



Narrative as an Epistemic Framework for Critical Thinking

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is a fundamental competence required for learners to navigate the complexity of modern life. However, numerous studies indicate that students' critical thinking abilities remain inadequately developed, pointing to the need for educational approaches that go beyond knowledge transmission and foster reflective and analytical processes. This article examines narrative as an epistemic framework for the development of critical thinking through a philosophical inquiry. Using a conceptual-philosophical method, the study analyzes the epistemological perspectives of Plato, Aristotle, and Immanuel Kant. The findings demonstrate that narrative functions epistemologically as a reflective transition from opinion (*doxa*) to true knowledge (*epistēmē*) in Plato, as a rational structure that cultivates causal understanding and coherence of action in Aristotle, and as structured experiential content organized by a priori cognitive categories in Kant. The integration of these perspectives establishes narrative as an epistemic framework that shapes the formation of critical thinking and contributes theoretically to philosophy of education.

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking has long been recognized as a foundational competence for learners in responding to the intellectual, social, and ethical complexities of contemporary life. Within educational discourse, critical thinking is widely understood as involving reflective judgment, reasoned evaluation, and the ability to assess claims and arguments beyond surface-level information (Ennis, 2018; Fisher & Scriven, 2018; Siegel, 2017). Despite its prominence as an educational goal, numerous studies indicate that students' critical thinking abilities remain insufficiently developed, particularly in instructional contexts that emphasize content mastery and measurable outcomes over reflective and analytical engagement (Biesta, 2015; Lai, 2011). This condition suggests that the challenge of cultivating critical thinking is not merely pedagogical, but fundamentally epistemological.

In recent years, narrative has increasingly attracted attention within educational research as a means of enhancing learning experiences. Research in narrative theory and the cognitive sciences has demonstrated that narrative plays a central role in how human beings organize experience, construct meaning, and develop understanding (Bruner, 2019; Herman, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2016). Empirical studies further indicate that storytelling can support comprehension, engagement, and linguistic development across educational contexts (Haven, 2007; Isbell et al., 2004). However, while existing studies on narrative in education predominantly emphasize its pedagogical, motivational, or communicative functions, narrative is rarely examined as an epistemic structure that shapes how knowledge itself is formed and understood. As a result, the epistemic status of narrative in relation to critical thinking remains theoretically underexplored.

This theoretical gap becomes particularly evident when critical thinking is reduced to a collection of transferable cognitive skills detached from broader questions concerning how knowledge is constituted, evaluated, and justified (Siegel, 2017; Peters, 2015). Although skills-based models provide useful frameworks for instruction and assessment, they often overlook the epistemological processes through which learners organize experience, evaluate causality, and reflect on the conditions of knowing. Addressing this limitation requires a philosophical inquiry that situates critical thinking within the structures of knowledge formation rather than treating it solely as an instrumental competency.

This article responds to that need by advancing a conceptual-philosophical analysis of narrative as an epistemic framework for critical thinking, grounded in the epistemological traditions of Plato, Aristotle, and Immanuel Kant. From a Platonic perspective, knowledge is not attained through the passive reception of appearances, but through a reflective ascent from *doxa* (opinion) toward *epistēmē* (true knowledge), a process often mediated through dialogical and allegorical narratives such as the Allegory of the Cave (Plato, 1992, 2004; Kosman, 2010; Nightingale, 2004). Aristotle complements this view by conceptualizing narrative as a rational structure grounded in mimesis and causal coherence, through which human actions and ethical judgments become

intelligible and subject to rational evaluation (Aristotle, 1995, 1996, 2014). Kant's critical epistemology further extends this framework by demonstrating that knowledge emerges from the synthesis of experiential content and a priori cognitive categories, thereby positioning narrative as a structured form of experience that activates reflective awareness of the conditions under which knowing is possible (Kant, 1998).

