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Teaching Students How to Think Critically and Actively Express Their Opinions

Critical thinking is the most fruitful challenge for understanding, as it implies the correct use of concepts, analysis, evaluations, and inference. For a teacher, the degree to which his/her students are able to consistently criticize is the best proof of their correct understanding of things. However, thinking critically also implies liberty and responsibility: the liberty of expressing your opinions and the responsibility of doing this in a fair way. This is the starting point in discussing about how to teach students think critically in post-totalitarian countries like Romania.

Thinking critically is not a common ability for common students in the Romanian education system. The explanations for this situation usually lay on cultural grounds, in the so-called ‘politics of duplicity’ in the communist period. In order to survive the communist terror, people developed a parallel ego that spoke in slogans. Criticizing or expressing personal opinions was dangerous, and the easiest way of avoiding that was reproducing the official discourse, the so-called wooden language. There was no danger in that and soon this culture of reproducing words deeply translated in the field of education. Information became mainly accumulated and was analyzed very little. Learning lessons by heart, achieving knowledge without the least sense of usefulness, were common practices in the education during the communist period. After 1989, things changed very little, and mainly in the field of higher education, where opportunities of contact with Western educational systems became largely widespread. So, this is the general framework of our topic of analysis; let’s now focus on the students.

As I emphasized earlier, critical thinking is mainly a question of liberty and responsibility. Well, when they enter the universities, for most of the Romanian junior undergraduate students both features are deficiently shaped. This is the first challenge a teacher has to answer – make your students talk and, when they do it, make them assume and support their ideas. From my experience of teaching, first year students are surprised when someone asks for their opinions. They are not used to that and they like it, but almost none of them dares to clearly express his/her point of view. You can usually hear a choir of murmured opinions, expressed louder or lower, but still indistinctly. This is the moment when the teacher gains or loses the confidence and support of his/her students. It is a time when maximum diplomacy is requested from the teacher: openness to students’ ideas, the art of building through questions, rectifying without frightening. Once the acceptance and confidence of students are achieved, the golden pathway of expressing ideas is wide open – ideas are freely exchanged, related, and supported. And the rational support for your own ideas is a basic form of responsibility.

The ability to think critically comes later, once the lesson of responsibility is fully learned. Most scholars are comfortable with critical approaches to materials, they understand that critical does not necessarily mean negative. But this is not the case for many undergraduate students¹. They might learn to perform critical analysis, but they are not prepared to accept critiques. This is another factor that inhibits the public expression of their critical thinking –

¹ For an interesting coverage of this topic, see Mary S. Alexander, “The Art of Teaching Students to Think Critically”, in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 45, Issue 48, 1999.

if they do not interfere, they cannot become subjects of critiques or contradictory discussions. Once the lesson of liberty and responsibility is accepted by the students, there are at least three different paths towards making critical thinking functional inside the class. In a first scenario, students may simply avoid the expression of their critiques. There are academic opinions coming from more or less famous scholars that they prefer to take for granted, accepting the argument of power: “big guys” can’t be wrong. If the teacher asks for a well-founded critique of an opinion expressed in a reading material, the class answer is usually silence, doubled by a severe avoidance of eye contact. At those times, the ceiling of the room or the personal notes become a particularly interesting view for most of the students. No one has an answer or no one dares to express one. From my experience, this tends to become a dead-end situation if the teacher doesn’t carefully manage such a “crisis”. What are the ways out I suggest? My experience says (I also include here my readings) the teacher should try to:

- (1) Drive students’ attention towards comparing. If they compare contending theories or apparently similar cases they are familiar with, it may be easier to identify the weak points and the strong points of each theory.
- (2) Try not to develop the arguments *in abstracto*, but contextualize: focus on familiar cases, or build hypothetical challenges (“what if” situations), together with lots of follow-up questions. For example: “Which would be the chances of democracy in a North Korea conquered by the American troops?”, or “How well does Kitschelt’s theory of democratization fit the Romanian case?”.
- (3) Offer step-by-step examples in order to guide the students towards thinking differently about the controversial issue. It is probable that students, getting used to managing such explicative chains, will be prepared to repeat such inferences.
- (4) Use empathetic comments or enthusiastic remarks in order to encourage the students’ interventions². The teacher should also act as a trainer, marching on the psychological dimension of his formative mission.
- (5) Home assignments, consisting of writing short position papers, would also be beneficial in preparing the students to identify arguments for or against different theories relevant for the specific field of the course. These exercises would highly contribute to the development of the analytical skills needed for a social scientist.
- (6) When building a seminar syllabus, try to offer different perspectives on the same issue by recommending, whenever it’s possible, contending or complementary reading materials.

In a second scenario, a small number of students (or even a single one) may want to express their opinions, while the large majority of students adopt a rather passive attitude. Two possible sub-scenarios may occur.

In a first case, the few students involved in discussions may be motivated by symbolical needs, as to ‘prove something’ to the rest of the class or, even worse, personal vendettas. In other words, they use critique as an attack weapon pointed towards their fellow students. Such a behavior is highly damaging for the general course of the discussion, as it favors distortions and brings about unscholarly arguments. Nevertheless, it induces tensions in the class and inhibits the appetite for discussions of many students. In such a sub-scenario, a prompt intervention of the teacher is a must. From my experience, there are two directions the teacher should follow: inhibit the ‘louds’ and stimulate the ‘silents’. Carefully playing the devil’s advocate by offering contrary perspectives to the arguments of those monopolizing discussions is, in my opinion, the best way to achieve the first task. For the

² See also Brian K. Payne & Randy R. Gainey, “Understanding and Developing Controversial Issues in College Courses”, in *College Teaching*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2003.

second task, I strongly recommend the use of verbal cues³, especially calling students by names, in order to drive the other students say what they have to say and take the lead of discussions.

In the second sub-scenario, students involved in controversial discussions are driven exclusively by scholarly reasons in expressing their critiques, but they still remain very few. In such cases, there is a strong need for making the rest of the class more active. Calling the students by their names would only be the first step. Offering consistent bonuses for particularly interesting comments, perspectives, or critiques to indicated issues would highly stimulate critical and innovative thinking. To these I should probably add at least the middle four of the six ways out presented for the first scenario, as the nature of non-participation in class remains the same.

As I have tried to assess earlier, helping students to think critically is a real challenge for every teacher. We are usually aware of the solutions, but it remains to be seen how prepared any of us is to fruitfully implement them.

³ See again Brian K. Payne & Randy R. Gainey, "Understanding and Developing Controversial Issues in College Courses", in *College Teaching*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2003.