

Inviting Controversy Into the Classroom

by

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## **Abstract**

The potential for controversy, differences in opinion and wonderment to form the foundations for critical inquiry and stimulating conversation, was recognized by William Hazlitt (1830) who stated, “when a thing ceases to be a subject of controversy, it ceases to be a subject of interest” (n.p.). Controversy is a topic of interest for adolescents, and by providing structured strategies, teachers can facilitate their students’ engagement with controversial issues in a civil and informed manner. The capacity to effectively discuss a charged topic is a significant life skill. The literature review discusses the importance of integrating controversial issues and instruction strategies for approaching such themes and relating them to the curriculum. Theoretical approaches and implementation challenges are also examined. The teaching resource developed for this project for discussing controversial issues in the classroom includes three interdependent layers: the creation of a supportive classroom environment; overt instruction in critical skills of thinking, literacy and dialogue; and, situated practice of the critical skills taught in a supported context.

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## Acknowledgments

During the writing phase of this project I found that creating visual diagrams helped me to organize my thoughts and plans. Now, as I sit and think about the journey this learning experience has been, I see a similar diagram to the one I created for my Approach. In this diagram I sit at the center with my graduate degree in hand, surrounded by the many people who helped me get to this place. In the next ring is my family, my husband Jamie who gave up so much of his own time and freedom in order for me to take on this venture, and who listened to me as I shared all that I was learning and doing. My children are in this ring as well. Talon and Naiajah, who not only gave up the dinner table that became my work station, but who graciously accepted the many, many dinners of frozen pizza or scrambled eggs. Particularly during these last few months, I have to thank Naiajah for accepting shorter bedtime stories (we will finish the Harry Potter series this summer, I promise), and Talon for listening to my plans and providing me with his honest opinions, as only a middle school student can. Lilia, you are still so new, and won't remember this busy time, but I am thankful to you for being such a sweet baby, for being healthy and strong, and for joining me on many outdoor walks as I processed my thoughts and planned my next move. The third layer is filled with my friends, Leigh, who tirelessly edited my literature review with a sharp eye and a sweet tongue, Korry for the many late night phone calls and emails (and one memorable midnight trip to Starbucks in July!), Roxanne for her hours of babysitting, Meghan, Pia, and Terra for walking the baby around the neighbourhood during her first few months so that I could harness a few daylight hours of work. The outer layer holds the many educators and colleagues who I have worked with at the University of Victoria. I have had the pleasure of completing two and a half degrees here, and hold this institution in high regard.

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With Gratitude,

Amy Collins-Emery



## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Project Rationale**

The potential for controversy, differences in opinion and wonderment to form the foundations for critical inquiry and stimulating conversation, was recognized by William Hazlitt (1830) who stated, “when a thing ceases to be a subject of controversy, it ceases to be a subject of interest” (n.p.). The research indicates that controversy is a topic of interest for middle years students (Bolgatz, 2005; Rossi, 2006) and my experiences as a Grade 7 teacher have shown me that students of this age love to share their opinion.

My reasons for choosing critical dialogue for controversy as the focus of my project were many. As mentioned above, I have noticed that this topic is interest for middle years students. I have also noticed that most students of this age are not skilled in engaging in dialogue in a manner that is respectful and inclusive of all members. Too often, a few students dominate the discourse leaving others silenced; and reactive, unsubstantiated comments are not uncommon. This reality indicates a need for instruction in dialogue skills.

Furthermore, the information age that we currently live in means that students are continuously exposed to advertising, news, media, and other forms of information. I think it is important for students to be able to thoughtfully engage with this barrage of information, and be aware of its effects on them. This project was inspired by my Grade 7 students and P. Clarke’s (2007) article entitled “Teaching Controversial Issues: A Four Step Strategy.” My approach included a thorough review of the literature on this topic, which incorporated well over 100

articles on topics such as controversy, censorship, critical literacy, critical thinking, and classroom discussion. During the research phase I looked for common themes in the literature, as well as recurring findings and suggestions. I used these findings to create my approach and the strategies embedded in this approach.

Consequently, critical thinking skills and critical literacy form important elements for the implementation of a critical dialogue approach in which students contemplate and form opinions about issues that are controversial in nature. Since critical thinking, literacy and dialogue are all important topics for teachers to address, I believe there is a need for a Teacher Resource that middle school educators can use as a resource for implementing instruction on critical dialogue skills in their classrooms.

In order for a topic to be considered controversial it must have personal meaning for the discussants, thus, controversial topics usually have social, political, or moral context. Accordingly, my intention was to create a guide for educators that will assist them in capturing student interest and intrigue so that students can learn to discuss topics that are personally meaningful to them, as well as relevant to the greater community beyond the classroom walls.

In addition, my Teacher Resource includes an approach with a nested framework. This framework has three interdependent layers, beginning with the creation of a classroom environment that is inclusive, respectful and safe for all members to participate and learn within. The second layer focuses on overt instruction in critical skills of thinking, literacy and dialogue within a classroom environment that contains the aforementioned characteristics. The third layer involves strategies for practicing the critical skills taught in a supported context, as it is recognized that copious opportunities for practice are necessary for skills to become learned and

fully internalized (Adler, Rougle, Kaiser, & Caughlin, 2003; Liggert, 2008; Reis & Roth, 2010; Ross & Fey, 2003).

Many curricular links can be established for teachers in British Columbia who are interested in using my approach to critical dialogue. Curricular connections can be made to English Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, and Health and Career Education. The vast curricular applications and the real world applications make this approach worthy of the time investment required.

As it was my intention to share my Teacher Resource with other educators, I have created a Resource that can stand-alone as an educational resource. I have adjusted my formatting to reflect my goal and thus, the Teacher Resource is the final chapter of this project, after my reflection. For this reason, the labelling of the page numbers and figures deviates from the APA requirements in the Appendix only, in order to reflect the resource's independence.

It is my hope that the strategies included in my approach to critical dialogue will help teachers to support their students as they become critical thinkers and speakers in a safe and constructive environment. I believe that the skills addressed in the Teacher Resource are life skills that students can utilize, not only during the time of education, but during their lifetime, as members of the communities they live in and as members of the global community we all live in.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

“How do you get students that involved in your subject? An essential and often overlooked part of the answer is, ‘Stir up conflict’” (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2000, p. 29). Controversy is an element of classroom discourse that needs to be discussed. Its role in the classroom is controversial, itself, yet the literature indicates its value is substantial.

Several themes emerged in my review of the literature on the role that controversy can play in the classroom. Its benefits for critical literacy and critical thinking are significant, and it holds value for inviting important socio-cultural topics such as the questioning of social norms and assumptions, censorship, and teacher neutrality into the arena of the classroom.

Middle years students, as early adolescents, expend tremendous energy defining and redefining themselves and trying on various identities and roles (Bean & Moni, 2003). It is also at the middle level that students find controversial issues immediately compelling and, given the opportunity, think and wonder about ideas and their consequences willingly and eagerly (Freedman & Johnson, 2000). Important, albeit controversial, issues such as racism, poverty, sexism, heterosexism, and war, all hold significant interest for middle years students. Providing skills and strategies for them to engage with these issues in a civil and informed manner means providing life skills that can be drawn from indefinitely.

Controversial issues are usually those that are social in nature, and familiarity with such issues has been widely viewed as preparing students for effective citizenship (Asimeng-Boahene, 2007). Thus, approaches that support critical thinking, such as critical literacy, which involves

“an attitude toward text and discourses that questions the social, political, and economic conditions under which those texts were constructed” (Beck, 2005b, p. 392; Freire, 1970; Rogers, 2002), has much to offer students learning to face controversy. In the discourse that follows, I discuss why it is important to integrate controversial issues into the classroom curriculum, as well as the dominant themes and topics presented in the literature. Theoretical approaches, strategies, assessment musings, and implementation challenges are also examined.

The ability to participate in critical dialogue across differences is a life skill that is both beneficial and, arguably, necessary for citizens living in our global society. The literature reinforces a need for explicit instruction that incorporates a gradual release of responsibility approach when teaching students critical literacy skills as well as the skills necessary for critical dialogue (Asimeng-Boahene, 2007; P. Clarke, 2007; Fisher & Frey 2008; Gambell, Hunter, & Randhawa, 2005; Henning, Nielsen, Henning, & Schulz, 2008; Mercer, 2008; Morgan & Wyatt-Smith, 2000; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Ross & Frey, 2009;). In addition to providing explicit instruction, the implementation of a critical dialogue program requires that teachers be reflective, flexible, and open to a continuous shift in the ownership of power within the classroom (Beck, 2005a, 2005b Freire, 1970, 1992; Morgan & Wyatt-Smith, 2000; Rogers, 2002; Wolk, 2003). This shift in the teachers’ role is emphasized in Paulo Freire’s seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) but is one of the many challenges that must be faced for teachers implementing critical dialogue into their practice. Hence, a reflective and supportive practice is necessary as a means of effecting pedagogical change. Bloem, Klooster and Preece (2008) recognize that a “democratic culture depends on a citizenry educated in the arts of free expression and the open exchange of ideas and information” (p. 7). This vision can only be

accomplished in an environment that is *aware* of hierarchy inherent in educational institutions, and *willing to change* its authority.

### **The Importance of Including Controversy in the Classroom**

Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving... conflict is a 'sine qua non' of reflection and ingenuity (Dewey, 1922, p. 207).

Discussing controversial issues is often contentious, yet it is an essential mechanism for supporting students' ability to deliberate about the common good, including the ability to take a stand on an issue using evidence from multiple sources (Bucy, 2006; Marcus & Stoddard, 2009). This idea, with its emphasis on the use of multiple perspectives, is reinforced in much of the literature on controversy (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; P. Clarke, 2007; Marcus & Stoddard, 2009).

Johnson, Johnson and Smith (2000) define a controversial issue as "one for which society has not found consensus and that is considered so significant that each proposed way of dealing with it has ardent supporters and adamant opponents" (p. 30). Determining whether or not an issue is controversial for the participating students is important, as is the necessity of conveying the reality that most contentious issues do not possess one correct solution. However, there is no shortage of possible topics. Researchers have found a positive correlation between an open classroom climate and levels of political efficacy, interest, and participation (Rossi, 2006). Avery (2002) found a positive correlation between the discussion of issues about civil liberties and the development of tolerant attitudes with secondary level students. The implications for citizenship education are tremendous, yet, as Avery (2002) points out, discussion of controversial issues is rare in most social studies classrooms. Nystrand, Gamoran, and Carbonaro (1998) reported that

90% of the instruction they observed in more than 100 middle and high school classes involved no discussion at all, much less any discussion of a controversial nature. Rossi (2006) recognized that conducting engaging and thoughtful discussion in any classroom requires a well-prepared, skilled teacher, and students knowledgeable about the content germane to the issue, as well as about the rules and guidelines for participating in civil discourse. This view is supported by Marcus and Stoddard (2009) who found that “including those issues in class, and in a meaningful way, is critical for [secondary] students to learn to deliberate about the common good and develop into citizens who can sustain a thriving democracy” (p. 284). Thus, public education needs to help students examine the discursive acts that they are likely to encounter in the public sphere. These discursive acts may be similar to or different from discursive acts they hear in the private sphere of the home, but exposure to them can help students to form new understandings of public discourse and become part of the public world (Bickmore, 2005; Ruitenberg, 2008).

In general, citizens’ ways of thinking, being, and behaving are not completely autonomous. Individual and collective agency are shaped and constrained by the currents of power surrounding cultural patterns, social locations, and education. Relations of power are reinforced through presumptions that normalize, or construct as ‘other’, certain identities and patterns of behaviour (Bickmore, 2005). L. Clarke (2007) sees a need for an approach to teaching issues that overcomes these obstacles, and Paulo Freire (1992), a world renowned educator and philosopher, recognized the obstacles created by power imbalance and wisely approached this challenge by saying, “What can we do now in order to be able to do tomorrow what we are unable to do today?” (p. 125). Incorporating meaningful discussions into the classroom is one way to create awareness of barriers that are caused by power imbalance. Awareness is a necessary precursor to action for change.

Critical literacy and critical citizenship provide students with an approach to discussing controversy that encourages, through questioning and critical self reflection, an awareness of multiple perspectives and the influence of personal and media bias and media (Applebaum, 2004; Bickmore, 2005; P. Clarke, 2007). There is a growing belief that quality education needs to concentrate on helping students understand connection and interdependence; to focus on developing an awareness of the planetary condition, and to prepare students to act as effective, responsible citizens in a complex world (P. Clarke, 2007). A core component of critical citizenship education is for teachers to develop their capacity to facilitate students' practice with democratic processes and skills. These processes include dialogue, conflict analysis and resolution, constructive discussion of controversial issues, deliberation, and decision making. Democratic processes are not generic, simple, or technical. A key to citizenship for socially just democracy is the development of capacity to non-violently and equitably manage conflict (Bickmore, 2005; P. Clarke, 2007).

### **Controversial topics.**

Current research on controversial classroom topics tends to focus on issues such as heterosexism and homophobia, sex education, and discussions of race. Studies show the importance of inviting these topics into the classroom, and the risks that may be brought about by avoidance or apathy. Gerouki (2007) found that unnecessary emotional stress can be caused by lack of information and understanding about issues to do with sexuality, bodily changes and functions, and emotional feelings, and that sex education is most effective when given before a young person is sexually active. Gerouki also found, with elementary students, that the teachers' attitudes and abilities to implement controversial and innovative curricula, such as sexuality education, were essential ingredients to program success.

Another topic that is very current and relevant to middle years students is heterosexism and homophobia. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) people face a reality that they are more likely than assumed heterosexuals to be scorned or physically assaulted in public, and face greater restriction to their rights and life options in schools, and hospitals (Swank, Raiz, Faulkner, Faulkner, & Hesterberg, 2008). Yet few students realize the extent of homophobia (Blackburn & Smith, 2010). Homophobia is considered to be a learned outlook that is cultivated by the internalization of cultural scripts that have been transmitted by family members, peers, and institutional agents. However, Swank et al. (2008) found that dialogue on GLB discrimination fosters a greater comfort level, with acceptance of sexual diversity and a significant association between class discussions and comfort.

Bolgatz's (2005) study found that race is a topic of interest for elementary children. She worked with a Grade 5 class that was learning about slavery in the United States, and observed that, "not only did the students remain engaged and calm... but also they were able to move the discussion to sophisticated levels...they saw connections between events and ideas" (p. 262). This study is significant for Canadians in an increasingly globalized world and in a multicultural country with a high proportion of immigrants and. The United Nations has ranked Canada as one of the best countries in which to live, because, as a liberal democracy, the Canadian State attempts to ensure its people equality of access to various social benefits such as education, health care and pension plans. Accordingly, all citizens are guaranteed a long list of rights and freedoms through legislation (e.g., Constitution Act, 1867; Canadian Bill of Rights, 1960; Human Rights Act, 1978; The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982; Multicultural Act, 1988). Educational opportunity for all is guaranteed through the federal Charter, and various provincial policies (Ghosh, 2004). Nonetheless, although the Multicultural policy has been in effect for

more than three decades, its effect on Canadian society is viewed as negligible. In response to this shortcoming, Ghosh (2004) completed a study of Canada's multicultural policies, in an attempt to increase appreciation for diversity and reduce discrimination or disparate treatment of marginalized groups in the classroom. She found that in terms of socio-economic status, inequality is more marked among ethnic groups than it is between genders. Ghosh's (2004) findings suggest that Canadian society continues to be a hierarchy based on race, ethnicity, and gender, the fact of which indicates a wide gap between reality and political discourse. It is apparent that education has an important role to play to increase appreciation for diversity and to reduce discrimination or disparate treatment of marginalized groups in the classroom.

Controversial issues such as sex, sexuality, race and ethnicity are all strongly linked to the socio-political realm. They are deeply complex issues that offer multiple perspectives and require an understanding of cultural influence and bias. To this end, critical literacy is discussed fully in the next section, with its implicit goal of advancing the emancipator functions of knowledge, and its promotion of critical thinking, has an important role to play in education (Freire, 1970, 1992; Leonardo, 2004). Inherent in this theory is the recognition that it is via research and critical thinking, listening, and viewing that students acquire the information needed to intelligently converse on provocative matters. Teaching is inevitably political; to avoid talking about political issues is to teach apathy. Therefore, some kind of pedagogical practice that encourages the recognition and discussion of socio-political conflict in constructive ways is essential for what Bickmore (2005) refers to as "difficult citizenship". In a complex world few societal discussions are simple or easy.

Children have the right to examine issues; education should involve critical inquiry into socially relevant topics that hold personal significance (Bolgatz, 2005; Wight & Abraham,

2000). To critically engage students, educators should embrace topics of interest. When teachers initiate conversations or bring in materials that enable students to initiate conversations about race and other controversial issues, children are not necessarily overwhelmed by the issue, but are given an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills. Elementary and middle years students are not only able to deal with controversial questions but they are also able to stretch intellectually by embracing controversial discussions that invite them to engage at new levels of thinking and reasoning (Bolgatz, 2005). Topical questions that may have multiple right answers, where different perspectives collide, allow students to practice higher order thinking skills, such as making decisions from an array of options, using reasoning to justify positions on an issue, and using evidence to support reasoning.

Rossi's (1993 as cited in Rossi, 2006) study on dialogue strategies for discussing public issues found that high-school students exposed to frequent discussion of controversial issues developed a more complex, tentative, and skeptical disposition toward knowledge. When educators choose not to confront controversial questions, they deny students the chance to develop the skills needed to arrive at possible answers (Rossi, 2006). The literature shows multiple benefits of engaging in controversial discussions including higher level reasoning, critical thinking, increased retention, higher quality decision making, more viable creative solutions, increased self-esteem, more sophisticated thinking, and the capacity to work cooperatively in contentious situations (Fitch & Hulgín, 2008; Johnson et al., 2000).

Nonetheless, current research indicates that a key to success is that an orientation to cooperation dominates the context and that individuals have the skills to address controversy effectively. At the very least, students must be able to criticize another person's ideas while confirming his or

her competence and worth, and to see the issue from all relevant perspectives (Johnson et al., 2000).

Overall, the literature reveals that matters of conflict and fairness are intrinsically interesting, and that, scholarly focus on these issues is engaging and credible (Bickmore, 2005). However, studies are lacking that focus on the impact of the emotional implications associated with this type of engagement. Reis and Roth (2010) found that emotions mediate upper-elementary students' school performance and their decision-making more strongly than scientific and sound reasoning. In their 2010 study, Reis and Roth acknowledge that research in this field is rare despite the recognition of its positive impact on learning.

### **Predominant themes found in literature**

A review of the literature reveals several reoccurring themes in relation to the inclusion of controversial issues in the classroom. Teachers' values and bias play a significant role in their perception of what 'normal' means and looks like (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Liggett, 2008; McLaren, 1997), as well as in teachers' selection or censorship of teaching materials (Agee, 1999; Baily & Boyd, 2009; Winkler, 2005). Teachers' choice to assume a neutral stance instead of a critical stance in regards to controversial topics is also a significant theme in the literature (Bickmore, 2005; Brandes & Kelly, 2001; Ruitenberg, 2008).

### ***Questioning normal.***

“Recognizing the complex ways that our conceptualizations of race and equity influence our teaching strategies, practice, and curricular choices will better ensure that the classroom is a place for all students to grow and learn” (Liggett, 2008, p. 387).

Liggett's (2008) study of English-as-a-Second Language teachers (K-Grade 12) focused on educator beliefs and values and how these impact the delivery of multicultural education.

Teacher understanding of values and bias was found to influence the curricula that were implemented in the classroom and how they were delivered. The importance of teacher belief is also relevant to Blackburn and Smith's (2010) discussion of the impact of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is defined as a way of being in the world that relies on the belief that heterosexuality is the norm. This implicitly positions homosexuality and bisexuality as abnormal or deviant, and thus inferior to heterosexuality (Blackburn & Smith, 2010). The authors found that heteronormativity can be called a *tautology* that explains things must be this way because that's the way they are (Blackburn & Smith, 2010). With respect to race, Ketter and Lewis (2001) argue that Caucasians rarely see themselves as having a race, but instead accept whiteness as the norm and see anyone non-White as different or exceptional.

Assumptions around normality offer much to be discussed for educators and classroom communities. By examining how social structures limit or enhance different cultural groups' access to power and authority, readers also come to see how cultural identities are forged (Freire, 1970; Ketter & Lewis, 2001; McLaren, 1997).

The tendency to normalize the status quo is a popular sub-topic in discussions of controversy in the classroom, particularly in reference to race and sexuality (Blackburn and Smith, 2010; Bickmore, 2005; Ghosh, 2004; Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Liggett, 2008; McLaren, 1997; Williams, 2004). Foucault (1977, as cited in Liggett, 2008) recognizes that through gradual and subtle practice, the repeated performance of specific acts become so ingrained in people's lives that, without notice, they are taken for granted to become a part of the normal and natural. Thus, inquiry into the construction of racialized discourse forms a key component for highlighting societal notions of acceptability. Ketter and Lewis discuss many approaches to multicultural education, and found that the common approach of neutrality is often viewed as

desirable. However, a neutral stance glosses over potentially controversial issues and prevents important learning from occurring. Accordingly, Ketter and Lewis (2001) discuss the importance of recognizing the influence that teachers' beliefs and perceptions hold for their pedagogy and suggest having students consider how their whiteness affects the way they interpret multicultural literature. Their (2001) study of Grade 5 to 9 teachers focused on understanding the conditions that influence teachers when they are selecting multicultural literature to teach, and how they use these texts. The researchers found that some teachers were uncomfortable with this important form of introspection.

The implications of normalizing the status quo include teachers misinterpreting students' interpretations of text and images based on their own perspective of white culture as normal; and the recognition that by not addressing the culturally related physical differences of people in classroom inquiry, subtle messages of what is important to discuss and what is not are reinforced (Liggett, 2008; McLaren, 1997). This perspective is relevant in regards to difference of physical and mental ability as well. In reference to racial difference, the significance of this outlook is highlighted in Liggett's (2008) study which found an "overwhelming lack of racial diversity in the teaching force, [and an] increase in the number of students of colour [that] continues to rise" (p. 398). Blackburn and Smith (2010) found that literacy practices are "valued more when they resemble those defined in white middle class ways" (p. 632; Heath, 1983). Thus, the literature indicates a strong need for educators to engage in reflective practices in regards to their own understanding of race and sexuality within the context of the society in which they work and reside.

