

Critical Thinking and the Media

A fact is a shaky piece of real estate. A sand dune shaped by wind, wave, and time.

An old adage in philosophy and the communication disciplines suggests that there is no such thing as a totally accurate eyewitness account of any event. There is no such thing as *fact* in history. Facts involve people's perception of reality, of their own experience.

Four people witness an accident—a head-on collision involving two speeding

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Audis at the intersection of Main Street and Maple Avenue. Twisted metal, shattered glass, broken bodies. What happened?

There was a crash. On that, everyone agrees. (Although a fifth "witness" arriving two minutes later assumed that a flatbed truck flipped, spilling the remains of a previous collision all over the intersection.)

Each witness reports his or her perception to the police. A composite reality evolves. Sequence is established. Fault is evaluated. Guilt is assessed. But what *really* happened can never be known.

Only when a remembered experience is reported and that report evaluated can history be written. And then we can

ascribe meaning to the memory. But to what are we ascribing meaning? Certainly not the event. It is past, lost. We attribute meaning to perceptions of events.

But whose perceptions? History is largely the domain of kings, generals, the well-educated, and males. The perspectives of minorities, slaves, women, and ordinary people seldom play much of a role in the compilations of "facts" that we read about in history books.

Assigning Meaning to Events

History—both our own and others'—is therefore incomplete, lacking in perspective. However, this does not mean that we should not try to assign meaning

BY KEN GREENMAN

to remembrances and perceptions. We have to. Otherwise life is a series of disconnected, random moments, void of significance.

In our media-saturated world we call these perceptions by different names. We call observations on the theme and plot of reality, "Eyewitness News," the latest novel, Broadway, and "that junk in the Metropolitan Museum of Art."

An Inevitable Influence

All these things affect and shape us. We cannot *not* be affected. Just as we cannot *not* communicate (silence speaks volumes, absence leaves much said), so we are inevitably influenced by each piece of the blitz that hits us every day. We can't choose not to be affected. It is there, and we must deal with it.

How are we affected? One most dramatic way is expressed in the words "we become like what we behold." We are what our brains as well as our stomachs digest.

Styles change; fashions change. Political ideas modify. Our sense of humor warps. Our belief in right and wrong is strengthened, or weakened. And all these things change us, whether for good or for evil. So how do we defend against the bad?

By critically sifting the barrage. By recognizing bias. By understanding the various persuasion techniques used. By making informed decisions about "fact," fiction, and opinion. By realizing that Truth does not appear on surfaces, whether they are television screens, newspapers, or encyclopedia articles. Truth must be sought for carefully; we must dig for it.

Critical Thinking Skills

How can you help your students develop critical thinking skills? How can they learn to apply these skills?

Mona McCormick, in her article, "Critical Thinking and Library Instruction," lists skills that sharp thinkers employ. Critical thinkers:

- identify main issues.
- recognize underlying assumptions.
- evaluate evidence, authorities, people, publications.
- recognize bias, emotional appeals, relevant facts, propaganda, generalizations, language problems.
- question whether facts support conclusions.
- see relationships among ideas.
- know their own attitudes.

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- suspend judgment until the search is ended.

Applications

How would these skills work in a research paper? Let me tell you a story on myself.

While I was working on an M.A. in communication, I wrote a paper for a political communication class. The topic was the agenda-setting function of media; that is, how media create and develop knowledge, disseminate information to the public, and how the public is affected by that information. One of the areas I investigated for the paper was media coverage of nuclear energy over a 10-year period before the accident at Three-Mile Island, as well as after the event. I leaned heavily on media "watchdog" agencies for much of my information.

When I presented my paper in a grad-

uate seminar, the professor asked one simple, devastating question: "What were the biases of the watchdogs?"

It should have occurred to me that one group checking the bias of another has a bias of its own. But I didn't think of it. Checking it out wasn't so simple, but after further investigation, the professor and I were satisfied that the agencies presented relatively balanced information and that they strove to be objective.

Suppose, however, that I hadn't had the problem brought to my attention. If my report had been widely read, it might have influenced people to believe something that wasn't accurate. What kinds of decisions might have been made, based on their misconceptions?

There has to be, of course, a limit to how far you go in source checking. The problem is that some of our students do not even take the first step. It is our professional responsibility to teach them how to investigate, to think critically.

"Are You Sure?"

How do you do that? I think a good method of teaching thinking is to ask, "What do *you* think?" "Are you *sure* that is what you think?" "How do you know?" "Why?"

