



Connecting the dots to deepen knowledge and skill.

# COGNITIVE connections Newslines

## The First Level of Resistance

**Louis H. Falik**, International Center for the Enhancement of Learning Potential  
**Kathleen J. Bellanca**, international Renewal institute, Inc.

Educators and clinicians alike are sometimes faced with students who are resistant to a new learning experience. The resisters can appear either (a) in the academic setting or (b) in the behavioral setting. The concept of ‘resistance’ to learning has typically been address by behaviorists or cognitive behaviorist as “learned avoidance” or “learned helplessness”. In a general sense, learning resistance is a phenomenon in which the learner” seeks to avoid or escape from a given experience which has somehow threatened them.

We will examine the individual learner’s level of resistance from the social - cognitive perspective based on Feustein’s theories of structural cognitive modifiability (SCM) and mediated learning experience (MLE). The essential question is asked “*How can an adult - teacher, psychologist, or parent systematically intervene with a resistant learner so as to enable positive outcomes in thinking and learning?*”

### Introduction to the Concept of Resistance

When an individual is faced with difficult demands under conditions of performance expectation, and certainly when the demand requires the use of skills at which the person has been unsuccessful, a typical response is an attempt to escape or withdraw from the learning experience. For many individuals, this strategy has been successful at finding ways to escape or avoid, and becomes an internalized response to the “danger” or threat of frustration. Moreover, as will be discussed below, many adults in the life of the child (parents, teachers, etc.) are either covertly or overtly complicit in the learner’s maneuvers. This has been well described in the child development literature as *learned avoidance* (*i.e.*, learned helplessness).

Learned avoidance, in many instances, is reasonable and protective. In general, individuals will not do what they think they will fail at, and find ways to compensate for presumed disappointment and the potential for failure—both with regard to self-perceptions and the expectations and reactions of others. Indeed, parents and teachers, in a sincere desire to protect their children and/or students from stress and discomfort, and to save themselves from tension or anticipated behavioral disruptions, are very likely to detect the early signs of avoidance and



# Mediating Past the First Level of Resistance

respond by releasing the child from the stress. This response can be viewed as a positive expression of caring and concern for the child, a desire to protect the child from discomfort.

*“Oh, I see you are tired, frustrated, hungry, anxious, thirsty, or hot, so let’s stop this activity and do something else.”*

Learned avoidance, in many instances, is a reaction that is reasonable and protective. It represents “short-term” ways to compensate for presumed disappointment and the potential for failure. For these reasons it is a major feature of those individuals who have experienced learning failure, adjustment difficulties, and environmental stresses.

There are many variations on this response that teachers and parents will readily recognize. However, there is a dilemma here. The child is released from the situation, stress is reduced, and a response of avoidance is thus learned and reinforced. Yet it is also generally accepted that learning and development requires some degree of stress and conflict as an “energizer.” Thus the pattern of avoidance is produced and habitual.

Resistance is not limited to the learner—both the child and adult have expectations regarding performance. Adults can project their expectations regarding performance—both in themselves and for their children and students—as part of their own personal belief systems or by past experiences. Adults may believe that the child cannot succeed or may have too much stress attempting to comply. Anger and annoyance may be mixed with disappointment. The mother who says of her son: *“He can’t read. He never will be able to read. His father never learned to read, so why should I expect him to?”*

In this way, the reciprocal nature of the reaction to resistance is revealed from the adult to the learner. The adult sees the mounting stress, anticipates the upcoming disruption of performance, and the signs of stress and conflict lead to a reaction to reduce conflict—both for the child and the adult. Going back to the example above, the mother sees that the child is having difficulties with reading. She then relates this back to his father’s difficulties, thus giving the easy way out—limited expectations of her son. By doing this, equilibrium is maintained for both the child and adult. This unwittingly reinforces the child’s (and the adult’s) limited view of himself and the adult’s limited, pessimistic, reduced expectations—all in the service of restoring or maintaining comfort levels.

## First Resistance and Mediated Learning Experience (MLE)

Given the phenomenon described above, what is the reason to term this reaction a “first level of resistance?” Certainly, it is the child’s initial reaction to perceived difficulty, or a reminder of past failures or experiences with inadequacies. However, from the perspective of MLE (which we will describe briefly below), it can be seen as an “opportunity” to respond in a different way, leading to a different outcome.

