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# DISCRIMINATING READERS ARE CRITICAL THINKERS

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Critical thinking is usually described as a part of problem solving and of creative thinking. Critical thinking usually implies appraisal in terms of some standard or value.<sup>1</sup> And, according to the reports of research conducted at the University of Buffalo in their Creative Education Foundation, as one gains facility in critical thinking skills there also occur significant gains in personality traits such as confidence, self-reliance, persuasiveness, initiative, and leadership potential.<sup>2</sup>

Critical thinking is a high level intellectual process. In order to carry out this high level thinking process the individual must inspect and compare the facts. He must then arrive at some conclusion, making some judgment about the relevant facts or opinions. Critical thinking utilizes varied "experiences" that are somehow related, combined and applied to the thoughts being appraised.

In general, critical thinking has been found to be relatively independent of general intelligence and knowledge of subject matter. Yet it is readily understood that a reasonable amount of intelligence and knowledge of the subject must be considered minimum essentials for the process of critical thinking. Of considerable importance are two other essentials to the process of critical thinking, namely, the command of the techniques of evaluation and the willingness to be objective. It is through example, reminder and direct teaching by the mature and intelligent adult that the acquisition of both of these essentials are facilitated. Research has demonstrated that some critical thinking abilities can be improved only by direct and systematic instructional guidance.<sup>3</sup> This planned instructional program must allow for extensive exposure to the kind of learning experiences that will enable the student to practice the various critical thinking skills. The learning experiences must afford considerable practice in such critical thinking skills as anticipating outcomes, distinguishing fact and opinion, establishing cause and effect, finding information to

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1. David H. Russell. *Children's Thinking*. Boston: Ginn and Co., 1949, p. 13.
  2. Sidney J. Parnes. "Can Creativity Be Increased?" *A Source Book for Creative Thinking*. Sidney J. Parnes and Harold F. Harding, editors. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962, p. 189.
  3. E. M. Glaser. *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking*. Contributions to Education, No. 843. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1941.

prove or disprove a statement, forming an opinion, interpreting language ideas which are implied not stated, and recognizing emotional reactions and motives.

The writer mentioned above that the student who is to engage in the evaluative process must be willing to be objective. This is by far the most difficult essential for the teacher to provide for or with which to equip each learner. But it affords us a reason why educators must realize that direct instructional approaches in teaching critical thinking must be used. By and large, the indirect or manipulative approach that is so often advised in the educational methods books for all subjects is ineffective in providing for two of the four essentials to the process of critical thinking (command of the techniques of evaluation and a willingness to be objective).

*The process of discriminating reading.* The process of discriminating reading is identical to that called for in critical thinking. The variance being that in discriminating reading one is evaluating the written word rather than the oral word. Critical thinking is a high level intellectual process. But it is one that even three year olds can carry on to some degree! In order to carry out this high level thinking process the individual must inspect and compare the facts that he reads. He must arrive at some conclusion, making some judgment about the relevant facts or opinions. He must use his background of experiences for the critical thinker must utilize the varied experiences that are somehow related, combined, applied to the thoughts (oral or written) that are being appraised. Thus we see that an effective discriminating reader examines the verbal materials in light of related objective evidence, compares the statement with some norm or standard, and concludes or acts upon the judgment made.<sup>4</sup> The reader can employ the various discriminating skills as he reads informational material, persuasive writing and literature.

The reader will have to think critically and read discriminately if, as he reads the following publications, he compares and contrasts *Wanderers of the Field* by George Harmon Smith with *Blue Willow* by Doris Gates and *The Big Road* by Tom E. Clarke. In all three of these junior novels the migrant farm workers are the topic of concern but in each case the focus is different. Another interesting group of books which would call for the use of discriminating reading skills are those which pertain to the problem of race relations in the United

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4. David H. Russell. *Children's Thinking*. New York: Ginn and Company, 1956, p. 301.

