



What Works? Research into Practice

Research monograph # 67
April 2017

Think About It!

Renewing Our Commitment to Teaching for Critical Thinking in the Social Studies and History Curricula

By Dr. Todd A. Horton, Schulich School of Education at Nipissing University in North Bay

Tips to Foster Critical Thinking

- Create a community of thinkers by establishing and modelling an atmosphere of inquiry.
- Offer “critical challenges” that require students to think critically.
- Provide requisite conceptual tools (e.g., background knowledge, vocabulary, thinking strategies, habits of mind, and criteria for judgment).
- Assess the effective use of the tools throughout critical challenges.

Effective critical thinking does not require students to just “think”; rather, it requires that they think about “something.” How can critical thinking help students to work in and through the curricular areas?

Most educators believe that teaching for critical thinking is important, but many are unsure what critical thinking actually is and what it looks like in practice. As a community of educators, we must take responsibility for our own learning, so we can empower the learning of our students. This entails engaging in ongoing formal and informal professional development, accessing available resources and adapting them to our curricular and classroom needs, (re)considering the curriculum through a lens that includes critical thinking, and, perhaps most importantly, purposefully creating opportunities whereby students are provided questions or tasks that involve critical thinking.

The revised *Canadian and World Studies, Grades 11 and 12* curriculum, released by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2015, seeks to empower students to become “critically thoughtful and informed citizens”¹ (p. 8). In this document, critical thinking is situated within a broader citizenship-education framework and is linked to concepts of disciplinary thinking. The curriculum is a bold step forward, coming at a time when society faces increasing challenges and when successfully confronting important social, political, economic, and environmental issues will require the best thinkers we have.

Critical thinking is not a new concept; it has been floating around the field of education for several decades and, thus, it is easy for us to become complacent.

The expanded size of the latest curriculum documents may inadvertently send teachers the message that there is much more to “cover” and, thus, lessons involving critical thinking will necessarily have to be sacrificed. Nothing could or should be further from the truth. Now is the time to renew our commitment to teaching students to think critically and, in doing so, meet the forward vision embedded in the curriculum’s expectations.

What We Know

The basis of critical thinking has been with us for centuries, beginning with Socrates’ method of questioning, which challenges us to justify our claims to knowledge. By the early 20th century, philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey advocated for a curriculum that embedded critical thinking, conceptualizing it as a means to enhance the individual, the community, and the democratic state.² In the 1940s, Edward M. Glaser outlined the three main elements involved in thinking critically:³ (1) a disposition to thoughtfully consider the questions and problems one encounters in one’s experience, (2) knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning, and (3) skill at applying those methods.

Today’s definitions envision critical thinking as “thinking through problematic situations about what to believe or how to act where the thinker makes reasoned judgments”⁴ (p. 249) in situations where there is no predetermined result or answer; these judgments are assessed against pre-established criteria such as clarity, cogency, plausibility, etc.

While there is no single approach to engaging students in critical thinking, researchers have concluded that classroom discussions, writing activities, and effective questioning techniques are essential for overall effectiveness.⁵ Further, opportunities for critical thinking, or critical challenges, must be embedded in the mandated curriculum. Effective critical thinking does not require students to just “think”; rather, it requires that they think about “something,” and that means thinking about curricular content and applying a wide repertoire of skills needed to address critical questions

or tasks. For example, understanding and using concepts in composing coherent arguments or using voice and tone effectively will be part of this repertoire.

There is substantial evidence-based research on the efficacy of critical thinking in diverse curricular areas; benefits include promoting understanding, heightening awareness of the world, and contributing to the development of thoughtful and informed citizens. Engagement in critical-thinking activities has been positively linked to the teaching of subjects in the social sciences and history: physical geography, in which students used critical thinking when linking concepts of Earth systems;⁶ history, in which students were expected to question their presuppositions and interrogate historical documents;⁷ and literature, in which students participated in social justice discussion groups.⁸

What Does Critical Thinking Look and Sound Like in Practice?

When working with and through the curriculum on a day-to-day basis, educators can do a number of things to foster critical thinking¹¹:

- Create a community of thinkers by establishing and modelling an atmosphere of inquiry.
- Offer “critical challenges” that require students to think critically.
- Provide requisite conceptual tools – including background knowledge, vocabulary, thinking strategies, habits of mind, and criteria for judgment – to facilitate critical thinking.
- Assess the effective use of these tools throughout critical challenges.

The conceptual tools offered in the revised social studies and history curriculum documents provide a useful framework for planning thoughtful and critical lessons across the curriculum:

- **Teach for big ideas.** Create enduring understandings that students will “delve into and retain long after they have forgotten many of the details of the content they studied”⁹ (p. 14).

- **Use framing questions.** Pose “overarching questions related to the overall expectations and big ideas. They are intended to stimulate students’ critical thinking and to encourage them to consider the broader relevance of what they are studying”¹⁰ (p. 8).
- **Integrate concepts of disciplinary thinking.** Embed “particular ways of thinking and a particular set of concepts” associated with “doing” each subject¹ (pp. 16–17).

Implications for the Social Studies and History Classroom

Historical thinking involves the disciplinary concepts of historical significance, cause and consequence, continuity and change, and historical perspective. The following exemplars from social studies and history illustrate critical-challenge possibilities appropriate for a range of grades, both elementary and secondary. These critical challenges require a thoughtful teacher to organize and delineate the content more fully for optimal use in their classrooms. They highlight the need for teachers to purposefully develop critical-thinking opportunities and, using the conceptual tools provided, embed them in various curriculum topics. Note how each exemplar challenges students to draw on their background knowledge, make reasoned judgments in response to open-ended questions, and practise habits of critical thinking.

