

Promoting Critical Thinking Among the Tertiary learners

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking in the words of Richard Paul and Linda Elder is ‘the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it’. Critical thinking being a component of Higher Order Thinking Skills is an essential facet for the tertiary literature learners. It is also generally accepted that learners with critical thinking acumen understand and appreciate literature better. The primary responsibility of English language teachers is to develop the four indispensable language skills (LSRW- Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). Besides they are expected to make the learners confident to face the challenges of life by honing their emotional intelligence. The introduction of vital elements of critical thinking through the pieces of literature is relatively easier for English teachers. The paper attempts to show how students exposed to the Universal Intellectual Standards can improve their elements of critical thinking. The methodology adopted covertly develops the learners’ Intellectual traits and accomplishes the ulterior aim of ‘Man Making Education’.

Key Terms:

Tertiary Learners: Degree Level (B.A., B. Sc., B. Com etc.)

Universal Intellectual Standards: Clarity, Accuracy, Precision, Relevance, Depth, Breadth, Logic, Significance and Fairness.

Elements of critical thinking: Purpose, Question, Information, Concepts, Assumptions, Inferences, Points of View and Implications.

Intellectual Traits: Intellectual integrity, Intellectual humility, Confidence in reason, Intellectual empathy, Intellectual courage, Intellectual autonomy and Fair-mindedness.

Thoughts are indispensable and all our efforts and actions are the byproduct of thoughts. According to Robin Sharma, human beings get around sixty thousand thoughts, among which majority of them deal with the elements that constitute routine life. There is no dearth of thoughts. However, thoughts when left to itself tend to become ‘biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or downright prejudiced’ (Richard Paul and Linda Elder, 2007). This paper presents the research carried out at RKM Vivekananda College, Mylapore, Chennai. It highlights how tertiary learners when exposed to the selected poems and stories can think critically and evolve as complete individuals equipped with the skill of questioning rationally before accepting any information or fact.

Education is meant to cater to the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains to develop the learners’ overall personality. Cognitive aspect which deals with thinking has the following components as per the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy: Remembering, Understanding,

Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating and Creating. Primary and secondary levels of education in general concentrate only on 'Remembering' and 'Understanding'. Only in exceptional circumstances, students are given a chance to move further towards 'Applying' the knowledge gained in classroom. The purpose of education remains unfulfilled as learners do not reach the stage of 'Creating'. The trend continues more or less even at the tertiary level as majority of the learners and teachers are only conscious of good results/academic grades.

Critical thinking as defined by Ennis "is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do". Critical thinking, a component of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) is rarely introduced or given its due importance as "training students to do critical thinking is not an easy task" Doyle (1985). This has resulted in the burgeoning of thousands of learners who get their academic degrees without having any exposure to the HOTS.

"Language classes are particularly appropriate for teaching critical thinking owing to the richness of material and the interactive approaches used" says Ervin Ustunluoglu (2004). With an objective to expose the tertiary learners about the importance of critical thinking, two poems (Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* and Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*) and two short stories (RK Narayan's *Another Community* and Somerset Maugham's *The Verger*) were selected. The selected pieces of literature were taught in the general English classes for B. A. English literature students.

The poem 'The Road Not Taken' presents the theme of decision making which everyone has to make at different points of life. After introducing the poem and analyzing its themes, the following questions were posed to the learners:

- Do you have any road not taken? Why did you avoid it?
- What made you prefer English Literature to other branches of study?
- What are your plans after pursuing graduation in literature?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of different options available for a graduate in English?

The questions were carefully drafted to make the learners think beyond the subject handled. They did not seek to check the 'Remembering' and 'Understanding' areas of the revised Bloom's taxonomy. The descriptive questions were purposefully meant to move the learners from the lower levels of thinking to HOTS namely 'Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating and Creating'.

The students were asked to analyze the following questions:

- Was the poet right in taking writing as his career? Why?
- What would be your criteria for choosing a career: passion or money? Why?

The students were expected to jot down their answers in about ten minutes. Following the individual task, a group discussion on the given questions was initiated for eight volunteers in about twenty minutes. The teacher's role in these tasks was to facilitate the learners to analyze their thinking with an objective to improve it. This poem offered an excellent scope to make the learners apply the knowledge learnt in making their personal decisions. "The improvement of student thinking from ordinary thinking to good thinking depends heavily upon students' ability to identify and cite good reasons for their opinions" says Lipman (1988). The poem provided ample areas for analyzing, evaluating the options available and finally creating something similar to what they had learnt. The poem also provided an ideal

environment for the teacher to introduce the ‘Intellectual Standards’ which are decisive for Critical thinking.

INTELLECTUAL STANDARDS	IDEAS/THOUGHTS
Clarity	Do I have a clear idea about my future plans? Do I need any further clarity before my venture?
Accuracy	Do I have accurate/ specific ideas to reach my objective?
Precision	Do I have a road map to achieve my goals?
Relevance	How is the poem relevant to my goal setting? Is my goal setting relevant to my skills/knowledge/purpose?
Depth	What are the factors involved in making a decision about my career options?
Breadth	Should I consider different options or analyze different perspectives before arriving at a decision?
Logic	Does my plan make sense? Is it worth achieving? Is my plan logically correct?
Significance	What are the facts that are crucial in my career?
Fairness	Have I taken others’ viewpoints? Do I have any other interests in achieving the particular objective?

