

Chapter 14

Critical Thinking: Centering Teachers' Knowledge and Understanding

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ABSTRACT

Teaching critical thinking skills to students has become a central focus the language arts classroom. It is therefore important to examine what critical thinking may look like for the language arts teacher: How do language arts teachers come to know and understand? How do language arts teachers engage in critical thinking in order to enhance their pedagogical practices? This chapter examines the ways in which teachers' involvement in developing their critical thinking skills can aid them in establishing their knowledge and understandings. The chapter explores findings from a study that involved teachers in Grades 2 and 4 in the development of a framework for reading instruction in the primary grades. These findings make a case for encouraging teachers to engage in critical thinking in professional learning communities that foster professional development and collaboration in an active and reflective process.

INTRODUCTION

Interwoven in the evolving quilt that shapes effective pedagogy at all levels of learning is the construct of critical thinking. Critical thinking is one of the skills that employers require of their novice and experienced employees. In the classroom, the ability to think critically is one of the major indicators of successful learning and application. The ability to think critically is an essential life skill (Frijters, ten Dam & Rijlaarsdam, 2008). Often, emphasis is placed primarily on determining exactly how teachers develop critical thinking skills among students. In some professional development sessions, teachers receive resources that provide numerous strategies, activities, routines and protocols that can be used to develop critical thinking skills among their students (Guskey & Suk Yoon, 2009). These approaches have had some success in the classroom. In conjunction with the general consensus that students must be explicitly taught how to think critically across disciplines, is the acknowledgement that the quality of critical thinking in which teachers themselves engage must also be targeted.

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There is an interdependent relationship between teaching and learning and so, the expectation is that language arts teachers who teach critical thinking skills to students, must also be critical thinkers themselves. An essential question that this chapter seeks to address is how language arts teachers can centre their sense of knowing and understanding through critical thinking. There is no one simple response to this question; nonetheless, there are some understandings that teachers can embrace in an effort to harness their critical thinking skills. In an attempt to centre teachers' knowledge and understandings, transactions that result in a collective conceptualization of critical thinking are paramount. Similarly, the processes that facilitate the ways in which language arts teachers come to know and understand must be explored. The anticipated result is that these understandings will highlight some ways in which teachers come to know and come to understand language arts content and pedagogy, in an effort to improve teaching and learning in the language arts classroom. Since the goal of teachers' understandings through critical thinking is improved instructional practice, the contexts that best facilitate teachers' coming to knowledge and deeper understandings must also be examined.

Critical Thinking: An Emerging Definition

Research indicates that there is no consensus regarding a single definition of critical thinking; however, an exploration of different perspectives of critical thinking would help to centre the understandings that undergird this chapter. For instance, in the 1980s, The Delphi Report's contribution to the discourse on critical thinking was one that explained "critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which 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. 2). Facione, in the Delphi Report (1989) emphasized that critical thinking is essential as a tool of inquiry and as such, critical thinking is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's personal and civic life (p. 3).

Another definition of critical thinking is one in which Paul, Fisher and Nosich (1993) propose that:

Critical thinking is that mode of thinking – about any subject, content or problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skilfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them (p. 4).

More recently, Halpern (2011) has defined critical thinking as:

the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed. It is the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions (p.2).

She further indicates that "critical thinkers use these skills appropriately, without prompting, and usually with conscious intent, in a variety of settings. That is, they are predisposed to think critically" (p. 2). While there are several commonalities among these definitions, the differences are equally nuanced. As a consequence, whatever definition of critical thinking is preferred, is often dependent on the understanding of the roles it should play in a specific context.

What might critical thinking look like for the language arts teacher?

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