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The Trump Candidacy: Implications for Curriculum

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Abstract The popular attraction of Donald Trump has been a conundrum for many educators who have tried to understand the rationale behind his support. This article presents a philosophical argument for what this implies for curriculum design and the intellectual temperament of the populace. There has been much written about the purpose of education to prepare students to be knowledgeable participants in the democratic process to further the best interests of the country. The foundational skills of critical thinking are an integral component of that process, and should be reevaluated for how they fit into the current curriculum model. Suggestions for how to integrate critical thinking within the traditional school day are presented, along with the rationale for doing so.

Keywords Critical thinking · Curriculum · Trump · Social justice · Pedagogy

The recent election cycle has exposed the lack of critical thinking skills of one third of the country, and the ramifications for educators to rethink curriculum are salient. Proficiency at critical thinking is characterized by an ability to evaluate information from experience, observation, reflection, reasoning, and communication to guide belief and action (Scriven and Paul 1987). When based on selfish interests, it manifests in the manipulation of ideas for the vested interest of one's group, which, however logical and pragmatic it may appear to be, is typically intellectually flawed. Critical thinking entails skill sets characterized by self-discipline and self-corrective thinking fostered by effective communication and problem solving, with an underlying commitment to rise above native egocentrism and sociocentrism (Dewey 1910). Decision making processes that are grounded in fairmindedness towards the

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broader spectrum of humanity are more likely to be of a higher intellectual order, embodying a moral compass which is integral to the quality of life.

The importance of an educated electorate in a Democracy has been recognized as an integral factor for thousands of years. Plato's solution was to limit decision making to the small minority of educated aristocrats who were positioned to take advantage of an educational system. The concept was based on Socrates' precepts that a just man was wise and good, while unjust men were ignorant and bad (Sembou 2012). It thus follows that wise men were knowledgeable and should have the responsibility of making decisions for the good of society. Plato recognized that for a Democracy to work, it was essential that citizens were brought up from very young ages in an educated system that emphasized a benevolent character. This character trait was also seen as an essential element in a statesman, whose modus operandi was to pursue justice and truth for the well-being of the whole society. Plato's Philosopher King was the epitome of this kind of ruler; therefore, it was conjectured that a philosopher king charged with ruling a monarchy would be the best form of government, due to the encumbrance of educating an entire populace to the same degree of excellence as one leader who had been bred and trained for that role (Sembou 2012).

Extending Plato's train of thought into the 21st century, Brennan (2016) makes an argument for epistocracy, a word that combines the Greek word for knowledge (epi), with the Greek work for rule (stocracy). The argument is that too often the exercise of voting by an ignorant, irrational populace that do not have the mental acuity to think critically, ends up with negative consequences for society as a whole. Epistocracy then, is an extension of Plato's Philosopher King, with the caveat that voting should be limited to those who are knowledgeable enough to make decisions that are truly in the best interest of the country. Estlund (2009) coined the phrase and presents a rebuttal to this notion, arguing that it is implausible to make judgements about who could be characterized as knowledgeable, a point that Brennan does not fully address. Clearly, there is a strong moral objection to limiting the right to vote based on taking an intelligence test, considering how our country has evolved, yet the issue that Brennan and others (Caplan 2008; Somin 2016) have elucidated is a real concern, especially in the wake of the recent election.

Critical Thinking in the Curriculum

Educational curriculum changes alone cannot change the critical thinking skills of a significant percentage of the populace, but it is one crucial factor. There are already progressive changes afoot that recognize the importance of emphasizing critical thinking skills (McMahon 2005), and the current political climate represents just another example of an ongoing need to improve the critical reflection of marginalized citizens that has been going on for millennium. Freire's (1973) perspective on the issue was that education should be used to raise the literacy level to the degree that people could attain a critical understanding of how social inequalities result from social policies and structures. To effectively develop this understanding, it is necessary to develop the mental acuity of the general populace

to form a foundation for critical reflection, which is strongly related to the intellectual prowess that results from an understanding of literary analysis.

The impetus for current focus on critical thinking in the curriculum largely grew out of a frustration with business leaders who didn't feel that the current educational system was meeting the demands of a new economic paradigm. Collaboration and communication were noted as the basis for critical thinking skills, and the traditional K-12 system was slow to adapt to a curriculum that emphasized this focus. Thus, the original plan was to incorporate the 4 C's (collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking) within the traditional content areas, expanding the expectations for student outcomes (Roekel 2016). Application of known formulas, memorization of historical facts, and replication of science experiments were no longer meeting the elevated needs that are important for driving a burgeoning economy. An understanding of applying mathematical concepts to real world issues, analysis and evaluation of historical trends, and creative applications of scientific inquiry have evolved as the new norm for many school districts (Edwards and Hinueber 2015).

