

# 'Knowing thyself': The Importance of Critical Thinking for Undergraduate Education

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## Abstract

*Traditionally departments of the Humanities developed pedagogical methodologies of critical thinking. The importance of critical thinking has increased in the present age of social media and the information highway that bombards us with unregulated information and 'truths'. However, the practice of teaching critical thinking through a systematized pedagogy has now disappeared, and without critical thinking it is impossible to either analyze critically or to write persuasively. Aristotle's Rhetoric emphasizes the importance of the ethos of the speaker or writer. Antonio Gramsci writes that critical elaboration begins with the speaker making an inventory of themselves as historical processes to date. English Literature departments have a crucial role to play in formulating a pedagogical model for teaching critical thinking as the tools they expect students to acquire are those of close reading of texts and critical analysis. Using Aristotle's model of rhetorical speech and Gramsci's exhortation to 'know thyself' undergraduate students should be taught critical thinking at the beginning of their college education.*

**Keywords—** *Critical thinking, Ethos and logos, Pedagogical methodology, Analytical writing, Cultural Materialism*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades the role of critical enquiry, or critical thinking, has become crucial to society because of the deluge of information that the world wide web, the information highway, and digitalization and social media have immersed us in. This fast-travelling, unregulated information has been very useful to us but has also led to vast misinformation. The recently coined phrase 'post truth' has turned attention towards how this phenomenon can be countered by confronting it with 'real' truth, that is, empirically verifiable truth. The trail to empirical verification takes us down the path of epistemology, that is, the origin of the knowledge that constructs and forms the foundation of this particular 'truth'. Most foundational 'truths' do not stand up to the scrutiny of data and statistics as they are based on an ideology and power center that posits them as natural and universal. The constructed single, universal 'truth' that we find at the end of our epistemological search is distributed and networked into a bewildering maze of a

multiplicity of networked narratives that are internalized so intrinsically by us that it is often impossible to find our way out. All of us try to construct a composite, unified, single 'truth' out of these diverse narratives, and in the process of doing so we endeavour to be conscious of our own biases and prejudices. For those of us whose work is critical analysis, post truth is just a new term for what we have always studied and taught but now in a new bottle, and the fast-spreading digitalization of information and ideas has forced us to engage with it in new ways.

The present bombardment of contrasting, conflicting information seeks to sound the death knell to critical thinking by convincing us that applying standards of logic, morality, ethics, or epistemology are impossible, and even undesirable. This, in itself, is not new because the deep-rooted existence of patriarchy, casteism, racism, heteronormativity and all other structural oppressions is based on the same false information and beliefs that are foundational to the

economic, social, and political structures within which we exist and form our own identities. However, the fast pace of the movement of information on the one hand, and the defunding of Humanities departments that taught and studied critical enquiry on the other, have added urgency to the issue of critical thinking. The problem is compounded by the fact that the University, the institution which traditionally engaged in critical thinking, has become a site for gaining degrees by racing through short semesters, rather than being an oasis for young people to sit and think about the knowledge they are receiving, and more crucially, enquiring into the source of that knowledge.

## II. IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING

In universities in India, it is English Literature departments that are meant to teach critical thinking systemically through analysis of texts and the ideas they contain. However, the pedagogy of teaching critical thinking is neither discussed nor systematized and is therefore often neglected and overlooked in the rush to finish syllabus and prepare for examinations. It is crucial for all undergraduate students, not just those studying the Humanities, to be taught critical thinking as without it there can be no analytical writing in any field. If there is one skill that a college education should instill in young people it releases into society and the work force it should be to train them to use their education to think critically, and it is thus imperative to structure an established pedagogy for teaching critical thinking to students that links conceptualization of ideas and their translation into academic writing.

Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally, to understand the logical connection between ideas. It involves observation, analysis, interpretation, reflection, and evaluation. There is an existing body of research on the benefits of teaching courses on critical thinking. I want to focus on one aspect of critical thinking that is crucial to it, and indeed must be the first step: analyzing one's own ideas, influences, biases, prejudices. This is because it is impossible to think critically without first being aware of one's own complicity in the hegemonic received ideas that inescapably govern all our concepts, values, judgment, ideas of normativity. Antonio Gramsci writes in his *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971):

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is and in 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you

an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (p. 324)

To this Edward Said adds in his 'Introduction' in *Orientalism* Gramsci's conclusion from his Italian text, "Therefore, it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory." (p. 25)

## III. PEDAGOGY OF CRITICAL THINKING

What are the pedagogical tools we can use to ask students in the classroom to compile this inventory honestly and with sensitivity? Is there a pedagogical system that we can use for undergraduate students to guide them towards critical thinking? In order to structure a module of critical thinking for students I would like to travel back to 300 BC to Aristotle and his Rhetorical model of persuasion, or *pisteis*. In his seminal work *Rhetoric* Aristotle says that a speech consists of three things: the speaker, the subject that is treated in the speech, and the audience to whom the speech is addressed. Persuasive speech (or writing) comes out of the character of the speaker (*ethos*), or the emotional state of the listener (*pathos*) or the argument itself (*logos*). If we are training our students to frame persuasive academic arguments using *logos* then, in order for them to think logically, we need to first make them aware of their *ethos* by "'knowing [themselves]' as a product of the historical processes to date". Gramsci writes that it is imperative to compile an inventory of oneself before embarking on critical elaboration, and this could be used as an entry point into introducing students to critical thinking in a structured manner.

Gramsci has a very specific materialist method of compiling one's inventory; that of identifying the traces left on the individual by the historical processes on them up to the present moment. Before asking students to compile an inventory of themselves they need to be made conscious of the materiality of their social, economic, geographical and historical conditions that have shaped their ideas and thoughts. Gramsci locates cultural hegemony in civil society in affiliations like schools, families and unions. Cultural hegemony functions through consent and not through the political society of the military, police, jails, etc. This is the point where the classroom needs to transform from a lecture theatre to a session where students introspect about their own locations and the origin of their ideas. The text they are asked to study deconstruct is that of the construction of their own identity. What are the forms of functioning they have voluntarily given their consent to without any thinking? Where have their ideas come

from? There have to be a specific set of questions given to students to undertake the task of interrogating their ideas in the context of their location with relation to history, geography and the geopolitical, economics, politics, religion, gender, and community. The questions could be along the following lines:

What is it about their specific period of birth in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that has influenced the way they think? Would their ideas have been the same if they had come into the world in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or even the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century? Would their frame of thinking have differed if they were sitting in this very classroom in 1947? Or even as late as 1997? What are the particular historical events that have contributed to their different way of thinking from these earlier times? What are the economic policies of the early 1990s that have contributed to the choices of clothing available to them? How has the women's movement changed the composition of girls and boys among their classmates from what it would have been if they were born half a century ago?

How does their geographical location determine their way of thinking? Would the architecture of the buildings they occupy be the same if they lived in a Nordic country? Does living in houses that have terraces, verandas, balconies rather than sloping roofs change the way they interact with their neighbours? How does climate determined by geographical location impact the clothes they wear, the foods available to them, the seasonal activities, the experience of rain as monsoons as opposed to cold, wet, drizzle? What is the geopolitical consciousness of the nation as determined by boundaries, shared rivers and mountains, and more crucially, the Othering of culturally and ethnically similar peoples made enemies of by creating border lines?

Economically, does the amount of money made available to them also influence the ideas available to them? If they were children of billionaires, or children of the construction labour they see working around the city, how would their access to education, society, experiences impact their thinking? Politically, what does it mean to live in an electoral democracy as against a dictatorship or a monarchy? How do specific political ideologies that shape political ideas that surround them effect thought processes? What role does their religion, or lack of religion, play materially in their lives? How does it determine their annual calendar, the food they consume, their beliefs of the afterlife? How do its values systems shape their very being? How does gender and sexuality shape how they perceive themselves? What

does it mean to walk the streets everyday in a woman's body as opposed to the male body? How does heteronormativity determine their life choices?

