

## ◆◆ Chapter 24

# *Critical Thinking in Elementary Language Arts*

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### *Abstract*

*This, the third paper in the series for Teaching K–8, briefly discusses the relationship of critical thinking to language arts instruction, then provides an example of a remodelled lesson on a short story.*

Last April *Teaching K–8* published an article on infusing critical thinking by remodelling lesson plans. The October issue carried an article focused specifically on remodelling social studies lessons. The present article will apply the same basic concept to language arts instruction.

Lesson plan remodelling provides a framework wherein teachers redesign existing lesson plans based on their critical assessment of them. It helps teachers clarify their concept of critical thinking and the critical person by distinguishing and clarifying principles of critical thought. Once teachers have familiarized themselves with a few of the principles and how those principles can be integrated into instruction, they then select lessons in which those principles could be infused, and thus redesign their classroom instruction.

Throughout the process, we recommend that the teacher have clearly in mind an ideal of education and of the genuinely educated person. This ideal is developed at length in the four critical thinking handbooks we have published and serves as an organizing concept in the remodelling process. For example, if teachers are clear in their own minds that a genuinely educated person can distinguish knowledge from information, then they will look for occasions in their teaching in which students are called upon to use the distinction effectively. All of the various principles of critical thinking correlate with a set of ideals that define what it is to be educated. Before turning to an example of a remodelled lesson, let's examine some basic problems with language arts texts you should watch out for. They help suggest what most needs remodelling.

Language arts instruction tends to be fragmented. As a rule, texts fail to adequately address connections between the various aspects of language arts instruction: language, reading, writing, grammar, and literature. Skills, tech-

niques, basic concepts, and insights within each area are rarely transferred or compared to those of the others. Furthermore, instruction within each area tends to be fragmented. The logic of grammar — the basic unifying patterns underlying many rules of grammar — is routinely ignored. Skills and crucial grammatical distinctions are usually taught as mindless drill, rather than as tools, with specific functions, useful for specific tasks. Students usually learn how to use each skill only in exercises when the directions tell them to; they rarely transfer that skill to situations that require it. In reading, discussion is also usually fragmented, with questions regarding the writer's purpose, the main points, and the significant issues mixed willy-nilly with irrelevancies and trivial details. Most importantly, the fundamental idea and goal of language use — that of "clear communication with an audience" — is rarely used to unify either reading or writing instruction; it is in fact rarely mentioned. As often as possible, each detail covered in language arts instruction should be related to this basic idea with examples that students can understand.

Students are rarely asked to evaluate writing which they create or read. Thus, they do not develop and clarify their own standards of good writing, their own sense of the distinctions between what is clear and vague, gripping and boring, flowing and awkward.

Now let us look at a sample remodel.

## *Marvin's Manhole*

### *Objectives of the remodelled lesson*

The students will:

- select story details to support a conclusion
- discuss different interpretations of a character's behavior

### *Original Lesson Plan*

#### *Abstract*

The students read "Marvin's Manhole", a story about a boy who, rejecting his mother's explanation of the purpose of a manhole, decides that there is a "scary thing" living below his street. Marvin tries to make contact with the thing, but fails. One day he finds the manhole open. After looking for the thing, Marvin climbs into the manhole, has a scare, and meets a workman who confirms his mother's explanation.

Students are asked to recall details, discuss Marvin's personality, discuss parts of Marvin's reasoning, read an emphasized word as Marvin would have said it, discuss some of the pictures, discuss Marvin's feelings, and describe what might have happened after the end of the story.

From *People Need People*,  
Eldonna L. Everetts, Holt Publishing, 1977. pp. T222-231

## *Critique*

This lesson fails to take advantage of the ambiguous nature of Marvin's story. It is unclear whether Marvin really believes in the existence of the scary thing, or is merely pretending to believe in it. Most of Marvin's behavior can be interpreted either way. This lesson misses the opportunity to have students argue for one interpretation over another, or see how each interpretation affects the reader's understanding of the details in the story.

Early in the story, when Marvin hits the manhole cover with his baseball bat and runs away, the reader could interpret his actions as bravely trying to get the scary thing to come out, or as part of a game. The faultiness of Marvin's reasoning (for example, when he concludes that the scary thing eats the bread he leaves on the street overnight) suggests that he's joking. Yet, when he discovers that the manhole is open, he behaves as though he believes in the thing.

The suggested questions do nothing to explore the possible different points of view. Only one question raises the issue of Marvin's belief, "How strongly do you think Marvin believed in the scary thing by this point in the story?" Another assumes his belief in the thing, "Do you think Marvin finally believed what his mother had told him about the manhole?" The different interpretations, then, could be the focus of the remodelled lesson.

### *Strategies used to remodel*

- S-23** evaluating arguments
- S-17** making inferences
- S-10** using critical vocabulary
- S-3** exercising reciprocity
- S-18** supplying evidence for a conclusion

## *Remodelled Lesson Plan*

The process of sorting out the different interpretations of the story should begin with Marvin's claim that he thinks there is a scary thing in the manhole. The teacher might ask the students, "Why do you think Marvin said that there was a thing in the manhole?" Encourage a discussion of the question. Then focus on the issue, "Does Marvin really believe in the scary thing?" Keep raising this issue as the students discuss various parts of the story. Ask, "Does this part of the story support or weaken your conclusion? **S-23** How? If you think he does believe in the thing, why do you think he did this? **S-17** What did you infer from his actions? **S-10** If you think he doesn't believe in the thing, why do you think he did this? What did you infer from his actions?"

Accept any position a student may maintain. The possibilities include: Marvin believed in the thing the whole time; Marvin believed part of the time; Marvin was pretending to believe in the thing. Encourage the students to use "if-then" statements when discussing the implications of their ideas; for example, "If Marvin really believed in the thing, he didn't make a good inference when he concluded that it ate the bread." Have the students state each other's positions. **S-3** Finally, after the story has been read and discussed, review the positions taken and assign a writing exercise. Have the students state the issue and defend their positions with details from the story. **S-18**