

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING

Elif Zeynep Azar, Çağlayan Erdönmez, Desirée Verscheijden

Developing critical thinking is one of the four components of the curriculum framework on which the assignments and classes were based. In this section, after explaining what critical thinking means in the context of the curriculum framework, we will explain how it was used in the assignments and in the classrooms, and how student teachers could be sure that pupils think critically.

CRITICAL THINKING IN CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

In our understanding the aim of curriculum framework in developing critical thinking skills is to raise the awareness of pupils that ideas and beliefs, as well as the data representing these values may be subjective. To be able to really understand the messages expressed in these data, pupils should comprehend this subjectivity by questioning the reasons lying behind it.

A GENERAL LOOK AT CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking is a skill that pupils have to develop to become critical citizens in society. It is very important for pupils to think critically because they live in a world where they are overloaded with a lot of information because of the opportunities of the internet and other media sources. Before they can develop critical thinking, they need to have some knowledge of the subject matter. One difficult aspect is the relationship between the development of critical thinking and the age of the pupils. Most of the assignments were tested with pupils in secondary schools of the ages between 12 to 18 years old. For pupils in lower classes especially the skills needed were totally new. At this age the pupils were taking most of the things they had learned for granted. Because the level of critical thinking has to increase every year, the teacher plays an important role as a coach in supporting this process. The pupils have to learn critical

thinking step by step and the teacher or the assignment has to ask them a lot of ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘why there’ questions to get there. There also have to be varying scales in the assignments, that is to say they should include an individual, a class, a country and a European level. Because of this aspect all the student teachers concluded that working with the ‘traffic light game’ was very successful. The pupils had to develop an opinion of their own about one of the value aspects mentioned in the maps. Every pupil had a green card to agree with the statement and a red card to disagree. With only two options they really had to choose and this was convincing. Sometimes the student teacher could also give the pupils an extra yellow card for those who were neutral in their opinion. After the statement was shown or read out the pupils had to choose the card of their opinion and could also see the opinions in the whole class. At this stage they could search for explanations at a personal level and at a class level and from there could move to a comparison with the data for their own country. After this, they took a look at the maps and saw the differences or similarities shown for the countries of Europe. They could then look for explanations in different fields like political-historical aspects, economic development, the level of modernisation, the level of globalisation, the level of individualism or collectivism and other cultural factors.

HOW CRITICAL THINKING TAKES PLACE IN THE CLASSROOM AND SOME SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

Although critical thinking is a highly cognitive skill and hard to observe directly and therefore to measure accurately looking at the changes of ideas (if there are any) throughout the lesson could give student teachers an impression of what might be going on in pupils minds.

In the evaluation forms filled in by the student teachers there were mainly three answers to the question on how to develop critical thinking skills: 1) the assignment was not helpful for developing critical thinking, 2) there could have been some critical thinking activities if we had had time to cover all the tasks and 3) the assignment was fruitful in terms of critical thinking only when developed and adapted by the student teachers.

An example for assignments not being really helpful is to be found in the assignment entitled ‘Football and Religion’. Although it claimed to foster critical thinking, it actually did not. The reason is that the assignment was too controlled. A comment by the student teacher, who used this assignment, was: ‘The assignment gives a theory and then with the questions and a table and a map, it refutes the theory itself. There is no place for students to question anything. I realised this after we did the first lesson.’ After realising this, the student teacher asked pupils ‘why’- and ‘how’- questions to elicit more discussion.

When we consider the option, that students had to adapt the assignments to make the implicit strategies of developing thinking skills more obvious, the main ways that

student teachers did it was in the form of relating the topic to the pupils. This was achieved by asking individual questions about their own values in relation to the topic and playing some fun games to draw their attention and to simplify the tasks. Also sometimes examples were given to explain some of the more difficult concepts such as collectivism vs. individualism, secularism and globalism.

The student teachers could determine whether there had been critical thinking by looking at the changes in the ideas at the end of the lesson. For example, for the assignment entitled 'Religion and Politics' a pupil stated that he had expected Turkey to answer 'yes' to the question 'Do you think religion should have an effect on politics?' although the answer was 'no' according to the related map. The reasons for this assumption were that firstly the student thought of Turkey as a highly Islamic country and secondly on the map related to the question 'Do you believe in God?' the average answer for Turkey was 'definitely yes'. However, on the maps related to politics Turkey did not look like it would welcome religious influences on politics. The fact that the pupil was able to realise that his or her assumption and the measured reality were different was a sign of critical thinking.

