

Articles

Developing Constructive Criticism in Students of Teacher Training Programs

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Abstract

The article makes an attempt to analyse the issue of constructive criticism as an important area of reflection at a university. The article discusses an original definition of constructive criticism, analysis of students' critical competences as well as inspirations and conditions of the practice of constructing standards for teaching, curricula and classes aimed at developing constructive criticism in students of teacher training programs.

Keywords: constructive criticism, critical thinking, university education

Rozvíjení konstruktivně kritického přístupu u studentů učitelských oborů

Abstrakt

Článek se věnuje rozboru otázky konstruktivně kritického přístupu coby důležité oblasti úvah na vysoké škole. Zabývá se autorskou definicí konstruktivně kritického přístupu, rozbořem kritických kompetencí studentů a inspiracemi a podmínkami pro praktickou konstrukci standardů výuky, programů a aktivit, které mají za účel rozvíjet konstruktivně kritický přístup u studentů učitelských oborů.

Klíčová slova: konstruktivní kritika, kritické myšlení, vzdělávání na vysoké škole

Introduction

The issue of critical thinking as an important area of reflection and research has appeared in the Polish educational literature only recently. Information smog, invasiveness and uncontrollability of content transferred by the media make it necessary to introduce paradigmatic changes into educational processes – moving from the imperative of obedience to the imperative of independence, activity, caution and mistrust (Crozier, 1996; Kwieciński, 2000). The key everyday experience of an individual involved in dilemmas of numerous blurred categories of the real-virtual, objective-subjective, individualistic-global, temporary-universal type should be “critical verification of sense” – careful, persistent and in-depth verification of rationality of thinking. An academic teacher also should be prepared to fulfill the role of a guide in this process.

1 Aims of the study

This article is a result of over ten years’ experience in teaching students of teacher training courses at the Pedagogical University in Krakow. It is aimed at presenting and explaining the notion that being reflective, aware and competent, despite minimum personality predispositions, also requires the knowledge of strategy and methods of critical information processing.

What has already been written about? – competences of a practising teacher and an intellectual

A considerable interest in the issues connected with critical thinking is accompanied by significant diversity of understanding this notion. In the description of “awareness”, “orientation” or the critical “attitude”, critical pedagogy should be given the priority. In her handbook on emancipation pedagogy, M. Czerepaniak-Walczak (2006, p. 153) defines “critical awareness” as the ability to *“think critically about problems, perceiving them and solving them effectively”*, contrasting it with naive and semi-transitive awareness. In regard to the competences of a teacher participating and creating the process of emancipation of subjects. The author emphasizes the ability to *“individual search for models, contents, methods and forms of work on one’s own and the criticism of acts and orders, formal regulations and standards sanctioned by tradition [...]”. The main effort focuses on going beyond one’s experience and one’s own perspective in thinking and in*

acting, broadening the horizons and possibilities on a continuous basis” (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006, p. 194)

Earlier concepts of a teacher's competences underline the reflective and critical attitude (by H. Giroux, a transformative intellectual, D. Schön, reflective practitioner and J. Kincheloe, post-positivist practitioner) *implicite* assume also the occurrence of above-average personality predispositions of a teacher (Mizerek, 1999). For example, J. Kincheloe (2000; 2004), while presenting a description of a teacher's responsibilities in the post-modern era, estimates that he/she will be characterised by auto-reflection, independence, activity, involvement in the deconstruction of the social world, flexibility and ability to improvise, affirming “differences” and cultural pluralism, authenticity, humour, empathy. Compared with the educational reality (Nalaskowski, 1995; Kwieciński, 2000; 2007; Klus-Stańska and Nowicka, 2005), these concepts sound like idealistic postulates. They do not fit the reality of recruitment and academic education of future teachers and it is impossible to translate them into the language of practice. However, guidelines how to achieve such a state are provided rarely. These concepts ignore the basic and elementary level of a critical attitude – the capability of critical reasoning.

2 Why constructive criticism? – understanding and meaning of this notion

Definitions of critical competences are connected with the adopted scope of critical thinking. For E. Glasera (1941, after: Fisher, 2006, p. 3), the co-author of the most popular tools for testing critical skills, thinking is an ability to consider problems and issues in a logical manner, knowledge about methods of logical research and reasoning and ability to use them. R. Ennis (2003, p. 295) defined them succinctly as: *“rational, reflective thinking focusing on deciding what to believe in and what to do”*. R. Paul and colleagues from the *“Critical Movement”* (Paul, Binker & Weil, 1995) suggest that this type of thinking should be defined as progressive, in which an individual continuously and dynamically improves his/her thinking by using and imposing intellectual standards. A. Fisher (2006, p. 8) lists several fundamental characteristics of critical thinking, in particular, rational identification of elements of knowledge (perception and evaluation of assumptions, evidence and conclusions), explaining and interpreting views and meanings, determining the credibility of arguments and evidence, formulating correct explanations, accepting or rejecting ideas. According to M. Lipman (1996), critical thinking is distinguished from other types of thinking by the fact that it is based on criteria of objectivity, usefulness and logic.

