

An ASCD Study Guide for
Critical Thinking in the Elementary Classroom:
Engaging Young Minds with Meaningful Content

This ASCD Study Guide is designed to enhance your understanding and application of the ideas and strategies presented in *Critical Thinking in the Elementary Classroom: Engaging Young Minds with Meaningful Content*, an ASCD book by Erin Shadowens, published in October 2023.

You can use the study guide before or after you have read the book or as you finish each chapter. The study questions provided are not meant to cover all aspects of the book, but, rather, to address specific ideas that might warrant further reflection.

Most of the questions contained in this study guide are ones you can think about on your own, with a colleague, or in a study group with others who have read (or are reading) *Critical Thinking in the Elementary Classroom*.

Introduction

1. What is the purpose of school? Does your definition include critical thinking? Why or why not?
2. The introduction describes a set of questions from the international PISA exam about the effects of dairy. What are your reactions to these questions? How would students in your context perform on these types of questions?
3. The introduction challenges educators to “expand our definition of possible” for young students. What excites you about this idea? Does it make you nervous or uncomfortable? Why or why not?

Chapter 1. What Do We Mean by Critical Thinking?

1. Before reading Chapter 1, jot down your personal definition of critical thinking. As you read, consider the following:
 - a. How is your definition similar to or different from the definitions in Chapter 1?
 - b. Shadowens chooses the Oxford English Dictionary definition to guide her thinking in this chapter. How could you rewrite the definition in your own words? You may also want to use pencil and paper to create a visual representation of the definition.
2. The chapter describes two characters, Harry and Phoebe. Harry is a confident bread baker, and Phoebe is an amateur.
 - a. What similarities do you see between the highly ranked chess players in the Frey and Adesman study (1976) and Harry the bread baker? How do they use their expertise to approach tasks in their field?

- b. When have you felt like Phoebe? What were the implications—professionally, emotionally, mentally, physically—of lacking expertise?
 - c. In your context, who are your Harrys? Who are your Phoebes? Using examples and evidence from this chapter, reflect on their experiences. How can the classroom environment cultivate Harrys? And Phoebes?
3. Shadowens uses the word *spring* to illustrate the concept of schema. Choose another common word, like *bridge* or *relationship*. Set a timer for 2 minutes. In those 2 minutes, create a list or word tree of all the concepts and ideas contained in that one word.
4. Shadowens likens procedural and conceptual knowledge to a chemical reaction. Consider your context. Are both procedural and conceptual understanding given adequate attention in your curriculum? Are there times one of the elements is missing or underemphasized? What are the implications for students?

Chapter 2. Introduction to the Critical Thinking Framework

1. After reviewing the Critical Thinking Framework, reflect on the five components. What would it mean for students to consistently engage in all five components during their lessons? What would the impact be at the student, classroom, and school levels?
2. Reflect on the two critiques presented after the framework. Do you share any of the same concerns? Shadowens acknowledges the tension created by the “limiting realities” of our current schooling system. How do these limiting realities manifest in your context?
3. After reading the three case studies, consider the following questions:
 - a. How do each of the classrooms implement “look for structure”? How are the methods similar and different?
 - b. All the classrooms ask students to use evidence. How does the type of evidence vary based on the subject matter?
 - c. Reflect on comparable classes you either taught or supported. What would you do differently, based on the case studies?
4. Shadowens challenges the way the term “developmental appropriateness” is often used in elementary schools. Why is it important for educators to reconsider this term?
5. In the conclusion following the K–5 trajectory, Shadowens says, “It cannot be overstated that students need to learn sufficient content to analyze, evaluate, and judge.” What content is taught in your school or district? Where are there gaps and areas of need?

Chapter 3. Creating an Ambitious Vision for Student Outcomes

1. Shadowens describes a process for crafting an ambitious vision for student outcomes so that we can “expand our definition of possible.” Why is this work a prerequisite for learning environments that foster critical thinking?
2. Why is it important for teachers to conceive an ambitious vision for student outcomes *before* they plan for the differing needs of students? What are the pitfalls of not starting with an ambitious vision?