Pupils' evaluation forms filled in at the end of each teaching session were another way of being sure that there was a development of critical thinking. A collective comment of pupils about the lessons was that discussing some data and maps instead of listening to a plain lecture was both fun and an efficient way of teaching. As long as there was a discussion, pupils had a chance to compare and explore reasons for the differences in the values. They also stated that they liked learning about different countries, which they usually do not do in their geography classes.

Another example is that in one of the assignments the main aim was explicitly to lead the pupils to think critically and at the end to reach the conclusion that the meaning of religious places might change depending on the way people view them. Normally one may think that pupils might be hesitant in talking about their religious views but thanks to the fact that the lesson in which we taught the assignment was a religious education lesson, students were really interested in the subject. Otherwise it could have been difficult to elicit the critical responses from the pupils. The pupils' evaluations indicate that we needed more time to think critically about the topic. It turned out that critical thinking is possible only out after a certain process of developing competences. So pupils first need to build up the background knowledge about the topic to be able to make a critical comment. It takes time to build links between different elements or aspects related to the meaning of religious places. All in all, the assignment reached the desired aims in terms of eliciting critical responses. For example, one student could summarise the whole point of the assignment in one single sentence: 'You have to think about why things can be important or sacred to some people when they actually mean nothing to you.' The pupils indicated that even if some of them were not religious or did not have anything to do with religious beliefs they had a good time discussing the meaning of religious places. They could infer from the assignment that religious places are not just sacred because they have a religious

value and because they are said to be important because of the existence of a divine power, but also because they might have 'scenic' or other values. For example, some pupils used to view churches as places, which only have a sacred value for religious people. However, during the lessons they realised that churches are also sacred places for themselves for other reasons. Students said they liked to talk about the different meaning of places.

It is actually hard to assess the level of critical thinking of the pupils. We thought that another way to see if the students could think critically was by asking them whether they had changed their previous opinions after the lessons. For example, after the assignment entitled 'Religion and Active Citizenship', we observed that the pupils modified some of their opinions regarding how they view the relationship between religion and active citizenship. The assignment first asked if there was a relationship between religion and active citizenship. The majority of the class said they did not believe in any God and therefore they did not see any relationship between religion and critical citizenship. To summarise their opinion before the lesson, they simply did not believe in the supremacy of religion. When they were asked who was religious and who would say they were concerned about unemployment, there were just a few students positive about both questions. Actually, the majority of the class accepted that they would be concerned about unemployed people, but they simply would not accept that they were religious. Therefore, at first they could not see any relationship between religion and active citizenship. On the other hand, there were some students who said they were religious and they would help unemployed people. There were also other questions like whether religion was important in their life and whether they would be concerned about older people. In general it turned out that religious pupils also said they were active citizens. On the other hand, other students who said that they were not religious changed their opinions and said they did not believe in the existence of a specific god but they believe in a superior being. That is why when they were asked who would say there was a supernatural power and who would help unemployed people almost every pupil in the classroom said they would. In the discussion part, the pupils changed their minds and they said religion or the belief in a supernatural power foster active citizenship. Besides, they reached the conclusion that whether the pupils have an organised system of belief in a specific religion, or whether they have an individualised belief system in a supernatural power; they accept that their belief system has a positive impact on their active citizenship.

Another hint which indicates that students have made use of critical thinking is how they interpreted the maps. Their conclusion was that a belief system in one form or another has a fostering effect on their active citizenship; however, when they had to interpret the maps from the Atlas of European Values, they could notice the inconsistencies with their conclusions. For example, Turkey has a dark colour regarding the statement 'I am a religious person' (fig. 1). However, it has a light colour regarding the statement 'I would attend in lawful boycotts' (fig. 2). Actually, the students' conclusion would predict that Turkey would also agree to 'I would attend in lawful boycotts'. Yet, it turned out to be the contrary. The

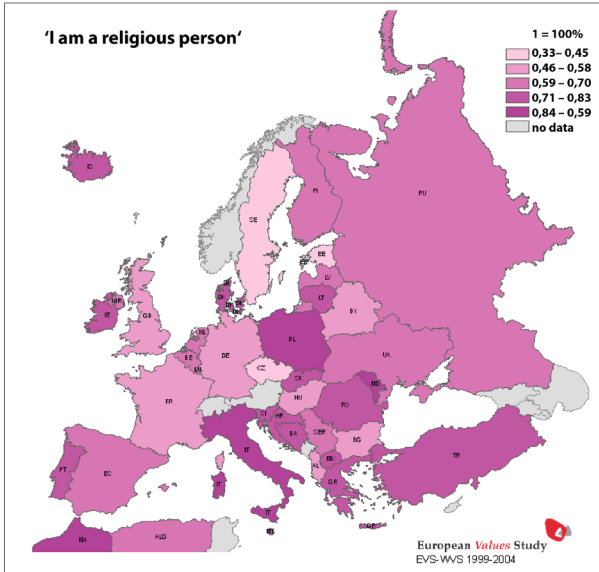


Figure 1: 'I am a religious person'

why people from different countries behave as they do.