Strategically, it can be framed as a “first resistance” that does not have to be accepted as deeply embedded in the child’s behavioral repertoire but is amenable to mediational interventions. This is illustrated by a young child who was assessed in a training workshop for professionals who were learning to apply MLE:

*Five-year-old Enrico’s grandfather brought him to an LPAD-Basic workshop to be assessed by a training team. He was described as mildly developmentally delayed and slow to learn or adjust to new situations. Indeed, during the first morning of assessment, comprising of approximately three hours of activity, he was difficult to control, often expressing dislike of the activities, a short attention span, manipulative behavior, and in great need of focusing mediation and repeated efforts to keep him on task or to bring him back to task focus. The team had to work very hard and at the end of the session was frustrated and concerned that they (and he) had not had a positive experience.*

At the end of the session, we spoke to his grandfather about our desire to have him return the next morning and that he might not want to come back given his difficult experience. We spoke of strategies to encourage him. When he and his grandfather returned the next morning, we asked how Enrico had been persuaded to continue to participate. “No problem,” said the grandfather. That evening, as he was getting ready for bed, he inquired of his mother whether he was going back to the workshop. He said he wanted to go and that he “had fun there, and learned a lot!” Moreover, his behavior was quite changed on the second day . . . he was cooperative, stayed on task, and was open to trying new and unfamiliar tasks. It was then possible to assess his cognitive functions and mediate many new skills and strategies. And then, when he asked whether he was going to come back for a third session and was told, “No, the program is finished,” he expressed great disappointment. Quite a contrast to his initial reactions and quite a change in response to the mediations which were offered in that first session, many of the outcomes of which were not immediately observable by the mediators.

Imagine if they had stopped after the first encounter and formulated their assessment conclusions on the basis of it. Often in response to an unfamiliar or challenging experience—with or without prior experiences with failure—the initial reaction is of frustration or blocking. A persistent but gentle encouragement to stay with the task, to remain in the situation, use already accomplished skills, or be open to some assistance past the blocking will result in an overcoming of the resistance and lead to major and powerful changes in attitude, approach, and self-concept.

The provision of MLE (Feuerstein, Feuerstein, Falik, & Rand, 2006), offered in a systematic and organized way, works to overcome the resistance and move the learner forward or around the resistance by capitalizing on skills and readiness and making adjustments that are not compensations to deficits

# Mediating Past the First Level of Resistance

but adaptations to newly acquired, strengthened, and utilized cognitive functions. For this to occur, the mediator must be familiar with the nature of the tasks that the learner is required to respond to (the Cognitive Map) and the nature of the learner's functional skills and deficiencies (the Deficient Cognitive Functions) (Feuerstein, et al., 2006). These operational conceptual formulations guide and target the MLE interventions.

## The Role of Expectations in the First Resistance

Both the child and the adult (mediator) have expectations regarding performance. It is important to point out the first resistance is not limited to the learner. Adults have them, as a projection of their expectations for the learner, or as a part of their own personal belief systems. We may genuinely believe that the child cannot succeed or may have too much stress attempting to comply. We may or may not have anger or annoyance mixed in with our disappointment like the mother who says of her son: "He can't read. He never will be able to read. His father never learned to read, so what should I expect of him?" Or less overtly, parents who have internalized disappointment over their child's limitations, and thus reduce expectations, accept limitations or express negative attitudes that generalize to other areas of the child's performance.

Another aspect of this part of the phenomenon is the reciprocity of the reaction. The parent or teacher sees the mounting stress, anticipates the upcoming disruption if the child's performance is insisted upon, and detects and reacts to the early signs by reducing conflict, both for the child and adult. By responding by reducing demands or allowing the child to stop or leave the scene of the conflict, equilibrium is maintained for both the child and adult but the child's (and the parent's or teacher's) limited, pessimistic, low expectations and escape mechanisms are unwittingly reinforced.

## The Parameters of MLE

Twelve parameters for providing MLE have been identified and described (Feuerstein, et al., 2002, 2006). They are organized into three universal criteria that are present in all mediational interactions: intentionality and reciprocity (insuring that the learner knows what will occur and arranging conditions so that they do), transcendence (conveying to the learner why the experience is occurring and where it is going), and the mediation of meaning (why it is important and what its value is both for the learner and the mediator). There are other parameters that are engaged according to specific, situational circumstances that are encountered such as the regulation and control of behavior; the mediation of feelings of competence; the mediation of sharing behavior; mediating a sense of individuation; mediating goal seeking, goal setting, and goal achieving; the mediation of challenge; the mediation of a sense of belonging; the capacity to change, and the searching for positive alternatives. These are called "parameters" because they are not specific behaviors or suggestions for action but rather, general dimensions of action that guide a wide and innovative spectrum of potential mediator responses and actions.

