in recent decades to the place where partisans charged up about a particular issue often include extreme language that is later ignored or criticized by mainstream party members (just ask the national Democrats and Republicans who often have to deal with unanticipated conflicts over platform issues at party conventions).

Beyond these intra-party dynamics, we should also realize that the platform statement quoted above, which represents the argument decision-makers behind this plank are making, is not attacking critical thinking education *per se*. Rather, it is saying that there exists a bad educational method called Higher-Order Thinking Skills (or HOTS, a rebranding of something called Outcome-Based Education) that hides its real agenda (behavior

modification and undermining of fixed beliefs) behind the virtuous façade of critical-thinking education.

Now it may turn out that this argument is dead wrong. But even if it is, we need to recognize that we are dealing with a different issue than an attempt to ban the teaching of critical thinking to Texas students. Rather, we are dealing with an argument that implies a question those of us who *favor* the teaching of critical thinking shouldn't automatically dismiss, which is: do teaching strategies that *do not* involve the teaching of critical thinking (or, worse, fad or quack educational theories) try to take advantage of the halo effect associated with critical thinking to their own advantage?

Getting back to our analysis, the Texas GOP's criticism seems to ultimately center on something called Outcome-Based Education (or OBE), so the next stop in my search campaign will be to find out more about this subject using "Outcome-Based Education" (in quotes) for my next key word search. As expected, the first link that pops up when I search for this topic comes from Wikipedia.

Given the nature of that source (which allows anyone to edit any article anonymously), I tend to avoid Wikipedia for any subject that smacks of political controversy since partisans tend to try to rewrite Wiki entries to suit their biases and agendas. So as tempting as it might be to click on that link or on one of the many links that talk about controversies related to OBE that appear on the first pages of Google, I'm instead going to log into my public library's Web site, where they maintain access to a number of professional edited and scholarly information databases to see if I can get a handle on what OBE is really all about.

A search through those databases, which are no harder to use than Google, gives me a long literature about OBE and the controversies surrounding it. While there isn't the time and space to go through all this material here, the upshot seems to be that Outcome-Based Education was once a *conservative* proposal to

measure the success of education by outputs (student achievement in certain knowledge and skill areas) vs. inputs (spending per student, classroom size, and the like). Given that standardized testing designed to measure outcomes is now a cornerstone of public education, it looks like this educational theory succeeded in going mainstream, which is why we now tend to measure school success based on test scores rather than spending levels.

But, at least according to critics, OBE lost its way when those outcomes became defined not in terms of knowledge and skills mastered but in terms of behaviors and beliefs. As one critic put it, today's outcomes "show little concern for core academic content, describing instead mental processes such as attitudes, dispositions, and sentiments. In short, the focus was on behavioral and social outcomes rather than knowledge and skills."

Keep in mind that understanding the nature of this controversy doesn't let the Texas GOP off the hook. After all, their attitudes towards OBE are rather narrow (there are other opinions on the subject, after all), and they do seem to be conflating a number of educational ideas (OBE, Higher-Order Thinking Skills, Mastery Learning, critical thinking) into a single issue. While many people (including many educators) may also be confused over what these modern educational theories are and how they fit together, most of us have not assigned ourselves the task of denouncing them in an important political forum.

Now that I have a better understanding of the issues involved, I'm ready to go back to some of my original search results, including criticism of the decision (with a focus on sources that covered the Texas GOP convention, such as Texas newspapers) and explanations of the decision, such as that interview I mentioned with the head of the Texas GOP.

I could, if I wanted to, reach out to one of the journalists who covered the convention or either the head of the Texas GOP or a party spokesperson for more firsthand detail (both the newspaper

and Texas GOP site have “Contact Us” links I could use to connect to sources closest to the ground).

But even without doing this or any further research, I believe we have finally achieved sufficiency with regard to having enough information to answer our question.

If you recall, the original question was “did the Texas Republican party attempt to ban the teaching of critical thinking in the public schools?” The answer is no, they included a plank in their platform criticizing the use of other teaching methods (either Higher-Order Thinking Skills or Outcome-Based Education), which they claim do not teach critical thinking but instead use critical thinking as a cover for their own nefarious agenda of behavior modification.

But, as our research showed, this equating of OBE, HOTS, Mastery Learning, critical thinking, and the like reflects confused thinking on important educational topics. The fact that Texas leaders were willing to give, at-best, muddled thinkers the chance to shape their party platform on the subject reflects both a lack of concern for understanding before acting and a tin ear for how this story would play out in the media. In other words, even if their goal was to highlight the alleged evils of Outcome-Based Education, the choice of wording for their platform plank made it all but inevitable that they would be denounced as Neanderthals looking to banish the ability to think critically from the brains of Texas students.

Now for partisans who have either an anti-Republican or pro critical-thinking education bias, notice that this analysis still leaves plenty of room to criticize the Texas Republican Party and its platform. I’ll admit that it doesn’t support some of the more caustic and self-flattering statements I read that characterize those behind this decision as boobs, bumpkins, and dimwits, as opposed to we sophisticates who appreciate the importance of critical thinking even if we, too, are unfamiliar with debates over Outcome-Based Education and other reform efforts.

Notice that this more appropriate criticism, that people who didn't understand what they were talking about were allowed to craft sloppy language that would be identified with the party as a whole, could have come from people who *agree* with the sentiment the GOP platform group was trying to convey who are probably appalled that their issue has been made a laughingstock through the inappropriate use of the phrase "critical thinking."

As we finish with this topic, take a look at how all the principles of information literacy helped us achieve understanding. I *located* information, not just on the Open Web but in library databases, with a focus on sources closest to the ground who I had the option of contacting directly for more information if I needed to. When *evaluating* these sources, I selected scholarly ones to give me better sourced (and, hopefully, more impartial) information on some subjects and partisan ones to help me better understand the issues being debated. This information was *organized* well enough to *synthesize* into a work product (this case study), which, if you've read up to this point, has just been successfully *communicated* to you.