### *Condemning censorship.*

Another area that requires educators to engage in thoughtful reflection is in regards to censorship. As mentioned above, Ketter and Lewis (2001) found that individual bias and beliefs influence teachers' choice of teaching materials; in some instances limitations are placed on which books teachers have available to choose from. Thus, two forms of censorship may be acknowledged here, institutional and self-censorship. Institutional censorship occurs when published or shared works, like books, films, or art work, are kept from public access by restriction or removal from libraries, museums, or other public venues. It is no coincidence that censored literature is usually that which challenges some 'authority' by offering alternative perspectives of reality (Baily & Boyd, 2009). Consequently, the literature review revealed that self-censorship by educators is the predominant issue in regards to censorship in education today. The literature reveals that teacher self-censorship is enacted through choice of 'safe' methods and books; decisions made about teaching and curricula based on how they might protect themselves from complaints by parents or other potential censors; a disinclination to take on 'hot' topics for fear of the classroom chaos that might ensue; worries that in teaching about controversy, they become the controversy; and uncertainty of guiding Ministry of Education policies. All of these factors are deterrents for teachers (Baily & Boyd, 2009; P. Clarke, 2007; Gerouki, 2007; Liggett, 2008). Educators must reflect on and assess the causes of their fear as self-censorship silences both teachers and students. This practice of self-censorship is particularly problematic in the middle years, as students of this age are to recognize books as controversial and are attracted to this feature.

In her American based study, of K-12 teachers with varying experience levels, Agee (1999) found that teacher self-censorship was more pervasive with veteran teachers who had faced

controversy over their book selections than for novice teachers who “were not as concerned about how such issues might affect their own selection of texts or their personal and professional lives” (p. 67). This indication of how censorship can impact teachers’ professional practice is disconcerting. In her discussion of how teachers can face censorship challenges Agee cited factors such as strong support from administrators, school districts, and professional organizations, careful planning, knowledge about the community, and clear communication with parents. Baily and Boyd (2009) also recognize the difficulty teachers’ face when trying to align all of the above factors. They noted how teachers in their study avoided seeing and discussing the institutional nature of racism and claimed that a “particularly insidious effect of censorship, is its power to silence teachers” (p. 659). Winkler (2005), recognizing the dangers of censorship in education, stated that teaching students to speak out for themselves is one of the basic tenets of democracy:

We teach to promote critical thinking. We teach to ensure that students can become responsible citizens capable of meeting complex challenges in society. We teach reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. Part of our charge is to teach about censorship. (p. 48)

A recent perusal of the Greater Victoria #61 School Board website did not yield a censorship policy. However, the topic of self-censorship requires the need for self reflection, confidence, and collegial support when undertaking potentially contentious topics or texts in the classroom.

***Resisting neutrality.***

While teacher self-censorship can seriously limit the scope of the curriculum, teacher neutrality also has negative consequences. The ideal of teacher neutrality is so pervasive in our

society that, even when it is recognized as impossible, teachers have the expectation that they should be neutral (Brandes & Kelly, 2001). A neutral stance can refer to the belief that it is better to ignore difference and to focus on universal themes. It sometimes can take the form of ‘colour-blindness.’ This orientation embraces a form of tolerance that is common in many developed countries (Ruitenbergh, 2008). However, by adopting such a stance, educators may be overlooking many cultural assumptions that warrant scrutiny. While there are merits to withholding one’s personal opinion so that students can grapple with differing perspectives and choose their own, it is important for teachers to assist students in recognizing difference, as well as the likelihood that there will be several sides to any issue. The adoption of a neutral stance simply to circumvent dealing with issues that can be contentious or problematic does not encourage students to reflect on why there may be several perspectives, and how they can work through such issues to formulate their own position on it. Brandes and Kelly (2001) argue that an important purpose for teaching multicultural texts is to promote an awareness of systemic inequalities that show experiences are anything but universal. As a result of the findings from their Canadian study of pre-service teachers, Brandes and Kelly (2001) encourage new teachers to shift out of neutral and into a role that is inclusive and includes situated engagement. As all teachers are located within a particular landscape of identities, values and social situations from which they view the world, educators must be open to engagement with respect to the need to make their viewpoints open to critique, as well as to model reasoned inquiry in action. Teachers must point out and include the perspectives of subordinated groups and provide opportunities for young people to develop their deliberate capacities to learn to act on their reasoned convictions. The research by Brandes and Kelly’s (2001) recognized that teachers can play an important role in helping students to perceive issues from multiple perspectives. Educators must teach analytic,

communicative, and strategic skills that will aid them in collective problem solving and the ability to make reasoned judgment. Learning how to discuss and debate emotionally charged issues is a crucial first step toward working with others to solve collective problems.

Brandes and Kelly (2001) asserted that those who have written about critical pedagogy are clear that teaching is inevitably political and that teachers cannot be value-neutral. The “downfall of neutrality is that it models a stance of moral apathy” (p. 441). What makes public education public is primarily how it serves public interest by creating, or contributing to the creation of, a public, not an audience, not a clientele or customer base, but a public, in the sense of a democratic polity. Education ought to facilitate the transition from the private to the public sphere. To successfully make the transition to being a member of a heterogeneous democratic public, students must have the opportunity to encounter such heterogeneity, not on the street, where they can walk away from it, but in schools, where they can be required to respond to and interact with those different from themselves (Ruitenberg, 2008).

“To be ‘educated’ means to be allowed to think and wonder about ideas and their consequences; to be ‘indoctrinated’ means to hear only about acceptable values, beliefs, and traditions of a group” (Swiderek, 1996, p. 592 as cited in Freedman & Johnson, 2000, p. 356). Thus, the necessary critical perspective allows learners to take an informed position on a topic and to justify their associated stance.

Controversy is an element of classroom discourse that leaves much to be discussed. Its role in the classroom is controversial, itself, yet the literature indicates its value is substantial. Teacher reflection is fundamental for educators willing to tackle controversial issues. However, given the complexity of socio-political structures and frameworks, one cannot help but wonder at

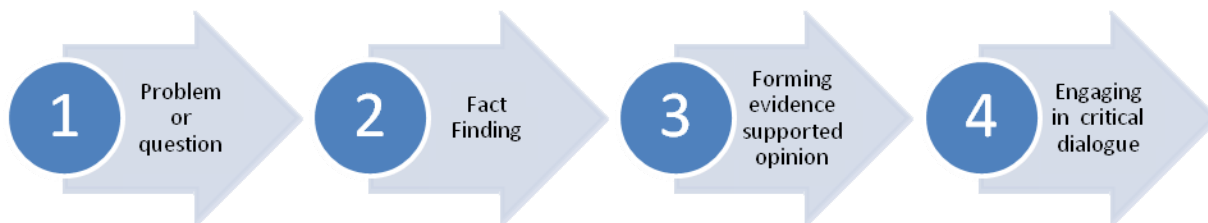
the magnitude of attempting such an approach in today's diverse and overly populated classrooms.

### **Connecting Critical Thinking, Critical Literacy, and Critical Dialogue**

A program that includes critical dialogue in a classroom setting should begin with instruction in critical thinking that will serve to support critical literacy pedagogy. Freire (1970) saw literacy as an 'act of knowing', insisting that "the cognitive dimension of the literacy process must include the relationships of men [sic] with their world" (p. 212). He recognized literacy as a social practice, accompanied by reflection, intent, and action. This definition situates critical literacy in a place that incorporates critical thinking, with its emphasis on higher order comprehension activities, and extends it to incorporate an analysis of power relations in society (Beck, 2005a).

To be critical is to be discerning, reflective, and analytical. Although critical thinking and critical literacy overlap and perhaps differ in their assumptions and purpose, they offer the possibility of a synergistic joining for critical dialogue pedagogy. Critical thinking assumes that we are often governed by our prejudices, and that language can liberate us if it is used rationally (Temple, 2005). It assumes that we need to analyze all new information, and that what we speak and write may need to be reworked to ensure we can make logical, evidence-supported claims (Temple, 2005). Critical literacy differs in its assumption that every form of language includes power relationships, which renders language a form of politics. It assumes that all texts are written for a purpose and that it is the reader's job to apply their critical faculties in order to understand this purpose, and the political assumptions embedded within it (Temple, 2005). The

process of critical thinking may be viewed as a series of steps to be taken (see Figure 1 below); it begins with a question or problem to be solved, then carries on to fact finding, opinion making, and discussion of ideas.



*Figure 1. A Critical Thinking Process*

Critical thinking aligns with what Paulo Freire refers to as ‘problem-posing education’ (1970) as it begins with a question or problem. “Authentic learning, at every level, is marked by the urge to solve problems and to answer questions that arise from the learners’ own interests and needs” (Klooster, 2001, p. 38). Thus, focusing on significant problems that are personally relevant for the students is part of the teacher’s role in the critical classroom. As Beck (2005b) points out, “[P]art of the difficulty of teaching critical thinking, therefore, is awakening students to the existence of problems all around them” (p. 38).

In addressing a particular problem, finding information is the starting point for critical thinking. Students need ‘raw material’ in the form of facts, ideas, texts, theories, data, and concepts, before they can think for themselves. Media literacy and an awareness of an author’s bias each play a role in this part of the process. Once information has been gathered, the critical thinker seeks reasoned arguments. Critical thinkers find their own solutions to develop their own opinions about problems, and they support these decisions with convincing reasons. They recognize that more than one right answer exists, thus, they work to demonstrate why their preferred solution is logical and practical, and more so than the other possible solutions (Klooster, 2001). Discussion plays an important part in this process, because “as we discuss,

read, debate and disagree, and enjoy the give and take of ideas, we engage in a process of deepening and refining our own positions” (Klooster, 2001, p. 40). Critical thinking is social thinking. Ideas are tested and improved as they are shared with others through engaging discussion; the sharing of multiple, evidence-supported perspectives on an issue helps the critical thinker to hone their skills, broaden their perspective, and clarify their stance. “Critical thinking means that we carefully entertain arguments with which we are inclined to disagree, that we appraise the quality of their reasons and the logic with which the reasons are marshalled toward a conclusion” (Temple, 2005, p. 20). It is through the practice of critical thinking that people are able to discuss issues that are sensitive or controversial. A strategy to hone these skills provides more than an academic skill; it contributes to a life skill for students to use as citizens within their communities.

Temple (2005) claims that proponents of critical thinking in the classroom will find valuable insight and tools in the critical literacy movement, and both approaches have much to offer pedagogy for discussing controversial issues. Critical literacy is a theory that consciously lacks an explicit definition (Behrman, 2008). It may be referred to as a theoretical and practical attitude (Luke, 2000), as it entails a perspective that espouses the pursuit of social justice by allowing students to recognize how language is affected by and has an affect on social relations (Behrman, 2006; Ciardiello, 2004; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Soares & Wood, 2010). This critical awareness includes understanding that texts represent particular points of view while often silencing other views (Luke & Freebody, 1997), and the recognition of ulterior and multiple meanings of text (Ciardiello, 2004; Soares & Wood, 2010).

Critical literacy impacts the political, socio-cultural, historical, and economic forces that shape young students’ lives by teaching readers to become critically conscious of their own

values and responsibilities in society (Soares & Wood, 2010). This awareness is nurtured when students are provided with opportunities to practice critical literacy in a variety of contexts. Situated practice allows teachers and students to view critical literacy as a natural part of learning (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). Ideally, learners can then move critical literacy beyond a classroom activity towards a stance that is used in all contexts of students' lives.

Critical literacy teaching begins by problematizing the cultural assumptions and information in the text, and offering them up for critical debate and critique. A critical stance offers students an opportunity to consider what choices have been made in the creation of the text (Bean & Moni, 2003), and to recognize that these choices were made by the author, and are thus subject to interrogation. Through the process of naming and analyzing these complex relations, individuals can become critically aware about the conditions of their reality. Some believe that this critical awareness is accompanied by an ethical and social responsibility to humanely transform the world in which they live (Beck, 2005b), what Freire (1970) refers to as "word-and-action" (p. 210). For these reasons, "literacy is an act of knowing that empowers individuals because, through it, individuals simultaneously discover their voices and their ethical responsibilities to use literacy for the improvement of their world" (Beck, 2005b, p. 394).

Critical literacy is not just about educating children about critical ways of seeing and questioning. It is equally concerned with helping students to think creatively, to be innovative, and to think for themselves, for the purposes of opening up new possibilities and social healing (Wolk, 2003). To this end, critical dialogue across difference, within a framework of critical literacy, prepares students to participate as informed citizens within their local and global communities.

Thus, the purpose of critical literacy is to empower students to consider multiple perspectives and to develop a questioning habit of mind. Its aim is to encourage students to think and take action on their decisions through inquiry, dialogue, and activism, and reflect on their daily decisions about how to live so that they help make a better world (Wolk, 2003).

### **Critical characteristics.**

While, a universal definition of critical literacy does not exist, Behrman (2006) claims that critical literacy instruction can be organized into six broad categories based on student activities or tasks: (1) reading supplementary texts; (2) reading multiple texts to gain multiple perspectives; (3) reading from a resistant perspective to recognize authors' stance and the influence of personal values; (4) producing counter-texts from another point of view; (5) conducting student-choice research projects that allow students to explore a topic that holds personal significance, thus moving real life issues into the school setting; and (6) taking social action, which allows students to recognize literacy as a socio-cultural process that is capable of leading to social change. Below I elaborate on each of Behrman's categories.

#### ***Reading supplementary texts.***

Schramm-Pate and Lussier (2003) discuss using popular texts as instructional texts and found that secondary level students were able to sharpen their own opinions and determine what others believe, by deconstructing popular texts and situating them within wider social and historical contexts. In their classroom students debated, read things that "were not always palatable" (p. 58), engaged in role-playing, journaling, and essay writing, and as a result, "they began to see, feel, and understand what 'dialoguing across differences' was like" (Schramm-Pate and Lussier, 2003, p. 58). Reflective journals formed part of their students' experience. Students

reflected on their citizenship and how the values that inform it are conveyed through their comprehension of popular press texts.

***Reading multiple texts.*** Reading multiple texts in order to gain multiple perspectives on one event can help students to understand the subjectivity involved in the writing of history as well as the popular press. This practice encourages students to question and analyze what is going on in their world and to seek multiple meanings, providing opportunities for students to understand that no one text tells the whole story (Behrman, 2008; Soares & Wood, 2010).

***Reading from a resistant perspective.*** This strategy helps readers to recognize how the reader's values and the author's stance (Behrman, 2008; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Soares & Wood, 2010) can position the reader to form an interpretation of text, and can encourage students to understand authorship as a situated activity where an understanding of the author's intent and socio-cultural influences assists in comprehension with a critical edge (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2004). Students should consider who constructed the text, as well as the when, where, why, and the values on which it was based.

***Producing counter-texts from another point of view.*** Luke (2000) contended that the production of counter-texts can help to broaden the scope of a topic and bring in alternate perspectives that otherwise may not be considered, such as with 'counterstorytelling' (Spector & Jones, 2007), the point of which is not simply to replace one narrative with another, but to open up other voices that have been marginalized and put them in dialogue with the dominant narratives in ways that highlight connections and conflicts. Those outside the dominant culture have traditionally used stories, parables, parody, and satire to tell of their experiences and provide another version, or vision, of society (Spector & Jones, 2007). Although such stories are

often created for other members of marginalized groups, they can be used to reveal contradictions in the dominant cultural ideology in ways that argument cannot (Williams, 2004).

***Conducting student-choice research projects.*** Students explore a topic that holds personal significance, thus moving real life issues into the school setting. A critical literacy approach should encourage teachers and students to collaborate to understand how texts work, what texts intend to do to the world, and how social relations can be critiqued and reconstructed (Freire, 1970, 1992, Luke, 2000).

***Taking social action allows students to recognize literacy as a socio-cultural process that is capable of leading to social change.*** According to Harste (2003), good curriculum involves “planning for student conversation to allow engagement in real world activities” (p. 8). Students need to be encouraged to voice their opinions and ideas, and to assess how topics and questions being studied connect to their lives (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Perry, 2006; Wolk, 2003). Students need to move beyond their personal experiences to engage in a critique of their social worlds (Rogers, 2002), and, ultimately, one of the goals in critical literacy practice is for students to become more knowledgeable on important issues in their world and then to connect their voice to critical issues. Soares and Wood (2010) maintain that “it is crucial that students be given opportunities to discuss, debate, and rewrite cultural narratives using their unique voices while becoming critically literate” (p. 490).

*Reading from a critical stance.* The notion of reading from a critical stance in order to identify issues related to power underscores all of the above characteristics, and thus is worthy of more discussion. Reading from a critical stance enables the reader to raise questions about the voices that are represented and the voices that are missing, as well as who gains and who loses by the reading of a text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). This focus gives readers the power to envision alternate ways of viewing the author's topic, reflecting what Durrant and Green (2001) described as "a situated social practice model of language, literacy, and technology learning...authentic learning and cultural apprenticeships within a critical socio-cultural view of discourse and practice" (p. 151). Reading from a critical stance requires not only reading and understanding the words, but "reading the world" and understanding a text's purpose so readers will not be manipulated by it (Freire, 1970). This focus on issues of power is intrinsically associated with critical thinking and literacy, and it is very relevant for any discussion of issues related to morals or values, the type of issues most likely to be controversial in nature. Examples of issues of power, who has it and who is denied it, how it is used and how it is abused –issues that often revolve around matters of race, class, gender, media, and the environment – are grounded in the hope of creating a more just, humane, democratic, and equal world (Wolk, 2003). By teaching for critical literacy teachers can help their students to see and question the dominant power themes in their society and world (Freire, 1970, 1992; Morgan & Wyatt-Smith, 2000; Rogers, 2002; Wolk, 2003).

Inherent in the principles of critical literacy and its focus on issues of power are the promotion of reflection, transformation, and action. Thus critical dialogue, which represents a cycle of "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" is what Freire (1970, p. 36) calls praxis, a process which is not passive but active challenging for the purpose of relieving

inequity or injustice. Critical literacy can help students develop praxis in regards to issues of power in the classroom. Teachers, as facilitators, must be aware of power imbalances in group work, and use them as ‘teachable moments’ for the members of each group. Examples of power issues reported in the literature include boys displaying disruptive behaviour, and girls tendency to dominate discussions by playing the role of teacher (Lloyd, 2006); females using silence in different ways to achieve or relinquish power (Evans, 1998; Lloyd, 2006,); young adolescent girls modulating their voices and being quiet as a self-protective compromise in situations where speaking their minds could be interpreted as being rude, angry or aggressive (Evans, 1998). Evans (1998) also reported that a group’s notion of power may influence whose voices are allowed to be heard and whose are silenced. The failure to be attuned to the operating power imbalances could be ‘miseducative’ for those involved. Teachers must be aware of these manifestations of power imbalance during small and large group discussions and intercede accordingly.

### **Critical benefits.**

P. Clarke (2007) wrote that good education is “education that concentrates on helping students understand connections and interdependence...and prepares students to act as effective, responsible citizens in a complex world” (n.p.). Yet, what are our chances of achieving this vision if educators remain averse to taking on controversial public issues as part of their teaching practice? Critical literacy practices position students so they can begin to recognize the ways in which information can be framed to privilege one perspective over another. Engagement with text thus needs to move beyond identifying with texts to the questioning the power relationships contained in texts, and the understanding of how the socio-political systems and power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions (Beck, 2005a; Freire, 1970). This shift

from the personal to the social arena appears in the critical literacy classroom when teachers include discussions of difficult controversial issues (Beck, 2005a). “A critical literacy approach places in the foreground issues of power and explicitly attends to differences across race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on” (Cervetti, Pardales, & Domico, 2001, p. 9).

Many other benefits are associated with critical literacy practice. Students who engage in critical literacy are more likely to become open-minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of viewing text from a critical perspective (Bean & Moni, 2003; Beck, 2005a; Harrison, 2006). They understand that the information presented in texts, magazines, newspapers, song lyrics, and websites has been authored from a particular perspective, for a particular purpose. They know that to engage and learn more about understanding critically, it is necessary to begin through practice and reflection (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). These skills are especially important in today’s technological, information-saturated society.

Teachers today must work with rapidly advancing technology in a society swamped by masses of information. Accordingly, critical literacy offers a valuable framework with its emphasis on textual critique and meaning making from an array of multimedia and other sources (Beck, 2005a). The deluge of data requires an education that encourages students to develop critical, higher order thinking skills and apply these skills by questioning the socio-political intent of the text.

Critical thinking skills are an essential requirement of good citizenship and academic excellence. Without the ability to critically evaluate the world about them, students will not have the ability to either define problems or to find solutions. The world today is increasingly complex and change comes at an almost revolutionary pace. Ideas held to be true and facts seemingly indisputable fall by the wayside almost on a daily basis (Schoeman, 1997). In such an

environment students must have the ability to think critically by asking questions rather than merely living by accepted answers. In a world of constant movement and flow, media images of advertising and commerce seep into our lives and strongly influence identity development. Thus, the ability to think critically is imperative.

Critical literacy may also help society meet the demands of an increasingly multicultural reality that requires an education that is equitable for all; one that values “student voice, linguistic diversity, cultural pluralism and democratic schooling while emphasizing literacy and biliteracy as processes of empowerment” (Cardiero-Kaplan, 2002, p. 378). This possibility is significant as, in most nations and regions, disparate economies and life-worlds sit in various stages of emergence and decay (Bean & Moni, 2003). In this turbulent context, there is an acute need for curricular changes that engage students in reading the world. Literacy, especially through multicultural young adult novels, provides a forum upon which to build cosmopolitan worldviews and identities (Bean & Moni, 2003). As stated previously, critical literacy implies there are no right or wrong interpretations and openly encourages different, competing views (Beck, 2005a; Burbles & Rice, 1991; Cardiero-Kaplan, 2002).

