



9-1993

Critical Thinking in the Early Years Connecting Language and Thought

Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thayer-Bacon, Barbara J. (1993) "Critical Thinking in the Early Years Connecting Language and Thought," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 4. Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol8/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

CRITICAL THINKING in the EARLY YEARS

Connecting Language and Thought

by

Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon

Introduction

Teachers currently are hearing a lot about critical thinking in the form of theory and advice on how to successfully teach it in the classroom. The discussion is geared toward older children and adults, but it is my position that the early years are when we have a tremendous opportunity to build critical thinking skills by assisting the development of children's language abilities. There are things we can do as parents and teachers to help promote critical thinking skills which involve only our understanding, support, and encouragement. There are things we can do that involve modeling good communication skills, and giving children the opportunity to practice these skills themselves. This article proposes to address the need to give young children in our homes, childcare facilities, and classrooms a chance to be heard. It presents the argument that by offering children the opportunity to speak up, we, as parents and educators, help build a vital foundation in open-mindedness that is essential for critical thinking in this multicultural world in which we live.

As a scholar in the field of critical thinking, a former elementary teacher and the parent of four children, my experience and knowledge leave no doubt—we have to start with the young child. If we want to teach children how to be critical thinkers, we have to begin by listening to what they have to say and encouraging them to talk. And we need to be very careful not to make our evaluation of them, or feelings toward them, contingent on their having specific beliefs. In particular, we must not insist that their beliefs be the same as ours. It is my plan to discuss positive things we can do as teachers to encourage the foundational development of critical thinking, along with pointing out the theory that supports these suggestions. Finally, I will look at obstacles that stand in our way and threaten to make us unsuccessful at our task.

Connecting Language and Thought

Critical thinking is a social event. It involves being able to look at a problem from more than one point of view, and to access the reasons that support these different points of view, in order to make a judgment about which is the best, the right solution to the problem. If a person has no realization that there is more than one point of view and what her point of view is, then she will not be aware that she can be wrong or that she can misunderstand a problem. We do not begin our practice and development of the ability to reason with an understanding about point of view, or what ours might be. We have to learn this, and the way we learn it is through interaction with others. This lack of knowledge about points of view is what Piaget labeled "egocentrism" (*Judgment and Reasoning in the Child*, 1928). All of us are forced to view the world through our own eyes, hear the world through our own ears, and gather the knowledge we do through our own senses, too. In this sense, we are all egocentric. But a young child is unique in her egocentricity for she hasn't learned yet that she is doing this. She hasn't learned that how she experiences the world is unique to her, and that others don't experience it necessarily the same way.

Being able to think critically requires being able to reflect on the results of one's own thinking process, and be aware of other points of view. What moves a child out of her "egocentric" thought

onto another level of reasoning is interrelating with other people. As Piaget says, “We become conscious of ourselves to the extent that we are adapted to other people” (1966, p. 210). This is one of the reasons why I said earlier that critical thinking is a social event.

Another reason critical thinking is social is the strong connection that exists between language and thought. Language is also social; we learn it through interaction with others. Indeed, thinking has been defined by Plato as inner-speech, the talking (conversing, debating) one does with oneself, within one’s own mind (*The Dialogues of Plato*, 1937). We learn introspection when we are socially pressured by argument and opposition, or misunderstanding and miscommunication, to justify ourselves in the eyes of others. This is how children begin to acquire the habit of watching their thinking or of attending to the assessment of outcomes of their thinking. From a critical thinking viewpoint, this idea of acquiring introspection is important. As language skills and thinking skills such as introspection are acquired through interaction with others, it makes sense to recommend children have the opportunity to interact with each other.

Recommendations for Educators

Children need to practice and improve upon their language skills. It will improve their ability to communicate as well as their thinking abilities. They need a chance to be heard. It sounds so simple, and what’s great about it is we can do it for free; well, almost for free. It does cost us a lot of time.

Parents and teachers live in a world that is very hectic and busy. Along with the complicated life many of us now seem to be living has come a loss of time to just relax and talk to each other. Giving children time to be heard is not as easy as it sounds. We need to listen to what they have to say, but when do we squeeze it in? Young children, just learning how to talk, don’t speak very quickly or clearly, so not only do we need to listen, but we need to be willing to listen patiently and to be able to offer guidance.