In an ideal academic calendar, the processing of these questions should be spread over four to six class periods, and in order to immerse students in these questions the format should be that of a discussion among the students with the teacher as a moderator. Most of the questions require a complex, multifaceted reflection and the answer is not one that can be arrived at without thinking over an extended period of time. Unfortunately, this luxury of time is not available in an examination oriented educational system, so students can just be introduced to this mode of questioning their location. The greater and more time-consuming difficulty in finding answers to these questions, however, is that they force students to interrogate the very foundation of ideas they consider 'natural', universal, absolute truths about themselves and their place in society. There is much greater resistance to re-evaluating an entire value system that has been hegemonically engrained in all individuals through civil society. This is the point at which the teacher needs to introduce in the class the next concept in critical thinking, which is to make students aware of how the ideas they have accepted unthinkingly are not just naturally available ideas but are the ideas of the ruling class.

#### IV. POWER STRUCTURE AND CRITICAL THINKING

In *Literary Theory: An introduction*, Terry Eagleton identifies ideology as "the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power structure and power relations of the society we live in." (p. 13) Thus, dominant cultural forms are those of the ruling class and they determine beliefs, perceptions, and values. They become naturalized and normalized, that is, the accepted norm. They form the hegemonic dominant ideology which resists interrogation and analysis and becomes a major challenge to introducing students to critical thinking. However, there is no pedagogical space more suited to guiding students through critical thinking than an English Literature classroom where close reading and locating stories in their cultural material context are the necessary tools of the discipline.

In *The Shadow Lines* Amitav Ghosh writes evocatively about the need to navigate the maze of received ideas and create one's own reality. The narrator tells his unimaginative cousin, Ila, about "the

Tridib who had said we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly". Ila responds, "Why? Why should we try, why not just take the world as it is?" The unnamed narrator explains, "...because the alternative wasn't blankness – it only meant that if we didn't try [to invent the world] ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions." [p. 31] Ghosh provides an entry for opening students' minds to the idea that the world they inhabit has been scripted by others, and that they need, at the very least, to ask questions about why and how they have voluntarily consented to it. The next classroom activity should lead students to be able to not just interrogate established ideas that they have internalized, but also to probe into their origins. This second classroom activity of interactive discussion should evolve from the first one where they started thinking critically about the effect of their material conditions on ideas they accepted as established norms. In this second round of discussion, they should be guided to discover the power structures that have invented the ideas that determine their identities, indeed their very existence. In this stage the teacher would need to play a larger role in explaining the concept of foundational 'truths' and introducing an elementary level of deconstruction, or anti-foundational epistemology.

Patriarchy's invention of gender and sexuality is an example that works well for young students who are at the cusp of adulthood and in the process of discovering their own gendered identities. All the women in the class will identify with the examples of patriarchal training in being feminine and submissive, and the men will easily relate to being brought up to be tough and masculine and not weak and feminine. A guided discussion on patriarchy as a power structure that constructs gender roles can also lead to an introduction to critical thinking through the theory of Feminism. Similarly, as students in a post-colonial classroom, Said's *Orientalism* which shows how geography is as much of an invention as history is easily graspable because as young citizens they are acutely aware of the global inequality between the West and the erstwhile Orient. An introductory, very brief lecture on the colonial invention of the Occident and the Orient would also give students a sampling of thinking critically using Post Colonial theory. An analysis of the vast economic inequality globally, within the so-called First World as well as between countries of the global North and the global South would have to engage with the powers behind capitalism, and this analysis would also

introduce students to the theory of Marxism. Pedagogically, this stage is crucial in providing students with a toolbox for critical thinking, one which they will hopefully use to hone their skills over the next three years if not for the rest of their lives.

