

Elements of Reasoning in English Language Arts:

The Logic behind the Words

July 15, 2013

Michelle Watt

Language Arts permeates the fabric of everyday life. From primal communication between mother and infant to secure basic needs to doctoral level thesis, the art of language is everywhere. The importance of studying language and how to communicate is of paramount importance, so much so that it is a core subject studied throughout the world. To study language in a critical manner is best practice. This paper will explore the logic of English Language Arts (ELA), it will use the elements of reasoning to provide a working conclusion of what it means to be a critically thinking ELA Student.

Purpose, the first element to look at through the lens of ELA, is intent with which we inquire. So the question that needs to be asked is: What is the purpose of studying ELA? Simply answered: We study ELA to learn how to communicate with efficiency. However, there is much more to purpose than that. The purpose of ELA is not just communication, it is the expression of thoughts and ideas, it is the facilitation of ideas and information from person to person. The purpose of ELA is to make the student literate, they then have the ability to read, write, speak, listen, view and represent their understanding of through various modes of communication. These include non-fiction, fiction, song, video, poetry, plays, and images. All of this will help the student gain an understanding and appreciation for ELA. For example, a student with a firm grasp of language arts will be able to create, with precision, a professional resume that will increase their chance of gaining employment. The purpose of ELA is so that students know to write in a manner that does not make them a cannibal. A student who has embraced the purpose of ELA will know that it is not "Time to eat children!" but that it is, "Time to eat, children!" The placement of a comma is a very important distinction that a student who has studied the purpose of ELA will understand.

The second element that this paper will address is the question-at-issue, as questions are vital to critical thinking (Nosich, 2012, p. 51). When critically thinking a matter through, we start by asking an open-ended, inquiry question. The subject of ELA is open to any key question. An educator must decide what direction the unit will take and ask the key question accordingly. An example of a key-question in ELA is, "How does the author interpret the world around him?" Most authors write with the intent of reconciling an issue that surrounds them. Their point of view (POV) is unique and offers a different perspective to the reader, by looking at how the author interprets their surroundings can provide readers with insight and an opportunity to explore in a critical manner, information presented. Through thought provoking literature, any type of interpretation can be examined with an attempt to reconcile. In his book, *Outliers* (2008), Malcolm Gladwell challenges us to understand why some people succeed and others do not. He interprets data and analyzes information to understand the world around him in relation to the success of others. He claims, with documented data to substantiate his claims, that success is a combination of birthdates, practice time, a nurturing environment, and being at the right place at the right time.

Information is an element of logical reasoning. We must have information that is free of prejudiced conclusions. Information in ELA can be considered two-fold. Information could be about the piece of writing, the information that is used provides the body of the work. But information in relation to the study of ELA could be how that body of work is created, the information of the writing process. For example, a first year university student may present a paper for a history class on the Reformation and the implications for the Catholic Church that it had. The student may include information such as who Martin Luther was, what transubstantiation means and how the Catholic Church lost its monopoly. Information about

syntax, grammar, sentence structure and other conventions are also important to recognize in ELA. The same paper, if not written well will not convey the proper information. For example if grammar is incorrect and sentence structure confusing the paper will be undecipherable and the message will be lost, resulting in poor communication and a loss of grades for the student. Information in ELA is like learning a different language, we all might be able to manage a phrase or two, but it requires in depth information to be clearly understood.

Another element of reasoning to consider when analyzing the logic of ELA is that of assumptions. An assumption is, as Nosich (2012) tells us, “everything you take for granted when you think through something” (p. 52). An important element of critical thinking is to the ability to be aware of your assumptions when analyzing (Nosich, 2012, p. 52). An assumption specific to ELA is that everyone likes to read and analyze what he or she has read. When studying ELA many instructors focus on analysis, considering it important to understanding a text and often tend to over analyze. An example of over-analyzing is explained by poet laureate, Billy Collins in his poem “Introduction to Poetry”, “But all they want to do / is tie the poem to a chair with a rope / and beat a confession out of it” (12-14). Assuming that people who enjoy reading also like to analyze what they have read is the same as saying that people who like to fly also enjoy skydiving. While the two are related, many would agree that analyzing a piece of writing would be as enticing as jumping out of a perfectly good airplane.

Another element of reasoning is point of view (POV). All work in ELA will always have a POV attached to it. The POV is the lens that the work looks out from. A POV in ELA is different for every piece of work. There are multiple POVs in ELA and they are open to interpretation. An example of a POV is first person, the story told from the POV of the main character, and the pronoun “I” found throughout the work. POV in ELA can be compared to a

forest, sometimes it is hard to see the forest for the trees and other times it is hard to see the tree for the forest. POV is in every piece of work that we encounter, but we often are not aware of it unless forced to interpret it.