States. The discriminating reader will notice that the problem is given slightly different emphasis in Peter Goldman's *Civil Rights, The Challenge of the Fourteenth Amendment* when it is compared with Emma G. Sterne's *I Have a Dream*, Milton Meltzer's *In Their Own Words: A History of the American Negro: 1865-1916* and David Bowen's *The Struggle Within: Race Relations in the United States*. Interesting also to the discriminating reader would be a study of how the book characters in the following novels deal with the problem of poverty: Charlene J. Talbot's *Tomas Takes Charge* compared with Aimee Sommerfelt's *My Name is Pablo* and Tyler Whittle's *The Spinning Tops of Naples*. The setting for each story is New York, Mexico City, and Naples, respectively. Each story character faces similar problems under different circumstances. Each copes with and resolves his own problem in a different way. All three stories would provoke much thoughtful reading about setting, characterization, and plot development.

*The discriminating reader described.* A discriminating reader likes books and is able to gain real pleasure from them. But children have to be taught to want books; they have to learn how they can gain pleasure from them. This does not happen unless the child is read to a great deal by the parents at home long before he starts to school and is read to by the teacher when he is in school and read to by his parents at home long after he has begun to attend school. If the reader is to learn to like books and is to gain pleasure from them, he must experience emotional identification with the book characters or situations. The reader must be able to affiliate some real or fictional character in literature with himself or his associate. A story like Emily Neville's *It's Like This, Cat* masterfully portrays the feelings harboured by most early adolescents. It is a novel that lends itself well to emotional identification on the part of the reader. It exemplifies a publication that would help the young reader realize that he could gain real pleasure from a well written book. It readily evidences all of the components of quality literary fiction.

The young reader must learn that a discriminating reader also uses books (informational and fiction) to get explanations of his world. Thus an informational book like *Jewels for a Crown* by M. K. Freund can be used to introduce the young readers to the painting of Chagall, the stories in the Old Testament, and the technique of using symbolism in the fine arts, be they in literature or painting.

From his first junior book onwards the discriminating reader uses books to find out something of what people and places are really like.

Whether he actually met with poverty and tenement apartment living or not, whether he has observed family strife and quarreling or not, stories like *Jazz Man* by May Wiek will help him to better understand human emotions and human frailty. This story is simple and true and direct. The hunger and family conflicts as well as the family's closeness were included because it is a part of life the author was writing about. It is not a depressing story, it is expandable. It opens windows to the world and through these windows children will see more and more each time they read it. It gives them knowledge about people. It is only too easy to underestimate the understanding of the young. What we give them must be strong and honest. Books today cannot be criticized for their repressions and omissions. Books should tax and stimulate the reader. Books should help the reader view some moral and social values. This, the *Jazz Man* does.

The books that are read to the child or made available for him to read on his own should encourage the child to be thoughtful about his reading. Parents and teachers should encourage him to express these thoughts. He should be given numerous opportunities to discuss or interpret in some way his thoughts and feelings about the happenings of the book's characters. He should express some reaction to the theme or the messages of the books that he reads. A discriminating reader would certainly respond to the thoughtful message stressed by Marie Halun Bloch in *The Two Worlds of Damyon* in which the democratic way of life is glorified and communism is denounced. Few readers would miss the strong theme in Andre Norton's science fiction story of *Steel Magic*, that one can overcome his fears.

Stories like *Twins of Space* by Ralph O. Shankle and *The Time Traders* by Andre Norton would challenge the young reader to distinguish fact from fiction, the real from the fanciful. A comparison of the details in two biographies about Andrew Johnson, namely, *In Lincoln's Footsteps* by Bill Severn and *Impeached: The President Who Almost Lost His Job* by G. Allen Foster will remind the student he must distinguish fact and opinion as he reads, he can use the printed word to prove or disprove a statement and perhaps form an idea about some controversial topic which he has read or heard about.

The discriminating reader will not only select informational material and fiction to find out about his contemporary world, but he will select literary material that will help him to understand and appreciate his cultural heritage or the heritage of others. Thus he must read, enjoy, and use selections from historical fiction, biographies and autobiographies, folk and fairy tales from various national groups.

