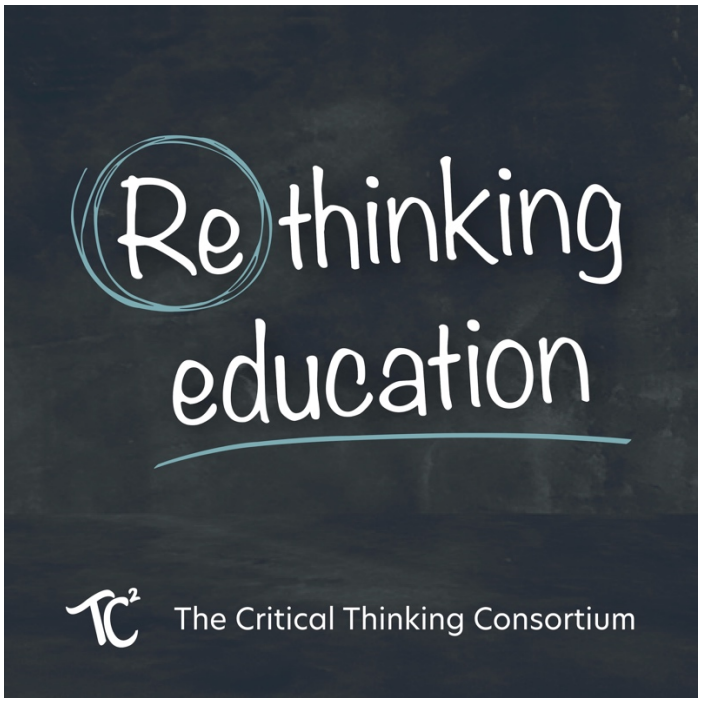

Transcript

Welcome Back to School Message 2026 from Usha James

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Usha James, Executive Director of The Critical Thinking Consortium

September 2026. Here we are at the start of a brand new school year again. Fresh and open to all possibilities, like a blank piece of paper or a clean slate. But not really. None of us arrives at the beginning of a new year or a new term or a new course as a blank slate. Not students, not educators, not leaders. We bring so much into our learning environments - our lived experiences, our hopes and our fears, the growth and learning from the previous school year, all the learning we've done outside of school from our families, our communities, the land, our friends and colleagues, and simply from our interactions in the world. And we bring everything else that's going on in our lives too - the pressures, the joys, the worries. We need to be able to bring our whole selves into teaching and into learning, and sometimes that takes courage.

So, as we open this school year, I thought I might talk a little bit about something we've been working on at TC²: courageous inquiry.

We're about to release a new book called *Courageous Inquiry: Educator Stories of Unlearning, Relearning, and Reconciliation*. It was a collaborative effort across the TC² team. It's authored by Maria Vamvalis with guiding wisdom and significant contributions from Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Baptiste. But what do we mean by courageous inquiry? I've been thinking about that question more broadly as we begin this school year. How might we approach the year with courage? How might we engage with an inquiry stance? And why does that take courage?

Because teaching and learning are challenging. They're joyful. They can be wonderful and exciting and engaging. And they can also be hard. It can be hard when we as educators learn something that shakes up what we thought was true, and that's hard for students as well. When someone tells us that what we're doing isn't helpful for them, as educators that can be so hard to hear. When we become aware that something we've done for a long time may not actually be supportive for some groups of students, looking in that mirror takes courage. It takes courage for us to commit to the inner work that's required for us to really take steps forward towards truth and reconciliation as individuals, as communities, and as a nation.

It takes courage to see the students in our classrooms who may be struggling with mental health, with circumstances beyond their control, as whole human beings who are capable of learning given the right conditions. It takes courage to see ourselves as part of an ecosystem and to recognize that we contribute to the health of that ecosystem, to whether it's thriving or not. And it takes courage to invite students to inquire into something complex that we may not have the answer to, and then to be with them in that journey.

I think anyone who chooses to be an educator already has courage. Every year, you step in front of a brand new group of students. You put your best self forward and you hope to have a positive influence on their learning. Entering this profession takes courage, so we know you have it. The question for this year might be, “How do we bring that courage to the surface in challenging moments?”

The courage to inquire, to listen, to examine our own practices, to meaningfully surface student voice and actually give students agency. Because that can mean decentering ourselves, it can mean being willing to hand over some control to students. And what's exciting is that we are hearing stories from educators who are doing just that. There are missteps. Sometimes it's difficult. Sometimes there's really anxiety about letting go of the reins, but we are also hearing about what happens when they do - students blossoming and flourishing and thriving. That can happen when educators have the courage to engage with their own professional practice as critical inquiry and to engage students in meaningful critical inquiry.

I have so much admiration for every educator who walks into a new learning context this year with hope and aspiration. And with the courage to try something new, to take a risk, to listen to guidance with humility, to seek out alternate perspectives. It takes courage to ask students what works for them in their learning and what doesn't, and then to be willing to take what they tell us seriously when we plan teaching and learning experiences.

These are complex times. How might we all flourish individually and collectively in these times? It's going to take courageous inquiry on the part of each of us - educators, students and leaders - to find ways forward. To teach and learn in a good way, to lead in a good way, and ultimately to live a good life.

At TC², we want to walk with you as you take bold steps and uncover new things about your students and about yourselves. We want to support you as you engage in critical inquiry and as you engage students in questions that really matter. We can't wait to hear from you. Have a wonderful start to the year and please stay in touch.