



Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Colleges of Education Students in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to advocate the development of critical thinking skills in colleges of education students in Nigeria. This study is qualitative in nature and philosophical in orientation. It is expository and primarily focused on library sources for its data. It chiefly adopted the analytical and the prescriptive techniques in philosophy to deal with issues and problems such as thinking, critical thinking, indoctrination, and inhibitions, among others. This study found out that many of the graduates of colleges of education in Nigeria handled life issues poorly, some could not further their education, while some could not be gainfully employed because critical thinking skills were not adequately developed in them. The paper reveals that developing critical thinking skills in colleges of education students in Nigeria could serve as a way of preparing the students for issues of life beyond the classroom, preparing them for further education and to be gainfully employed when they graduate. This paper concludes that critical thinking skills need to be promptly and adequately developed in colleges of education students in Nigeria in order to make the students more useful to themselves and the society at large.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the aims of education in Nigeria, in the general sense, should be to enhance students' ability to think critically. However, lack of adequate development of critical thinking skills in colleges of education students in Nigeria may be identified as a major reason some of them handle life issues poorly and are unfit for further education after their Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) programme. They handle life issues poorly without being conscious of their actions as they affect individuals and the society at large because they are not critical enough in their thinking.

This paper describes thinking as a sequence of unrelated thought(s), and examines critical thinking as thinking that assesses itself. It, as well, highlights abilities to identify, define/explain, analyse, critique, reflect, evaluate, infer and fix issues as some of the critical thinking skills. The paper discusses some of the reasons critical thinking skills need to be developed in Nigerian colleges of education students. The paper identifies questioning, debates/arguments and match making, among others, as some of the techniques for developing critical thinking skills. The paper points out some possible inhibitions to developing critical thinking skills, which include abnormal intelligence quotient, cognitive impairment, rote learning and indoctrination.

Thinking

Thinking may be conceived as a peculiar feature of human beings. Adeyemi (2012) share the view that everyone thinks, since it is our nature to do so. Keller (2022) affirms that thinking is unique to human beings. Thinking may be conceptualised as a sequence of unrelated thoughts. It is a process that entails mental manipulation of idea(s) or information. Granada (2015) is of the opinion that to think is to process information, already existing in the mind, with the brain. He, therefore, submits that thinking is processing information mentally or cognitively. For Keller (2022), thinking involves manipulation and analysis of information received from the environment. However, it must be noted that, while thinking, one thought may not directly lead to another. This looks like a justification for Adeyemi's (2012) claim that much of our thinking, left to itself, is subjective, distorted, partial, uninformed, or prejudiced. By implication, the idea(s) involved in thinking may not necessarily be coherent or consistent in all cases.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking may be described as thinking that assesses itself. Thinking critically entails thinking about one's thinking while one is thinking about how to solve an identified problem or make judgement. It encompasses abilities to identify, probe, question, consider and re-consider, evaluate, and draw inference(s). These embedded abilities are a cluster of skills usually regarded as critical thinking skills. Therefore, a critical thinker is likely to possess the abilities to identify, define/explain, analyse, critique/criticise, reflect, clarify, evaluate, reason logically, construct ideas, transform knowledge, infer, predict correctly and fix issues. It must be noted quickly that to be a critical thinker does not necessarily mean to be critical in the typical negative sense of it. This is why Haase (2018) asserts that critical thinking does not mean being skeptical all the time, but to deeply examine any information, fact, or claim one comes across before one takes decision on such a piece of information, fact or claim. Critical thinking refers to thinking towards solving an identified problem.

Critical thinking in the face of the technology in the World

Science, technology and innovation, no doubt, have become parts of the engine that drives the development in countries of the World today. Nigeria cannot be exempted from this. In other words, for Nigeria to develop, there is the need for the deployment of science, technology and innovation. This observation can be strengthened by Nabasu's (2018) claim that no nation of the earth can develop without adequate deployment of science, technology and innovation. Interestingly, technology, among other factors, has earned man mastery over nature. To a large extent, man has been able to assume control over the world around him through science and technology. Technology has also helped man to overcome several mountains of disabilities in life. In this regard, the level of advancement in technology has become an important paradigm for determining the strength of every nation across the globe today. However, it seems as if Nigeria is yet to measure up to the global standards in science and technology.

