

A PERSPECTIVE ON CRITICAL THINKING, DEBATE, HIGHER EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

The aim of higher education is to pursue learning for its own sake and to develop specialist skills. However due to market pressure higher education institutions in Bangladesh and across the world have had to focus on practical skills rather than inculcating a desire for knowledge. There is more emphasis to secure jobs than making students curious about knowledge and learning. Alongside this pragmatic approach there is a lot of importance given to critical thinking skills in the higher education curriculum. However, despite its centrality in the curricula most academic institutions follow a simplistic form of teaching critical thinking skills, which focus on the skill of breaking down arguments into its parts and ignores modes of thought which might facilitate solutions. This paper looks at the elements of critical thinking as it applies to the educational practices in higher education institutions in Bangladesh, and how the classical art of rhetoric, manifested in the extracurricular activity of debate, functions towards rote reproduction rather than initiating the process to think critically.

Keywords: Critical thinking skills, Curricula, Pedagogy, Rote learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education programs aim to develop specialist skills and knowledge in students and to pursue learning and research without regard to immediate utility¹. It might be charged that the current trend in higher education institutions in Bangladesh and across the world has been to focus more on practical subjects than imparting what Russell called a "love of learning"¹. More emphasis is given to teaching students the requirements and skills needed to secure jobs than equipping them with a genuine curiosity, and a desire for learning and self-improvement. Concurrent with this emphasis on practicality is also the importance given to critical thinking as the "sacred cow"² of the higher education curriculum. However, despite the importance given to it, most academic institutions follow a simplistic form of teaching critical thinking skills, which focuses on the skill of breaking down arguments into its parts and ignores

modes of thought which might facilitate solutions: the component of critical thinking capacities which Walters called "pattern-of-discovery"². This paper looks at the elements of critical thinking as it applies to the educational practices in higher education institutions in Bangladesh, and how the classical art of rhetoric, manifested in the extracurricular activity of debate, functions towards rote reproduction rather than initiating the process to think critically.

II. THE FALLACY OF CRITICAL THINKING IN FOUNDATION CLASSES

Walters argued that the current cache placed on critical thinking is based on what Barry, Blair and Johnson, National Assessment of Educational Progress, and Nosich described as "a pragmatic imperative in an age of information overload, deceptive advertising, and political ideology"². But the positivistic values of critical thinking are not a new pedagogical tool; for example teaching students to subjectively question and interpret real life situations based on personal study has been the dominant ethos in teaching English Literature under the reader response schools and Russian

¹ B. Russell: *On education: especially in early childhood*. 4th ed., pp 93. London: Routledge. (2000)

² K. S. Walters: "How critical is critical thinking?" *The Clearing House*, 64(1), pp 57-60. (1990)

Formalists³. However, only recently has critical thinking taken on the role of the bedrock of higher education. To this end institutions of higher education have developed the curriculums and requirements of classes called foundations, classes aimed at aiding students in the transition from the standard higher secondary institutions into the university models and initiating the development of critical thinking skills.

Ironically, the practice of critical thinking currently being presented is not itself given a critical look-over. In the essay “How Critical is Critical Thinking”, Walters outlined the two specific cognitive functions that have to be the aims of critical thinking skills and how the widespread model of critical thinking ignores the latter and focuses on the former:

Calculus-of-justification skills enable the reasoner to logically analyze and evaluate propositional arguments and problems, while pattern-of-discovery skills promote the creative constructions of alternative models and the imaginative discovery of new problems and fresh perspectives. Together, these two cognitive functions constitute that set of thinking skills that are associated with human rationality...the conventional model of critical thinking by and large have missed [this bicameral nature of rationality]—understandably so, because they tend to conflate thinking skills in general with the logical operations appropriate to the calculus-of-justification.¹

Walters said that the skill of dissecting, arguing, and getting at the core of any propositional topic functions on and develops through a process of “calculus-of-justification”. The process of “pattern-of-discovery” is a separate and second function which enables creativity and perspicacity on the part a problem solver¹. Walters was of the opinion that of these two elements to rational thinking the popular practice has been to focus only on “calculus-of-justification” largely ignoring the function of “pattern-of-discovery”. The tendency towards overgeneralization of the former as the sole constituent of critical thinking makes the conventional model “[conflate] thinking skills in general with the logical operations appropriate to the calculus-of-justification”¹.

