THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON USING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH THE BLOG

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Abstract

The benefits of using CT skills in an online learning environment are evident in many ways; however, the influence of culture on students' CT is not clear. This paper highlights how students' cultural backgrounds can affect the way they use CT skills through the blog in a multi-cultural society. The participants were an intact class of ESL tertiary level students from different ethnic origins: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Students were trained to apply different CT skills in their writing through the blog. The results indicate that Malay students tended to rely more on applying CT skills than Chinese and Indians. Limitations and some directions for future research related to promoting students' CT by using technology in a multi-cultural society are suggested.

Key words: *blog, culture influence, multi-cultural society, teaching critical thinking*

1. CRITICAL THINKING

Promoting students' critical thinking (CT) has been set as a primary goal in higher education. Recently, educators emphasize on the importance of applying CT skills (Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011). A number of definitions of CT emerge from the literature. According to Linda and Paul (2012) CT is more than just a set of quantifiable skills. It is a combination of "concepts, ideas and theories to interpret data, facts, and experiences sequences" (p. 5). It is also argued that a critical thinker has the disposition and capability to scrutinize, differentiate and appraise information as well as reflect on the information that will be applied to make decisions (Banning, 2006). Although the benefits of using CT skills are evident in many ways, most students are not able to think critically particularly where they have strong vested interests or where verifying their identity is at risk. Besides, due to increasing complexity of the world, it is difficult for students to be a critical thinker (Behar-Horenstein, 2011). To overcome these barriers, people should include their practical experience, values, and moral reasoning in their thinking. They should also engage in different disciplines and multiple cultural traditions to identify various cultures and societies (Labouvie-Vief, 2006).

1.1 *Cultural differences in using critical thinking*

Some researchers argue that Eastern students entered college are used to rote learning and do not think critically (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Rafik–Galea, Siti Zaidah Zainuddin & Galea, 2011; Wang & Woo, 2010). Nevertheless, others (Biggs & Watkin, 1999) believe that lack of CT skills among Eastern students may not indicate that they are academically deficient. It may occur due to cultural influences in the way they learn. For example, most Eastern societies such as Malaysia, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, India, and China have had teacher-dominated, a group-based, centrally organized pedagogical culture for many years (Zhang, 2007). In theses societies, teachers have full authority and their students prefer to accept and memorize the textbook content, or replicate their teachers' words (Salili, 2001). They prefer a one-way interaction from teachers to students in spite of a two-way interaction between teachers and students which is absolutely valued in Western educational systems (Huang, 2002). Another cultural comparison between Eastern and Western students shows that Eastern culture is under the theory of instructivism or teacher-centered learning while Western culture is under the theory of constructivism (Zhang, 2007) in which learners are actively engaged in the learning process (Shahsavar, 2013).

As the research on the influence of culture on students' CT skills is still in its infancy, there is a need to address this concern. Some researchers believe that to obtain an optimal learning environment in

different cultures Web 2.0 tools can be applied in educational settings (e.g., Lai & Wang, 2008; Pearce, 2011; Wang & Woo, 2010). To this end, the role of culture in using Web 2.0 tools is shortly discussed in the following section.

1.2 Cultural diversity in using Web 2.0 tools

Recently, researchers have shown a great interest in using Web 2.0 tools to increase student interaction with teachers and promote their CT in various pedagogical cultures (Eduardo, 2011). Wild (1999) believes that culture has a strong influence on the design, use of Web 2.0 tools, as well as management of information, communication, and learning systems. A study conducted by Shih and Cifuentes (2003) reveals that Chinese students were passive and reluctant to take part in online discussions. In this cultural background, students do not feel comfortable to express their views freely in public. Besides, they do not use to get feedback from their peers (Ku & Lohr, 2003). According to Zigures (2001) it is hardly possible for a learner to promote his/her CT skills and problem solving abilities in Eastern culture while Western culture leads to greater learning achievements for students. In Western culture, students are more satisfied with using Web 2.0 tools to deliver clear demonstrations and presentation in their classes which enhance the level of reflection among students (Ali, Hodson-Carlton & Ryan, 2004; Jin, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

1.2.1 Blogs and critical thinking

Among Web 2.0 tools, blogs have great potential to promote students' CT skills because of their distinctive features such as feasibility, practicality, and easy access (Lee, 2011; Shahsavar, 2013; Wang & Woo, 2010; Wang, Woo & Zhao, 2009). Through blogs, students are able to express their views and ideas effectively (Choy, 2012). Studies show that blogging assists students in confronting their own ideas and considering how their points of views might be understood by others. Therefore, blogging could be useful for students not only to develop their own perspectives but also to learn how to think critically (Pearce, 2011; Shahsavar & Tan, 2013).

