Exploring the General Capabilities of Critical and Creative Thinking through Literature
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What is critical and creative thinking?

- “Critical thinking is at the core of most intellectual activity that involves students in learning to recognise or develop an argument, use evidence in support of that argument, draw reasoned conclusions, and use information to solve problems.” (Australian Curriculum)
- “Creative thinking involves students in learning to generate and apply new ideas in specific contexts, seeing existing situations in a new way, identifying alternative explanations, and seeing or making new links that generate a positive outcome.” (Australian Curriculum)
- “Critical literacy involves an understanding of the way ideology and textual practices shape the representation of reality in texts.” (Cervetti et al., 2001)

The process of critical thinking through literature

If the goal of critical thinking is be able to form some well-thought philosophy in the real world with real agency, then thinking must be activated and driven through objectives. This model is one way of developing the critical literacies needed from a picture book.

Visual Literacy

“The world narrated is a different world to ‘the world depicted and displayed.” (Kress, 2003)

Picture books are multimodal. Reading illustrations as well as words develops children’s semiotic understanding of the world. Teach students to examine the semiotic relationship between modes. When one mode extends the other, are images and text augmented, distributed or divergent? See Wu (2014, p. 1417) for elaboration.

- Look at this image closely.
- What do you see?
- What do you think is going on?
- What do you see that makes you think that?

Writing opportunity

Find writing opportunities where possible. “Writing is a form of problem solving,” (Dunn, 2009). It allows students to develop ideas, extend thinking and communicate accurately. Students write their thinking in their reading journals. Provide support structures where necessary; such as sentence starters:

I think….. because…..
Reader stances

Aesthetic  ↔  Efferent  (Rosenblatt, 1978)

Text Spectator  ↔  Text Participant  (Britton, 1970)

Encouraging Aesthetic Responses

Allow students time to respond to the text emotionally as a text spectator and then work backwards to indicate which written or illustrated elements were used in order to elicit such a response and consequently becoming a text participant.

Using a printout of pages and a large sheet of paper, students can work in groups to respond to various elements on the page by using sentence starters such as: I feel… because…; I think this means…; I wonder…

Encouraging Critical Questions

Students place post-it notes throughout the book in places where they want to ask questions in the form of “I wonder why….” Students can ask questions about the illustrations, language used, or the page structure. This can be done digitally if students have access to a copy of the book on laptops or iPads.

Writing opportunity

Using selected questions from post-it notes throughout the book, students work in groups to attempt to answer them either personally or from the perspective of the author/illustrator. Results from discussions can be turned into a written response.

Extending Text Participation (Efferent Responses)

“Activities that foster critical and creative thinking should include both independent and collaborative tasks, and entail some sort of transition or tension between ways of thinking.” (Australian Curriculum)

Allow students time, where appropriate, to begin forming responses to I wonder statements in group or individual situations. Varying levels of modelling may be required.

Exploring Themes – Critical Consciousness

Identifying and discussing themes in a picture book as they relate to the real world and then forming one’s own philosophy on the matter, is known as attaining critical consciousness.

- “… the person learning words [should] be concomitantly engaged in a critical analysis of the social framework in which men exist.” (Freire, 1985)
- “In critical consciousness, students read texts (and the world) critically, and they move beyond critical readings of texts to become actors against oppressive situations.” (Cervetti et al., 2001)

In these earlier stages of approaching picture books critically, themes will need to be revealed as many students might be unaware that picture books contain subtext. Discuss the following in isolation of the text:
• Fear
• Belonging
• Life-altering change
• Peer pressure

Take this opportunity to allow students to have small group discussions on where in book these themes are featured. Can they select individual words, sentences or images that justify this?

**Thinking Skills Activities**

In order to target the general capabilities of critical and creative thinking and ethical decision making explicitly, design tasks that connect to the book. Each task will involve elements of both critical and creative thinking, but are likely to centre strongly one in particular. Tony Ryan’s Thinkers Keys is a good place to start. Ron Ritchhart’s Making Thinking Visible routines are also incredibly useful. Later, students can begin designing their own critical or creative thinking activities, to examine picture books closely.

**Critical Thinking Activities**

**Perspectives**
Spike shouldn’t have left Bubba alone. List the arguments for both sides of this dilemma and debate them.

**3 Whys**
Like Spike, some people are too confident.
Why is that?
Why is that?
Why is that?

**Consequences**
Think of a situation where peer-pressure might get the better of you. What consequences might there be?

**Reflection**
Reflect on your reading of The Watertower and Beneath the Surface. What have you learned? How will you approach the next Gary Crew book you find?

**Creative Thinking Activities**

**Predictions**
Predict what might happen if a government takes over the world.

**In Common**
What do Spike and they have in common?

**Inventions**
Invent a device that can be used to control the world. What components will it have? What are your plans to implement it?

