

◆◆ Chapter 22

Critical Thinking in the Elementary Classroom

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Abstract

This paper, which originally appeared as the first in a series of articles for Teaching K-8, introduces teachers to lesson plan remodelling by offering an example of an original lesson (about advertising), a critique and remodel of it, and lists of the “strategies used to remodel” and “objectives of the remodelled lesson.”

No matter what grade you teach, your lesson plans can be remodelled to encourage critical thinking.

I begin every inservice — whether for elementary, secondary, or university educators — by having each person choose a number between one and 28. I then have everyone read the critical thinking principle that correlates with that number on a list of critical thinking principles. Next, I ask for a show of hands of all those who feel that the principle they’ve just read applies to their grade level. To date, only two out of about 4,500 teachers and professors I have inserviced have answered in the negative.

The implication is obvious. It’s relatively easy to articulate a list of critical thinking principles which are easily recognized as applicable to every subject and grade level. The problem is not their articulation, but their *application*.

To meet this need, I have been working with a team of researchers and practitioner-advisors at the Center for Critical Thinking at Sonoma State University on a series of handbooks that illustrate the infusion of critical thinking principles into about 100 standardized K-8 lessons. Our objective has been, not only to demonstrate that such infusion is possible, but also to help teachers learn how to infuse these principles into their own lessons. The end result is teachers who think critically about their own instruction and use their own critiques to develop remodelled lessons that foster critical thinking.

To see how a teacher might infuse critical thinking principles into his or her lessons, let’s take a closer look at one of the principles:

S-17, making inferences.

Principle: Thinking critically involves the ability to reach sound conclusions based on observation and information. Critical thinkers distinguish their observations from their conclusions. They look beyond the facts to see what those facts imply, and they know what the concepts they use imply. They also distinguish cases in which they must guess from cases in which they can safely conclude. Critical thinkers recognize their tendency to make inferences that support their own egocentric world view and are therefore especially careful to evaluate inferences when their interests or desires are involved.

Application: Teachers can ask students to make inferences based on a wide variety of statements and actions. For example, students can make inferences from story titles and pictures, story characters' statements and actions, and their fellow students' statements and actions. Students should be encouraged to distinguish their observations from inferences. Teachers can have students give examples of their experience of inferring incorrectly, and encourage them to recognize situations in which they are most susceptible to uncritical thought. The class can discuss how to successfully minimize the effects of irrationality in their lives. Remember — every interpretation is based on inference, and we interpret every situation we are in.

Once teachers are familiar with these principles and can generate some applications of their own, they are ready to try remodelling some lessons. The following lesson in language arts shows the kind of before/after transformation we have in mind.

Advertising

Objectives of the remodelled plan

The students will:

- think dialogically by considering advertisements from a variety of perspectives
- practice using critical vocabulary to analyze and evaluate ads
- clarify key words in ads
- distinguish relevant from irrelevant facts in ads
- develop insight into egocentricity by exploring the ways in which ads appeal to self-image
- explore the implications of visual and audio aspects of ads
- examine assumptions in ads

Original Lesson Plan

Abstract

The student text reminds students that poets have their own ways of using language to describe, then points out that ad writers also have a unique way of using language. It emphasizes that such writers try to make products sound attractive. Students are informed that "*Advertisers use language that*

influences people to buy." Students match products with sentences. (For example, strawberries: *Try our sweet vine-ripened rubies to delight a king's table.*) They make up names for products, and rewrite sentences (For example: *Our vitamins will make you feel better.*) "using the language of advertisers". They write a "Buyer's Guide".

from *Patterns of Language*, H. Tompson Fillmer, et al. American Book Co. © 1974 pp. 80-81.

Critique

We chose this lesson for its subject: advertising. Ads are a natural tie-in to critical thinking, since many are designed to persuade the audience it needs or wants a product. Ads provide innumerable clear-cut examples of irrelevance, distortion, suppressed evidence, and vague uses of language. Students can later compare these examples with other reasoning. Analysis of ads can teach students critical thinking micro-skills, and show their use in context. This lesson, however, is not done in a way which best achieves these results.

