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Literature - A Mode to Improve Critical Thinking Skills

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Abstract

The ability to think clearly and rationally is essential in any kind of work. Critical thinking plays a major role in the new knowledge era. In the field of education this concept has been contemplated for a long time. One of the efficient ways of improving critical thinking skills is through reading literature. Educators have a lead role in developing critical thinking skills by introducing new teaching methods apart from rote memorization.

The paper focuses on how reading a literary text can enhance thinking skills. For this Toru Dutt's "The Lotus" poem has been chosen and the framework chosen for analysis shows the different stages of critical thinking.

Key words: critical thinking, literature reading, communication.

Introduction

Thinking is a crucial aspect in human life. "I think, therefore I am." This saying attributed to the French philosopher Rene Descartes, captures an assumption that has been ingrained in western societies for over 2000 years. Thinking can be identified as normative or descriptive.

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Descriptive definitions rely on the mental processes involved in different aspects of thinking. This suggests that thinking and problem solving can be got through practice. By contrast, philosophers argue for a normative definition. This shows that critical thinking essentially means good thinking.

The English word 'to think' is derived from the Middle English word 'thenken' and from the Old English word 'thencan'. Old High German 'denken' means 'to think', Latin 'tongere' 'to know' (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/think). This etymology shows that thinking and knowledge are derived from the same root. Thinking in general can be divided into several types as productive, reflective, emotional, logical, creative and critical (Mosley et al, 2005). Educators have a lead role in developing the critical thinking skills by introducing new teaching methods apart from rote memorization.

Importance of Critical Thinking

Most of us consider the abilities to reason and to acquire knowledge to be unique to human beings. Because the intellect is prized psychologists are interested in what promotes the intellectual growth. The roots of critical thinking can be traced back to the age of Socrates. He established the importance of asking questions before accepting ideas. Socrates highlighted the need in thinking for clarity and logical consistency. Doddington also stated that "critical thinking is broadly seen as the kind of logical thinking that helps us to analyse and make sense of, or interpret, all forms of situations or information so that the conclusions we draw from our interpretations are sound" (Doddington, 449).

The ability to think clearly and rationally is important in all aspects of life. Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly, rationally and independently. The global knowledge economy is driven by information and knowledge. This information knowledge world demands individuals with flexible intellectual skills. Critical thinking and logical reasoning is crucial to improve social institutions. Good logical thinking is important in the fast-changing workplace. Critical thinking improves comprehension abilities and promotes creativity. Critical thinking is considered as a tool of inquiry and is a way to approach problems in different perspectives and suggest solutions.

The conclusion obtained from critical thinking is the product of detailed evaluation. Effective critical thinking involves judgment that is context dependent. The aim of critical thinking is judgment or bringing out a solution to the problem but the judgment is sensitive to context. (Linda Elder and Richard Paul, 2005). Critical thinking can be developed as a skill. Since the critical thinking skills is indispensable in all fields more steps are taken to improve and develop it. Today's world demands individuals with effective critical thinking skills. At the

present the need is to identify materials and methods that can help knowledge and skills emerge as a result of thinking through one's experience of reading a text.

Improving Critical Thinking Skills Through Literature

If observed over a period of time, one will find the mushrooming skill-based crash courses will crash as quickly as they took hold. This is so because the skill-sets require sustainable capacities for them to have significant shelf life. If students are to possess effective cognitive skills, they must start with developing the capacities for the same.

Here is where literature can offer itself as sites for experiential participation by which core capacities for recognition, perception, understanding, analysis and reasoning can be improved. Incidentally, reading literature also helps in using appropriate language for giving expression to our own "understanding" of whatever the subject is. Is not communication all about expressing who we are and what we know and understand well.

Logical Reasoning

Logical reasoning is one of the important cognitive skills. This skill is important for the purpose of understanding a text. Thinking can be either emotional or analytical. Critical thinking helps in creating new concepts or ideas and enhances better comprehension. Though there are various ways to improve critical thinking skills this paper focuses on how through a literary text it can be developed. For this the poem "The Lotus" by Toru Dutt has been selected which comprises analysis, logic, persuasion and argument.

The Lotus

Love came to Flora asking for a flower
That would of flowers be undisputed queen,
The lily and the rose, long long had been
Rivals for that high honour. Bards of power
Had sung their claims. "The rose can never tower
Like the pale lily with her Juno mien" -
"But is the lily lovelier?" Thus between
Flower factions rang the strife in Psyche's bower.
"Give me a flower delicious as the rose
And stately as the lily in her pride"-
"But of what colour?"- "Rose red," Love first chose,
Then prayed, - "No, lily-white, - or both provide";
And Flora gave the lotus, "rose red" dyed
And "lily white," queenliest flower that blows
-Toru Dutt

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The poem has been analysed in four different stages.

- Diagnosis
- Analysis
- Argument
- Solution (logical reasoning)

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is the initial stage. Diagnosis is the identification of the conflict. The first four lines of the poem clearly shows that there exists a conflict between the flowers, the lily and the rose. The word 'rival' shows that there is a competition between the flowers as to who would be the queen of flowers.

Analysis

In the diagnosis stage the conflict is identified. In this stage the problem is analysed and more information about the problem is gathered. The analysis clearly shows that both the lily and the rose have their supporters. It is quiet common that whenever there are two groups with contradictory ideas quarrel arises. Both the rose and the lily long to be the queen of flowers.

Argument

Argument between the two groups of flowers is obvious in the poem. Love wants a flower that has the qualities of both the majestic lily and the lovely rose. The difference leads to strife and strife to quarrel and argument.

Thus between flower-factions rang their strife
in Psyche's bower.

The immensity and the pervasiveness of the strife is suggested by the verb "rang." Rose is of a beautiful red colour and is the symbol of love. Lily is white and is the symbol of majesty.

Solution (Logical Thinking)

The final phase involves the solution to the problem. To arrive at a solution, a lot of thinking particularly logical and critical thinking is essential. An apt solution is one which does not offend either group. Here Flora's final decision is one such thinking. Flora heard all the arguments of both the flower groups and at last gave a new flower 'lotus' with the qualities of lily and rose. The colour of the lotus flower is the combination of 'rose-red' and lily-white.' Thus, the new flower group satisfies both the flower groups as it has the qualities of the rose and the lily. Flora's solution to the problem is the result of logical and critical thinking. In management terminology Flora comes with a win-win solution where both the parties are happy.

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The poem shows no trace of emotional thinking. What the poem foregrounds are intelligence and presence of mind. It is an instance of wit minus emotion.

Conclusion

Enlightenment and rational humanism tended to emphasize the intellect. The academia also insists on the importance of critical thinking. The analysis of the poem shows the process of critical thinking. The poem presents the conflict between the flower groups and shows how Flora, the goddess of flowers resolves the conflict by creating the new flower, Lotus. The poem has a contextual explication of a skill–conflict resolution through reasoning and logic.

The analysis of the poem helps in understanding the concept of the poem and also the thinking process involved. Thinking is essential for understanding even a simple concept. It is only thinking that helps to form different ideas on a text and every new idea is a product of thinking. We face different situations in life and mostly all those demand the critical thinking to take decisions. Thus reading literature acts as a platform to different circumstances through which our thinking skills can be enhanced which in turn help an individual to lead a better life.

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