3. Is your context more similar to Mr. Matthews's or Ms. Pierre's? What can you take away from their experiences?
4. In addition to crafting an ambitious vision, the teachers in this chapter define the specific knowledge and skills students will learn and the potential errors students can make.
 - a. Does your context currently "unpack" student learning like Mr. Matthews and Ms. Pierre do? If so, what is similar and different about the process?
 - b. If your context lacks a preparation process like the one described in the chapter, what would be the impact of implementing one? What barriers currently exist to creating a preparation system? How could you remove or circumvent those barriers?

Chapter 4. Planning for Instruction with the Critical Thinking Framework

1. Have you ever been tasked with curriculum that contained erroneous information or troublesome cultural representations? How did you respond?
2. Shadowens describes three common reasons students do not remember what they are taught in class. Reflect on your context. Where do you see these pitfalls arise? What strategies can you take away from this chapter to address these pitfalls?
3. In the section "Meaning-Making Activities," Shadowens relates an experience with teaching a 2nd grade fractions unit. When have you, or teachers you support, focused more on an activity than on the outcome of teaching? How can activities either support or inhibit learning?
4. Shadowens re-imagines the 2nd grade fractions unit using the Critical Thinking Framework. What's a lesson or unit you would re-imagine? How could you use the framework and the instructional strategies described in the book to improve student understanding?

Chapter 5. Cycles of Assessment and Feedback

1. Shadowens writes, "Assessments help us check our individual biases by providing an impersonal representation of student ability." How can teacher bias influence student achievement? Why shouldn't teachers rely on their subjective assessments of students alone?
2. The chapter describes the phenomenon known as the "testing effect." How can tests also serve as tools for *learning*, not just assessment?
3. When is an assessment–feedback cycle virtuous? How can teachers use assessment–feedback cycles to foster deeper thinking?
4. In your experience, when have you executed or witnessed virtuous assessment–feedback cycles? What about vicious cycles? What are the common ingredients that lead to virtuous rather than vicious cycles?

5. After reading the chapter, reflect on the assessment and feedback systems within your own school or district. What is present or lacking in your systems? How can you enhance your systems to focus on the quality of student thinking?

Chapter 6. Feedback: A Thought Process

1. Shadowens describes two ways to capture notes on student performance in the moment. She also describes her own workaround for experienced teachers. How do you or teachers you support monitor student thinking? How does this type of monitoring support a virtuous cycle of assessment and feedback?
2. Shadowens walks the reader through several different scenarios for feedback—whole-group, small-group, and individual—and presents the types of instructional responses teachers can use to address learning gaps. Reflect on a time you needed to give feedback to a class, small group, or individual. Locate the section in the chapter that most closely matches this experience. Based on the suggestions, how would your approach stay the same? What would you adjust or change?
3. After reading Chapters 5 and 6, summarize the role assessment and feedback play in cultivating critical thinking in students. How could ineffective, vicious cycles of assessment and feedback undermine critical thinking?

Chapter 7. Fostering an Intellectual Community Throughout the Year

1. Why is a positive classroom community a fundamental prerequisite for students to engage in deep thinking?
2. Reflect on common phrases and word choices used in your context. What story are you telling your students about themselves? Is it the story you want to tell?
3. Connect the discussion of struggle to the virtuous cycle of assessment and feedback discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. How can classrooms incorporate celebration of struggle into the assessment and feedback cycle?
4. Throughout the chapter, teachers are repeatedly called on to act as role models for students. Consider the example of intellectual honesty. Why is it critical for teachers to model intellectual honesty for students? What other norms and behaviors should teachers model?
5. Shadowens describes multiple ways to create opportunities for relevant dialogue outside of academic contexts. How can dialogue nurture both community and critical thinking?

Conclusion

1. At the end of the book, Shadowens writes, “As teachers, we approach most classroom problems by thinking about how we can control what is happening within the classroom’s walls. But the truth is that we cannot control the minds of our children, and it would be quite sad if we tried to. What we can do is provide them with the environment, experiences, and instruction that do something more radical: trust them to learn a lot,

think, and then proceed to make their own judgments about the world.” How can you use the instructional tools from this book to empower the minds of students in your classroom, school, or district?

2. After reading the book, reflect on your journey:
 - a. The introduction called on us to “expand our definition of possible” for both elementary students and educators. How do you plan to expand your definition of possible moving forward?
 - b. What two to three key understandings are you walking away with?
 - c. What challenged your thinking the most?
 - d. Look back at your responses to the first question in the introduction and the first question in Chapter 1. If you were to answer those questions again, would your answers change? Why or why not?