

A critical appreciation of 'critical thinking'

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THERE is always a conflict between tradition and innovation. Tradition is too heavy to nudge with innovation. Most of the people like tradition since it is long tested and something they have well adapted to. If the urge of innovation is extremely strong and it proves very useful, then it can wage a fight against tradition. If it wins, it takes the place of the old one, gradually becoming a fashion, if not a tradition itself. But in every case, innovation has to face severe resistance from traditional fronts.



In our education there is also tradition and a negligibly weak flow of innovation. Traditionally, we love to make our classes lecture-based rather than task-based. Teachers are always dominating in the class and rarely entertain students' opinions. Our classroom activities mainly centre on set question patterns, provided by textbooks, and the teachers hardly tread outside that. We strictly stick to tradition and rarely give way to educational innovation. This is our national trait.

I felt the heat of tradition-innovation friction when I listened to the lecture of Professor Dr John C Bean, from Seattle University, at a workshop at Brac University here in Dhaka. The workshop was organised by the Centre of Languages, BracU, on September 7-8, 2008 and the topic was 'Critical Thinking in the Language Classroom and Writing across the Curriculum'. It was really interesting. As Professor Bean was explaining the situation in the USA, I was pondering the Bangladesh scenario. The Americans are a real innovative nation, I suppose. They are in constant survey and experiments and come out with new findings. They apply them in related fields and again replace them with more novel ideas. But in our country the trend is just the opposite. We never like changes. We spend all our energy to resist novelty. This is the reason we probably lag behind in all respects, and if we ever need anything new we shamelessly borrow it from the west.

Professor Bean stressed the need to exercise critical thinking in the classroom. He suggested more active role of students as well as of teachers regarding the lessons they deal with. It is the responsibility of the teachers to engage the students in critical thinking with whatever they study.

It must be ensured that students do not just memorise and reproduce. They must think and write themselves. They will explore and discover themselves. They will find new interpretations of old phenomena, going beyond the established outlook. It apparently seems to be an audacity, but it is necessary to nourish the creative faculty of the students. I daresay, the prime objective of education should be to make students critical thinkers. They will break out of the confines of conventional thinking and generate new ideas. Unfortunately, we are far behind that objective. Our educational system does not endorse it.

The workshop observed that critical thinking may be resisted from many sides. First, the teachers may oppose it, as they have to put in extra labour for this, which emanates from treating all students individually. They have to read students' writings carefully and provide effective suggestions for improvement. Secondly, students may not like critical thinking, as they do not feel easy with it. It is mainly because they have not been acquainted with the system from their childhood, so they like the easier option, i.e. set questions and memorisation. Thirdly, there might be opposition from the education managers. Being of old mindset, they cannot keep confidence in new practices. So they want teachers to follow the established norms rather than experimenting in classroom. All these kinds of resistance are strongly felt in the field of education in our country.

The workshop particularly focussed on academic writing. Writing is a job not exclusively belonging to the English graduates. In fact, the writing skill is necessary for the graduates of all disciplines. It helps students not only to produce the term-ending 'capstone paper' (e.g., dissertation, term paper, project paper, internship paper, etc.), but also to go up the career ladder. The ability to write correctly is considered as an added quality for the people of any profession. From this reality, the Americans have started what the academicians call 'WAC' movement in recent years. WAC is 'Writing Across Curriculum' which provides an integrative course for the students from assorted departments. Susan McLeod et al in their book 'WAC for the New Millennium' published in 2001 defines WAC in the following terms: "WAC works to transform pedagogy at the college level, at moving away from the lecture mode of teaching to a model of active student engagement with the materials and with the genres of the discipline through writing, not just in English classes but in all classes across the university."

Curriculum has been developed in this line according to the multidisciplinary needs and is now being practised in full swing in the USA.

WAC necessarily entails a task-based syllabus. It allocates tasks to students according to the nature of the subject they are studying at their college/university level. In the way, literature students will learn how to critically appreciate Frankenstein or Paradise Lost; the students of psychology will discern a new aspect of conditioning phenomenon; students of mathematics will devise a new way of solving a geometric or arithmetic problem; history students will shed new light on any historical event like the French Revolution or the British rule in Bengal, economics students will propose new measures for inflationary pitfalls, chemistry students will note the outcome of new laboratory experiments, and physics students will resolve the velocity/acceleration puzzles of flying balls, etc. The method is exploratory. The learners explore and they write about their findings. It is far beyond book browsing.

We can take a concrete example from the program of literature to understand how WAC works. A

course teacher who is teaching, for example, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein with a group of undergraduate students may tell his/her students: 'for next week, finish reading Frankenstein and prepare for a class test. You have to analyse the character of monster.' This is probably the most typical practice in our country, which encourages the students to go through ready notes available in market. There is little brain work of the students involved here. But the exercise may be given in a different way. For example, the teacher may say: 'For next week, finish Frankenstein and then write a one-page single spaced 'thinking piece' that addresses the following question: Critic Harold Bloom has said, "The greatest paradox and most astounding achievement of Mary Shelley's novel is that the monster is more human than the creator." To what extent do you agree with Bloom's assertion? Play the believing and doubting game with Bloom's thesis. Spend half a page making the case that the monster is more human than Victor Frankenstein. Then spend half a page arguing against Bloom's view. Which view is closest to yours? Come to class with your completed thinking piece and be prepared to share your ideas with your classmates.' Now, this kind of task demands more thinking activity from the students. They will read, think and learn. That's the WAC strategy of classroom education.

I thank Professor Bean for his excellent delivery in the workshop. He explained the current American practice of composition teaching and made it relevant to Bangladeshi context. The workshop was very helpful in understanding the pedagogy of writing and how the teachers address the problem, traditionally and innovatively. I am especially grateful to him for giving me the realisation that we need to be more active and critical not only in our classroom activities, but in all other spheres of life. We have to conquer the fear of 'new'!

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