

CRITICAL THINKING: A TOOL FOR REDEFINING EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's education system seems to have been characterised by too much of theories and memorisation at the expense of critical thinking, a problem-solving skill, over the years. Therefore, this paper advocates a critical thinking oriented system of education in Nigeria, and attempts a discouragement of rote learning among learners in Nigerian schools. This study is qualitative in nature, and philosophical in orientation. It is expository and primarily focused on library sources for its data. The study adopted the analytical, the speculative and the prescriptive techniques in philosophy to deal with issues such as critical thinking, stages in critical thinking, critical thinking behaviours, deschooling and pedagogy for critical thinking, among others. This study found out that Nigeria's education system had been characterised by too much of theories and encouraged memorisation among learners in Nigerian schools over the years. The study revealed that many of the Nigerian students were not problem-solving because the education system in operation in the country revolved around too much of theories and encouraged memorisation at the expense of critical thinking, a problem-solving skill. This study concluded that introducing an education system that is critical thinking oriented in Nigeria is likely to serve as a way of instilling problem-solving skill in the learners. The study recommended the kind of education system that concentrates less on theories and discourages memorisation at the expense of critical thinking, a problem-solving skill.

Keywords: Critical theory, critical thinking, critical thinking behaviours, deschooling, memorisation.

Introduction

Observation has revealed that Nigeria's education system has been revolving around too much of theories and memorisation at the expense of critical thinking, a problem-solving skill, over the years. The focus of this paper, therefore, is to advocate a system of education that is critical thinking oriented in Nigeria, and to discourage rote learning among learners in Nigerian schools. This study discusses critical thinking as thinking that assesses itself. The study identifies abilities to analyse, critique, evaluate and infer, among others, as critical thinking skills. It examines some stages in critical thinking and discusses critical thinking

pedagogy. The paper analyses deschooling, an educational critical theory, and explains its implication for education in Nigeria.

Concept of critical thinking

The origin of critical thinking may be arguably traced to Socrates, although it seems as if it has been classified under logic in modern philosophy. Critical thinking may therefore be considered a subset of logic. According to Olalekan (2017), Socrates championed the pursuit of truth by using probing questioning technique during his days in the 5th century B. C. Mansoor and Bagheri (2012) assert that the Greek philosopher Socrates evidently set the agenda for the tradition of critical thinking. They affirm that Socrates believe that no idea could be taught directly except through questioning.

Critical thinking may be conceived as thinking that assesses itself. Thinking critically has to do with thinking about how to solve an identified problem, dissolve a puzzle or make judgement. It involves questioning of common beliefs and explanations, carefully distinguishing beliefs that are reasonable and logical from those that are otherwise. This explains why Aboluwodi (2008, p. 109) conceives critical thinking as “thinking in pursuit of relevant and reliable knowledge of this world”. Critical thinking is characterised by reflective assessment and critique of the world around us. It is concerned with the identification of a problem/an issue, surveying and analysing the situation mentally, listing out some possible solutions, thinking out the implication of each solution (so that comparison would indicate the most suitable), and the actual putting into practice of the decision arrived at. Suarniati, Hidayah and Handarini (2018) seem to share this view by describing critical thinking as analytical ability.

Paul, (as cited in Siegel, 2003), believes critical thinking to be thinking about your thinking while you are thinking in order to make your thinking better. He equally argues that critical thinking is encased in the ability and disposition of critical evaluation of beliefs and their underlying assumptions. This implies that critical thinking involves two major components, which are skills/abilities of reason assessment, and the inclination to engage in and be guided by inferences from such assessments. In the opinion of Haase (2018), which seems to intersect with that of Paul, critical thinking is the thinking that proceeds as the basis of careful evaluation of premises. He further explains that critical thinking is reasonable, reflective, responsible kind of thinking, which focuses on what decision to make. Based on Haase’s opinion here, one may see critical thinking as a high cognitive exercise that involves thorough assessment of a claim, the rationale behind the claim and the evidence to substantiate that claim.

Stages in critical thinking

Paul and Elder (2007) have identified some stages in critical thinking development, which include, in an ascending order, unreflective thinking, challenged thinking, beginning thinking, practicing thinking, advanced thinking and master thinking. Unreflective thinking is usually the first stage of critical thinking development. This is a stage in which one is unaware of significant problem(s) in one’s thinking. It is the lowest stage of critical thinking development. At this stage, the thinker is only given to thinking in the ordinary sense of it. He is engaged in sequence of unrelated thoughts.

The next stage is that of challenged thinking, which is where the thinker is faced with significant problems in his thinking. Here, the thinker identifies a problem to be solved, or a puzzle to be dissolved. This is where ability to identify begins to manifest in the critical thinker. Following this stage is the stage of beginning thinking. At this stage, the thinker tries to think things out and engages in mental (or cognitive) survey but without regular practice. The beginning thinking stage is followed by practising thinking stage. At this stage, the thinker recognizes the need for regular practice. There is the advanced thinking stage after the practicing thinking stage.

