Teacher's Perception of Critical Thinking: Beneficial or Time Consuming?

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Abstract

This paper provides the importance of the critical thinking among the student, which starts from the classroom. It also provides an overview of teachers' perceptions and practices of it while teaching. Further, it also brings to the fore the necessity of integrating it in the classroom by the teachers. This qualitative study was conducted under Habermas's interests' approach with purposeful sampling technique as a methodology. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with teachers who have more than five years of experience in the academic field. The findings of the research provided insight that education though has gone through paradigm shift, from teacher centered to student centered, teachers still prefer practicing traditional teacher centered method depriving students of the critical thinking skills which they are in need of

Introduction

Education is successful in providing knowledge but it is still struggling to produce critical thinkers. Barr and Tagg (1995) mention that there has been a paradigm shift in the education: teacher centered to student centered. However, the education is still reproducing the traditional banking concept that believes in filling the minds of the students with the content of a particular subject without explaining how to analyze, evaluate and arrive on an argument (Friere, 1970).

Meyer (1986) argues that the aim of education is to help an individual in nurturing and unleashing one's potential to the extreme. A sound education should usher the students in judging not only the learning practices and methods but also teach them what and how to learn which manifests their critical thinking skills (Emir, 2009). Learning should be designed in such a way that the students are filled with a purpose that enables them to deal with the currents of life (Thompson, 2011). Critical thinking skills can be empowered through deliberate teaching (Azevedo, 2005). There should be learning situations as a space for "thought experiments" of learners (Bono, 1992). Brown (2007) adds to it by stating that space for thought interaction can be given by providing opportunities for the learners through social interaction.

Critical thinking is referred as an ability to consider any information from any source and process it into a logical and creative way and also analyze until it was concluded if that is correct and can be maintained (Moon, 2008). Critical thinking has an important role in making the right decisions to settle the problems while studying or in a day-to-day life (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). That is why, critical thinking has become an important tool in everyday life.

The goal of education should be to prepare students to tackle the real-life situation, to teach how to act in a particular situation providing life lessons. And critical thinking is a ladder that helps the students in equipping students with these kinds of skills which rote learning can never do. Though critical thinking is considered an integral aspect of education, I believe that the teachers are failing to practice it in the classroom. When these skills are not practiced in the classroom, it becomes tough for the students to learn these out of the class. The main responsibility lies in the part of an educator in enhancing critical thinking rather than just making them aware of what is in the syllabus.

The point I want to articulate here is though there has been change in the education paradigm, the education in Nepal still relies on the traditional education system. As a result, the students are still not equipped with critical thinking but made aware of just the content. When education has to help them in learning critical thinking skills to compete in the global market, teachers still prefer lecture method as a means of teaching strategy in the classroom.

Objective and Importance of Critical Thinking

Oliver and Utermohlem (1996) see students as being the submissive receivers of information. They are treated as a sponge who merely absorb information by listening to them for hours. The banking concept states that the students in a teacher centered method mechanically memorizes the content that is served to them. The teachers assume the students to be containers and believe in filling or depositing the knowledge to the brim. They are more content if they achieve their purpose in doing it (Friere, 1970).

Meyer (1976) argues that the aim of education is to help an individual in nurturing and unleashing one's potential to the extreme. There has always been a group of educational thinkers who believe that

nourishing a child's thinking should be the chief concern of all the schools and colleges (Lipman, 2003). A sound education should usher the students in judging not only the learning practices and learning methods but also what and how to learn which manifests their critical thinking skills (Emir, 2009). Brown (2007) suggests that development of critical thinking skills in college students is an ultimate goal for many college instructors in higher education who seek to prepare their students for real world situations. Paul and Elder (2009) mentioned that thinking of the students can be refined with proper intervention and therefore be made free from prejudices or loopholes.

Paul and Elder (2007) stated that our thoughts largely determine our quality of life. Critical thinking in this sense comes as a remedy in boosting the quality of thinking. According to (Qing, 2013), a critical thinker can think well, analyze rationally, filter information and cop me to a sound judgment.

Critical Thinking is defined as "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis 1987, p. 10). Facione (1990) states that critical thinking is the amalgam of various skills like interpretation, analysis, evaluation, Inference, explanation and self-regulation. Kurland (2000) further adds that adds open-mindedness is also an indispensable aspect of critical thinking. Critical thinking involves enhancement of cognitive process that includes processing of the information and evaluation (Salmon, 2013).

Cultivating critical thinking is a must in today's educational context as it is useful in communicating, thinking rationally and reasoning (Billings & Roberts, 2014). Analytic reading is a key to developing critical thinking. Reading something critically encourages readers to generate their own value judgment. The objective of teaching critical thinking in any branch of learning is to harness the reasoning skills and prepare them to encounter the challenges. Innabi (2003) states that critical thinking helps in the decision making. Hughes and Lavery (2015) argue that cognitive abilities of a particular individual help to gauge the achievement of critical thinking. The significance of critical thinking skills is of utmost importance in the academic setting where students are asked to reach to the conclusion and draw assessment of their understanding (Ennis, 1962).