³ T. Eagleton: *Literary Theory: an introduction*. Pp 27. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (1996)

In Bangladesh, foundation courses are required for all freshmen in private and public universities so that they might prepare themselves for advanced classes in set disciplines by learning the skills of communication (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) and critical thinking in English. These foundation courses are usually based around the concept of introductory English classes, i.e. 100 level classes. Naturally, given the large number of students matriculating into universities each year, the usual foundation course in a Bangladeshi university has large numbers of students, eager to learn the skills of rhetoric and critical thinking, which they see as key to doing well in their academic future. According to the information posted on their websites, at least three such courses are requirements for East West University⁴, BRAC University⁵, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh⁶ - three well-respected private universities. According to the handbooks of Department of English, University of Dhaka⁷ and Jahangirnagar University⁸, foundation courses are also a requirement for these two apex public universities.

These foundation courses proclaim the development of communication skills and assume the development of critical thinking skills through their syllabi and curricula; stressing upon what will be immediately useful to the students through instructions on speaking, listening, reading, and writing, following a process conducive to the skill of “calculus-of-justification”, and ignoring “pattern-of-discovery”. Practice in universities

⁴ East West University Program Plan. (2008) Retrieved from <http://www.ewubd.edu/ewu/showDocument.php?documentid=1052&dc=>.

⁵ BRAC University Bachelor of Arts (BA) in English. (n.d.) Retrieved (November 15, 2010) from <http://www.bracuniversity.net/academics/dept/cc.php?code=ENG>.

⁶ ULAB: University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh. (n.d.). *ULAB: University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh*. Retrieved (November 15, 2010), from <http://www.ulab.edu.bd/Department-of-ENG/department-of-english-and-humanities/>.

⁷ Syllabus of Department of English for B.A. Honours Course. (2007). Retrieved from University of Dhaka Department of English Website: http://www.univdhaka.edu/DownLoads/Academic_Program/english_ba.pdf

⁸ Syllabus of Department of English for B.A. Honours Course. (2007). Retrieved from University of Dhaka Department of English Website: http://www.univdhaka.edu/DownLoads/Academic_Program/english_ba.pdf

across Bangladesh shows that when a student is assigned an essay on a topic within a word limit in a foundation class, the instructors emphasize the structure of a logical flow of arguments followed by a conclusion. Sometimes students might write a line or two about an alternative perspective to an issue s/he is asked to deal with, but mostly writing which receives an “A” grade or first class marks will be structured within the set criteria and present only one perspective in order to maintain focus.

So “intuition, insight, and imagination” as Walters said are ignored, and “special emphasis is given on correcting grammar, spoken English, and presentation skills. These skills are considered to be useful for further studies and in the job market...[there are] hardly any literature components in the foundation courses curriculum apart from the occasional use of short stories and small articles.”⁹ Thus we see functional skills of English are taught so that language might be used in an effective way; it is broken down, arranged, and rearranged, edited and reedited. It is what Walters said is the “mechanical manipulation of content”. Imaginative use, which might form the basis for original thought through a process of “pattern-of-discovery” becomes redundant.

This emphasis on manipulation of content perpetuates and supports the traditional rote-learning methods, which critical thinking skills are purportedly aimed to overturn. Park¹⁰, in his analysis of the process of education given to the African American population to improve their social positioning, which also applies to the emphasis on English language education in Bangladesh as a critical component of national development, defined rote-learning as follows: “Rote learning seems to be learning without, or with a minimum of, insight...Without discussion words may perform their original function of expressing sentiments, but they will not become the symbols of intelligible ideas”¹⁰. It is true that instruction by the teachers may carry out the primary function of instruction, but in order for the ideas to be truly realized analysis, discussion, reflection, and application are necessary. With

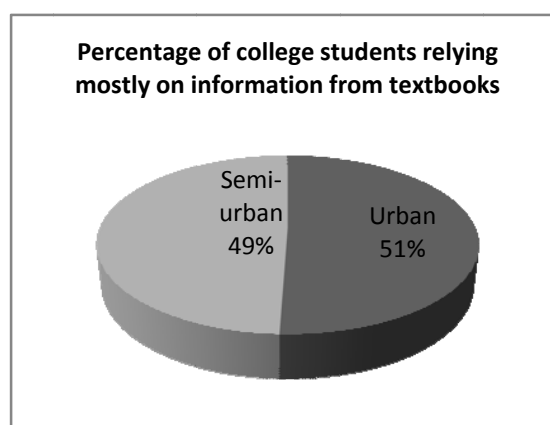
⁹ S. Karim and T. Zaman: “Teaching language from literature background: Bringing the best of two Worlds” *BRAC University Journal*, 3(1), pp 75-81. (2006)

¹⁰ R. E. Park: “A memorandum on rote learning” *Chicago Journals*, 43(1), pp 23-36. (1937)

higher emphasis placed on graduating students than on creating genuinely critical minded citizens, such activities within the classroom are deemed wasteful in most Bangladeshi colleges (higher secondary institutions).