At the advanced thinking stage, the thinker advances in keeping with his practice. He now thinks coherently and consistently on regular basis. The final stage of critical thinking development is the master thinking stage. The master thinking stage is where good habits of thought are becoming second nature of the thinker. At this stage, the thinker may be able to demonstrate some of the critical thinking skills at the mastery level.

What critical thinking is not

For the sake of clarification, there is the need to take care of the possibility of ambiguity of conceptualisation or misinterpretation of critical thinking. There is also the need to take care of the possibility of conceiving it in the negative sense. For instance, critical thinking is a concept that is often misjudged by many as criticism, but which rather focuses on the ability to follow logical steps and arrive at a decisive and appropriate conclusion. According to a submission in University of Essex Online Report (2018), critical thinking is not just being critical in the typical, negative sense of the word. It is rather a social process that is targeted at clarifying thinking as individuals or groups, explaining or defending actions or beliefs, and solving problems or making judgement.

To critic does not imply to attack. Being critical about someone's opinion or claim may not involve casting of aspersion on that person's reputation, although some constructive disagreement may set in at times. This explains why Marinela (2009) asserts that critical thinking cannot be negative or wrong, and does not necessarily mean being 'critical' and negative about everything. Critical thinking may not be without emotional attachment though, it is not strictly based on emotion or instinct/intuition. Haase (2018) observes that critical thinking does not mean being skeptical all the time, but to deeply examine information, fact, or claim before one takes decision on such information, fact or claim. The process of critical thinking should produce positive and improved result.

Critical thinking behaviours

Certain attitudes may be regarded as critical thinking behaviours. This is because they seem to characterise critical thinking. Von, (as cited in Bozik, 1987), identifies some of these behaviours as soft and hard. According to him, the soft include metaphor, dream, humour, ambiguity, play, paradox, generalisation and child, while the hard include logic, reason, precision, consistency, work, direct, reality, specific and adult. In all, Von submits that what is important to note is the variety of forms of thinking and the potential value of all the various forms.

Critical theory

For a theory to be regarded as critical, it must be based on critique, and have emancipation/liberation as the undertone. A critical theory is supposed to be a doctrine that emphasises the reflective assessment and critique of society and culture. For Horkheimer (1972), a theory is critical if it seeks to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them. According to Crossman (2019), a critical theory is a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole. It should attempt to critique the existing norm of a given society with a view to improving the condition of that society. Horkheimer (1995) affirms that for a theory to be critical, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the techniques that can be employed to achieve the needed change, and come up with achievable practical recommendations. To this end, this paper takes interest in Ivan Illich's *Deschooling*, which is an educational critical theory.

Deschooling

Homeschooling is likely to be an eye-opener to the real meaning of deschooling. This is because homeschooling seems to be a practical reflection of deschooling as a movement. As could be inferred from Scirri's (2023) submission, homeschooling entails educating a child at home or making a child to acquire education without allowing that child to undergo the process within the four walls of the school. If we were to conceive schooling as the systematic acquisition of knowledge in school, deschooling, being the opposite of schooling, may be described as the process of acquiring knowledge outside the school. Scirri (2023, para. 4) sees deschooling as "the process that supports children who are switching from private or public school to homeschool". Kessler (2018) describes deschooling simply as "recovering from public school". However, Gaddy seems to have a slightly different view of deschooling from the intersecting ones above.

For Gaddy (2023), deschooling does not actually advocate learning outside the school, but simply implies that learning can take place in different situations and in different ways (aside the classroom situation). It appears as if Gaddy's understanding of Illich and Holt's image of deschooling, as expressed here, is that going to school to learn is not compulsory. In other words, in a deschooled society, everybody has the choice of whether to go to school or not. Soegiono, Anis and Maulida (2018) posit that to deschool does not mean to abolish the school system, but to recognise learning activities outside the school system. According to Delgado (2020), "a group of educators believes that schools should be "deschooled", arguing that students are like prisoners inside schools" (p. 2). In the light of this, the deschooler believes that an individual should not be forced to go to school, take an entry test before offered admission, or denied the opportunity to learn their desired topic, and should be free to learn the way they want.

Deschooling negates the traditional formal education system in which students are made to learn within the four walls of the school. Kotinsky (2021) affirms that deschooling was invented by the Australian Ivan Illich. The term deschooling, according to Scirri (2023), has come to mean the transition process that parents and students undergo when switching from public school to homeschool. Scirri further explains that one of the roles of a homeschooler is to help the child through this process. The organisation K12 Academics, according to Delgado (2020), describes deschooling as an educational movement whose idea is based on the notion that schools and other learning institutions are incapable of providing the best possible

education for some or most individual. For Bales (2019), “deschooling simply means giving your just-removed-from-traditional-school child time to decompress before starting formal learning in your homeschool” (p. 1). According to Sailen (2012), John Holt, an advocate of deschooling, initiated unschooling out of deschooling to express his own educational belief system. As such, the two could be used synonymously.