By integrating these three epistemological perspectives, this study advances a distinct theoretical contribution by reconceptualizing narrative not merely as an instructional aid or rhetorical device, but as an epistemic framework for the formation of critical thinking. The novelty of this article lies in its integrative philosophical synthesis of Plato's dialectical epistemology, Aristotle's rational-causal account of knowledge, and Kant's critical theory of cognition to demonstrate how narrative structures knowledge formation itself. Rather than treating critical thinking as a set of transferable skills, this article situates it within epistemic processes through which learners organize experience, evaluate causality, and reflect on the conditions of knowing. In doing so, the study offers a novel epistemological foundation for narrative-based learning and extends philosophical discourse in education beyond instrumental and skills-oriented models of critical thinking.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Narrative and Critical Thinking in Education

Critical thinking is widely regarded as a core educational aim, encompassing reflective judgment, rational evaluation, and the capacity to assess reasons and evidence beyond surface-level information (Ennis, 2018; Fisher & Scriven, 2018; Siegel, 2017). Within contemporary educational discourse, critical thinking is often operationalized as a set of transferable cognitive skills that can be taught, measured, and assessed across disciplines (Lai, 2011). While such skills-based approaches provide practical frameworks for instruction and evaluation, critics argue that they tend to abstract critical thinking from its deeper epistemological foundations (Biesta, 2015; Peters, 2015).

Narrative, on the other hand, has been extensively examined in educational research as a pedagogical tool that enhances engagement, comprehension, and meaning-making. Studies in cognitive psychology and narrative theory emphasize that human understanding is fundamentally narrative in structure, as individuals organize experience, interpret events, and construct coherence through stories (Bruner, 2019; Polkinghorne, 2016; Herman, 2018). Empirical studies further suggest that storytelling supports language development and conceptual understanding, particularly in early educational contexts (Haven, 2007; Isbell et al., 2004). However, much of this literature approaches narrative primarily in instrumental terms – as a motivational or communicative strategy – rather than as a constitutive element of knowing itself.

Plato's Epistemology: Narrative and the Ascent from Doxa to Epistēmē

In Plato's epistemology, knowledge is achieved through a transformative process that moves beyond opinion (doxa) toward true understanding

(epistēmē). This ascent is not merely logical but deeply reflective, often mediated through dialogical and allegorical narratives. Plato's use of myth and allegory – most notably the Allegory of the Cave – illustrates how narrative functions as a cognitive and epistemic bridge that provokes critical reflection on appearances, assumptions, and the nature of reality (Plato, 1992, 2004; Kosman, 2010; Nightingale, 2004).

Rather than conveying knowledge directly, Platonic narratives invite learners into a process of questioning and self-examination, thereby cultivating the reflective dimension of critical thinking. Narrative, in this sense, serves as an epistemic medium that initiates the movement from unexamined belief toward rational insight.

Aristotle's Rational-Causal Account of Narrative Understanding

Aristotle complements Plato's account by grounding narrative in rational structure and causal coherence. In *Poetics*, Aristotle conceptualizes narrative (mythos) as an organized whole governed by logical relations of cause and effect, enabling understanding of human action and ethical judgment (Aristotle, 1995, 1996). This rational-causal structure allows narrative to function not merely as representation but as a means of intelligibility.

Furthermore, Aristotle's ethical philosophy emphasizes practical reasoning (phronēsis), where understanding arises through the interpretation of concrete situations rather than abstract rules (Aristotle, 2014). Narrative thus supports critical thinking by providing a structured context in which actions, motives, and consequences can be evaluated coherently. From this perspective, narrative contributes to the development of judgment by integrating reasoning, experience, and ethical reflection.

Kant's Critical Epistemology and Narrative as Structured Experience

Kant's critical epistemology provides a further theoretical foundation for understanding narrative as an epistemic framework. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that knowledge arises from the synthesis of sensory experience and a priori cognitive categories, such as causality, unity, and temporality (Kant, 1998). Experience is not passively received but actively structured by the mind.

