

Enhancing Critical Thinking Tip #1

Ranee Cervania, Ph.D.

Critical thinking is the ability to reflectively question, analyze and evaluate relevant information/situations, and efficiently make rational and well-supported judgment (Cervania, 2008). According to Clement and Lockhead (1980), teachers tend to focus more on the “what” (content) rather than the “how to” (thinking process). As educators, it is our responsibility to help students become critical thinkers. One simple way to do this is by challenging our students to explore the unknown and discover for themselves the information or knowledge they are seeking through **leading questions**.

Enhancing Critical Thinking Tip #1—

WHEN A STUDENT HAS A QUESTION, WHENEVER POSSIBLE, TURN THE QUESTION BACK TO THE STUDENT.

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| ▪ What do you think? | ▪ How would you....? |
| ▪ What ideas do you have about that? | ▪ Why is that? |
| ▪ What has been your experience? | ▪ What clues are available? |

(Adapted from Suzanne Forster's "How Tutors Can Help Tutees Improve Their Critical Thinking, 1996. Source: <http://www.communityeducation.org/victory/docs/training%20docs/Module%20Six--Critical%20Thinking.doc>)

LEARNING A NEW VOCABULARY WORD

Scenario #1: *A student comes up and asks what the meaning of “collaborate” is.*

S: What does “collaborate” mean?

T: **What do you think?**

S: I don't know; that's why I'm asking you. You're the teacher.

T: Let's look at the word together. Using your knowledge of word parts, **how would you divide this word?**

S: *Col-* is the prefix, *-ate* is the suffix. I guess *labor* is the root word.

T: Very good! **What do you think labor means?**

S: Hmm... I don't know.

T: **How about col?** It has the same meaning as *com-* or *con-*.

S: I know that. It means *together*.

T: That's right! Let's use it in a sentence—*When students collaborate on a project, they get the work done much more quickly.* **Why is that?**

S: Because they work together?

T: Exactly. **So what does collaborate mean?**

S: Work together?

T: Excellent! You did a great job! You applied your knowledge of word parts and context clues to help you find the meaning of a new word. It would have been much easier and less time consuming if I had just given you the meaning, but that wouldn't have helped you become an independent learner, which is one of my goals for you. Remember to use this technique next time you encounter a new vocabulary word.

This short dialog demonstrates how, through the teacher's effective questioning, students are challenged to think critically. Let's **collaborate** to enhance our students' critical thinking skills.

Scenario #2: Ann stops reading because she doesn't know what 'collateral' means and immediately seeks the teacher's help.

Reading Passage:

Almost all notes written by banks are secured by collateral. That is, the person borrowing the money must pledge assets such as cars, stocks, or real estate that are equal to or of greater value than the amount of the loan. In the event of nonpayment, the bank will take the collateral and sell or liquidate it. The bank then uses the proceeds to pay off the note. (Adapted from Salzman, Miller, and Clendenen, *Mathematics for Business*, 7th ed., Addison Wesley Longman, Inc. 2001, p. 422)

Ann: What does *collateral* mean?

T: **What do you think** it means?

Ann: I have no idea.

T: Read the next sentence. Do you notice the words, *that is*? **What do these words indicate?**

Ann: That an explanation follows?

T: That's right. So, **what do you think** *collateral* means?

Ann: The person borrowing money must pledge assets. What are *assets*?

T: First of all, *collateral* is not a person. *Collateral* is the *asset* that the borrower must pledge. But what is an *asset*? **Are there any clues** in the sentence that will give you an idea of what an *asset* is?

Ann: *Such as*?

T: That's right. And when you see these words, **what follows them?**

Ann: Examples?

T: Good. So **what are some examples of** *assets*?

Ann: Cars, stocks, real estate.

T: In other words, anything that you own that has value and can be sold or exchanged for money.

Ann: I still don't understand.

T: **Has anyone experienced** borrowing money from the bank to buy a car or a house?

Sam: I have! In fact, last month I bought a used 2005 Jetta for only \$10,000. It was a great deal!

T: **Would you like to share your bank experience** with the class?

Sam: Sure. I needed a car to go to and from work, school, and home. I had no cash to pay for the car, so I borrowed money from my bank. I filled out an application for a car loan, which was immediately approved because of my good credit.

T: **Did the bank give you the money directly so you can pay for your car?**

Sam: No. Actually, the car dealership contacted the bank for me and did all the paper work. All I did was sign the papers. Then I was given the car key, and I drove home in my Jetta.

Ann: Wow! It was that simple?

T: It appears so simple, doesn't it. Sam borrowed money from the bank through the help of the car dealer to pay for his Jetta. It seems the bank got nothing for its money. But we all know that's not true. No bank will lend anyone money for nothing. There's always a price.

What do you think the bank got in exchange for the money Sam borrowed?

Ken: The title of ownership?

T: That's right. Sam may have the use of the car, but he doesn't have ownership of it. The bank owns his car. **When do you think** the ownership will transfer to Sam?

Ken: When he pays his car loan in full.

T: And **what will the bank do with his car if he fails to pay his loan?**

Ken: The bank will take it and sell it to get their money back.

T: Exactly. In the world of banking, the bank requires *collateral* in exchange for a loan, and when the loan is not paid in full by the due date, the *collateral* is *liquidated*. So, class, we learned two new words today—*collateral* and *liquidate*. Now, write a short paragraph using these two new words to demonstrate your complete understanding of these words.

In this scenario, through leading questions and real life situations, the teacher helps students make connections and discover for themselves the information they are seeking.