**[Critical thinking](https://www.dawn.com/news/1596984/critical-thinking)**

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CAN all of us recognise fake news when we come across it? Can we sift out relevant information from a detailed text? Do we know how to weigh possibilities and perspectives and present them in equal measure in a logically structured way, reflecting on the loopholes in our own viewpoint? This is just the tip of the iceberg when we consider what critical thinking skills can do for students’ learning.

Last week, a group of teachers sat to discuss the power of critical thinking, and how it is a significant learning tool to inculcate in our younger generations for the progress of education in the country. A couple of minutes later, in the same conversation, they also lamented how students don’t listen and demand a reason for everything before they accept instructions. Reasoning and logic leads to rationality and acceptance of directives, and if our students were to be taught critical-thinking skills, wouldn’t they be expected to question instructions before they process, understand and accept them? We want to give the world to our students and help them reach out for the sun, moon and stars, but we are paradoxically resistant to the rocky road that leads them there.

Critical-thinking skills do not spring out of a magician’s hat in a dramatic burst of energy. In fact, they are the result of a painstaking process of building and rebuilding with carefully wielded teaching tools in the hands of educators who have learnt to develop it as a social culture rather than an activity. It has to be built into the ethos of a school, and manifests itself in student interaction with peers and teachers, reflects in the leadership of the organisation and upholds the academic benchmarks set by the school. Critical thinking skills demand a degree of involvement that is born out of an immersive learning experience — focused on communication — and cannot grow like a lone flower in isolation.

The pandemic climate has provided teachers with fertile ground to encourage communication between students in online lessons. They may not get a chance to meet physically, play or work together, but they have a ready platform to communicate their ideas and, if teachers were to hone these communication skills, which are a vital cog for critical analysis, they would help steer children towards a constructive learning experience.

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The perspicacious ones can get to ‘teach’ the others, the opportunity is ripe for brainstorming, the chat box is a treasure trove that can produce instant answers from students who normally don’t speak up in class and provide real-time feedback. Teachers also have access to an unprecedented supply of visual prompts that take seconds to download, videos and music to aid learning, interactive worksheets to help with assessments — to top it off, the ‘mute all’ button has done wonders for classroom management.

The new digital landscape is a poignant opportunity for integrating ideas — the ‘only one-student-can-speak-at-a-time’ paradigm is fizzling out as teachers keep the chat box busy. In the process, children may be learning to become better listeners and readers as they keep pace with discussions in the chat box and onscreen texts. Interestingly, research has found that students are becoming braver with their ideas and producing a mix of whacky and out-of-the-box answers as they are sheltered from the intimidation of a live classroom. Encouraging personal responses to the text, no matter what the subject, might be an integral part of encouraging critical thinking. A host of strategies, from picking up clues from prompts and making predictions about what happens next, to learning to structure and support an argument and decoding graphic organisers, such as maps and illustrations, would contribute towards jogging the recesses of critical-response skills.

Contrary to popular opinion, critical-thinking skills are not taught at the expense of academic content, nor do they take time away from it. One cannot possibly think deeply about a subject that they know nothing about — critical-thinking skills fill the gap with the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions that students must answer for themselves if they are to internalise, construct and structure their analysis focusing on the topic at hand. Critical analysis necessitates a roomful of perspectives, which implies accepting input from all students, whether right or wrong, logical or bizarre. Out of the chaos of ideas comes a pattern of reasoning that we can help students organise in a logical argument.

In critical thinking, the pendulum swings between possibilities. It is a journey away from the status quo, focusing on the endeavour to produce new means and innovative knowledge. The result is a wide array of skills, ranging from problem-solving and decision-making to foresight and creativity.

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