Within this framework, narrative can be understood as a form of organized experience that activates these cognitive structures, making reflection on the conditions of knowing possible. By arranging events temporally and causally, narrative enables learners to recognize patterns, question assumptions, and reflect on how knowledge is constituted. Consequently, narrative supports critical thinking not by transmitting information, but by fostering awareness of the epistemic processes underlying judgment and understanding.

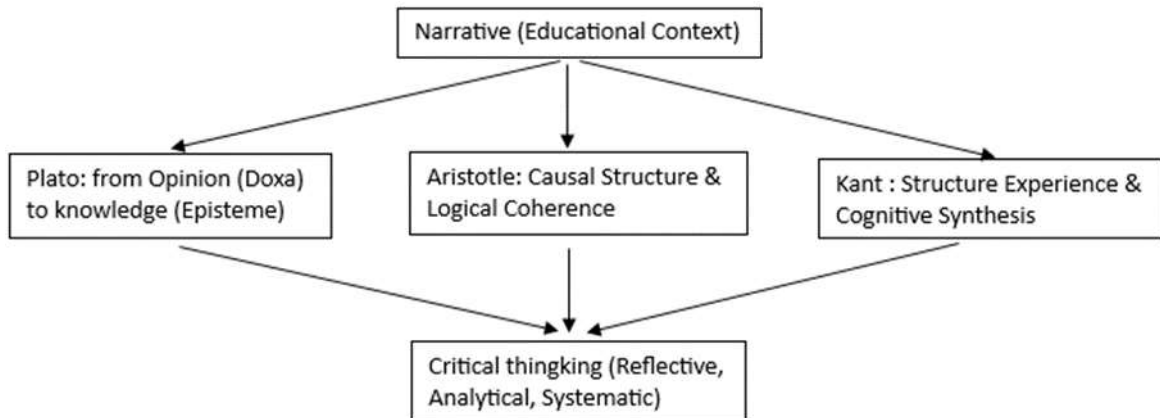


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Narrative as an Epistemic Strategy for Critical Thinking

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a conceptual–philosophical research design aimed at examining narrative as an epistemic framework for the development of critical thinking. Rather than pursuing empirical measurement or instructional intervention, the research is grounded in philosophical analysis and theoretical synthesis, focusing on the epistemological conditions through which critical thinking is formed.

The primary method used is analytic–interpretive inquiry, involving a close reading and systematic interpretation of key philosophical texts by Plato, Aristotle, and Immanuel Kant. These thinkers were selected due to their foundational contributions to epistemology and their enduring influence on educational philosophy. Plato’s epistemology is analyzed to elucidate the transition from doxa to epistēmē and the role of narrative and allegory in facilitating reflective ascent. Aristotle’s epistemological framework is examined to clarify how narrative, understood through mimesis and causal coherence, structures rational understanding and evaluative judgment. Kant’s critical epistemology is analyzed to demonstrate how narrative functions as structured experiential content organized by a priori cognitive categories, enabling reflective awareness of the conditions of knowing.

The analysis proceeds through a comparative and integrative framework. First, each philosophical perspective is examined independently to identify its distinctive epistemological account of knowledge formation and critical reflection. Second, these perspectives are systematically compared to uncover convergences and tensions regarding the epistemic function of narrative. Finally, the study synthesizes these insights into an integrative epistemic framework that conceptualizes narrative as a mediating structure through which experience, reasoning, and reflection are organized in the formation of critical thinking.

To ensure conceptual rigor and coherence, the analysis is guided by three analytical dimensions: (1) the role of the subject in the process of knowing, (2) the relationship between experience and rational structure, and (3) the conditions under which reflective judgment and critical evaluation become possible. These

dimensions provide a consistent epistemological lens through which narrative is examined across the three philosophical traditions.

By adopting this methodological approach, the study does not seek to generalize empirical findings or propose direct instructional prescriptions. Instead, it aims to offer a theoretical and epistemological contribution to the philosophy of education by clarifying the foundational role of narrative in shaping critical thinking. This methodological orientation aligns with the article’s central claim that narrative functions not merely as a pedagogical technique, but as an epistemic framework that structures the formation of knowledge and reflective judgment within educational contexts.