Implication of deschooling for education in Nigeria

Deschooling, by implication, may be described as an educational critical theory that is capable of enhancing critical thinking among Nigerian students. As discussed above, one could infer from the nature of deschooling and the ideas that characterised it that it encouraged the fostering of critical thinking dispositions. For instance, a major logical consequence of deschooling, according to Bales (2019), is that it promotes children’s sense of creativity and their innate desires to learn which could have been suppressed or hampered by institutionalised school setting. Creativity is characterised by coming up with something new that is considered worthwhile by the target group. This means deschooling, if deployed into the education system of Nigeria, could boost creativity among the students.

We may not be able to separate abilities for creativity and self-actualisation from critical thinking. Self-actualisation connotes consummating self desire. As further argued by Bales (2019), deschooling allows students time to rediscover their own innate creative ability and desire for knowledge and endeavour to consummate such. In a similar spirit, Kessler (2018), avers that deschooling would help one to find one’s footing, and that deschooling a child, therefore, is like doing the child a favour. The emphasis here is still self-actualisation.

In the same vein, Gaddy (2023) explains that deschooling allows the child’s natural curiosity to direct his learning, allows him to enjoy learning, take learning easy and make it fun. He also believes that deschooling is an avenue for the child to embrace natural learning and get engaged in practical skill study. This is equally applicable to the Nigerian students. Meanwhile, the dignified reality of education in itself, according to Ezeanya-Esiobu (2017), should be to introduce the learner to an appreciation of his environment, and the curiosity to explore more, in order to add value.

Rogero, (as cited in Delgado, 2020), pitching tent with the other advocates of deschooling, condemns the traditional system of education on the ground of his belief that the system has its peculiar issues. According to him, “the traditional school focuses on exams, the academic success of the students, the curriculum, and other factors that end up producing exhausted teachers and students who do not enjoy or potentialize their learning” (para. 7). Takahashi, (as cited in Scirri, 2023), condemns rote learning and recommends homeschooling as the best way to educate a child as the system will help the child to find the answer within himself. If rote learning actually characterises the traditional system of education, then it could be argued that it is anti-thetical to the original aim and purpose of education. To this end, deschooling could help the Nigerian students to be free from the incarceration of rote learning.

Pedagogy for critical thinking

Teaching critical thinking in the classroom may be intriguing. The process may involve certain activities and exercises for both the teacher and the learners. However, it could be taught by Neve’s model. Neve (1986) presents seven principles that could enhance learning in the

classroom. Neve believes that these principles are brain-compatible. Brain-compatible principles are principles of logic. These principles can be of help in teaching critical thinking to students in the classroom. For him, the principles are far removed from the teacher talking and the students listening as a passive group in the classroom. The seven principles are: creating a non-threatening climate/classroom situation; providing a large amount of input; emphasising genuineness (originality); providing for much manipulation; emphasising reality; direct thinking towards productivity; and respect for natural thinking. These principles could serve as a template of pedagogy for teaching critical thinking. By logical consequence, teaching critical thinking in the classroom is capable of enhancing the development of learners from the lowest to the highest stage of learning.

Redefining education in Nigeria through critical thinking

One of the major requirements for students to succeed as young adults is the critical thinking ability. It is evident that the world of education no longer revolves around percentage, marks or assessments. It is now about whether students have acquired the skills required for them to succeed in the competitive world. In view of this, fostering critical thinking among students should be ensured across all levels of education in Nigeria. This idea deserves to be embraced by all and sundry. Although critical thinking is intriguing, students should be made to imbibe it naturally in the course of their study as a way of equipping them against the challenges beyond the classroom.

Incorporated critical thinking into the educational curricula in Nigeria as part of the learning content would put not only the students but also the entire country at great advantage. For instance, critical thinking is applied in all academic fields, including Education, Mathematics, Computer Science, Law, Linguistics and Psychology. By logical consequence, the Nigerian students and graduates would be able to compete side-by-side with their counterparts in the outside world without fear or intimidation.

Critical thinking in itself is a problem-solving skill. Therefore, by incorporating it into Nigeria's education system, education becomes problem-solving in the country. It enhances reasoning ability and critical facilities. It could help in giving meaning to words/language, and eliminating erroneous concepts. It could also help the students in solving problems and making valid reasoning. Critical thinking could help learners to differentiate reason from fallacy(s), and enable them to utilise deductive reasoning to interpret statements. It could help in giving meaning to words (language) and eliminate erroneous concepts. Critical thinking skills could help learners to justify or invalidate inferences, as it deals with the laws of reasoning.

Conclusion

One of the biggest problems with Nigeria's education system is that students are mostly taught in theory in many schools. It seems as if these students are not always prepared for the actual practice and experience of what they are taught on paper. It equally encourages rote learning just for the sake of passing examinations. This practice of theoretical learning does not encourage critical thinking among the learners. Therefore, there is the need to change from a curriculum that emphasises theory rather than practice and experience to the type that would encourage study and skills acquisition processes. There may be a significant

improvement in the attitude of the Nigerian army of youths in general if the education system is saturated with content that could enhance critical thinking among the learners.

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