

DIVIDING UP GRANDMA'S THINGS: A MULTIFACETED EXERCISE IN CRITICAL THINKING

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ABSTRACT

The reader is introduced to a multifaceted experiential exercise on developing critical thinking skills in undergraduates. The exercise is meant to introduce the student to critical thinking and is recommended for use in a junior-level Organizational Behavior class. The importance of critical thinking skills is discussed in the background and theory section of the exercise. The exercise has three phases: (1) discovery and self-insight, (2) analysis of negotiation and conflict, and (3) a team building application. The exercise is best used during the first (or second) class in an Organizational Behavior course, at the point when students are assigned to (or select) their teams for the semester. The exercise requires more time than many other exercises used in Organizational Behavior classes (at least 75 minutes).

BACKGROUND & THEORY

The AACSB has urged business schools to inculcate critical thinking (CT) skills across the curriculum. "Business leaders seek graduates who can think analytically, communicate effectively and solve problems" (2002, page ix). A study by the Kepner-Tregoe consulting company found, "Half the workers and 44% of the managers surveyed reported that lack of critical thinking skills in the workplace."

Despite AACSB prompting, CT in the business curriculum remains elusive and short. Braun reports pedagogies oriented toward improving CT skills has not sufficiently been addressed in business schools (2004, 235). She goes on to argue that outcome assessment of CT is lacking, a view supported by the research of Tsui (2002, 740). Clearly, there is a need for ways to address the issue and measure its success.

Definitions. Definitions of CT are legion. An Internet search using Google Scholar provided over 100 definitions, description, dissertations, etc on CT. One way to discuss CT is to contrast it with its opposite, uncritical thinking. Shenkman relates uncritical thinking to stupidity for which he offers five characteristics:

- First is sheer ignorance: ignorance of critical facts about important events in the news and ignorance of how our government functions and who's in charge.
- Second is negligence: the disinclination to seek reliable sources of information about important news events.
- Third is wooden-headedness, as the historian Barbara Tuchman defined it: the inclination to believe what we want to believe, regardless of the facts.
- Fourth is shortsightedness: the support of public policies that are mutually exclusive, or contrary to the country's long-term interests.
- Fifth, and the final characteristic, is a broad category I call bone-headedness, for want of a better word: the susceptibility to meaningless phrases, stereotypes, irrational biases, and simplistic diagnoses and solutions that play on our hopes and fears (2007, 14).

The results of uncritical thinking have serious deleterious effects for both the individual and for society. As the behavioral economist Ariely notes, a great amount of inefficiency can be attributed to this type of irrational decision-making (2008, 239-40).

Paul defines CT as:..disciplined, self-directed thinking which exemplifies the perfections of thinking appropriate to a particular mode or domain of thought: which comes in two forms. If disciplined to serve the interests of a particular individual or group, to the exclusion of other relevant persons or groups, it is sophistic or weak sense critical thinking. If disciplined to take into account the interests of diverse persons or groups, it is fair-minded or strong-sense critical thinking (1990, p. 47). Facione provides the following definition, "Purposeful, self-regulatory judgment that results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based" (p. 3), while Kurfiss describes CT as "an investigation whose purpose is to explore a situation, phenomenon, question or problem to arrive at a hypothesis or conclusion about it that integrates all available information and that can therefore be convincingly justified" (1988, p3). For purposes of introducing the undergraduate to CT, we have distilled the following elements from the above definitions and contrasts.

- A process for evaluating arguments
- Understanding bias in thinking
- Using rigorous methodology and a knowledge base

A typical topic in Organizational Behavior classes is *Negotiation*, which as it turns out, is an excellent way in which to present some basic concepts and techniques on CT. In this experimental exercise, students have the opportunity to:

- Identify both explicit and implicit positions
- Test assumptions
- Understand and react to bias
- Determine standards for fairness
- Understand the role of emotional factors on negotiation
- Use the technique of “scaffolding” or machine heuristics (i.e., a template that prompts students to engage dialectically with views of others) in clarifying ones own assumptions and positions (Academe, 2008).

