

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING

Jakub Medved', Tomáš Matisovský, Maico Suijkerbuijk

Developing critical thinking is one of the four stages of the EVE-project. In this chapter we will explain what critical thinking means, why it is considered to be important in the classroom and how a teacher can help pupils to learn critical thinking.

DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking is a very complex individual process. On the basis of critical thinking people make well-considered choices using both positive and negative arguments. Most young pupils have ideas about family values. With the help of the Atlas of European Values pupils can understand differences and similarities in the choices people make in different countries.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT FAMILY VALUES

Critical thinking is one of the most important issues in the development of young children. It helps them to become critical citizens in an increasingly complex society. Young pupils are not able to make well-considered choices, so they must learn it in secondary or high school. The development of a young pupil is influenced by many factors, like the internet, television and other people. Before they can develop critical thinking, they need to have knowledge of the related subject. The teacher plays an important role in supporting this process, although he or she cannot provide them with answers because there is not a single answer that is right. The only task of the teacher is to let pupils think about the specific

subject. With questions like what, where, when, why and how, the teacher can make the students think about their decisions. After they have observed some facts and have interpreted them, the teacher can elicit analyses by using these kinds of questions. In close collaboration with the pupils, he or she can analyse and explain the issue, so that it becomes more compact and vivid in the end.

Family is a topic on which every pupil has his or her opinion. Therefore, it is obviously very interesting to have a discussion about this issues concerning family. For example, pupils know a lot about the family life in Slovakia, but they do not know what it is like in other countries. Now the teacher can ask questions as ‘What are the differences or similarities?’, ‘Describe the differences between the importance of family for people in the Netherlands and Slovakia’ or ‘Why are there differences between these countries?’ Pupils could then try to find explanations referring to different aspects, like the economic development, the level of modernization, religious factors, the level of individualism and other cultural factors.

HOW TO TEACH CRITICAL THINKING

There are several ways of how to achieve critical thinking. First of all, we should know about the pupils’ backgrounds. This includes taking a look at information about their background because it is the basis for critical thinking. Furthermore, we need to know whether they are used to discussing and presenting their opinions, even if it is not their opinion and if they stand to what they are thinking.

Considering this knowledge, the teacher has to offer some piece of information to the pupils at the beginning. They can then add more information later to build a more complex picture.

After some input by the teacher, the pupils start to activate one of the skills of critical thinking which describes the procedure of adopting and decoding information. This enquiry is important for taking the next step of creating arguments and conclusions, which can be presented in a discussion for example. It is easier to elicit a discussion when the input is either extremely negative or extremely positive, so that the pupils can meet in between.

During our lessons we could see a great variety of pupils’ critical thinking. Not all of the pupils we taught were used to presenting what they are thinking. This may be due to influences from the school system, from their family or from society as a whole.

The teacher has to develop the pupils’ critical thinking during each lesson. He or she has to show them that this skill is very important in real life, so that it would be useful if it became something almost automatic. The use of this skill can be shown to the pupils in a discussion that aims at, for example, solving problems or interpreting data. This involves personal beliefs and thinking. Each pupil has

to be able to find the best solution for a concrete problem by themselves. In order to draw conclusions, critical thinking can also be activated after the discussion.

Each of the strategies we used was designed to achieve this skill. The only task of the teacher was to guide the pupils through their own ideas and ask questions to elicit a deeper understanding of some problems.