In a survey conducted for this research, a sample of 200 grade 12 students (100 from 6 urban colleges, 100 from 4 semi-urban colleges) were asked to fill out a questionnaire on what their sources/modes of learning were for the subjects they took at college (see appendix 1). The locations of the survey were in and around Dhaka city in Bangladesh. The eleven criteria for sources/modes of learning were: 1. Classroom discussion, 2. Lecture, 3. Information from textbooks, 4. Guidebooks, 5. Group study/discussion, 6. Reflection, 7. Home Tutor/coaching centre, 8. Brainstorming, 9. Research, 10. Teachers’ feedback, and 11. Others. The criteria were adapted from “Critical Thinking Framework For Any Discipline” by Robert Duron, Barbara Limbach, and Wendy Waugh¹¹.

A total of 176 (89 urban, 87 semi-urban) college students assigned highest points to the third criterion i.e. Information from textbooks.

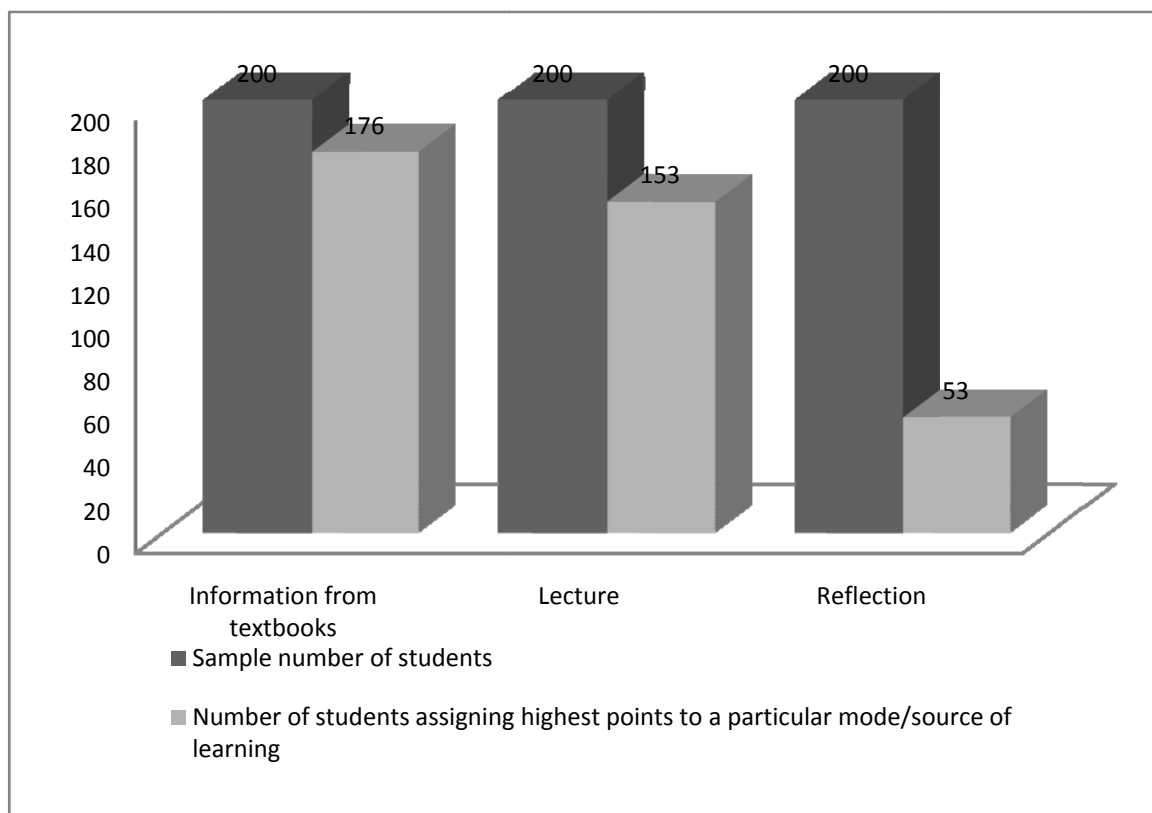


The above chart shows how heavily and almost equally both groups of urban and semi-urban college students depend on procuring information from the textbooks. A total of 153 (87 urban, 66 semi-urban) students assigned most importance to Lecture, and 53 (22 urban, 31 semi-urban) students attributed most importance to Reflection as fundamental sources/modes of their learning.

