



About this book

Do you want critical thinking to come alive in your classroom?

In this book, designed for year levels two onwards, you will find that critical thinking is not simply a question of children 'doing something harder', but a way of thinking that is distinct and discerning.

You will be able to use the suggested activities and tasks to teach children the essential skills of working in collaborative groups and asking questions that position them in relation to the information they receive and communicate. This stimulating environment sparks children's desire to share their ideas and to participate in all aspects of critical thinking programs.

You will explore three classroom scenarios with the development of critical thinking as the constant thread.

Investigation of children's fictional literature examines universal themes that are relevant to children's lives, such as human foibles, bullying, stereotyping. Combine a favourite story, pertinent questions and collaborative learning – and see critical thinking come alive!

Inquiry and research is implemented in the classroom with the emphasis on keeping inquiry simple. Take organisational approaches that enable students to become more independent researchers (essential questions and thinking features), implement learning strategies and study skills (annotating, note taking, conferencing) and see children's participation in critical thinking inquiry come alive!

Critical literacy book clubs provide a context where children feel comfortable and enthusiastic when talking about books or issues, and where teachers can facilitate manageable discussion groups in which the teachers' and students' roles are clearly defined. Book clubs bring thinkers, performers and critical literacy to life!

Thinkers and Performers details explicit teaching techniques for planning, implementing and assessing critical thinking. The key concepts of scaffolding and shifting responsibility to the children, the three Cs – comprehension, critical thinking and creative thinking, and the information process all lead to children eventually taking control of their own learning.

This book also offers instruction in conducting conferences, timely intervention, monitoring and evaluating programs, self assessment, inquiry journals, creative thinking (looking for alternative solutions) and study skills needed for research.

I remember having a set formula of questions to guide their thinking so that they would consciously assume the role of a critical thinker. For example, when examining Humpty Dumpty, the children were asked:

- What do you think the character is like?
- Have you experienced a time when you ...?
- How could the character have acted differently?
- Why do you think that?

Even the youngest school-age child, when a story was read aloud to them, was able to think of and express 'good points' and 'bad points'.

Children, all ages, can be encouraged to think critically.

What is critical literacy?

Critical literacy is the ability to analyse and make reflective judgements of literary works (see chapters 3, 8 and 9).

Language is pivotal to our society's structure, and literacy comprises the cultural, communicative activities that use language – reading, writing, speaking. If we understand the world we live in through literature then we begin to understand how we, as individuals, function within our society. Perhaps, for example, women's and men's roles in society have been constructed through our language practices – our story-telling. There do not seem to be many princes in fairytales who are ugly and stupid, nor princesses in fairytales who are resourceful and dominant, yet in contemporary stories this is not always so! In any case, literature reflects what is known about societies and their culture.

A critical literacy program emphasises that:

When students read and view imaginative texts, they infer meanings and messages developed through the storyline, and identify how construction of characters contributes to plot development. They draw conclusions about possible reasons for characters' behaviours and feelings, and consider ethical choices made by various characters...They compare information and ideas in different texts to identify the different emphases, and the influence of these on their own perceptions...They explore how their own membership of groups influences their interpretation of texts. (Curriculum Corporation, 2005, p. 11)

In chapter 3 children's fictional literature is used as the communicative process to develop children's personal perspectives about issues in our society, such as recognising stereotypical treatment of people, sexism and human foibles like jealousy and bullying.



The Three Billy Goats Gruff

Synopsis

Three billy goats want to cross a bridge to go to greener fields. A troll is underneath the bridge which, it seems, he sees as his territory. Two billy goats trick the troll into allowing them to cross. The third billy goat is rather violent to the troll. The ending is a happy one for the three goats, grazing on the other side of the bridge.

The aim is to look at the behaviour of the troll and, later, the stereotyping of trolls and giants in stories. The children forward their opinions and everyone is encouraged to respect those opinions.

Knowing the story – lead-in

It is important to establish that the children know the plot. Read aloud the story to the children but do not show them the pictures; then have them discuss in pairs and individually fill in the sheet 'Knowing the main parts of the story' (black line master 3 on page 67) to consolidate their grasp of the main points.