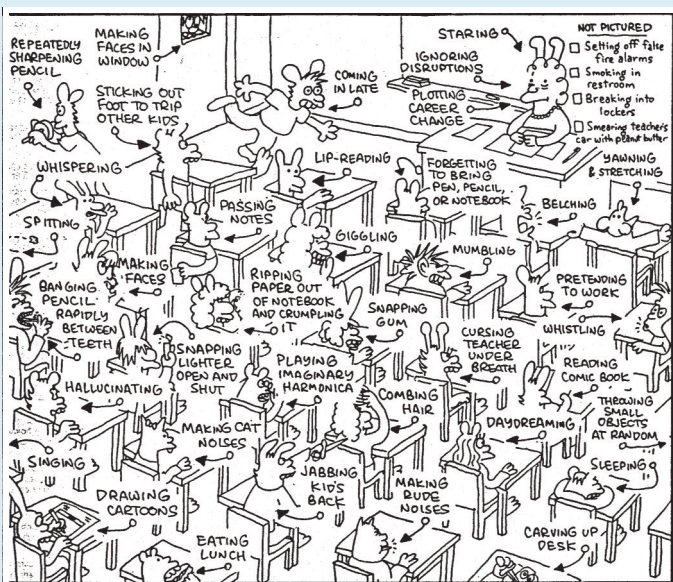
In this way, the parameters of MLE are designed to guide the mediator's interaction with the learner to achieve modifiability through focused, persistent, and systematic activity. The ability of MLE to enable functionally disabled individuals from a wide spectrum of disabilities and to overcome limitations in their behavioral functioning is testament to this potential for modifiability. For this reason, the readiness on the part of the mediator to understand and engage in efforts to direct mediation toward and beyond the manifest resistance becomes absolutely critical, and requires developing and moving actively toward higher expectations—both on the part of the *mediatee* (the learner) and the *mediator* (the parent, teacher, etc.).

So, we identify another "partner" in the process of acting on expectations that will create the conditions of modifiability. To the learner and the parent or teacher, we add the mediator, acting as a direct provider of MLE, or as a consultant helping the other two partners to bring MLE to their interactions.

MLE is thus addressed, and continually adjusted and modified with regard to what is being observed, both in the content (specific skills and problem-solving strategies) and the process of responding. In the latter area, the mediator observes and adjusts to the affective level of the learner (feelings and reactions), provides structure and encouragement to stay with the tasks, and provides positive feedback for already accomplished levels of performance.

## Observing the First Level of Resistance

A central tenant of Feuerstein's structural cognitive modifiability theory (SCM) is that the human being is modifiable,



# Mediating Past the First Level of Resistance

not only at the level of behavior but also in the very mental (neurophysiological) structures of the brain. However, modifiability does not come easily or without stress.

The key to identifying and accurately observing the first level of resistance is a good knowledge of the nature of the tasks to which the learner is responding or needs to respond (an analysis of the task according to the Cognitive Map), and an equally clear understanding of the skills and levels of functioning in the learner (using the dimensions of the Deficient Cognitive Functions) (cf. Feuerstein, Feuerstein, Falik, & Rand, 2006). With these perspectives and a sense of the context of the learning situations—that can vary significantly and influence learner responses—the mediator initiates activities and both *observes* behavioral responses and *constructs* interventions in a dynamically interactive way.

If, and when, the learner begins to express distress, one can assume that the *first level of resistance* is being approached and reasons for its appearance must be discerned. This is especially important for those learners who do not have a history of successful performance. They often do not recognize their positive achievement, they do not internalize an image or expectation of success, and they do not trust their immediate reactions. The mediation of a feeling of competence, along with support for their uniquely successful responses, pointing out and enthusiastically valuing their ability to solve new and difficult tasks, and a high degree of sharing behavior must be invoked here.

But it may not be enough. The urge to escape may be overwhelming! It is at this point that specific strategies of MLE must be provided to address the level of experienced resistance. A mediational strategy requires a structural plan and attention to critical variables.



