

Target

# The legacy of Socrates

**The great ancient Greek philosopher is still having an impact on the world and challenging us to ask “why” through his development of Critical Thinking – which you may know from Liberal Studies**

**S**OCRATES, the wisest and most influential thinker of the ancient world, preached, “The only thing I know is that I know nothing.” For Socrates, the man with no knowledge or belief was wiser than the man with incorrect knowledge or false belief. What mattered was an open and critical mind – eager to explore, to discuss, to create and to challenge. He sowed the seeds of Critical Thinking and, two thousand years later, schools and learning centres across the world are following in his footsteps.

## Critical Thinking now

DESPITE its long history, Critical Thinking is still a new idea to many and in lots of countries the demands of exams and memorising facts continue to overshadow the need for independent

opinion and creativity. In Hong Kong, however, it has taken hold, and evidence can be seen in both international and local curriculums. The UK exam boards offer a ‘Critical Thinking’ A-Level and the International Baccalaureate prides itself on the module ‘Theory of Knowledge’, while the local Hong Kong curriculum (DSE) requires all students to take ‘Liberal Studies’. The aim of these courses? To provide students with the tools to analyse phenomena with an open and analytical mind.

## How is Critical Thinking taught?

DESPITE being ‘taught’ in schools, Critical Thinking is not a ‘subject’. Rather, it is the term given to a mindset which is logical, creative and even freeing. The DSE curriculum (only three years old) has replaced the outdated HKCEE and HKALE syllabus. In Liberal Studies, through a series of modules, students learn about the problems that face us today, from social issues in Hong Kong to environmental concerns and the impact of science and technology. Exams encourage the students to use their skills in approaching challenging, unseen questions where independent opinion scores highly. In fact, the course caused a stir in 2012 when students were asked in an exam to question the credibility of political parties in Hong Kong and in 2013 when students had to assess the impact of filibustering campaigns in the Legislative Council on Hong Kong society. The controversy surrounding these cases exemplifies the fresh and forward-thinking approach to education within the Liberal Studies course.

## So, what's the point?

WHILE it may still be a novel or even controversial notion for some, the benefits of developing critical thinking skills are extensive. On a personal level, students gain the satisfaction of being encouraged to ask “why” and explore issues with the

independence and freedom denied by rigid syllabuses and rote learning. On an academic level, these skills then foster students’ abilities to make well-considered and logical conclusions in other areas of their studies.

Moreover, it develops skills which are essential at undergraduate level and beyond. Come university, facts, dates, quotes and stats will mean nothing if not considered critically. For instance, a political consideration of the Israel-Palestine conflict cannot be carried out without a grasp of the historical context and beliefs motivating each side. Even in the sciences, philosophical questions are central: when do we take a theory as scientific fact and when do we leave it open for investigation, and is genetic engineering morally justified? In everyday life it helps students spot logical fallacies; going beneath the rhetoric of politicians, reading between the lines of newspaper articles and looking beyond the deceit of advertising. Ultimately, one would hope, students would also learn not to commit errors of reasoning or make fallacious claims themselves.

## Start early

CHILDREN from the age of nine should be introduced to a broad range of social, economic and political topics which form the foundation of critical analysis. What are the ethical problems with zoos? Is aid or trade the solution to poverty in Africa? Why did the 2008 financial crisis happen? Should we eat shark’s fin soup? Is torture ever justified? In true Socratic fashion, discussion is the method through which ideas are formed and debated, with the teacher acting as a facilitator rather than a lecturer. By exploring current affairs and different perspectives, a good critical thinking programme aims to broaden students’ minds and ensure that new ideas have been logically created and can be justly defended.