I remember when my first child, Alex, was born, it was easy for her to get my attention; I listened to her a lot. She was very verbal and spoke quite clearly. When my first son came along, he had to compete with his older sister for listening time, and the fact that she could do everything better and faster than him. He would start to talk, slowly and garbled, and she would finish his sentences for him. We, the parents, worked a lot on teaching Alex not to speak for Thayer so that he learned to express his thoughts better himself. By the time Spencer came around, he figured the only way anyone was going to listen to what he had to say, with all the noise going on around our house, was if he shouted. He became a good screamer! Once we figured out why Spencer was being so loud and we started listening to him the first time he would try to say something, things quieted down a little. My fourth child has come along now that the other three are teenagers. Because he has five people who love to listen to him, counting his parents and his siblings, Sammy is very adept in his language development and his thought processes. The other day he grabbed my hand to get my attention and said, “Mom, I’m trying to have a conversation with you!”

My point behind these family stories is that it is so important to listen to your young child as she or he is starting, clumsily, to communicate with you. When or how you do this will be something that has to be worked out, but that it needs to be worked out I am sure of. Suggestions I can give are ones that apply for children of all ages, such as: Use the time you spend in the car with your child to talk to her, and listen to what she has to say; when your child wakes up in the morning, try to be there to greet him and start his day with a feeling that someone cares to listen

to what he has to say; also, at night, the age-old custom of tucking a child in bed is a wonderful time to sit quietly and talk about the day or worries and problems a child may have. If you are a parent who has to travel or be away from home for extended periods of time, as I have had to, make liberal use of the telephone. We have scheduled times when I call and talk to everyone, and mostly listen to what they have to say.

It is important that a child have a chance to communicate with the family jointly, as well as with the parent alone, in order to develop one's language ability and thinking ability. Time to talk socially to a group of people is when young children begin to be confronted with the notion that people don't all think alike and that there is more than one perspective. This is when they also can learn how to think more critically, and learn what are sound reasons to support a position expressed. How? I am a big fan of the dinner-hour-for-family-conversation custom, and I have tried to hang on to this time for talking. As my children get older and more involved in activities such as soccer, baseball, jobs, etc., it is more difficult to coordinate the dinner hour, which was originally around 6 p.m. Sometimes we eat at 5 p.m., sometimes at 7 or 8 p.m., but we still eat together. The dinner hour is the perfect time to share how everyone's day has been. Even very young children will learn from your example that this is a time when we all can talk to each other, and share our different experiences and points of view.

Aside from settings at home such as the dinner table or while riding in the car, school is another excellent place to help children learn skills such as how to socialize and argue a point or discuss an issue. As teachers, we have a wonderful opportunity to help children develop their language and thinking abilities, and we can help them develop both simultaneously through conversation and dialogue. Remember, if thinking is the mind talking to itself and answering its own questions, then dialoguing is just the externalization of this same process. Just as at home children need the opportunity to practice talking and listening to others talk, this need doesn't go away when they walk into the classroom. How better to realize this opportunity than through open classroom discussions and small discussion groups? Yet, my experience is that children have little or no opportunity to discuss issues in class, especially young children. Why? The number one reason would probably be the same one that parents are struggling with: lack of time.

Teaching children how to have a large or small group discussion takes time. And then getting a discussion going in one's class and giving it the opportunity to develop and be completed takes time. We cannot have the kind of discussion that encourages children to wonder and question and develop critical thinking skills without making changes in our curriculum and allotting enough time for dialoguing and discussion. We are trying to teach children to be reflective thinkers, and to take their own thoughts seriously. Allowing time for this will mean something else may have to go. Paraphrasing the words of a great thinker, Sir Whitehead ("The Aims of Education," 1929), we should teach a few things well, and make the time to go into depth on core subjects, instead of doing all subjects at a superficial level. By teaching at a superficial level, we are teaching children to think at a superficial level. Encouraging children to ask questions should help them learn to take their own thoughts seriously, and help them learn how to refine and develop their thinking, sometimes even rejecting thoughts they may have.

