



How early can critical thinking skills be developed?

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Critical thinking ability is considered very important in both learning and working; hence it is always emphasized in education. As a senior high school teacher, I used to think that we could start teaching F1 students how to think clearly and rationally about what they encounter in life. However, since my recent visit to a private school in Bundaberg, Australia, I have learnt that this ability should be cultivated at a much earlier stage in school.

During my visit, I observed classes from Preparatory Classes (K1 and K2) to Year 12 (Form 6). Educators there teach students as young as K2 children how to practise active listening and making sensible decisions, which are the very first and essential steps for developing critical thinking skills. To become a critical thinker, one needs to truly listen for information before one can analyze it.

I took part in a strawberry farm visit arranged for Preparatory Class 2 (K2) children. Before the picking of the fruit,



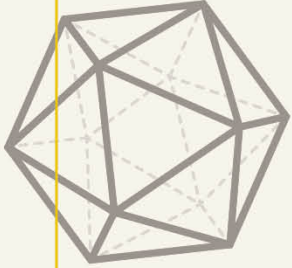
a class of about 20 kids stood in a line with patience for the briefing. They were so well-trained that they listened with full attention when the farm owner gave instructions. Then I followed them when they started fruit picking. When asked, the 4-year olds could utter key phrases of what they had been told.

“Don’t pick this one; the white ring touches the seeds.”

“Choose the very red ones, not the pink.”

“Just get the big, big ones. This is OK; it can’t pass through the circle,” said a cute boy forming a circle with his tiny middle finger and his thumb. I was amazed when I watched them picking the fruit with a firm decision. They did think carefully about the information they had got before taking action.





Another impressive scene took place in a primary 4 classroom. Students were sitting on the floor with a world map in the middle. The teacher started the discussion by asking a few questions about what they had learnt in the first half of their History lesson. Then he brought up a question, “What makes a country a country?” Young learners eagerly raised their hands to give answers, which included land, size of land, people, animals, etc. Obviously these answers from the young minds missed a lot of main elements. Next the teacher asked a few more questions, “Who is the owner? Can everybody do anything they like in the country? When something bad happens, who can help the people?” Children enthusiastically offered answers again, “A government, rulers, policemen, hospitals...”

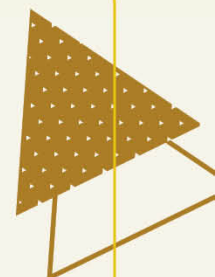
After some time, a firm voice was heard, “Land is not really necessary. We can build a country on water.” This drew a bubble of laughter. The voice continued, “Why not? People can live on boats, not in houses.” Instead of offering the correct answer, the teacher allowed the students to challenge this belief in a critical-thinking process.

“Bad weather can destroy the whole country easily.”

“The sea is so big, with no limit!” And this was followed by many other comments.

Then one confident voice said, “I don’t think we can build a country on water. How can we draw a line to mark the area?”





The teacher responded, “You mean the boundary. Right? The bell rang, but the teacher continued, “All of you have done well and given good answers. I think we need more time before drawing a conclusion. It’ll be a great idea that you talk with your parents and friends about this topic and we’ll have the conclusion in the next lesson.” With sparkling eyes, everyone nodded his head vigorously and I could foresee another inspiring lesson.

In the above classroom situation, I witnessed how the students questioned and challenged one another’s assumptions in a serious and logical way. How we teachers wish that our students could have such

critical thinking skills! These skills can be assets for all careers because critical thinkers can handle things and solve problems more logically, systematically and efficiently.

To conclude, we all know the importance of developing critical thinking skills and the need for long-term practice. From what I have experienced in Bundaberg, Australia, I believe we can start cultivating this ability, or at least provide students with the opportunities to acquire the basic requirements of the skills, as early as at the kindergarten stage.

