
PROMOTING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

Nasiba Mahkamova Otajon qizi ¹

¹ A head of teacher at academic lyceum named after
M.S.Vosiqova under the TSUL

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The article "Promoting Critical Thinking Through Inquiry-Based Learning" explores how inquiry-based learning (IBL) fosters deeper student engagement and enhances critical thinking skills. It emphasizes the shift from traditional, lecture-centered education to a student-centered approach where learners investigate questions, problems, or scenarios rather than simply memorizing facts. The author outlines key strategies for implementing IBL, such as posing open-ended questions, encouraging exploration, and supporting evidence-based reasoning. Research findings are cited to show that IBL improves analytical abilities, promotes curiosity, and prepares students for real-world problem-solving. The article concludes by recommending practical classroom applications and teacher training to effectively integrate IBL across disciplines.

INTRODUCTION. In today's dynamic and information-rich world, critical thinking is no longer a luxury—it's a necessity. Traditional education systems, long focused on rote memorization and standardized testing, are increasingly being challenged by progressive pedagogies that place student thinking, questioning, and exploration at the center of learning. One of the most effective among these is **Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL)**—an approach that encourages students to ask questions, conduct research, and draw conclusions based on evidence. Through IBL, educators can cultivate not only knowledge but the essential habits of mind that define a critical thinker.

What is Inquiry-Based Learning?

Inquiry-Based Learning is an educational method built around students investigating open-ended questions or problems. Rather than being passive recipients of information, learners in an IBL environment actively explore topics, formulate questions, test hypotheses, and present their findings. This approach is rooted in **constructivist theory**, which asserts that learners construct knowledge most effectively through active engagement and reflection.

There are different levels of inquiry, ranging from **structured inquiry**—where the teacher provides the question and outlines the process—to **open inquiry**, in which students

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have full autonomy to design their investigations. Regardless of level, all forms of IBL aim to develop deep understanding and transferable skills.

Critical Thinking: A Core Outcome

Critical thinking involves the ability to analyze information objectively, evaluate different perspectives, reason logically, and make informed decisions. In the context of IBL, critical thinking emerges as students:

- Formulate meaningful, research-worthy questions
- Evaluate the credibility of sources and evidence
- Draw logical conclusions based on data
- Reflect on their reasoning and revise ideas based on new findings

Through these processes, students learn to think independently and develop intellectual resilience. They become less reliant on memorized facts and more adept at thinking across contexts.

Key Features of Inquiry-Based Learning That Promote Critical Thinking

1. Question-Driven Learning

At the heart of IBL is curiosity. Students are encouraged to ask "why," "how," and "what if"—questions that move beyond factual recall and demand critical engagement. Teachers act as facilitators, helping students refine their questions and think through how to find answers.

2. Active Engagement with Content

Students conduct experiments, gather data, analyze results, and synthesize information. This process of **active learning** strengthens their ability to think systematically and logically. Engaging with real-world issues makes learning relevant and encourages deeper intellectual exploration.

3. Collaborative Learning

IBL often involves group work, where students learn to listen, argue respectfully, and defend their positions with evidence. Collaboration fosters **social reasoning skills**, which are essential to critical thinking, especially in a world that values teamwork and diverse perspectives.

4. Reflection and Metacognition

IBL promotes ongoing reflection, helping students to examine their own thought processes. Questions like “What did I learn?” and “How did I come to this conclusion?” encourage **metacognitive awareness**, which is the foundation of independent and critical thought.

Implementation Strategies for Educators

To integrate IBL effectively and support the development of critical thinking, educators can consider the following strategies:

- **Design meaningful inquiry tasks** that are aligned with curricular goals but open enough to allow for student interpretation and exploration.
- **Create a safe learning environment** where students feel comfortable taking intellectual risks and making mistakes.
- **Use formative assessment** to monitor progress and provide feedback that supports critical reflection and improvement.

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- **Model critical thinking** by thinking aloud, questioning assumptions, and showing how experts approach problems.
 - **Support information literacy** by teaching students how to find, evaluate, and use sources effectively.

Real-World Applications and Case Studies

Numerous studies and real-world examples demonstrate the effectiveness of IBL. For instance, in science classrooms, inquiry-based labs lead to improved conceptual understanding and greater student interest. In social studies, analyzing primary sources through inquiry enhances students' ability to evaluate bias and make reasoned judgments about historical events.

In Finland—a global leader in education—IBL is a core component of the national curriculum, and students consistently outperform peers in international assessments of problem-solving and analytical reasoning.

Challenges and Considerations

Despite its benefits, IBL also presents challenges. Teachers may require professional development to design and facilitate inquiry effectively. Time constraints and curriculum coverage pressures can also limit opportunities for extended inquiry projects. Moreover, assessing inquiry and critical thinking remains complex, as traditional tests often fail to capture higher-order skills.

To address these barriers, schools can adopt a gradual approach to implementation, starting with structured inquiry tasks and slowly building toward more open-ended projects. Encouraging cross-disciplinary collaboration and using rubrics focused on critical thinking indicators can also help make assessment more effective.

Conclusion

Inquiry-Based Learning is a powerful tool for promoting critical thinking in the classroom. By centering learning on exploration, questioning, and reflection, IBL nurtures independent thinkers prepared to tackle complex problems both in school and in life. For educators, embracing this approach means reimagining the classroom as a space for dialogue, discovery, and deeper learning.

As the demands of the 21st century continue to evolve, the ability to think critically and learn independently will be more important than ever. Through inquiry, educators can cultivate these essential skills and inspire a new generation of thoughtful, capable learners.