DESCRIPTION

The premise of the exercise is that grandma has died and has left a will. The will stipulates that her belongings are to be divided up through negotiation and agreement among her relatives. The number of relatives can be varied for the exercise and typically is from four to seven. If an agreement (consensus) cannot be reached, grandma’s attorney will give all the belongings to a charity. For the exercise, the instructor provides each relative with a role and script. The general roles known by all participants and are listed in APPENDIX A. APPENDIX A also provides the necessary background for the exercise. There is also a set of “secret” or ulterior roles (motives) of the relatives which should not be disclosed to the others. They are in APPENDIX B . At the beginning of the exercise, student teams are assembled and given the general situation. Each student is assigned a relative’s role and given information about the “secret” role for that relative. Students should be given four-five minutes to assimilate their individual roles. All students should participate in the exercise, so that a class of thirty could have five teams of six members or six teams of five members. The instructor can use teams between four to seven members, and select which roles h/she wants to use from APPENDICES A & B.

ROLES AND ROUNDS. After assimilating their roles, students gather in a circle and are told to try to reach some sort of agreement. They are given about five to seven minutes. At the end of Round 1, students are asked to rotate to the next role position and given the “secret” role for that relative. They are given two to four minutes to assimilate that role. They are then given five to seven minutes to try to reach an agreement with their new roles. In a short class, we do at least one more rotation of roles. If time permits, we try to have the team members assume the roles for all the relatives. This portion of the exercise is part of phase one, *discovery and self-insight*, and should take between twenty-five to thirty minutes.

DEBRIEFING. Debriefing has three crucial phases. Generally, most teams do not reach agreements, but as Paul notes, “One can learn through the rational capabilities of the human mind or through its irrational propensities” (1990).

- (1) *Discovery and self-insight.* Students are first asked *if* and *how* they saw the situation differently after having been in another role. They are asked “why” they saw things differently. Responses are summarized (sometimes re-phrased) and listed on the board. This should take around fifteen minutes.
- (2) *Analysis of negotiation and conflict.* Students are asked if it is possible to arrive at a reasonable agreement (solution) to items in the will. Students are asked to list the barriers and blocks to reaching reasonable agreements. Students then are asked what could be done? After a short discussion (five to seven minutes), students are then given some of the basic tenets of successful negotiations based on the *Negotiation Project at Harvard* (see APPENDIX C). This is the longest of the debriefing phases and can last thirty to forty minutes. If time is limited, the instructor should at least spend fifteen to twenty minutes on basic negotiation techniques.
- (3) *Team building application.* The instructor may want to use the exercise teams for the semester teams, or rearrange the teams based on some other criteria. Either way, once the teams are assembled and are about to have an initial meeting, each team member is told to write a one to two page paper for the next class on how this exercise is applicable to the initial team meeting. Some suggestions for writing the paper, as well as a rubric for assessing the papers is provided in APPENDIX D. The rubric should be shared with the students. Students should read APPENDIX D before their initial team meeting.

FACILITATION MATERIALS.

- Large name cards for each relative (so that students can easily identify the other members of the exercise),
- Copies of the Exercise Background & General Roles (Appendix A) for all students,
- Copies of “secret” roles for appropriate players (Appendix B),
- Copies of Paper Suggestions & CT Rubric (Appendix D) for all students.

SUGGESTED SCHEDULE.

- Phase 1 *discovery and self-insight*
 - Roles & Rounds (twenty-five to thirty minutes),
 - Debriefing (fifteen to twenty minutes),
- Phase 2 *Analysis of Negotiation & conflict* (twenty to forty minutes),
- Phase 3 *Team building application* (five to ten minutes to explain assignment and the remainder of the exercise is completed outside of class).

CONCLUSION

According to Paul, the reality is:

Unfortunately much academic learning is of a lower order: undisciplined, associative, and inert. Much of it is an obstacle rather than an aid to education. Much of

it blocks genuine understanding...few students understand what it means to think through the content of a subject analytically, few use critical thinking as a tool for acquiring knowledge (Paul, 1990, 1).

Professor Jerry Wind of Wharton claims, "Business schools should really be teaching critical thinking more than anything else" (1996). We agree and have devised this experiential exercise which addresses this important obligation.