Given the importance of engaging students in different activities that contribute to CT in an online learning environment, educators have conducted different research in Eastern societies such as Singapore (e.g., Wang & Woo, 2010), China (e.g., Zhao, 2009), Taiwan (e.g., Chiu, 2009). In the same light, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia, initiated the Masterplan set out to integrate ICT in education. One of the main purposes of applying ICT is promoting students' CT with three main ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese and Indian races (Kaboudarahangi, Osman Mohd Tahir & Mustafa Kamal , 2013). To do so, in 1994, the Ministry of Education introduced CT to the educational curriculum in colleges (Rajendran, 2010). After that, Malaysian universities such as University Malaya, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia have started offering CT courses particularly in higher education (Rajendran, 2008). Despite of diverse cultural backgrounds among students in Malaysia, to our knowledge, no research was carried out on the influence of culture on using CT skills in a learning environment. To fill the gap in the existing literature, this study attempts to investigate if students' cultural backgrounds can affect the way they use CT skills through the blog.

2. **METHOD**

In this study, 39 ESL tertiary level students enrolled in an intact class. They ranged from 20 to 25 years of age. Among these students, 28 (72%) were Malay, 7 (18%) were Chinese, and 4 (10%) were Indian. All of them were Malaysian citizens so they had the experience of living and learning in Malaysia. They had access to the Internet and were familiar with at least one or two Web 2.0 tools such as facebook and email. Most of them (87%) were familiar with blogs and used them for different purposes such as reading and giving comments to their classmates' blog posts, updating their posting, and posting their homework.

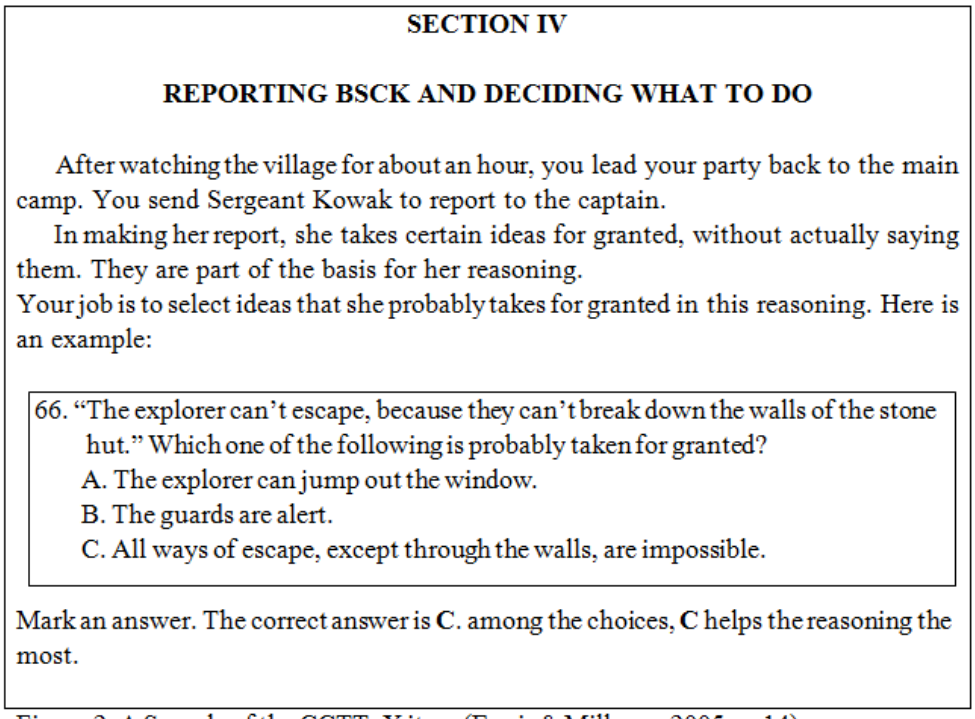
The course ran in one of Malaysian universities. One compulsory part of the course was training CT skills: induction, deduction, observation, and assumption. These skills are considered as the most important elements of CT for students to accept or reject others' ideas, change their own views reasonably, and be independent in making decisions (Ennis, Millman & Tomoko, 2004; Mayfield,

2007; Mohanan, 2003). Students were trained to apply different CT skills in their writing through the blog. Figure 1 presents a sample of student's blog post.



