



Frequently Asked Questions AND Answers from the Weekly Reader webinar:

How to Think About Critical Thinking Skills: Using Content-Based Instruction to Achieve Your Ultimate Goals: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving in Grades K through 6

Research has shown how difficult it is to teach students to learn to think, analyze, and evaluate what they read. This webinar answered such questions as:

- What are critical thinking skills?
- How can you help students learn to solve problems?
- What strategies can you use to help students develop these important life skills?

Below are some of the more frequently asked questions and the answers to them provided by Cindy Lassonde, associate professor at the State University of New York at Oneonta, who was the presenter of this event.

1. Can we incorporate the use of cell phones into critical thinking activities? All the students from the highest level thinker to the lowest level students know how to operate the cell phone with ease. How can we transfer that knowledge over to the Literature we read, the experiments in Science, the math we use, etc.?

I think creative uses of new technologies, in general, in the classroom act to engage and motivate students. I'm always careful to be very focused and to set expectations with the students when bringing "outside" technologies, like cell phones, into the classroom. And, of course, I don't assume ALL students own or are proficient in the use of new technologies. Be aware of the gaps within your classroom and have a plan for compensating for them. Also, with cell phones, think about how you'll monitor and assess students' responses and how you will respond to families who are concerned that they will be paying for the minutes used in class. (Consider all issues.) Students could text responses to literature, calculate and critique mathematical equations, and research possible outcomes for science experiments online—all with a cell phone.

2. Why are we not seeing more homework in this area for 3rd grade? How can parents encourage these skills at home?

Families can foster critical thinking at home by encouraging their children to interpret texts at home (and by "texts" I mean not only books, but television shows, song lyrics, symbols, etc.). Hold conversations with children that help children look beyond the literal meanings of things in their environment and look into what they learn from something, what the underlying meanings are, and what opposing points of view might exist.

3. Are there strategies and methods that can help develop higher level thinking for students with disabilities?

With students with disabilities, I make things concrete vs. abstract. I use visualizing strategies and other tools to clarify thinking, such as graphic organizers.

4. I would like to know if there is any research that delineates a Scope and Sequence for critical thinking skills.

See The Critical Thinking Community at criticalthinking.org for their stages of critical thinking development with implications for instruction at each stage. This site also has a link to current research on critical thinking.

5. How do we help prepare young children to develop their critical thinking skills and problem solving? I teach Pre-K and I would like to help them begin to develop these skills prior to entering kindergarten.

Help children make connections to real-life situations first. For example, say, “If I see my brother getting dressed in the morning, eating his breakfast, and leaving for the bus stop, I know it is a school day. But when my brother sleeps late in the morning, what would I think?” Then, use texts, like picture books, to help children think critically. Read multiple versions of the same book, like Cinderella, and discuss with children how the books are different and how they’re the same. Also, teach them to notice the differences in the shapes of letters as you introduce them. This encourages critical thinking at the preschool level.

6. How do you ensure that critical thinking skills will be automatic for students once you teach them? Will you always have to guide them through the process or will they begin to use the skills on their own?

I would never assume critical thinking is occurring automatically for students once you teach them helpful strategies. I use ongoing assessment to observe and determine students’ successes and levels of development across content areas, reading levels, and literacies. Critical thinking may not transfer from one reading level to another, for example. Or, a child who is able to analyze and critique science-content learning may have difficulty with mathematics. While I don’t always need to guide students through the process and application of their use of strategies, I do consistently check through evaluative observation and questioning techniques how well they are understanding the nuances of a passage and the “big meanings.”

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