The lesson focuses more on writing ads than critiquing them. It treats neutral and advertising language as basically equivalent in meaning, though different in effect, rather than pointing out how differences in effect arise from differences in meaning. It downplays the emptiness, irrelevance, repetition, and distortion of language in most ads. Its made-up slogans bear little resemblance to real ads. Furthermore, most of the products are not children's products, minimizing the immediate usefulness of any insights students may have.

Since most students are exposed to more television commercials than other ads, we recommend that students discuss real commercials, aimed at them. We also provide suggestions for using ads to practice use of critical vocabulary, and to discuss the visual and audio aspects of commercials.

Strategies used to remodel

- S-18** evaluating arguments
- S-14** clarifying the meanings of words or phrases
- S-25** reasoning dialogically
- S-31** distinguishing relevant from irrelevant facts
- S-2** developing insight into egocentricity and sociocentricity
- S-28** using critical vocabulary
- S-35** exploring implications and consequences
- S-30** examining assumptions

Remodelled Lesson Plan

Due to the number of ads to which students are exposed and their degree of influence, we recommend the class spend as much time as possible on the subject.

To focus on ads and language, begin by having students give complete descriptions of what is said in a variety of television commercials. Put the quotes on the board. For each commercial, the class can discuss the following questions: What ideas does it give you about the product (or service) and owning or using it? Does it give reasons for buying the product? If so, what reasons? Are they good reasons? **S-18** What are the key words? Do they have a clear meaning? What? What would be some examples of (key word)? How can you tell whether something is (key word)? **S-14** What other words could have been chosen? How might someone who wasn't trying to sell the product describe it? How might a competitor describe it? **S-25** What would you need to know to make a wise decision about whether to buy it? **S-31** Does the commercial address these points? Why or why not? Has anyone here had experience with the product? What?

When the commercials have been discussed, have students group them by the nature of the ads (repetition, positive but empty language, etc.) or of the appeals made (to the desires to: have fun, be popular, be more grown up, etc.) **S-2** Have students fill out the groups by naming similar commercials not previously discussed.

The class could also compare different ads for the same product, aimed at different audiences (e.g., fast food ads aimed at children and adults). Or the class could compare ads for different brands of the same or similar products, compare ads to what can be read on ingredients' labels, or conduct blind taste tests.

The teacher interested in developing students' critical vocabulary can have students practice while critiquing ads. Use questions like the following: **S-28** What does the ad *imply*? **S-35** Does the ad make, or lead the audience to make, any *assumptions*? **S-30** Are the assumptions *true*, *questionable*, or *false*? Does the ad contain an *argument*? If so, what is the *conclusion*? Is the conclusion *stated* or *implied*? Does the ad *misuse* any *concepts* or *ideas*? To judge the product, what facts are *relevant*? **S-31** Are the relevant facts presented? Does it make any *irrelevant* claims?

The class could also discuss aspects of the ads other than use of language. **S-35** What does the ad show? What effect is it designed to achieve? What is the music like? Why is it used? Do

the actors and announcers use tone of voice to persuade? Facial expression? How? Are these things relevant to judging or understanding the product?

The class could hypothesize about why ad campaigns and specific techniques work as well as they do, given their unreasonableness. **S-2**

The teacher may also have the class critique ads for any stereotyping (e.g., sexual stereotyping).

I have found that most teachers are capable of remodelling lessons in this way, provided: 1) They have access to handbooks that provide them with a wide selection of illustrations of principles, applications and remodelled lessons in a variety of subject areas; 2) they have time and appropriate inservice in the process, and; 3) they are systematically encouraged over an extended period of time (with follow-up inservice).

The time and effort required in this model are well worth the results, for critical thinking skills are of signal value, not only for learning academic subjects but also in every domain of everyday life: choosing one's friends and developing one's personal philosophy.