This does not mean that you try to get students to think about things the same way you do. Ask questions. Require them

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choose a characteristic for one of your students, such as weight, that has stayed relatively constant over a one-week (or longer) period, with slight variations. Plot the scores using the time dimension as the horizontal axis and the characteristic (weight) as the vertical axis. Make the chart appear to have a large fluctuation during the time period as shown in Figure 1.

For the initial discussion, do not put the numbers on the vertical axis of the chart. After discussing what occurred over the time period, insert the numbers, and note the different interpretation.

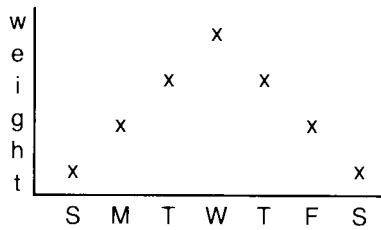


Figure 1

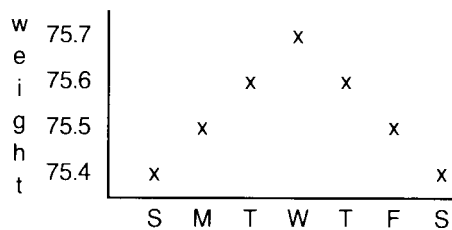


Figure 2

You can use these two charts to illustrate the importance of looking at numbers critically when interpreting graphs and charts to get the true picture of what the information is saying.

Use of Percentages

A good way to teach the importance of understanding percentages correctly would be to take some event that happens very rarely in your school or community and report changes that have occurred in it over the past two years. For example, if last year one person caught pneumonia and this year, three persons became ill with the disease, you could tell the class that there has been a 300 percent increase in the incidence of pneumonia and discuss whether public health authorities should be concerned about this trend.

In a general business or social studies class you could cite a newspaper account that reports a corporation's profits as increasing 300 percent in the past year, and discuss what this means. It may be that on \$5 billion sales, last year the profit per share was 25 cents and this year it was 75 cents.

Both of these examples could be used to emphasize the importance of knowing the base number in interpreting a report

that uses changes in percentages as the basis for its conclusions.

In Summary

For teachers to use numbers to teach thinking they should have (or develop) these four characteristics:

1. Appreciation for the value of numbers in decision-making;
2. A desire to use numbers when they naturally appear in the subject being taught;
3. A commitment to learn the meaning of numbers with which they will deal; and

4. A desire to include in the curriculum various techniques of interpreting data.

Of course, expertise in mathematical calculations and the background of having completed a statistics course that emphasized the practical use of numbers would also be a help. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ J. Buchler, ed., *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955), chapter 2.

² Audrey Haber and Richard P. Runyon, *General Statistics*, 3rd ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1977), p. 12.

³ Darrell Huff, *How to Lie With Statistics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., New York, 1954).

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to defend their opinions.

Teach logical thinking. Show students how to recognize hasty generalizations and biased commentary. Teach them to seek the information on which conclusions are based.

Analyzing Advertising

Explain to your students that Madison Avenue lives or dies by emotional appeals. Teach them that emulation is not always good, that fear is not always warranted, that the bandwagon is not always a sturdy place on which to stand, that status is not always a worthy target.

Bring an ad for a new car with a sexy person smiling from the front seat or draped over the hood. Then ask, "What's really on sale in this picture?" Help students see that they are shaped by the media barrage.

Looking at TV

I think we can safely assume that our students, at least in the United States, watch a minimum of 10 to 15 hours of television each week. (If you're a boarding academy teacher, your students probably make up for lost time when they're on home leave.)

Another safe assumption is that a majority of our students watch movies, either in the theater or on VCRs in the family room.

Given the above statistics, what criteria do our students use in deciding which programs and movies to watch? I suspect that frequently the main criteria is exciting entertainment value. It titillates, watch it.

Are we willing to allow that to be the only criteria? Are we going to surrender our students' minds to a jungle for 15 hours a week without giving them some self-defense techniques?

Why not teach evaluative critique? Talk about morality, or the lack of it, and the callousing of the spirit that comes from seeing too much crime, evil, murder, and mayhem. Talk about the overdose of fantasy, the problem of too much unreality, the 30-minute solutions to complex problems.

Discuss with your students the effect of a two-minute news report about a complicated major issue, say disarmament, on our perception of that issue.

Critiquing Art

Analyze beauty in art. Help your students decide what makes a work of art praiseworthy. Help them establish criteria based on balance, variety, intricacy, vitality, universality. . . .