Sogunro (2017) posits that, compared to what obtain in other societies, the Nigerian society is a failure by several parameters. According to him, "reality says we are, comparatively, one of the most backward political societies on earth...our science and technology are imported" (p.4). It must be noted quickly here that Sogunro might not have the intention to defiantly cast aspersion on the reputation of his dear country, Nigeria, by this statement. He might simply be trying to point attention to the traces of backwardness he has personally observed in science and technology in Nigeria, in comparison with the situation in other countries of the World. He could have raised this alarm so that Nigeria would not become the world underdog in science and technology. Better still, he might be trying to discourage a situation in which Nigeria has to copy other countries of the World instead of developing and acquiring the technical knowhow in science and technology. In salvaging the situation identified by Sogunro above, critical thinking skills could be instrumental. That is, critical thinking is likely to facilitate the intellectual dynamism that is needed for promoting science, technology and innovation in Nigeria.

As could be inferred from the last paragraph above, developing critical thinking skills in students of colleges of education in Nigeria may be regarded as a way of equipping them to be able to compete in science and technology at the global level. By logical consequence, exposure to technology could enhance the turning out of creative youths in the society. In this spirit, Marczak (2019) avers that technology serves as richer opportunity for students to develop metacognitive skills, reduce their stress and increase their achievement. In essence, critical thinking skills are needed by these students to be able to cope with, and grasp, the complexity and intricacies of science, technology and innovation.

Why critical thinking skills in Nigerian colleges of education students?

It could be argued, based on the trend in education across the globe today, that the world of education no longer revolves around recitation, percentage, marks or assessments, but about whether students have acquired the skills required for them to succeed in the competitive world. This explains the submission in World Economic Forum (2016) that critical thinking, complex problem-solving skill and creativity would soon be the most important skills for a student to possess. The urgent need to develop critical thinking skills in students generally in Nigeria is acknowledged by Bayless (2017) who declares that "what I know for sure is *now* is the time to embed critical thinking lessons and practice throughout the content areas of school" (p.1). Ability to think critically seems to have now become a specific trait of genuine education and a very significant aspect of educational process across the globe. On this ground, Periklis (2016) argues that "critical thinking is an organic and fundamental element of the meaning of education" (p.75). Meanwhile, Aboluwodi (2008) has earlier contended that education should teach learners *how to think* rather than *what to think*. Hence the need to develop critical thinking skills in Nigerian colleges of education students.

Developing critical thinking skills in students of colleges of education in Nigeria could be instrumental to the students' enlightenment the general sense. Enlightenment, awareness and conscientisation constitute part of the essence of education in life. If critical thinking skills are adequately developed in these students, this supposed essence of education may be better achieved. This claim is rigorously substantiated and explicitly illustrated in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. Although some may have seen Plato's allegory of the cave as a mere fictional narrative, in the actual sense, it illustrates how awareness or enlightenment could help to move individuals beyond illusion. Williams (2009) asserts that "the purpose of this allegory defines clearly the process of enlightenment" (p.4). The implication of the allegory for critical thinking is that it takes an individual who thinks critically to realise his deplorable or unsatisfactory state before he can begin to look for solution.

In some situations, critical thinking skills may serve as guiding tools for solving identified problems. For instance, a student who is disposed to thinking critically may be able to figure out, articulate and regularly re-articulate his goals, purposes and needs. He may be able to recognise problems and possible obstacles to reaching those goals, achieving those purposes and satisfying those needs. If critical thinking skills include abilities to clarify and generate ideas, and to assess the reasonableness of ideas, critical thinking skills could help students to proffer reliable solutions to problems and make sound judgement. In this case, they may be able to sail through the huddles of taking decisions that can adversely affect their future and bring them regrets later in life.

It may be of interest to note that there seems to be a link between critical thinking and creative thinking. According to Marinela, “creative thinking covers skills of flexibility, originality, elaboration, brainstorming, modification, associate thinking, attributes listing, metaphorical thinking and so on” (2009: p. 4). The link between critical thinking and creative thinking is an interesting one. Something is regarded as creative, or created, if it is new and useful to the society judging and admiring it. With critical thinking skills developed in Nigerian colleges of education students, they may be able to create meaningfully, thereby adding more value to the Nigerian society.

As stated in Nigeria’s National Policy on Education, 2014 edition, the objectives of education in Nigeria include the provision of trained manpower in the applied science, technology and commerce. Interestingly, Onu (2018) declares that *science, technology* and *innovation* are the engine that drives development. In line with Onu’s argument, Nabasu (2018) observes that no nation of the earth can develop without adequate deployment of science, technology and innovation. To achieve national development through science, technology and innovation, there is the need to develop critical thinking skills in colleges of education students in Nigeria. This is because these students are part of the army of youths the country needs to develop.