*Folktales of China* by Wolfram Eberhard, contains seventy-nine Chinese folktales. Some of these tales were in existence before 1937 but some are newly translated from Communist China and have been included to illustrate the propagandistic uses of folktales. A publication such as this constitutes excellent sources for the young student of culture and literature.

A discriminating reader is capable of appraising the books he reads. He will be knowledgeable about the constants of quality literature. He will know the criteria for each literary form and will appraise each book accordingly. He will read many kinds of literature—fiction, adventure, biography, science, poetry, and essays. Yet his reading interests and habits will be truly indicative of his unique personality.

The most valuable quality a child can have as a discriminating reader is curiosity. Easily squashed, it is as easily encouraged by the provision of books varied in style and content. If our children can advance into the world of adult fiction and non-fiction with an intense curiosity about human relations, about the position of a man in the world, about the technique of writing, they will not go far wrong. They will have grown up with good will towards reading and view it as a necessity of life and one of its major pleasures.

*Teaching children to be discriminating readers.* Presently the tests for measuring and appraising critical thinking abilities of young children are slim in number. "The Gans Selection Rejection Test" measures the ability of intermediate grade students to detect relevancy and irrelevancy. Sections of the "Ginn Basic Reading Tests" include ideas for interpreting the author's suggestions and recognizing propaganda devices. Critical interpretation of a limited number of science ideas are presented in Maney's "Intermediate Reading Test" and critical interpretation in a limited number of social studies ideas are presented in Sochor's "Intermediate Reading Test." "The Ohio Thinking Check-UP" (Department of Education, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, 1944) tests such errors as interpreting through personal judgment, evading the issue by "name calling," believing a superstition, and generalizing from insufficient evidence. "The Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal" and "Kay's Critical Reading Test" evaluate the critical thinking abilities of junior and senior high school students and adults. Children seldom evidence facility in critical thinking on the above named tests unless they have had some instruction and practice in critical thinking activities.

What can be done by the teacher to nurture critical thinking and discriminating reading in the elementary school classroom? First and

foremost, the reading assignments that he asks of his students must call for critical thinking. These activities must give the students numerous opportunities to engage in some aspect of the evaluative process when they study. If possible, application of the conclusion they reach as a result of their reading the books, periodicals or newspapers should occur. Assignments that call for the mere memorizing and the recalling of facts or more random interpretations of the printed word will not provide the evaluative skills that are involved in critical thinking.

Secondly, the elementary school teacher or librarian must be certain that the students are fully aware and appreciative of the importance of learning to do critical thinking. They should realize that this is a major objective of elementary schools in the United States. Thus, we might emphasize that, in large measure, survival of democracy may depend upon the ability of its citizens to evaluate critically the many contrary ideas and issues that are presented in the reading materials and through the mass media today. We might emphasize that in addition to critical appraisal of reading materials and viewing media the citizens of today must be able to carry out self-learning. They must be able to gain the knowledge that is so rapidly being uncovered from numerous sources, such as library books, periodicals and newspapers instead of depending solely on attendance in organized courses or instead of limiting their sources for gaining knowledge to the use of a basic text or a single learning experience. We would have intermediate and upper grade students be fully aware of all the components of critical thinking. They must know of the varied and specific skills and attitudes involved in this kind of thinking. They would be well aware that the learning experiences which are provided them are in actual fact especially designed to help them gain facility in critical thinking and discriminating reading.

The teacher himself must evidence a high degree of facility in critical thinking and must exemplify the ideal critical thinker and discriminating reader. He must be knowledgeable about the many forms of children's literature and he must know which titles can be used to gather information about some specific topic. He must be familiar with and understand the techniques in persuasive reading materials. He must be aware of the literature about controversial topics and he must know of the wide variety of informative or expository type printed matter. Thus we see that something can be done to nurture discriminating reading in the elementary school classrooms. All of our elementary school students can be helped to develop questive and

curious minds. All can be helped to be independent and careful thinkers. They can be taught that they will gain much pleasure from their reading of good literature.

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