

# Discernment

Character... It starts with me!

MONTHLY EDUCATOR BULLETIN

MAY 2011

## Vs. Shortsightedness

### I WILL:

- ask questions
- not judge hastily
- learn from experience
- not repeat mistakes
- trace problems to their causes



### Understanding the deeper reasons why things happen

Discernment may seem like a difficult quality for students to understand, but the definition is very simple: Understanding the deeper meaning of why things happen. This definition allows us to look at discernment in terms of simple problem solving or curiosity that prompts us to discover the “whys”. For older students, critical thinking skills can apply to

discernment.

Another simple way to think about discernment involves the blame game. When something goes wrong, our first response is find someone or something to blame. Discovering our part of the blame is a way to practice discernment.

Crime scene investigators often look for patterns when solving a crime so they can understand the deeper

reasons why things happen. It is structured problem solving that ties together the facts to come to a solution. It is using not only our mind, but our “gut” - our intuition - to sort through the facts and arrive at the truth. This month, rather than jumping to hasty conclusions, take the time to understand the deeper reasons why things happen and use discernment to arrive at better solutions.

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#### Discernimiento

vs. Imprevisión

Entender las razones

profundas de

lo que

sucede



### Go to the Root

“1300–50; Middle English (< Old French ) < Latin discernere to separate”

This root description draws a visual of untying a knot, separating the various pieces until the knot is loosened, the problem solved. It is as if you are separating good from bad or fact from fiction to arrive at the proper understanding of a situation.



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*"People will accept your idea much more readily if you tell them Benjamin Franklin said it first." -David H. Comins*

"The first rule of holes: When you're in one, stop digging."  
~Molly Ivans

"Organizational effectiveness does not lie in that narrow minded concept called rationality. It lies in the blend of clearheaded logic and powerful intuition."  
~Henry Mintzberg

"One who returns to a place sees it with new eyes. Although the place may not have changed, the viewer inevitably has. For the first time things invisible before become suddenly visible."  
~Louis L'Amour

"The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him."  
~Niccolo Machiavelli

"The kinds of nets we know how to weave determine the kinds of nets we cast. These nets, in turn, determine the kinds of fish we catch."  
~Elliot Eisner

Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.  
~Albert Einstein

## Character Quotables

"Difficult times have helped me to understand better than before how infinitely rich and beautiful life is in every way, and that so many things that one goes worrying about are of no importance whatsoever."  
~Isak Dinesen

"The practice of discernment is part of higher consciousness. Discernment is not just a step up from judgment. In life's curriculum, it is the opposite of judgment. Through judgment a man reveals what he needs to confront and learn. Through discernment, one reveals what he has mastered."  
~Glenda Green

"Opportunities are seldom labeled."  
~John A. Shedd

An observant person sees things overlooked by others. A scientist sees things going on and then asks how these goings-on array themselves into patterns, patterns that are reliable and predictable. A really good scientist--or a really good artist for that matter, anyone whose mind and soul are capable of some extension--sees what is going on, sees the patterns, and asks, "Why?" What underlying forces are at work? How are those forces exerting themselves? How may we understand? Once pried from the universe by a great mind or a discerning heart, the hard-won understanding may then be conveyed and conferred upon humanity at large.

~Carl Safina

### Curriculum Connection



### Science

Scientists use discernment in a very structured way when they are searching for a truth. Discuss scientific experimentation as it relates to discernment. Check out the site below for some lessons on making decisions through the process of scientific reasoning.



<http://www.acde.org/educate/46plan2.htm>

# Mythbusters, Heroes of Discernment

*MythBusters* is an entertaining science TV show that airs on the Discovery Channel in the United States and on many international stations since 2003. The show is hosted by Adam Savage and Jamie Hyneman who are special effects experts. They use scientific methods to “bust” or “confirm” rumors, myths, movie scenes, adages, Internet videos and news stories. Myths are suggested by the show staff or viewers.

Adam and Jamie carefully construct scenarios to prove if something could actually happen or not. The science behind each myth is carefully

researched and experts are called upon when needed. Integral to the plan is the quantitative analysis of the results. Each result must be able to be measured to remove emotion from the decision.

Each week, Adam and Jamie must look at the deeper reasons of why something may happen in order to prove or disprove the concept. Their

natural curiosity, problem solving skills and critical thinking expertise are demonstrated in every show.

The 3rd Annual Independent Investigative Group IIG Awards presented an award to *Mythbusters* recognizing the promotion of science and critical thinking in popular media on May 18, 2009.