Despite the seeming awareness that there is no alternate to education, there are still reported cases of drop-outs in colleges of education in Nigeria. Developing critical thinking skills in these students may serve as an effective tool for controlling the rate of drop-outs among them. Upon critical thinking, most of these school drop-outs might see reasons for which they should remain in school. They may be able to realise that the rigor involved in education would not last forever. Many of them might also be encouraged to further their education after their graduation from the colleges of education.

Blake (2018) opines that students require strong critical thinking skills to develop reading and writing competencies in colleges. Critical thinking skills may enhance linguistic and communicative competencies in students. Students with the skills often look out for opportunities to open up productive and constructive dialogue. Critical thinking habit could enable students to use language better. Similarly, thinking critically, in general, could help these college students to reflect on people’s actions and beliefs, and question the rationale behind such actions and beliefs. By this, these youths are likely to develop confidence to work, interact and relate well with others, analyse and evaluate information before subscribing to them, challenge inequality in their society, have the courage to withstand life challenges, and to be objectively judgemental in whatever situation(s) they find themselves.

Techniques for developing critical thinking skills

Thinking seems to be a natural feature of human beings. However, it appears as if not every human being thinks critically. In the light of this, Schlueter (2016) expresses concern on how to develop critical thinking skills in students. There is also the question of *What techniques should be employed?* Although there is no consensus on a particular strategy or technique as the best for developing critical thinking skills in students, some researchers in critical thinking have suggested that certain techniques/strategies could be of help.

According to Blake (2018), some class exercises that are likely to help improve students’ capacity for critical thinking include assigning free writes to connect with other course work, the practice of analysing and assessing ideas, using of stories to draw connections, connecting stories to related concepts, and embracing active learning in general. One may want to argue, in addition, that critical thinking is contingent on recognising the relationship between things/parts and a whole that encompass them. Therefore, teachers could help students to develop critical thinking ability by training the students to configurationally relate parts to each other (or one another) and to whole. In a related sense, teachers may help students build a foundation for critical thinking by asking them open-ended questions, encouraging thinking in different ways, providing opportunities for play, helping the students to develop hypotheses, and patiently avoiding completing or doing the task for them at all times.

For Walker (2003), “students need to be exposed to diverse teaching methods that promote critical thinking in order to nurture the critical thinking process” (p. 264). In essence, Walker is of the opinion that various teaching methods may be used to facilitate the process of critical thinking development in students. Besides, the method that is effective in promoting or arousing critical thinking in a student may not be so effective on another. Walker, therefore, recommends *three* different teaching techniques for developing critical thinking skills in students. These are *questioning, classroom discussion and debates, and written assignments*. In a similar spirit, Mansoor and Bagheri (2012) reason that questions may be asked at times simply to test the student’s abilities to evaluate and to synthesise facts, data, figures, concepts and/or ideas. Questioning for promoting critical thinking among students could be *open-ended, close-ended or Socratic* in form.

Classroom discussion and debates could be instrumental in the process of developing critical thinking skills in students. This technique encompasses *critical negotiation, constructive confrontation* and *credible antagonism*. In this kind of situation, controversial issues/topics may be thrown open in the class. When this is observed on regular basis, thinking critically may become

the students' habit. Giving *written assignments*, too, is helpful in developing critical thinking skills in students because it encourages independent work. Independent work, in turn, may promote critical thinking. For instance, students may be asked to compose a poem on a particular item. Their opinions and constructions may differ, but they still express a single central idea in as much as they are writing on the same item.

Considering the development of critical thinking skills in students a necessity, Lee (2015) recommends a list of techniques for developing the skills, which include speaking with sketch, prioritising critical thinking in class, and changing the students' misconceptions. Also, at their own end, Lisa and Diane (2011) hold the notion that simulating real-world experiences and providing opportunities to discuss challenges in those scenarios could enhance critical thinking skills. In furtherance, Lee (2015) suggests 'make a mess' technique. Using this technique, the teacher may deliberately disorganise a set of items, or dismantle an object, and instruct the students to attempt the re-arrangement or assemblage of the component parts. In the process, the students are goaded into activating their metacognitive ability.

Possible inhibitions to developing critical thinking skills in students

A number of factors could militate against the development of critical thinking skills in students. Major among them is profound intellectual disability. A student with profound intellectual disability may not be able to pick the critical thinking skills. It takes intellectual soundness to be a critical thinker. Relatedly, according to Saez (2018), mental disability and/or mental illness (cognitive impairment) can cause a variety of obstacles to critical thinking, including disturbances of thoughts and perceptions. Students facing such challenges may be at intellectual disadvantage.