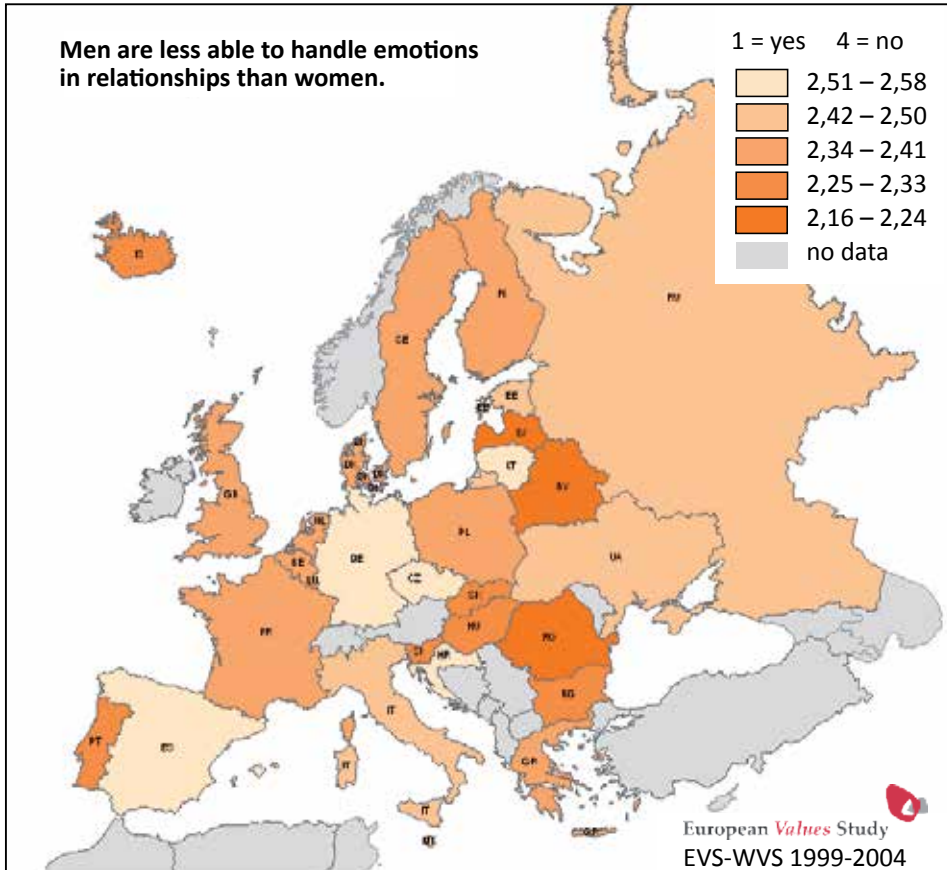


Figure 1: Map showing the judgement of the statement that men are less able to handle emotions than women

We used the maps from the Atlas of European Values as background information, so that the interpretation of the data was supported by visual representations. In figure 1 you find a map that shows data collected on the statement that men are less able to handle their emotions than women. It is a great example to detect different opinions not only between girls and boys but also between boys alone. While analysing the different opinions, pupils may understand some of the data in a more complex way. That makes the lesson more creative and it might be the beginning of successful critical thinking.

STRATEGIES AS A MEANS TO DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKING

The strategies, which were offered to us, were well made. Nevertheless some were favoured more than others.

Nearly everybody used the traffic light game, which aims at presenting the opinion of the students. However, this strategy does not seem to be the best strategy because it only shows whether the students are for or against something. Only the second step makes the strategy more interesting when the pupils are asked to give reasons for having raised the red or green card. This helped them to express and develop their own opinion. It is important to notice that even if everybody raised either a green or a red card, the reasons why they did it could be quite different, according to the individuality of the pupils. The discussions that followed the game, made them think about their choice and develop critical thinking.