## Strategies to Overcome Resistance

In the development of MLE strategies, two organizing schemas have been developed. The first reflects the process of engagement as identified in the *Prerequisites of Effective Mediation*:

- **Pursuit:** in the face of distraction, habits, and learned avoidance
- **Persistence:** in the face of resistance, to build crystallization and transformation
- **Performance:** being active and engaging the learner with experiences
- **Penetration:** of the learner's cognitive, behavioral, and affective system

These provide a general “systematic” attitude toward the necessity to provide MLE by indicating a basic “posture” of the mediator in response to the manifestation of resistance. When understood, they guide the mediator in orienting responses and in activating the second set of operational parameters for the provision of MLE, focusing on its organized and systematic qualities. To be effective, mediation must be:

- **Planful:** having an objective, something that the mediator wants to occur, in a specific time/place/sequence
- **Systematic:** applying interactions in a thoughtful, organized, and articulated manner, in relation to well thought out goals
- **Consistent:** using the same techniques in the same ways, for the same behaviors and settings
- **Directional:** focusing interactions toward goals, orienting responses in light of them, clearly articulating to the learner and “significant others”

## Applying MLE to Resistance

Central to both of these conceptualizations is the need to be overt and explicit in responding—labeling the resistance, being clear and optimistic about overcoming it. “*I know you are tired, bored, hungry, or frustrated, so we will take a short break, and come back, and I will show you how to succeed, and you will be successful,*” and so on. The mediator is both optimistic (“*you will succeed*”) and persistent (“*we will keep working on it, we will not give up*”).

The mediator observes responses to tasks and other dimensions of performance while anticipating initial resistances as a function of dimensions of the task or the learner's “past history” of responding. This observation must be calibrated (adjusted) in light of previous observations and other information that comes from the referral or other descriptions of behavior. It is important to understand the influence of situations . . . *where* and *when* the behavior is generated, past ex-

# Mediating Past the First Level of Resistance

periences and reactions, and the like. With this perspective, diversions can be anticipated, and tactically responded to.

The mediator must be willing to create or maintain some disequilibrium in the learner, being both reassuring and demanding at the same time. This is why the need to be open and clear about what is (or will) happen is so important . . . the learner must know why the reaction is being generated, what will happen, and why it is happening (the mediation of intentionality and transcendence). Initial inefficient or incorrect reactions are gently and repeatedly blocked (somewhat like the effort of “keeping a litter of kittens in their box when they are struggling to get out”), but are substituted for alternative, effective responses and encouragement to imitate and share. Initial, small indications of ability to focus and maintain contact with the feared or avoided stimuli are noticed, positively commented upon, and reinforced.

As the learner is being “expected” to perform, in spite of the expressions of resistance, the tasks must be structured to indicate competence and overcome resistance. That is, if something is difficult, solutions and skills are taught in such a way to clearly show to the learner that it has been solved and that he or she has the skills to do it. Activities of both the Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment (FIE) program and the Learning Propensity Assessment Device (LPAD) instruments are organized to present a sequence of cognitive tasks that show variations of repetitions and experiences that address the parameters of MLE. Each task increases in its level of difficulty and novelty, while maintaining a similarity. The successful, mediated experience with such a structure conveys to the learner a sense of competence and accomplishment.

We cannot predict the time or nature of task exposure necessary to overcome resistance. It may come rapidly or require considerable time, patience, and employment of innovative MLE strategies. The persistence needed to penetrate the learner’s system of defenses and avoidance is a natural phenomenon of the process. However, when the learner is “penetrated” many options for mediation and accelerated learning emerge. Working with Damon illustrated this well:

*Damon came to the Institute as a 16 year old with undifferentiated learning and behavior difficulties, largely of a psychiatric nature. As he was generally unknown to us, we began an LPAD assessment. One of the first instruments used was the Raven Progressive Matrices and Set Variations. He was assessed by a team of examiners and the goals were as much research oriented (what does it take to overcome resistance, what are the ranges of possible and effective mediational strategies) as clinical (how to help him modify his behavior). Over the course of 15 hours, spread among a number of sessions, Damon was mediated to stay on task and to respond in spite of his avoidance maneuvers, which revealed excellent social awareness on his part, and good interactive skills in several languages. It was clear that many cognitive functions were fragile or deficient, and that he could learn to acquire skills or overcome deficit, but that he was very difficult to penetrate. To some degree, his social encounter needs precluded some of the cognitive gains, and it became evident that he was prolonging the encounter because he enjoyed the so-*

*cial encounter. However, after more than 15 hours, he mastered many complex problems in Set Variation, and began to see himself as able to learn, and, most importantly, able to stay focused on task.*