## Team~Building Activity

Building a culture of good character requires building the class into a community. Here is this month's teambuilding activity:



### Word Wizards

Divide the class into several small groups of 5 - 7 students per group. Each student should have a sheet of paper and a pen or pencil. Each student will write any 5 letters of the alphabet they choose. The students in each group will share their letters with the rest of the group members so that all group members will now have all of the letters chosen by the group members on their sheet. As a group, they will see how many words they can make out of the letters they have chosen. (Let them trade in a few letters for vowels if they didn't end up with any.) See which group can create the most words with the letters they have. For students too young to be reading, you can make letter cards and give each group a selection of letters. Since most young students can spell their name (and perhaps those of siblings), ask them to see how many names they can spell with letters they have. You may need to give them more letters to make sure names can be spelled.

When they are done, ask them to talk about the strategies they used in looking for words. Ask if they got ideas for new words by reading words suggested by others.



# Tell an Alien

Ask your students to describe how to do a simple task to you, only you are to pretend you are from Mars. Interrupt their description to ask more detailed questions as Martians do not understand anything about life on our planet. Some ideas for descriptions are how to catch a bus, how to use the U-Scan at the grocery store or how to record a TV show. When they have finished their explanation, ask them how difficult it was to think in such detailed terms. Relate this to discernment by explaining how assumptions can get in the way of getting to the true deeper meaning. If you, as the Martian, hadn't asked the specific questions, you may not have understood the task completely. If time allows, let them partner and take turns explaining something and being the Martian.



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## Fact or Opinion

Part of being discerning is determining Fact from Opinion. Start a discussion on the differences between Facts and Opinions. A statement of fact expresses only what actually happened, or what could be proven by objective data. A statement of opinion expresses an attitude toward something – it makes a judgment, view, or conclusion, or gives an opinion that cannot be proven true or false. Help them to come up with some clues as to whether a statement is a fact or someone's opinion. Be careful to distinguish that you are not debating True or False. For instance, the statement "Eighty-five percent of all cases of lung cancer in the U.S. are caused by smoking" is considered a fact. You may not know if the 85% is true but the statement is at least in the form of a fact. It can be verified. There are several sites listed below that contain games and lessons on teaching the difference between fact and opinion.

<http://languagearts.pppst.com/fact-opinion.html>

<http://www.mrsdell.org/gr2/factopinion.html>

<http://pbskids.org/arthur/games/factsopinions/>

<http://webinstituteforteachers.org/97/jlyman/default/quiz/factopquiz.html>

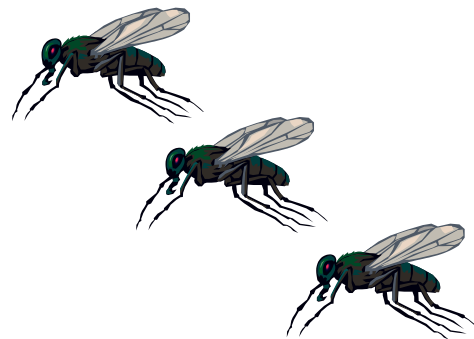
<http://www.quia.com/jq/24723.html>

## A Challenge to Critical Thinking

The following is a passage from the management bestseller “In Search of Excellence” by Peters and Waterman:

If you place in a bottle half a dozen bees and the same number of flies, and lay the bottle horizontally, with its base (the closed end) to the window, you will find that the bees will persist, till they die of exhaustion or hunger, in their endeavor to discover an opening through the glass; while the flies, in less than two minutes, will all have sallied forth through the neck on the opposite side. ... It is the bees' love of flight, it is their very intelligence, that is their undoing in this experiment. They evidently imagine that the issue from every prison must be where the light shines clearest; and they act in accordance, and persist in too-logical action. To bees glass is a supernatural mystery. ... And, the greater their intelligence, the more inadmissible, more incomprehensible, will the strange obstacle appear. Whereas the featherbrained flies, careless of logic ... flutter wildly hither and thither, and meeting here the good fortune that often waits on the simple ... Necessarily end up by discovering the friendly opening that restores their liberty to them (Peters and Waterman, 1988, p. 108).

Read the passage to the class. Ask them to relate it to the statement “Think outside the box.” Compare critical thinking with creative thinking. One is looking for facts and the other is a matter of coming up with new and useful possibilities. The bees were so focused on one solution that they thought should be right that they were unable to see any other possible solutions to the problem. Discuss the importance of creative and critical thinking in problem solving.



“Last night I shot an elephant in my pajamas.  
How he got in my pajamas, I’ll never know.”