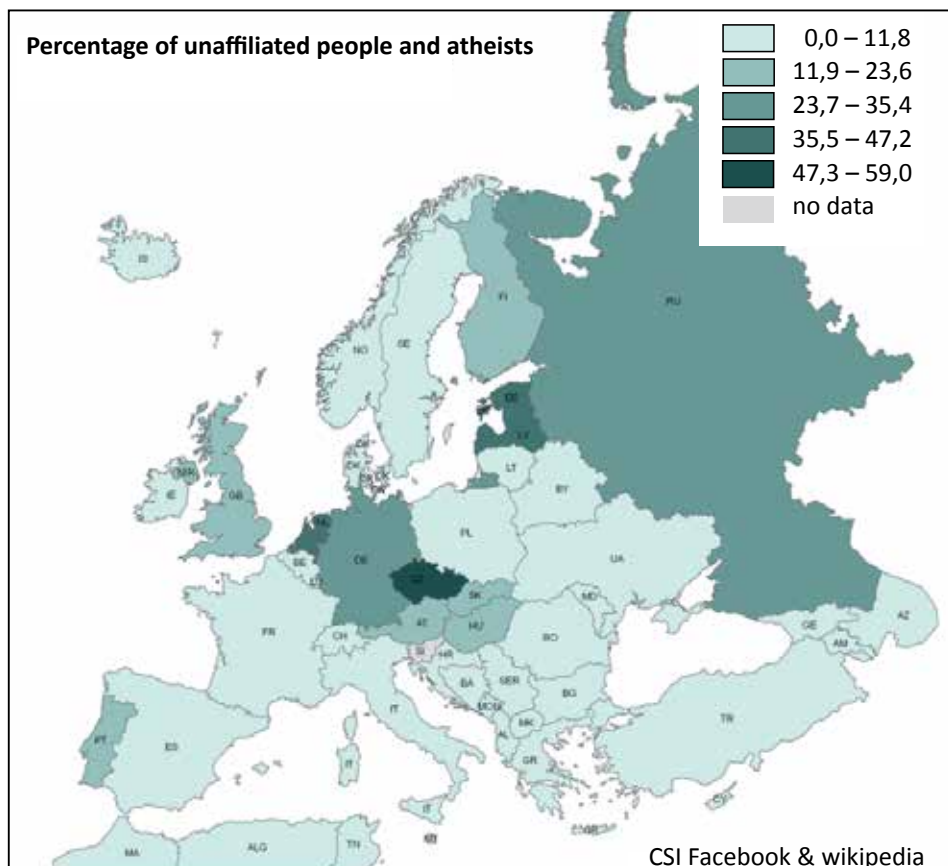


Figure 2: Map showing the percentage of unaffiliated people and atheists

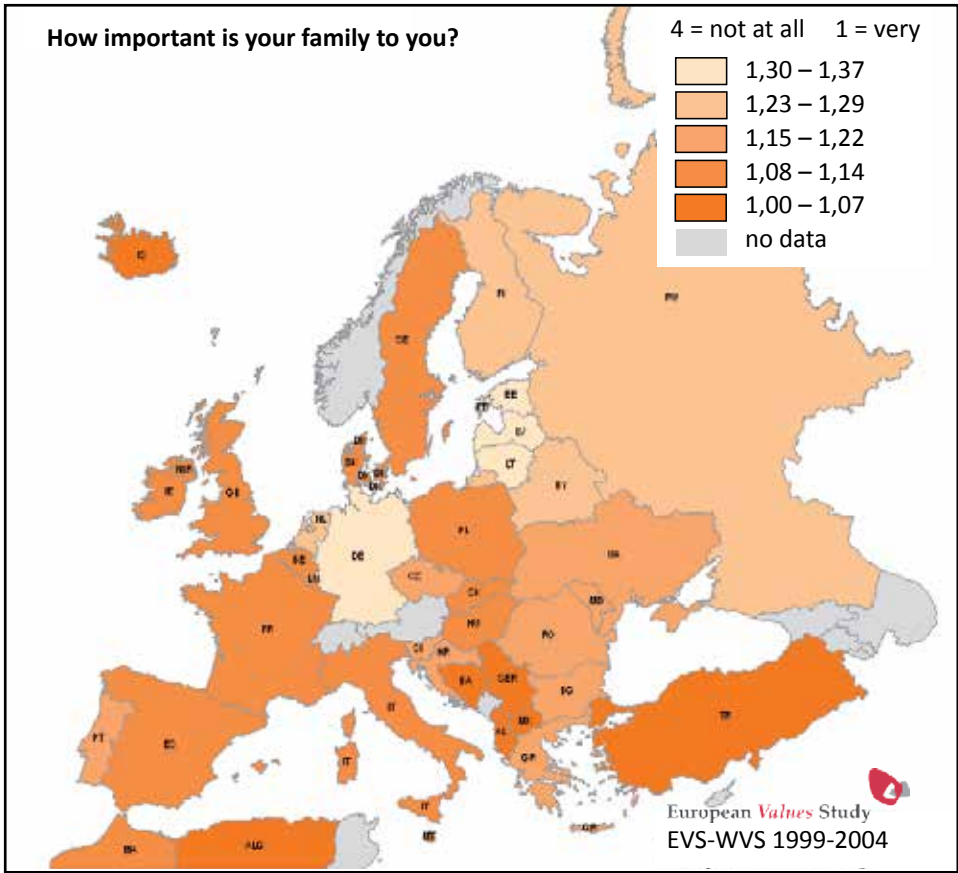


Figure 3: Map showing the importance people attribute to family

The strategy intelligent guesswork was very suitable to reach the aim of critical thinking. The strategy works as follows: the pupils are given a table which only shows either the names of a number of European countries or a column of data. The pupils are then asked to complete the table by intelligently guessing which data could fit which country or vice versa. The basis for guessing is their own knowledge, beliefs and feelings. This was the first step to achieve critical thinking. The next step was to make the pupils think about the decisions they have made.

Strategies like these try to get pupils to change their opinions by discovering on the one hand new facts and on the other hand ideas of the others relating to the same data. Reacting to the responses and thoughts of others force pupils to think about the facts in a different manner. As the discussions went on, the pupils were able to reconsider their opinions and after some more supportive materials like maps were used, the pupils started to think about their decisions in a more complex way. In the end, nearly everybody was able to answer certain questions while considering all facts and also their own beliefs.

For example if we look at the maps in figure 2 and 3, we can see a pattern when correlating the data of one map to the data of the other map. Pupils can then see that religion is an important factor for people in some countries and this belief influences their relation to their family.

CRITICAL THINKING IN THE EVE LESSONS

First of all, we came to the conclusion that critical thinking has to be a part of each lesson, because the lesson becomes more interesting with interactions, discussions or other activities. We noticed that the pupils were not really used to it. Therefore, we had to work harder to achieve our aims. We wanted to show them that their opinions and thus their critical thinking are the most important things during the lesson. In many cases we have achieved that.

In some of the lesson, we could observe that pupils started a totally different discussion when they realized that they were given the chance to explore their own opinions, even if they were opposite to everybody else's. We could see that most of them were even surprised that lessons like that could be so interesting. Another point we would like to mention is that having the opportunity to explore critical thinking and listen to each other opened pupils' minds and brought new views to everyone. Probably for the first time, they have heard the opinions of their class mates. It was a great experience to appreciate their interest in hearing the opinions of their class mates and their reasons for thinking that way. The pupils understood that every person has his or her own life and background and lives in a different surrounding, and that all these things can affect their way of living. They could see advantages and disadvantages of different opinions and after all they could choose the best for them.

CONCLUSION

Critical thinking is important for developing pupils' views and also for having discussions with other people. It makes you a better adult because you can make well- considered choices. It makes you think about a problem and develop own ideas. Sometimes schools do not concentrate on developing this ability. They present facts, which are adopted by the pupils without any critical reflection. Critical thinking should be a part of each lesson. In lessons you can discuss freely and train your behaviour in accepting different opinions, but also in presenting and defending your own opinion. Everybody understands that it requires time to achieve critical thinking and that it also relates to your previous knowledge. However, if you start developing this ability as a child then you should not have any problems with it in the future.