

**Connecting Standards to Critical Thinking**

Kara J. Olivarria

Department of Education, University of Phoenix

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Teaching students how to develop and use critical thinking skills is an essential part of a student's academic success. "Some educators argue that standards and critical thinking instruction can't or don't coexist peacefully, and that content instruction doesn't have room for "more" (e.g., critical thinking strategies, quality questioning)" (Lange, 2022). However, there are countless ways to take state standards and shape them into curriculum that requires students to think at a level higher than they would if they were being instructed solely from a textbook. According to Ferlazzo (2021), "Critical thinking blasts through the surface level of a topic. It reaches beyond the who and the what and launches students on a learning journey that ultimately unlocks a deeper level of understanding." This deeper level of understanding that Ferlazzo is referring to has a profound impact on the development of critical thinking skills; this is a key constituent to students becoming well-rounded members of our global society.

CCSS: SL.6.1 is a state standard entailing that sixth graders can "engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). This standard's description opens a wide range of opportunities for students to use critical thinking skills, reflection, and metacognition. Since the standard necessitates that students can effectively participate in discussions, educators could choose topics that involve the content in textbooks but apply them to real-life situations and current events in order to build effective discussions. This state standard easily intertwines with students being able to use their critical thinking skills because engaging in discussions gives students more room to use higher levels of thinking while sharing ideas with each other. The teacher plays an important role in designing these discussions because they need to nurture each child as a whole and choose topics and create questions that will help each student uncover deeper thinking skills.

Discussion topics can be chosen based on the classroom's needs, while also taking each individual student into consideration. My classroom consists of seven students and is differentiated in many ways. I have students of different grades, learning abilities, ages, upbringings, and socioeconomic status. One of my sixth graders was adopted out of poverty in Uganda two years ago, and two of my younger students were raised and currently live in high-class neighborhoods. A recent global knowledge lesson regarding the world hunger issue included a discussion in which there were clearly very different levels of thinking happening during this discussion. Some of my students seemed as though their minds were blown when they learned about the crisis that some countries are going through in terms of access to food and clean water, while one of my students had experienced it first-hand. The diversity in my classroom contributed to this discussion and brought out an array of aspects on the issue. It is important, as the teacher of this classroom, to take my time before a discussion to think of questions for each student, based on their backgrounds and abilities.

As the facilitator of classroom discussions, I use prompt questions to make students aware of their thinking process. These prompt questions are based off my students' backgrounds, academic needs, and personalities. I have put a lot of time and effort into building relationships with my students and I feel confident that I have created a learning environment in which all my students feel comfortable sharing. They have time to reflect on the discussion session after it takes place and write down what they took away from the discussion. After they turn their reflection papers in, I summarize the discussion and address with the class points that students made in their papers. At the end of a discussion and reflection session that I developed, I generally feel confident that my students have used different levels of thinking skills, metacognition, and reflection. Ensuring that standards can be used to unlock students' higher-level thinking skills is undeniably a key constituent to academic success.

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