Thus, an objective of critical literacy is the development of responsible citizens who are able to face social inequities in their many forms and take action against injustices. “Teaching critical literacy requires that teachers highlight controversial, provocative issues in student-centered discussions that encourage students to reflect on their own experiences and to make changes in themselves and the world around them” (Beck, 2005b, p. 389; Soares & Wood, 2010).

## **The Benefits and Considerations for Classroom Discourse**

“Dialogue is important because learning is primarily a social act that is tied to its real-life context and relies on language as a mediator” (Beck, 2005b, p. 394; Rogers, 2002). It has been widely accepted for several decades now that learners’ cognitive development is driven by interactions between children, adults, and society (Halliday, 1993, Harrison, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). In part learning is achieved through comparison of new knowledge with their previous thinking. However, the major part of this learning results from negotiating common meaning with others who are also engaged in the learning experience. In this way, new knowledge is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978) and communication through dialogue is essential. (Harrison, 2006).

As noted above, social interaction forms and integral component of student learning. As such, discussion is widely used to refer to any whole-class interaction around a text or experience. It is the most used strategy, other than seatwork, in middle school English classrooms (Adler et al., 2003). Dialogue refines the meaning of ‘discussion’ in that “dialogic discourse refers to the true interaction among a variety of voices” (Adler et al., 2003, p. 313). Yet, typically, and particularly when the whole class is involved, classroom discourse takes the form of a three-part exchange, in which the teacher asks a question, a student is selected to answer, and the teacher evaluates the student’s response. This sequence is known as initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) (Mehan, 1979 as cited in Wells & Arauz, 2006), and this “recitation script” has been criticized from several points of view: it disadvantages children from cultures in which this form of interaction is uncommon; it can fail to provide a bridge from everyday registers to those in which disciplinary knowledge is constructed; and it provides little or no opportunity for students to voice their own ideas or comment on those of others (Wells & Arauz,

2006). In recognition of these limitations, the teacher's role is to offer an instructional structure that scaffolds and supports students so that they can participate in authentic dialogue, one in which all voices are heard and all opinions are respected. The benefits of this type of classroom dialogue are many and include increased success in school, the workforce, and life as a democratic citizen (Bloem et al., 2008; Mercer, 2007; Smart & Featheringham, 2006). According to the literature, the following factors should be considered when planning for authentic dialogue: co-creation of criteria with students; opportunities for student control during discussion; student collaboration; explicit instruction of dialogue skills; student development of meta-cognition of dialogue skills and processes; the teacher's role; and potential challenges.

Communication skills are recognized as critical to an individual's success in school (Mercer, 2007), in today's competitive workplace (Smart & Featheringham, 2006), and in life as a democratic citizen (Bloem et al., 2008). Discussion-based teaching has long been recognized as a way to promote civic engagement as its benefits include increase in students' belief that they can have an impact on the political system; the promotion of the development of tolerance; improvement in problem solving ability and moral reasoning skills; change and development in attitude; and enhancement of communication skills (Henning, Nielsen, Henning & Schulz, 2008).

Time spent in productively structured interactional activities can assist students in developing their communication skills, and teacher modeling is an effective method for illustrating how to use language to make problems explicit, consider them rationally and creatively, and devise some possible solutions. Through using language themselves and hearing how others use it, children can learn how language can be used to describe the world, to make

sense of life's experience and to solve problems. Research suggests that children internalize the dialogues they have been involved in as models for their own thinking (Mercer, 2007).

Beck (2005b) claims that an emphasis on students' voices and dialogue, as tools with which to reflect on and construct meaning from text and discourses, is central to critical literacy. Increased communication skills will assist students in honing their critical literacy skills, while at the same time, the application of critical thinking and critical literacy perspectives will assist students in the discussion of controversial issues. Ultimately, participation in classroom dialogue can serve to challenge pre-set notions for students, and thus, create moments of possibility or moments of closure for students in their thinking (Nystrand et al, 1998; Townsend & Pace, 2005).

### **Student ownership.**

Student ownership of discussions is important. Affording students with opportunities to determine the course of the discussion and providing teacher support of students' understanding of their meta-cognitive learning processes are key to effective engagement and motivation. Lloyd (2006) suggests that substantive engagement is only possible in situations where students, as well as teachers, have input into what is being learned. "To engage more students in authentic learning, the locus of authority must be shifted away from both the teacher and text" (Lloyd, 2006, p. 32). This transfer of power from teacher to student plays an important role in students assuming ownership over the discussion, contributing to their conversations reaching levels where higher learning occurs. Indeed, Wells and Arauz (2006) found that when students, from Grades 1 through 8, had the opportunity to initiate the discussion, they tended to speak at much greater length and with greater linguistic complexity. Freire's (1970) discussion about the need for change in power distribution in the classroom, away from the IRE model, invites teachers to

reflect on how power is distributed during discussion in their classrooms. The acceptance of this shift is not easy, and the manifestation of this transition will occur uniquely in each classroom community.

Fishbowl strategies, such as Copeland's (2005) Socratic Circle approach and others, where students are both responsible for leading and controlling the conversation, as well as for observing and evaluating topic and communication factors (Bloem et al., 2008; Gallavan & Kottler, 2002; Smart & Featheringham, 2006 ), offer an effective method for supporting authentic, student-directed, discussion. The Fishbowl strategy provides a framework for students to practice critical dialogue and at the same time it encourages students to become meta-cognitive of their thinking, speaking, and listening skills. This format requires students to think about how well they share ideas and how well they listen to others. In reference to this strategy, Bloem et al. (2008) observed that upper elementary

students knew that if they were not inclusive, if they manipulated the discussion or cut each other off, the rest of the group would criticize them. There were rules for engagement; students realized they needed to respect those rules and each other.(p. 17)

Mutually respectful interaction is a necessary precondition to effective dialogue. Bloem et al. (2008) state that "when humans gather on equal footing with shared concerns, their voices are likely to blend into meaningful and purposeful conversation" (p. 7). Hence, "when two or more people engage in dialogue, they both assume that the other(s) will enter into and honour a kind of contract to alternate between two roles [speaker and listener]" (Wells & Arauz, 2006, p. 382). One of the characteristics of linguistic communication is that it is almost always potentially ambiguous, as words do not convey a fixed meaning but, rather, are imbued with the speaker's meaning, which is based on his or her perspective on the topic under discussion. Thus, even

when attending to the same object, individual participants interpret and speak of it from different perspectives as a result of their previous experiences and current concerns. Accordingly, for dialogue to proceed satisfactorily, participants must make a persistent attempt to understand each other's perspectives (Wells & Arauz, 2006). Teaching students to understand this underlying premise that exists during interaction will help them to become better participants when engaged in dialogue, and thus, increase their sense of empowerment and ownership in respect to their shared opinions. This awareness is particularly relevant to discussions that are contentious, where people are often quick to react and respond.

Having a meta-cognitive awareness during discussion is integral to a critical literacy approach and to student ownership of discussion (Behrman, 2006; Devick-Fry & LeSage, 2010; Fang, 2008; Galavan & Kotler, 2002). Individual students need to become meta-cognitively aware of their habits of exploration and reflection, and of how they contribute to a group discussion. The quality of discussion can be influenced by the opportunities, or lack thereof, for participants to reflect on, analyze, and critique their experiences of the discussions and interactional events that are part of schooling (Bloem et al., 2008). Clearly, the skills gained through classroom talk are an invaluable life skill that can transfer to other settings in students' futures when they will be called upon, as citizens, to speak out.

### **Collaboration.**

In addition to the ability to support one's ideas and opinions, working with others can help students to broaden and strengthen their understanding of a particular issue or topic.

Collaborative learning can build confidence and self-efficacy in students (Adler et al., 2003). It is commonly aligned with the socio-cultural theories of Vygotsky (1978), and tends to focus on the co-construction of shared meaning through dialogue and discussion. Studies show that learning

is likely to be most effective when students are actively involved in the collaborative dialogic co-construction of meaning about topics that are of significance to them (Beck, 2005a; Bloem et al., 2008; Wells & Arauz, 2006). Five common attributes of collaborative learning include a common task or learning activity suitable for group work, a small group learning structure, cooperative behaviour, positive interdependence among group members, and, individual accountability and responsibility (Fitch & Hulgin, 2008). Accordingly, collaborative approaches emphasize co-construction of shared meanings in the context of peer group dialogue and discussion. This approach recognizes that “understanding is fostered when students are given the opportunity to explain, elaborate or defend positions to others, causing them to ‘evaluate’, integrate, and elaborate knowledge in new ways” (Fitch & Hulgin, 2008, p. 426). Collaborative knowledge building, which develops understanding between individuals and the group, is viewed as one of the greatest benefits of collaborative discourse, because in the effort to formulate our ideas for others, we most effectively clarify them for ourselves (Fitch & Hulgin, 2008; Wells & Arauz, 2006).

Research indicates several beneficial effects associated with collaborative discourse such as students experiencing a general satisfaction and positive feeling towards learning, and students developing greater self-esteem during collaborative experiences (Smitz & Winskel, 2008). Collaborative discourse can also increase the time spent or perseverance on the task as the presence of a partner can prevent a person giving up prematurely when the task becomes difficult (Smitz & Winskel, 2008). Research by Keys (1996) on collaborative discussion with Grade 9 students found that collaborative discussion and writing corresponded with a high degree of interconnection between social interaction and cognitive processing. When applied to personally relevant issues, Wells and Arauz (2006) found that students, ranging from kindergarten to Grade

8, who were given the opportunity to participate in the cumulative construction of community problem solving, recognized that their contributions were consequential for the decision that was jointly constructed over successive turns. Part of the success was due to the fact that participants were invested in the outcome of the discourse, and the outcome was not predetermined in advance. Wells and Arauz also found that when compared to the motivational attributes associated with competitive forms of discourse, like debating, it seemed that there was an equal, if not greater, satisfaction to be gained through working with peers toward a jointly achieved outcome. Thus, not only does collaborative discourse address the social orientation of students' interests, but it also enables them to achieve together more than they could have achieved alone.

Collaboration has much to offer discussions that are contentious in nature. Burbules and Rice (1991) recognize three prospective kinds of benefit that can be derived from dialogue across difference, which is often the case with a controversial issue. The first kind of benefit, those related to the construction of identity along lines that are more flexible without becoming arbitrary occurs when people broaden their personal views of reality to include the recognition that we all belong to more than one community, allowing one's personal identity to be more flexible, autonomous, stable, and thus more tolerant of difference. The second kind of benefit, those related to broadening our understanding of others, addresses our understanding of ourselves by recognizing that cultural meanings are internally constructed within webs of significance, and that the same issue may look or feel different to different people depending on their cultural standpoint. Finally, the third type of benefit, those related to fostering more reasonable and sustainable communicative practices involve embracing 'communicative virtues' of tolerance, patience, and a willingness to listen while maintaining a healthy modesty about the possibilities and limits of our communicative efforts. These multiple benefits are entirely

plausible with collaborative discussion, but would likely require the inclusion of reflective practice, for both students and teachers for maximum gains to be realized.

In recognition of the many benefits of collaboration, classroom communities should continuously strive to enact norms that are collaborative and include reflective self-evaluation of their work. Self-reflection by the teacher is also important. Teachers must challenge themselves to question the norms in which they operate, and recognize the influence of socio-cultural factors that may be beyond their control. Reflection opens the space for critically evaluating oneself according to values and beliefs that one chooses to live by. Evans (1998) stated that “reflection is the means by which norms are challenged” (p. 120). In addition to the value that reflection holds for an individual’s personal growth, reflection also plays an important role for anyone focused on improving their ability to work and discuss effectively in a collaborative group situation.

Constructivist approaches often assume that group work will automatically create a mutually beneficial learning environment for all members, regardless of factors such as gender, age, or social status. However, effective skills for group work need to be modeled and taught (Evans, 1998; Fitch & Hulgín, 2008); students need to know how to make their point without belittling others. Educators need to create classrooms where all children can bring their strengths and experiences to the discussion and that can only happen in a collaborative context.

Establishing such an environment can be challenging. For example, employing single gender groups, or letting students choose who to work with, may appear to be simple solutions, yet L. Clarke (2007) urges educators to resist the urge to implement single gender groups. Giving in means a lost opportunity to confront the gendered reproductions and the chance to interrupt the unequal patterns and power structures. Fitch and Hulgín (2008) found that as elementary aged children participated in ‘collaborative learning assessment through dialogue’ (CLAD), they

disagreed, discussed, explained, and persuaded one another, and as a result new positions, new ideas and deeper thinking emerged. Studies increasingly point to the need for collaborative teamwork, the ability to think critically, and the ability to be creative in problem solving, as central for workforce effectiveness (Gambell et al., 2005). Thus, the establishment of effective collaborative discourse formats is a worthy endeavour for middle years educators.

### **Teacher's role.**

The teacher's role in facilitating critical dialogue in the classroom environment is multifaceted. Although, no single list of methods in the literature on critical literacy work the same way in all contexts all the time (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), the following pedagogical techniques and characteristics have been found to be effective. These include: explicit instruction of discussion technique (Adler et al., 2003; Mercer, 2008; Ross & Frey, 2009; Schramm-Pat & Lussier, 2003; Wells & Arauz, 2006); teacher modeling and scaffolding of methods (Adler et al., 2003; Mercer, 2007); student reflection (Heath, 1983; Townsend & Pace, 2005); a classroom culture that is safe and inclusive and includes a predictable classroom routine (Beck, 2005a; Townsend & Pace, 2005); the creation of problem posing lessons (Dahl, 1998; Mills, 1998; Harrison, 2006; Schoeman, 1997; Townsend & Pace, 2005); and the movement away from the teacher as authority to teacher as facilitator (Burbules & Rice, 1991; Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002; L. Clarke, 2007; Gruber & Boreen, 2003; Harrison, 2006; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Mills, 1998; Schramm-Pat & Lussier, 2003; Townsend & Pace, 2005).

*Explicit instruction.* Luke (2000) claims that, from a sociological perspective, literacy “is principally about building access to literate practices and discourse resources, about setting the ... conditions for students to use their existing and new discourse resources for exchange in the social fields where text and discourse matter” (p. 449). How teachers select and frame these

resources in their teaching has consequences for our students' capacity to become active designers and agents in shaping their social futures and those of their communities and cultures (Luke, 2000; New London Group, 1996). As noted in the above section on collaboration, effective skills for group work need to be modeled, taught, and practiced (Adler et al., 2003; Evans, 1998; Fitch & Hulin, 2008; Mercer, 2008, Ross & Frey, 2009; Wells & Arauz, 2006). Adler et al. (2003) found that middle school students did not generally develop discussion skills they had not been taught and claimed that, "as with any endeavour one needs practice to gain expertise" (p. 312). Mercer (2008) studied what happens when elementary children are given explicit guidance by their teachers on using talk for solving problems and engaging in other kinds of intellectual activity. He found that this guidance affected not only how well the students talked and worked together, but also the development of individual children's thinking skills and academic attainment.

The beginning steps towards productive dialogue, it would seem, include seizing occasions that spontaneously arise to encourage students to express alternative points of view, helping students learn how to provide supporting argument for their own perspective and to listen respectfully to, and attempting to understand the perspectives and arguments of others. In addition to these actions, time must be devoted to explicit teaching of the required social and discursive skills is necessary (Wells & Arauz, 2006). Ross and Frey (2009) found that learners need purposeful and systematic instruction to increase engagement and decrease problem behaviour. Their research on recursive teaching methods with high school students revealed that teacher modeling and guiding the acquisition of new content, time for students to collaborate as they refine their understanding of the new content, and opportunities for students to try on the new content independently were important for student learning. In addition to Ross and Frey's

suggestions, a critical reflection component would further support the students' meta-cognitive awareness of their learning.

In regards to controversial issues, Schramm-Pat and Lussier, (2003) also point to a need for explicit instruction in dialogue methods that includes an explanation that dialogue does not require a monolithic resolution to a problem, "but rather the democratic virtues of open-minded deliberation and compromise" (p. 62). Because controversial issues are inherently contentious in nature, students need practice discussing controversial issues with one another, in order to learn how to engage in a potentially 'heated discussion' while maintaining control over their emotions. This practice requires a shift in focus from the personal to social, and takes place through an explicit foregrounding in the classroom of controversial, provocative issues regarding race, class, gender, and political differences (Beck, 2005b, p. 394; Cervetti et al., 2001).

***A gradual release of responsibility.*** Fostering independence in students' use of strategies is important and best accomplished by scaffolding within a gradual release of responsibility framework. Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) gradual release of responsibility model of instruction begins with explicit instruction, which includes teacher 'think-alouds', followed by guided practice in which the teacher and student have joint responsibility for using the strategies. The learner takes the lead while the teacher offers guidance through the tough spots and then steps back when control is gained to allow the learner independence. In practice, the gradual release of responsibility model should include a collaborative learning phase because it requires individual accountability based on the collaborative work of the group. This practice combined with assistance in understanding the value of each strategy, reflective practice, and practice engaging in critical dialogue with one another, can aid students in internalizing literacy strategies and applying them independently during their academic career.

Teachers can take an active role in guiding their pupils' understanding of how talk can be used for learning and thinking collectively. "Class discussion [is] a tool that encourages kids in thinking and learning... it is a controlled, student-run, teacher-motivated dialogue" (Adler et al., 2003, p. 321). They can model exploratory talk, engage children in extended discussions of topics, and encourage them to see that responding to a teacher's question need not simply mean providing the 'right answer' (Mercer, 2007). In order for students to learn to communicate collaboratively and effectively, teachers and students can establish an appropriate set of ground rules for talk in class, on the basis of their exploration of what makes a 'good discussion' (Mercer, 2007). Students need to be supported to participate freely during discussions, but with the understanding that "free expression means not just that you have a right to be heard; it also means that you have a right to hear what others have to say" (Dahl, 1998, p. 96).

***Student reflection.*** Encouraging students to reflect on the topic being studied, as well as their learning process, is important. Considering alternative viewpoints requires practice. Writing before and after a discussion might help students develop dialogic habits of mind. Dialogue journals, whether between teacher and students or between student and student, could help students entertain one another's views (Townsend & Pace, 2005). Meta-cognitive activities that help students reflect on their own thinking and interpretive processes, while taking time from classroom talk, itself, may be necessary to support the thinking and preparation required for peer interactions. One Grade 11 literature teacher asked students to tape and analyze paired conversations so that they could consider their own meaning-making processes (Townsend & Pace, 2005). Similarly, Heath (1983) documented how Grade 2 students become "language detectives," by developing and recording their awareness of the diversity in people's expressive ways. These types of reflective activities can assist students in realizing that, in order to take the

views of others into account, one must be able to hear what others have to say (Bloem et al., 2008).

Allowing time at the beginning of class for students to reflect on and generate discussion questions, individually and together, as well as time at the end to write down remaining pending questions and puzzlements, can also help students broaden their thinking (Townsend & Pace, 2005). Sharing these writings as a way of introducing the next class could provide continuity and an opportunity for students to initiate new topics. In this way, discussions could become ongoing, organic, and part of the class pattern. Students could begin to expect these kinds of interactions and prepare for them, supporting their ideas with sound arguments and textual references.

***Classroom culture.*** One of the first foundations a teacher must strive to create each year is a cohesive classroom culture. Because learning takes place in society, it cannot be separated from its social context (Beck, 2005a). Thus, the primary responsibility of the teacher seeking to support the critical skills of students is to create conditions for a classroom that will be a safe place for students to “engage with one another in critical dialogue that will move them to higher levels of understanding” (Beck, 2005a, p. 4). The nature of student participation in the classroom and the roles students may play are based on their understanding of the particular culture of that classroom (Townsend & Pace, 2005). If that culture allows for “trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties” then the discourse that develops is likely to be dialogic and to invite multiple perspectives and multiple possibilities, to help students open their minds and think deeply (Townsend & Pace, 2005, p. 594). Despite this endorsement of an open culture, the literature does not provide much in the way of practical, strategy based suggestions for how to

work towards such a learning environment and thus illustrates a need for professional development in this area.

*From dictator to facilitator.* The teacher's role is to set up the discourse format and then to facilitate, but not dominate the discussion (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002). In her research on provocative teaching techniques, Mills (1998) found that classroom discourse centers on one individual's view, most often the teacher's. This focus may encourage students to echo preordained ideas and skate on the surface of literary or other conundrums. A critical literacy approach can enable students and teachers to move away from assuming roles that see the teacher as the sole authority and the students as a receptacle of knowledge. Accordingly, authority is negotiated and reassessed by each speaker who contributes to the dialogue. Students in this environment are not seen as receiving information indiscriminately but as constantly developing and improving their critical thinking skills. Teachers need to provide access to a variety of texts that provide opportunities to explore the topics critically (Gruber & Boreen, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), and to act as facilitators to keep the dialogue moving and potential conflict manageable (Schramm-Pat & Lussier, 2003). This type of authentic classroom discussion (Townsend & Pace, 2005) can invite students to participate in the public negotiation of meaning and to recognize and, perhaps even relish the variety of perspectives that emerge when any group of thoughtful individuals considers problems and possibilities (Townsend & Pace, 2005). L. Clarke (2007) purports that peer-led discussion leads to an increase in engagement that moves away from traditional teacher-centered instruction and encourages students to create their own vibrant discourse communities. This practice can stimulate and support higher order thinking, and improve students' text comprehension. L. Clarke recognizes the importance of minimal teacher interference, and, in her research on gender relations during

group work, found the conversations in peer-led groups were more complex and offered more opportunities for students to engage in higher order thought processes than did the teacher-led groups.