¹¹ R. Duron, B Limbach, and W. Waugh: “Critical Thinking Framework For any Discipline.” *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. 17(2), pp 160-166. (2006)

Teachers' feedback was seen as of medium importance (range 2- 3) by 112 (75 urban, 37 semi-urban) students and of most importance by 55 (24 urban, 31 semi- urban) students, 65 (46 urban, 19 semi-urban) students assigned lower-medium (range 1-2) importance but only 6 (all urban) gave most importance to classroom discussion, and 41 (37 urban, 4 semi-urban) students chose home tutor/coaching centers as their principal source(s) of learning. Neither Brainstorming nor Research were chosen by any student as the most important source/mode of learning, only 17 students (12 urban, 5 semi-urban) thought of Research as an

important (range 2-4) source/mode of learning. Although only 3 students (all semi-urban) gave most importance to guidebooks, 103 (urban 56, semi-urban 47) noted guidebooks of considerable importance (range 3-4) as a source of learning. None of the college students thought of group study/discussion as the most important source(s) of learning, however, 30 students (all urban) considered it as an important (range 2-4) source/mode of learning. Of 93 students who selected Others, only 11 mentioned sources/modes of learning that required any form of interaction with teachers and/or peers or discussion.



From the bar diagram above it is clear that college students rely heavily on lectures from teachers and information from textbooks for the correct answers to questions which are possible to evaluate their progress in learning. Discussions, reflection, and research are considered less important by most of these students because of such a product-oriented approach to learning. Similarly, a majority of teachers do not anticipate or encourage any digression from normal expectations: that of a class of mute students passively listening to the instructor's set lectures. This tradition of heavy dependence on learning

(memorizing) the so- called correct answers and an overt emphasis on teacher centered learning is carried into the higher education system in Bangladesh.

The foundation classes of the three private universities and two public universities previously mentioned were observed by this researcher. Observations show that they do not deviate from the scenario of classrooms heavily dependent on information provided by the instructor as those observed in the colleges studied. Even technological tools such as power-point

presentations, currently espoused in most private universities, are not necessarily facilitative because discussion does not constitute a critical element in presentations based on technology; the student's focus merely shifts from the instructor to the screen.

Most students in Bangladesh are also especially apprehensive about asking questions in English language classes. This aversion stems from the fact that most students here believe English is a language divorced from their everyday lives. It is mystified as the language of the West, of the higher classes, not connected to or constituting ordinary lives most students live everyday. Yet these same reasons are why they believe that they need to reproduce it satisfactorily to be able to become upwardly mobile and so learning the language becomes what was once for the African Americans "a series of ordeals by which one makes the transition from a status socially inferior to one socially superior."¹⁰ As such, students in Bangladeshi universities tend to focus on the functional skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in the English classes, specifically by imitating the models presented by the instructor or more fluent English-speakers they see around them. The focus is not on critical understanding of the language as a medium of thought operations, but on reproduction. This phenomenon was pointed out by Park, which he called a "defect of academic training": "Sometimes this pedantry takes the form of a shallow verbosity or a general disposition, characteristic of a college intelligentsia, to play with ideas in a wholly irresponsible way as if they were merely mental toys."¹⁰ Similar phenomena are common in many classrooms in Bangladeshi higher education institutions, where only those who speak fluently dominate the classrooms where substance and originality are rarely fostered.

Alongside this glib championing of "shallow verbosity" and unsubstantiated prestige a tacit agreement between the instructors and students also develops to continue rote-methods. Fuller in his article "Rote Learning: Bypassing Thinking" explained that even the teacher sometimes falls into perpetuating rote-methods because it is more comfortable and does not require active efforts of reasoning. He added rote-methods also have the potential of indoctrinating the students into fallacies, which in Bangladeshi scenario might be that of unquestioned benefits of critical thinking and rhetoric as ideal tools for pedagogy in higher

education¹². Additionally, as most teachers' job performances are rated on the basis of student performance and pass-rates, and student evaluations¹³, most teachers in the foundation classes focus on elements that will ease better marks. Park said about this: "As long as education is conceived by the teacher and the student as a preparation for a recitation or an examination, and examinations are regarded as ordeals by which one acquires merit and distinction merely, such methods are likely to persist."¹⁰