This classic joke from Groucho Marx depends on a grammatical ambiguity for its humor. Being able to clarify ambiguities is one skill needed to practice discernment. As you are digging for information, sometimes you will encounter something that can be interpreted multiple ways. It is important to discern the correct interpretation. A fun way to teach this is to have the students come up with some more sentences like Groucho’s joke. If possible, you can play Groucho doing the joke by visiting [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWFaxEkYmSc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWFaxEkYmSc).

Another place to find ambiguity is in the funny newspaper headlines such as:

- Red Tape Holds Up New Bridges
- New Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Test Group
- Kids Make Nutritious Snacks
- Local High School Dropouts Cut in Half
- Hospitals are Sued by Seven Foot Doctors
- Typhoon Rips Through Cemetery; Hundreds Dead
- Lawmen from Mexico Barbecue Guests
- Miners Refuse to Work after Death

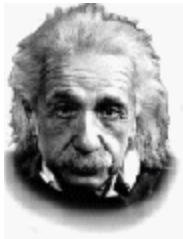
## Mondegreens

A **mondegreen** is the mishearing or misinterpretation of a phrase as a result of near homophony, in a way that gives it a new meaning. Visit wikipedia’s explanation (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mondegreen>) of this for a more in-depth study of the concept. The song lyrics section is particularly entertaining with examples such as “*There’s a bathroom on the right* (the line at the end of each verse of “Bad Moon Rising” by Creedence Clearwater Revival: “There’s a bad moon on the rise”).

A game that makes use of this concept is Mad Gab by Mattel. In this game, a person reads a group of meaningless words out loud. The other players must discern what the phrase is supposed to be by listening for the sounds of other words. For example, “These If Hill Wore” when pronounced quickly sounds like “The Civil War”. If you do not have access to the board game, you can find examples at [www.playmadgabonline.com](http://www.playmadgabonline.com).



Once the game is complete discuss the amount of concentration needed to discern the real phrase. Discuss how important details are to arriving at true conclusions or problem resolutions.



## Einstein's Puzzles

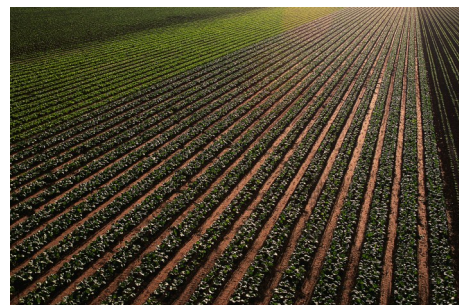
The following logic puzzle will take some time to solve but it provides good practice at digging to get to the truth. You can choose to solve the puzzle as a group or divide the class and let each group work on it. For more puzzles (and the solution to this one) visit

[www.mathsisfun.com/puzzles/einstein-puzzles-index.html](http://www.mathsisfun.com/puzzles/einstein-puzzles-index.html)

Five friends have their gardens next to one another, where they grow three kinds of crops: fruits (apple, pear, nut, cherry), vegetables (carrot, parsley, gourd, onion) and flowers (aster, rose, tulip, lily).

1. They grow 12 different varieties.
2. Everybody grows exactly 4 different varieties
3. Each variety is at least in one garden.
4. Only one variety is in 4 gardens.
5. Only in one garden are all 3 kinds of crops.
6. Only in one garden are all 4 varieties of one kind of crops.
7. Pear is only in the two border gardens.
8. Paul's garden is in the middle with no lily.
9. Aster grower doesn't grow vegetables.
10. Rose grower doesn't grow parsley.
11. Nuts grower has also gourd and parsley.
12. In the first garden are apples and cherries.
13. Only in two gardens are cherries.
14. Sam has onions and cherries.
15. Luke grows exactly two kinds of fruit.
16. Tulip is only in two gardens.
17. Apple is in a single garden.
18. Only in one garden next to the Zick's is parsley.
19. Sam's garden is not on the border.
20. Hank grows neither vegetables nor asters.
21. Paul has exactly three kinds of vegetable.

Who has which garden and what is grown where?



# Robin's Reading List

## Grades K – 3:

### So Few of Me by Peter H. Reynolds

This is an insightful fable about the repercussions of overscheduled lives. Leo is a very busy lad...so busy that he wishes for a second Leo to share his chores. His wish is granted and another Leo appears...and another...and another. But instead of reducing his workload, these extra Leos (10 in all) only complicate the situation. Exhausted Leo slips away to take a nap wondering, "What if I did less...but did my best?" Eventually the original Leo decides that efficiency and productivity are sometimes overrated.

### I'm like You, You're like Me: a Child's Book about Understanding and Celebrating Each Other by Cindy Gainer

This book deals with the similarities and differences among people. The illustrations are bold and brightly colored featuring children of various ethnic backgrounds. References are made about the acceptance of differences, the importance of

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understanding through listening, thinking about the feelings of others, and accomplishing tasks through cooperation. The activities in this book are well thought out.