Teach for big ideas.

In Grade 1 classrooms, discuss the natural and designed features of communities; explore the services communities provide to help meet the needs of the people who live and work there (SS 1–6, HG 7–8, p. 65).

- **Critical Challenge: Who are more heroic, police officers or firefighters?** Have students consider what makes someone a hero. Read students *Firefighters to the Rescue!* (2005) and *Police Officers on Patrol* (2009), both by Kersten Hamilton. Pose the critical question and have students use examples from the stories when answering.

Use framing questions.

In the Grade 12 classroom, invite students to consider how Canada deals with competing rights. (C & WS 11–12, p. 403).

- **Critical Challenge: Settle the debate in a case where religious rights compete against the right to equal protection under the law.** Guide students through a consideration of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as well as a selection of Supreme Court judgments that deal with freedom-of-religion and equality-under-the-law cases. Following this, present a case study involving an apartment owner who refuses to rent to a same-sex couple. The couple decides to sue the apartment owner for discrimination and for violating their charter right to equality under the law. The apartment owner says that to rent to a same-sex couple would violate her freedom of religious conscience. Pose the critical task and have the students render a decision on whose rights will prevail. Require that students draw on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as well as previous Supreme Court decisions, to support their decision.

Integrate concepts of disciplinary thinking.

Use the historical inquiry process in the Grade 7 classroom to investigate the perspectives of different groups regarding a significant event (SS 1–6, HG 7–8).

- **Critical Challenge: Rewrite existing text from the perspective of a marginalized voice.** Have students consider a textbook entry on the contributions and death of Shawnee Chief Tecumseh at the Battle of Thames in October, 1813. Note that the textbook provides only a superficial accounting of Tecumseh’s contributions to the British efforts during the War of 1812 and of his ultimate demise. Note also the possible lack of indigenous perspectives in the textbook’s account of Chief Tecumseh and the events of the battle. Share with students that Canada’s indigenous peoples have long been marginalized and silenced in Canadian historical accounts. Present students with three Internet webpages that offer aboriginal perspectives on Chief Tecumseh and the Battle of

the Thames. Pose the critical task and have students draw on the three webpages to rewrite the entry for their textbook.

The critical challenge framework used in these activities was developed by Case and Daniels,¹¹ who also contributed to the development of TC², the Critical Thinking Consortium (www.tc2.ca) website. TC² offers a wide array of resources for teachers – including background on concepts, fully developed lesson plans, and professional development opportunities – as does The Historical Thinking Project (www.historicalthinking.ca). Other options include the Canadian Museum of History (www.historymuseum.ca) and the Archives of Ontario (www.archives.gov.on.ca).

References

1. Ontario Ministry of Education. (2015). *The Ontario curriculum grades 11 and 12: Canadian and world studies*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/2015cws11and12.pdf
2. Dewey, J. (2015). *How we think*. Charleston, SC: BiblioLife. (Original work published 1910).
3. Glaser, E. M. (1941). *An experiment in the development of critical thinking*. New York, NY: Columbia University Teacher's College Publications.
4. Farr-Darling, L., & Wright, I. (2004). Critical thinking and the "social" in social studies. In A. Sears & I. Wright. (Eds.), *Challenges and prospects for Canadian social studies* (247–258). Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.
5. Karabulut, U. S. (2012). How to teach critical thinking in social studies education: An examination of three NCSS journals. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 49, 197–212.
6. Wolf, J., Stanton, M., & Gellott, L. (2010). Critical thinking in physical geography: Linking concepts of content and applicability. *Journal of Geography*, 109, 43–53.
7. Pattiz, A. E. (2004). The idea of history teaching: Using Collingwood's idea of history to promote critical thinking in the high school history classroom. *The History Teacher*, 37, 239–249.
8. Moeller, K. J. (2012). Developing understanding of social justice: Critical thinking in action in a literature discussion group. *Journal of Children's Literature*. 38(2), 23–36.
9. Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *The Ontario curriculum grades 1 to 6: Social studies and grades 7 and 8: History and geography*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/sshg18curr2013.pdf
10. Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *The Ontario curriculum grades 9 and 10: Canadian & world studies*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/canworld910curr2013.pdf
11. Case, R., & Daniels, L. (1999). *Tools for thought: Promoting and assessing critical thinking*. Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.

Summary

One of the goals of the Ontario Ministry of Education is to empower students to become critically thoughtful and informed citizens. The question for educators is how to teach critical thinking with and through the curriculum. We have the framework; we have the tools. Now it is time for us to accept the critical challenge and make it so. Let's renew our commitment to teaching for critical thinking. With brand new social studies and history curriculum documents in hand, the time to (re)start is now!

What Works? Research into Practice is produced by a partnership between the Ontario Association of Deans of Education and the Student Achievement Division.

To learn more about how to write a monograph [click here](#) *Mobilizing Research into Practice in Meaningful Ways* By Dr. Michelann Parr and Dr. Terry Campbell Co-editors

What Works? is updated and posted at: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/WhatWorks.html

The opinions and conclusions contained in these monographs are, those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies, views, or directions of the Ontario Ministry of Education or the Student Achievement Division.

ISSN 1913-1097 *What Works? Research Into Practice* (Print)
ISSN 1913-1100 *What Works? Research Into Practice* (Online)