



# Stories from the Classroom

## A school of critical thinkers

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**M**y personal journey with critical thinking started approximately four years ago when I had the opportunity to hear Garfield Gini-Newman speak on assessment and evaluation. I was intrigued by his message and wondered how I could incorporate my new knowledge in the classroom. Fast forward four years and I have now have had the pleasure of participating in four more sessions with Garfield. As each session passed, I was further intrigued and began questioning how I could bring critical thinking to my staff as a whole.

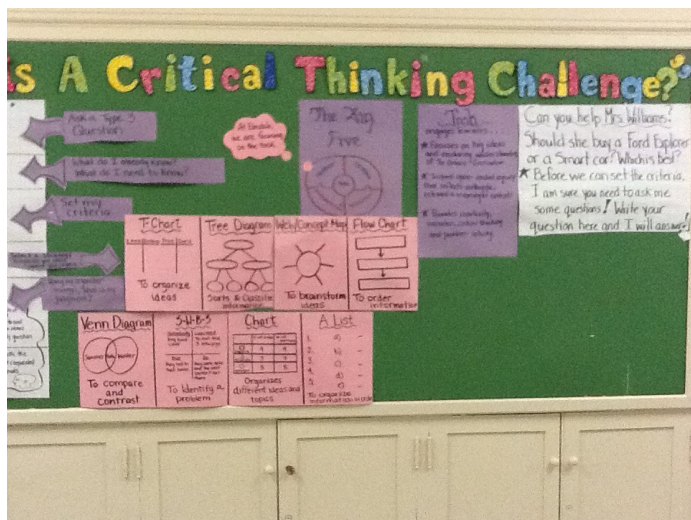
At the beginning of each school year, as a staff, we examine our provincial test scores alongside other data to pinpoint a focus for our school improvement planning. The staff has worked extremely hard at de-privatizing teaching, opening our doors, sharing our ideas and creating a common language. One of the results is that our test scores have continually improved over time. This promotes a great sense of accomplishment. The danger, of course, is that we become complacent after reaching a certain level of achievement. Our school is in a 'good to great' scenario in which we recognize that we must continue to raise the bar. Using Garfield's work and the TC<sup>2</sup> approach was definitely what we needed in order to see sustained growth, not only in our students, but also in our teaching practices.

The big question remained – where to begin? As a staff, we started very small by using staff meetings to look at different types of challenges. We began slowly by building our understanding of what critical thinking is and what it is not, using staff meetings and PD days to bring critical thinking to all staff. We looked at the different types of questions and reflected on our questioning techniques, formulating and/or tweaking questions to be used in the classroom. Once we were more comfortable with designing critically challenging questions, we began to look at the different types of challenges. We had now built a solid foundation of our understanding of critical questions and hence, we were able to incorporate critical thinking as the central focus of our school improvement plan.

Our first phase of our planning this year left the decision to the staff as to what type of challenges they would incorporate. Teams worked to select pre and post assessment tasks which were assessed using the rubric that was designed by the school improvement planning team. Collaboration throughout the first phase was essential to our success as we learned from one another. Our results showed significant gains in students' ability to work through challenges using a planning template that we had designed. However, and perhaps more importantly, staff saw the value added to having students make decisions in light of criteria. With this in place, we were able to springboard into our second phase of improvement planning in which we revamped the planning template, incorporating what we had learned and refining the rubric. We felt it would be beneficial to select one type of challenge to assess this time around.

We selected "judge the better or best" as our focus challenge type as it is fairly simple to implement and those staff who were less comfortable in designing challenges could easily integrate this into their planning. We went a step further and created critical thinking anchor charts which are laminated and used across the grades for each challenge that the students

undertake. One of the things that we had learned from our first phase was that we needed to explicitly teach students how to organize their thinking. To address this, we designed strategy boards (e.g., Venn diagram, T-charts, tables, spider webs) and used them in all classes for students to consult and select the best strategy for any given challenge. We noted that students were able to create many of their own strategies such as point systems when working through a “judge the better or best” challenge. We also posted “in progress” critical challenges inside or outside all of our classrooms and displayed a school-wide challenge for students, parents and community members outside the main office. As well, we conducted traveling staff meetings where staff members showcased the challenges their students had been working on. Throughout this time, we were building our knowledge of teaching critical thinking and our comfort with tweaking our own activities.



A school-wide challenge at Elmdale Public School

I think we have had a tremendous journey thus far and we are forging ahead looking into next year. Our plans include creating overarching critical questions to frame units of study and to assess the evolution of students’ thinking from the beginning to the end as they gain knowledge and receive timely and effective feedback on their work. For example, Garfield talks about giving students a task at the outset (e.g., design your dream home) and then having them go back and modify their work based on what they are learning after each lesson (e.g., perhaps they have to make their house eco friendly). The more they learn, the more they change their thinking and implement it

into the plan.

I was asked recently, “How did you get the whole team to buy in?” First and foremost, I am fortunate to work with an amazingly motivated staff that is open to new ideas. The other key was to demonstrate and come to the realization that this is not something new. It is not a fad, or a program – it is good teaching. While incorporating critical tasks, staff are not the imparters of all knowledge. With less transmissive teaching, there is much more accountable student talk. In our K – 6 classrooms, you will hear comments such as “I hear what you are saying but I will have to respectfully disagree because.....” Students are engaged in thoughtful discussions, co-constructing meaning while developing their “habits of mind.” Best teaching practices unveil themselves as we engage students in critical thinking tasks and our staff have noticed the change.

We must acknowledge that we can no longer teach the way we did many years ago. Today’s students are very different from their counterparts twenty years ago. They live in an information-rich world where answers are found with the click of a button. Thus, it is of utmost importance that our students learn how to question and assess the validity and credibility of information. This, I believe, is one of the biggest gifts we can give our students. It is imperative that we, as educators, prepare our students for their future, not our past. I firmly believe that infusing critical thinking across the curriculum is essential for preparing our students to face this brave new world.

