Educators and Students as Transformative Agents of Change

Recent studies and reports, such as UNESCO’s Position paper on education post-2015 and IIEP’s From schooling to learning report, continue to highlight the central role played by passionate, inspired and highly skilled educators in supporting student learning. Given this reality, we must continue to carefully consider the ways in which we engage with the ‘instructional core’ (Elmore, 2008) as educators – the relationship between teachers, students and the learning objectives. The key foundation to developing quality education lies in nurturing the learner’s capacity to engage in quality thinking through critical inquiry within the central teaching and learning dynamic.

As educators, how can we ensure that our approaches to teaching and learning adeptly foster the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to tackle complex global challenges, as well as cultivate conceptions of citizenship grounded in genuine commitments to sustainable development, equity and peacebuilding within diverse contexts? In order to develop the deep understandings, lifelong skills and ethical orientations that they will require to thrive in an increasingly multifaceted, pluralistic and interdependent world, students must be actively engaged in their learning.

Conceptualizations of learner engagement are most robust when, as Bruce Beairsto writes,

…they focus on the students’ perspective in terms of the nature and degree of commitment they feel.

Engagement is not something we can cause in others, but we can provide opportunities for students to be inspired, encouraged and supported in becoming personally committed to their own learning. Focusing on levels of engagement that promote mere compliance, entertainment or interest are not adequate for developing the deep understandings, skills and dispositions needed today; learners must be challenged and transformed through their educational encounters.
Conditions for intellectual engagement to flourish happen when learners are continuously faced with problematic situations through meaningful inquiries where they must make reasoned judgments that competently employ the intellectual tools necessary for quality thinking. This is the definition of critical thinking that has been developed over two decades by The Critical Thinking Consortium (or TC²), an educational not-for-profit founded and based in Canada.

The Consortium’s aim is to work in sound, sustained ways with educators and related organizations to inspire, support and advocate for the infusion of critical, creative and collaborative thinking as an educational goal and as a method of teaching and learning. Our goals are to foster in learners:

- enhanced abilities and inclinations to think effectively
- deeper understanding of the curriculum
- increased engagement in the world
- greater willingness to act in thoughtful, ethically responsible ways

TC², has developed a series of powerful frameworks for surfacing, nurturing and assessing quality thinking (thinking that is critical, creative and collaborative) through the development of a thinking classroom that has been highlighted in a recent publication, Creating Thinking Classrooms (Gini-Newman and Case, 2015). A thinking classroom is one where students think in order to learn, and learn how to think. As we often say at TC², whoever is doing the thinking, is the one who is doing the learning.

Within this framework and conceptualization, thinking becomes the methodology for learning, and simultaneously enhances the capacity to learn basic facts through a critical inquiry focus. The four key elements of creating a thinking classroom or context are: shaping the climate to support thinking, creating opportunities for thinking, building capacity for thinking, and providing guidance to inform thinking. All four elements are crucial but efforts in any of these areas can begin to enhance our approach to nurturing quality thinking.
Professional learning is, as highlighted in the *From schooling to learning* report something that is best done with teachers, not to them. Teacher engagement and student engagement are complementary. Providing teachers with meaningful opportunities for reflection, supporting them in refining their capacity to engage students in relevant and authentic learning opportunities, and developing tools for assessing their instructional choices are important dimensions of robust and meaningful professional learning.

The Critical Thinking Consortium’s approach to professional learning invites educators to both reimagine and reconnect with their role as profound transformative agents of change in students’ lives. Conceptualizing teaching and learning through a quality thinking framework inspires new possibilities within the classroom, and enhances teacher capacity to develop effective instructional strategies to support the development of quality thinking in all learners.

A measureable target and relevant indicator within broader educational goals would be tracking the extent to which teacher capacity to surface, nurture and assess quality thinking as a key educational outcome has been improved. In addition, this approach to both educator and student learning nurtures capacities and competencies that transcend the classroom, thereby becoming a powerful model for lifelong learning that has universal relevance across cultures and contexts.

TC²’s role in strengthening the capacity of the educational system to translate or transform resources and methods available to teachers to enhance learning is achieved through an approach that focuses on inspiring wonder, curiosity and citizenship by problematizing the curriculum and making it a problem to solve, rather than a series of facts to be memorized, learned and transmitted to students.
in unthinking ways. I recently had the opportunity to not only develop a comprehensive critical inquiry unit designed to inspire and nurture environmental citizenship in intermediate students, but to also teach through this unit in a grade 7 classroom. My experience and reflections with enhancing teaching and learning through a critical inquiry approach have been captured in a recent piece I wrote for UNESCO’s Blue Dot magazine, as well as a recent interview on how placing a thinking approach at the center of education transforms teaching and learning.

Quality education has been cited as the most influential force for alleviating poverty, improving health and livelihoods, increasing prosperity and shaping more inclusive, sustainable and peaceful societies. Put simply, quality education is among the most transformative avenues for creating a preferred global future. The stakes for improving teaching and learning have never been higher. Realizing the profound potential and power of education arises when educators and students take their place as transformative agents of change through meaningful engagements with curricular objectives. Thinking classrooms and contexts that create opportunities for critical, creative and collaborative thinking to flourish are integral in nurturing learners capable of responding to the complexities of the 21st century with insight, effectiveness and vision.

Works Cited

Beairsto, Bruce. “Engagement in learning: finding the depth beyond diligence”. Critical Discussions Series. The Critical Thinking Consortium (online piece, no date given)


