

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKERS

Critical thinking in the classroom

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CRITICAL thinking aims at encouraging students to think through problems of a divergent nature, drawing information from a variety of sources, developing the capacity and motivation to use intellectual tools in order to arrive at fair and just conclusions. The critical 'spirit' inherent in critical thinking develops personality attributes, motives values and interests so that, when engaged in a critical thinking process, students come to value inquiry, tolerance of views and respect for differing opinions.

Critical thinking and language learning

Critical thinking can be infused in language learning, since a language offers numerous opportunities to students to explore their own experiences, ideas, points of view and feelings through the presentation of various texts and the subsequent interpretation. Language learning also allows students to engage in the negotiation of meaning with the teacher. Students can become critical when they feel they are no longer dependent on the teacher. Self-reflection is promoted along with inquiry in social issues and a problem-solving approach when dealing with these issues.

The two aspects of language learning offer ample space for critical thinking. On the one hand, the four communicative skills of a language – reading, writing, listening and speaking – form a mode of reasoning as each of them involves problems. Each skill can be experienced dialogically as each allows for more than one view to be investigated. Students are led to consider alternative points of view; they are led to clarify issues, to evaluate information, to develop their own views and beliefs. On the other hand, literature represents and reveals the deeper meanings and universal problems of real everyday life. Students can be led to explore implications of actions, events or situations in literary works, compare perspectives or belief systems, so as to arrive at a deeper understanding of moral principles. Literature is capable of fostering sensibility through personal response if it is approached as a field of study that can lead to knowledge founded on students' experience.

Teaching Techniques

Learning to think critically does not develop naturally as students process and internalise increasingly complex levels of subject content and information. A critical thinking approach to language learning demands appropriate planning and provision. A philosophical belief in the value of critical thinking will not, on its own, transform teaching. Practical ways to introduce it into classroom activities need to be found.

Critical thinking is best infused in a problem-solving context. Questions play a

Within a classroom context, critical thinking is a thinking style that relies on the active participation of students. As different social and political issues are approached, students should display two fundamental qualities, namely, open-mindedness, that calls for the need for students to remain open to reasoned opinions, as well as emotional development that should help them to understand and accept divergent points of view. When students practise critical thinking systematically, they internalise critical thinking as a realistic way of looking at the world; they internalize the willingness to be attentive to information and opinion, the readiness to raise questions and probe beyond appearances. They become critical when they acquire a discerning attitude and sound thinking skills.

Once critical thinking is mentioned within the classroom situation, fundamental questions arise concerning how it should be taught:

Should critical thinking be conceived as a 'new' subject to be added to the already established curriculum?

Should it be context and content specific?

Should it be generic and infused in the already established spectrum of school subjects?

As critical thinking is a generic skill that can be applied in all spheres of reality, and it is after autonomy and independence of the thinker, its infusion in school subjects seems to be the most appropriate approach. The major reason to support infusion of critical thinking in the curriculum is that the process of thinking is valued as an integral element in the teaching/learning of all subjects. Students can examine the nature of their own thinking, an educational opportunity that implies the active participation and involvement of students in the learning process, with students actually developing awareness and control of their own thinking.

Another reason for infusion is that critical thinking, with its focus on inquiry can help to

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fundamental role; they invite students to think, to respond to ideas, to express their own thoughts and to formulate their own questions. Questions lead to the construction of knowledge on the part of the students. The value of this kind of experiential learning lies in the opportunity students have to be part of the learning situation, in which they have the chance to relate to the issues and concepts that are being analysed and discussed.

There are three particular teaching techniques for teaching critical thinking, namely:

Discussion Role-play Modelling

Discussion is particularly valued because it promotes thinking, as it relies primarily on responses. It can develop students' ability to think rationally and respond cogently and clearly. It offers opportunities for ideas to be analysed, assumptions to be questioned and problems to be investigated. The participants, that is students and teacher, use this particular activity to talk back-and-forth with one another about an issue that is in question for everyone. Thus the 'talking' that characterizes discussion consists of advancing and examining different proposals over the issue.