Even modern Western standardized tests have been criticized in the past for rewarding rote methods, perpetuating its deleterious effects. Fuller outlined the case of Mike, a highly intelligent individual, who never learns to think in a genuine manner and question. He explained that because Mike has remarkable memorization ability – bolstered by a photographic memory – he excels all throughout his school and university life, securing outstanding results in the SAT and Graduate Record Exam. However, despite his excellent results, Mike never had to genuinely think or question; thinking or questioning was never necessary for him to do well in his studies.¹²

Often the teachers of the foundational language classes are also students schooled in the rote-learning methods, which means they themselves will perpetuate what they had learned at such great efforts, and so are disinclined to teach new methods. Park called this the "rote-learning complex", where "the fate of the industrious and "good" student is often worse, since his natural destiny is to become a teacher or "professor" – condemned for life to inflict upon future generations of pupils, as well as the general public, the pedantries he acquired at such great cost in school."¹⁰ This charge can be applied to Bangladeshi education institutions, where only the best students in our rote learning models in schools, colleges, and universities secure the highest marks, a pre-requisite for being teachers.

This may also be identified as one of the reasons for the focus on memorization of structures of

¹² Fuller, R. Rote learning: bypassing thinking. Retrieved (November 15, 2010) from http://www.ballstickbird.com/articles/a38_rotelarning.html. (2005)

¹³ S. M. Islam: "The problem of English studies in Bangladesh" *Crossings: ULAB Journal of English Studies*. 1(1), pp 1-6. (2008)

language rather than imparting essential skills of rhetoric based on individual and original thought. Alongside the culture of spoon feeding in the private universities is also damaging the capacities of its students to learn on their own and who, therefore, become “passive recipients” of the instruction.”⁹ Karim and Zaman further said about foundational language classes: “English is no longer a language, it is a ‘skill’ that is vital for surviving in this competitive job market.”⁹ Naturally skills of rhetoric and critical thinking become less important, and phrases and structures to carry out conversations or write answers to questions or prepare a power point presentation become the more vital. Therefore learning remains mostly lecture-based and teacher-centered even at the highest levels of education, leaving minimal space for critical thinking.

III. DEBATE AND FOUNDATION ENGLISH CLASSES

In addition to regular classes, students are also actively encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities and of these activities debate is especially worth mentioning. Debate is greatly respected by institutions in Bangladesh and abroad. There is a widespread perception in Bangladesh that it provides participants a platform for publicity and an opportunity to network with professionals, who either come to or sponsor the events as possible recruitment tools. A report published in *The Daily Star* on November 18, 2009, on ‘Battle of Minds’, one of the premier debate competitions in the country, made this perception about a connection between debating and corporate recruitment clear:

Mansur lauded BAT Bangladesh's role for providing university students a unique opportunity to interact with the corporate world...“Battle of Minds is truly the showcase competition of graduating students of Bangladesh, providing the aspiring future leaders with a platform to showcase their entrepreneurial acumen,” said Alan Davy, managing director of BAT Bangladesh...Syed Imtiaz Faruque, head of human resources of BAT Bangladesh, said “Battle of Minds helps talented young individuals in their grooming and preparedness to enter the corporate world.”¹⁴

¹⁴ “NSU: the Battle of Minds 2009 Champion.” *The Daily Star Online Edition*. Retrieved from

According to the interviews reported, the emphasis in ‘Battle of Minds’ is as much about networking as debate. It is about being a “platform to showcase entrepreneurial acumen”, “to interact with the corporate world”, and about “grooming” “to enter the corporate world.” This potentiality for the spotlight and jobs provided by debate gives it clear attraction for students in Bangladesh, who see it as an opportunity to make contacts or achieve personal recognitions. However in addition to exposure provided by debate activities they also exercise the concepts espoused in the foundation classes. As Leow¹⁵ highlighted in his article “Ideas: Lets Debate!” debates are excellent in-class activities for language acquisition “because debates are learner-centered activities that promote maximum participation from students. Debates promote an integration of skills, specifically, oral production, aural comprehension, note taking, and team work.”¹⁵ Foundation English classes aim to teach the same fundamentals, centered on the pedagogical methods used to develop grammar, writing, speaking skills. Thus debate is especially useful for a student because it supplements his/her foundation university classes.

According to Australasian Adjudication Criteria¹⁶, widely accepted as the standardized criteria for judging debate – internationally and in Bangladesh – the basis for marking debates are three elements: 1) Matter, 2) Method, and 3) Manner.

