

In my last post, I suggested that perhaps we're asking the wrong question.

Instead of asking, "*How do we teach critical thinking?*", we should be asking:

"How do we design learning experiences in which critical thinking becomes unavoidable?"

Here's an example.

Year 8 Interdisciplinary Unit

The Future of Water: Who Gets What and Why?

(Linked to UN Sustainable Development Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation)

Rather than teaching critical thinking as a separate lesson, students investigate a real-world problem:

Should a growing community facing water shortages prioritise households, agriculture, industry, or environmental sustainability?

There is no single correct answer.

To respond, students draw on science to understand water systems, mathematics to analyse consumption data, humanities to explore social and economic implications, and English to construct evidence-based arguments. Success depends not on finding "the answer", but on the quality of their reasoning.

In this environment, critical thinking is not an add-on. It is the mechanism through which learning occurs.

A significant contributor to this work is **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**.

While often associated with inclusion, I have always viewed UDL as a framework for **excellence rather than accommodation**.

By providing multiple means of engagement, representation and expression, UDL encourages students to approach problems from different perspectives, evaluate information critically, select appropriate learning strategies, and communicate understanding in diverse ways.

Students are not constrained by a single pathway to success. Instead, they are encouraged to analyse, interpret, create, question, and transfer understanding. UDL therefore supports critical thinking by fostering cognitive flexibility, learner agency, and deeper engagement with complex ideas.

This aligns closely with a broader vision for a 21st-century learning community.

The future of schooling is not determined by buildings, furniture, or technology. It begins with understanding the nature of learning itself. Education—our core business—should drive the environment and community that it both informs and inhabits.

A genuine *learning-to-learn* model draws on research into motivation, curiosity, knowledge acquisition, mastery, creativity, transfer, and self-efficacy. It prioritises inquiry, collaboration, academic rigour, creativity, and purpose.

As Sir Ken Robinson argued, creativity deserves the same status as literacy and numeracy. Creativity and critical thinking are not competing priorities—they are complementary capacities essential for innovation and human flourishing.

The Assessment

Rather than asking students to recall isolated facts, we might ask:

Develop a water management plan for the community and defend your recommendations to a panel representing government, industry, environmental groups, and local residents.

Success is determined not by whether students arrive at the "right" answer, but by:

- The quality of their reasoning.
- Their use of evidence.
- Their ability to consider multiple perspectives.
- The strength of their justification.

In an era of AI, limitless information, and increasing misinformation, information is abundant.

Judgement is not.

Perhaps the challenge for schools is not teaching critical thinking explicitly.

Perhaps it is designing curriculum, assessment, and learning environments so thoughtfully that **critical thinking becomes impossible to avoid.**