

Teaching critical reading

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TODAY'S societies around the world are changing tremendously. Educators, from curriculum planners and policy makers to classroom teachers, face the daunting task of preparing children for a successful, prosperous and productive life. In the United States it is believed that over twenty five percent of the jobs people will be performing in the coming years do not even exist today, and that those which continue to exist will be markedly different in their nature from today.

What makes matters complex is the continuing explosion of information. According to estimates, within the next ten years, 100 per cent of the world's present collective knowledge will constitute only 10 per cent of the available knowledge base. Experts have already said that most of what we know usually has a shelf life of ten years or less.

The technological explosion in the delivery of information cannot be ignored either. Provided one has a computer, a phone line (or a cable), and a modem, the libraries of the world are accessible to him/her with the click of the mouse. The tremendous volume of available information through CD-ROM, the Internet and books makes one point evident: more than ever before, young people will need skills not only to benefit from a vast fund of available knowledge but also to do well in later life.

However, literacy levels in Pakistan indicate that the educational careers of a large numbers of children are in jeopardy because they do not read well enough. The question of how best to prepare children for the future is not easy to answer. However, one can say with confidence that children cannot be prepared to face the future with the information that is taught to them in schools.

The most central task for student is to learn how to learn effectively. That is to say, students must be able to take new ideas and examine them critically from numerous perspectives and make judgments about the overall value based on their own needs, purpose and prior knowledge. In brief, they must develop all those abilities listed under 'intellectual development' by Goodlad (1983), that is, the ability to think rationally, to use and evaluate knowledge and to develop intellectual curiosity.

The responsibility of teaching students how to read and think critically lies on teachers. It cannot be assumed that students will become critical readers naturally or simply by wishing. To become effective critical readers and thinkers, they must be given opportunities and reasons to think

critically. Students must be provided opportunities to challenge, integrate, reconfigure, adapt, or dismiss information. On receiving new information (either through spoken or written text), they should be encouraged to ask questions like: "What does this information mean to me?", "how can I use it?", "is it similar or different from what I already know?", "how important and helpful is it?", "how should I react to it?", and "what might be the consequences of accepting these ideas on me and on others?"

When students approach a text in this manner they make sense of the information they read and the ideas at hand. Such questioning methods help them to internalize, synthesize, and make the information their own.

It would seem pertinent to point out here that critical reading and thinking is often thought to be something in which only older students can engage. This is not the case. Young children are able to encounter new information and examine it thoughtfully and critically. In fact, children of all ages are capable of critical reading. What is important is to provide them an environment in the classroom that promotes the development of critical reading and thinking skills.

For creating a set of classroom conditions that stimulate critical reading and thinking, teachers should (1) take steps to determine and activate students' prior knowledge and background experiences in relation to a topic; (2) actively involve children in the reading process by encouraging them to ask questions about and from the text before, during and after reading; (3) provide time to anticipate and predict; (4) accept their opinions about the text; (5) let them challenge the information or opinion expressed in the text, and (6) assure them of a risk-free environment without ridicule.

To engage in effective critical reading and thinking, students must (1) develop self-confidence and feel that their opinions and ideas are worthwhile; (2) give other students a reasonable chance to speak in group or class discussions; (3) listen with respect to multiple opinions; (4) take risks and not be afraid to make mistakes and learn from them; (5) actively engage in the learning process and be willing to embrace discomfort, and (6) be prepared to evaluate one another's ideas and opinions on the basis of well-reasoned arguments.

Only when these conditions prevail in the classroom will students read a text with cognitive engagement. Since before and during reading they examine their own knowledge about a topic and think about the topic they are reading, they monitor their com-

prehension actively. Thus, while reading they get their own questions answered, which is the definition of comprehension according to Pearson (1991).

An increasing number of studies show that for meaningful, lasting, critical understanding to happen, students must connect the new with the known. Good readers cannot be looked upon as empty vessels waiting to be filled by the meanings carried in a particular text. Instead, good readers are active participants who bring to the text all the knowledge and prior experience they have with the topic and this allows them to interact with the text and to construct meaning for themselves.

Purposeful reading is more effective than non-purposeful learning because purposeful reading is guided by the reader's intentions. The purpose can be teacher- or text-driven or

certain activities in my classroom to help my students become critical readers and thinkers. These are very interactive and engaging teaching activities that sustain a student's engagement with the text. All of them can be adapted to different grades and subjects depending on the type of text chosen for reading. I have successfully used them in teacher training sessions and in primary and secondary classes. And I have seen, when students execute these activities box, they realize that meaning-making requires self-monitoring comprehension and cognitive engagement.

Some of these are:

Interactive noting system for effective reading and thinking (INSERT): INSERT is an interactive activity in which students actively monitor their own comprehension as they read. In this activity students bring to every

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it can be self-directed. Available research on reading shows that self-directed purposes are more powerful than those imposed or suggested by external sources. Self-directed purposes increase motivation and the capacity for comprehension. Students who do this get a greater sense of fulfillment from the reading process. And they intentionally select from a variety of strategies those that are most helpful to them, depending on the challenges presented by the text.

To become critical readers, what is most important for students is to recognize where they are in their own thinking and what strategies they can use for comprehending a text. Expert readers probably select from a variety of strategies nearly automatically; less expert readers need to be aware of what strategies they can use and use them deliberately. When students are aware of their own strategies and alternative strategies, they are able to monitor and manage their thinking and reading processes. Such self-monitoring can often lead to greater comprehension.

Since strategic behaviour can be taught and learned I have carried out

act of reading all the knowledge and prior information they have had with the topic and they connect it to the new information they are getting from the text. Thus, through sustained active engagement with the text they construct meaning for themselves.

Here are the steps to follow in conducting INSERT:

1. Assign a chapter to students to read and tell them that while reading they should make some marks in the margin of the chapter.

2. Tell them that they will make a check mark if they already knew it. A plus if it is a new information for them. A minus if something is confusing or not clear to them, and a question mark if they want to find out more about it.

3. Tell them that they will be placing these marks in the margin according to their own knowledge and understanding. It is not necessary to mark each line or each idea presented. They may end up with one or two markings per paragraph, sometimes more or less.

4. After students have read the text ask them to make an individual chart and put key words in it. The chart