A majority of researchers quoted here regard the ability to think critically more as *“a method or a personality trait”* (Cotrell, 2006, p. 2), assuming, however, the existence of significant individual differences for this skill. The abilities to observe, reason,

analyse, judge, assign values and make decisions as well as argue are the basis for critical thinking (Cotrell, 2006, p. 4). This type of thinking requires precision, attention to details, sensitivity, persistence in arriving at the foundations of judgements, the ability to adopt somebody else's perspective, objectiveness, far-sightedness and the ability to predict consequences. It requires a constant effort of analysing knowledge in the light of evidence that supports it and conclusions to which it leads. It is connected with scientific and research thinking (Bailin, 2002), reflective and philosophical thinking (Lippman, 1996; Czerepaniak-Waczak, 2006; Woroniewicz, 2006) and also with creative thinking. Constructive criticism, however, does not involve fault finding, but the ability to notice numerous implications, the context, contradictions, discrepancies between intentions and results of actions and multiple-aspect consequences of expressed ideas, and decisions taken. It is a type of rational thinking in which noticing a problem, a defect or a negative assessment of a state is the beginning of search for a new solution, improvement of the reality. It is criticism of propositions and possibilities which is aimed at adding value and becoming aware of a broader perspective, the context.

3 How is it? – critical and creative competences of students in teacher training programs

In view of the fact that the criticism understood in this way is nearly completely ignored by Polish pedeutologists, empirical reports on this issue are very rare. Therefore, the level of critical thinking in students was not researched or defined. Finding a satisfactory answer to the question above requires broad analyses. Three of them are – in my opinion – of fundamental importance. They pertain to three components of critical orientation: (1) analytical skills (2) a research approach – ability to doubt, to be surprised or interested or to ask questions and (3) a self-reflection. Results obtained in research (Czaja-Chudyba, 2013) unambiguously indicate that a considerable percentage from a group of students cannot analyse a text critically, settling for generalizations and stereotypes, does not have a habit of doubting and checking the context and the truthfulness of data presented in publications, it is also characterised by a lack of preparation in the area of elementary logic and is not able to analyse critically invalid or uncertain research results or information. Superficiality and schematism of students' conclusions and self-reflection, their triviality and conventionalism as well as inability to formulate questions and problems were also observed. The analysis of answers connected with demonstrated, preferred and accepted attitudes reveals the dominance of student conformity, dogmatism and destructiveness.

The results obtained raise concern and evoke questions. They confirm polemic analyses of critics of the methods of educating students – future teachers. They show that a vast majority of students are “uncritical” or “deprived of reflection” practitioners

who accept and copy knowledge and submit themselves to the “anti-category of reflective education” (Woroniewicz, 2006, p. 212) – a negative social influence, prejudice, stereotypes and symbolic violence.

4 Where to draw inspiration from? – an outline of selected concepts of the formation of critical thinking

Taking into consideration the research results presented above, it seems important to become familiar with the formations of the ability to think critically popularised in foreign literature. A majority of the propositions presented below is of analytical and training character, being combined with studying texts or active drama exercise in a group (or a pair) accompanied by following the partner’s statements attentively. The authors assume that the critical and creative abilities can be measured and learned, i.e. that it is possible to learn to think critically using appropriate strategies. This view is shared by a majority of researchers, usually from the cognitive orientation (Nęcka, 2001).

S. Cotrell (2005) proposes that the intellectual ability to be critical should be taught at ten stages of original exercises allowing students to develop critical competences (in particular the ability to identify erroneous, false assumptions and argumentation, critical analysis of written texts and creation of logically coherent oral and written statements). At the preliminary and final stage, the author presents a range of tests allowing for self-evaluation of the critical thinking level and monitoring the progress in training. Further exercises pertain to: the identification of the main thesis of a text, supporting or contradictory arguments, structurization of statements (evaluation of logic, coherence, the order of argumentation, adequacy of conclusions and the summary), finding hidden assumptions (stereotypes, ideology, emotive associations, overgeneralization), distinguishing between the cause and effect, linguistic implications, apparent correlations, the habit of searching and analysing sources and evidence, distinguishing between certainty and probability, possibility, separating facts from opinions and finally – the practice of discussion – asking questions, paraphrasing, exchanging arguments and opinions.

