

Chapter 57

Cultivating Critical Thinking Amongst University Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

The importance of critical thinking in 21st century knowledge economy is no longer disputable. Yet, its cultivation amongst learners remains a challenge - even to the most accomplished teachers. This chapter examines the perceptions of critical thinking held by faculty members of a university's college of education in Uganda. The study findings reveal that faculty members have different perceptions of what critical thinking is, its importance, and how it is cultivated amongst graduate students. Additionally, the faculty reported several challenges while cultivating critical thinking among students. It was thus concluded that the differences in faculty members' perceptions of critical thinking were responsible for its inadequate cultivation amongst students, other factors notwithstanding. Therefore, the study recommends for the formal inclusion of critical thinking in the curricula of graduate programs in order to strengthen its cultivation among students.

INTRODUCTION

The demand for critical thinking (CT) among policy-makers, practitioners as well as scholars is today on the rise, world over. This growing desire for critical thinking is underpinned by different factors. First, critical thinking is aptly considered not only “among the first causes for change” (Teachthought, 2017, para 1), but also “a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one’s personal and civic life. While not synonymous with good thinking, CT is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon” (Facione, 1990, p.ii). Second,

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Outside of university study, employers seek graduate employees who are able to transfer their critical thinking abilities to the workplace (Tapper, 2004). Other scholars such as Elander et al. (2006) believe that critical thinking skills are not merely transferable to other areas of our lives, but also personally transformative, inducing individuals to develop from passive recipients of knowledge to active, participants in society. (Vyncke, 2012, p.12)

It is common to hear conversation about teachers preferring to work with learners who exhibit more critical thinking skills than others. Thus, the demand for critical thinking implies more pressure is being mounted on teachers (or educators) at all levels of education to enable their learners not only to learn but also to learn to think critically. The case of graduate students pursuing masters and doctoral programs in education is not any exception. However, numerous studies conducted over the years have shown that the cultivation of critical thinking skills amongst learners is no easy feat – not even for the most talented teacher.

In this study, the researcher explores the perceptions of critical thinking held by faculty members of a university's college of education in Uganda. Specifically, the study delves into the faculty's perceptions of what critical thinking is; its importance; how it is cultivated; and the challenges and coping strategies used by faculty members for cultivating critical thinking among their graduate students. In the next section, the author presents the background to the study problem which is divided into four parts, namely: the historical, theoretical, conceptual, and contextual perspectives.

BACKGROUND

Historical Perspectives

Critical thinking has a long history. According to Anderson, *et al.* (nd), the “roots of critical thinking are linked to the teaching practices of Socrates, who 2,500 years ago, utilized a method of probing questioning that people could not rationally justify their confident claims to knowledge” (p.3). Since then, several scholars have, at different times, taken interest to promote its idea in schools as well as in society as a whole. Among the scholars and educators who significantly re-ignited the interest in understanding and applying critical thinking skills were John Dewey and Benjamin Bloom (Lai, 2011). According to these two scholars (Dewey and Bloom), critical thinking is of great importance not only to the student, but to society as well. Nevertheless, despite the proven benefit of critical thinking in education and elsewhere, the development of its skills amongst learners of all kinds has remained dismally low. In this study, an attempt has been made to explore the perceptions of critical thinking held by faculty members of a university's college of education in order to re-ignite the debate on a subject that will in the near future (if not already) become the main object of higher education.

Over the years, a plethora of research has been conducted to understand the perceptions of critical thinking held by different parties in different contexts. Some of these studies looked at the perceptions of critical thinking held by employers as they make considerations of who to employ or not (e.g. Jacob, Lee & Ing, 2006; Field, 2001; DETYA, 2000). Many of such studies showed that employers often prefer to give employment opportunities to those individuals they consider to possess more critical thinking skills than others. On the other hand, some of the studies about critical thinking have delved into the perceptions of critical thinking held by students (e.g. Johnstone, 2006; 2008; Tapper, 2004, Shah, 2007;

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