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THE MEANING OF CRITICAL THINKING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

ZNACZENIE KRYTYCZNEGO MYŚLENIA Z PERSPEKTYWY MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH STUDENTÓW

ABSTRACT: The general aim of this paper is to identify the meaning of critical thinking from the perspective of a sample of international students' experiences and explain how that knowledge can be used to improve teaching. The main research question is: how do international student's understand critical thinking? The author presents the data from a focus group discussion consisting of nine 1st year students in the Master of Education Program, at the Department of Education of Stockholm University (SU). The hermeneutical approach was used in both epistemological and methodological aspects as the framework for the analysis of the focus group discussion. One of the conclusions is that critical thinking is re/constructed and a part of lifelong and life-wide learning.

KEYWORDS: critical thinking, international students, critical reflection, understanding.

ABSTRAKT: Głównym celem artykułu jest rozpoznanie znaczenia krytycznego myślenia z perspektywy doświadczeń grupy międzynarodowych studentów oraz wyjaśnienie, jak pozyskana wiedza może być wykorzystana w procesie nauczania. Pytanie badawcze brzmi: jak studenci międzynarodowi rozumieją krytyczne myślenie? Autorka prezentuje wyniki badań pozyskane z wykorzystaniem metody dyskusji grupowej ze studentami pierwszego roku studiów magisterskich w Instytucie Pedagogiki, na Uniwersytecie Sztokholmskim. W badaniach została zastosowana perspektywa hermeneutyczna zarówno w aspekcie metodologicznym oraz jako podstawa do przeprowadzenia analizy uzyskanych wyników badań. Jedną z konkluzji prezentowanego tekstu brzmi następująco: krytyczne myślenie jest re/konstruowane i jest częścią procesu całożyciowego uczenia się.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: krytyczne myślenie, studenci międzynarodowi, krytyczna refleksja, rozumienie.

Introduction

The concept of critical thinking is under constant consideration. Since 2001, I have been working as a University lecturer and still find myself searching for the meaning of critical thinking. In this role, I work with international students and have been presented with a new challenge to develop my teaching in light of their varied educational experiences. The diversity of students – from different cultural, social and educational backgrounds – encourage reflections on how to best handle such diversity, different learning experiences and different points of view. The European tertiary education landscape is characterised by mobility; there is the possibility of studying and living abroad (Erasmus) and moving for work. This intensification of migration brings great

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opportunities for development for both migrant students and workers but also for the host societies. Yet, there are also considerable challenges. Thus, this teaching position has inspired me to conduct research into the experiences of international students in relation to critical thinking. In this paper, I focus on the diversity of learning and thinking as well as on the understanding of the world from the perspectives of international students. The aim of the paper is to explore the meanings of critical thinking from the perspective of the international students' experiences and explain how that knowledge can be used to improve teaching. We live in a world determined by cultural diversity, therefore, international experiences have become a permanent element of many people lives.

Studies on meanings of critical thinking

What is critical thinking? This question has been the interest of researchers, scientists, philosophical thinkers, theorists and educators for many years and they have interpreted critical thinking in many different ways (see for example, Moore 2011; Davies 2013, 2015; Facione 1998; Lipman 1988; Elder & Paul 1994; Brookfield 1987, 2005). Moreover, there is the Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique and the Foundation for Critical Thinking (NGO) which seek to promote essential change in education and society through the cultivation of fair-minded critical thinking¹. These organisations provide a lot of information concerning critical thinking e.g. articles, books, conferences, online courses.

Firstly, in this paper, I would like to provide some considerations about the meaning of thinking and related terms. To quote Dewey (1997, pp. 8-9), thinking is defined as *that operation in which present facts suggest other facts (or truths) in such a way as to induce belief in the latter upon the ground or warrant of the former*. In other words, thinking is a series of thoughts we follow to obtain certain facts or beliefs that can be based on certain assumptions. However, reflecting on our experiences, and then thinking “is more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance” (Dewey 1997, p. 13). Thus, reflective thinking is a process that is more complex and focuses on maintaining suspense during further thinking and maintaining a state of doubt while continuing systematic and protracted reflection.

Critical thinking is the ability to reason and argue (Davies 2015) and “is essential as a tool of inquiry” (Facione 1998, p. 28), so it seems that it is a skill which may be

¹ Foundation for Critical Thinking <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/766>.

developed or learned. I agree with Brookfield (1987) that critical thinking is a process not an outcome and that manifestations of critical thinking are varied depending on the contexts in which they occur. According to Sigel (1989) a critical thinker must have not only “a good understanding of, and the ability to utilise, principles governing the assessment of reasons” (p. 23) but must have a ‘critical attitude’ that ‘means not only ability to seek reasons, but commitment to do so; not simply an ability to judge impartially, but the willingness and desire to do so’ (p. 26). This means that critical thinking is an ability and disposition, which can be influenced by certain factors, such as the diversity of culture or society, and can be learnt. Moreover, critical thinking requires a high degree of continuous self-reflection and intellectual discipline (Elder and Paul 1994). It is a process that requires action (asking questions) and refers to critical reflection that ensures transformation of the meaning perspectives (Mezirow 2009) and critical thinking is embedded in a cultural and social context.