Another element of reasoning is fundamental and powerful concepts. Fundamental and powerful concepts drive ELA. An example of a fundamental and powerful concept in ELA is language fluency, including the art of active reading and listening. A goal for all students is to understand concepts in the subject area that they are studying (Nosich, 2012, p. 56). A concept is a general notion that is central to the subject being studied. An example of a concept in ELA is grammar. For students to understand the subject of ELA, they must have a grasp of how grammar works and why it is important to use. The importance of learning the concepts of ELA can be compared to the importance of a chef learning to cook. He may be able to turn out a meal, it is cooked, and everyone can eat it, but it lacks *somethin*. After learning how to blend herbs and what flavours work best together he can turn out a magnificent meal that will have people talking about for days. In much the same manner an ELA student can write a story, it contains all the required elements but it lacks *something*. If that same student masters the concepts of figurative language, creative thinking, and plot twists, they will produce a piece of writing that will leave the reader hoping it will be book one of a trilogy.

Closer to the end of a reasoned inquiry the element of conclusion and inferences are arrived at. With all critical thinking, conclusions are working conclusions that can be adapted when new, correct information presents itself. The element of conclusion is an answer to a question-at-issue that is open to re-visiting when new, correct information presents itself. An inference is defined as a conclusion based on evidence and reasoning. In ELA conclusions and inferences can be arrived at, however because the content matter is subjective these will vary. It

is hard, as an ELA, teacher to mark a conclusion or inference wrong because we all bring different background information with us, as long as the person making the claim can critically reason their thinking the conclusion should be considered correct. As most conclusions and inferences in ELA are founded in empirical data, there cannot be a right or wrong answer, only critically reasoned working conclusions. An example of a conclusion in ELA is that Macbeth's character flaw is ambition. A conclusion and inference in ELA can be compared to the story of five blind men and an elephant. Each man was touching a different part of the animal and each man described the animal in a different way, therefore arriving at five different conclusions. Each man was correct in his answer, so could not be considered wrong, however not one indicated that the animal was an elephant. They all brought different background information and inferred differently while all talking about the same animal. Our students bring different background information and make their conclusions and inferences grounded in that, while employing critical thinking as educators of ELA, fostering critical thinking must acknowledge the "correctness" of their findings.

A different element is that of Implications and Consequences. An implication is what we consider after making a choice. Implication is the "Now what?" portion of a conclusion. Consequences are the results of a decision, the idea that a reasoned conclusion will provide positive consequences, but not always. In life, tough decisions must be made and they have far-reaching implications and consequences. When considering these two factors we have to look beyond where we decide we have concluded to, with a reasoned judgement, and consider what will happen as a result of that conclusion, this is to consider the implications and consequences of a conclusion. An important question to ask is "What follows from [the conclusion]?" (Nosich, 2012, p. 53). In ELA, implication and consequences are important to consider. Just as we

consider the POV, context and assumptions, the implications and consequences of our reasoning must be considered. An example of implication and consequence in relation to ELA is that we expect that students from grade one to three will “learn to read” and students from grades four to twelve and beyond will “read to learn.” The implication is that students can read by grade three, the consequence is that if they do not know how to read by the end of grade three, they will not learn. The application of implication and consequence in the ELA classroom could be illustrated using the fairy tale of The Three Little Pigs. The first pig, the one who built his house out of straw, is the student who does not care to study ELA and the big bad wolf/society blows his house/dreams and future down and he has run for his life. The second pig is the student that built his house out of sticks, he has tentative understands the English language and how to apply it, so society blows his dreams and future away. However, the last little pig has built his house out of brick, he has a firm grasp on the English language, he can read and write with great proficiency, he takes in his brothers and he supports them all. The moral of the story or rather the implications and consequences of this choice to master the English language has positive outcomes.

English Language Arts is the foundation of the education pillar. All other subjects are built on the student’s ability to read, write, and express their thoughts and ideas. The elements of reasoning; purpose, question-at-issue, information, assumptions, point of view, fundamental and powerful concepts, conclusions and inferences, and implications and consequences provide the framework to reason the study for this discipline. They are the support for guiding a critical inquiry based approach to ELA. By providing students the framework and posing critical overarching questions, they can reason through the elements and discover the importance of their learning.

References

Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: the story of success*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books.

Collins, B. "Introduction to poetry." *Poetry Archive*. http://www.cstone.net/~poems/intro_lo.htm

2008. Accessed July 15, 2013.

Nosich, G. M. (2012). *Learning to think things through: a guide to critical thinking across the curriculum* (4th ed.) Boston MA:Pearson.