Teaching Critical Thinking in Western and Non-Western Contexts: Cultural Imperialism and Practical Necessity

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Critical thinking has become a focus in Japan, as reflected recent education reform. However, ESL educators remain divided on the issue of teaching critical thinking skills. Specifically, many question the appropriateness of teaching critical thinking skills in Non-Western contexts on the grounds that they embody values and beliefs specific to Western societies (e.g., Atkinson, 1997). For the current paper, I argue that individuals bring potential strengths and weaknesses to the critical thinking process depending on their particular culture. I reject the idea that individuals from Asian cultures are less suited for critical thinking than individuals from Western cultures.

1.0 Introduction

In a 1997 speech to the faculty of Asia University in Tokyo, Robert Kaplan, then ex-present of TESOL, defined the teaching of critical thinking in ESL settings in Japan as a form of 'xenophobia' (Reid, 1998). Furthermore, he suggested that courses in critical thinking be called courses in 'Western-style of thinking'. Earlier that same year, in an article which has come to be widely cited in the critical thinking debate, Atkinson strongly urged that ESL teachers question the validity of teaching critical thinking in non-Western contexts (Atkinson, 1997). In this article, Atkison argues that critical thinking is a social practice potentially 'fraught with cultural problems' when taught in non-Western settings.

The goal of the current paper is to reconsider the issues underlying the debate regarding the teaching of critical thinking in non-Western ESL contexts, using Japan as an example. Specifically, I will consider two primary claims: 1) that critical thinking *should not* be taught in non-Western cultures and 2) that CT *cannot* be taught in non-Western cultures. I will address each of these claims in this paper using evidence from a variety of sources to illustrate my main points that 1) critical thinking is a 'process' consisting of set of skills (not a single skill); and 2) individuals bring potential skills and weaknesses to the process of critical thinking depending on their particular culture. Although the current paper will focus on Japan, it is my belief that main points of the argument can be applied to other Asian cultures as well (e.g., China, Korea).

2.0 Critical Thinking Definition

There is little agreement regarding the definition of critical thinking. One scholar on the subject noted that 'there are as many definitions of critical thinking as there are writers on the subject' (Mayfield, 2001, p. 4). A sampling of definitions from the literature illustrates this point.

Critical thinking is a 'process of evaluating statements, arguments, and experiences' (D'Angelo, 1971)

Critical thinking is 'reasonably and reflectively deciding what to believe or do.' (Ennis & Weir, 1985)

Critical thinking is 'the art of thinking about your thinking while you are thinking in order to make your thinking better: more clear, more accurate, more defensible' (Paul, 1992)

Critical thinking is 'a process which stresses an attitude of suspended judgement, incorporates logical inquiry and problem solving, and leads to an evaluative decision or action' (National Committee on Critical Thinking, 2003)

Although there are many differences in the above definitions, there are also similarities. For example, they all seem to characterize critical thinking as a purposeful mental activity which brings conscious awareness of thinking process itself (hence the much cited definition, 'thinking about your thinking while your thinking'). In this sense, they are all compatible with a view of critical thinking as a process that consists of set of a skills and not a single skill. Below is a summary of the skills that scholars seem to view as central to critical thinking process (summarized from Mayfield, 2001).

The ability to…
- separate facts from opinions, inferences, and evaluations
- recognize own and other's assumptions
- question the validity of evidence
- prepare persuasive arguments using evidence
- ask questions
- verify information
- listen and observe
- resist jumping to conclusions
- seek to understand multiple perspectives
- seek 'truth' before being 'right'

Atkinson defines critical thinking as a social practice that often defies definition (Atkinson, 1997). I agree that many educators do not take the time to consider a definition of critical thinking and therefore operate with a vague understanding based on their own cultural expectations. One potential negative effect, as discussed in Atkinson, of teachers bringing their culture specific expectations into the classroom is that they evaluate students based on inappropriate standards. However, this problem is not the result of an inherent cross-cultural incompatibility in the concept of critical thinking. Rather, such shortcomings result from a lack of understanding on the part of educators who fail to recognize the multifaceted nature of critical thinking.

