

# Pros and Cons

## Our Point of View: Learning to Think

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We live in a time of change. Everything seems to be in transition, and education is no exception. There are all kinds of new ideas and new approaches to teaching. We would like to tell you about a system of teaching methods adopted by our teachers a few years ago—a program for the development of critical thinking. Actually it is more than just a methodology—It is a whole philosophy of education. As 11<sup>th</sup> graders who have studied in this environment for over three years now, we want to share our opinions about critical thinking and its influence on our lives both in and outside of school.

The new teaching methods have a direct effect on us as students. Until recently we came to class with only one expectation—to be given information. But at some point we began to notice changes. No one seemed prepared to feed us ready-made knowledge. The whole atmosphere of the classroom had changed. Previously, we didn't think that our friends and teachers could be interested in our ideas. We would try to avoid having the teacher call on us, averting our gaze and appearing as inconspicuous as possible.

But now the situation is different—the teachers really take an interest in what we think. They allow us to think for ourselves in class, and even to make mistakes. Since we no longer feel that the classroom is a battlefield, we don't feel a need to defend ourselves



Photo: Irmela Kagaya

against the teacher's questions. The teachers used to interrupt us when we said something wrong, but now they are willing to hear us out and they value our opinions. We have taken some unorthodox approaches to the curriculum; and we are expected to do more independent work.

Even the way our work is assessed has changed. In the old system, teachers would begin every class with an oral quiz on the homework. It was so boring to listen to the same old memorized rules and theorems repeated over and over again. Now we work in groups (which is really fun!) or in pairs, and prepare presentations of the homework material. This is much more interesting than standing there waiting your turn to spout out essentially the same answer as everyone else, and wondering what grade the teacher will give you for it. Nowadays, sometimes we actually get to evaluate

our own work! Working in teams shows us the importance of objectivity in evaluating our work, as well as teaching us to listen to one another and to value our classmates' opinions.

As we reflect on our classes and discuss what we have learned, we realize that our views have become much more progressive. It must be difficult for the teachers, trying to organize our studies in a whole new way. We are aware of changes in our own attitudes in class—we have become more open and eager to learn, and we are not afraid to speak up and ask questions. The transformation is most dramatic in some of our classmates who always used to seem timid and insignificant. Now they express such interesting thoughts, and they can argue so convincingly in support of their opinions!

We have all become more reflective, less reliant on the opin-



ions and ideas of others. And if we want to form our own opinions, we have to base them on facts and figures, so we are learning to search for information, process it, choose the things we need, contribute some of our own ideas. We never used to have to do any of this. Of course, it was easier to just sit there and listen to the teacher talk. But the situation has changed. We have gradually come to understand that the knowledge we acquire on our own, through independent and conscious effort, is much more useful than the knowledge that used to be handed to us.

Many of us have noticed a change in our attitudes outside the classroom, too, which affects our relations with friends, parents, even with our younger brothers and sisters. For example, three years ago it wouldn't have occurred to us to wonder *why* our younger brother was acting up—we would just tell him to shut up, or even punish him. Now, we find ourselves trying to see things from his point of view, to understand his motives.

We believe that this change to a new way of learning has come at just the right time in our lives. We are growing up and coming face to face with the problems of communicating with other people. We don't always know how to act in a given situation or how to react to another person—whether to accept his opinions or try to change them. The new attitudes we are forming can help us resolve these problems. In class we have learned how to analyze and evaluate the behavior of lit-

erary characters, whereas three years ago we would just go along with the teacher's description of them. We have learned to accept one another's opinions and viewpoints, and to be tolerant. It is these very skills that will now help us find understanding with other people.

We realize that the development of thinking cannot be limited to the mind of a single person (be it a teacher or a student), but requires like-minded colleagues. In discussing this fact, we came up with the idea of a school journal devoted to critical thinking. Our journal, *CT Island*, has been in existence for over a year now. We thought this title would be appropriate because it refers to the idea—critical thinking—that was responsible for bringing us to this point in our personal development. *CT Island*, a combined effort of teachers and students, provides a forum for expressing both our ideas and our doubts, a place for engaging in both debate and co-operation. We are glad we decided to work together with the teachers on the journal, as many of the issues that concern us are the same. The publication process gives us an opportunity to discuss and develop our ideas on these issues, to make them more concrete. In fact, in our school community *CT Island* has now become a vehicle for advancing new points of view and a new way of thinking.

Of course, nothing is perfect. There is always a "fly in the ointment," as they say. Our new approach to education has its own problems. We live in a small town

that has few resources for research, particularly when it comes to up-to-date materials. It is not easy for us to get access to the Internet, so getting the information we need is extremely difficult. There is so much we want to find out! How can we form our own opinions when we have so little to base them on?

There is another problem, too, one that lies within our own minds. We often find that our old habits take precedence over critical thinking. And no wonder—the tradition of just taking our elders' word for granted, and not accepting any personal responsibility, is many centuries old.

There are students who ask: *What good are these new teaching methods to me? And why should I put out all this extra effort?* We would like to answer that question with a question of our own: *Why do you expect instant gratification? You have to invest some time and effort in order to see the benefits.*

Despite the drawbacks, the positive effects of the new teaching-learning system in our school are obvious. Sometimes we ask ourselves, "Do I need this? Do we need this? Wouldn't it be better to just leave things alone, to go back to the traditional way of doing things?" In a few people's minds, this is still an open question, but most of us would never even consider going back.

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