

PME 833 Critical Thinking Assignment

Scenario for Supporting Critical Thinking

Education Scenario #4 - The Workplace...In a Parallel Universe

Julie, along with everyone on the staff, loves staff meetings, or as they are referred to around the office, 'professional learning communities'. Each meeting takes place in the large conference room, which offers a great space for staff from all departments to come together to employ their varied skills to find solutions to the most pressing issues. No one stands at the front of the room giving orders or reading carefully worded scripts, rather the manager sits among the other employees eager to listen, support, and mentor the group to develop the tools for critical thinking. The manager commands respect from the employees, not through authority, but through openness, empathy, and appreciation for diverse points of view, which models exemplary habits of mind to the rest of the staff. As a result, each meeting provides a new way to frame challenges using different thinking strategies that are learned through each other and fosters opportunities to gain new perspectives and ideas to solve problems. Prior to meetings, the latest news regarding plans and programs are shared via email with expectations that the employees arrive at the meeting well-informed with questions to advance thinking and actions, criticisms of the proposals, and suggestions for improvement to rework the plans. These plans are shared with transparency as they have been developed through staff input, which demonstrates the value of shared ownership of the decisions made within the organization. After the plans have been reviewed, it is down to business as meaningful questions and critical challenges are raised requiring reasoned judgment that get the staff buzzing with excitement and engagement to find solutions through collaborative efforts and critical thinking. The time spent in meetings is used productively using the thinking of the collective whole as there is no time to be wasted on trivial matters that could have been addressed through other forms of communication. Tasks are always focused and free from the burden of micro-management or reprimands for not washing the coffee mugs after they have been used.

When Julie accepted the position here, the HR materials she was given talked about valuing critical thinking and creativity and how the employees are the heart of the organization, which initially made her skeptical as her past places of work also made these claims, but were not always evident. However, in this environment, the HR resources couldn't have been more true. She would even go so far to suggest that the words printed in the HR resources didn't do justice to the quality of the community of

thinkers present in the workplace. It was clear that the staff had been hired for their critical thinking skills as they are fully embedded within the culture of the organization. Powerful questions, ideas, and the tools for critical thinking are nurtured within the community while habits or attitudes that undermine critical thinking are quickly addressed to be improved for greater focus on productivity. There are clear expectations and routines in place to promote critical thinking, but these never stagnate the thinking process. Instead, they allow thinking to flourish and spread with an understanding of the importance of the differentiated roles and responsibilities of the staff. Ideas are welcomed and respected regardless of pay grade creating a comfortable environment for decision making to be viewed as a shared responsibility within the organization.

The strong community of thinkers creates a climate in which the tools for critical thinking are continuously being demonstrated with extensive opportunities for professional learning. The habits of mind for critical thinking are extensively modelled throughout the workplace with an air of open-mindedness. Problems are thought through collectively without jumping to conclusions, but rather by giving voice to all, questioning ideas, persisting, and remaining flexible to change approaches if necessary. Thinking strategies are in place in which challenges are clearly illustrated, ideas are tested, challenges are broken down into manageable bite-sized pieces, and connections are discovered between ideas and new pieces of information that get brought into the light through analyzing ideas from different angles. While conflicts do arise, they are welcomed and controlled using respectful language that embodies the vocabulary and conceptual knowledge of critical thinking. Background knowledge on issues are frequently addressed by allowing departments and project teams to cross-pollinate to become more informed while the criteria for framing critical challenges is always made overt. For example, in the last meeting, Chris from the sales team addressed the problem of declining sales numbers. Together, the staff established clear criteria to frame the issue and by applying various thinking strategies, it was realized that there were gaps in information regarding new product features being shared with the sales team. This, in turn, led Amber from the product development department to spearhead a plan to work more collaboratively with the sales team. This plan afforded added benefits to both departments by providing the sales team with necessary information regarding product features to drive their sales while the product development team could gain more insight into consumer needs to improve their products meeting new specifications that they would have otherwise overlooked. Establishing criteria for thinking about the issue helped to bridge a gap in background knowledge to aid both departments to improve their strategies. The tools of critical thinking taught within the organization bring new understanding to complex problems with no single, clear answer and equip the staff with the ability to define an array of

possible solutions, draw conclusions, and make well-informed decisions and reasoned judgments for the best course of action.

The critical challenges that are raised in meetings spill over into the regular projects and tasks to keep the work engaging with a clear focus on innovation and finding creative solutions to meaningful problems. When the time for performance reviews roll around, the employees are not judged simply based on numbers or quarterly results -- they are evaluated on their ability to frame a problem and think critically to arrive at solutions using the tools they are continuously developing. Julie knows that with her excellent performance as of late and her determination to learn and refine her skills, she will be rewarded with the career opportunities she is striving for. The incentive programs in place and the chances for upward mobility are firmly planted in the value of critical thinking and are apparent throughout the organization. The manager regularly provides constructive formative feedback to help steer Julie toward her ambitions in the organization, and this is where she is happy to stay and build her career for the long term.

Resources:

Case, R. (2008) *Beyond Inert Facts: Teaching for Understanding in Elementary Social Studies*.

Case, R., & Balcaen, P. (2008). "Supporting a community of critical thinkers." In: Case, R. & Clark, P. (Eds.). *The Anthology of Social Studies: Issues and Strategies for Elementary Educators*, Pacific Educational Press, Vancouver.

Case, R., & Daniels, L. (2008). "Teaching the tools to think critically." In: Case, R. & Clark, P. (Eds.). *The Canadian Anthology of Social Studies Volume Two: Issues and Strategies for Secondary Teachers*, pp.74-85. Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.