At first blush, the exercise may seem overly complex and time consuming. One might also feel it contains too many subjects and has too many goals. But this is exactly the point. Most situations and problems students face have these very elements and students must learn how to make sense of them and deal with them and use at least some of the concepts and techniques of CT. By fully engaging in this exercise students should be able to:

- See various points of view from having "experienced" them;
- Understand and use some techniques to handle negotiation and conflict;
- By analogy, apply some of these lessons and insights to other situations (like team building);
- Apply, albeit simplistically, some "machine" heuristics as an aid to CT;
- Be able to reflect upon their experience and using some "thinking" heuristics, write up a reasonable response.

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APPENDIX A: EXERCISE BACKGROUND & GENERAL ROLES

THE GOODS:

This being my Last Will and Testament, I, Charlene, have instructed my attorney upon my death to read you the terms by which I have authorized him to dispose of my most valuable possessions:

1. my five-bedroom home in Santa Monica, California;
2. my mother's antique sterling silverware;
3. my fire red Mercedes-Benz ZZ Convertible (only twenty in the U.S. ever made);
4. my four-bedroom beach house in Florida;
5. my original Andy Warhol painting;
6. my wedding ring and my late husband's wedding ring (total worth of \$30,000);
7. my rare royal China place setting;
8. my prize winning poodle, Princess.

THE RULES:

You are to see if you can reach an agreement for dividing these things of mine among you. You are all to meet together and try and reach consensus. You have seven minutes in which to do this. If you cannot all reach an agreement for dividing up all of my things among you, I have instructed my attorney to sell everything and give the proceeds to the Red Cross.

THE RELATIVES AND FRIEND OF CHARLENE (GRANDMA):

1. (Frank) my oldest child,
2. (Susan) my middle child,
3. (Tom) my youngest child,
4. (Paul) my only living sibling,
5. (Chester) my older grandchild,
6. (Kathy) my younger grandchild,
7. and (Jim) my best friend.

The instructor should choose as many relatives' roles as needed to form an equal number of teams for the first (or second) day of class. All students should be assigned to an exercise team.

Frank, oldest child. You are the oldest of the three children of Charlene. You are a college fine arts history professor and live on a farm in Geneseo, NY, with your wife and

two children. You are 58 years old and love your job. You believe that all the others perceive you as being fair, even-handed and will give you some deference.

Susan, the middle child. You are the middle child of Charlene. You were a high school art teacher in Oregon until you retired early. Now you are a widow and have one adult child, David. You would describe yourself as a perfectionist who holds yourself and everyone else to your high standards.

Tom, the youngest child. You are the youngest child of the late Charlene. You never got along with your mother or your siblings and have had very little to do with them for twenty years. You were shocked when you heard you had been included in your mother's will. You are a single person without children. You have been divorced twice. You have been a very successful investment banker traveling all over the world. You were never very comfortable with your family's provincial ways. You are a jet-setter and really enjoy your high-flying life style.

Paul, the sibling. Since your sister's (Janice) death four years ago, you are the only sibling left. Charlene and you weren't close, but you were not at odds either. You are somewhat surprised you were included in Charlene's will. You are a very proud and private person, as well as the family's outcast. You have always been a loner. You never married. You never went to college or learned a profession. You were a skilled furniture maker and craftsman, but you never really held a job for long. You weren't good at business and had trouble working for anyone else. To be honest, you are much more comfortable with animals than people.

Chester, the oldest grandchild. You are one of two of Charlene's grandchildren and the child of her oldest child, Frank. By all accounts including your own, you are a hellion who has gotten into trouble from as far back as you can remember. They say you have difficulty dealing with authority. You are very uncomfortable being part of this will reading. Despite this, you are not overly materialistic, selfish or greedy.

Kathy, the youngest grandchild. You are the younger of Charlene's two grandchildren. You are in very poor health which is affecting everything you do. You need some place to stay for the next year. From your perspective, you would care for any of your family members if they were in the same situation you are now in. So, they should care for you.

Jim, the close friend. You were Charlene's best friend and confidante for twenty years after her husband died. You were also a close friend of his for many years before his death. You are extremely loyal to the memory of both of them, very concerned that Charlene's wishes for her estate be carried out, and, frankly, very suspicious about the motives of some of her family members. You think that the relatives are suspicious of you, although you have no evidence for this view. Most of them do not know much about your personal or financial situation.