In the contemporary university, we encounter growing expectations from employers for evidence of critical thinking skills in their employees. Yet, within the internationalisation of tertiary education it is less clear how meanings of critical thinking carry across culturally diverse cohorts of students and graduates. These requirements have inspired me to undertake this research.

Background of the research – data collection and procedure of analysis

The aim of the paper is to explore the meanings of critical thinking among a group of international students at a Swedish university. The research questions are: How do international students understand critical thinking? What is the meaning of critical thinking? Where/how can international students learn to think critically?

To answer these questions, I have used data from a focus group consisting of nine first year students in the Master of Education Program at the Department of Education at Stockholm University. The focus group (90-minute discussion) was arranged as a focused research situation (out of class). The students were invited to participate and were well informed about the purpose of the discussion and all the rules, accordingly, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) were followed. The focus group discussion is one of the qualitative methods that allows a researcher to develop an understanding of what or how people think (Bryman 2016). The focus group emphasizes a specific theme that is explored in depth and “offers the researcher the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it” (Bryman 2016, p. 502).

The students were from different countries: Sweden, USA, China, Italy, Russia, Uganda (six women and one man). They were between 25 and 45 years of age. Thus,

eight students with different social-cultural and educational backgrounds discussed their understanding of the meaning of critical thinking. The diversity of the participants is welcomed however the “researcher must always be mindful of the impact of status and power on group dynamics” (Coe et al. 2017, p. 192). However, I admit that although students came from different countries and were of different ages they belonged to one group at SU which caused a specific situation that could be considered as a limitation of research.

Since the participants already knew each other’s names and cultural backgrounds, no general introduction was needed. I started the discussion with an open question: How do you understand critical thinking? Afterwards, I followed the dynamics of the group discussion by asking relevant questions to the students’ answers whilst focusing on the theme of the discussion. During the focus discussion the group followed these questions: How can we learn to think critically? What are the differences between critical thinking and critical reflection? Do you think critically? Who taught you critical thinking?

I used Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as the framework for the analysis of the collected data as it deals with the practise of understanding. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975/2013) wrote that ‘understanding is, primarily, agreement. Thus, people usually understand each other immediately, or they make themselves understood with the view toward reaching agreement. Understanding each other is always understanding each other with the respect to something’ (p. 167), ‘... understanding is not, in fact, understanding better... it is enough to say that we understand in a *different* way, *if we understand at all*’ (p. 257, emphasis in original).

From a hermeneutic approach, understanding another’s way of thinking happens in dialogue. Thus, in reference to the meaning of critical thinking, the understanding of the concept is possible through dialogue. Hermeneutical dialogue is a special type of exchanging of thoughts, it is an openness to the truth and sensitivity to difference, to the interlocutor’s individuality (Zakrzewska-Manterys 1998). It is more than just exchanging sentences. By talking we ‘immerse’ in conversation, we go beyond ourselves to see “otherness”, the distinctness of our interlocutor. Only in a conversation in which two people understand each other, there may be understanding. Gadamer offers a definition of a hermeneutic situation where understanding happens. Trying to understand a phenomenon or situation we are always affected by history and the experiences we have collected. Consciousness of affecting, Gadamer (1975/2013, p. 260) called ‘consciousness of the hermeneutical *situation*. [...] the very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it, hence we are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We always find ourselves within a situation and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished.’ Trying to understand the situation or phenomenon, we reflect upon experiences and acquired knowledge influenced by historical, cultural and social

contexts. “A hermeneutical situation is determined by the prejudices that we bring with us” (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 263). Thus, the way of thinking or understanding is affected by historical, cultural and social contexts and determined by our prejudices as well.

Gadamer (1975/2013, p. 263) connects the hermeneutic situation with the concept of horizon: “to acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion”. Thus, to “‘have a horizon’ means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it” (Gadamer 1975/2013, p. 261). Horizon changes for a person who is moving and who is in the process of being formed. By creating a place for discussion and dialogue we are confronted with our prejudices embedded in social, cultural and historical contexts and we can explore the meaning of the phenomenon. Therefore, I use the hermeneutical approach in both the epistemological and methodological aspects as the framework for data analyses and as the focus of the group discussion.

