

Thinking critically within a subject area

Another important reason for thinking carefully about what concepts or knowledge should be taught in a curriculum, is that we often want pupils to think critically within a subject. However, for pupils to think critically, they must have a secure understanding of the knowledge within the subject area they are being asked to think critically about. If we don't explicitly teach the relevant domain-specific knowledge, our pupils are likely to struggle with any activity that requires critical thinking.

An analogy

We are going to use a cooking analogy to help us to understand this idea. Let's think about the 'dish' as the demonstration of pupils' critical thinking about a subject area. Let's then think about the 'ingredients' that are used to produce this dish, as the relevant domain-specific knowledge.

Firstly, if pupils do not know what the ingredients are, they are very unlikely to be able to make the dish! However, often we will tell pupils what the ingredients are and expect that this will be enough for them to be able to make a dish. In order to think critically, or in this analogy use the ingredients to cook, they need to have these ingredients easily at hand.

For our pupils this means that they need to have enough relevant subject knowledge in their long-term memory to draw upon in order to think or 'cook' well. The more developed pupils' mental models are, the better able they will be draw upon the knowledge or 'ingredients' when they are asked to think critically. In other words, pupils will be able to cook a far more successful and satisfying 'dish'!

Common pitfalls

A common pitfall for supporting pupils' critical thinking is to focus too much on the process or the product of their critical thinking. For example, spending a disproportionate amount of time on learning how to structure a critical essay or looking at model answers, rather than spending enough time to help pupils master the domain-specific knowledge required to think well about the subject area. To use the above analogy again, we might spend a lot of time learning about how to use the kitchen appliances or follow the steps of a recipe, but without good knowledge of the ingredients and their properties, we would be unlikely to be able to cook anything that was edible or tasty.

To support you with understanding where there are opportunities for pupils to think critically in your phase and subject, take some time now to explore the relevant frameworks.

If you are in primary or secondary please explore the National Curriculum.

If you are in Early years please explore the EYFS statutory framework and Development matters framework.



Consider the following questions:

1. What does critical thinking look like in your subject?
2. Identify in your scheme of work where you have planned opportunities for pupils to think critically.

Your final training seminar focuses more on how to help pupils apply knowledge and skills to other contexts.