APPENDIX B: "SECRET" SCRIPTS & ROLES

Frank, the oldest son. You were very close to your mother and not very close to your father. You kept in touch with her and visited regularly since your father died twenty years ago. You have been reasonably successful although you have almost no savings to show for it. You know the Santa Monica house is paid for and would be worth \$450,000, but is in need of many repairs perhaps totaling \$200,000. You have no idea what the beach house is worth, but you know your parents bought it for \$10,000 in 1960. You haven't visited it in many years. The painting is easily worth \$100,000 but you don't think anyone else knows its market value. You don't know about the value of the car, silver or china. You are not particularly competitive person and feel it is important to try and reach consensus on this.

You are interested in seeing your mother's wishes fulfilled, in being fair and in treating everyone else in your family fairly. You are not interested in relocating, but would love to be able to vacation in Florida every year. You already have a cat and two birds. You need a new car although a convertible isn't very practical for you. Andy Warhol is your favorite painter. You don't own any silver or china and you do a reasonable amount of entertaining. You believe that the children of your mother should feel they received items of roughly equal value. You think grandchildren should **wait** to inherit from their children. Siblings should not expect anything expensive, except items of sentimental value to that person. You don't think non-family members should inherit anything.

Susan, the middle child. You took care of your mother after your father died and, therefore, you think you should get the family house in Santa Monica as well as the sentimental things your mother has left behind: the rings, the china and the silver. You never understood Warhol's art so you don't want it and, although you were fond of Princess, you prefer not to get any pets. Florida is too far of a drive for you and you don't like beach homes as you are an avid environmentalist and think the beach homes should be illegal. You are indifferent to the car.

You lived with your parents for the first thirty-five years of your life in the house in Santa Monica. After you got married, you moved to Oregon, but you still visited them at least twice a year until your mother's death. You talked to her on the phone at least twice a week even when your siblings never talked to her or spent time with her. They never helped her when your father died or afterwards. The house was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and should be worth plenty, you think. You have no idea what the sentimental items are worth. You like your older Brother Frank, but think he is an airhead and probably will try to lead the group during the discussion of the Will, which, you believe will lead to nowhere.

Tom the youngest child. You are only interested in one item, the Mercedes convertible. You have always wanted it since your mother bought it and she would never let you drive it, which burns you till this day. She never really appreciated its true value, but you do. You live in an apartment in NYC, but you have a parking space in the garage. You think everyone has a responsibility to take care of him or herself as best they can. That is how you live and that is how you expect others to live.

You know a lot about the value of the items in your mother's estate. You know a guy in Ohio who would pay \$85,000 for the car. The lot in Florida has a considerable worth

if they tore the house down and sold it as is. The painting could go for \$150,000 in Paris. You know a private collector who would pay at least that for it. The Santa Monica home might be eligible for National Landmark status which could double its value. In pristine condition, it could go for as much as \$350,000 now. In other words, if the estate was liquidated, it could bring in a lot of money. You heard that a set of the Chinaware like your mother's went for \$25,000 in Sotheby's last year. You view most of the other relatives as financially ignorant.

Paul, the last sibling. Right now you just need a place to stay and something to keep you busy for the next year. You are dying, but you haven't told anyone else. You have an inoperable brain tumor and have been told you have no more than a year to live. However, you are still able to work at your craft. You have just been evicted from a homeless shelter where you had been living for two months. You have no place to go tonight. You haven't seen or spoken to your other sibling for over two years. You have not been to Santa Monica for at least thirty years although you still have very fond memories of visiting the beach house in Florida. It was never weatherized and so it was only really useable from May through September. You don't know if anything had been done to upgrade it in all this time.

Chester, the older grandchild. About the only items you would like from your grandmother's things are the car, the china, and maybe the dog. You also need a place to stay for awhile and would like to be able to stay in the Santa Monica House for at least a year, although you would feel it would be unfair to get "too" much. You have to take care of yourself because nobody else is going to.

You have had trouble holding down jobs and have spent some time in jail for minor offenses. You have experience doing odd jobs as a plumber's and electrician's apprentices and are pretty handy. You have no money to pay for the insurance on the car or for a place to live. The reason the china is so important to you is because you and your grandmother used to have pretend tea parties when you were little. She would get out some of the place settings and tell you stories. Your grandmother promised you that you would get those dishes one day (although she told no one else) and you promised her you would take care of them for her. You have no idea how much they might be worth although a fence friend of yours once said they might be worth as much as \$15,000 on the black market.