When conducting the analyses, I searched for similarities and differences in the data, which I described in categories and then in themes. Thus, I moved from the data to a theoretical understanding. This way of analysis and hermeneutical approach helped me to discover the meaning of underlying patterns and differences of understanding of critical thinking. The analysis of the collected data brought interesting findings and drew some conclusions. Two main themes emerged from the data. The first theme – **the meaning of critical thinking** shows the understanding of critical thinking by international students, while the second one: **learning critical thinking – through places, situations, and others**, presents the situations and places of learning critical thinking. The results of the analyses are presented below.

The meaning of critical thinking

The preliminary analysis showed that culture or the students’ countries of origin do not impact the understanding of critical thinking so much. However, this was only the first insight. Deeper analyses showed that the most important aspects of critical thinking are the life and learning experiences the participants received as international students on different levels of education (as in the case of two students from the U.S) and as members of family background where they had grown up. The discussion of the international students about their understanding of the meaning of critical thinking shows that they understand critical thinking both as a process and as a skill. The result of understanding critical thinking by international students was divided into two sub-themes of understanding which somehow overlap: **critical thinking by doing, by questioning** and **critical thinking as a learnt skill**.

Critical thinking by doing, by questioning

Understanding critical thinking by doing and by questioning refers to a process that requires action (Mezirow 2009). Thus, it means that critical thinking is about questioning the new knowledge while referring to prior knowledge or the way around. As Maria said: critical thinking *is questioning* (Maria – Italy). *To question the knowledge that's being presented to you [...] that's always more behind* (Sandra – U.S). *Critical thinking is how prior knowledge is applied to new knowledge we get* (Asha – U.S). Critical thinking as a process requires asking questions and questioning the reality, facts and knowledge that we learn. Thus, we learn critical thinking when we ask questions and confront our perspectives with others while considering the prejudices embedded in social, cultural and historical contexts.

Critical thinking as a learnt skill

Critical thinking as a skill to be learnt is the second sub-theme of the understanding the critical thinking:

[As Merika (Sweden) said, critical thinking]: [...] *is a skill that you need to practice and a skill that is learnable [...]. Critical thinking is a tool to navigate the world [...]. The world which our kids meet is more complex than the world we met and in this sense we need to understand where the information is coming from. How can I understand this information?*

It seems like we need a lot of subject knowledge in order to be good critical thinkers. Thus, in this sense being a critical thinker requires a tool and, if that is so, then we can or we need to learn how to use it.

The ability to think critically *can come to us [...] it should be train[ed] and implemented in the curriculum* (Natasza – Russia) and we should be practicing it also in everyday life:

[...] *even in the relationship between parents and kids – mother or father is always right – you should listen to me because I'm your mother. This model should be [subject to] change nowadays – [...] so critical thinking is the ability to give the space for finding new things – it is important to develop the skill from the childhood* (Natasza – Russia).

Critical thinking requires knowledge and needs context: *we need to be able to explain why we are using our knowledge* (Natasza-Russia). Thus, in this sense critical thinking needs 'background' knowledge to be practiced. Critical thinking loses its purpose without knowledge and context. As Natasza points out, one of the places to practice critical thinking is family where the child can learn to ask questions in order to bring critical thinking into action.

To conclude, critical thinking is a complex issue. And, in reference to the findings, critical thinking might be understood as a process – critical thinking by doing, by questioning and as well as a learnt skill. However, from the perspective of time we can distinguish critical thinking from critical reflection. Critical thinking is:

[...] more present and critical reflection is more past – it is before and after. Critical thinking happens in the moment when you receive information [...] and critical reflection is after something happened [...] critical reflection needs some more time (Sandra – U.S).

Critical thinking and critical reflection can *be used separately but they work best when you use them both together (Sandra – U.S); they are like two different processes (Merika – Sweden).* This means that critical reflection needs critical thinking, but critical thinking does not require critical reflection.

Learning critical thinking – through places, situations and others

As one of the participants Ibab (Uganda) said, *critical thinking comes with experience* that we get from both formal and informal situations of learning. The regular courses at school or at universities might be such formal places of learning critical learning (Sandra – U.S; Maria – Italy; Shu – China). The participants of the focus group pointed out some of such places of learning critical thinking in different countries. For example, in China, in some kindergartens, teachers attempt to teach kids critical thinking. In Italy there exists an unspoken opinion that *if you attend some type of school (specific one) you will gain critical thinking in some way [...]* because it is the way the subjects are taught; for example, *they want you to always ask questions about this. They ask you when? Where? Why? What? They want you to connect things (Maria – Italy).*

In the USA, at the colleague level there are some courses which are seen as:

[...] an eye opening course[s] [they were] an introduction to basic philosophy and ethics and morals and just made me question everything that I assumed in my own mind about my life and my assumption about others opinions (Sandra – U.S).