L. Elder and R. Paul and their colleagues, based on theoretical assumptions concerning 35 dimensions of critical thinking (Paul, Binker. i Weil, 1995, s. 60), developed numerous programs for children, youths and adults. Their only book which was translated into Polish (Elder and Paul, 2007), intended for popularization purposes, does not fully render the specificity of a multiple aspect program of teaching fair-minded criticism, which have been propagated for several years by representatives of “*the Critical Movement*”. The authors propose a twenty-five day course devoted to becoming familiar with and implementing 25 ideas connected with the intellectual and emotional development. Practical exercises focus on the development of characteristics such as:

empathy, intellectual humbleness, noticing contradictions, hypocrisy, justice and objectivity in judgements, determining precise objectives, thinking precision, focusing on specific issues, asking questions, predicting consequences, reason, non-conformity and freedom, avoiding egocentrism or servility, critical analysis of the media and political propaganda, extending knowledge, effectiveness of actions. Exercises proposed by the authors are individual.

The inclusion of practical exercise in a theoretical and methodological context is an advantage of A. Fisher's book (2006). The author focuses in particular on analysis of texts and situations significant for studying at the university level, using a varied scope of material he presents exercises developing elementary capabilities of analytical reasoning. The presentation of further strategies is followed by self-evaluation tests and vast comments pertaining to the essence, nature and improvement of critical thinking.

In the English-language literature, a lot of interesting proposals for comprehensive training programs aimed at developing critical thinking abilities can be found (Swartz, 2003; Luckey, 2003). The failure to popularize such classes in Poland is becoming a very disturbing phenomenon.

What next? – conclusions and postulates concerning the practice of constructing teaching standards, curricula and classes with students.

Exemplifications of individual problems will have their sources in the practice of pedagogical research. A closer look at daily educational practices as well as the behaviours and qualities of students in teacher training programs falsify the concept of a teacher as a critical practitioner. This makes it more important to reconstruct standards and curricula for future teachers to increase the number of classes promoting critical thinking. Changes should pertain to both the formal aspect (content, subjects, selection of texts) the methodological aspect (teaching strategies- used and proposed) as well as emotional aspects (creating an atmosphere allowing for taking a different perspective, freedom, involvement, individualism). In their implementation, it is worth taking into account the following guidelines and remarks:

- While teaching classes connected with education as well as general and professional knowledge, tasks and problems connected with ordering, organizing, analysing, evaluating and describing information should be created. Exercises including basic principles of logical and deductive thinking should not – as it is the case now – constitute a separate kind of activity not connected with other experiences.
- Stimulation of a research attitude is extremely important – one that will allow for an active search for information as well as for experimentation and verification of formulated hypotheses.
- Students should be given open-ended tasks which evoke critical thinking, e.g. by asking questions combined with an analysis of questions, paraphrasing, encouragement to inquisitiveness, reformulation of questions.
- Encouraging students to paying attention whether materials presented in texts are not too simplified or untrue, developing sensitivity to untruths, paying attention to

contexts, absurdities, contradictions and mutually exclusive oppositions. Tracing and making students aware of groundless generalizations.

- Providing educational materials which create an opportunity for a reflective approach to the presented problem from numerous perspectives (Muchacki, 2006).
- Exploring and assessing methods used for the development of knowledge in specific disciplines with students.
- Demanding that students should defend their positions by looking for appropriate arguments. Allowing students to participate in establishing the criteria and assessing the involvement as well as one's own and other people's work. Respecting constructive criticism. This is connected with the encouragement of students to comparing their own ideas with other, alternative ideas and to ensure the possibility of reflection on the teaching process.

Conclusions

The academic education of teachers may not result in shaping individuals "closed" to diversity, multidimensionality of social and cultural reality, unable to perceive the pluralism of views and interpretations of reality. Research shows, however, that as long as the number of pedagogical theories allows the teacher to make his/her choices in a conscious and critical manner, it makes future early education teachers feel lost or even indifferent (Grochowalska, 2012). Classes should allow students to become familiar with the multitude of images of the educational world, however, on the other hand, they should allow for the development of critical thinking to empower them to become distanced critics of reality, demonstrating critical and analytical abilities to observe and interpret the educational process.

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