For the current paper, an awareness of the multifaceted nature of the critical thinking process is central. As noted above, I argue that because of this nature, people from different cultures can potentially bring different strengths and weaknesses to the critical thinking process. This reasoning is in line with Davidson (1995) who argues that although there are many aspects of critical thinking that seems difficult for Japanese students (e.g., expressing their own opinions, questions the opinions of others out loud) there are other aspects which they seem to learn easily (e.g., resist jumping to conclusions, seeking to understand multiple perspectives). Following Davidson, I attempt to systematically addressed specific aspects of the definition of critical thinking and to consider evidence from a number of studies regarding the potential impact of cultural on the critical thinking aptitude of individuals in Western and Asian contexts.

3.0 Should We Teach CT in Japan?

Before examining individual critical thinking skills in relation to Western and non-Western cultures, I will consider the more general question of whether we *should* teach critical thinking in non-Western cultures. In this section, I use the example of educational policy reform in Japan to argue that we should teach critical thinking in Japan. Specifically, I discuss how the Japanese Ministry of Education is encouraging critical thinking skills in Japanese students as early as the elementary school level through recent educational policy reform. Based on this, I maintain that teaching critical thinking supports educational policy already being implemented from within Japan. Therefore, although there may be some theoretical validity to the argument that teaching critical thinking represents a form of cultural imperialism (see Atkinson, 1997), there is little practical relevance to such claims.

3.1. Education Reform

Starting in April 2003, a new period of study, the 'Period for Integrated Study' (Sougoutekina Gakusyu no Jikan), was introduced into the national elementary schools curriculum in Japan. This new period, which has received much media attention, has been characterized as the beginning of English education in Japan. However, such an interpretation is misleading. English education falls within one of four stated general

areas of study included in the new period (shown below).

- International Understanding
- Environment
- Health
- Computers

English education is incorporated within the area of International Understanding and is only one of a variety of suggested subjects within this area. Interestingly, Japanese language instruction is also included within the International Understanding area, presumably as a means for improving student ability at self-expression.

Clearly, the new Period for Integrated Study is not primarily about 'English education' at the elementary school level. According to the Ministry of Education website, this new period is design to 'create independent thinkers' who 'learn, think and act for themselves' and 'develop problem solving skills' in students. Although there is no mention of the phrase 'critical thinking', clearly the goals as listed by the Ministry of Education share much in common with the skills that make up the process of critical thinking.

Part of the Ministry's reasons behind the push to develop critical thinking skills is likely in response to the demands of internationalization in a number of areas. For example, much interest in critical thinking in Japan has focused on international business. A cursory survey of the Japanese Internet reveals approximately 3,400 cites containing the words 'critical thinking' in Japanese (or 'kuritikaru shinkingu' in Katakana). Of these cites, 1800 (52%) are business related. This is in contrast to a mere 12 (0.3%) that are related to ESL. Although such figures are not conclusive, they reflect the perceived need of Japanese business leaders to develop a more internationally competitive workforce via the development of skills such as critical thinking.

Based on these facts, it seems clear that there is a mandate coming from within Japan to teach critical thinking skills. This mandate can be seen in recent education reform, which has the explicit goal of developing basic critical thinking skills in Japanese students starting at the elementary school level. It can also be seen in the business communities interest in developing such skills in response to an ever increasingly global community.

In light of the clear mandate coming from within Japan, the view that teaching critical thinking represents a form of cultural imperialism provides a weak argument against the teaching of such skills. Interestingly, it is the non-Japanese educators within Japan who have been most adamant in their stance against teaching critical thinking skills in Japan.

4.0 Can We Teach CT in Japan?

All academic study is based in large part on drawing inferences from

generalizations. However, as useful as generalizations can be, they have negative consequences. Stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination all have roots in generalizations. In this sense, it could be said that the ability to generalize is both a blessing and a curse.

In a recent presentation to faculty at Sophia University in Tokyo, Ryouko Kuboto spoke on the dangers inherent in generalizations. Specifically, Kubota focused on the negative effect of generalizations in language education (ESL and JFL). Her main point was that generalizations offered by teachers and in educational material such as textbooks often present a limited view of the target culture and thereby serve to perpetuate misconception, misunderstanding, and stereotypes. In a recent article, Kubota also criticized the critical thinking debate on similar grounds (Kubota, 1999). According to Kubota, arguments against teaching critical thinking in non-Western contexts are based on unfounded generalizations and stereotypes of Asian cultures.

