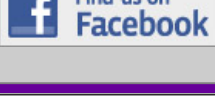


GoodCharacter.com Monthly Newsletter

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Theme of the Month: Critical Thinking

There's an old story about Socrates that one day someone came running up to him and blurted out "Socrates, I want to tell you what I just heard about one of your students."

Socrates stopped him, saying "Wait, wait, before you tell me anything about someone else, have you made sure that it is true?"

"Well, no," the man admitted, "but I did hear about it."

"But you're not certain of its truth?"

"Not certain," said the man.

"Well, then, tell me this," continued Socrates, "Is what you wish to tell me about my student something good?"

"No, no, to the contrary," said the man.

"Really?" Socrates inquired. "You want to tell me something bad about one of my students, even though you're not sure that it's true?"

The man looked away, confused.

"Then let me ask you one last question," said Socrates. "Is what you are about to say about my student going to be of any use to me?"

The man thought for a moment, and then slowly replied, "probably not."

"Well then," concluded Socrates, "if what you want to tell me is neither true, nor good, nor even useful, why tell it to me at all?"

The man walked away deflated.

What we like so much about this story is that Socrates actually establishes a standard for tale-telling. In other words, he lays out a set of criteria for determining whether or not it's right to tell someone something about someone else. In this case the criteria are: is it true, is it good, is it useful. You might even call this a lesson in critical thinking (which, lo and behold, happens to be what we call it).

Critical thinking?

You bet. Critical thinking is all about establishing the validity of an assumption or an action when you see or hear it, and especially before you say it or do it. You get there by asking the right questions and then seeking out honest answers, regardless of where it takes you. It's a great tool when applied to character education.

And how do we do that?

By constantly challenging our students to scrutinize their thoughts and actions, to think deeply and honestly about how they make choices in life, to question commonly held assumptions. And it's really not hard to do. Suppose you read this Socrates anecdote to your students and then asked them what lessons in life they saw in this story? Do you think that would get a discussion going? Do you think that might lead to meaningful reflection? Wouldn't that be character education?

In designing our classroom materials we have always employed critical thinking techniques to focus on choices and behaviors—our particular niche. We use critical thinking as a tool for affective (and effective) education as we attempt to teach students to use their heads about issues of the heart.

In putting together this bloggish newsletter we discovered a number of articles and lesson plans that we think will be useful to those of you who would like to delve more deeply into critical thinking with the young people you work with. Critical thinking is a serious discipline—practically a science of thought. In schools it can do wonders almost anywhere across the curriculum. Check out the following links. Apply them thoughtfully.

So, what about that Socrates story—do you think it's true? Probably. Is it good? We think so. Is it useful? You'll just have to try it and find out.

David Elkind & Freddy Sweet, Ph.D.

P.S. May we modestly recommend a pair of articles that we, ourselves, wrote on critical thinking in the classroom. [A Socratic Approach to Character Education](#) is about using Socratic method to trigger critical thinking in educating for character. [Ethical Reasoning and the Art of Classroom Dialogue](#) demonstrates how to use critical thinking to generate great classroom discussions.

"Don't believe everything you think."

—Unknown

TEACH CRITICAL THINKING WITH SOCRATES AND THE POPCORN PARK PUPPETS



"No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof."

—Henry David Thoreau

John Trapasso, a student of Richard Paul and a teacher at Hilldale School in Daly City CA, has contributed the following ideas to this newsletter:

"Here are a few suggestions . . . they really helped me develop my own understanding of critical thinking and helped me to see how to put it to use in my classroom. I made wall posters for Dr. Paul's two core sets of tools, the Elements of Reason and the Standards for Reasoning. The Center for Critical Thinking now has [wall posters of these that you can purchase for \\$5](#). I just put them up on the wall and continued to teach in my regular manner. Soon during a class discussion I noticed that one of the Elements of Reason or a Standard would be screaming out at me from the wall chart. I was beginning to see how the elements and standards are alive and at play in all of the thinking that we do day in and day out, and the charts simply reminded me of this and allowed me to draw the class's attention to the element or standard relevant to our discussion. It was a simple and effective way to help me and my class.

"Second, I have found the Center for Critical Thinking's "miniguides" invaluable. [The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools](#) and [The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking for Children](#) are both small, pocket sized, and brief overviews of core concepts that are cheap and very helpful."

"The trouble with most people is that they think with their hopes or fears or wishes rather than with their minds."

—Will Durant

Lesson Plans and Resources

[The Critical Thinking Community](#) was founded in 1980 by Dr Richard Paul, a key educator in the field of critical thinking. This website is an excellent resource if you need consistent help in engaging your student to think critically about the world around them. Dr Linda Elder is the Executive Director of the program. The website also lists resources in languages other than English.

A multitude of [critical thinking worksheets](#)! Most of these worksheets are about 5-10 minutes in length and can easily fit into a tight classroom schedule.

Here are [two excellent critical thinking exercises](#) for all grades. In the first assignment, students act as tour guides to an "alien" who has some questions about our professional sports. In the second assignment, students are given several statements and have to separate the facts from the opinions.

In these three, hour-long lesson plans, students learn the idea of [cause and effect](#) by finding out what is and isn't important. These units include both group work and solitary work and help prepare middle school students for the challenges of writing high school essays. This lesson plan is a great way to teach critical thinking and prepare your students to succeed.

The Annenberg Classroom brings together the idea of [citizenship and critical thinking](#). This site offers a number of lesson plans for high school students to think critically about how politics and the media are presented to us. Start off the discussion with your students by asking, Can we trust everything that we read, hear or see? (Lessons plans are presented on the web or can be easily downloaded as PDF files.)

Microsoft has posted an in-depth lesson plan on [critical thinking with regard to internet usage](#). The lesson plan can be downloaded in steps or as a .pdf file. The lesson plan has many parts and can be used with middle school or high school students. Finally, the lesson plan also meets National Technology Educational Standards. The lesson plan covers important topics such as plagiarism, searching, validation, citing web sources and much more.

"The important thing is not to stop questioning."

—Albert Einstein

News

We often provide links to a variety of news sources in our newsletter, but this month The Critical Thinking Community has done our work for us. See this link to their [news section](#) to find a variety of news articles on critical thinking issues around the United States.

The most recent news articles on the Critical Thinking.org website are from Nov. 2011. Here are some more current news articles:

This news article discusses [how critical thinking can be taught through computer programming](#). Computer programming encourages children to break down a problem and analyze it before putting the puzzle, or program, together. This article is full of free helpful tips as well.

In Atlanta, and other communities teachers are finding [new and different ways to introduce critical thinking](#) into their lesson plans. Many of the examples used in this article can be employed in your own classroom to help students learn about almost any subject at hand.

"We use 10% of our brains. Imagine how much we could accomplish if we used the other 60%."

—Ellen Degeneres

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