



# Stories from the Classroom

## The power of sustained professional learning

— Warren Woytuck

During the summer of 2007 members of The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC<sup>2</sup>) began work with a charter middle school in Calgary, Alberta. The entire school staff attended a day-long presentation that introduced critical thinking and launched a program of sustained professional learning. TC<sup>2</sup> staff met with key teachers to explore ways of infusing critical thinking into all subjects and grades. A wiki was established for teacher teams to hold ongoing discussions of critical thinking within their disciplines.

With periodic support from TC<sup>2</sup> facilitators, for six months the staff discussed, experimented and reflected on the role of critical thinking in their teaching. In February and March 2008, I returned to the school to see the results of their efforts.

I spent three days observing teachers in action (they were sufficiently kind and comfortable enough to invite me into their classrooms!), then explored with them ways to infuse critical thinking into their methodology. Some teachers taught lessons that focused on critical thinking, others taught using conventional approaches. One of the key challenges in inviting this school to embrace critical thinking was the school orientation towards direct instruction. Rich discussions ensued on the relationship between teaching and critical thinking. I saw and heard about numerous lessons that effectively incorporated critical thinking in various subject areas:

- Language arts: Designing a unit around heroes and villains. Students established criteria to determine which characters from various stories were the most villainous. The criteria for a villain were used effectively to learn parts of speech (for adverbs: “Can you use the criteria to find words that describe how a villain would act?”). Other teachers used critical thinking to explore short stories (“Which technique of introducing suspense was the most important in the story “The Sniper?”). These lessons were then extended to a movie-based assignment. Students went on a field trip to view a current fantasy movie and then used the criteria for villains and suspense to guide the creation of movie reviews.

- Social studies: Using the concept of leadership as a theme to frame a study of Louis Riel (“Which person demonstrated the most effective form of leadership?”). The plan was to connect these discussions to a poetry study and the school’s key virtues (integrity, discipline, benevolence, and leadership).

- Math and science: Teachers searched for small ways to infuse critical thinking into daily activities and structures. For example, teachers and students created the criteria for an effective math problem and then after practising basics, students created their own word problems for other students to solve.

- Life skills: Students developed a “Stress-o-meter” with the criteria for “very stressful” and “not stressful” events, then used the “Stress-o-meter” to rank order events from their lives according to stress levels. Students developed plans to address the events that caused the most stress. This activity created opportunity for dialogue around important life events and stress with students, including an opportunity for me to have a profound conversation with a grade 6 boy about the stress associated with parents fighting.

One of the “Ah-ha!” moments during this process occurred when teachers realized that critical thinking could be done every day without compromising the school’s focus or time available for ‘curriculum coverage.’ In addition, some teachers have extended the use of critical thinking beyond general instruction to classroom management. When instructed to select a partner, one grade 5 student asked “What are the criteria for choosing a partner?”

The efforts of these teachers illustrate how sustained professional learning can effect educational change. As a result of the face-to-face sessions, ongoing wiki discussions and shoulder-to-shoulder work, both teachers and students have experienced great successes.