### Ava and the Magic Tutu by Sandi Bloomberg

Ava is a little girl who longs to dance, but has no confidence in herself until she finds a hidden trunk with the answer to her dream at the very bottom. The message is subtle...about the importance of feeling good and believing in yourself.

## Grades 3 – 6:

### Storm Rising by Dandi Daley Mackall

"Storm Rising" is a story about a high school freshman girl who tries very hard to hide the fact that she is a genius. She acts very differently depending on whom she's with...her friends or her parents. She quits every project she starts before anyone gets too close. Her biggest fear is that people at school will find out that she is both smart and poor.

### Geek Chic: The Zoey Zone by Margie Palatini

Sixth grade is 198 days away, and ten year old Zoey



needs a fairy godmother to give her a makeover, and teach her about style if she is ever going to make it into the "cool crowd" in the lunchroom. Zoey is driven in a limousine to what she thinks is going to be her ultimate makeover. She is in for a big surprise, and so are the readers.

### Center Court Sting by Matt Christopher

Daren McCall is a hot-tempered star forward of the Rangers, and blames everyone else but himself for issues both on and off the court. Daren finally realizes his problem when his friends are barely speaking to him, and the coach is ready to bench him or kick him off the team.

## Grades 4 – 8:

### The Intruder (Roswell High No. 5) by Melinda Metz

Michael is being held in a secret compound, concerned less for himself than his friends...and Isabel. He has to get out as once Sheriff Valenti has the information he wants, he won't need Michael

# Robin's Reading List

anymore. Isabel used to think of Michael as a brother, but now that he's been captured she thinks only of him. Are they meant to be together...forever?

## Leave Well Enough Alone by Rosemary Wells

Dorothy is working as a mother's helper to a wealthy family, and that is about as far from her working-class neighborhood in New York as she can get. However something is not quite right in the Hoades' home. It appears that they are hiding something...or someone-in the cottage behind their home. Dorothy's curiosity takes over, and she stumbles upon their secret...one that could cost her future.

## Grades 9 – 12:

## The Noticer by Andy Andrews

This is a tale of a mysterious old man named Jones, who shows up in the lives of people in crisis. He gives people he encounters alternative ways to think about things...new perspectives. There is definitely a message for everyone. The book concludes with a Reader's Guide of thought provoking

questions for group discussion.

## Thousand Shades of Blue by Robin Stevenson

Rachel knew her parents had been going through some rough times, but she was dismayed when they took her and her brother, Tim, out of school to sail in the Bahamas. While in port, they see their mother in a compromising situation and Rachel, unable to discuss her feelings with Tim, becomes angry, restless and reckless. Rachel struggles with her desire to lose (or hold onto) her virginity to feeling anger towards her mother, and pity for her clueless father. This novel portrays an unhappy family, going their separate ways yet oftentimes coming together to support each other.

## The Dream Watcher by Barbara Wersba

Albert Scully is a miserable teenager. He considers himself the "All American" failure until he meets Mrs. Woodfin, an eight-year-old neighborhood eccentric who helps him see the value of being an individual. The story talks about what Albert does in his life in search of adventure. He realizes that

his life has more meaning than what he had thought.

## Monster by Walter Dean Myers

Steve Harmon, 16, is accused of serving as a lookout for a robbery of a Harlem drugstore. The owner was shot and killed. Now Steve is in prison, awaiting trial for murder. But was Steve really the lookout who gave the "all clear" to the murderer, or was he just in the wrong place at the wrong time? In this novel the reader becomes both juror and witness during the trial of Steven's life.



# Croskey's Corner

I have a confession to offer. I am a serial mistake-maker. I learned as early as age 18 that I am prone to a particular cycle when I meet a new person. I develop a connection with him or her, begin to feel intense affection for that person, invest a great deal of time and "doing for" in that person, overdo it, get clingy, and sometimes chase the person away. Lesson learned young, right? Wrong. I have repeated the cycle many times. I even make this mistake with jobs and institutions. I have come to recognize when I am caught in it. But I don't do enough to break the pattern.

Recently, a song reminded me of my habitual mistakes. (I grew up during the 1960's folk song era, before the Earth's crust had fully formed.) One of the leading groups from the folk era was the Kingston Trio. They had a hit with a talking/singing recording called, "**The Reverend Mr. Black**" in 1963. It was a song about a minister who turned the other cheek. Two of the guys who wrote "You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog" and "Stand By Me" (Jerry Leiber and Mick Stoller) also wrote "The Reverend Mr. Black." The chorus, based on an old hymn, went like this:

"You've gotta walk this lonesome valley;  
You've gotta walk it by yourself.  
Nobody else can walk it for you,  
You've gotta walk it by yourself."

