

Think Talk

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English teachers know the difficulties of teaching students who believe that three sentences are sufficient for most paragraphs and five of these paragraphs should constitute an essay. Thus, by the time students reach high school they find it difficult to exercise their ability to present their ideas in the interesting, well-organized and perceptive manner that will gain them an A on those all important Departmental exams. With a primary emphasis on "thought and detail," the written section of the exam requires "insightful," "perceptive" and "thoughtful" expression of ideas. In other words students must be able to stretch their minds and THINK. Since Government statistics indicate that there are often less than 20% of the thousands of students who write the exam in Alberta who attain 80%, where are we going wrong?

The responsibility rests on teachers to provide a rich environment where students can learn to think, where students can fill their own cup of knowledge rather than relying on someone else to fill their cup with correct answers. Since critical thinking does not appear to be a natural process in all students, students must learn to think critically and teachers must take the initiative in leading them in the right direction, emphasizing several methods of thinking rather than one cognitive skill.

Perhaps we, as teachers, have been guilty of encouraging students to vomit their ideas onto the page in order to obtain at least a modicum of quantity with the result that there is too little emphasis on thoughtful planning and insightful ideas. Perhaps we need to encourage the students to use the skills at the top of [Bloom's taxonomy](#) as soon as they begin to learn writing skills. The belief of some students that all this higher level of thinking is the result of one semester of grade twelve English is most assuredly a misconception, and teaching students to think must become a priority for teachers at every level from kindergarten through university. Teachers and administrators need to structure the school program for thinking ? valuing it, making time for it, emphasizing it, searching for materials to support it and planning methods to evaluate the growth in it. Teachers need to read [Bloom's taxonomy](#) periodically just to refresh their memory of the educational objectives classified as the cognitive domain. These objectives emphasize intellectual learning and problem-solving tasks. Then we could choose appropriate materials for teaching these skills and evaluate the levels of learning that we are using in the instruction of our students. It is entirely possible to become bogged down in one level, such as straight knowledge, the lowest level of learning, or the lowest comprehension where the individual knows what is being communicated and can make use of the material without necessarily relating it to other material or seeing its fullest implications.

Often the task of teaching students to think is a daunting prospect. However, we need to encourage students to have fluency, flexibility and originality as well as to have a clear idea of where they are headed before they commit pen to paper rather than to just write down the first idea that comes to mind. If they simply start writing and hope for the best, it is rather like ending up in Calgary when they intended to arrive in Edmonton. We must place more emphasis on teaching students methods of hypothesizing, analyzing, inferring and synthesizing, skills that are generally mastered with a significant amount of practice. Abstract thinking skills must be taught early in a child's education. For example, students can begin to interpret simple symbols, and analyse parallel situations between those symbols and some concrete incident within a short story even at the elementary level.

In an article called "Thinking Straight About Thinking Skills," Kenneth J. Martinelli uses a chart to prioritize the thinking skills that may be taught at four different grade levels. At the junior high level Martinelli suggests that students should learn reasoning by analogies, cause and effect, visualization and imagery, beginning synthesis, generating hypothesis, interpretation and exploring consequences, among other skills. Since these skills are essential to the language arts program, it is imperative that students begin to deal with more abstract ideas and concepts as early as grade seven. By the time students reach grade twelve they should be at a stage where they can use critical thinking and creative problem solving, where they can evaluate conclusions and assumptions. And it is up to their teachers to help them reach these levels of independent thinking. Awesome thought!

Since critical writing and creative writing are not mutually exclusive, in order to write well, students must be creative in expressing their evaluation of evidence. Teachers who grade government exams are constantly reading essays based on the same stories, thus students must be taught creative ways in which to present their information if they want to catch the attention of the reader. Students need to be taught to draw forth from memory and their own past experiences, to use these experiences and the experiences of others as a basis for understanding and relating to the world around them.

Teachers, especially those in elementary and junior high, should be made aware of the criteria used to grade the government exams so that they can begin teaching their students the necessary skills at the earliest possible level of education. Although some would say that this leads to teachers simply teaching to the test, those teachers who inspire their students to become familiar with the highest level of thinking as well as a logical, precise, concise method of expressing their ideas, would clearly be accomplishing an admirable feat. Their students could then reach the standard of excellence on not only their English exams but also other government exams as well since there is a very obvious carry over into other areas of study. Certainly, students will need to become astute thinkers as they finish their education and enter the job market of tomorrow.

At a recent Alberta Government Consortium, a number of junior and senior high school English teachers met to discuss the new Western Canada Protocol curriculum. It was an enlightening meeting for both groups as each group was made aware of the teaching expectations and problems in meeting those expectations of the other group. The opportunity to discuss methods of teaching a cohesive program beginning in grade seven and continuing into grade twelve wherein students are required to use several methods of thinking skills was invaluable. Perhaps teachers need to encourage the government to provide more of this type of interaction in order to provide a more cohesive program.

References:

- Martinelli Kenneth J. "How to Sequence Thinking Skills: Thinking Straight About Thinking" *THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR*, January 1987: 21 -23