Kathy, the younger grandchild. You have AIDS and are not sure how long you will live. Your grandmother is the only member of your family who you have told. You are not comfortable telling your parents. You know they will judge you and you do not need to be judged right now. You need help and support. Just before she died, your grandmother promised you that you could stay in her house in Santa Monica (although she told no one else). She liked you very much because she used to give you money and other things secretly, but you no one else knows this. You will need as much money as you can get your hands on to pay for your care if you have no place to stay and no one to care for you.

Jim, the best friend. The reality is that you were the only one who cared about Charlene and took care of her for the last twenty years. You lived in a bedroom in the house shortly after her husband died and took care of the household and other things. Charlene promised you the house and often complained bitterly that none of her children ever called her or visited her or did anything for her. The house is in major need of repairs, but

it has been that way for years. You don't have the money to fix it up. You feel Charlene's ring should be yours now given your close personal relationship.

You are most concerned that Charlene's wishes be fulfilled, as well as your own welfare. You have little money on your own, do not own a home or car, and are retired living on a fixed income and now living alone for the first time in twenty years. You want the Santa Monica house since Charlene and her husband promised it to you and are very disappointed that Charlene did not just give it to you outright. You hate the dog but would take her if you get the house and Charlene's wedding ring. You were very close to her.

APPENDIX C: NEGOTIATION TECHNIQUES

The following list of negotiation concepts and techniques is not comprehensive, but covers what we believe are the first and most crucial tenants for successful negotiation. In phase two of the exercise, the instructor should explain and discuss these. The following is a list of techniques that may prove useful in the negotiation process. It is recommended that instructors familiarize themselves with basic negotiation techniques; a good primer is "Getting to YES: Negotiation Agreement without Giving In."

1. separate the people from the problem;
2. focus on interests, not positions;
3. generate a list of viable possibilities before deciding what to do;
4. move toward the use of an "objective" criteria;
5. identify when emotions cloud issues;
6. understand the concept of "face saving;" and
7. do not accommodate for the sake of accommodating.

Finally, the instructor should spend some time illustrating how the students can use various protocols, techniques and tools to facilitate the process of CT. For example, one way is to use the "summary and response" technique—making claims based on a response to others as well as putting ourselves in the shoes with those who disagree with us" (page 19) to provide another way in which to assist the students in the use of CT.

Students may find some "machine" heuristics or scaffolding techniques help when it comes to writing their papers for the exercise. For example, the Journal NATURE suggests that contributors include something like, "how does this contribution differ from previous findings..." Some examples simply include the use of phrases to prod the student to justify his/her position, for example, "while most readers of (this topic) have said (summarize the main points)." Or, "one school of thought in the field (name of field) suggests that (brief explanation). Skeptics, however, might object to that (explanation). My own view is that (brief explanation)." "While most readers of _____ have said _____, a close and careful reading shows that _____."

APPENDIX D: PAPER SUGGESTIONS & CRITICAL THINKING RUBRIC

You are now on a XXX-person team for the Organizational Behavior course. You probably do not know most of the members of your team. You are about to attend an initial meeting. You have some concerns (i.e., your past experience with teams has not been good). Before the initial meeting, you reflect back on the exercise you participated in during the first Organizational Behavior class. The instructor has asked you to try and apply some of the CT concepts and techniques to your first team meeting, which he has labeled, “a first experience with team building.” How are you going to do that? After the initial meeting you must write a paper.

The paper should be between two to four pages, address the following issues, and provide examples:

- Were you able to talk about the team’s “real” concerns (theirs and yours)?
- How were you able to address the practical concerns of the team?
- What types of rules, schedules and expectations did the team set for itself
- What types of options for the project was the team able to develop?
- How is the team to collect and review research & evidence for the project to insure its accuracy and relevance?
- Why did the instructor assign this task?

There are several rubrics for assessing CT which are currently being used by business schools. Many can be found on the AACSB website. The rubric below is designed specifically for assessing this experiential exercise. It contains the following criteria:

- Evidence that one was able to “put oneself” in another’s shoes.
- Evidence that you got people to express their concerns.
- Evidence that clear goals and standards were set by the team.
- Able to project the consequences of how the team’s project will proceed.
- Appropriate use of “machine” heuristics.
- Paper was:
 - specific
 - complete
 - explicit