In *Orientalism* Edward Said formulates the blueprint for critical thinking when he writes, "There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. Authority can, indeed must, be analyzed." (p.20) Said's formulation of challenging authority will normally find students in their late teens and early twenties very receptive, and the module for making them think their way through to analyzing authority with the right set of critical tools should make this a constructive activity rather than a destructive one. Once the class has been guided through the first two steps of locating themselves in their cultural material existence and interrogating the link between their existing ideas and the power structure, students can be set Gramsci's task of writing out the inventory of the traces that their historical process to date has left on them. This last activity involves self-reflexivity and honest scrutiny. Thus, the best format for this last task would be in the form of a written assignment done at home. It is an assignment that should be repeated every year the student is in college, and the inventory of the last semester be compared to the one written immediately after completing the critical thinking module in the first semester. The proof of the evolution of their ability to think critically from the first semester to the last will show the results of this teaching module, and as teachers we can only hope that the lesson in critical thinking learned as an undergraduate student will be seen as a lifelong learning activity and still remembered once they take their place as part of the work force and as responsible citizens in the community.

## V. APPLICATION OF CRITICAL THINKING IN ACADEMIC WRITING

How will critical thinking be applied academically? How do we justify the need to structure a module of critical thinking and ask for classroom time and space for it? Critical thinking is crucial for academic analysis and writing arguments based on logos because they make the writer aware of the inescapable biases and prejudices in their perspective. Perspectivism is based on the subjectivity of the perceiver, or the reader. There is no neutral observer. How does perspectivism influence our construction of knowledge and ideas? What are the items in our inventory that frame our



perspective? What are our blind spots? Critical thinking should make the student aware of the biases that underpin their arguments when writing or researching. It should answer the question of why one reader of *Jane Eyre* is deeply disappointed when Jane marries Rochester at the end while another finds her final domestication an appropriate ending; why one's prejudices lead to the perception of Bertha Mason as monstrous while another's lauds her for her courage in destroying her patriarchal prison; why a student in India notices the mixed race of Jewel in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* while a student in the West notices only her gender when she fights beside Jim.

To return to Aristotle's *pisteis* or means of persuasion, a sound academic essay can only be produced by the writer's *ethos* that addresses the skeptical hearer, or the audience, with a logical analysis of the subject at hand. Across the world English teachers are made responsible for instructing students from all disciplines on academic writing. Writing departments are becoming common in many academic institutions, hiring faculty with English Literature degrees to teach writing even to Engineering students. However, the project of teaching writing must begin with teaching critical thinking, and therefore a common pedagogical structure needs to be adopted. Further, teachers must be trained to teach critical thinking systematically to all undergraduate students. In the present time the need to make a case for critical thinking classes has become urgent as English departments are being inundated with courses on communication - Business Communication, Communication in Everyday Life, Communication in Professional Life, etc - as well as with courses on skill enhancement of writing. Teaching communication or writing skills without the pre-requisite foundation of how to think makes these courses hollow and incomplete.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Critical thinking courses or modules for all undergraduate students are essential for teaching academic or professional writing as well as for educating a body of young people who will leave the university to join the work force. The teaching of critical awareness and critical tools is neglected as a pedagogical system and is left to the discretion of individual teachers as to how to teach it or whether to bring it into classroom teaching at all or not. The last few years have seen an exponential increase in social media platforms, and information websites, culminating in the

most recent entrant of Artificial Intelligence and ChatGPT. This deluge of unmonitored, unrestricted information has made it increasingly difficult to discern fact from misinformation, and seemingly made it impossible to locate the truth value of any perspective, opinion, or narrative. It is only the tools of critical thinking that can enable us to try to find the origin and perspectival location of the torrent of information and ideas that we are bombarded with, and to offer a valid analysis.

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