SUGGESTIONS

After having asked all of the student teachers for their evaluation, we would like to make

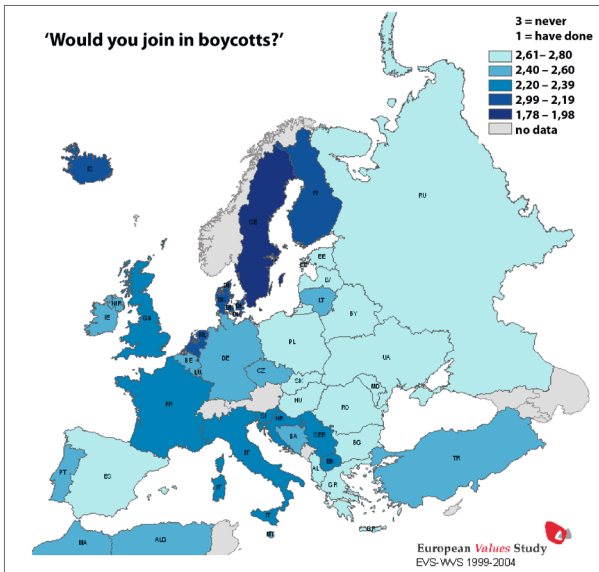


Figure 2: „I would join boycotts'

pupils could then try to explain the situation. They said it was because of how people view the government and that they are afraid of boycotts. This is actually where critical thinking plays a part. Their final conclusion then is that a lot of different things play a part in active citizenship like culture, the perception of government authority and religion. Their critical thinking skills helped them to understand that countries have unique characteristics regarding European values. Students have now gained an insight into how to consider

some suggestions.

Firstly, to enable developing critical thinking the assignments should provide more 'why' questions. Pupils of a young age aren't yet capable of asking deeper questions about the issue. If tasks require just comparing the data, it will not help the students to question them. For this reason, the assignments and the teachers have to provide some guidelines to the pupils.

Secondly, the assignments should also focus more on the preconceptions of the pupils before starting the lesson so that it will be clearer how

critical thinking was developed during the lesson. In that way it would be possible to see whether the opinion of the pupils has changed or not and whether they can explain why they think in a certain way.

Thirdly, another suggestion is that because pupils seem to benefit from group work and discussion, assignments should include tasks for both individual and group activities. Some guidelines should also be provided in the teacher notes regarding how to use which task in the most effective way.

Another suggestion is that all assignments should include pre-task, on-task and after-task activities, but the main point is that if we have to skip some tasks because of certain limitations such as time, we should not have to skip all pre-task activities, for example. The tasks should be independent enough to allow us to choose from them. If we have to skip all kinds of specific tasks, then there will be no critical thinking.

On the other hand, the content of the assignments should not be plain facts, they should enable students to negotiate and discuss and come up with their own examples. When the topic is up-to-date and somehow controversial, there will be more discussions and pupils will think more critically instead of just learning facts. Furthermore, at the beginning of all the assignments and lessons, it should be stated that there is no right or wrong, or privileged and better religion or way of believing. Because religion is a very sensitive, subjective and personal topic, some pupils may think that assignments or student teachers are biased. Such a situation will lead to a communication breakdown or maybe fights in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

As a final remark, assignments should not contain so many culture specific concepts, which are vital for students to carry out the task. For example some student teachers had difficulty in the classroom because pupils were not familiar with the concepts of 'collectivism and individualism' and they were hard to explain with just a few sentences. On the other hand, because not all the pupils are familiar with the religions and cultures of other European countries some background information about all the religions should be provided in the assignments.

Although it is one of the main components of the curriculum framework and it was tried to have it included in each assignment and lesson, critical thinking is not easy to observe. It does not necessarily take place in the classroom. So, it may not start when the lesson starts, and also it may not stop when the bell rings. Critical thinking may go on in the minds of pupils. The important point and aim of our lessons should be at least to make pupils aware of critical thinking and questioning skills and thereby to give critical thinking a go. Sooner or later, pupils will gain the necessary skills to be critical thinkers and citizens.