I think there are lots of truisms and old adages that follow the same theme. Not only "Walking the walk," or "The only way through is through," but especially, "Experience is the best teacher." The May Character Quality of the Month is Discernment, defined as "Understanding the deeper reasons why things happen." One of the "I will" statements really echoes "The Reverend Mr. Black;" I will Learn from experience, and I will not repeat mistakes. Even the April Character Quality, Humility, reminds me that others contribute to my success and that I am not as great or as important as I think I am. To my mind, being humbled by life and coming to learn the deeper meaning of that humbling experience, are connected.

Why is this? Why do we have to learn from our own experience? Why can't we duck some of the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune?" Why do we have to endure pain and suffering to learn? That which does not kill me makes me stronger – and presumably, smarter. But couldn't I just sit this one out and learn from the sidelines? And... why do I repeat the same mistakes!?

Bill Croskey is a school psychologist from the Loveland City Schools

# Croskey's Corner

I think this is especially frustrating for parents and educators. In one sense, our whole mission is to teach young people what they need to know to survive before they end up exposed to life-threatening experiences. To avoid their parents' mistakes and to learn from them. In our view, we want to prepare them for life without exposing them to it too intensely or unsafely. That which does not kill them could still injure them for life!

Maybe one reason that most of us, including kids, have to learn these lessons first hand is that we commit to memory those experiences which come to us along with great emotional impact. Research - AND experience - tell us that the memory will be much stronger and last longer if it is paired with strong feelings. Therefore, walking the lonesome valley on our own is more likely to generate strong feelings such as fear, humiliation (yes!), anger, joy, shame or sadness. Then, when we face a similar situation in the future, it will trigger an emotion which might remind us of the previous lesson learned. I like to think that is why a parent will spank a child who has run into the street. I hope it is because the parent knows that if he pairs the reckless behavior with the fear and shame of a spanking, it will serve to help the child Remember not to make dangerous sprints into traffic.

As educators, I think our lesson might be that when we teach, we should arrange emotional experiences to help set the moral of the story in the child's memory banks. So group work, feelings journals, debriefing sessions, artistic expressions of what students have learned, singing, poetry, role plays, simulation games, and "What will you be doing in 10 years?" reflections can help to evoke emotion in school and make learning more authentically like Life. That will help students to be more discerning in their approach to school.

Maybe this helps explain the need to learn from emotional experiences. What of learning about but still repeating the same mistakes? I am afraid it's a problem for many, not just me. Perhaps it's because I like the familiar path (even with it's land mine mistakes) rather than the uncharted territory of a road less traveled for me. Indeed, the emotional reaction to familiar experiences, even ones that hurt me, can be comforting and reassuring. And, maybe I remember my times of joy as well as my times of humiliation and consider the trade-off worth the cost. I will forget the facts I have memorized sooner or later. (In my case, sooner!) But the smells, the textures, the sounds, the tastes, and the sights I encounter will jog my mind to connect to emotional experiences that changed - or DIDN'T change - the way I approach life. Then I will be able to Discern the deeper reasons as to why things happen. That's a start!

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**Character...It Starts With Me!**

## Character in the Classroom *Continuously*

There are many ways that you can teach the Character Quality of Month. Here are just a few suggestions:

- Ask students to make posters to hang in the classroom or around the school.
- Challenge students to find quotes, news stories, current (or classic) songs or movies that portray the character quality of the month. Be sure to share these with the class and “archive” these to use in future years.
- Add the character trait of the month to the spelling word list. (Even if it is posted in the classroom to copy!)
- Offer for students to make a video or write a rap that demonstrates the Character Quality of the Month.
- If you teach younger students, see if you can “borrow” some older students to lead your students in an activity or switch the roles and have the younger students “teach” a rhyme to the older students.
- If you teach older students, you can be the initiator in the previous activities.
- Invite local business leaders or small business owners to talk about the importance of a character trait. If you teach older students, aim to get a representative from a business that typically hires teens so that they can relate the importance of good character when applying for and *keeping* a job.
- Men and women in uniform usually make impressive guest speakers. Police departments, fire departments and military recruiting offices are usually willing to come into a classroom. Do not be afraid to give them specific requests or guidelines for speaking so that it is pertinent to the lessons of the month.
- Always have a generic character activity planned and ready to go that you can use as filler when you have time to kill or that a substitute teacher can use in your absence.