***Planning problem posing curriculum.*** A key aspect of creating a classroom culture to effectively support critical dialogue is planning. Teachers must select topics for classroom talk that are framed to invite multiple perspectives, and make issues problematic. The teacher's role is to set up the conditions in which this dialogue can take place. This structure involves both organizing the social setting so that dialogue is likely to be fruitful and also working with the learners to ensure that their learning moves forward. The latter is reached through a diagnostic exploration of where students are in their learning and then scaffolding these ideas forward (Harrison, 2006). Considerations when planning discussion to engage students include: choosing a topic that is arguable and that allows for differing opinions and interpretations, locating the topic within the students' existing knowledge base; and selecting a purpose that serves an educational purpose and extends students' thinking beyond their previous experiences (Beck, 2005a; Gruber & Boreen, 2003). Schoeman (1997) recommends teachers give thought to sequencing of questions before asking them to ensure that the subject matter to be learned will be meaningfully developed. It is also important that provocative prompts or methods designed to provoke are brief, concrete, and contain only one or two issues at a time for class reflection (Mills, 1998).

The use of provocative prompts is advantageous as they are designed to "grab" students psychologically and intellectually, cultivating their curiosity and motivating cognitive and personal growth. Provocation can include making a statement or posing a question that may divide the students such as: "Are Facebook and You Tube the new weapons of choice? Should

people under the age of 18 be banned from these sites?” or “In order to minimize the sexual harassment that has become a daily fact of life for girls in many middle and high schools, schools should impose and enforce strict dress codes.” Provocatively situating topics that are enticing to students can create motivation for students and can lead to intellectual exploration that transcends more traditional teaching methods (P. Clarke, 2007; Mills, 1998).

### **Challenges.**

Despite recognition of the importance of genuine dialogic talk to the development of the capacity to think critically, particularly for adolescents (Sutherland, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978), research indicates a considerable deficit in practice (Avery, 2002; Nystrand, Gamoran & Carbonaro, 1998). This deficit in classroom dialogue increases in regards to the discussion of controversial issues (P. Clarke, 2007). The literature identifies the following challenges to implementing critical dialogue in the classroom: (a) pupils seeing the completion of a task, not the process of talking as the key objective so they choose to sit in groups but work individually (Adler et al., 2003; Asimeng-Boahene, 2007; Beck, 2005b; Freire, 1970, 1992; Mercer, 2008; Sutherland, 2006); (b) a gap in professional development for teachers in how to productively orchestrate group work (Asimeng-Boahene, 2007; Beck, 2005a; 2005b Bloem et al., 2008; P. Clarke, 2007; Freire, 1970, 1992; Luke, 2000; Sutherland, 2006); (c) time constraints resulting from curricular expectations (the curriculum can pose a barrier because discussion of controversial issues require in-depth study over time, which may be difficult to allocate given the time demands of government induced requirements) (Henning, Nielsen, Henning, & Schulz, 2008; Wells & Arauz, 2006); and (d) teacher concerns about reactions of school boards and parents if issues are contentious in nature (Bloem et al., 2008; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Morgan & Wyatt-Smith, 2000).

In addition, several difficulties are inherent in notion of dialogue. Most of the time, classroom recordings capture discussions in which children do not listen to each other, in which one person dominates the proceedings, in which students argue unproductively, or in which participants seem happy to go along with whatever anyone says without any reflection or debate (Mercer, 2008, Sutherland, 2006). Although teachers are able to specify the characteristics that constitute a good discussion, such discussions occur rarely in most classrooms. One likely reason for this paradox is that, many teachers assume that most students know how to talk and work together and so teachers rarely provide students with explicit guidance or training (Mercer, 2008, p. 62).

Sutherland (2006) and Adler et al. (2003) both conducted studies with elementary students and teachers that focused on classroom talk. The researchers found that students rarely responded to each other. Most responses were to the teacher, or the students worked independently while in groups. Some of these behaviours could be due to resistance from students who may be emotionally unwilling to accept newly introduced facts that may threaten pre-existing opinions. In this context, reflection has a key role to play. Williams (2004) found that issues of race were difficult for her adolescent students to discuss, as “nothing seems to shut down genuine conversation among students (of any color) as quickly as issues of race. Regardless of what we’re talking about...conversations about race often make students defensive, polarized, and wary” (p. 184). Williams (2004) found that students seem to “retreat into protective statements” (p. 184) and she sympathized, acknowledging that most educators have not provided students with the discourse or approaches to get beyond fear and defensiveness to engage in conversations about race. The latter emphasizes the need for not only explicit instruction but also practice in discourse (Asimeng-Boahene, 2007).

Another factor that can challenge productive classroom talk is the power distribution within a group scenario. Bloem et al. (2008) identify access, equity, and conflict as barrier issues in classroom talk. Access refers to barriers due to differences of gender, culture, ability, experience, peer status, personality, and “social capital” (Beck, 2005b; Bloem et al., 2008). Bloem et al. purport that these aspects can be addressed by making them transparent from a societal perspective and promoting an awareness of these barriers during discussions. Equity issues surround the commonality of a few students dominating the discussion while the rest of the class sits back and listens (or not). This issue can be addressed by establishing guidelines and procedures to encourage participation. Bloem et al. (2008) recommend communicating the expectation that students should prepare for the discussion by engaging in advanced reading, by mulling over a question and by organizing a response. This preparation is particularly important in regards to preparing students to face conflict and difference in productive ways. Thus, the teacher’s challenge is to educate students to discuss differences with appropriate restraint and civility without exacerbating divisions (Bloem et al., 2008). These skills are very important for a democratic society and must be learned through explicit instruction in valuing genuinely held and reasoned differences of opinion, and in valuing discussions that support explorative talk and considerations, and include the marshalling of evidence and judgement that is based on evidence, analysis, and reflection. Overall, a predictable format, in which students are clear about the expectations in group contexts, will address some of these issues and increase participation.

Whereas the above barriers are student related, a barrier for teachers in facilitating successful classroom discussions surrounds a lack of professional development. Despite the fact that explicit instruction is cited as a prerequisite for teaching discourse skills, many educators are not confident in facilitating critical dialogue, particularly if it surrounds contentious issues.

Teacher concerns surround a lack of familiarity with the issues, and a fear of classroom chaos. “We live in a time of general decline in the protocols of civil discourse. Television talk shows bristle with outrageous behaviour, which teachers are understandably reluctant to see reproduced in their classrooms” (P. Clarke, 2007, n.p.). Classroom management is an understandable concern for many educators, and a focus on dialogue, reflection, critique, and social action means that the critical literacy classroom is necessarily student centered and rich in debate; an ideal situation for middle years students, but possibly challenging for the teachers in charge to generate conditions for dialogue that is mutually respectful for all (Adler et al., 2003; Beck, 2005a, 2005b). In this context, the teacher must simultaneously use authority and expertise to promote student agency because “saying too much or too little, too soon or too late, can damage the group process” (Shor, 1997, p. 9). At the same time, the teacher must constantly negotiate a complicated and dynamic process in which authority is transferred between students and teacher.

Henning, Nielsen, Henning, and Schulz (2008) claim that conducting a discussion is one of the most difficult and complex tasks in teaching. Hence, professional development and collegial support are suggested, particularly in support of the facilitation of critical dialogue. While educational theorists, such as Luke (2000), purport that critical literacy should not be distilled into a single step method, the lack of a widely accepted model makes it difficult to implement and can lead to “a classroom, in which there are no restrictive rules, but correspondingly also very few supports” (Beck, 2005a, p. 7). Leading a discussion, while attempting to maintain equity and access for all involved, necessitates constant vigilance for all members of the group. It is the teacher’s responsibility to model and to scaffold a procedure that includes meta-cognition of language that is inclusive. However, the magnitude of such a task requires collegial support and reflective practice in order to avoid self-censorship. Beck (2005a)

and Luke (2000) suggest that support mechanisms, such as workshops and study groups, are necessary for teachers to implement all dimensions of critical literacy, and warn that in the absence of support, critical literacy may not be fully implemented in most classrooms.

It is apparent that teaching for critical literacy via classroom dialogue provides many challenges for the educators. Issues of power, teacher self-censorship, access, equity, conflict, the curriculum, and a lack of teacher professional development in this area all increase the challenge for implementation. Notwithstanding, the literature provides some excellent strategies for educators willing to face these challenges. These research-supported strategies are presented in the next section. Literacy educators who are contemplating the inclusion of critical dialogue about controversial issues may legitimately ask how the latter will improve their practice. The words of Martin Luther King Jr. are pertinent for those on this precipice, as he claims: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy” (King, 1983, n.p.). Thus, helping students to communicate effectively when a contentious claim has been articulated and emotions are running high is a truly valuable endeavour.

## **The Strategies**

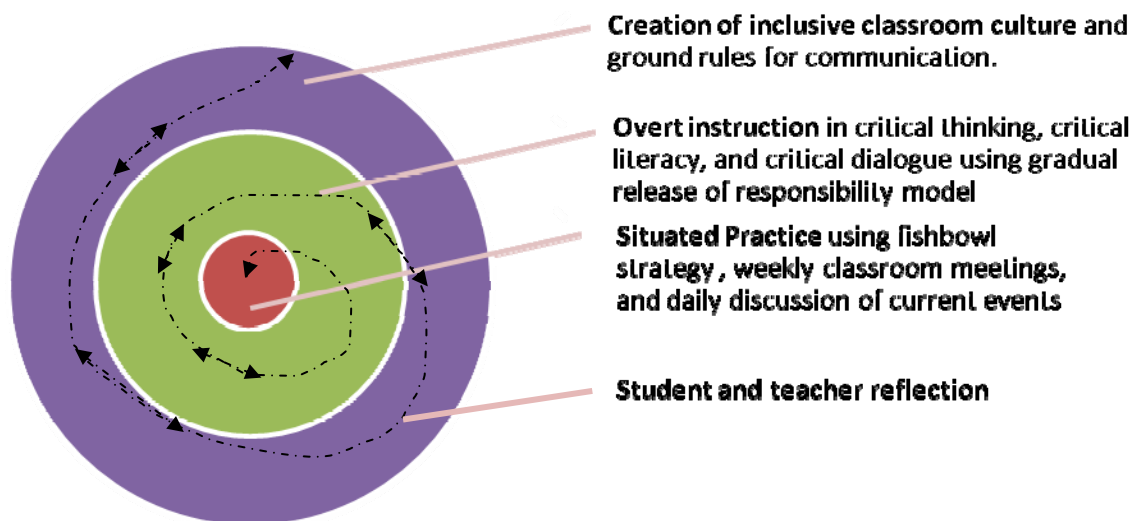
### **Strategy attributes.**

Twenty-nine articles were located and reviewed in order to identify research supported suggestions for teaching strategies, many of which incorporated cross-curricular applications. From these articles, the strategies were organized as follows: eight focused on critical thinking; 25 applied to critical literacy; 20 addressed group work and discussion strategies; six discussed reflection strategies; and, three focused on the gradual release of responsibility model. As the literature reviewed for this discourse illustrates, embracing a pedagogy that supports the

inclusion of critical dialogue for controversial issues is not a simple endeavour. A pedagogical approach must include explicit instruction in critical thinking, critical literacy, and critical dialogue. The classroom culture must be supportive and open-minded and respectfully inclusive. Student and teacher reflection are integral to the learning outcomes, and the teacher must assume the role of manager or facilitator of a problem posing approach that focuses on informed discussion of possible truths or perspectives. A pedagogical approach to critical dialogue must also include the gradual release of responsibility in order for students to take ownership over their learning, and ideally, extend a thoughtfully critical orientation into other areas of their lives. In order to support such integration, teachers must provide consistent opportunities for practice.

### **Implementation Suggestions.**

It is best to conceive of implementation as a series of stages that build upon and are nested in one another, allowing for the necessary learning to be assimilated. As outlined in Figure 2 below, the pedagogical approach must begin with the creation of an inclusive and supportive classroom community which can be created with the establishment of a set of ground rules for communication within the classroom.



*Figure 2.* A Pedagogical Approach to Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom

Furthermore, co-operative activities aimed at nurturing personal connections among students should take place during the beginning of the school year. Teachers should consistently monitor and attend to the maintenance of a supportive classroom culture, as the latter is the foundation for other learning to build upon. Teacher and student reflection also forms a key component to the overall implementation of critical dialogue of controversial issues and needs to be integrated as a regular practice to assist in the processing of new learning. Various formats may be used throughout the year depending on the intended focus of the reflection. For example, initially simple response cards requiring no more than identifying one position might be used. Later, a double sided journal could be used to reflect on a personal reaction to an issue; one side could contain the emotional reaction and associated feelings, and the other side could address how values, personal bias, or media bias affect the expressed emotions. This type of written reflection could help the learner understand how values and bias can influence emotional response.

The next stage involves explicit instruction in three areas: critical thinking, critical literacy, and critical dialogue. The instructional format and philosophies for introducing these educational theories differ, but are in alignment with one another. I suggest introducing the topics in the order listed above, as critical thinking skills can be applied to a critical literacy structure, which in turn can support the learning of critical dialogue skills. This instructional stage will take the longest to implement and will require carefully scaffolded instruction using a gradual release of responsibility model. Once students are familiar with the skills and strategies associated with critical thinking, literacy, and dialogue, these may be applied to various contexts. Ideally these skills will be assimilated by the students and visible in their choices and actions beyond the walls of the school.

In order to help students truly incorporate what they are learning, regular practice must occur. Daily discussion of current events can provide students with opportunities to reflect on their thoughts, opinions, and discussion topics that may or may not be contentious in nature. Critical literacy skills can be embedded in this daily practice by looking for author bias or silenced voices. This practice can provide students with an opportunity to practice exploratory talk. Weekly classroom meetings offer a more formal discourse method for students to discuss issues that are personal and relevant to them as students in the school. These meetings could also provide a means for maintaining a classroom culture that is connected, open minded, and respectful. Eventually, Socratic circles, or fishbowl discussions, can be incorporated, as these formats provide an opportunity for students to participate in formal critical dialogue, as well as observe and practice communication skills and strategies.

Thus, in order for teachers to truly embrace all that can be offered by a critical approach to thinking, literacy, and dialogue, the approach must be multifaceted and continuous. In this way, the approach to learning becomes an expected format for the students.

### **Assessment**

Cross-curricular links related to critical thinking, critical literacy, critical dialogue are plentiful. The British Columbia curriculum for Grade 7 indicates that curricular connections can be made to English, Social Studies, Science, and Health and Career Education (specific IRP outcomes are included in the Teacher Resource). Ultimately, the goal of this approach is to teach students lifelong skills that will aid them as active citizens within their communities. Accordingly, assessment strategies should serve to support this goal. Including students in the creation of assessment criteria is coined assessment-as-learning (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010) and is beneficial as it assists students in understanding the value in what is being taught and practiced.

Self-assessment and peer observation feedback may be used for assessing oral communication skills. Setting goals is embedded in the curriculum (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010) and can be utilized when students set personal goals for improving their oral communication skills. Student reflection and self-assessment may be used assess how goals are being pursued and achieved.

During the explicit teaching phase, teacher-directed assessment can be used as formative and summative assessment of specific components of the strategies being taught. Student reflection can also be used as a form of assessment if students are informed of this intention beforehand. Rubrics and descriptive feedback offer useful assessment approaches that can help

students to increase their meta-cognitive awareness of what they have learned and what they still need to focus on.

## **Conclusion**

Controversy offers an opportunity for classroom discourse. Its role in the classroom is controversial, itself, yet the literature indicates its value is substantial. The research literature indicates that productive discussion of controversial topics is rarely in occurrence in classrooms. My Teacher Resource guide was created to address this need for critical dialogue of controversial issues.

As revealed by the literature review, few studies have focused on cooperative explorations of controversy. Some research has explained controversial topics themselves, such as multicultural education, sex and sexuality, violence, war, and censorship. In regards to the studies that have been conducted, participants ranged from elementary and middle level students to teacher education. Overall, most of the research tends to focus on higher education in the United States. However, the ability to critically analyze and converse about topics of relevance is a skill that is worthy of attention for middle years students. The literature also indicates a lack of professional development opportunities, in Canada, in this field and accordingly confirms a need in this area.

“Students enjoy talking about controversy...it’s engaging and fun” (Rossi, 2006, p.113). The rationale for investigating strategies for cooperative controversy with middle years students is based on the recognition that students at this stage of development are engaged by critical inquiry. Classrooms come alive when topics such as sex and sexuality are introduced, with all students actively listening and responding. The British Columbia curriculum for Grade 7 Health and Career Education (Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia, 2010) provides an excellent starting point for introducing cooperative controversy strategies. Topics, in this subject

area, include sexual reproduction, internet bullying, abuse, HIV awareness, all of which are tantalizing to ponder and discuss.

In chapter 3, I discuss how I incorporated the information found during the literature review into the design of the Teacher Resource. The Teacher Resource reflects my findings from the review as well as my attempt to design a resource that is accessible and practical for middle school educators interested in inviting controversy into their classrooms.

## Chapter 3

### Design Considerations and Reflections

#### Considerations for the Design of the Resource

My goals in organizing this Teacher Resource were to create a resource that was user friendly and organized for quick access. I organized the Resource into four major sections. Three sections correspond with my nested approach to facilitating discussion of controversial issues in the classroom, and the fourth section explains the approach. I also incorporated a colour scheme to delineate the sections that correspond with the diagram created to organize my approach.

The four sections of the Resource are as follows: Introduction to a Pedagogical Approach for Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom (DCIC); Creating a Supportive Classroom Culture and Setting Ground Rules for Communication; Overt Instruction in Critical Thinking, Literacy and Dialogue, and, Situated Practice Using the Approach to Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom. The last section also includes a detailed unit overview and related resources. The goal underlying the sections was to create a linear format, in which the lessons and strategies built upon one another. However, teachers wanting to use my Resource can choose to focus on different sections at different times. If people believe that their classroom culture is already strong and cohesive, they can skip the first section. Those who are new to the process of facilitating critical literacy may choose to focus on the strategy preparation activities one year, and then take on the full approach the following year. Initially, the second section of the book was going to contain four well known strategies, presented as they appear in the literature. However, after much reflection on the ‘do-ability’ of this idea, particularly with 11 to 13 year

olds, I generated the ‘Critical Thinking to Critical Dialogue’ CTCD strategy in an attempt to fuse and simplify the strategies I had reviewed.

It was challenging to decide what to include in the (CTCD) strategy and it is in no way comprehensive. However, in order to create an approach that teachers can understand and implement, I thought it was important to provide an organized, linear system. Conversely, in an attempt to ensure that my strategy was not a “cookie cutter system”, I provide focus areas for each section so that educators can adjust how long they spend in each section of the strategy, as well as how they are going to scaffold the learning. While designing the focus areas I kept in mind the students who I teach, and reflected on their anticipated reactions to the materials, as well as how these ideas could work in my differentiated classroom.

In order to make my Resource attractive and useful to educators, in addition to the colour coded segments, I included a section with research supported ideas (page 6), and a section on challenges (page 55). I also incorporated related quotes from my research throughout the Resource. Teachers can choose to flip through the book to read these quotes and if something intrigues them, they can find related material on that page. I organized the Resource so that it has many small sub sections in each segment, and included colourful clip art as a way to increase its aesthetic appeal. I also included several sample handouts that teachers can photocopy and enlarge or adapt to suit their individual purposes. It is my hope that I have created a Teacher Resource that is not only full of useful and practical information for educators, but one that is interesting and pleasing to read.

### **Overall Reflections**

Now that my project is complete I am able to reflect on and marvel at all that I have learned during this process. My project started as a desire to help students to increase their

communication and group work skills and extended its scope to include critical literacies.

Children of today are inundated with media and advertising. Most are consistently connected to one form of electronic technology or another, and many spend large amounts of time communicating via text or social media. Because of this reality, I believe there is a profound need to develop skills in critical literacy and communication.

During the research phase of this project, I read over 100 articles. I focused on controversy, censorship, critical thinking, critical literacy, and dialogue skills. Although, I found all of the research very interesting, I found the scope of my research to be overwhelming at times. My investigation of critical literacy led me to believe that its roots run contrary to a standardized, scripted, approach to instruction, yet I knew that I wanted to create a user friendly Teacher Resource that situated critically literacy as its base. I devoted much time to reflecting on what to include in my literature review and what to leave out, and more time reflecting on the overall findings of my review of the literature and how I could transform them into something practical for educators.

Prior to creating the Teacher Resource, I created a table to organize the many related strategy suggestions. I borrowed many ideas from these research supported suggestions and then faced the task of organizing the information into something useful that responded to the strategies and challenges noted in the research. A major breakthrough in this process occurred for me when I created the nested diagram. The colour and design helped me to organize my ideas, and to realize that I did not want to create a Resource with a collection of strategies, but rather an approach that contained connected strategies.

I was surprised at how creative and inspiring I found this project to be. I enjoyed the research portion and colour coded my findings in order to organize them into related sections. I

found I needed to take time to process the new information, and spent a lot of time walking along the beach, thinking about all that I was learning. I visualized the many aspects of this project, created webbed diagrams as well as the overall 'Approach for Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom' (DCIC) and the 'Critical Thinking to Critical Dialogue' (CTCD) strategy. I tried on ideas and let them go; sometimes the latter was difficult to do. I discovered that it is possible to take on a project of this magnitude with a newborn baby, if you write all your thoughts down on sticky notes and discover the joy of writing until 3:00 a.m. when the house is quiet.

At this point, now that the Resource is written, I believe that the 'real work' lies in front of me; my next step is to try out the DCIC approach with my next class. I plan to organize an action research project so that I can monitor and reflect on the successes of my approach. Some of my questions will focus on how to implement this approach in my differentiated classroom (specifics will depend on the class composition), the length of time required to teach the students how to understand the ideas behind my question sheets, and how to read critically, using the critical literacy questions as prompts. I intend to reflect, consistently, on the effectiveness of class meetings as I have suggested they be organized, and look forward to organizing inquiry-based themes for my students to explore. Despite all of my questions, which can only be addressed upon implementation, I think that what I have created is a valuable teaching tool. I believe that its focus covers important life skills for students, as I have intended it to. Once I have facilitated the approach and its strategies, I would like to offer workshops in the Victoria area to any teachers interested in inviting controversy into their classrooms.

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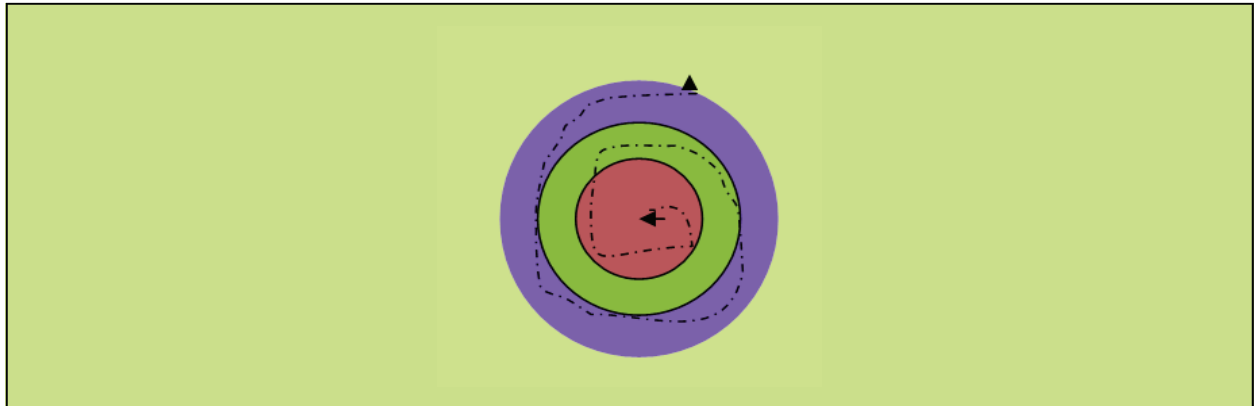
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## **Appendix 1:**

# **Inviting Controversy into the Classroom: A Teacher Resource for Implementing Critical Dialogue with Adolescents**

# **Inviting Controversy Into the Classroom**

## **A Teacher Resource for Implementing Critical Dialogue with Adolescents**



**Created by: Amy Collins-Emery ©**

**University of Victoria  
June 2011**



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## Rationale for Teacher Guide

Controversy, differences in opinion and wonderment form the foundations for critical inquiry and stimulating conversation. William Hazlitt stated “when a thing ceases to be a subject of controversy, it ceases to be a subject of interest” (1830, n.p.). The research indicates that controversy is a topic of interest for middle years students (Bolgatz, 2005; Rossi, 2006) and my experience as a Grade 7 teacher has shown me that students of this age love to share their opinions.

My rationale for investigating strategies for cooperative controversy with middle years students is based on the recognition that students at this stage of development are engaged by critical inquiry. Classrooms come alive when topics such as sex and sexuality are introduced, with all students actively listening and responding. However, I have also observed that most students of this age are not skilled in engaging in dialogue in a manner that is respectful and inclusive of all members. Too often, a few students dominate the discourse leaving others silenced and reactive and unsubstantiated comments are not uncommon. These experiences indicate a need for strategy based instruction in dialogue skills. Furthermore, the information age that we currently live in means that most students are continuously exposed to advertising, news, media, and other forms of information. I think it is important for students to be aware of this exposure and its effects on them.

The British Columbia curriculum for Grade 7 Health and Career Education provides an excellent starting point for introducing cooperative controversy strategies. Topics, in this subject area, include sexual reproduction, internet bullying, abuse, HIV awareness, all of which are tantalizing to ponder and discuss. Curriculum content can also be incorporated in other subject areas as well, including Language Arts and Social Studies. I have included a table of curriculum connection on page \_\_\_\_ in order to assist teachers with their planning, and to justify the relevance of incorporating the approach for discussing controversial issues in the classroom (DCIC).

In addition to their cross-content applications, and in recognition of the time

**“When a thing ceases to be a subject of controversy, it ceases to be a Subject of Interest.”**  
(Hazlitt, 1830,

constraints faced by teachers, the strategies are embedded in a nested approach that I believe supports the complexities and challenges inherent in discussing controversial issues in the classroom. The format for this teacher guide is based on the nested approach I created which includes three sections: the creation of an inclusive classroom culture, overt instruction in critical thinking, literacy, and dialogue, and situated practice. Student and teacher reflection also forms an integral component of each layer. Teachers can use the approach in its entirety or can choose to focus on one or two components independently. Prior to creating this handbook, I read approximately 100 peer reviewed articles on topics related to the discussion of contentious issues with adolescents. From this literature review, I discerned that students would benefit from a solid and predictable routine for practicing skills in critical thinking, literacy and dialogue. Practical guidelines for establishing such a 'routine' is what this Handbook offers to those educators who are interested in inviting controversy into their classrooms.

## Controversial Topics

Determining whether or not an issue is controversial *for the participating students* is important, as is the necessity of conveying the reality that most contentious issues do not possess one correct solution. Thus, when selecting issues, teachers should consider students' interests, experiences, maturity level, relevance to their lives, and significance to society. A well-designed discussion will satisfy the following three conditions: the topic will be arguable, located within the students' existing knowledge base, and educational in purpose (Henning, Nielson, Henning, Schulz, 2008). Possible topics include:

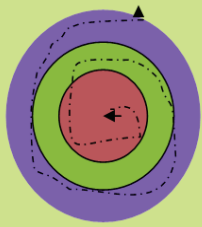
Ethnic and religious diversity	Nationalism	Wi-Fi in schools
Media manipulation	Social media issues	Abuse
Class issues	Sexuality	Ability
Media manipulation	Bullying	Racism
Competition for resources	Slavery	Food security
Cell phone use and cancer	Corporate Power	Politics
Degradation of the environment		

**“Students  
enjoy  
talking  
about  
Controversy  
...it’s  
engaging  
and fun.”**  
(Rossi, 2006,

## Key Points from the Research

- Johnson, Johnson and Smith (2000) define a controversial issue as “one for which society has not found consensus and that is considered so significant that each proposed way of dealing with it has ardent supporters and adamant opponents” (p. 30). Determining whether or not an issue is controversial for the participating students is important.
- There is a positive correlation between an open classroom climate and levels of political efficacy, interest, and participation (Rossi, 2006).
- A key to citizenship for socially just democracy is the development of a capacity to non-violently and equitably manage conflict (Bickmore, 2005; Clarke, 2007b).
- Children have the right to examine everything; education should involve critical inquiry into socially relevant topics that hold personal significance (Bolgatz, 2005; Wight & Abraham, 2000).
- Topical questions that may have multiple right answers, where different perspectives collide, enable students to practice higher order thinking skills, such as making decisions from an array of options, using reasoning to justify positions on an issue, and using evidence to support reasoning (Bolgatz, 2005).
- Multiple benefits are associated with engaging in controversial discussions including: higher level reasoning, critical thinking, increased retention, higher quality decision making, well-founded creative solutions, increased self esteem, more sophisticated thinking due to the ability to see issues from a variety of perspectives, and the capacity to work cooperatively in conflictual situations (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000).
- Students must be able to criticize another person’s ideas while confirming his or her competence and worth, and to see the issue from all relevant perspectives (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000).
- Teaching is inevitably political; teachers cannot be value-neutral, as the “downfall of neutrality is that it models a stance of moral apathy” (Kelly & Brandes, 2001, p.441).
- Emotions mediate students’ school performance and their decision-making more strongly than scientific and sound reasoning (Reis and Roth, 2010).

- We teach to promote critical thinking. We teach to ensure that students can become responsible citizens capable of meeting complex challenges in society. “We teach reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. Part of our charge is to teach about censorship” (Winkler, 2005, p. 48).
- Critical pedagogy includes the teaching of analytic, communicative, and strategic skills that will aid students in collective problem solving and the ability to make reasoned judgment (Kelly & Brandes, 2001).
- A crucial first step toward working with others to solve collective problems is learning how to discuss and debate emotionally charged issues (Kelly & Brandes, 2001).
- In regards to controversial issues, Schramm-Pat and Lussier (2003) point to need for explicit instruction in dialogue methods so that learners come to realize that dialogue does not require a monolithic resolution to a problem, “but rather the democratic virtues of open-minded deliberation and compromise” (p. 62).
- Because controversial issues are inherently contentious in nature, students need practice discussing controversial issues with one another, in order to learn how to engage in a potentially ‘heated discussion’ while maintaining control over their emotions. This practice requires a shift in focus from the personal to social, and takes place through an explicit foregrounding in the classroom of controversial, provocative issues regarding racial, class, gender, and political differences” (Beck, 2005b, p. 394; Cervetti et al, 2001).
- “Class discussion [is] a tool that encourages kids in thinking and learning...to use scaffolding and uptake. It is a controlled, student-run, teacher-motivated dialogue” (Adler, Rougle, Kaiser, & Caughlin, 2003, p. 321).
- Teachers must model exploratory talk, engage children in extended discussions of topics, and encourage them to see that responding to a teacher’s question need not simply mean providing the ‘right answer’. (Mercer, 2007)



## Introduction to a Pedagogical Approach for Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom (DCIC)

Implementing an approach that is inclusive of contentious discussion practices is a complex endeavour, one that is best perceived of as a series of stages. These stages build upon and are nested in one another, allowing the learning to be assimilated and built upon. Figure 1 below outlines the nested framework approach. This framework includes three interdependent layers, beginning with the creation of a classroom environment that is inclusive, respectful and safe for all members to participate and learn within. The second layer focuses on overt instruction in critical skills of thinking, literacy and dialogue within a classroom environment that contains the characteristics mentioned above. The third layer involves strategies for practicing the critical skills taught in a supported context. It is recognized that multiple opportunities for practice are necessary for skills to become learned and fully internalized (Adler, Rougle, Kaiser & Caughlin, 2003; Liggert, 2008; Reis, & Roth, 2010; Ross & Frey, 2003). Reflection is woven through each layer, as both student and teacher reflection form necessary components within this approach.

**Teaching is inevitably political; to avoid talking about political issues is to teach apathy.**

**Therefore some kind of practice with recognizing and handling social political conflict in constructive ways is essential to education for difficult citizenship** (Bickmore, 2005).

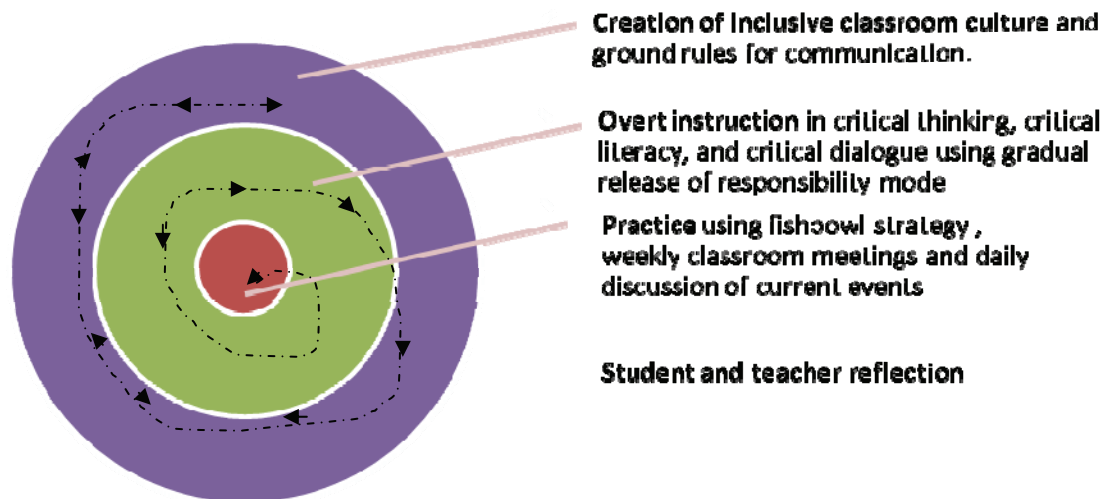
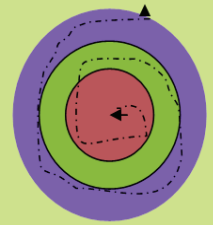


































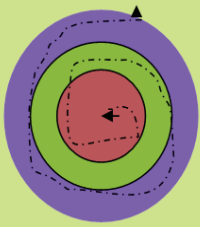
Figure 1. The Pedagogical Approach to Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom (DCIC)

























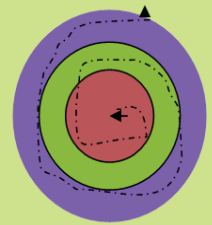
## Curriculum Connections

There are many curriculum connections to this approach, indicating that it is not 'extra' material to be covered. The curriculum links shown below were chosen from Grade 7 curriculum for British Columbia because it is the middle grade in most middle schools and thus will have some overlap with Grades 6 and 8. The coloured columns correspond with the sections of the approach and this teacher Handbook. Curricular connections for specific strategies will be elaborated on in the sections where each strategy is defined.

<b>LEGEND</b>				
				
	Creating a Supportive Classroom Culture and Setting Ground Rules for Communication			
	Overt Instruction in Critical Thinking, Literacy, and Dialogue			
	Situating Practice Using the Approach to Discussion Controversial Issues in the Classroom			
<b>Health and Career Education</b>				
<b>A2 Demonstrate an ability to apply a decision-making model to a specific situation</b> -based on their own or others' experiences, identify a variety of contexts for decision making (i.e. responding to peer pressure, risk-taking behavior, etc.) -describe influences (e.g. messages in TV programs, movies, magazines, music video, advertisements, Internet; explicit and implicit expectations of friends and family) that affected a specific decision they or someone else has made.				
<b>B2 Identify skills that are transferable to a range of school and recreational situations (e.g., time management, teamwork, problem solving, communication, adaptability)</b> -create a detailed list of skills that are transferable to a range of situations (i.e. co-operative teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, literacy skills, active listening skills etc.) -Identify current situations where they can apply these skills (i.e. schoolwork, babysitting, recreational activities, volunteer activities)				
<b>C1 Analyse factors (including media and peer) that influence personal health decisions</b>				
<b>C4 Demonstrate an understanding of the life-threatening nature of HIV/AIDS (e.g., HIV/AIDS damages the immune system, there is currently no known cure for HIV/AIDS)</b>				
<b>C5 Identify characteristics of healthy relationships and unhealthy relationships (e.g., healthy relationships – respect, open communication; unhealthy relationships – jealousy, power imbalance, lack of empathy)</b>				
<b>C7 Demonstrate behaviours that contribute to the prevention of stereotyping, discrimination, and bullying (i.e. leadership skills, conflict resolution, problem solving, effective communication skills, respectful language, respect for diversity)</b>				
<b>C9 Propose strategies to avoid potentially unsafe situations on the road and in the community, such as assertive communication skills</b>				

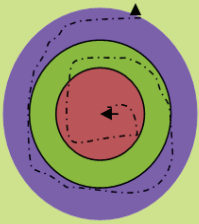


English Language Arts					
A1	<p>use speaking and listening to interact with others for the purpose of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-contributing to group success</li> <li>-discussing and analysing ideas and opinions</li> <li>-improving and deepening comprehension</li> <li>-discussing concerns and resolving problems</li> <li>-negotiating consensus or agreeing to differ</li> </ul>				
A2	<p>Use speaking to explore, express, and present a range of ideas, information, and feelings for different purposes and audiences, by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-using prior knowledge and/or other sources of evidence</li> <li>-staying on topic in focussed discussions</li> <li>-presenting in a clear and focused, organized, and effective manner</li> <li>explaining and supporting a viewpoint</li> </ul>				
A3	<p>Listen critically to understand and analyse ideas and information by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-summarizing and synthesizing</li> <li>-generate questions</li> <li>-making inferences and drawing conclusions</li> <li>-interpreting speakers verbal and nonverbal messages, purposes and perspectives</li> <li>-analysing ignoring distractions</li> </ul>				
A4	<p>Select and use various strategies when interacting with others, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-accessing prior knowledge</li> <li>-making and sharing connections</li> <li>-asking questions for clarification and understanding</li> <li>-taking turns as speaker and listener and paraphrasing to clarify meaning</li> </ul>				
A5	<p>Select and use various strategies when expressing and presenting ideas, information, and feelings, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-setting a purpose</li> <li>-accessing prior knowledge</li> <li>-generating ideas</li> <li>-making and sharing connections</li> <li>-organizing information and practicing delivery</li> <li>-self-monitoring and self-correcting in response to feedback</li> </ul>				
A6	<p>Select and use various strategies when listening to make and clarify meaning including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-accessing prior knowledge</li> <li>-making predictions before listening</li> <li>-focusing on the speaker</li> <li>-listening for specifics</li> <li>-generating questions</li> <li>-recalling, summarizing, and synthesizing</li> <li>-drawing inferences and conclusions</li> <li>-distinguishing between fact and opinion</li> <li>-visualizing monitoring comprehension</li> </ul>				



<b>English Language Arts</b>				
A9 Use speaking and listening to improve and extend thinking, by -questioning and speculating -analysing and evaluating ideas -developing explanations -considering alternative viewpoints -summarizing and synthesizing problem solving				
A10 Reflect on and assess their speaking and listening by -referring to class generated criteria -considering and incorporating peer and adult feedback -setting goals and creating a plan for improvement taking steps toward achieving goals				
B2 Read fluently and demonstrate comprehension of grade-appropriate information texts, with some specialized language and some complex ideas, -Including: non fiction books, textbooks and other instructional material, -visual and graphic material, reference material, websites, instructions and procedures, advertising and promotional materials				
B8 Respond to selections they read or view by, -expressing opinions and making judgments supported by explanations and evidence -explaining connections (text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world) -identifying personally meaningful selections, passages and images				
B9 Read and view to improve and extend thinking by, -analysing and evaluating ideas and information -comparing various viewpoints -summarizing and synthesizing to create new ideas				
B10 Reflect on and assess their reading and viewing by - referring to class-generated criteria -setting goals and creating a plan for improvement taking steps toward achieving goals				
<b>Social Studies</b>				
A1 Apply critical thinking skills, including comparing, classifying, inferring, imaginig, verifying, using analogies, identifying relationships, summarizing, and drawing conclusions – to a range of problems and issues				
A3 Compile a body of information from a range of sources				
A5 Defend a position on a contemporary or historical issue				

Figure 2: British Columbia Curriculum for Grade 7 that connects to the DCIC approach



## Year Overview and Timeline

Focus Area	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J
Making connections										
Communication Skills										
What's Happening?										
Class meetings										
Reflection										
Critical literacy skills (pre-strategy)										
Critical Literacy to Critical Dialogue										

Figure 3: A Year Overview of the DCIC Approach focus Areas

## The Importance of Reflection for Student and Teacher

Teacher and student reflection plays a key role in the implementation of critical dialogue about controversial issues and should be integrated as a regular practice. For this reason the approach to discussing controversial issues in the classroom (DCIC) includes reflection in each level. Reflection can occur via written journals, quiet moments or in dialogic scenarios, and provides opportunities for teachers and students to process new learning and their emotive responses to it. Various formats may be used throughout the year depending on the intended focus of the reflection. For example, initially simple response cards requiring no more than identifying one position might be used. Later, a double sided journal could be used to reflect on a personal reaction to an issue; one side could contain the emotional reaction and associated feelings, and the other side could address how values, personal bias, or media bias influence the felt emotion. This type of written reflection could help the learner understand how values and bias can influence emotional response.



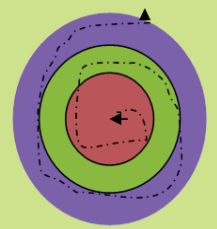
## ***Student Reflection***

Meta-cognitive activities, such as personal reflection, help students to reflect on their own thoughts, and interpretive processes, and the impact that value and bias has on these processes. Considering alternative viewpoints is a key component of critical dialogue and requires practice. Reflective practice can occur in many forms, including:

- Allowing time at the beginning of class for students to reflect on and generate discussion questions, individually and together, as well as time at the end to write down still pending questions and puzzlements. These activities could also help students broaden their thinking (Townsend & Pace, 2005).
- Scheduling journal writing before and after a discussion. This activity may help students develop dialogic habits of mind. Dialogue journals, whether between teacher and students or student and student, can help students to entertain one another's views (Townsend & Pace, 2005).
- Using two sided journals that can be used to record a students' reactions to a topic on one side, and their interpretation of the values or bias that have influenced them on the other side. This format could also be used for students to reflect on multiple perspectives of a topic.
- Having students tape and analyze paired conversations so that they can consider their own meaning-making processes (Townsend & Pace, 2005).
- Having students interpret and record their interpretation of body language and other forms of non-verbal communication using pictures or videos (Heath, 1983). This type of activity assists students as they develop an awareness of the diversity in people's expressive ways, and the realization that, in order to take the views of others into account, one must be able to hear what others have to say (Bloem, Klooster & Preece, 2008).

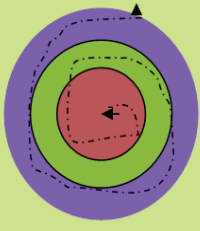
Student reflection may be used as a form of assessment if students are informed of this goal before hand. Rubrics and descriptive feedback offer a useful assessment approach that can help students to increase their meta-cognitive awareness of what they have learned and what they still need to focus on.

***Curriculum Connection:*** English Language Arts: A2, A9, A10, B8, B10



**Critical literacy and critical citizenship provide students with an approach to discussing controversy that encourages the development of awareness of multiple perspectives and the influence of personal bias and media through questioning and critical self-reflection.**

(Applebaum, 2004; Bickmore, 2005)

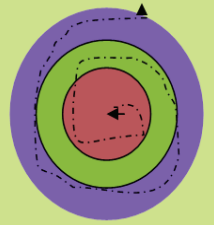


### **Teacher Reflection**

Implementing a pedagogy that invites controversy and controversial issues into one's practices necessitates reflection on the part of the teacher. There are several reasons for teachers to consider engaging in reflective practice. Studies have shown that a teacher's **understanding of values and bias** influenced what curricula were implemented in the classroom and how they were delivered (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Liggett, 2008). In addition, it was found that the **tendency to normalize the status quo** is a popular sub-topic in discussions of controversy in the classroom, particularly in reference to race and sexuality (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Bickmore, 2005; Ghosh, 2004; Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Liggett, 2008). For example, multicultural education is often presented from a perspective that views 'white' as normal. Teacher reflection on their personal values and bias is essential. Consistent with an awareness of personal values and bias is an understanding of the role that **teacher self-censorship** can play. As professionals we choose what to include in our programs and what not to include. Self-censorship can occur in many ways:

- When we select 'safe' methods and books;
- When we make our decisions about teaching and curricula which are based on how we might protect ourselves from anticipated complaints by parents or other potential censors;
- When we feel a disinclination to take on 'hot' topics for fear of the classroom chaos that might ensue as a result of uncertainty of guiding Ministry of Education policies; and
- When we worry that in teaching about controversy, we become the controversy.
- All of these are deterrents for teachers (Baily & Boyd, 2009; Clarke, 2007; Gerouki, 2007; Liggett, 2008). Educators must reflect and assess the cause of their fear in recognition that self censorship silences both teachers and students.

In addition to personal reflection, **collegial support** would provide a place for educators to engage in critical dialogue about their practice and the professional choices being made.



**A transparent policy with administrators, parents and caregivers** must accompany the DCIC approach (See below for a sample, introductory, letter to parents and guardians). Encouraging students to reflect on the topics discussed at schools with their families can further support the internalization of the critical skills being taught.

Dear Parents and Guardians,

As part of the Language Arts and Health and Career curriculum for Grade 7, we will be focusing on learning discussion strategies and communication skills for talking about current events, media manipulation, and other, potentially controversial topics. In support of this focus your child will be responsible for bringing in a newspaper article about a current event on # specific dates, and will be asked to research several perspectives on various issues.

Some of the topics we will be learning about and discussing this year are:

---

The purpose of this focus of study is to acquire and practice skills in critical reading (reading between the lines) and the ability to share and defend a position, as well as to respectfully listen to an alternate perspective. You can support your child's learning in this area by discussing current events, with your child, with the goal of defining the issue and analysing different perspectives one may take to understand it (dinner time and car rides provide great opportunity for these connections).

If you have any questions about this focus of study, please feel free to contact me at the school (include phone #)

(Salutation)

your name

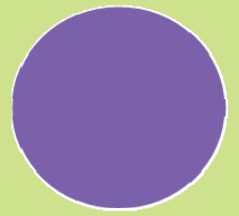
*Figure 4. Sample Parent Letter*

# **Creating a Supportive Classroom Culture and Setting Guidelines for Communication**

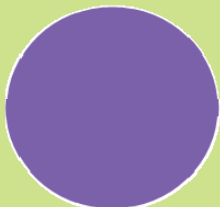
## Creating a Supportive Classroom Culture

The outer layer of the Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom (DCIC) approach is the largest because it forms the foundation to build upon. It includes the creation of a strong classroom community (Beck, 2005a), and the generation of ground rules for communication (Mercer, 2007) within a problem posing pedagogy (Freire, 1970, 1992). Key here is a classroom culture that allows for students to take risks in a safe and supported environment. This sense of safety is important for all learners, particularly adolescents; however, the strength of these components is effective only if they are continually nurtured. I suggest that teachers take time on a daily, weekly and monthly basis to support the constructive, inclusive nature of the culture of the classroom and address any arising challenges.

This section of the DCIC approach involves the creation and support of a classroom culture in which students and their teacher(s) are able to communicate and problem solve together effectively. In order to create and nurture this dynamic, consistent awareness and thoughtful attention is needed. The approach I advocate begins with the establishment of personal connections within the classroom so that the students are comfortable to engage in explorative and deliberative talk together. From there, ground rules for communication must be established so that a safe environment is created for talk and problem solving; the goal being the creation of conditions for a classroom that is a safe place for students to “engage with one another in critical dialogue that will move them to higher levels of understanding” (Beck, 2005a, p. 6). In order to move away from a predominance of teacher-student talk towards student-student dialogue, teachers need to set up the discourse format and then facilitate, but not dominate, the discussion (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002). Clarke (2007) purports that peer-led discussion leads to an increase in engagement that moves away from traditional teacher-centered instruction and encourages students to create their own vibrant discourse communities. This autonomy can stimulate and supports higher order thinking, and



**Conducting Engaging and thoughtful discussion in any classroom requires a well prepared, skilled teacher and students knowledgeable about the content germane to the issue as well as about the rules and guidelines for participating in civil discourse (Rossi, 2006).**



Planning for ‘problem posing’ approaches supports the DCIC approach because problems allow for classroom talk to be framed in ways that invite multiple perspectives. Considerations when planning discussion to engage students involve:

- choosing a topic that is arguable and that allows for differing opinions and interpretations,
- locating topics within the students existing knowledge base,
- Choosing a topic that serves an educational purpose
- extending students thinking beyond their previous experiences (Beck, 2005a; Gruber & Boreen, 2003)

Finally, it is important that teachers model exploratory talk, engage children in extended discussions of topics, and encourage them to see that responding to a teacher’s question need not simply mean providing the ‘right answer’ (Mercer, 2007).

### Beginning of Year Set-up

Beginning of the year set-up	Making connections, creating ground rules for communication and behavior.
Daily	Daily discussion of a current event
Weekly	Class meeting
Monthly	Fishbowl discussion
Ongoing	Reflective Practice (written, oral)

Figure 5. Beginning of year Set-up

### Considerations

- Set up desks so that they encourage interaction (i.e. a horseshoe shape, several tables of 4-6 desks)
- Create a cozy corner for reading or for taking space, as needed
- If possible create an open, carpeted, spot for sitting in during class meetings and fishbowl discussion (students can sit on carpet or on mats or chairs)

**Create conditions for a classroom that is a safe place for students to “engage with one another in critical dialogue that will move them to higher levels of understanding”**

**(Beck, 2005a, p. 4)**

## Making Connections

In order for learning to occur via discussion, students must feel safe and empowered to speak their thoughts. This security is important during exploratory, as well as deliberate talk. When students feel connected to one another they are more likely to fully participate in classroom activities. Because the DCIC approach embraces what Paulo Freire calls problem posing education, it is fitting for students to participate in a series of co-operative problem solving activities during the first few weeks of school. These tasks can range from silly to meaningful, from 5 minutes to 2 weeks, but serve to reinforce a sense of connection and belonging among classmates. A few examples are provided below:

- Students form groups of 4, each student must tape his/her fingers together with masking tape and work together to open a package of bubble gum (Hubba Bubba type package).
- People BINGO – students have to find someone who possesses the trait stated on one of the squares on their BINGO sheet.
- As a classroom, choose a school initiative to lead such as setting up a composting program for the school.

### Websites for more examples of collaborative teambuilding activities

FIRST - Examples of Activities - <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~first/examples.htm>

Top 10 Icebreakers of 2010 - <http://adulted.about.com/od/icebreakers/tp/Top-10-Ice-Breakers-Of-2010.htm>

Top 10 Kinetic Icebreakers - <http://adulted.about.com/od/icebreakers/tp/toptenkinetic.htm>

Index of Icebreakers, Games, and Activities - <http://www.icebreakers.ws/>

Icebreaker Questions - <http://www.icebreakers.ws/get-to-know-you/icebreaker-questions.html>

Active Games - <http://www.icebreakers.ws/active>

Icebreakers - <http://www.funandgames.org/games/GameIcebreakers.htm>

Amnesty International – Icebreakers - [http://www.amnesty.ca/youth/youth\\_action\\_toolkit/icebreakers.php](http://www.amnesty.ca/youth/youth_action_toolkit/icebreakers.php)

Team building Exercises - <http://www.teambuilding-leader.com/>

Kindness Wins - [http://www.teambuildersplus.com/team\\_building\\_kindness\\_wins.html](http://www.teambuildersplus.com/team_building_kindness_wins.html)

(All sites accessed on 25 May, 2011)

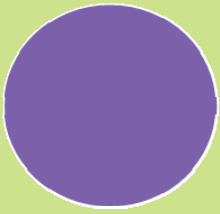


**Exploratory talk— uses language for thinking with others where partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas**

(Rojas-Drummond, Mazon, Fernandez, & Wegerif, 2006)

**Deliberative Talk— uses critical thinking and reasoned argument in order to create mutual understanding, build relationships, solve public problems, address policy issues, and to connect personal concerns with public concerns**

(McCoy, & Scully, 2002).



## Setting Guidelines for Communication

Teachers can establish, in a cooperative manner, an appropriate set of guidelines for respectful communication in the classroom, on the basis of their exploration of what makes a 'good discussion' with their students (Mercer, 2007). These expectations should be posted in a highly visible spot in the classroom and reinforced during classroom discussions. Once guidelines are established they could also be used for evaluation purposes that assist students in becoming more aware of their communication strengths and challenges.

*Curriculum Connection:* English Language Arts: A10

Health and Career Education: A2, B2.

## Current Event Discussion: "What's happening?"

This activity allows for daily practice in active listening, critical thinking and presentation skills, and exploratory talk. It can help students to develop an awareness of current events and issues on a local and global level, as well as consider how these issues are presented in the media.

### *Format*

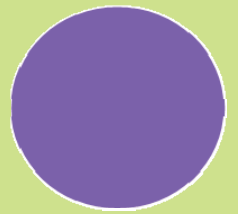
All students sign up to bring in a newspaper article on a particular day, meaning that each student will be sharing an article, and facilitating a related discussion every 6 weeks or so. Students are responsible to choose a news article that they find interesting. Appropriate news sources will be established by the teacher. For this assignment students must choose an article, share it with the class by reading aloud or providing an oral summary, and prepare 2-3 questions to pose to the class to get them thinking about the significance of the article. Types of questions may be framed by teacher, for example hand, heart, and head questions (answer is on the page, answer is based on an emotion, answer is implied in the article).

*Curriculum Connection:* English Language Arts: A1, A2, A5, B2, B8

Health and Career Education: C1,

Social Studies: A1

**Model exploratory talk, engage children in extended discussions of topics, and encourage them to see that responding to a teacher's question need not simply mean providing the 'right answer'. (Mercer, 2007).**



## The Classroom Meeting

“The purpose of classroom meetings is to provide a climate in which to learn specific social skills and establish a nurturing environment that supports and rewards children for using these skills in the classroom setting” (Frey & Doyle, 2001, p. 212). Classroom meetings provide students with an opportunity to practice their dialogic communication skills in a structured group format, and to discuss issues that are of immediate importance to them. These meetings can facilitate the development of skills for students to be independent problem solvers in the school, home, and community.

### ***Additional Benefits***

- Class meetings provided a safe environment to address student issues, practice effective communication skills, and resolve conflicts among students.
- Class meeting systems gives teachers and students the opportunity to mutually decide upon rules, and to develop a classroom management system that will work for them.
- Class meetings allow students to discuss behaviours, set goals, choose positive reinforcement rewards, and make suggestions for improvement.
- Class meetings support student development of problem solving abilities. Students who participate in solving classroom management problems during a class meeting had a great success in alleviating interruption in the classroom (Kariuki & Davis, 2000).

### ***Implementation Considerations***

Educators planning to implement classroom meetings should consider the following research supported suggestions:

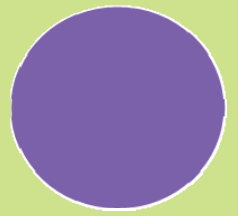
- Running the meeting in a circle or square (Gathercoal, 2000; Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn, 2000) as ‘circling up’ gives all students an opportunity during a class meeting to witness their teacher as an active part of the process and building the community. The teacher sits with students in the circle.
- Avoiding coercion of students to participate in a class meeting (Gathercoal,

- Teaching specific strategies for effective communication during classroom meetings. Students should know why these strategies work before they begin.
- Practicing strategies to enhance the effectiveness of the meetings. These include statements of appreciation and compliments, use of a talking tool to control multiple conversations at once, student agenda setting, teacher agenda setting, recording class meeting topics and events in a journal, and setting a goal or objective for each meeting (Collins, 2004; Gathercoal, 2000, Nelson, Lott & Glenn, 2000)
- Practice strategies, independently, for effective communication (as outlined below) during the first 5 weeks of the school year.
- Considering the use of journals after meetings to record summaries of issues or to suggest new ideas (Collins, 2004)
- Inviting the school counselor to attend the first few months of meetings because they are trained in group dynamics and behavioural psychology (Frey & Doyle, 2001).

### **Keys to Communication Strategies**

Before classroom meetings can effectively take place, teachers need to teach the students several necessary communication tools and strategies.

Students should have an awareness of those strategies that help and those that hinder successful communication. This process can be supported by co-creating a list of both types of behaviours that can be posted in the classroom. Students can practice strategies that support effective communication during all instances of group talk, including classroom meetings (see Figure 6 for a sample poster). These communication keys include giving and receiving compliments, using “I” statements, listening actively, reading body language, calming strategies, learning to compromise, moving forward, and staying on task (Frey & Doyle, 2001). Prior to using the strategies outlined below in real life situations, students should practice them, first using assigned scenarios, and then in general classroom activities.

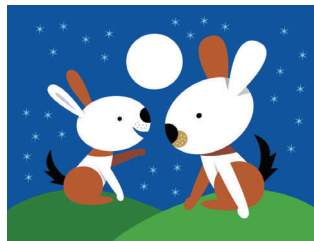


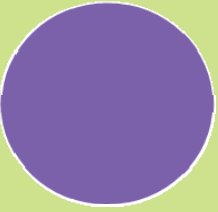
A chart similar to Figure 6 can be co-created with the students and posted in the classroom to remind students of the expectations for behavior during classroom discussions.

Communication Key	Communication Blocker
Compliments	Put downs
“I” messages	Blaming
Taking responsibility	Denying
Active listening	Not listening/not understanding
Compromising	Insisting on your own way
Moving to the future	Staying in the past
Good body language	Negative body language
Being calm	Being too angry or upset
Staying on topic	Changing the topic

*Figure 6. Keys to Effective Communication (Frey & Doyle, 2001)*

Note that the title of this chart is not “Rules” or “Acceptable and Unacceptable” behaviour. The focus of the chart is on strategies for effective communication. Each communication key is a strategy that is explicitly taught and practiced. Communication blockers refer to communication choices that students can become aware of and avoid. The inclusion of communication blockers offers an opportunity for students to be aware that these actions are communication choices to be aware of.

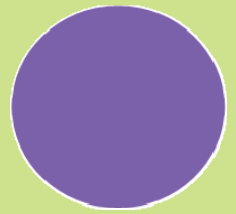




**Compliments** – Compliments are positive statements that acknowledge something a person does or did well. Students should be taught the difference between an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ compliment where an ‘inside’ compliment recognizes a personality trait, quality or an action, and an ‘outside’ compliment refers to something superficial such as hair style or clothing (Frey & Doyle, 2001). Students should also be cognizant of not sharing ‘fake’ compliments. Initially this process of sharing compliments may feel ‘staged’ but the latter will dissipate with practice. Practicing acceptance of a compliment with ‘thank you’ or ‘your welcome’ is also relevant. Students are encouraged to use compliments inside and outside of classroom meetings. The entire first meeting may focus on this communication skill.

**“I” Messages** – “I” statements are used to communicate how one feels. Students must understand how they are feeling, why they are feeling that way, and what they want from the person(s) they are communicating with in order to use “I” statements. It is also necessary to discuss the importance of not blaming others for their feelings. Teaching children to distinguish between “you” messages, which can insinuate blame, and “I” messages supports students in becoming effective problem solvers (Frey & Doyle, 2001). Students can practice using “I” statements during initial class meetings, for example, “I feel sad when I’m not included” (Frey & Doyle, 2001, p. 214). It may be a good idea to co-create a list of feeling words so that students have a range of options for describing their feelings in this context. In addition, students will need to practice stating their request at the end of their “I” statement so that it is phrased positively. For example, “I feel mad when you tease me so please don’t talk to me if you are going to tease me” instead of “I feel mad when you tease me so don’t talk to me.”

**Active Listening** - A key strategy for developing active listening is to encourage students to repeat back or paraphrase what the speaker they are responding to has just said (for example, “I heard you say you hate it when I sit at your desk, and you want me to ask you first if I want to sit next to Anna.”) (Frey & Doyle, 2001). It is important for students to know that paraphrasing is important for several reasons. It



gives the other person time to process what has been said, it allows the person giving the “I” message to be heard, and it ensures both parties share in the understanding of what is being discussed. This practice can be naturally incorporated into other classroom activities. For example, during a math lesson a student could say, “I understand how you did step one and two, but I don’t understand what to do next.”

***Calming down*** – A necessary skill for all. There are many simple strategies for calming one’s self such as, counting to 10, waiting to respond, focusing on one’s breathing. For particularly contentious moments it may be useful to have a ‘time out/cool down’ zone in the classroom that can students to retreat to as needed.

***Understanding body language*** – Actions speak louder than words, so it is necessary for students to practice cultivating an awareness of the messages inherent in body language (i.e. A lack of openness to problem solve displayed in arms crossed, head turned away, a tense rigid body), and how to attend to these non verbal cues and adjust problem solving strategy accordingly. (For a lesson on teaching body language awareness see <http://www.samaritans.org/pdf/A3BodyLanguage.pdf> )

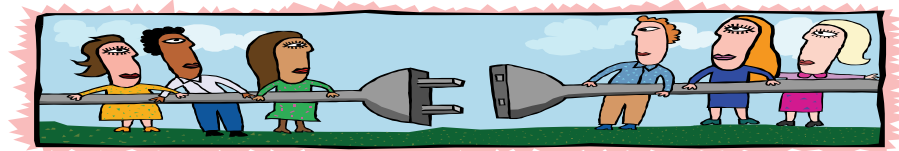
***Learning to compromise*** – Most problems or issues do not possess a single solution. An ability to compromise affords another alternative when the recipient of an “I” message does not like either choice (Frey & Doyle, 2001). Learning to compromise is also a useful skill when discussing problems in any context. Once students have engaged in a respectful communication in which both, or all parties have had an opportunity to be heard, strategies for compromising could include practicing statements such as “let’s agree to disagree.”

***Moving into the future*** – Getting stuck in the past happens when students disagree on the facts leading to a problem (Frey & Doyle, 2001). Moving into the future is a strategy that encourages students to move forward and focus on

addressing the problem at hand. This strategy helps students learn that it is not always necessary to have all of the facts, before moving on to problem solve. Moving on can be accomplished when a student acknowledges the “I” statement of another, and even if they do not feel responsible for the other students feelings, they agree to act differently in the future.

***Staying on topic*** – In a classroom meeting format, *Staying on topic* means focusing on the problem addressed in the request sheet. A few considerations for facilitators include:

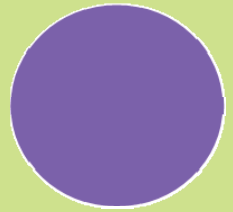
- Establishing a system for talking, such as the use of a ‘talking stick’
- Establishing a set time for the discussion of each issue. This guideline could be a general for all meetings and would help to ensure that more members of the class are actively involved in the meeting.
- Using specific prompts such as, “Let’s bring our attention back to the \_\_\_\_\_ issue.” Or “that sounds like an issue for another day. Why don’t you fill out a request form so we can spend time discussing that next time?”



### ***Classroom Meeting Procedure Suggestions***

(Based on Frey & Doyle, 2001)

1. The teacher gathers the class in circle and welcomes students to the meeting. The meeting commences with the sharing of compliments.
2. The teacher reminds the class of the previous week’s challenge, and one related, specific, skill of problem solving. The first request form is distributed (see figures 7 and 8 for samples). If students are unsuccessful solving a problem with a peer or teacher first they can fill out a request form any-time during the week. Limitations to consider include: one form per student per meeting, and allow a maximum of 5 forms per meeting.



Classroom Meeting Request Form

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your Name

What have you already tried in order to solve the problem on your own?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_, May I speak with you?

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when (I, I'm, or my) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Would you \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_

Feelings to use:

Happy	Ecstatic	Nervous	Sad
Angry	Uncomfortable	Enraged	Silly
Scared	Frustrated	Mad	Upset
Confused	Embarrassed	Hurt	Excited
Encouraged	Disappointed	impatient	overjoyed

(Adapted from Frey & Doyle, 2001)

Figure 7. Template for a Request Form for Classroom Meeting (Frey & Doyle, 2001)

Classroom Meeting Request Form

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your Name

State the problem Every time I lend Keaton my school supplies he breaks them or keeps them.

What have you already tried in order to solve the problem on your own?  
I asked him to give them back  
I stopped sharing with him

Keaton, May I speak with you?

I feel frustrated when (I, I'm, or my) pencils are not returned and are broken.

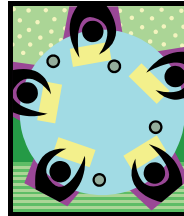
Would you please bring your own supplies or stop breaking my things

Feelings to use:

Impatient	Ecstatic	Nervous	Sad
Angry	Uncomfortable	Enraged	Mad
Scared	Frustrated	Disappointed	Upset
Confused	Embarrassed	Hurt	Excited

Figure 8. Sample Request Form for Classroom Meeting

3. The child who submitted the form begins with his or her “I” statement.
4. The students try to solve the problem using the strategies they have learned.
5. Once the students have come to a compromise, or an impasse, the teacher facilitator asks students what they noticed. Students are invited to give feedback on how students used the strategies such as active listening, use of “I” statements, and body language (positive or negative).
6. The Students can only provide feedback that relates to the communication strategies listed on the keys of communication poster. Teacher may sum up feedback and ask students if they would like to try to solve the problem again using the feedback received.
7. The process is repeated for each submitted request form.
8. The teacher ends meeting by offering a challenge or focus for students to work on during the next week.



**Student Facilitation** – Students should be ready to facilitate the meetings after approximately three months of practice in which the teacher systematically gives students more control each week. This gradual release of responsibility can be done by selecting students each week to choose people to share compliments, or to distribute the problem solving forms.

**Evaluation** – Improving students’ social communication skills is the most measurable outcome of classroom meetings, and the information is useful for sharing with administration and parents. A checklist or tally sheet based on the strategies practiced, or the items on the keys to communication poster can be useful tools for this. Teachers could focus on a few students to evaluate during each meeting by copying six evaluation forms onto one side of a piece of paper.

**Curriculum Connection:** English Language Arts: A1, A2, A3, A4, A6, A10  
Health and Career Education: A2, C7, C9.



# **Overt Instruction in Critical Thinking, Literacy and Dialogue**

## Overt Instruction in Critical Thinking, Literacy and Dialogue

The previous section focused on creating a learning environment that where students feel connected and safe to explore and communicate together, and on honing students communication skills. Overt instruction of strategies forms an important aspect for student learning, and this section of the DCIC approach describes various strategies that can be implemented to cultivate students' skills in critical thinking for critical literacy and critical dialogue.

### Contributions to a Critical Orientation

Critical thinking assumes that we are often governed by our prejudices, and that language can liberate us if it is used rationally (Temple, 2005). It assumes that we need to analyze all new information, and that what we speak and write may need to be reworked to ensure we can make logical and evidence supported claims (Temple, 2005). Readers must apply their critical faculties in order to understand new information, and the political and personal assumptions embedded within it. In the DCIC approach the process of critical thinking is infused with strategies for critical literacy, which also emphasizes that readers read from a resistant perspective that looks for the author's intent, motive, and audience, and that focuses on how power is situated, who represented and who is silenced. The strategy I created to support the DCIC approach provides a structure for children to move from critical literacy to critical dialogue and incorporates student reflection, and collaboration in both explorative and deliberate talk. The 'Critical Literacy to Critical Dialogue (CTCD) strategy includes the following four steps, identify an issue to be discussed, find facts, structure opinion and arguments, and discuss ideas (see Figure 9).



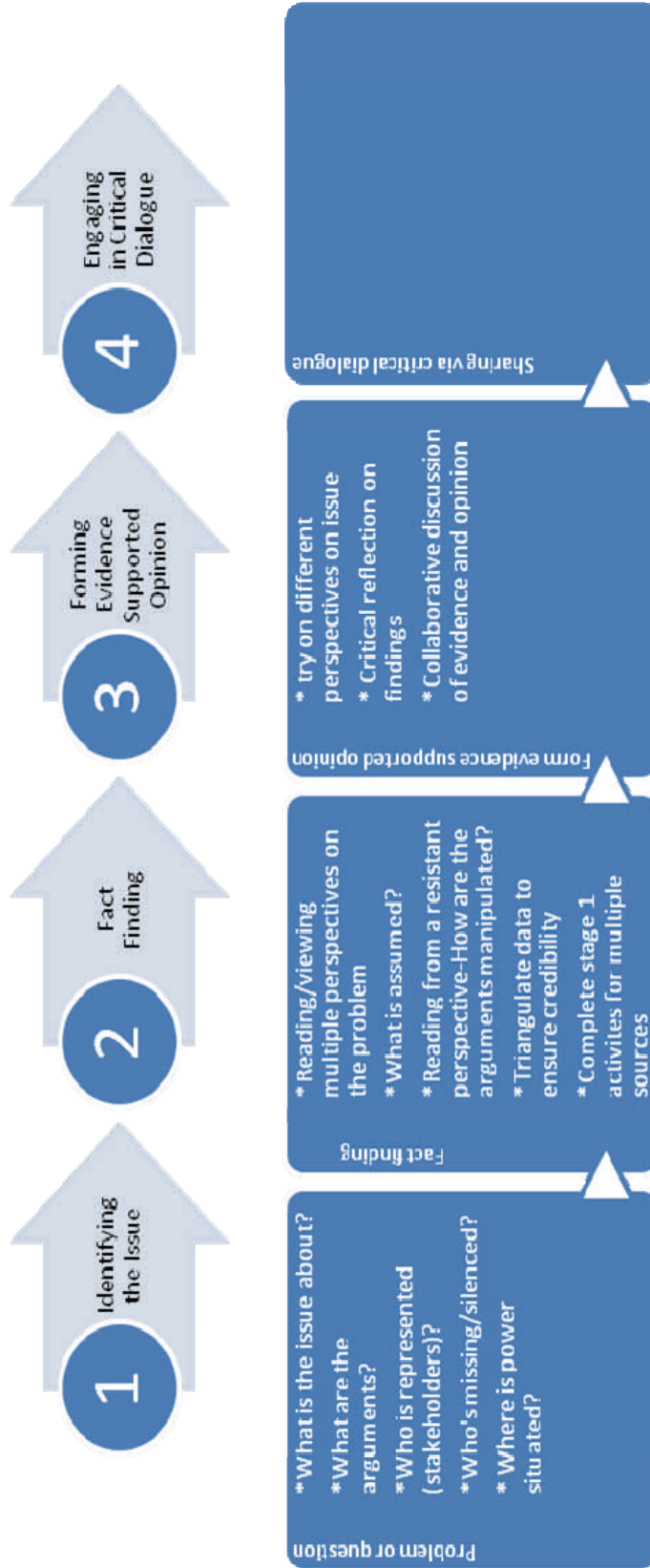


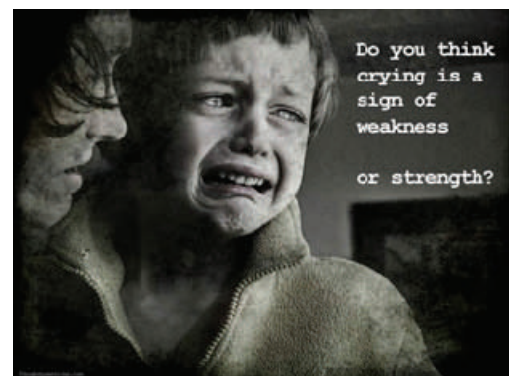
Figure 9. From Critical Thinking to Critical Dialogue Strategy



## Strategy Preparation Activities

Prior to implementing the Critical Literacy to Critical Dialogue (CTCD) Strategy, and during the making connections part of the year several independent activities can be done with the students to get them thinking about perspective and how it can be formed and influenced. These activities are not in a sequential order, and all can be used as opportunities for students to engage in exploratory talk.

- Responding to an observation. This activity requires little student preparation - can provide opportunity for a quick start discussion. Show a picture or a series of pictures to elicit a response, could use a period photograph, a graph, political cartoons, figures, posters or advertisement. Begin a discussion by asking students what they see or by asking them about primary features of picture (Henning, Nielson, Henning, Schulz, 2008). Ask broad questions such as above that students will feel safe responding too, listen to response to see what is imp to students and do not exert control but ask follow up questions that encourage students to clarify, reflect on, or extend their previous answers. Images like those below may be used (the site referenced has many similar photos). I also keep a folder on my computer with photographic Power Point slideshows that I consider have the potential to spark thoughtful discussion.



(Amazingworldwide.blogspot.com (2011) Retrieved from <http://amazingworldwide.blogspot.com/2011/04/thought-provoking-questions.html> on 1 June, 2011)



**Seize occasions that spontaneously arise to encourage students to express alternative points of view and to learn how to provide supporting argument for their own perspective and to listen respectfully to, and attempt to understand, the perspectives and arguments of others. (Wells & Arauz, 2006).**

- Jigsaw puzzle perception. Give each student or pair of students a piece from a jigsaw puzzle. Have the students predict what they think the whole picture is going to be. Students can be organized into a jigsaw framework, in which one person from each group remain while the others rotate. In this way, the talk that develops in one group can be compared with that from other groups and so the shared meaning continues to evolve as some thoughts get consolidated and added to while other ideas diminish as they are challenged and discarded. Within the groups, individuals find and present pieces of the picture. Some pieces will be identified as important for the whole picture while others will be discarded or set aside temporarily when others are not too sure of their part in the whole idea. Sometimes jigsaw pieces can be joined to others such that the part of the whole picture that any group possesses is likely to be clearer than the single pieces held by any individual within the group (Harrison, 2006). Afterwards discuss the significance of making judgements when a person has only part of the information (things are not always as they appear).
- Responding to a narrative. Read aloud, with students following along, a short piece of writing about something unfamiliar to the students. For example, a play-by-play description of a cricket game. The vocabulary words will be foreign for the students. Have the students predict what they think the writing is about, and then lead them into a discussion about the importance of understanding the author's intent and meaning.

Here's a sample that can be used:

#### Commentary

England have fought back well and hold a slight edge at the end of the day. They lost three quick wickets after being asked to bat. The first session belonged to Lanka but Cook ably supported by Bell first and Morgan later helped England to a respectable score. Prior played with a lot of freedom and pushed England to 342 in the last session. SL will be disappointed with the way they bowled in the latter part of the day. They can still come back strongly if they manage to pick some early wickets tomorrow morning. The seamers should get some assistance early on. This was an engrossing day and tomorrow promises to be another. Join us as we bring you all the action. Take care and Goodbye!

- Reading *Mr. Peabody's Apples* by Madonna (2003). Ask students to think about and share what they think the story is about. Then lead a discussion that focuses on how harmful assumptions can lead to stereotypes and unfair judgments about individuals and groups and thus to the establishment of social barriers. Have students share an experience where they have been recipients of biased judgments, or hurt due to untrue rumours. Questions to introduce this theme might include: What words or actions have ever been directed at you because of negative assumptions or stereotypes? How did the experience make you feel? How do you think you should have been treated in that situation?
- Students can practice viewing an author's stance with popular music, magazine advertisements, or documentary films (Behrman, 2006). Have students choose a publication to share with the class, along with their interpretation of the author's stance.
- Juxtapose two versions of the same story, two or more newspaper accounts of the same event, or two paintings of the same setting in order to facilitate a discussion on perspective. (Why did the author or artist chose to emphasize particular aspects? How does this emphasis change the message?). After students have come to a decision on a topic have them consider the nuances and context and find evidence *against* their position in order to find other ways to look at an issue (Bloem, Klooster, & Preece, 2008).
- Taking a Stand. Students identify their position on a controversial topic by standing in a self-selected position on a continuum. After an assigned reading, the teacher draws on the board or designates a spot in the classroom with each end of the area representing strong agreement with respective perspective. The students make decisions independently after having small group or whole class discussion, and then they explain and defend their opinions. (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002).

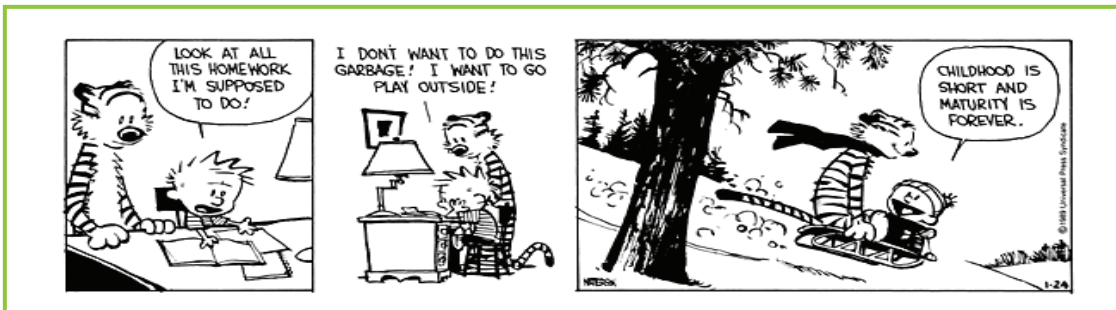
- Daily Quote. Have a thought-provoking quote on the board for students to view upon arrival in morning. Their responses do not have to be given during a formal discussion unless student-prompted. Simply ask if volunteers to share their thoughts, and if students are engaged by the quote, an informal class discussion can ensue. This strategy can provide daily opportunities to practice exploratory talk and critical thinking.

Recommended websites: [www.thinkexist.com](http://www.thinkexist.com); [http:// www.quotationspage.com/](http://www.quotationspage.com/)

Here are some sample ideas:

“In a controversy, the instant we feel anger, we have already ceased striving for truth and have begun striving for ourselves” ~ Abraham J. Heschel (Jewish theologian and philosopher 1907-1972)

Retrieved from [www.thinkexist.com](http://www.thinkexist.com) on June 15, 2011.



Watterson, B (1992). Retrieved from: <http://thecuriousbrain.com/?p=4594> on June 15, 2011

## From Critical Thinking to Critical Dialogue Strategy

This strategy was created as four separate but connected stages so that teachers can spend time providing overt instruction on each section in a manner that will build students meta-cognitive awareness of how to read and discuss an issue from a critical point of view.

### Step One: Identify and Explore the Issue

This first stage is the densest and will initially require several independent lessons that focus on developing various critical literacy skills. Once students are familiar with critical reading and viewing, they should be able to complete stage one independently or in small groups. I have separated the critical literacy questions into five separate areas in order to assist students in recognizing the many ways one can approach a text. These areas are framed as a key question:

- What is the issue? (accuracy, enough information, reasonable argument?)
- What does a reader bring to the reading? (connections and disconnections, prior knowledge, values and bias)
- What about the author? (What is the author's opinion or perspective? Is the author encouraging critical thought or positioning the writing as 'truth'? How is power situated?)
- What is this all about? (examine how and why the text was written, who would connect or not connect to this text, what is not mentioned and who is silenced? Why?)
- How else could this be viewed?

Included in this guide is a series of questions that teachers can use to help students to begin reading from a critical perspective. I suggest spending a day focusing on each of the five areas using the question sheet provided. If critical literacy is new for you and your students, you will have to carefully scaffold the learning. It is not necessary for students to answer every question on the sheet, teachers should select questions that fit with each respective issue. I have provided several suggestions for viewing text from each perspective area of focus. Once students are familiar with this format, the question sheet can be given to the students to be used for subsequent explorations, independently and collaboratively (see Figure 9). In order to make this process less overwhelming. I have included prompt handouts for each area that can be used during the initial introductory lessons.



## **Critical Reading and Viewing Prompts**

### **What is the issue?**

- Are the claims in the information accurate?
- Is there enough information?
- Are the sources primary or secondary?
- Are the conclusion presented in the argument reasonable?
- What criteria are being used to make a judgment? Moral or prudential? (Moral criteria for judgment are based on a concern for how all people will be affected. Prudential criteria are concerned mainly with how an individual person or group will be affected).

### **What does a reader bring to the reading?**

- Would you like it if this were done to you?
- What if everybody did that?
- Are there any situations where you would feel different or disagree with this value?
- Who might feel comfortable reading this text and why?
- Who might feel uncomfortable reading this text and why?
- What is your reaction to this text?
- How do you connect to this text?
- How do you not feel connected to this text?

### **How else could this be viewed?**

- How could this story be framed differently?
- How would that contribute to your understanding the text from a critical stance?
- Could the text have focused on different people or aspects of the issue?
- When comparing texts, what overall impression does each version create?
- Does one seem more accurate? Why do you think this?

### **What about the author?**

- What does the author want us to think?
- What constraints on perspective does the author have?
- Does the use of power lean more toward perpetuating stereotypes or toward challenging them?
- Is the author encouraging critical reading or is the text positioned as “truth”?
- Who, or what, is given more power or privilege in this text?
- Who, or what, is given less power or privilege in this text?
- What power relations might the author have had to negotiate through the publishing of this text? (What could have been edited?)
- Who is making the argument? Insiders or outsiders?

### **What is this text all about?**

- Who could have created this text?
  - What can you guess about the perspective of the writer (composer, speaker)?
  - Who are the intended audiences and how can you tell?
  - What assumptions are made about the intended audiences?
  - Are any perspectives, practices, or people are devalued in the text?
  - Whose voices are not heard in the text?
  - What alternate ways can texts be presented to give voice to the silenced?
  - Does the text position the reader as an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ and how does that change the reading?
  - Whose interests might be served in this interpretation of the issue?
- (Adapted from Clarke, 2007; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Spector & Jones, 2007)

Figure 10. Critical Reading and Viewing Prompts

### Critical Reading and Viewing Prompts

1

#### **What is the issue?**

1. Are the claims in the information accurate?
2. Is there enough information?
3. Are the sources primary or secondary?
4. Are the conclusions presented in the argument reasonable?
5. What criteria are being used to make a judgment, moral or prudential? (Moral criteria for judgment are based on a concern for how all people will be affected. Prudential criteria are concerned mainly with how an individual person or group will be affected).

### Critical Reading and Viewing Prompts

2

#### **What does a reader bring to the reading?**

1. Would you like it if this were done to you? Or Place yourself inside this issue, if this affected you, personally, how would you feel?
2. What if everybody did that?
3. Are there any situations where you would feel different or disagree with this value?
4. Who might feel comfortable reading this text and why?
5. Who might feel uncomfortable reading this text and why?
6. What is your reaction to this text?
7. How do you connect to this text?

### Critical Reading and Viewing Prompts

3

#### **How else could this be viewed?**

1. How could this story be framed differently?
2. How would that contribute to your understanding the text from a critical stance?
3. Could it have focused on different people or aspects of the issue?
4. When comparing texts, what overall impression does each version create?



### **What about the author?**

4

1. What does the author want us to think?
2. What constraints on perspective does the author have?
3. Does the author lean more toward perpetuating stereotypes or toward challenging them?
4. Is the author encouraging critical reading or is the text positioned as “truth”?
5. Who, or what, is given more power or privilege in this text?
6. Who, or what, is given less power or privilege in this text?
7. What power relations might the author have had to negotiate through the publishing of this text? (What could have been edited out?)
8. Who is making the argument? Insiders or outsiders?

### **Critical Reading and Viewing Prompts**

5

#### **What is this text all about?**

1. Who could have created this text?
2. What can you guess about the perspective of the writer (composer, speaker)?
3. Who are the intended audiences and how can you tell?
4. What assumptions are made about the intended audiences?
5. What perspectives, practices, or people are devalued in the text?
6. Whose voices are not heard in the text?
7. What alternate ways can texts be presented to give voice to the silenced?
8. Does the text position the reader as an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ and how does that change the reading?
9. Whose interests might be served in this interpretation of this issue?

These numbered cards may be used with students to organize critical viewing of material. By providing the critical prompts in small sections at first, it will help make the learning a less daunting task. Once, students are familiar with reading from a critical perspective according to the prompts included in this handbook, the larger question sheet could be distributed for students to use as needed.

*Curriculum Connection:* English Language Arts: A1, A3, A 6, B2, B8, B9  
Social Studies: A1, A3, A5

## **Step Two: Forming Evidence-supported Opinion**

During this stage, students will assess at least three different publications related the same issue or story. Type of text may vary, for example, a student may compare two newspaper articles and a video. The students will complete the critical reading questions from stage one for each publication, either independently or in partners or small groups.

*Curriculum Connection:* English Language Arts: A1, A2, A3,A4, A 6, A9, B2, B8, B9 Social Studies: A1, A3, A5

## **Step Three: From Critical Reflection to Opinion and Argument Formation**

At this point, students should be quite familiar with the issue being addressed. Students should review their notes on the topic and take some time to reflect on what they have read and how they have responded to the critical reading questions. Reflection considerations should include:

- How their personal values influence their understanding and opinion of the issue
- Whether or not this issue holds personal significance for them
- How media can manipulate the argument

Teachers may choose to co-create a set of reflection considerations with their students for use during this stage (see Figure 11 for a sample).

### **Reflection Considerations**

1. What are my beliefs in regards to this issue?
2. Why do I feel this way?
3. Is this issue relevant to me, personally, or to someone close to me?
4. How can media both reflect and create reality?
5. To what extent is the media either creating an issue or manipulating arguments

*Figure 11.* CTCD Step Three: Reflection Considerations



After reflecting on the topic being addressed, students can work in partners or groups of three to build their argument. During this stage students may choose to work with someone who has similar feelings on the issue, as their will be opportunity for sharing differing opinions during stage four. Partners may be chosen based on where students situate themselves during the “Taking a Stand” activity. Klooster (2001) provides a useful framework for building an argument that consists of four basic elements: a claim, reasons, evidence, and warrant. The claim (also called thesis, main idea, and central position) is the heart of the argument, the one most important idea of the thinker. The claim is supported by reasons and each reason is supported by *evidence*. Evidence can be statistical data, textual details, personal experience, or other kinds of evidence recognized as legitimate by the audience. The warrant is the underlying belief or assumption that the speaker or writer shares with the audience; the assumption that justifies the entire argument. See Figure 12 for a sample template that can be used to help students as they work together to build an argument. In addition, students should create a list of 8-10 key questions the group thinks ought to be posed during discussion. Questions are ranked in order of importance. These questions should be submitted to teacher prior to discussion to ensure adequate preparation has occurred.

**In practice, the gradual release of responsibility model should include a collaborative learning phase because it requires individual accountability based on the collaborative work of the group (Ross & Frey, 2003).**

### Building an Argument

**CLAIM:** What is your central position? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**REASONS:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

**EVIDENCE:** (provide as much as you can for each reason)

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

**WARRANT:** (Justify your argument, acknowledge counter-arguments and refute) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Figure 12. Argument Building Template*

**Curriculum Connection:** English Language Arts: A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A9, B2, B8, B9, B10  
Social Studies: A1, A3, A5

### **Step Four: Engaging in Critical Dialogue**

Dialogic interactions can take place in any number of configurations, such as across the circle during large-group discussion, in intimate paired conversations, or in small groups. They can be ongoing across multiple class sessions (Townsend & Pace, 2005). Dialogic pedagogy is more likely to be successful if offered in a predictable format, in which students are clear about what is expected of them in group contexts (Bloem et al., 2008). The DCIC approach includes class meeting formats, and lots of partner and small group work. It involves student reflection and student meta-cognition of communication skills. For these reasons, a fishbowl strategy is well suited for this

**The Fishbowl Strategy** (Adapted from Bloem et al., 2008, Copeland, 2008, Gallavan & Kottler, 2002; Smart & Featheringham)

The fishbowl strategy enables students to converse in deliberative dialogue in a small group setting while being observed by the larger group. The inner circle participant's focus on the content or topic and engage in discussion. While those in the outer circle consider both the content discussed and the communication moves that help or hinder the conversation. The structure provides a systematic way to identify, examine, and teach specific interpersonal communication behaviours. The focus is on students, not the teacher, with students becoming the experts and having the opportunity to teach one another. The larger circle group members are responsible for observing the speaking students communication skills and strategies and later these students provide constructive feedback. This method is ideal because it involves all students, and provides opportunities for students to hone their communication skills by practicing critical dialogue, as well as occasions for students to reflect on strategies used by effective speakers. If possible, model this type of dialogue for the students by role playing a fishbowl discussion using other adults in the school. Afterwards specific components of the dialogue strategy can be identified for the students.

After the students have completed steps one through three of the Critical Literacy for Critical Dialogue Strategy they are ready to engage in a structured discussion format for critical dialogue. Set up the classroom with two circles of chairs, an inner and an outer circle. The students are organized into two groups, an inner group that discusses and an outer group that observes and evaluates the discussion. Prior to the discussion remind the students of the classroom guidelines for effective communication, and build, with the students, a list of positive discussion behaviours (see Figure 13 for a sample poster of discussion behaviours). These can be posted in the classroom. Students should also co-create criteria for the discussion based on the strategy for building an argument (CTCD step three) and the Keys to communication guidelines (see Figure 6). Using this list, the teacher creates an evaluation form and informs students that they will be evaluated by others in class for their communication choices and behaviour as a means for creating awareness and setting goals to improve communication skills.



Positive Discussion Behaviours
Taking a position on an issue
Providing a relevant comment
Supporting a position with evidence
Bringing others into the discussion
Asking a clarifying question
Representing an opposing viewpoint
Demonstrating active listening

Figure 13. Positive Discussion Behaviours (Adapted from Smart & Featheringham, 2006, p. 280)

Initially, the students in the outer circle should focus on active listening and observe the students participating in the inner circle. Feedback can be provided orally using a format such as “two stars and a wish” in which students provide two positive observations and one suggestion for improvement.

All students are provided with an opportunity to participate in both the inner and the outer circle. During initial practice lessons, a reflective component should be added so that the students can reflect on strengths and challenges within this format and set goals for improvement.

#### The inner circle

The inner circle is composed of 5-6 students who have completed steps 1-3. These students may bring their completed Building an Argument sheet with them. The actual discussion takes about 20-25 minutes, so 2-3 groups could conduct a discussion in one class. The facilitator starts with a 2 minute introduction of topic and purpose of discussion. One student can be assigned or volunteer for the role of facilitator. The facilitator may assume role of keeping dialogue moving if it falters. When time is over each person will have 30 seconds to give a final statement about his or her position or feelings on the topic.

#### The outer circle

Members of the outer group individually observe and attempt to identify behaviours that enhance and detract from the discussion. They can use a format such as providing “two stars and a wish” for a specific student (or more than one student), or use the Fishbowl Discussion Feedback Sheet (Figure 13).

**Peer-led discussion leads to an increase in engagement that moves away from traditional teacher-centered instruction and encourages students to create their own vibrant discourse communities. This stimulates and supports higher order thinking, and improves students' text comprehension Clarke (2007a).**



<b>Fishbowl Discussion Feedback Sheet</b>	
Name of speaker: _____ Name of observer: _____	
<b>Positive Communication Behaviours</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Taking a position on an issue	
Providing a relevant comment	
Supporting position with evidence/facts	
Bringing another person into discussion	
Asking a clarifying question	
Representing an opposing view	
Demonstrating active listening	
Additional observations and/or suggestions	
General comments about the group process and discussion	

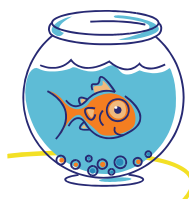
Figure 14. Sample Fishbowl Feedback Sheet (Adapted from Smart & Featheringham, 2006, p.281)

The Fishbowl Discussion Feedback Sheet can be used in several ways. For example, students could use the positive communication behaviours listed as prompts for observing the group in general. In this manner, the comment section of the form can be filled with the name and corresponding behaviour of the person exhibiting one of the behaviours indicated on the list. Another use for the Fishbowl Discussion Feedback Sheet could be to have students in the outer circle observe one or two students and record comments referring to when the behaviours on the list were exhibited. I included a section at the bottom of the form for students in the outer circle to record general observations in regards to the group dynamic in discussion they are observing. The feedback sheet can also be changed and adapted to reflect specific criteria that have been created by the teacher or co-created by all members of the class.

Prior to facilitating a fishbowl discussion the teacher should take time to teach students how to frame their feedback comments so that feedback is given in a positive manner based on the goals indicated on the sheet or other goals selected prior to a discussion. Furthermore, the outer circle participants could be given time to discuss their observations before providing feedback. The teacher can take part in this discussion to ensure that observations are based on the stated

criteria and are framed in a positive manner. Inner circle participants could be working on a reflective writing piece based on their discussion, during this time. Teachers should be aware that it may take several months of practicing verbal feedback in a supported context before students are able to do this independently.

*Curriculum Connection:* English Language Arts: A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A9, B8, B9  
Social Studies: A1, A3, A5



### NOTES

## Discussion Caveats and Troubleshooting

Despite recognition of the importance of genuine dialogic talk to the development of the capacity to think critically, particularly for adolescents (Sutherland, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978), research indicates a considerable deficit in practice (Avery, 2002; Nystrand, Gamoran, & Carbonaro, 1998). This deficit increases in regards to the discussion of controversial issues (P. Clarke, 2007). In creating this handbook I have tried to address some of these challenges. A few challenges are highlighted below, along with suggestions for addressing them.

**1. Time constraints resulting from curricular expectations. The curriculum can pose a barrier because discussion of controversial issues require in-depth study over time which may be hard to allocate given the time demands of government requirements.**


As noted on pages 10-12 of this handbook, required curriculum in many subject areas can be addressed using this method. Further curriculum connections can be made in various subject areas if subject related contentious topics are chosen.

**2. Pupils seeing the completion of a task, and not the process of talking as the key objective so they choose to sit in groups but work individually.**

Because the process of talking is framed as an important and regular classroom activity when using this approach, and because there is a meta-cognitive component included via reflection, as well as an emphasis on practice, students are more likely to recognize the value of discussion as a classroom norm.

**3. Teacher concerns about the reactions of school board and parents if issues are contentious in nature.**

Please see page 17 for a sample letter to give to parents. A transparent policy and an open classroom are often enough to address this concern. I have had parents call the school with concerns; however, my explanation of my learning outcomes and an invitation to come and view the discussion have always been



**“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy”**  
~Martin Luther King Jr.

*Helping students to communicate effectively when a contentious claim has been made and emotions are running high is a truly valuable endeavour.*

sufficient to quell concerns.

**4. Productive classroom talk can be challenging due to power distribution within a group scenario.**

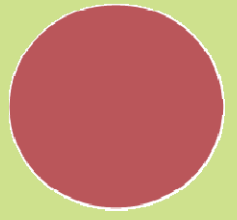
A strong emphasis on making personal connections during the beginning of the year, combined with clear expectations for communication and ongoing class meetings, as suggested in the DCIC approach, will help address this concern.

**5. Lack of professional development exists for teachers in how to productively orchestrate group work.**

I have included many strategies to address this concern. Please see "Making Connections" on page 21, and "Strategy Preparation Activities" on page 36. The CTCD strategy offers a structured format for partner work and small group collaborative activities.

**6. Classroom management is an understandable concern.**

Without classroom management this approach is not be doable. Thus, I have included a large section that focuses on creating a strong classroom culture. As emphasized, clear guidelines for communication are inherent in this approach.



**Situated Practice  
Using the Approach to  
Discussing  
Controversial Issues in the  
Classroom**

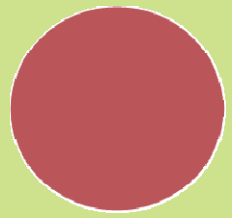
## Situated Practice Using the Approach to Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom

The approach to discussing controversial issues in the classroom is multilayered and requires continual vigilance by the educator in order to experience success. Implementing this approach requires regular practice with the associated formal procedures. Assessment can be based on the checklists and evaluation forms included in this guide, as well as rubrics based on the oral communication curriculum requirements.

In this section I provide a sample unit plan overview that can be used as part of the Critical Thinking for Critical Dialogue strategy (see Figure 3, the year overview for how this unit fits in with the overall DCIC approach). This unit plan overview focuses on addressing the influence and impact of social media on bullying.



**Topics for classroom talk must be framed in ways that invite multiple perspectives, in ways that make issues problematic. The teacher's role is to set up the conditions in which this dialogue can take place. This role involves both organizing the social setting so that dialogue is likely to be fruitful and also working with the learner to ensure that their learning moves forward (Harrison, 2006).**



## Example of Unit Overview

The following lessons are organized in a linear format but are not based on specific time allotment. One lesson may take several days to complete, depending on the students' level of critical literacy and familiarity with the strategy. When teachers are choosing the issue to be addressed the following considerations may be helpful:

- Frame your question or statement so that it is inviting for and likely to motivate students to engage in a lively discussion, and so that students are likely to choose differing sides within the issue. For example, do not say “Bullying is bad” because you are likely to have all students agree with this statement.
- Choose an issue that has more than two sides (although they may not be immediately obvious).
- Ensure there is enough information available for the students to become informed about the issue before introducing issue to students make. Know your students. If you know that one or more students may be personally challenged or emotional about a topic be mindful of this information in your decision making and planning. For example, discussions surrounding the topic of Canada’s role in Afghanistan may be sensitive for children in military families.

**Lesson One** – Introduce issue as a question or problem. Have students work in partners to discuss all sides of “Are Facebook and You Tube the new weapons of social destruction?” Share initial responses in a whole class format (exploratory talk). I included a war metaphor in this question in order to make it inflammatory and inviting for the students.

**Lesson Two** – Have students read CBC article: “Teen girl lured to brawl posted on YouTube: police”. Based on this article, have students share, in a whole class scenario, their initial responses to the question listed in the “What is the issue?” section of CTCD question sheet or Critical Reading Prompt Card #1 (see p. 38).

**Lesson Three** – Using the questions in the “What does a reader bring to the reading?” (card #2, see p. 38) section have students work in groups of three to discuss connections and disconnections to this topic.

Include explanations about the relevance of exploring disconnections to the topic.

**Lesson Four** – How else could this text be viewed? Have students reflect on the question in this section of the prompt sheet (card #3, see pg. 38), and then create a list of other perspectives on the event, and discuss the influence of media. Share the article “Nanaimo RCMP investigating after video of teen girls fighting posted online” and compare it to the first article.

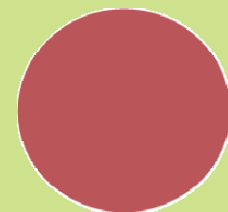
**Lesson Five** - Address the “What about the author?” section (card #4, see pg. 39) . Reflect on power and how it is situated. Have the students share examples from their experiences of observations of hierarchy based on power. Discuss writing style and how that influences what is conveyed. For example, give each student a statement and have them include it in a paragraph using two different writing styles. For example, use the sentence “She was running down the street.” in two separate paragraphs. One written as a humorous piece of writing and the other as a scary piece of writing. Students will share these in a whole class context. Link to author’s writing style in the article “Teen girl lured to brawl posted on YouTube: police”.

**Lesson Six** - What is this all about? (card #5, see pg. 39) Examine how and why the text was written, who would connect or not connect to this text, what is not mentioned and who is silenced? Why? Have the students write an additional section for the article that includes a stakeholder who was not represented in the story (i.e. the victim, a bystander who attends the same high school, a young child who witnessed the event, somebody’s Facebook friend who saw the post).

**Lesson Seven** – Introduce step two and explain. Show the video entitled “Words Hurt” Have students reflect independently in writing about their emotional responses is to the video

**Lesson Eight** – Have students work in pairs and answer a minimum of five questions from each section using the CTCD question sheet using the article “Nanaimo RCMP investigating after video of teen girls fighting posted online”. Collect responses and assess for understanding.

**Lesson Nine** – Discuss your observations and expectations based on the students



on this topic available for students to read. Show CBC newscast “Teenage Girls fight” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSBBsrn1OOQ> posted April 6, 2011. Retrieved April 16, 2011). Have the students complete prompt sheet based on the publication of their choice (of those offered in class).

**Lesson Ten** – Introduce elements of an effective argument. Explain the “Take a Stand” activity and have students complete this activity in relation to the issue of bullying and social media (see key questions in lesson one). The students can choose a partner to work with based on close proximity on the ‘Take a Stand’ line. Students will work with their partner and complete the Building an Argument Sheet. (Note: If most students choose one side of the line this result could lead into a discussion about why that is).

**Lesson Eleven** - Assign students to work with another group that shares a similar perspective, and have them compare and add to their arguments. Some students may be assigned to prepare for the dialogue assuming the perspective of the bully or a bystander as the teacher(s) needs to ensure that multiple perspectives on the issue are explored and brought into the upcoming dialogue.

**Lesson Twelve** – Review criteria for effective communication and guidelines for communication in the classroom. Have the students practice engaging in a critical dialogue in groups of four, two people sharing an opinion with two others who hold a different perspective. Have the students complete a written reflection on this experience to hand in.

**Lesson Thirteen** – Introduce the Fishbowl method of critical dialogue. If possible, model this technique using other staff members. Spend the lesson going over this format, discussing why it is valuable, and creating evaluation criteria, and answering questions.

**Lesson Fourteen** – Fishbowl discussions.

**Lesson Fifteen** – Independent and then group reflection on (a) the process of viewing an issue from multiple perspectives, (b). Their opinions about how the group work and discussions helped (or hindered) their learning, and. (c) The goals that can be set to improve their skills in both critical reading, and in group discussion and critical dialogue.

## Resources for Unit

### ARTICLE 1

March 31, 2011

## Teen girl lured to brawl posted on YouTube: police

By CBC News  
CBC News

***Police in Nanaimo, B.C., are investigating after a YouTube video showed a fight among several teenage girls that may have started with an ambush in a shopping mall's parking lot.***

Police in Nanaimo, B.C., are investigating after a YouTube video showed a fight among several teenage girls that may have started with an ambush in a shopping mall's parking lot.

The video, which YouTube has now removed, was taken last week and shows at least two teenage girls alternately punching and kicking another girl on the ground.

The dispute started with trumped-up allegations that a 15-year-old was bad mouthing others, said Const. Gary O'Brien of Nanaimo RCMP.

O'Brien said the situation escalated through allegations posted on Facebook and culminated in the parking lot fight.

"What we believe is the victim was set up," said O'Brien. "She was lured there by these girls. And there were a number of people watching. So we're looking at other people who may have brought this to fruition and in fact caused the fight to happen."

Several other teenagers could be seen watching the fight.

The RCMP has informed the school district about the fight, and even though the brawl did not happen on school property, the district said it would offer its support. O'Brien said police are considering recommending assault charges against the girls who appeared to have set up the fight.

### **School district's efforts called not effective**

The girls who allegedly organized last week's fight are from the same school as a student who committed suicide last year because of bullying.

The Nanaimo-Ladysmith School District vowed to crack down on bullying at the school after a 15-year-old male student at Dover Bay Secondary School, Ashkan Sultani [<http://www.cbc.ca/news/anada/british-columbia/story/2010/03/01/bc-sultani-bullying-suicide.html>], and committed suicide in January 2010.

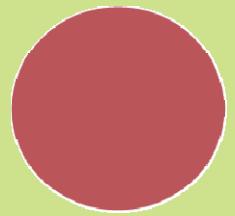
But the mother of another girl from the same school says her daughter was forced to change high schools twice because of bullying, and the school district's efforts to stop it aren't working.

"When it was reported ... the people that were in trouble then got their friends after her," she said.

"Then you report that group, and now you've got about 12 people, 20 people that hate you," said the mother, who asked not to be identified in order to protect her daughters identity.

"The problem is every time she told; she's the one who got in trouble. She's the one who suffered."

It will take the entire community to combat the problem, said Sibylle Artz, a professor at the University of Victoria and an expert on youth violence.



## ARTICLE 2

## **Nanaimo RCMP investigating after video of teen girls fighting posted online**

By Danielle Bell, Postmedia News March 31, 2011

Postmedia News

Nanaimo RCMP are investigating after a fight among several teenage girls was captured on video and posted online.

A dozen bystanders watch four girls fight in a parking lot near Pier 1 in the video, which was posted to online broadcast site YouTube on Monday.

At one point, two girls alternately punch and kick a girl who is lying on the ground.

RCMP called the fighting, its subsequent capture on video and the need for an audience "extremely disturbing."

With the proliferation of cellphones and other technology, police say it is not unusual for incidents to be recorded or for word to spread and people to gather quickly.

An anonymous person forwarded the cellphone video footage to Nanaimo RCMP on March 17.

Police say the fight took place over the spring break.

The girls involved in the fight are between 14 and 15.

Police say they have identified the girls in the video and have spoken to the victim's family. Police say no one was seriously injured but the victim suffered bumps and bruises.

The girls all knew each other and had been together at nearby Woodgrove Mall earlier.

No arrests have been made but police are not ruling out the possibility of charges as they continue to investigate the roles of the girls in the video. No charges are being considered against the bystanders.

The parking lot area near Woodgrove Centre is a place police say teens commonly gather, where fights have occurred.

Nanaimo RCMP say video footage of similar incidents has warranted charges in the past.

On Thursday, the video had been removed by YouTube for "violating its terms of service policy."

© Copyright (c) The Victoria Times Colonist - <http://www.timescolonist.com/technology/Nanaimo+RCMP+investigating+after+video+teen+girls+fighting+posted+online/4539525/story.html#ixzz1OG8MiBKJ> - Retrieved on April 16, 2011

April 15, 2011

## **Nanaimo Teenage Girl Bullying Video - Outrage after teen girls beating another girl caught on tape**

**Postmedia News Service: Friday, April 1, 2011**

**Nanaimo RCMP are investigating after a fight among several teenage girls was captured on video and posted on YouTube.**

**In the video, posted to online broadcast site YouTube on Monday, you can see a dozen bystanders watch four girls fight in a shopping mall parking lot. The video has since been removed by YouTube.**

**At one point, two girls alternately punch and kick a girl who is lying on the ground.**

**An anonymous person forwarded the cellphone video footage to Nanaimo RCMP on March 17.**

**Police say the fight took place over spring break in the parking lot at Woodgrove Centre. The girls involved in the fight are between 14 and 15 years old. No one was seriously injured.**

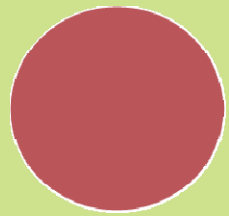
**Police say they have identified the girls in the video and have spoken to the victim's family. No arrests have been made but police are not ruling out the possibility of charges against at least two girls. Officers are continuing to investigate the roles of the other girls in the video. No charges are being considered against the bystanders.**

**The parking lot area near Woodgrove Centre is a place police say teens commonly gather, where fights have occurred.**

**Nanaimo RCMP say video footage of similar incidents has warranted charges in the past.**

**© Copyright (c) Shaw Media Inc. - Retrieved on April 18, 2011 from <http://www.globaltvbc.com/Outrage+after+Nanaimo+teen+girls+beating+another+girl+caught+tape/4542767/story.html>**

**\*\* There is a newscast on this site as well, but has a warning for viewer discretion.\*\***



## ARTICLE 4

## **B.C. girls in YouTube fight charged with assault**

By CBC News  
CBC News

*RCMP are recommending two teenaged girls from Nanaimo, B.C., be charged with assault in connection with a fight that was posted to YouTube.*

**RCMP are recommending two teenaged girls from Nanaimo, B.C., be charged with assault in connection with a fight that was posted to YouTube.**

**Investigators arrested the 13- and 14-year-old girls in early April and then immediately released both from custody on a Promise to Appear for one count of assault under Section 266 of the Criminal Code, according to Const. Gary O'Brien.**

**Police believe the girls lured the 15-year-old victim to a mall parking lot [<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2011/03/31/bc-nanaimo-you-tube-girl-fight.html>] some time in the last week of March and took turns attacking her.**

**Several others teens watched the brawl and at least one of them recorded the event and posted it to the popular video website. YouTube has since removed the video.**

**The fight was believed to be the culmination of a dispute among the three schoolmates that was fuelled by rounds of accusations on Facebook, said RCMP Const. Gary O'Brien.**

**The two accused girls, students at Dover Bay Secondary School, have been ordered to have no contact with the victim or each other, O'Brien said.**

**None of the youths can be identified.**

**You Tube Video of CBC News broadcast – “Teenage Girls Fight” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSBBsrn1OOQ> posted April 6, 2011. Retrieved April 16, 2011)**

## ARTICLE 5

## Teen girls charged in Nanaimo YouTube brawl

By: ctvbc.ca

Date: Monday Apr. 18, 2011 10:06 AM PT

**Two young girls have now been charged with assault after a brawl between five teenagers was filmed and posted online during March break.**

The YouTube video showed a girl being punched in the face by two other teens during a fight in a Nanaimo shopping mall parking lot on or around March 17.

The victim suffered a cut to her lip and a black eye from the altercation. As many as 20 youths watched the fight and made no effort to intervene.

Two girls, aged 13 and 14, have been ordered to have no contact with the victim. The girls are set to appear in Nanaimo Youth Court on June 16.

The probe was launched after the YouTube video link was forwarded to a Nanaimo school liaison officer.

Const. Gary O'Brien said the video was viewed hundreds of times before it was removed from the video sharing website.

(Retrieved on April 16, 2011 from [http://www.ctvbc.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20110418/bc\\_nanaimo\\_teen\\_brawl\\_110418?hub=BritishColumbiaHome](http://www.ctvbc.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20110418/bc_nanaimo_teen_brawl_110418?hub=BritishColumbiaHome))

### ARTICLE 6 — Extra material for lesson 9.

**The first video was created by a grade eight student in response to being bullied. The second is a response to that video.**

Pollack, Alys. "Girl Silently Speaks Out Against Bullying" Retrieved on June 2, 2011

from <http://www.buzzfeed.com/theuniblogger/a-y0ung-girl-silently-speaks-out-about-bullying-bhd> >and <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37\\_ncv79fLA&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37_ncv79fLA&feature=player_embedded)>

xoerikae. (Mar 30, 2011). Response to Words Hurt. Retrieved on June 2, 2011, from

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**NOTES**