The arts and media offer a multitude of opportunities for teachers of any discipline: Use *Star Trek* as a case study on speed, time, distance, and space. Discuss

impressionist painting as a means of understanding the past and how people recall experience. (Monet as memory.) Use *Our Town* as a treatise on "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." Analyze some news releases of the "Religious Right" in discussing religious tolerance and whether the United States is, or should be, a Christian nation. Use *M.A.S.H.* when you are discussing attitudes toward war and how people deal with stressful situations.

I think a worthy object of education is seeking to develop a healthy disrespect for "fact" and a healthy regard for clear thinking. It is said that before he died, Voltaire, a great questioner, said, "Now we'll see." I believe this to be a positive attitude. Questioning beliefs carefully, working toward more accurate, thoughtful understanding is a valuable enterprise. Part of a teacher's job is to help students know *what* they believe and *why*.

Your classroom should be a safe place where students learn to see, to think—where knowledge, perceptions of information, are questioned, where even their own thoughts, beliefs, and preconceptions are carefully analyzed.

In asking for classrooms to be safe places, I mean that they should be safe places to be dangerous, to be wrong. And also dangerous places to be too safe. □

REFERENCE

McCormick, Mona. "Critical Thinking and Library Instruction," *RQ (Reference Quarterly)* 22 (Summer 1983), 339-342.

WHY AND HOW TO TEACH RESEARCH SKILLS

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Special Resources

A unique component of teaching research skills in Adventist schools should be making students aware of the special Adventist collections throughout North America. These materials should be used in researching Adventist-related topics. Librarians can direct students to the appropriate location(s) for this research.

Students may obtain information by telephone or correspondence from the staff of the collection nearest to their school.

No single outline or method for teaching good research strategy meets the needs of every discipline. But whenever possible, librarians and teachers should cooperate in teaching students that there is always more to learn and no single key opens every door of knowledge.

Ellen White's statement is especially appropriate in this context:

Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do. . .

It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought.⁵

Adventist librarians and teachers should thus seek to train students to search out and evaluate information using good research techniques. This skill will serve them well as they make decisions throughout their lives. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ "The Story of a Story"—Parts I, II and III, *Adventist Review*, February 14, 21, and March 14, 1985.

² 1 Thess. 5:21.

³ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1946), p. 69.

⁴ George R. Knight, *Myths in Adventism* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1985), p. 251 (Epilogue).

⁵ White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 17.

THINKING ABOUT WRITING

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nature of composing and have intuitively sensed the left brain/right brain transformational process. In *Becoming a Writer*, a book published in 1934, Novelist Dorothea Brande wrote,

Most of the methods of training the conscious side of the writer—the craftsman and the critic in him—are actually hostile to the good of the artist's side; and the converse of this proposition is likewise true. But it is possible to train both sides of the character to work in harmony, and the first step in that education is to consider that you must teach yourself not as though you were one person, but two.⁹

Language, Thought, and Writing

Theorists such as Berthoff assert that in composing, meanings are made; the

forms of thought¹⁰ are found by means of language and the forms of language are found through thought. Underlying this is the sense of a two-part activity in the mind: thought and its verbalization. Ponsot and Deen see language as the *medium* of thought, and writing as the *instrument*¹¹ of thought. Again we find the sense of a two-part activity, with writing making it visual. And Hammond notes, "All writing requires observation, imagination, and discipline."¹²

Hammond's inclusion of imagination indicates that the writing process needs more than linear, sequential, analytical thinking. Emig's sense of the recursiveness of composing is demonstrated in her conviction that writing enables new knowledge. She believes it involves the imaginative mind in creating meaning by processing the materials of its experience, in stating relationships, which lie at the heart of learning.¹³

Rico and Claggett describe the complex symbolic activity of composing as necessitating "a kind of internal dialogue between whole and parts, between image and sequence, between configuration and specifics, between initially vague global idea and gradually emerging parts."¹⁴

Moreover, language can only be realized in a social context. Therefore writing is necessarily a social process. Because it allows for open connection-making and intellectual dialogue, writing helps encourage thinking and learning.¹⁶

A Complex Process

Ironically, the more we learn about the function of the brain and the composing process, the better we understand how complex composing really is. We also realize that we may never be able to clearly spell out the methods for teaching it—too much of what goes on during the composing process is internal. Although certain functions may be localized in one hemisphere or the other, the brain functions as a whole at all times.

However, scientists are discovering that the brain is "both a highly ordered, and at the same time, randomly organized structure."¹⁷ While the overall pattern of the brain may be predictable, specific activity within it is not. At present, research can give only general clues as to what usually occurs during the composing process.

Moreover, textbooks that try to deal with the nonlinearity of the composing