Current trends of unilateralism have exposed another aspect of critical thinking, not unrelated to the original impetus for curriculum change, that is characterized by a need to solve issues of egocentrism and sociocentrism, important foundational elements in the exercise of moral thinking (Dewey 1910; Edwards and Hinueber 2015). Inclusion of topics in the curriculum related to multiculturalism touch on the issue, but the focus needs to delve much deeper than the usual projects that study diverse cultures. Incorporating critical thinking acknowledges the realization that no one is an idealized critical thinker, and the pursuit of skilled reasoning will be a life-long process that strives to uncover complex issues for the benefit of self-improvement as well as the rights and needs of others. Foremost in this process is the unveiling of reasoning that falls prey to biases, prejudices, irrationality, self-interest, and vested interest (Davis 2016). This is potentially dangerous and controversial territory for the classroom and sure to shake up the status-quo, but failure to include self-examination on a deeper more personal level will sacrifice the potential for critical thinking to become more pervasive in our society, and risk falling into the realm of another subject that is meant to be memorized rather than internalized. Davis's (2016) article, written in the wake of multiple racially motivated shootings over the past year, emphasizes the effort teachers need to make to suspend negative perceptions due to stereotyping minority students, and make a concerted effort to connect with the communities from where these students come. Incorporating social justice issues into the curriculum is another suggestion geared towards uncovering implicit biases that tend to lie just below the surface.

Wilson's (2015) effort to teach students to carefully consider the logic behind various points of view in reading material that expresses overt and covert racist ideology was an example of how this work can be applied in the classroom through written assignments. Using Toulmin's (2003) Argument Model, students were confronted with the process of understanding the assumptions/warrants behind statements and arguments. While clearly identifying the initial claim, the evidence for the claim, and the resulting conclusions, students were better able to evaluate the lack of cogency in racist diatribes. Also of relevance was the use of Critical

Discourse Analysis (Huckin 1999), which provided a methodology for recognizing logical fallacies that individuals employ, consciously or unconsciously, to conceal prejudices. These strategies may include omitting facts, failing to include information that doesn't support a claim, emphasizing points that favor a cause, and relying on opinions and false assumptions to draw conclusions. As students become habituated to using logical processes to evaluate racially charged ideologies, they become better equipped to make decisions that are founded on a sound fact-based footing.

Educators have also experimented with using video recording in conjunction with literacy activities to support conceptual understanding of critical discrimination skills, with positive results (Burden and Kuechel 2004). Research by Lui et al. (2014) used video recordings of students as they defended points of view after reading articles on topics related to social justice. Video was used as a means for students to self-reflect on the validity of their arguments as they presented an oral presentation of their stance, backed by posters that highlighted the train of thought. Written summaries were also used to help students organize and express their positions that became part of class discussions. Exposing students to editorials on controversial topics and allowing for self-reflection that provided an overview of how well supporting details contributed to the nature of argumentation, prompted a deeper understanding of how critical thinking skills contribute to understanding and defending one's point of view.

Another creative approach to teaching critical thinking was conducted by Pekdoğan and Korkmaz (2016). The purpose of the study was to promote critical thinking skills via educational drama techniques that incorporated many of the skills associated with analytical acumen, such as exploration, creative expression, interpretation, inquiry, and problem solving. Using undergraduate preschool teacher candidates, a quasi-experimental study used a standardized test to measure critical thinking skills on a control group that did not receive drama training and an experimental group that did. Results showed a significant improvement in critical thinking skills for the experimental group, which mirrors findings from another study by Semerci (2003). Cahill (2014) conducted a similar study and found the play space to be an open forum that invited critical inquiry using new metaphors. Grady (2000) and Berry (2000) see the use of drama to engage in critical analysis and social change through an examination of how bias and privilege work to firm stereotypes, opening possibilities to reimagine possibilities for change.

A study by Aizikovitsh-Udi (2011) used the concept of transfer when examining how teaching critical thinking in relation to mathematics can improve dispositions in high school students. The pedagogy involved students who studied a learning unit titled "Probability in Daily Life", which challenged participants to engage in inquiry and evaluation of mathematical concepts relevant to a wide range of disciplines and topics. The approach aligns with Dan Finkel's (2016) suggestions for engaging students in real world mathematical applications. He starts with a question to stir curiosity and interest in solving a problem that has relevance and meaning for the class, which is a foundational step in activating the mental processes that characterize critical thinking.

The debate as to whether critical thinking should be a domain specific focus with applications in each content area, or a broader focus that seeks to enlighten people to use a self-reflective process that pertains to a wide array of issues in everyday life, should be considered resolved with the realization of where a third of the country stands in the development of this ability. An intentional application of critical thinking through a designated course that is not domain specific should be considered as an addition to the normal course load. These courses are now more commonly offered in higher education circles and should be added to the K-12 agenda. Higher education is typically viewed as the place to challenge well-formed belief systems and ideas that are mired in habitual patterns; however, curriculum that is designed to emphasize self-awareness of limiting patterns of thinking might have greater import in a younger audience, offering the potential to train minds that are in a more formative stage of development.

To date, this author is not aware of any efforts underway to enact a designated critical thinking course in elementary school, but there are efforts to incorporate critical thinking within the existing curriculum. Kraft et al. (2016) describe several creative hands on projects that challenge students to think analytically to solve problems. Most of the problems are based on engineering designs, but there is a component to the work that involves metacognitive processes, an essential component to all applications of critical thought. Duesbery and Justice (2015) tested the use of a unit for the William and Mary language arts curriculum that was designed to challenge students' literary analysis skills. Teachers using the program were encouraged to challenge students to inquire deeply about the content and make connections between discrete aspects of the literature. Students using the program scored higher on the Bracken Test of Critical Thinking, an instrument that measured reading fluency and writing, when compared to a control group that used traditional reading material. The William and Mary curriculum is available for grades two through eleven and represents a plausible alternative to the traditional book report.

Assessing Critical Thinking

As with any initiative that strives to make curriculum more relevant to the needs of society, there must be assessment measures to gauge the effectiveness of the effort. According to Watts et al. (2011), a reliable scale that directly measures critical reflection does not exist. Constructs that were seen to have a strong indirect relationship were attributions that contributed to a color blind racial ideology, lack of motivation to work hard, and lack of educational opportunities, which comprised a scale that Neville et al. (2005) developed to assess African Americans. Another scale which was seen to have relevance was developed by Pratto et al. (2006), which measures constructs that pertain to the degree that people reject or accept ideologies related to social dominance. A higher degree of critical reflection is represented by views that more strongly reject acceptance of social stratification.

A study by Wallace and Jefferson (2015) measured critical thinking skills of college freshman after taking a course that used a workbook titled *Critical Thinking: Building the Basics* by Walter et al. (2003) as a resource. Results showed an

improvement in cognitive abilities through the development of habits of mind that developed over the course of the semester, as measured by an assessment developed through the Educational Testing Service (ETS) called the iCritical Thinking Skills Test (ETS 2011). It signifies how traditional lessons based on a workbook can be used effectively to improve general thinking skills. Still another option is to use a standardized test such as the California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory. The original version of the test has 7 subtests (truth-seeking, open-mindedness, analyticity, systematicity, confidence in reasoning and inquisitiveness) that use a Likert scale. The average Cronbach Alpha for the subtests is 0.71, and while it may seem like the easy way out of trying to measure a construct like critical thinking, it does present a viable option for educational researchers searching for a standard by which to make comparisons.

Teacher Education

There are many resources that can guide teachers to foster critical thinking, characterized by cross-curricular inquiry, asking guiding questions, independent problem-solving opportunities, and collaborative work (Walter et al. 2003). But understanding how to utilize creative pedagogy is only one element in the purpose of professional development training. It is also necessary to challenge teachers to reflect on their own assumptions, prejudices, biases, and beliefs, to gain a deeper awareness of the process their students will undergo as they strive to refine their own decision-making skills (Lowenstein and Brill 2015). The purpose of training critical thinking skills is not to anticipate arriving at a specific outcome. When the purpose for critical analysis of an issue is to arrive at a well-justified conclusion characterized by support of human rights and tolerance, it has the capacity to counter factors that lead to fear and exclusion of others. In this way, professional development for teachers would require not only changes in pedagogical approaches to teaching, but challenges to the core issues that serve as assumptions underlying ethical reasoning.

An example of teacher preparation that reflects these concepts is The Boettcher Teachers Program (PEBC 2016). The yearlong seminar meets once a week and strives to create a dialogue concerning the role of schools in society, and explore the understated lessons about equity and power that specific teaching strategies offer. There is also an effort to reflect on the issues of diversity and power, using electronic journals and self-analyses of teaching videos to more fully recognize the implications of pedagogical choices. The program relies on a field-based approach that seeks to create a climate that accepts the risks of change and failure, elements that are essential for challenging core beliefs and seeking greater understanding.

When considering updates to programs that prepare teachers to include skills associated with supporting critical thinking, there is some research that suggests that simply raising the expectations for teachers to challenge students with higher order tasks will make a difference in critical thinking dispositions. A study by Elgün and Altındağ (2016) showed that English language teachers working in more advanced levels of education were better equipped to impart critical thinking skills to their

students, and that critical thinking skills were unrelated to the education level of the educator. These findings support the rationale that teachers who apply critical thinking as a regular component of their courses will gain expertise even without formal training.

Conclusion

Teachers have recognized the significance of embedding critical thinking in the curriculum for thousands of years. The Socratic method (circa 400 BC) of questioning sought to foster critical thinking by asking guiding questions essential to an interest in seeking meaning and truth through reflective inquiry (Ahbel-Rappe 2009). At the turn of the 20th century John Dewey was a proponent of experiential education, which influenced a hands-on approach to learning. His ideas about democracy and social reform led him to place importance on training students to use critical thinking skills for the greater good, essential for the maintenance of a functioning government (Dewey 1910). Robert Sternberg, Ken Robinson, John Howlett, Tom Little, Edna Shapiro and a host of other contemporary educators have encouraged a progressive agenda to reform curriculum in ways that recognize and promote critical thinking. The recent election provided stark data that reinforces the need for change in this direction. It has caught many people by surprise in terms of the extent of the issue, but therein lies an opportunity. With the issue front and center on the media cycles daily, impetus to enact positive solutions just got energized.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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