*Damon has remained in the Institute. Many years later he still recalls that early experience with pleasure. He talks about how hard it was for him to do the early work, how he learned, and how he can now do such tasks easily and with confidence. It is clear that the early experience and the overcoming of his resistances have stayed with him as an important part of his sense of himself and his capacity to change.*

## The Immediate and Longer Term Consequences

Learners who have been successfully mediated past the first level of their resistance experience major changes in both performance and attitude. They manifest major changes in motivation, often demanding that they be given more and increasingly difficult tasks in areas that they have just been significantly resisting. They experience a new sense of power, accomplishment, and a great source of pleasure. They are amenable to further mediation, increased demands and expectations. And most importantly, they are aware of these changes and mediation of higher level understandings is possible (mediating a sense of their capacity to change and the optimistic choices which were not previous within their self-perspective). Mira’s experience points out these changes and potentials well:

*Fourteen-year-old Mira had been hospitalized in a neuropsychiatric ward of a hospital, evidencing severe symptoms of anxiety and panic such as stomach aches, obsessive worrying, lack of focusing ability, and the like. She had a history of serious learning disabilities as a younger child, and her failure to respond to a variety of special educational interventions and the escalation of her “neurotic” symptoms had led to her hospitalization.*

*She was scheduled for a three-day evaluation of her cognitive functions using the LPAD. On the first morning of her assessment, starting with the Raven Progressive Matrices, all of her symptoms were in evidence in full force. Her complaints about being hungry, tired, needing the restroom, and the like came fast and furious and were either responded to with short breaks (and rapid return to task) or explicitly ignored (saying “you can continue with the task, you can wait awhile,” etc.), with both explanations and encouragement. Nonetheless, completing the 12 problems of Level A took the entire morning, a period of approximately three hours.*

*Upon returning from lunch and seeing the Raven booklet on the table, she exclaimed, with energy and frustration, “Oh no, not more of that red book!” Without much notice of her complaints, the examiner showed her the first problem in the next series and she quickly pointed to the correct answer. This was repeated for 4 more problems, to which she responded rapidly and accurately. At this point the examiner pointed out the change: “Mira, before lunch it took you 3 hours to work on 12 problems. Here, in a few minutes, you have done 5 prob-*

# Mediating Past the First Level of Resistance

lems, and you are accurate, and you are not complaining. You must have learned some important things this morning. Can you show me how you are solving the problems?" She began, with some mild mediational questioning, to explain her solutions, what information she was using, how she was choosing and differentiating, and the like. She was asked whether she could go on and do more problems, and she agreed. The next 45 minutes were spent finishing Level Ab and B.

Toward the end of the 45 minutes, Mira asked "When we are finished here, can I take the book home with me?" When asked why she wanted the book, she replied "Well, these problems are hard to solve and I don't think my brother could do them. I want to see if he can." Upon hearing this, Mira's mother who had been observing from a corner of the room literally fell off her chair, then whispered "I want to buy the book. I don't care what it costs." When asked what had just occurred, the mother responded, "Mira has been angry and jealous of her brother for many years. He is several years younger, is a good learner, and Mira has felt inadequate and non-functioning compared to him. If she wants to show him something that she has learned, and see his struggle with it, it would be so good for her."

*The examiner developed an "on-the-spot" mediational intervention. He said to her "I cannot sell you this book, but I have another one with problems just like it (Set Variations). I will give you that book to take home. But you must agree to a plan with me. I want you to show these problems to your brother, and keep a journal of which problems he has difficulty with, what was the reason for his difficulty, and how you showed him how to solve the problems. If you keep a good record of this, I will take your journal to Israel, and show it to our teachers and use what you have learned to help other teachers help students in learning to solve these problems." When Mira agreed, with evident pleasure and enthusiasm, the mediator said "I will be visiting in your city in a few months and I would like to visit you to see how you have done with this plan." Mira was pleased, and when the visit occurred a few months later, she had followed through well, and most importantly, had changed in her confidence about herself, her attitudes toward learning, and had been able to leave the hospital and return to school, with continued assistance to overcome many long-held blockages to learning.*

While Mira's long history of learning and behavioral difficulty did not qualify her reaction to the testing situation as a true "first level" of resistance, the fact that it was treated that way, from a MLE perspective, enabled the mediator to overcome what had been deeply integrated avoidance mechanisms. Mira's experience demonstrates a significant overcoming of long-held resistances. She was able to complete the assessment and was open to many new and previously inaccessible performance demands. The experience did not immediately overcome her cognitive deficiencies and wipe away her years of negative experience, but she was opened to me-

diation. She could be mediated, and she was on her way to acceptance of the need (and positive outcomes) to struggle.

