Teaching Critical Thinking Skills in a Hong Kong Secondary School

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Hong Kong education has always been regarded as examination-oriented and students were taught only to memorize and not to think. This paper gives an account of a school project in teaching critical thinking in the junior classes of a secondary school. This project is a collaboration between lecturers in teacher education and teachers working in the frontline. As a first attempt, the topic “fact and opinion” was chosen. In this paper, both the teaching approach and the teaching materials used are presented. Teachers’ feedback was obtained through informal sharing of information and student’s evaluation were obtained through a simple student survey. Through this process, a number of problems and insights related to this issue were revealed. This experience had implications for ways in which critical thinking in a cultural context like Hong Kong where memorization of facts is the norm can be developed and promoted.

Introduction

The curriculum of Hong Kong schools has always emphasized factual knowledge. It encourages rote learning and critical thinking is seldom taught. However, in this age of information and technology, Hong Kong citizens are now constantly under bombardment from various messages and propaganda. There is a need for our students to be able to make independent judgments in their daily lives. In the 1999 education reform proposals, helping students to develop critical thinking is included among the fundamental aims of education which were outlined. However, nothing substantial has been done since. To achieve this aim, it is necessary for some schools to pioneer a new way of educating our young. Under these circumstances, a collaborative project team from an institute of education and a secondary school has worked closely in developing a teaching program for students in the lower forms of a secondary school.

This paper begins by examining the importance of critical thinking. Next, an account of the project of teaching critical thinking is given, together with episodes of the teaching activities and teaching materials. Finally, both the teachers’ and students’ feedback are examined and the implications of the teaching experience are given in the conclusion.

Why Teach Critical Thinking?

Myers (1986) stated, "the amount of information available through computers and the media seems to have outstripped people's abilities to process and use that information" (p.1). Richard Paul (1995) also commented that in this era of information technology, "information is multiplying even as it is swiftly becoming obsolete". In view of the overwhelming amount of information a person receives today, it is important to alert our students to the potential dangers inherent in swimming in this new and vast sea of knowledge. Chief among
these is the danger that some of the information available may not be facts and the facts that are presented might have been manipulated through their presentation or reflect other bias. To protect our students from the dangers of being misinformed, there is a need to promote critical thinking in school. Education should not mean socialization or indoctrination. Students should not merely commit to memory any number of specific facts about this or that domain of study, or pass the number of examinations or gain any number of academic credits or degrees. Instead, it is important to improve students’ ability to think and reason. Critical thinking is important for a person to meet the everyday personal, social, and professional demands of an ever-changing society. Students should get regular practice in producing and evaluating ideas. Success in work depends on thinking skills. It isn’t enough for graduates to possess a large body of knowledge in their fields. People who want to succeed must be able to apply what they know to the challenges of their jobs. Employers are looking not for walking encyclopedias but for problem solvers and decision makers. Mental health also depends in large part on thinking skills. Some authorities believe neuroses stem from shallow and illogical thinking (Paul, 1993; Beyer, 1995; Rotta, 1998).

Critical thinking is complex because it involves overcoming not only intellectual barriers but also psychological barriers. We are more comfortable with our established ideas and thinking habits. It is hard to change our belief structure and our views of the world even if our views might be flawed, irrational, shallow, or biased. To question our beliefs may seem to challenge our integrity and even our identity (Paul, 1993). Critical thinking requires us to step out from our self-deception and view things from many different angles and evaluate them through a process of rigorous intellectual activities.

The most inescapable imperative of the future is continuous change, change that involves complex adjustments to the increasingly complex systems that dominate our lives. Therefore, the distinguishing characteristics of those who will not only survive but also flourish in the future will be traits and abilities, both intellectual and emotional that entail excellence in evaluating and responding to complex changing conditions.

Yet the mind is not by nature adaptable to changes of the breadth and depth that we are facing. Rather, the mind is instinctively designed for habit, associated with "peace of mind" with routine... (Paul, 1993, foreword).

Teaching Critical Thinking in Hong Kong, the Present Scenario

In view of the changing society of Hong Kong, the need to equip our young people with the ability for critical thinking is becoming more apparent. The 1990s were a decade of rapid economic, social and political changes in Hong Kong. Economically, she has changed from an industrial city to a financial center of the region. At present, Hong Kong is in the process of economic restructuring and she is embracing the full development of information technology. Yet, the advancement of information technology and the dominance of the mass media in our daily life meant that young people today are more susceptible to propaganda and misinformation. The new economy also demands our citizens to be more independent and creative.

However, a survey by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (1997) revealed that Hong Kong young people are not autonomous in their moral judgment. To most young people in Hong Kong, "an immoral action is one which will make them lose face in front of others" (p.34). About half of the respondents claimed that when dealing with moral issues, the opinion of the majority was usually correct (p.42). 70 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that "in order to avoid being squeezed out, one cannot help drifting with the current" (p.26).

Previous to that, the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (1994) had carried out another survey comparing moral judgment of youths in three cities: Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Beijing. The study revealed some interesting results. The moral standards were different among the young people in Beijing, Guangzhou and Hong Kong. About half of the Hong Kong respondents (613 respondents) agreed that when dealing with moral issues, the opinion of the majority was usually correct. However, over 55 percent of the Beijing respondents held a contrary view; whereas the opinions of the Guangzhou respondents were quite split (ibid, p.42). Although 60 percent of the respondents in each of the three cities disagreed that the traditional Chinese thoughts were usually correct. The younger Beijing