Figure 1 A student's blog post example

In this study, the Cornell CT Test Level X (CCTT-X) developed by Ennis and Millman (2005) was applied to measure students' CT ability before and after CT skill training. The test contains 76 questions which should be answered in 50 minutes. Five questions are sample questions and the rest (n = 71) are test questions. CCTT-X is a multidimensional CT test which represents a vivid picture of every student's CT ability in four dimensions: induction, deduction, observation and credibility, and assumption. The internal consistency of which is .71, .69, .82, and .55, respectively which indicates a moderate to high level of internal consistency among items. Because of copyright reasons, the test is not appended in the present study. A sample of its item is presented in Figure 2.



SECTION IV

REPORTING BSCK AND DECIDING WHAT TO DO

After watching the village for about an hour, you lead your party back to the main camp. You send Sergeant Kowak to report to the captain.

In making her report, she takes certain ideas for granted, without actually saying them. They are part of the basis for her reasoning.

Your job is to select ideas that she probably takes for granted in this reasoning. Here is an example:

66. "The explorer can't escape, because they can't break down the walls of the stone hut." Which one of the following is probably taken for granted?
A. The explorer can jump out the window.
B. The guards are alert.
C. All ways of escape, except through the walls, are impossible.

Mark an answer. The correct answer is **C**. among the choices, **C** helps the reasoning the most.

Figure 2. A Sample of the CCTT- X item (Ennis & Millman, 2005, p. 14)

To investigate if CT skill training can enhance students' CT ability on the blog, a paired samples t-test was conducted. Students' pre-test and post-test scores in the CCTT-X test were examined before and after training. Furthermore, to gain rich data, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview. Six students- two from each ethnic group- were interviewed voluntarily. The main interview questions were, "What you think of the course blog?" and "How did you find CT skill?" All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A significant mean difference in the overall score of students' CCTT-X before and after CT skill training ($t(39) = -2.83$, $p < .05$) shows the higher positive criticalness in students' CT ability after they were trained in CT skills. The descriptive statistics shows that Malay students ($M = 28.83$; $SD = 14.17$) tended to apply more CT than Chinese ($M = 22.64$; $SD = 14.48$). While, Indians ($M = 20.13$; $SD = 13.95$) tended to make the least CT.

Another important finding was that most participants had positive attitude towards practicing CT skills through the blog. They believed that the course gave them a chance to think better and therefore to write more clearly. A Malaysian student who got high marks in CT test after training claimed that at first he did not have the motivation to post his writing on the blog, but he gradually found blogging a pleasant way to improve his writing. He believed that learning CT skills and receiving his classmates' comments on his posting were highly effective to revise his posting. This finding is in agreement with Choy's (2012) idea that blogs has a key role in education. A Chinese student mentioned that using blogs helped him express his views and ideas effectively. In contrast, an Indian student said blogging made her feel boring; she felt that she could use her mind more often in face-to-face classrooms rather than online classrooms. A possible explanation for this finding might be that since online courses do not require students attend classrooms, students do not learn well from the class (Jonathan, 2006).

The main issue that emerges from the findings is that Malay students tended to rely more on applying CT skills than Chinese and Indians. It supports the assumption that identifying cultural differences may help investigators to promote individuals' CT (Perry, 1970). Therefore, in a multi-cultural society

like Malaysia, it seems essential for teachers to be informed about people from various cultural backgrounds, opinions, and views. The finding enhances our understanding that to promote students' CT, instructors should consider cultural differences in designing classroom activities (Riggs & Hellyer-Riggs, 2014).

4. CONCLUSION

This paper highlights how students' cultural backgrounds can affect the way they use CT skills through the blog in a multi-cultural society. The findings promoted some suggestions for educators particularly Eastern teachers in teaching CT skills in an online learning environment. Educators should make connections between using Web 2.0 tools such as blogs and ongoing traditional teaching practices and strategies in a learning environment. They should not only deal with a lot of challenges such as integrating ICT in teaching to promote students' CT but also be informed about students' various cultural backgrounds.

A few recommendations can be made to this study. Firstly, all students came from a single Asian university and the sample size was small. Secondly, a majority of students were Malay. Cultural differences could be varied among other nationalities. Besides, to teach CT effectively, educators may consider the influence of other factors such as students' ethnicity, language, and religion on their CT. These are issues that future studies may help to address.

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