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Teaching Students to Think About Thinking

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## Making Deep Thinking the Norm

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Whenever I ask students a question and they respond with a long silence, I start to worry about a few things. I worry about the quality of my question, I worry about whether I'm being fair, and I worry about whether I should swoop in at some point and provide clarification. But most of all, I worry about whether all of the kids in the room are staring at me because I'm asking them to do something hard: to sit and think about ideas that are not clear-cut, that can't be answered by scrolling through a smartphone.

This work is hard, but we can help students get comfortable with the struggle by shifting our classroom culture from a task-oriented pedagogy of coverage to one that invites open-ended thinking, inductive reasoning, and metacognition. Simply making more time to ask questions like, "What do you think?" can signal a shift to valuing student thinking and voice, while allowing teachers to check for understanding in a low-risk, student-centered way.

## Challenging Students to Push Their Thinking

Trusting relationships create a foundation from which students can push their critical thinking without the fear of taking risks. For example, layered brainstorming before a writing task can push students to unconventional perspectives. Suppose a prompt asks the writer to develop an argument about the benefits of vegetarianism. Students first make a list of frequently used arguments in favor of vegetarianism, then set that list aside to brainstorm less common examples. Once students begin to write, they may or may not decide to use that second list of thoughts, but they have the benefit of developing ideas in a risk-free space that encourages them to push past traditional boundaries.

In another example, in my creative writing class I ask students to list all the possible ways someone could use a Kleenex, with the proviso that they cannot share any already accepted uses of that

particular product. Once students began to think, they usually come up with ideas that are hilarious or inspiring, or both. Some students have imagined a lovely sheet set for a gerbil made of Kleenex, while others make prom dresses out of tissues.

Whatever content the prompt produces, the class is a safe space where students build on ideas by adding their own thoughts and supporting inventiveness. Ultimately, I have found that allowing time for discourse around open-ended thinking produces stronger literacy, language and thinking skills.

## Student-Owned Learning

Giving students choices in how they learn or provide evidence of learning invites students to think about their thinking and how they might learn best. For example, if a student shares that she does her best thinking while talking, assign her a "thought partner" who can write down ideas so that when it is time to do an assignment, much of the thinking is already done.

Or, if my class is resisting an assignment, I open a discussion about why. I incorporate their feedback and make visible changes to the learning process where possible. Being flexible in my teaching lets students own the learning and empowers them to think about what will support their thinking.

Does our pedagogy invite compliance or contemplation? The more we can steer instruction toward the latter, the more we will support independent learners who can drive their own thinking. Rather than enabling educators to look at instruction as a series of tasks to check off a list, let's encourage them to think about how metacognition can align to skills and standards to produce a deeper level of student work.

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