Matter uses logic to develop a “chain of reasoning to prove an argument. This involves stating, explaining and illustrating the argument. Relevance is established by tying the argument into the topic under debate.”¹⁶ Four steps comprising of statement of argument, explanation of the argument, examples and tying the argument are asked to follow. Method focuses on “the effectiveness of the structure and organization of each individual speech”, the team’s case as a whole and the team’s performance in holding up the dynamics of the debate.¹⁶ Manner is concerned with “the mechanics of public speaking and

<http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/newsdetails.php?nid=114499>. (2009)

¹⁵ R. R. Leow: “Ideas: Lets debate!” *Hispania*.78(1). pp 92-191. (1995)

¹⁶ C. Flynn: “*Australasian adjudication criteria*” Retrieved from <http://flynn.debating.net/austasia.htm>.

presentation of the debating case.”¹⁶ The elements of manner are vocal style, use of language, use of notes, use of eyes, gesture, stance, dress, impression of sincerity, refraining from personal attacks on opponents, and humor.¹⁶

Clearly, only a speaker with a sophisticated command of structure and form and with significant practice can meet the above criteria satisfactorily. This infers that too much importance is attached to structure than the content of a debate. Even the supposed content, that which is referred to under the criteria of “matter” is primarily about creating a chain of arguments and persuading during rebuttal to prove that the “opposing team’s argument should be accorded less weight.”¹⁶ As we can see, debates in Bangladesh are mostly structured around these circumscribed criteria, again minimizing anything relating to “pattern of discovery” in a way similar to instructions in foundations, ending with the development of an “incomplete persuasion.”¹⁷ Students in Bangladesh are taught this procedural persuasion without envisioning an end or conclusion. Thus in debate too a student is credited as capable of critical thinking when s/he can argue using English in the same vein as parroting of English is merited in foundation classes.

Contemporary debate is based on the art of rhetoric developed by Aristotle in the classical period. Garver¹⁶ explained that Aristotle stressed, one of the aims of rhetoric is to give pleasure to the listener by focusing on his/her personal constitutions and thereby reasoning them to a conclusion through passion. However, he also pointed out that Aristotle suggests rhetoric is incomplete without an established conclusion that comes through a structured series of arguments requiring creativity on part of the speaker or writer. This creativity is the same as Walters’ concept of the function of “pattern-of discovery.”² Thus it can be understood, similar to the way in which foundation classes espousing critical thinking only provide rote-reproduction of only one function of the bicameral aspect of critical thinking processes, debate as a supplement to foundation classes also omits use of creativity and ignores processes of “pattern-of-discovery.”

¹⁷ E. Garver: “Aristotle on the kinds of rhetoric” *Rhetorica*, 27(1), pp 118. (2009)

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus we see how neither foundation classes that promulgate critical thinking nor extracurricular activities such as debates really present the students with the dual functions of critical thinking. Both reproduce skills to break wholes into parts rather than formulate possible new models. Imam¹⁸ in her analysis of language policy in Bangladeshi education system indicated that our current models reproduce superficial commands of language, which make it impossible to develop and access original thought that is not simply a rehashing of old ideas.¹⁸ This failure of teaching imagination creates unoriginal thinkers, similar to those produced under the much-criticized rote model, whose negative effects were the reason education was seen as needing to develop new models (of which critical thinking and the foundations are supposedly representative of) to create students capable of real innovation.

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¹⁸ S. R. Imam: “English as a global language and the question of nation-building education in Bangladesh” *Comparative Education*. 41(4), pp 471-486. (2005)

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Questionnaire (Translated from Bangla)

All the information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. Please respond freely to the following questions.

Name (optional):

College's name:

Age:

Gender:

Type of college: Urban Semi-urban

Class: 12

Number of students in your class:

Optional question: Your class rank in last academic year (Please put a tick mark)

1. Top 1- 5
2. Top 10
3. Top 20
4. None of the above
5. Would rather not say

Pick the value appropriate to the level of importance of the modes/sources of learning classroom lessons. Assign the highest points to what you think is the most fundamental mode(s)/source(s) of learning for you (Grade from 0 to 5, 0 being "Not at all", and 5 being "Completely"):

Modes/sources of learning	0	1	2	3	4	5
Classroom discussion						
Lecture						
Information from textbooks						
Guidebooks						
Group study/discussion						
Reflection						
Home Tutor/coaching center						
Brainstorming						
Research						
Teachers' feedback						
Other(s)						

Please provide any additional comments here:

Thank you very much for your time.