Although it is true that many of those who argue against teaching critical thinking base their arguments on limited anecdotal evidence (e.g., Davidson, 1995; Day, 2003), we should not be too quick to disregard the effect of cultural differences. In this section, I will address the issue of cultural differences and their affect on the individual aptitude for critical thinking. It is my goal to introduce non-anecdotal evidence that quantifies certain differences between Western and Asian cultures. However, it is not my point to show that based on these differences only individuals from Western cultures are suited for critical thinking. Rather, I will argue that individuals from both Western and Asian cultures bring potential strengths and weakens to the critical thinking process as a result of their different cultural backgrounds.

4.1. Collectivism vs. Individualism

One finding of research on differences between Western and Asian cultures is that Westerners (e.g., Americans) are highly individualistic, whereas Asians (e.g., Japanese) are highly collectivist (e.g., Earley, 1989; Han 1990; Nisbett, 2003; Triandis, 1993). Although variation exists within both groups (i.e., there are individualistic Japanese and collectivist Americans), studies indicate that variation across groups (e.g., Americans vs. Japanese) is greater than variation within groups (e.g., Americans vs. Americans or Japanese vs. Japanese). The point being that, as a whole, Asians tend to value collectivist ideals and Westerners (particularly Americans) tend to value individualistic ideals.

'Individualism' and 'Collectivism' can be thought of as two extremes on either end of a continuum. Although the definition of these terms in not without contention, the following is a list of commonly cited characteristics (taken from Niles, 1998).

1. Collectivists define themselves as part of a group, whereas individualists focus on self-concepts that are independent of the group. Hence the contrast between interdependent and independent selves (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

2. Collectivists have personal goals that overlap with the goals of their collective, and when they do not group goals seem to have priority.   Individualists have personal goals that may or may not overlap with group goals, but in the event of any discrepancy between them individual goals will prevail (Schwartz, 1990).

3. Among collectivists, relationships are important, even at personal cost.   Among individualists, when costs are excessive relationships are dropped (Kim, et al., 1994).

4.1.1. Linguistic evidence

The use of Apologies in the US and Japan illustrates the contrast between 'self' vs. 'other' focus found in individualistic and collectivist cultures.   A number of scholars have noted the fact that the Japanese often apologize (e.g., 'sumimasen') in situations when Americans would express gratitude (e.g., Kumatoridani, 1994; Coulmas, 1981; Long 1998; Nakata, 1989).   Gratitude expressions are essentially self focused; they express one's pleasure at the benefit gained from the action of another.   In contrast, apology is other focused; by apologizing, the speaker expresses regret for the burden that the listener bared in performing some act the speaker's behalf.   Greater use of apology in Japan reflects a greater concern for the other.   Greater use of thanks in the US reflects a greater focus on self.

Japanese focus on the group is further reflected in the use of honorifics and politeness expressions.   Much politeness in English takes the form of conversational strategies that are largely independent of the relative status between interlocutors (e.g., would you, could you, would you mind, would you happen to mind, etc.).   In contrast, honorifics and polite forms in Japanese are highly dependent on the relative status of interlocutors.   In addition, as pointed out by Ide (1989), the use of such forms constitutes 'the socio-pragmatic equivalent of grammatical concord' and that such concord is 'socio-pragmatically obligatory' (p. 227).   Because such forms encode the social relationship between interlocutors and are obligatory, the use of such forms forces speakers to be highly aware of group relations.

4.1.2. Additional evidence

In addition to linguistic evidence, findings from a variety of studies support the above distinction between East and West and offer insight regarding the implications of these differences for the critical thinking debate.   For example, Nisbett reports that when asked to answer the seemingly simple question 'Tell me about yourself,' Americans tended to describe their personality traits (e.g., 'friendly', 'hard-working'), whereas Asians (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) tended to frame there responses in relation to their environment (e.g., 'I am serious at work' (Nisbett, 2003).   Nisbett argues that this supports the idea that collectivists tend to be more aware of their relationship to the environment.   Moreover, Nisbett found that American participants had difficulty responding when asked to frame their response in relation to specific environments (e.g., work), responding with phrases such as 'I am what I am' (p. 55).