Saez (2018) contends that indoctrination is another major roadblock to critical thinking. Aboluwodi (2008) sees indoctrination (in the classroom) as a process of forcing a set of beliefs, ideas or principles down the throat of students without the students being given the opportunity to ask questions. The teacher makes the students see the beliefs, ideas or principles as right or true. As such they see no reason for which they should query the source. Students who accept such beliefs, ideas or principles are not given the opportunity to reconsider their position, and those who do not subscribe to such are looked down upon and pitied. Indoctrination makes students uncritical in their thinking.

Weak disposition to critical thinking on the part of the teacher is a major factor that may inhibit the development of critical thinking skills in students. It appears as if there is a strong relationship between teachers' dispositions to thinking critically and the activation of critical thinking abilities in students. According to Ijaya, Alabi and Fasasi (2011), there have been serious complaints about the poor quality of knowledge and skills of the teachers being produced in Nigeria today. This condition must have put students at serious disadvantage over the years, particularly when it comes to developing critical thinking skills in the students. Relatedly, if the strategy is faulty, then there may be a problem. Some teachers may be too autocratic and rigid in their methodology, while some could be too nomothetic. In such situations, students turn out to be very rude, uncultured and defiant instead of getting trained to imbibe the critical thinking skills.

In the opinion of Touati (2016), the mostly challenging factors (in developing critical thinking skills) are the extensive and time consuming syllabus, the difficulty to implement the approach with large classes, lack of appropriate material resources, the issue of assessing students' progress, the limited contributions of teachers regarding innovative teaching and curriculum development, teachers poor professionalism (or lack of associated competencies), and mixed-ability-students. Touati's observation here does not only encompass both the internal and external factors that can influence critical thinking skills development, but also takes care of the classroom situation factor.

Korn (2011) highlights a litany of possible barriers to developing critical thinking. Some of them are pride and prejudice, inappropriate bias, indoctrination, peer pressure, myopia, apathy, conformity, egocentrism, ignorance, fear of change, wishful thinking and addictive emotions. Also, the development of critical thinking skills is likely to be hindered by misunderstanding, lack of detailed knowledge of the concept or issue at hand, fear of being wrong, and reluctance to critique the norm or experts in a field and consider alternative views. Fear of looking foolish, trying something new, and some educational practices such as passive participation and memorisation could also serve as impediments to developing critical thinking skills in students.

The peculiarity of the teaching-learning process may constitute a barrier to developing critical thinking skills in students. In a classroom situation of one-man-rule or loose-rein, there may be difficulty in developing critical thinking skills. As explained by Adepoju (2004), the one-man-rule classroom leadership is autocratic. The teacher dictates all policies and procedures in the class, imposes tasks and methods on the students, and nags and broods suspiciously. In the case of the loose-rein leadership in the classroom, the leader/teacher allows complete freedom; he allows the students to do as they wish. He does not care about his responsibilities. He tends to be irresponsible and unresponsive. These two classroom leadership peculiarities may not actually favour the development of critical thinking skills in students.

Emphasis on scores and certification at the expense of skills could hinder the development of critical thinking in students. This condition is usually borne out of the type of education called *banking education* by Paulo Freire (Luis, 2017). Here, learning revolves around too much of theory, memorisation and recitation. Too many facts, too little conceptualising, much memorising, and too little thinking seem to characterise banking education. This kind of educational practice is not likely to favour the development of critical thinking in students.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed some of the needs to develop critical thinking skills in colleges of education students in Nigeria. It has also attempted to advocate prompt and adequate attention to the skills in those schools. According to Plato, (as cited in Aboluwodi, 2008), no society would know peace until the king becomes a philosopher and the philosopher becomes the king. Philosophers are critical thinkers and critical thinkers are philosophers. In the general interest of the Nigerian society, critical thinking skills need to be developed in colleges of education students in the country. A student who is disposed to critical thinking is at an advantage over the one who is not. Although critical thinking is intriguing, colleges of education students in Nigeria should be made to imbibe it as a way of equipping them against the challenges beyond the classroom. They need to be set on the path of frequent tests for critical thinking development before they graduate. Critical thinking should be incorporated into college of education curriculum in Nigeria as part of the academic content. However, the techniques or strategies for developing the skills in students may vary with levels. Similarly, the possible hindrances to developing critical thinking skills in these college students should be guided against, so that they can develop the skills naturally in the course of their studies.

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