**Brick Wall**
How can we break down peer-pressure and become more individual?

**Thinking Sequence for Inquiry**

Develop a key question inspired by the book. Design (or have students design) a sequence of thinking activities in order to find a deeper understanding.

**Question:** What causes us to conform to group expectations?
Guided Reading and Assessment

In small groups, students examine one page from the book with the teacher. With selected textual questions listed, ask students to give their best answers verbally to these questions. Questions should be selected based on which areas of the Australian Curriculum you are targeting. Record responses. Ask “what else do you notice about this page?” at the end. Simultaneously, the rest of the class works on independent textual responses in the form of a Word Detective and Double-Entry Diary. It is also a good chance to find out what students understand in terms of the philosophical nature of the book by having them write personal responses to the previously mentioned themes.

Guided Reading Groups

1. How is the Watertower described? What adjectives are used?
2. Identify the repetition used. What effect does it have?
3. Why is it written in italics?
4. What is the purpose of this first page?
5. What else do you notice about this page?

Link your assessment to the Australian Curriculum Literacy outcomes of interpreting, analysing and evaluating:

- Analyse how text structures and language features work together to meet the purpose of a text
- Use comprehension strategies to interpret and analyse information and ideas
- Analyse strategies authors use to influence readers

Double Entry Diary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>My thoughts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bubba puffed on behind. His mother couldn’t have cared less where he went.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last summer, a security fence had kept trespassers out, but now the metal posts were twisted and flattened and barbed wire lay coiled on the ground.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Except for the ghostly wailing he kept up for the fun of hearing the echo, he might not have been there at all.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And from time to time he glanced up at the shaft of sunlight angling in from the open hatch, imagining.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His last words were lost in the wind.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All about him the tower creaked and groaned. That’s the tread, he mused. The heat expanding the metal. There was a smell. That’s the sign. All rotten and fettering. The water eddied and swirled. That’s the wind shuffling the tower. It’s old and rotten.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sun found him wherever he went, starting blisters on his skin.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep in the tank, the water eddied and swirled.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Word Detective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Warped</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulled on behind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swirling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climbered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edded and swirled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splintered</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Creative Writing

A picture book like The Watertower and Beneath the Surface and many others use artistic license to leave enough gaps for the reader to fill using their imagination and, of course, their critical and creative thinking skills. This may, at first, leave children confused. Re-reading is therefore important.

Discuss with the class what gaps they think exist in the story. Keep a pictorial record throughout the discussion.

- Students select which gap they most want filled
- Imagine what might have happened in this gap
- Select words and phrases from the books that are most appealing (list these on board)

Create literary texts that adapt or combine aspects of texts students have experienced in innovative ways – Australian Curriculum

In this way, students begin identifying quality literature

- Using inspiration from Gary Crew and the illustration & page structure of Steven Woolman, students create their own page in order to fill in the gaps.

Students participate in authorial reading of their work as though they themselves were the writer or illustrator of the book.

Classroom Environment

Create a classroom environment that sparks critical and creative thinking. If you have an online classroom space, make a character – like Bubba for example – come alive, haunting the students and interacting with them. Make the “Watertower Symbol” appear, unnoticed at first, around the classroom, on the water fountain or on students’ drink bottles. Leave messages written by the Evil Corporation accidently “leaked” for students to find and respond to. Create displays that demonstrate quality thinking – a creative wall and a critical wall; yes, it will be messy but that’s thinking for you. Have one day or one lesson where everybody in the class has taken a sip of water from the water tower. How will they respond? The important thing is that these opportunities are capitalised on and not just left as gimmicks. Writing comes to mind. Explore different writing genres that extend the experience created by book.

Other Picture Books to Extend Thinking Skills across the Curriculum

- The Lost Thing – Shaun Tan (dystopian concepts; the immigrant experience)
- Tales from Outer Suburbia – Shaun Tan (a range of themes relating to society)
- The Rabbits – John Marsden and Shaun Tan (white settlement of Australia)
- The Arrival – Shaun Tan (the immigrant experience; accepting differences)
- Fox – Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks (moral dilemma)
- Treasure Box – Margaret Wild and Freya Blackwood (appreciating what is important; historical links)
- The Stone Lion – Margaret Wild and Ritva Voutila (compassion)
- The Giving Tree – Shel Silverstein (gratitude; life and change)
- The Viewer – Gary Crew and Shaun Tan (historical perspectives of the world)
- The Serpent’s Tale – Gary Crew and Matt Ottley (historical perspectives of the world)
I would like to hear about the unique activities you design that promote critical and creative thinking through picture books. Please share them with me via email:

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References