Other studies indicate that the collectivist-individualist distinction manifests itself at the cognitive level as well. If this is the case, there are important implications for the critical thinking debate. In particular, research suggests that collectivists process information with more of a focus on the whole. Individualists, on the other hand, focus more on salient objects. Matsuda & Nisbett (2001), showed Japanese and American university students an underwater scene depicting a large fish and other smaller fish swimming with a variety of background objects (e.g., plants, rocks, snails). They asked participants to describe what they had seen after a short viewing time. The found that American students were more likely to describe the salient object (e.g., 'There was a big fish, maybe a trout, moving off to the left'), whereas Japanese students were more likely to describe the scene (e.g., 'It looked like a pond'). Several other up studies by Nisbett and his colleagues have confirmed these findings (e.g., Ji, Pen, & Nisbett, 2000; Matsuda & Nisbett, 2002, cited in Nisbett, 2003).

4.2. Implications for Critical Thinking Debate

The results of the above-cited studies suggest that the collectivist emphasis on group values over the individual results in a cognitive focus on the group. In other words, collectivists view their world more holistically than individualists and see themselves in relation to the whole to a greater extent than individualists. One manifestation of the tendency is the commonly noted observation that Americans are more apt at voicing their opinions than Japanese. This is one point that educators have raised as evidence of Japanese inability to think critically.

However, as noted above, voicing ones own opinion is only part of critical thinking (i.e., forming arguments). Equally important is the ability to reserve judgment while gathering information on a variety of possible viewpoints. Davidson (1995), comments that his Japanese students are 'willing to hear various and differing opinions' and furthermore 'are good at entering into the point of view of someone who disagrees' (p. 6). All of these skills are compatible with the cognitive tendencies of collectivists suggested in the literature. The point is that the ability to 'listen and observe', 'resist jumping to conclusions' and 'seek to understand multiple perspectives' are important critical thinking skills that people from collectivist cultures (e.g., Japan) may be better at than people from individualistic cultures (e.g., the United Sates). However, if educators view the ideal critical thinker as opinionated and confrontational they will overlook such potential strengths as these that Asian students have.

Although Americans are more opinionated than their Japanese counterparts, there is little clear evidence that they are better critical thinkers. Starting as early as the mid 1980s a growing number of American universities have been requiring incoming freshman to take courses in critical thinking. This growing trend alone suggest that the critical thinking level of American students is not as high as some would assume. As noted above, the process of forming one's opinions (e.g., considering other perspectives) is as important (if not more important) than having and stating opinions.

Ironically, an overemphasis on having and stating opinions can act as a hindrance to critical thinking. This is perhaps the major challenge that faces Americans (and other Westerners) in becoming critical thinkers. The opinions put forth by Tannen in her book *The Argument Culture* (Tannen, 1998) support this line of reasoning.

> 'The argument culture urges us to approach the world -and the people in it- in an adversarial frame of mind. It rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done: The best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate...the best way to begin an essay is to attack someone; and the best way to show you're really thinking is to criticize.' (Tannen, 1998)

5. Summary

I have argued that individuals from collectivist and individualist societies bring potential strengths and weakness to the critical thinking process. This view is founded on a definition of critical thinking as a process entailing a set of skills. This view is presented in contrast to a view that sees critical thinking as a simple (or indefinable) cultural model. I presented a brief discussion of recent educational reform in Japan and argued that such reform has the goal of developing critical thinking skills. This discussion served as the basis for my point that we *should* teach critical thinking in Japan. I also presented evidence from a variety of studies that indicate that Asian societies are highly collectivist whereas Western societies are highly individualistic. This data was presented to supplement the anecdotal evidence present in previous reports and to counter claims that any discussion of cultural differences is unfounded. The conclusion of this discussion was that individuals from collectivist societies (e.g., Asians) are potentially more able to recognize multiple perspectives when forming opinions compared to individuals from individualistic societies (e.g., America). Moreover, I argued that being overly opinionated is a potential pitfall for individualists in developing critical thinking skills.

The implications for educators are clear. We must work to expand our definition of critical thinking beyond our own cultural expectations. Particularly for Westerns working in Asian contexts we must strive to bring out the potential strengths of our students (e.g., the ability to view multiple perspectives) and gradually build up weak areas (e.g., the ability to express their own opinions). Moreover, we must refrain from the tendency to evaluate our students based on culture-specific standards. Just because our students are not opinionated, it doesn't mean they are not thinking critically. In fact, recent studies have shown that although Asian students do not outwardly question their teachers, they are not passively accepting everything they are told (e.g., Littlewood, 2000; Stapleton, 2002).

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