RESEARCH RESULTS

This study employs a qualitative, conceptual–philosophical approach. Accordingly, the “results” are not presented in the form of statistical outputs or numerical scores, but as systematic analytical findings derived from a structured examination of classical epistemological texts. The analytical process consisted of four main steps.

First, core epistemological concepts related to knowledge, judgment, and reasoning were identified within the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Immanuel Kant. This step involved close textual reading to extract key notions such as *doxa–epistēmē* (Plato), *mythos* and causal coherence (Aristotle), and *a priori* categories and synthesis (Kant).

Second, each epistemological concept was analyzed in relation to narrative structures, focusing on how narrative organizes experience, reasoning, and reflection. At this stage, narrative was treated not as a pedagogical technique but as an epistemic structure shaping the conditions of knowing.

Third, the findings from each philosophical tradition were compared and synthesized to identify convergent epistemic functions of narrative. This comparative analysis revealed recurring patterns through which narrative mediates reflective judgment, causal reasoning, and epistemic awareness.

Fourth, the synthesized findings were mapped onto the conceptual framework (Figure 1) to demonstrate how narrative operates as an epistemic framework contributing to the formation of critical thinking.

Rather than employing statistical tests, the study organizes its findings through analytical categorization, as summarized in Table 1. This table functions as a conceptual synthesis tool, clarifying the epistemic roles of narrative across the three philosophical traditions.

Table 1. Epistemic Functions of Narrative Across Philosophical Traditions

| Philosophical Tradition | Core Epistemic Concept | Function of Narrative | Contribution to Critical Thinking |
|-------------------------|---|---|------------------------------------|
| Plato | <i>Doxa</i> → <i>Epistēmē</i> | Reflective mediation through dialogical and allegorical narrative | Cultivation of reflective judgment |
| Aristotle | Rational–causal coherence (<i>mythos</i>) | Organization of actions through logical and causal structure | Development of rational evaluation |

| | | | |
|------|---|--|------------------------------------|
| Kant | Synthesis of experience and a priori categories | Structuring experience into coherent knowledge | Enhancement of epistemic awareness |
|------|---|--|------------------------------------|

DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that narrative consistently functions as an epistemic mediator across the three philosophical frameworks examined. In Platonic epistemology, narrative facilitates the reflective ascent from opinion to knowledge by destabilizing unexamined beliefs and prompting dialectical inquiry. In Aristotelian thought, narrative operates as a rational structure that renders human actions intelligible through causal coherence, enabling evaluative judgment. In Kantian epistemology, narrative emerges as structured experience that activates a priori cognitive categories, making reflective awareness of the conditions of knowing possible.

These findings collectively indicate that critical thinking cannot be adequately understood as a collection of isolated cognitive skills. Instead, it emerges through epistemic processes in which learners organize experience, assess causal relations, and reflect upon the grounds of knowledge. Narrative, therefore, plays a constitutive role in shaping the epistemological foundations of critical thinking.

This section elaborates on the findings by situating them within the broader discourse of philosophy of education and critical thinking. Given the conceptual-philosophical nature of the study, the discussion focuses on the theoretical significance of narrative as an epistemic framework in the formation of critical thinking rather than on the interpretation of statistical results. The findings demonstrate that narrative plays a constitutive role in epistemic processes underlying reflective judgment, rational evaluation, and metacognitive awareness, as articulated in the epistemologies of Plato, Aristotle, and Immanuel Kant.

The first major finding indicates that, within Platonic epistemology, narrative functions as a reflective medium that facilitates the transition from *doxa* (opinion) to *epistēmē* (true knowledge). Platonic dialogues and allegories are not merely rhetorical devices but dialectical instruments that provoke critical self-examination and the reassessment of unexamined assumptions. This supports the view that critical thinking involves transformative reflection rather than the accumulation of information, aligning with contemporary philosophical accounts that emphasize reasoned judgment and reflective inquiry as core components of critical thinking (Siegel, 2017).