The listed Intellectual Standards were taught using the poem. Hence, the learners found it easier to understand the criteria and they applied the Standards in the tasks provided. Thus, the objective of making the learners aware of the Intellectual Standards was quite successful. The poem helped learners in not only learning the Intellectual Standards but also to apply them in real life situations.

The ‘Elements of Reasoning’ which serve as a guide for Critical Thinking were covertly taught to the learners with Robert Browning’s My Last Duchess. It was deliberately chosen to make the learners approach the poem from a detective’s perspective. In the poem, the Duke who unveils the portrait of his last Duchess to his visitor happens to describe her qualities/nature through his monologue. Ironically through his narration, he reveals more about himself too. This element can be utilized to make the learners look for clues on the following questions:

- Who killed the Duchess? Why?
- Does the Duke glorify his last Duchess or bring down her reputation? How?

The questions were given as an individual work and students were asked to write the answers in about ten minutes. Then, a general discussion was initiated by the teacher following the guidelines of Elements of Reasoning.

ELEMENTS OF REASONING	THOUGHTS/ IDEAS
Purpose	What is the purpose of my thinking? Why am I reading this?
Question	What are the questions for which I would find answers? Are the answers

	relevant to the questions posed?
Information	Has the poet given the necessary information to arrive at a particular conclusion? What is the information that I have gathered?
Concepts	Have I understood the key concept of the poem? Has it been well explained?
Assumptions	What are the assumptions that I have when I arrive at a particular decision? When I say that the Duke has murdered the Duchess, what are the assumptions that I have? Has the poet got any assumptions?
Inferences	How did I arrive at the particular decision? What is the line of reasoning that I have followed to come to a decision that the Duchess was murdered by the Duke?
Points of View	Do I have any other points of view? Have I considered/taken other perspectives into consideration as well?
Implications	What is the result of accepting the arrived decision/idea? What are the implications of not following other ideas? Have I understood the implications of my understanding about the particular decision?

The Elements of Reasoning required for critical thinking facilitate the learners to understand the poem better. They also empower the learners to appreciate the nuances of any literary text by applying the Intellectual Standards on the different Elements of Reasoning. In general, the approach adopted enabled learners interpret literature and think critically on any given discourse.

RK Narayan's *Another Community* which deals with the protagonist getting killed in a communal clash serves to relate the learners to the evils of caste and other related prejudices that one has. The story provided a nice platform to discuss the prejudices associated with caste, religion, gender, language, region, race and other discriminating factors. The learners were taught what prejudices could lead to and why there is a need to eradicate such inhumane practices from any society.

The following questions were posed to the learners to make them think and evaluate their prejudices and assumptions:

- Do you enquire/learn about others' caste/religion? Why?
- Do you have any prejudices based on somebody's religion/region/colour/caste? What are they?

The above questions helped "the learners have and show understanding of themselves and their surroundings" Usunluoglu (2004). The learners critically evaluated the discriminating factors and were ready to be exposed to the Intellectual Traits like fair-mindedness, intellectual courage, and intellectual empathy. Innate egocentrism (It is true because I believe it) and innate sociocentrism (It is true because we believe it) were appropriately and clearly highlighted using the story.

"The use of ethics cases in the classroom can foster critical thinking and give students confidence to speak out" says Sokol (2004). Somerset Maugham's *The Verger* presents the ethical case of an illiterate man's difficulties in retaining the job that he is passionate about.

The following questions were given to the learners to elicit their opinions and make them incline towards critical thinking:

Is the new vicar right in his expectations? How?

Should a verger have any formal qualification? Why?

Is the verger ethically correct in becoming a tobacconist?

The ethical questions posed as individual work necessitated learners to write their ideas logically. When the same questions were discussed in the open forum, the students displayed certain aspects of the critical thinking. They were even found to use the similar terms explained to them in Elements of Reasoning and Intellectual Standards. This only proved the depth of understanding the students had achieved.

The story which ends with the sarcastic remarks on education was found ideal to bring in the message regarding intellectual humility. Innate selfishness (It is true because it is in my self interest) of the new vicar and the innate self-validation (It is true because I have always believed it) of the protagonist were easier for the learners to relate to similar experiences in their own lives.

Critical thinking being a component of HOTS is an essential facet for the tertiary learners. It is also generally accepted that learners with critical thinking acumen understand and appreciate literature better. The primary responsibility of English language teachers is to develop the four indispensable language skills (LSRW- Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). However, the language teachers are even expected to make the learners confident to face the challenges of life by honing their emotional intelligence. The introduction of vital elements of critical thinking through the pieces of literature is relatively easier for English teachers. The paper thus presents the attempt made to expose students to the Universal Intellectual Standards to improve their elements of critical thinking. The methodology adopted covertly develops the learners' Intellectual Traits and accomplishes the ulterior aim of Swami Vivekananda's mission of providing 'Man Making Education'.

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