Hayes and Devitt (2008) argued that critical thinking is considered as a measure of competence for the students. Also, in the real-world scenario even the job givers mark it as an important aspect of job success. Coughlin (2010) argued that students' knowledge on critical thinking is a better indicator of their competence than the command over subject matter.

While Ennis (1989) places much importance on the students' part in learning critical thinking skills, Cooper disagrees and states that the thinking of the students is broadened with the quality of the questions that the teachers ask (Cooper, 2013). Fisher (2001) further adds that the instances or the nature of the assignments given by the teachers refines the thinking of the students. Hence, to enhance critical thinking role of both teachers and students is crucial.

Educators play a pivotal role in shaping, refining and polishing the thinking ability of the students (Paul & Elder, 2008). In order to sharpen critical thinking skills, teachers need to incessantly practice it in the classroom and students should take their own responsibility of learning (Coughlin, 2010). Educators should use critical thinking skills to justify their reasoning and make them indulge in the self-assessment

process. This helps the students in becoming better critical thinkers. Coughlin (2010) further adds that the development of critical thinking skill will have a positive impact not only on the education of the students but also on the professional and the real-world scenario. In brief, incorporating critical thinking in the class prepares students for enhancing personal and professional competency.

Education in Nepal

Students are still seen to have carrying baggage of post conflict situation in Nepal. This has hindered teaching learning strategy. Students remain passive, do not raise questions no matter how dissatisfied they are with the existing situation. In such a situation, critical thinking can be very beneficial for students where the country they are living undergoes through political and economic problems. Critical thinking helps students to see a situation through their own vantage point, have their own take on a matter and sincere citizens (Shaila & Trudell, 2010).

Critical thinking is seen to be one of the most important skills in Nepalese society where the economy is becoming increasingly global and diverse. It is therefore crucial to usher the students to acquire the power skills in order to make them enter to a global market. According to Acharya (2016), "Critical thinking is not integrated in the course of many schools and colleges because of which the students do not know how to think and how to apply this skill in the real life" (p. 3). Hayes and Devitt (2008) stated that critical thinking techniques are not developed in the education of the schools and college education. The curriculum is designed in such a way that it fails to include thinking skills. Hence, the curriculum should be designed in such a way which could gift a solid base for the students in learning critical thinking skills and implementing it in their lives.

Nepal's education system exerts much importance to tests. But instead of giving much attention to these, it is beneficial to focus more on nourishing the critical thinking skills of the students. In so doing, teachers are capable of equipping students with the skills that helps to tackle them with the currents of life (Acharya, 2016).

In the context of Nepal, it is often found that if the classroom is silent and if the students do not ask or few any question, it is considered good. Which is why, teacher centered approach is still prevalent in our context where students just listen and the teachers lecture. In addition to this, group work is also not promoted by the teachers (Acharya, 2016). Teaching style that focuses on the traditional approach can barely improve the critical thinking of the students.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach in the form of interviews to gain deeper understanding about the teacher's perception in practicing critical thinking in a classroom. In this study, data was collected using semi-structured interviews the interview was conducted with the teachers who have been in the teaching field for five years. The questionnaire was administered in Nepali and English. The sample selection is based on purposeful sampling technique (Merriam, 2009). Participants were selected based on criteria identified in advance by the researcher to make sure that the information collected is appropriate and enough. Further, the content analysis process involves selecting, reducing and giving meaning to the data obtained. Pseudonyms are used for the participants in order to maintain the confidentiality of the information received from them.

Discussion and Analysis

I have analyzed the data using the research tools like interview and observation. Based on the data, I have generated four themes. Teacher's perceptions of critical thinking, students' engagement in learning new things, sticking to the content, most of them are visiting faculties and teachers lack of awareness on critical thinking and less training provided on the subject.

Theme 1: Teacher's perceptions of critical thinking

Critical thinking has become an issue of wide concern. Most of the schools and colleges are aware and conscious of making their students critical and so are the teachers. In response to teacher's perception of critical thinking, Binit stated, "Critical thinking is critiquing. It is also making critical arguments, reflecting on it. It is considered an important tool used not only in the class but also out of it. Students become quite analytical and reflective when if they learn these things in a classroom." Snyder and Snyder (2008) argue that critical thinking plays a pivotal role in helping a person take correct decisions not only in their learning but also in their day-to-day life. Critical thinking helps an individual to reflect properly in the real-life situations.

Suman agrees to Liberna's (2011) idea and states that critical thinking makes an individual rational, analytical and encourages them to make sound judgment. Bimal states that 'critical thinking is crucial in my field (management) because we need to critical and analytical. I create managers and supervisors therefore I should train them in developing these skills'. Critical thinking plays a significant role in solving the problem and project management as it brings clarity and accuracy in solving a potential problem (Cottrell, 2005). This skill has become an integral aspect not only in teaching learning but is also considered as an asset in a workplace.