The second finding highlights the Aristotelian contribution, wherein narrative operates as a rational structure grounded in causal coherence and intelligible action. Through the concept of *mythos* and the principle of *mimesis*, narrative enables the systematic understanding and evaluation of human actions and their consequences. This epistemic function reinforces the argument that critical thinking requires the ability to analyze causal relationships, assess plausibility, and justify evaluative judgments. In this sense, narrative supports the development of analytical reasoning rather than merely fostering engagement or

motivation, a position consistent with argument-based conceptions of critical thinking (Fisher & Scriven, 2018).

The third finding demonstrates that Kant's critical epistemology deepens the analysis by framing narrative as structured experiential content organized through a priori cognitive categories. From this perspective, narrative enables reflective awareness of how experience is synthesized into knowledge, thereby foregrounding the epistemic conditions that make understanding possible. This metacognitive dimension is central to critical thinking, as it involves not only evaluating claims but also reflecting on the conceptual frameworks and cognitive processes that underlie judgment. Such an interpretation resonates with educational theories that emphasize rational autonomy and epistemic responsibility (Peters, 2015).

Taken together, these findings challenge dominant educational approaches that treat narrative primarily as a pedagogical or motivational tool (Haven, 2007; Bruner, 2019). Instead, the study demonstrates that narrative functions as an epistemic framework that structures how learners organize experience, reason about causality, and reflect on the grounds of knowledge. By integrating Platonic, Aristotelian, and Kantian perspectives, the study reveals that critical thinking emerges through layered epistemic processes encompassing reflection, analysis, and metacognitive awareness.

This integrative account also contributes to ongoing debates concerning the conceptualization of critical thinking in education. Skill-based and measurement-oriented models, while useful for assessment purposes, often neglect the epistemological foundations of reflective judgment and rational evaluation (Biesta, 2015; Lai, 2011). The present discussion underscores the importance of addressing these foundations by reconceptualizing narrative-based learning as an epistemic strategy rather than an instructional technique. In doing so, the study extends philosophical discourse in education beyond instrumental models and offers a theoretically grounded framework for understanding how narrative supports the deep formation of critical thinking.

Overall, the discussion confirms the central claim of this article: narrative constitutes an epistemic framework that plays a fundamental role in the development of critical thinking. By grounding this claim in classical and critical epistemology, the study provides a robust theoretical contribution to the philosophy of education and establishes a conceptual basis for future research and pedagogical designs oriented toward epistemically informed narrative learning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has demonstrated that narrative should be understood not merely as a pedagogical or rhetorical device, but as an epistemic framework that plays a constitutive role in the development of critical thinking. Through a conceptual-philosophical analysis grounded in the epistemological traditions of Plato, Aristotle, and Immanuel Kant, the article has shown that narrative mediates essential epistemic processes, including reflective judgment, rational-causal reasoning, and metacognitive awareness of the conditions of knowing.

From a Platonic perspective, narrative facilitates the reflective movement from *doxa* (opinion) toward *epistēmē* (true knowledge) by destabilizing

unexamined assumptions and promoting dialectical inquiry. Aristotle's account complements this view by revealing narrative as a rational structure grounded in causal coherence, enabling the evaluation of actions and their consequences through reasoned judgment. Kant's critical epistemology further deepens this framework by situating narrative as structured experiential content organized by a priori cognitive categories, thereby emphasizing the active role of the subject in the synthesis of knowledge. The integration of these perspectives provides a coherent epistemological foundation for understanding how critical thinking emerges through layered processes of reflection, analysis, and epistemic self-awareness.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in its reconceptualization of narrative-based learning beyond instrumental and skills-oriented models of critical thinking. Rather than treating critical thinking as a collection of transferable competencies, this article situates it within epistemic processes through which learners organize experience, evaluate causality, and reflect on the grounds and limits of knowledge. In doing so, the study advances philosophical discourse in education by offering an epistemologically grounded account of narrative as a strategy central to the formation of critical thinking.