In my Montessori elementary classroom I organized my curriculum in terms of weeks and months, rather than days. I thought in terms of large blocks of time, and set up my schedule so there were no interruptions in the mornings, when children usually do their best work and are the least tired. I also tried to build my afternoons so that if there was going to be one with interruptions I had all the activities I could on those afternoons. Or I would try to schedule subjects like art and

music for right after lunch, or at the very end of the day, to still hang on to as much open time as I could. I found I actually had time to cover subjects in depth, and we had time to really talk about them, by setting up my schedule this way.

Getting a class going on discussion is very simple once you have established basic ground rules, such as: that the children will wait their turns to speak and not interrupt each other, that everyone will have an opportunity to speak if they desire, and that all ideas will be appreciated, no one is allowed to make fun of what anyone else has to say, etc. At first you will want to be very supportive of children having the courage to speak out and offer their ideas. Later they will need to learn to offer reasons to support their ideas. Over time you may find you have to put a time limit on how much they can say, as they won't want to stop talking!

This leads me to the final point I want to make. One obstacle that can hinder a child's ability to think critically arises when adults make their love for a child contingent on what the child believes. This obstacle most often develops at home with the child's parents. When a child is beginning to learn she is a separate person with her own point of view, she feels vulnerable and unsure of herself and insecure about her parents' love for her. She needs to learn her parents love her, unconditionally, no matter what she believes. If parents give their child love and encouragement only when she sees things their way, she may learn to accept her parents' beliefs unquestioningly. Surely the need for love is, psychologically speaking, much greater than the need to think critically. As the child grows older, she will continue to assume her parents' point of view, often without even realizing it. If she attempts to question their beliefs (her beliefs) and search for the reasons supporting them, she will meet great resistance and resentment. This is a serious barrier to critical thinking (Paul, 1990).

Just as parents need to be cautious not to make their love for their children contingent on their beliefs, so teachers need to be aware of this same obstacle, in the same form that it arises in the classroom. We, as teachers, are often guilty of encouraging children to think that there is one answer, the one we favor. Though we may not be aware of it, we have a tremendous influence on the thinking of our students, and on their adoption of belief systems we hold. We are very good/bad at insinuating what we believe, and then, unwittingly, giving praise even in the form of higher grades, to those students who give us the answer we agree with.

The result of this kind of approach is the discouragement of critical thinking. We want to create an environment in our classroom where children feel so safe and secure that they can express their thoughts and ideas without personal risk. Does this mean we, as teachers, shouldn't express our beliefs? No more or less than a child's parent, or any other adult for that matter, should. It is impossible not to express beliefs one has. What is important, though, is that we need to be very clear with our students about what our beliefs are, and try to point out beliefs that are different from ours, other points of view, if appropriate. This means that if we are going to avoid the obstacle of making how a child succeeds in our class contingent on her sharing our belief system, we need to search ourselves and try to understand and reflect on what it is *we* believe.

Summary

I began this research by looking at how a child reasons, and then looked at how a child's language development can enhance her thinking ability. I then moved to looking at these issues as they affect parents and educators. Next, I examined the importance of letting children talk at home and in the classroom, and suggested reasons why this isn't happening, currently, at home or in our schools. I suggested how we can make time for classroom discussions. I urged that children

have the opportunity to be heard, at home and in school. Finally, I explored this topic from an educator's point of view by looking at the same obstacle to the child's development of critical thinking skills that parents need to be concerned about. That is the possibility of making a child's success in the classroom contingent on whether or not she agrees with our (adults) beliefs.

The intent of this article was to give the reader pause to think, ideas to mull over, and issues to discuss. It is my hope that the perspective presented has encouraged the reader to consider that, by offering children a chance to speak up, we, as parents and teachers, help build a vital foundation of open-mindedness that is essential for critical thinking in the diverse, difficult, wonder-filled world in which we live.

References

- Jowett, B. (1937). *The dialogues of Plato*. New York: Random House.
- Paul, R. W. (1990). *Critical thinking: What every person needs to survive in a rapidly changing world*. Rohnert Park, CA: Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique, Sonoma State University.
- Piaget, J. (1966). *Judgment and reasoning in the child*. Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, & Co.
- Whitehead, S. (1970). The aims of education. (Original publisher, MacMillan Company, 1929). Taken from Steven Cahn's *The philosophical foundation of education* (pp. 265-274). New York: Harper & Row.