Work with other individuals who have had similar experiences confirms not only the potential for change but also the amenability to do the hard work of cognitive modifiability. Such individuals may temporarily "relapse" into old patterns but respond to reminders and encouragement to orient themselves toward their "new" perspectives. It is a source of great satisfaction for the mediator and for those around the individual so changed. This mutually experienced satisfaction becomes a source of further mediational interactions.

## Some Final Conclusions . . .

The first level of resistance is an unfortunately typical reaction for many individuals. It is central to the application of mediated learning experience that we understand this phenomenon and direct MLE toward overcoming it. It is the highest level manifestation of the goals and philosophy of the provision of MLE. And its power and importance in the process of dynamic teaching and assessment is reflected in the response of those individuals who have been successfully mediated past their initial resistance.

## References

- Feuerstein, R., Feuerstein, R.S., Falik, L. H., & Rand Y. (2002). *The Dynamic Assessment of Cognitive Modifiability: The Learning Propensity Assessment Device: Theory, Instruments, and Techniques*. Jerusalem, Israel: ICELP Press.
- Feuerstein, R., Feuerstein, R. S., Falik L. H., & Rand, Y. (2006). *Creating and Enhancing Cognitive Modifiability: The Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment Program*. Jerusalem: ICELP Publications.

## Mediating Past the First Level of Resistance

A Workshop Presented By  
Louis Falik, ICELP  
Kathleen Bellanca, iRi

**IACEP: North American Regional Conference**  
Catamaran Resort Hotel  
San Diego, CA  
February 5-7, 2010

**Cognitive Education, Diversity, and Special Needs  
Keynote Addresses**  
Michael Cole  
Robert Sternberg  
Barbara Rogoff

Visit [www.iacep-coged.org](http://www.iacep-coged.org) for more information

# The COGNITIVE CONNECTION NEWSLINE: A call for articles

The Cognitive Connection NewsLINE urges anyone with a unique perspective to write a piece for submission. We want to celebrate and explore as we move ahead in the complex swirl of education. We can do that best by hearing from many corners of the education world, those who chose it as a profession, those who make policy for it, those who spend their pride and joy to live it day after day, and those who are our best hope for the future.

Submission Submit an electronic file containing the article in a Word document for review. In a separate file indicate author's name, title, institutional affiliation, address, phone number, e-mail address, and an abstract that clearly represents the focus of the article and ties it to the theme.

Articles should be well written and between 2-4 pages, typed, double spaced, (pages numbered) and formatted to follow the Fifth Edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. E-mail to Kathleen J. Bellanca at [kjb@iriinc.us](mailto:kjb@iriinc.us). Deadline for of articles is **January 29, 2010**. She will notify authors by **February 2, 2010**. The issue will be published in **February, 2009**.

## OUR MISSION: Change student's minds!

To keep you up-to-date on new ideas emerging from research and applications that impact teaching and students' learning in the 21st Century. We describe professional development opportunities for educators to deepen their knowledge and enrich their skills.

By sharing this information, we hope to enable educators, parents, and other helping professionals to "**change student's minds**" by expanding the structures of their intellect and enriching their learning capabilities as they prepare to live and work in a high-tech world.



inside  
next issue:

Early Childhood

Special Education

21st Century Thinking Skills

And More

**LEARN 2 ENABLE LEARNING**

Intensive professional learning for educators to promote students' critical thinking, literacy, and mathematics achievement for 21st century success.

**Chicago, Illinois**  
July 26 - August 6, 2010

## Join Us for the 21st Century Critical Thinking Series

The 21<sup>st</sup> century requires new thinking, new skills, new content, new strategies, new media, and more.

**Are your students ready?**

Educators more than ever before are charged with enabling students to build critical thinking and problem solving skills to set the foundation for a lifetime of success in the classroom and the workplace.

**Are you prepared?**

**iRi's Learn To Enable Learning Summer Seminars** are 2 different weeks of intensive professional learning experiences for early childhood, middle school, high school, and special needs educators dedicated to improving the thinking and reasoning skills of all students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our children must learn to think higher, deeper, and faster. The 21<sup>st</sup> century demands it.

For more information please visit us at [www.iriinc.us](http://www.iriinc.us) or call us toll free 877. 474. 4900