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations can be proposed. First, scholars in philosophy of education are encouraged to further investigate the epistemic dimensions of narrative by engaging additional philosophical traditions, such as hermeneutics, phenomenology, pragmatism, or critical theory, in order to extend and refine the framework developed in this study. Such inquiries may deepen understanding of how narrative mediates meaning-making, judgment, and understanding in educational contexts.

Second, for educational practice, curriculum designers and educators are recommended to reconceptualize narrative-based learning as an epistemic practice rather than a motivational or illustrative technique. Learning activities should be designed to encourage dialogical engagement, interpretive inquiry, and critical reflection, enabling learners to examine assumptions, assess reasons, and reflect on the conditions under which knowledge claims are justified.

Third, teacher education and professional development programs should incorporate epistemologically informed approaches to narrative pedagogy. Preparing educators to facilitate narrative-based inquiry requires not only pedagogical skill but also philosophical awareness of how narrative structures reasoning, reflection, and epistemic responsibility. Such preparation may strengthen educators' capacity to foster deeper and more sustainable forms of critical thinking.

Finally, future research is recommended to empirically explore the epistemic functions of narrative identified in this study. Qualitative, mixed-method, and design-based research may investigate how epistemically grounded narrative-based learning supports reflective judgment, causal reasoning, and metacognitive awareness across different educational levels, disciplines, and cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies, in particular, may provide insights into the sustained impact of narrative as an epistemic framework on the development of intellectual autonomy and critical reflection.

In sum, by integrating classical and critical epistemology, this study establishes narrative as a fundamental mode of knowing that shapes the formation of critical thinking in education. The conclusions and recommendations offered here provide a coherent theoretical foundation and practical orientation for advancing both philosophical inquiry and educational practice beyond instrumental and skills-based approaches to critical thinking.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

While this study offers a conceptual–philosophical account of narrative as an epistemic framework for critical thinking, it also opens several avenues for further investigation. Future research may build upon the theoretical foundation established here by extending, refining, and empirically examining the epistemic role of narrative in educational contexts.

First, subsequent studies may expand the philosophical scope of this inquiry by incorporating additional epistemological and educational traditions. Engaging perspectives such as hermeneutics, phenomenology, pragmatism, or critical pedagogy could provide complementary insights into how narrative mediates meaning-making, understanding, and critical reflection. Such extensions would further enrich the theoretical landscape of narrative-based learning and critical thinking.

Second, future research is encouraged to translate the epistemic functions of narrative identified in this study into empirically investigable constructs. Qualitative approaches, including classroom-based narrative inquiry, discourse analysis, or phenomenological studies, may be particularly well suited to examining how learners engage in reflective judgment, causal reasoning, and metacognitive awareness through narrative-based learning activities.

Third, mixed-method and design-based research could explore how epistemically informed narrative pedagogy influences the development of critical thinking across different educational levels, disciplines, and cultural contexts. These studies may investigate how narrative structures support learners' transitions from unexamined opinions to reasoned judgments and how educators can effectively facilitate epistemic reflection through narrative dialogue.

Fourth, future research may focus on teacher education and professional development by examining how educators understand and implement narrative as an epistemic framework. Investigating teachers' epistemological beliefs and instructional practices could provide valuable insights into the conditions under which narrative-based learning effectively supports critical thinking.

Finally, longitudinal studies are recommended to examine the sustained impact of epistemically grounded narrative learning on learners' intellectual autonomy and reflective capacities. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of how critical thinking develops over time when narrative is treated not merely as a pedagogical technique, but as a foundational structure of knowing.

In sum, future research grounded in both philosophical inquiry and empirical investigation is essential for advancing a more comprehensive and

epistemologically robust understanding of narrative-based learning and its role in the development of critical thinking

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