In Pursuit of Meaning: Exploring the Language of Critical and Creative Thinking

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This short paper sets out to explore the nature of the discourse of critical and creative thinking. It reports on the initial stages of a PhD study in which children are studied engaging in critical and creative discussion as they interpret the meaning of texts (in the widest sense: written, visual, multi media). The research focuses on the language that children use to explore their thoughts and how they respond to each other's ideas. It is embedded in a social constructionist standpoint using Vygotsky's reflections on thought, language and the joint construction of knowledge. It is an ethnographic case study in which pairs of children from two different school grades/year groups (six year olds and ten year olds) were observed in discussions as they explored their ideas in response to a stimulus. They worked at first in a classroom context then later as smaller groups or pairs capturing their thoughts on video.

The work of Mercer (2000) and Wells (1981) are important to this study, considering the social aspects of language and thought through 'collaborative thinking' and the 'syntagmatic' and 'paradigmatic' aspects of discussion. Craft (2000), Ennis (1985) and Lipman (2003) provide useful definitions and models of critical and creative thinking upon which a framework for the analysis of children's talk is built. Whilst not offering pedagogical guidance, the research is an exploration of what happens when children talk together to interpret (make sense of) text.

John Dewey suggested in 1902 that a key purpose of education was to encourage children to enquire. This research stems from the viewpoint that children should be encouraged to embrace the purpose of inquiry – to find meaning and make sense of the world, and that this is very much part of being at school. It supports Lipman’s idea of the reflective educational paradigm which ‘assumes education to be inquiry' (2003:19) He also suggests, ‘the child is surrounded by a world that is problematic through and through, a world in which everything invites inquiry and reflective questioning, a world as provocative of thought as it is of wonder and action’.

Unpacking the experience of making meaning through listening to talk assumes that these processes are transparent. To listen to the voices of children as they talk about texts together assumes that their language is a reflection of their thinking, and that by talking together, their thinking is different than that of a lone meaning maker. In analysing case-study video vignettes of children making sense of text, the interplay between critical and creative thought becomes apparent.

Critical and Creative Thinking

Creative thinking can be seen as a divergent process, involving the expansion of ideas, and new possibilities, hence Craft’s term ‘possibility thinking’ (2000) as a definition of creative thinking. However, in the discussions that the children have it becomes clear that they use creative ideas to solve problems in meaning, to ‘fill in’ the gaps. In other words, processes that are more closely associated with critical thinking, ‘reasonable reflective thinking that is focussed on deciding what to believe or do’ (Ennis 1987: 10) are used in a creative way to generate possibility. In this way, the children appear to be thinking in a convergent and divergent way simultaneously - thinking creatively to solve the problem of making meaning. Moseley et al (2005: 119) suggest that ‘it makes little sense to separate critical thinking from creative thinking, since in many situations they overlap and are interdependent’. It is, however, interesting to look at these overlaps, particularly if creative thinking is seen as ‘divergent’ and critical thinking as ‘convergent’. Is it possible to think in both ways at once? Nickerson makes the suggestion that in fact
the two different dimensions of thinking can be thought of as 'two sides of the same coin' and that there is ‘...an ongoing dialogue between two agents, one of which puts forth ideas without restraint and the other of which evaluates those ideas.’ (1999:398)

The texts that were used were in the main visual (paintings, animated film, picture books). This was a deliberate attempt to make the situation a 'reading' one, but not allow the mechanics of decoding written text to limit the children’s interpretation. There was also an interest in the degree to which the children searched for meaning beyond the literal, the degree to which they made inferences or deduced meaning and how they supported each other in this. The transcripts show that the children moved naturally to interpret beyond the literal when they found the texts more elusive to interpret. Without the issue of decoding written text, their cognitive processes were concentrating on meaning rather than mechanics. They looked at surrealist painting and short animated film with a similar ‘eye’, seeking to create a plausible narrative to explain the events depicted. They collaborated with each other to take initial surface level inquiries to a deeper more inferential level, and it was at that point that their language reflected creative thinking.

In a close analysis of the dialogue in each vignette, there seem to be two main goals that are established. Firstly, there is the joint solving of the problem of making meaning and the shifts that occur as the children move to critically and creatively make sense of the texts. The frameworks developed by Anderson and colleagues (2001), as they examined children’s language of argument, have proved highly useful as a basis for my own development of a suitable framework. Similarly the work of Ennis (1987) on critical thinking and Wells (1981) on paradigmatic dimensions of discourse, have supported this analysis. Secondly there is a joint goal of collaboration. The language the children use demonstrates both a Bakhtinian (1981) consideration of the listener and a creative wordplay that keeps an amicable connection between speakers (Carter 2004). The patterns back and forth between speakers show collaboration as an assumed element of the dialogue, irrespective of how successfully the children collaborate.

The study offers the chance to link the language of inquiry and the need for a learning environment which supports this, to the development of children’s ability to ‘read’ and interpret texts. It gives new insights into the nature of critical and creative thinking and how children can be encouraged to think beyond the literal. As it is work in progress, any observations drawn from the data are initial understandings.

References