Theme 2: Students' engagement in learning new things

In response to students' eagerness in learning new things, Binit replied, "In order to facilitate it, I ask more open-ended questions and focus more on team work rather than opting for only delivery. Sometimes the quality of the students is too poor. They are reluctant to speak or do any sort of creative things. They just listen to me and are not quite receptive."Bernasconi (2008) observes that students of today's world opt for summaries which can be memorized. In this regard, student's arguing with the perception of the author and reflecting their own is impossible.

Suman like Binit mentioned that students love to participate in learning new stuff. They might be bored by reading the content from the syllabus. When I practice such things they pay much attention and thank me as they will get to learn something beyond their syllabus. And today's generation students love to learn new things. If I ask them to go through an article and ask for their perception, they express their opinion whether they agree or disagree to what he said. They are asked to offer fresh input, examine old and new information etc. I only facilitate the students and always leave the floor for open discussions. Bimal agreed to Binit's reply and mentioned that the "Students refuse to go beyond the subject. They think this is a waste of time. Once I decided to conduct a workshop on enhancing critical skills in a workplace. But only few students attended the workshop. Even in the classroom, he has to struggle a lot to control the class. Eventually this served as a barrier for him to introduce such skills". Mendelman (2007) stated that in today's world children are crammed with several malleable activities and in such a situation a teacher has to be more concerned on teaching critical thinking no matter how difficult it is. Teaching critical thinking though is a tedious task it has to be practiced in an everyday basis in order to sharpen it.

Theme 3: Sticking to Content as content is prerequisite of standardized tests

All the three participants agree on the fact that teaching such skills in a class is not much possible critical. Occasionally it can be done but not always as there are tests and exams. Besides most importantly, teachers have to complete their course on time. Content demands much attention than making students critical. Students should not be asked only to be aware of what is in the content but they should also be taught to think analytically, widely, rationally, and critically (Paul & Elder, 2008). They further add that most of the high school courses are designed in such a way that students can easily pass the exam even without stressing their minds (Paul & Elder, 2008).

Prioritizing standardized exam patterns is also one of the root causes behind teachers not practicing critical thinking in a class. Students also reproduce the same belief and express dissatisfaction when taught other topics except content. When priorities are placed high on tests and exams, students can easily pass the exams just going through the content just one day prior to their exam (Paul & Elder, 2008).

Teachers also ignore critical thinking in course of their teaching because of the curriculum. The curriculum still valorizes content rather than enhancing the critical thinking. Barnes stated that rote learning is storing information irrespective of realizing how they fit with the information that existed previously (Barnes, 1985). Students are still considered the containers or banks where simply knowledge is filled (Friere, 1970). Despite of all these barriers, it is the prime role of the teachers to facilitate students with these skills in the twenty first century to meet with the demands of the world.

Theme 4: Most of them are visiting faculties

All the participants are visiting faculty members. They teach in several colleges. All three reiterated on the fact that teaching critical thinking explicitly demands much time and attention which they didn't have. Teachers need to play an active role for enhancing the critical thinking skills of the students and the students should take their own steps in learning as well (Coughlin, 2010). Paul and Elder (2008) insisted that teachers should plan their lessons making students aware of all the possible challenges and ask them to refine their thinking rather than just relying on the content. If teachers are cautious then they will mandatorily practice it in a class as a teacher's role is to produce responsible and rational citizens.

Beyer (2008) insisted the schools to make more use of the thinking techniques because what a student learns in class depend upon how applying critical thinking skills are being taught and how often students use them in their real life. Students find it hard to think critically on their own but the teachers should always assist students in chiseling their learning and thinking (Paul & Elder, 2008). Being a visiting faculty should not restrict one from practicing critical thinking in a class.

Theme 5: Lack of awareness on critical thinking and less trainings provided on the subject

Three of my participants stated that teaching critical thinking requires training. There are hardly any training conducted to sharpen the skills of the teachers. A teacher can deliver well if he/she is equipped with trainings. This is also one of the reasons that we are reluctant to practice it in a class.

Ashton (1980) states that teacher has to have a good knowledge of critical thinking, in order to improve student's critical thinking skills. Teachers should be equipped with these skills so that they can practice it in a classroom. Teachers must be trained effectively so that they can incorporate these models of teachings in their teaching techniques (Walsh &Paul, 1988).

Quite different from all these, one of my participants mentioned that "He did not have an exact understanding of critical thinking. It is disagreeing on a particular subject but I am not sure whether I am practicing this in my subject or not. I simply teach and get out after the bell goes".

The data collected from the participants helped me to derive a conclusion that teachers have an idea of critical thinking. They also practice it but occasionally. It is so because they have to control their syllabus on time. Besides, they also teach in more than one or two colleges.

Conclusion

After the paradigm shift in the field of education, students centered approach has been adopted. However, when the education of our country is still teacher centered which prioritizes rote learning and memorization. Critical thinking though is considered an important tool in learning is not being practices. Habermas's (1972) technical interest still holds true in the context of Nepal where students are viewed as materials where value can be added. The roles of teachers play a crucial role in integrating critical thinking in the class but they do not take it seriously. Nevertheless, in order to create skilled and analytical students, teachers have to practice it in the class.

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