On a more practical level, class discussion should be stimulated through varied material, be it made up of facts

or anecdotes, so that students are confronted with numerous opportunities in which they can understand and accept divergent points of view. They learn to be flexible in the face of disagreement and they can build confidence in presenting statements that express their point of view.

The teacher's role during class discussions is quite particular - teachers need to guide students constantly during discussions; they should also stimulate students to participate in a challenging and enriching manner. Finally, the teacher should value open-mindedness during discussions; there is no need for a discussion to arrive at one single conclusion.

Role-play involves students 'taking up a role' which may either be familiar or a role that they are not used to. This classroom strategy has valuable learning implications as it allows students to express themselves openly as another person, allowing new ideas to emerge and it also offers possibilities to students to make use of this sense of freedom to explore a variety of situations and problems. Role-play is interactive and involves students in working together to explore, examine and resolve any given situation, and it helps to develop emotional and affective awareness through empathy with characters and situations.

The teacher, like in the case of discussions, has to facilitate this activity within an environment that allows risk-taking and where the 'one, right answer' is not desirable. The teacher's role is to give guidelines rather than demonstrate so that students have to rely on their own ideas.

Modelling is particularly valuable as it facilitates critical thinking. There is more than one kind of modelling, each of which can guide students in specific ways.

The text as model: when texts present real-life issues, they help students explore, examine and analyse social concepts incorporated in the themes and characters in these texts. Characters, carefully selected by the teacher with the intention to discuss conduct, motives and feeling, have the potential of presenting students with modes of conduct, insight and outlook, all of which can be models to students about how they should or should not behave.

Other students as model: students will use other students' behaviour, attitude as models of their own. If one student asks a question, the others may gradually learn to do likewise until questioning become normal practice within the classroom.

The teacher as model: teachers in the critical thinking classroom need to value

critical thinking and need to actually become critical thinkers themselves. Their role stops being that of the 'expert' handing down to students bits of knowledge, or that of a 'judge' deciding the right from the wrong answer. They should model two very important qualities in that of remaining open and receptive in the attitude that is expected from students.

The Environment

The environment best suited for the development of critical thinking is one in which students have opportunities to advance their ideas and give reasons to support their claims, while at the same time, they can hear others presenting their own. It is obvious that students need a non-threatening environment; the best atmosphere for critical thinking is one that promotes co-operation. Co-operative learning should feature as an integral part of critical thinking for a number of reasons. It helps to develop the thought process, instilling and positively reinforcing a collaborative process among students; it eases understanding as it attends to social dynamics. Besides co-operation creates a thinking environment in which thinkers can interact, while simultaneously observe and share. When students are engaged in critical and co-operative thinking, they acquire knowledge, process information, construct meaning and develop new concepts and ideas by recurring to thinking skills and problem-solving. In this way the environment created must be progressive and accommodate individual as well as group activities.

Texts

Texts can be relied upon to make critical thinking happen in class. Of primary importance is the choice of texts, that whatever its type, be it narrative or factual, it always offers students the opportunity to inquire, to probe, to analyse. Texts should be analysed by students for the facts presented, any opinions expressed, any judgement or bias implied and emotions and values that pervade. Such an approach allows students to critically process what they read and integrate it in their own thinking, after rejecting, accepting or qualifying part of the text according to their own personal assessment. Needless to say, texts that activate students' thinking are valuable as they provide students with the opportunity to think further and to build upon their personal thought.

Conclusion

A critical thinking curriculum offers analysis of social, political, economic and cultural values and patterns of interest in which democratic values are embedded. It is grounded in a social context and so it gives rise to a critical perspective which is developed as people struggle to understand forms of life presenting new possibilities, with alternatives. It aims to help students become well-informed, critical, reasonable and reflective.