Name _____ BLM 3

Knowing the main points of the story map

Title
Characters
Setting
Events
Ending

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BLM 3

Name _____ BLM 4

Character analysis

This character is

My opinions are ...

Also I think ...

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BLM 4

Analysis

When it is established that the children know the story, read the story again – still not showing the picture of the troll. Ask the children to imagine and interpret the appearance of the troll from listening to the story, then tell them to 'draw only what you think the character looks like' (black line master 4, page 68).

When the children have completed their drawings, ask them another question – *Why did you draw the troll like you did?* and record the reasons on a large chart. Make the children aware that it is good to give reasons when forwarding an opinion. Some answers may show that it was the language



Form discussion groups and ask these questions:

- Did Sleeping Beauty have control over her life?*
- How could the princess control her life?*
- If Sleeping Beauty lived now would she have more control over her life?*

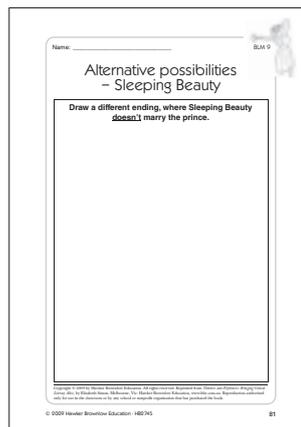
As a class activity ask,

*What do you **think** are the good and bad points of the story Sleeping Beauty?*

An answer might be 'The story is unreal and that made the story interesting'. The children work in groups of two, discussing and recording the good points and the bad points about the story *Sleeping Beauty*, their opinions and reasons for those opinions.

Alternative possibilities

Draw a different, humorous ending where *Sleeping Beauty* does not marry the prince (black line master 9, page 73).



BLM 9

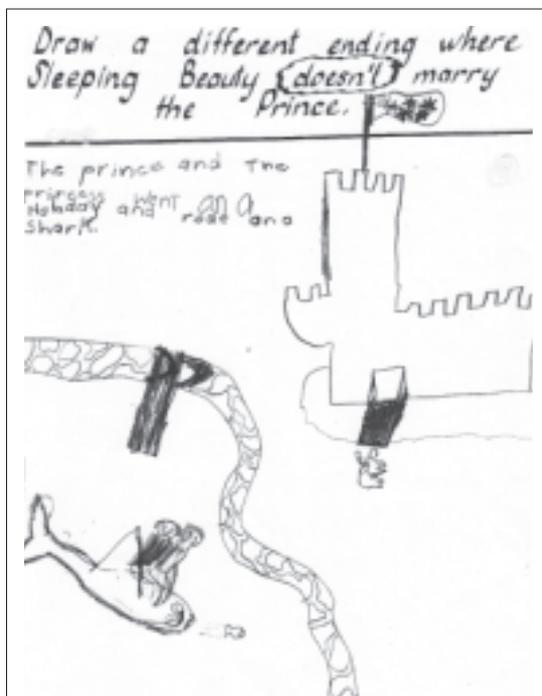


Figure 3.9: A child's potential alternative ending to *Sleeping Beauty*





Figure 9.2: Oral book review: A student shares her reading experience with the group

A critical literacy book club in action

The classroom teacher places six books and a recording sheet for each book on a table. Children peruse the books and include their names on the recording sheets headed 'I want to read this book and form a discussion group' (Black line master 27).

One group of six chooses Pam Rushby's *The King of Egypt*. This book is 'ripe' for discussion because of the theme and strong characterisation – and besides, the class is studying Ancient Egypt.

This group of children meets with the teacher for about ten minutes and he asks, *What do you think the book could be about?* He also names the characters and makes sure that children have no difficulties when they read the first few pages. He does not tell them about the theme, judging that they will discover it themselves.

The children are eager to begin reading. They move to a quiet area and begin to read, knowing that their first reading is for pleasure and becoming aware of the thinking features – qualities of storytelling that stand out in the book.

During the second reading they write on their sticky notes or in their reader's journal. The independent reading may take one or two days. As they read the second time, students record these and other questions and comments: