



# Imperative of Teaching Critical Thinking in Higher Institutions in Nigeria

Akinjide Aboluwodi

*Department of Arts Education, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria*

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**Abstract:** There is an urgent need for a new orientation to teaching and learning approaches in higher institutions in Nigeria. The absence of critical approach to teaching in these institutions in Nigeria, in spite of the teaching of Philosophy and Logic, leaves students to rely more on how much of the facts learnt can be memorised. Students lack the ability to deploy the knowledge acquired in this process to simple life situations, hence the need for a review of the content and the approach adopted in teaching the course, Philosophy and Logic, meant to teach students how to think critically. The need for a paradigm shift is required especially from the teaching of “what to think” to placing an emphasis on “how to think” which certainly provides an alternative learning approach to students in higher institutions in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** philosophy and logic, critical thinking, paradigm shift, learning approach, critical thinking abilities and dispositions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The need to develop critical thinking abilities and dispositions in individuals to enable them make a success of their academic work and reflect critically on their life situations must have informed the introduction of a General studies course, namely, Philosophy and Logic, in the curriculum of universities in Nigeria. Primarily, the course is designed for undergraduate students and it is meant to expose them to some elements of philosophy and logic. The content of what is taught and the techniques of teaching this content vary from one university to the other. However, the objective is the same, namely, the development of dispositions and critical thinking abilities in students.

The different efforts intended to initiate students into the culture of critical thinking through the teaching of philosophy and logic had yielded no reasonable results. In view of this challenge, there is need for a review of the content of and approach to what is being taught to give room for critical thinking abilities and dispositions. This is to enable students use their thinking abilities to act in a manner that will enable them to apply their reasoning to basic life situations.

## 2. COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The system of education which limits the cultivation of critical thinking habits can be traced to the pre-colonial and post-colonial education policies in Nigeria. The first Christian missionaries came to Nigeria through Badagry in 1942; a voyage that ushered in western education. The missionaries’ inability to communicate effectively with the natives, and the desire for the training of teacher-catechists, lay-readers and interpreters led to an early thought on the need for the establishment of schools. Subsequently, the British colonial administration began to show interest in education. First, its interest was to assist the missions in their efforts to run their schools, and second there was the need to train clerks, and technicians for the services of the imperial government (Sulaiman, 2012).

In this regard, the educational policy of the government which was not driven by the demands of the society, led to the belief that the British government did not have a clearly defined policy on education in Nigeria (Sulaiman, 2012). Thus, Nigerians grew up with the colonial education experience and the inherent values in it. Educational delivery was substandard during this period, an experience which informed Sulaiman’s submission that “curricular of schools during the colonial era [were] not in balance with the needs and aspirations



of the people for decades, a platform for a ‘knowledge economy’ was not really created” (p. 93).

In an attempt to meet the challenges posed by colonial education, the then Federal government set up a committee to examine the desirability of restructuring the educational system to reflect the needs of the society. The committee observed that the “entire world is questioning the relevance of higher education curricula, and the major issues have been the need to adopt what students learn, the way teaching and learning is organised, assessment procedures etc.” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2005, p. 220). The report indicates that the rapidly changing world of work now emphasises knowledge in terms of “how you know” and not “what you know”. The report contends that the emphasis in the knowledge management world is how individuals are able to create values and ideas rather than how they manage to acquire knowledge for the purpose of certification. This is a notion which represents one of the fundamentals of knowledge economy; it seems to be lacking in educational delivery in Nigeria, namely, students’ ability to create values and manage ideas.

Many students in Nigeria are used to the traditional teaching system that encourages a passive reception of teacher’s ideas in class. The system is organised in a manner that makes the teacher the sole authority and source of knowledge. A system of this sort is what the World Bank report (2003) says is “ill suited to equip people to work and live in a knowledge economy” (p. 28); because the competencies which the society demands cannot be acquired in such a learning setting. Unfortunately, the Nigerian educational system is still structured to reflect this pattern of learning. Thus, it is a system which Woolman (2001) claims to be “the rigid structure of time periods and grade-level progression found in the Western world” (p. 41). Though Nigerian educational system has gone through different stages of reform, relics of colonial educational system still pervades the system. Conspicuous among these relics are exam-approach to learning, teacher-centred orientation, and what Obanya (2004b) called “orienting education towards employment” (p. 4).

The initial effort at domesticating the content of education curriculum in Nigeria came in 1969 (Ajayi, 1990). According to Ajayi,

[in] 1969, Nigeria organised a conference to develop a new curriculum wholly local in content. The quest for this new orientation was informed by the need to depart from the educational legacy of the grammar-centred British system. There was the urge to have a curriculum that would be committed to the development of Nigerian cultures and customs, an educational system that would make the child

not only be useful to himself but also to the society in which he lives (p. 33).

Thus, as reported by Ajayi, the Curriculum Conference held in 1969 was supposed to provide Nigerians a forum to develop a basic curriculum that would reflect the cultural values of the people. Instead the conference substituted the existing colonial system with another system that lacked subtlety. The new 6-3-3-4 system, that is, six years of primary school, three years of junior secondary school, three years of senior secondary school, and four years of tertiary education, which acted as a substitute, was not itself far from being theoretical. Efforts to domesticate the content of the curriculum were not rigorous enough to allow for the incorporation of the needs, and cultural values of the people (Akinlua, 2007). For Ajibola (2008) the new system was thought to be too theoretical since it was “content driven and examination centered” (p. 56). The description as depicted here still explains the nature of Nigerian educational system as practised in schools.

On this issue, Ajibola (2008) sees the need for a paradigm “shift from theoretical and paper certification to a practical application of knowledge necessary for ... skills development”, (p. 57) while Woolman (2001) advises that developing nations should include ‘critical thinking’ in their civic curriculum. Obviously, the issue of reform goes beyond mass education as this is only a moment in any educational policy. It has to be accompanied with the desired quality that will expose students to critical thinking, creative and innovative education.

### 3. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE GENERAL STUDIES COURSE IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

The basic objective of the General studies course, Philosophy and Logic, in the curriculum of universities in Nigeria (Akinawonu, 2006) is to help students become more effective in recognising and avoiding mistakes in reasoning. Thus, the essence of teaching the course as indicated by Akinawonu is to enable students learn to reflect critically on their thought and the thought of others. Learning philosophy and logic is supposed to assist students to acquire the ability to think straight and correctly. Yount (2001) alludes to this assertion when he says that the teaching of philosophy and logic is expected to assist students to be able to think critically, and develop the ability to articulate good reasons for taking a particular position on issues. The course, as reflected in the curriculum of most of the Nigerian universities, has become one of the courses students need to register and pass in order to earn a credit. In view of this development, some of these universities place emphasis on the teaching of philosophical problems and some elements of logic.



In teaching the course, there is always a consideration for its two components, namely, philosophy and logic. Since the content reflects the elements of the two components students are taught some select topics in each unit. Sometimes teachers are more concerned with areas that address philosophical problems as mind-body interaction, freewill and determinism, and so on and such logical issues as deductive and inductive logic, truth table and so on, even where discussions on these issues are merely superficial. Attention is usually focused on students' ability to master these basic problems. As Fisher puts it, teachers sometimes focus on imparting knowledge than teaching students to learn and think for themselves, leading inevitably to students reproducing what they think will meet the demands of their teachers in passing examinations. It turns out, nevertheless, that students earn credit in the course but lack the ability to apply the knowledge acquired to real life situations.

Certainly any form of education which encourages students to reproduce what their teacher has taught them has only made it difficult for them to develop their thinking abilities. Sometimes this practice is encouraged by teachers who emphasise acquisition and memorisation of facts. As May (1966) has contended "a student's performance in a particular ...course may then depend on a good deal upon whether his natural intellectual attitudes fit in with those of his teacher" (p. 143). A shift in paradigm is inevitable in this process as there can be no alternative to an effective learning that incorporates critical thinking culture in school curriculum. Every nation that is desirous of enlightened citizenry needs to promote it.

#### 4. INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

There seems to be a gap between what is required in the world of work and how students are prepared for after-school experience in Nigeria. A typical practice in secondary and post-secondary institutions in Nigeria explains this knowledge gap. The practice involves giving instructions that lead to end-of-session examinations which indeed is an official policy of the state. This policy dates back to the colonial era where pupils' results were required for grant-in-aid to mission schools. In this process, teaching and learning was structured in a manner that saw the mind of the pupils glued to the thought of their teachers. The mind of each pupil is set to understand that his learning is geared towards passing examinations and obtaining certificate at the end of his programme.

This instructional practice still holds sway in Nigeria, though the conditions of pupils' results and school climate for financial assistance no longer obtain. Obviously, an instructional practice of this sort is

inadequate to support the present knowledge network where a great deal of learning requires skills and competencies. This practice is informed by the policy which makes it imperative, especially in the secondary schools, for teachers to prepare their students for external examinations usually administered by Examination Bodies set up by the state.

Most teachers adopt a crash programme to be able to meet the demands of the state. The implication is that inadequate focus is given to acquisition of skills and competencies while memorisation of inert facts is promoted. Certainly, individuals require more than rote learning to be able to integrate into the world of work; though that is not to deride possession of certificates, at least for ranking purposes. It is obvious that what is being done today requires a shift in paradigm if we intend to join in the global competition for knowledge economy.

Incidentally most teachers in Nigeria, higher institutions inclusive, are still tied to the colonial educational tradition where the dominant instructional practice is to teach students to pass examinations. This practice, indeed, accounts for the exam-driven approach which characterises educational delivery in schools. Though there are provisions for continuous assessments, its practice is worrisome. Sometimes a teacher awards arbitrary scores to students, because it is required to retain students in the system especially in private schools. Teachers engage in this practice in order to meet the demands of their employers whose motive sometimes is to please ignorant parents that take examination grades as synonymous to academic performance.

Richmond (2007) contends "the passive nature of education is reinforced by traditions of authority and obedience", (p. 4) this time, it is the authority of teachers and obedience by students to teachers' instructions. The reason is obvious; sometimes teacher takes offence when students deviate from his own ideas. The culture of "obedience and conformity to group expectations" is predominant in the Nigerian system with the system also sharing certain characteristics in common with the Japanese system. For instance, the Nigerian education system resembles the Japanese system where students as claimed by Richmond (2007) "are socialised to regard knowledge only as a step towards passing examinations which are the key to getting jobs" (p. 4).

Richmond is worried that instructional practice among some Asian countries, Japan and Indonesia, for example, does not prepare individuals for the twenty-first century knowledge economy. The practice, Richmond argued, requires students to absorb facts without recourse to context, which is often connected to what he calls the "function of textbooks." Richmond (2007) goes further to argue that:



students learn the contents of western textbooks which may have little application to the problems of their own countries; they pass exams; but they are ill-prepared for the very real and difficult problems their nations must transcend if they are to move forward (p. 5).

There is a similar practice in Nigeria where teachers prescribe textbooks for their students; in most cases some of these students may have little or no access to such books. Where they do, they are confronted with foreign materials whose contents are far removed from their own local environment. Where local textbooks are prescribed, the content may be far from being local as the greatest number of references in such books may turn out to be foreign. The contents of these textbooks are sometimes at variance with the assignments given to students since most of the ideas have foreign roots. For the teacher, all that is required is how to achieve the basic objective of the class, namely, getting the students to pass their examinations.

Richmond (2007) wants us to note that “students taught only Western-based theory do not acquire the skills to tackle (their local problems) such as poverty, disease and illiteracy...as its importation from the industrial countries poses difficulties of adaptation and use” (p.6). It is doubtful if Nigerian intellectuals will agree with Richmond since for them every academic exercise in school has to be measured by how much of foreign ideas are embedded in it. This dependency syndrome seems to have made a mockery of creative and critical studies among Nigerian students. The truth really is that Nigerians have had to live with this kind of experience, even though its implication for the nation’s development is being overlooked.

## 5. TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

The present instructional delivery which task students to master facts rather than to examine every assumption that underlies their thinking is an affront against normal critical thinking practice. Its practice may be destructive of any efforts made to assist students to achieve the disposition to think rationally. For Hayes (2014) there may be need for those who teach students to change their instructional approach and cultivate the habit of critical thinking, since for him “you can’t teach people to be critical unless you are critical yourself” (n.p). It may also require the efforts of teachers to push attitudinal change in students in the process of acquiring disposition to think critically. This is important for a group of individuals that require critical thinking abilities in school and out-of-school.

In his analysis of the practices in schools, Schafersman (1991) thinks all education consists of transmitting to students two different things, (i) the

subject matter or discipline content of the course (what to think) and (ii) the correct way to understand and evaluate this subject matter (how to think). Schafersman is worried that teachers are mainly concerned with the first goal, hence the second goal of education, “how to think” or critical thinking, is often so subtle that instructors fail to recognise it and students fail to realise its absence. In this respect, to Schafersman (1991) teacher’s basic belief is to emphasise the first goal’, namely, “what to think” in order to achieve the task of “transmitting and acquiring basic knowledge” (p. 2). He might probably be worried to learn that most teachers, especially in Nigerian universities, often embrace the first goal, hence the emphasis that is placed on examinations and grades.

Snyder (n.d) points to certain factors that may militate against the development of critical thinking among students. According to him, lack of critical thinking initiative may occur when students (a) consume too many facts with little conceptualising (b) engage in too much memorisation with little thinking, and (c) receive training (education) that does not involve thinking. This observation reflects the general trend in most schools where a student’s thought is generally considered an extension of his teacher’s. The usual practice, as indicated by Walker (2003), occurs “when lecturing, the instructor organizes and presents essential information without student input”, (p. 264) a practice that only leaves students to articulate the thought of their teacher. Kurfiss (n.d) believes that “the quality of students’ work improves when they have argued their ideas in class and discussed work in progress” (p. 2).

The culture of passivity among students in Nigerian schools, higher institutions inclusive, may sometimes work against their ability to take positions on issues. This culture of passivity is tied to a larger culture in the society which adorns conformity, hence students’ inability to questions others’ ideas or engage their elders, teachers inclusive, in arguments. The result is that they prefer to maintain their silence on issues and settle for what they thought emanated from their teachers.

The General studies course, Philosophy and Logic, is often seen by students as one of those courses they require to make up their credit. The teaching of formal and informal logic to them offers no significant difference from all other courses they have to learn. Based on this notion, Cosgrove (2013) is of the view that “many [students] are discouraged by studying informal logic, failing to see its significance to either thinking within academic discipline or to living one’s everyday life.” (p. 61). Though Walker (2003) thinks even when a teacher decides to teach students to think critically (the teaching of philosophy and logic, for example), the disposition to do so may not be there as the spirit or disposition to think critically is, unfortunately, not always present in all students. The teaching of



philosophy and logic, as a course devoted to critical thinking, does not offer any challenge to students, hence the disposition to think is further stifled.

At times, the teaching approach adopted by teachers may account for students' inability to think critically, as the disposition to engage in critical thinking may be lacking in such teachers. The most critical aspect of the General studies course is how the study's outcome matches the students' performance in the workplace. The issue has been that students are tested at the end of the year, but then how far are they able to transfer the knowledge acquired in this course to real life situations? The intellectual and social activities of most of the students, thought to have taken the course while in school, seem to have defeated the very basis of teaching the course. Ineffective communication, inability to sustain rigorous argument, and poor decision making are some of the observable characteristics of the individuals concerned. Nigerian universities require a new curriculum that specifies processes rather than a subject in critical thinking, in order to assist students to become more effective in their thinking.

In Nigeria, first, students require the disposition to think critically and second, teachers owe it a duty to encourage students, through their approach, to base their judgements, decisions or actions on reason rather than emotions. The teaching of philosophy and logic should emphasise process rather than a subject which is meant specifically to complement students' programme of study.

## 6. IMPLICATION OF TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

In May's (1966) view, the process of teaching critical thinking involves equipping students intellectually with a view to connecting them to the world beyond the classroom. An exercise of this sort is based on teaching students *how to think*, rather than *what to think*, which may be considered a paradigm shift in classroom instructional practice. It, therefore, suggests that a new orientation is desirable with respect to students' learning activities especially when the emphasis has to be shifted from *what to think* to *how to think*. In this regard, learning can now be organised in a way that enables students to think deeply on why they sometimes fail to accomplish their objectives in life.

Invariably the emphasis on 'how to think' or critical thinking is an invitation to a more proactive approach to teaching and learning in Nigerian schools. The instructional practice in some universities in Nigeria where the General studies, Philosophy and Logic, is being taught needs to involve, according to Richmond (2007), "a great deal of teaching by students who [are] assigned heavy reading and presentation [of]

assignments, and an atmosphere of constant structured interaction" (p. 17). The practice of tying students to teacher's lecture notes is an affront to thinking culture, though a practice sometimes considered to be normal in Nigeria's academic environment.

Many students in Nigeria experience a lot of challenges after leaving school. For instance, quite a number of them envisage the problem of unemployment, rejection in labour market and many others when they graduate. Sometimes some of these challenges push them to commit suicide, armed robbery, smuggling, and drug trafficking and so on. Nevertheless, students with passion for critical thinking, that is, students who have the drive to think and the ability to make a rational decision are likely to handle the challenges of this sort with reasonableness. Yoruba (an ethnic group in Nigeria) refer to such people as those who possess a critical mind and are capable of *arojinle* (critical thinking) as opposed to *riro* (mere thinking).

The Yoruba believe that a person who finds himself in a quagmire requires a reasoned judgment to be able make a rational decision. Such people are likely to overcome the temptations that may arise from suicide attempts, smuggling and so on. Sometimes students who are well-grounded in the knowledge of fallacies are likely to be able to articulate their thoughts and avoid bandwagon type of actions.

Since only higher institutions in Nigeria run courses in philosophy and logic in their general studies programme, there may be need to take a look at the content of what is being taught and how this is done. In most of these universities lectures constitute the basic approach to teaching. Major focus has been on elementary philosophy and logic, and the teaching has not given the students the opportunity to assess their thoughts, those of their teachers and perhaps the foreign materials they have been compelled to consume. The following questions from a course designed to initiate students into critical thinking culture feature in a General studies examination prepared to test logical reasoning among students.

- a ...is not in the domain of metaphysics
  - a. universals and particular
  - b. knowledge and justification
  - c. mind and body
  - d. freewill and determinism
- b. Which of the following is the fallacy of ambiguity?
  - a. equivocation
  - b. amphiboly
  - c. accent
  - d. appeal to ignorance



These questions do not require any thoughtful response from students; they only intend to find out how much of the facts students can recall from their teacher's lecture note. Most of the questions in this course are structurally designed this way. The performance of students in such questions is based on how far they are able to memorise facts and give them back to their teachers.

Critical thinking is all about respect for reason, a habit of mind; and any teaching intended to foster this habit in students must be done in such a way that students become critical in their thought. Nigerian students require this resource to be able to manage their academic programme. The teaching of Philosophy and Logic as a General studies course requires the mastery of the tools of logic, precisely, the use of questions. Questions of this sort must be capable of rational explanation. There should be seminars where students articulate their thoughts and evaluate ideas that come their way. Even when the general course is taken as a course of study, there should be minimal emphasis on students passing the course to earn a credit.

Another very significant point raised by Facione (1999) is that "experts do not regard critical thinking as a body of knowledge, (like Philosophy and Logic) to be delivered to students as 'one more school subject along with others'" (p. 4). Rather, it is seen as a process which if pursued, according to Bassham, Irwin, Nardone & Wallace (2011), "can help free us from the unexamined assumptions and biases of our upbringing and our society" (p. 10). For Willingham (2007) critical thinking is not a skill, rather it must be taught with 'factual content'. Shafersman (1991) advises the use of classroom instruction, homework, term paper, and examination, with active intellectual participation by students to achieve critical thinking. Critical thinking is best achieved when students are taught to master the tools of analysis, synthesis and evaluation in dealing with problematic situation, assumptions, particular task, questions, conducting inquiries, interpreting works and creative task (Bailin, 2002).

## 7. CONCLUSION

There is an urgent need for a new orientation to teaching and learning approaches in our schools especially in higher institutions in Nigeria. This orientation involves a conscious acceptance of critical thinking as an effective learning approach. It seeks to transform the individuals as well as the society, taking into consideration the need to shift from traditional method of teaching that encourages mere acquisition of knowledge and certification and aligns with Hale's report (1964) on the aim of university education, namely, to teach student to work on his own and to think for himself. Indeed, this is a reflection of the value of critical

thinking which should now be considered imperative in undergraduate education if the nation intends to graduate thinking graduates.

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