

21st Century Skills: Critical Thinking

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According to a poll taken by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 99% of the respondents believe that success in the increasingly global economy depends on developing critical thinking and analytical skills in today's students.



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Critical thinking and analysis is purposeful directed thought. It is not easy and requires explicit mental energy and focus. Critical thinking and analytical skills include:

- Exercising sound reasoning in understanding
- Making complex choices and decisions
- Understanding the interconnections among systems
- Identifying and asking significant questions that clarify various points of view and lead to better solutions
- Framing, analyzing, and synthesizing information in order to solve problems and answer questions.

As we go about our lives the majority of our day does not require critical thinking or a high level of analysis. Decisions such as what we will wear to work, the route we drive to the store, or developing our plans for the weekend require a lower level of thinking. Most of our daily decisions are made at this “automatic pilot” level of thought. It is when we move out of the automatic mode and exercise deliberate thought in our decision making, we must demonstrate our ability to think critically and analyze. Decisions such as creating a

plan to assess and reduce our electric consumption, confront and manage a debilitating illness, or develop a career path that will meet both personal and financial needs all require higher level thinking and problem solving strategies. Unfortunately, many critical decisions are made at the automatic pilot level because our critical thinking skills have not been developed, refined or used on a regular basis.

In order to prepare our youth for success in the 21st Century it is essential that we provide them with the instruction, training and practice to develop critical thinking, analyzing and problem solving skills. As influential adults we have the power to instill many of these strategies when interacting with our younger generation. When addressing an issue, encourage youth to clarify the concern, consider the topic from several points of view, identify the assumptions, implications and inferences, seek the root causes, evaluate all of the information and create strategies to solve the issue. This practice will encourage and embed critical thinking and analysis into their cognitive problem solving process.

In the future, today's youth will be making decisions that will impact the economics, safety, and sustainability of our country. Public policy, environment, and health care are examples of continuing issues they will have to face. Basing the discussions and ensuing solutions on critical and analytical thinking will be imperative. Preparing our future generations to confidently address these issues is our responsibility. Don't forget, their greatest teacher and model may be YOU!