However, there are countries like Russia where, in contrast to Sweden – *you cannot question the teacher*, there is no space for critical thinking because

the educational system is the 'good one' and [it] is difficult to question the knowledge so we don't have so much practise to train our critical thinking because the teacher is always right (Natasza – Russia).

As some participants of the focus group emphasised, critical thinking takes place in relationships with others – when we discuss our points of view or when we try to set up our position in that relationship. Critical thinking *is important however, this skill was not developed in my childhood [...]* but *I was lucky I met very interesting people*

and I changed myself (Natasza – Russia). Those ‘the others’ might be parents who let their children ask questions (Maria) or teachers, who, for example, in China prepare materials for parents to help kids learn critical learning (they share the pedagogical plan). It might be a member of the family, like a cousin who questioned everything (Maria – Italy) or a partner with whom we build a relationship with (Shu – China, Maria – Italy, Merika – Sweden).

Thus, if ‘the others’ are parents or teachers then it is important to allow the children to ask questions. It is fine to say, ‘I do not know’ when we are a teacher or parent and allow children to find the answer together, then both sides can learn critical thinking. Nevertheless, we should be aware of those who have *parents who cannot help their kids to think critically because they do not have those skills themselves* (Merika – Sweden). This means that learning critical thinking depends on many factors, one of which is the culture we grow up in (e.g. Sweden uses the character Pipi Longstocking in formal and informal education – to teach children to question).

However, critical thinking might be an unwanted skill in some countries. The person who shows *critical thinking is much [more] difficult to control* (Natasza – Russia). Therefore, in some countries the educational policies are formulated in a way to avoid teaching critical thinking. Politicians do not want to give the citizens ‘tools’ to become independent and critical thinkers. Then, the society is easy to manipulate by those in power. Nevertheless, being a critical thinker is not enough. We, students, should be trained to analyse critically (example of Swedish schools) (Merika – Sweden).

Discussion and conclusions

The data analysis has shown that the diversity of the group created a space for inspiration, discussion and negotiating the understanding of the meaning of critical thinking. During the discussion, the participants started to share more personal stories related to critical thinking. They started talking about their families and the relationships they build. The participants spoke about the need to improve their skills of critical thinking as parents because they did not want to make the same mistakes as their parents. As such, critical thinking takes place in everyday conversation with the members of their family. However, how can we handle critical thinking when we face it? We need the knowledge of how to analyse critically. We can present complex thinking however, complex thinking and critical thinking are not the same thing. *Critical thinking needs complex thinking* (Maria – Italy) but not necessarily the other way around (Merika – Sweden).

The analysis of this preliminary research shows that critical thinking is both a skill among participants in focus group discussions and the process of learning – forming opinions through action and the process by asking questions. Referring to Brookfield

(1987), critical thinking is a productive and positive activity and is a process not an outcome in which 'others' participate. Critical thinking is a lifelong and life-wide the learning process whereby all life experiences are involved. As he claims "learning is as crucial as breathing to the human being. It is the process whereby individuals develop their own minds, sense of self and identity, biography and their own history. Learning is the very basic of our humanity – it is the process of internalizing the external world and being able to locate ourselves within it. It is not a matter of learning a skill, but of a person learning a skill: it is the *person* that is crucial. Teachers do not teach subjects or skills, they teach *individuals'* subjects and skills" (Jarvis 2001, pp. 201-202). Thus, the emphasis is on the individual/person who is in the process of learning critical thinking.

The analysis of this exploratory research shows that it matters where the students come from. I argue that some countries like Sweden, U.S and Italy are more open to practicing critical thinking and China is on the way of implementing critical thinking into formal education. Russia seems to be a country where critical thinking is somehow 'forbidden' on the formal education level and in everyday situations (e.g. in the family) as well. These cultural differences which 'pop up' but are not as visible at first glance might provide some idea or answer as to why some of the international students differ from others and/or are more 'brave' to ask questions, to argue or to share their opinions with others. However, more study is required to explore the meaning and role of culture in enhancing curiosity and critical thinking.

This is an explorative study of understanding the meaning of critical thinking from the perspective of international students which requires more research. However, the study is arguably illustrative of many other diverse students' understanding of critical thinking who have experienced many similar situations and challenges in their lives. It illustrates that international students cannot be simply reduced to their formal learning. They also carry some struggles with cultural experiences that they have grown up with, and opportunities for learning: lifelong and life wide. Although I am aware that the presented research requires more explanation and deeper theoretical conceptualization, I believe that the presented findings constitute an interesting contribution to the understanding of the meaning of critical thinking from the perspective of international students. Being a critical thinker is becoming more and more 'valuable' in this multi-cultural and constantly changing postmodern world of mobility.

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