

Teaching Critical Thinking: Critical Pedagogy and Japanese Women College Students

クリティカルシンキングの教育方法：クリティカル教授理論と日本の女子大学生

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要 約

伝統的な教授理論においては、女性の声と経験は低く見られてきた。フリーレとフックスの教授理論に従い、日本人女子大学生にクリティカルシンキングを教授する際には学生の声を奨励しなければならない。日本の教育文化においては、少人数が行うタスクや自己省察的な内容のジャーナルライティングはクリティカルシンキングと自分の考えを表現するのに役立つ。ジェンダー研究は特に有用な教育内容であるが、どのような教育内容においても、若い日本人女性としての主観的、及び客観的なものの見方をもとにクリティカルな省察が行われるべきである。

ABSTRACT

Women's voices and experience have usually been devalued in traditional academic training. Following the pedagogy of Freire and hooks, in critical thinking training for Japanese women college students, every student's voice has to be encouraged. In the context of the Japanese classroom, small group tasks or reflective journal writing can encourage critical thinking and the expression of ideas. Gender studies is especially useful content but critical reflection on any content should take place from the point of view of students' subjective and objective experience as young Japanese women.

Key Words: Women, Japan, critical thinking, critical pedagogy, bell hooks, Paulo Freire

Introduction

Recently, critical thinking training has developed with a variety of approaches in Japan (Young, 1996; Davidson & Dunham, 1997; Yamashiro & McLaughlin, 1998; Kanaoka, 1999). Critical thinking has been defined in many ways (Pally, 1997) but from some of the points of view within critical pedagogy, it can be said to be a process of awareness and examination which results in a deeper understanding of self, society, and the world. Freire (1970) stresses students' active, critical role as creators of knowledge. In order that each student's personal voice be engaged in learning, hooks (1994) suggests that student locations (social

identities) of gender, class, ethnicity, and race need to be considered. This paper investigates the voices which women in Japanese women's colleges in particular bring to learning critical thinking and suggests some conditions for creating a classroom in which these voices can be heard and develop.

Women's voices and education for critical thinking

Traditionally education for women in Japan, especially before the Second World War, has been "gender segregated, gender stereotyped, inferior, and less valued compared to that of males." (Hara, 1995, p. 93). Women's voices and educational content about women have not been valued equally with men's in the foreign language classroom (Fujimura-Faneslow, 1996; Young, 1996). This is a world wide problem, not unique to Japan. One report on foreign language teaching listed six areas of bias in educational content:

. . . *exclusion of girls, stereotyping of members of both sexes, subordination or degradation of girls, isolation of materials on women, superficiality of attention to contemporary issues or social problems, and cultural inaccuracy*, through which most of the people active in a culture are excluded from view. (AAUW, 1992, p. 109)

Research has also suggested that, in general, both male and female teacher interactions with students reflect strong unconscious gender bias. This has "led to a 'learned helplessness,' or lack of academic perseverance in females. . . a debilitating loss of self-confidence." (AAUW, 1992, pp. 119-120).

Critical pedagogy takes this imbalance into account as part of the curriculum. Fujimura-Fanselow (1996) an EFL educator in Japan states:

. . . one of my goals is to empower individual women, that is to say, enable them to acquire the competence, knowledge, confidence, and skills required for them to critique existing practices and institutions and to strive for personal growth unimpeded by gender-based stereotypes and prejudices. (p. 32).

Our students bring a great deal of learning and experience to the classroom -- as Japanese women, most of them young -- as daughters, sisters, friends, mothers, lovers, workers, teachers, and a host of social locations beyond the location of "student." They may experience not one but several of these locations or social identities that hooks describes, and also experience conflict between the demands or contradictions between them. This rich experience, this tension and ambiguity create fertile ground for thinking and deep understanding in ways that traditional critical thinking pedagogy has not begun to realize (Cronin, 1997).

What are the implications of this for critical thinking pedagogy in Japan? One implication is that teachers must reflect critically on the elements of general Japanese culture and of their own classroom culture which inhibit students' voices from being heard. Another implication is that critical thinking training needs to make the voices of our students as young

Japanese women, their expression and reflection on the experience, tensions, and ambiguities of their social locations, a central part of the curriculum. Investigation of any subject matter, be it literature or statistics, needs to be related to their lives as young Japanese women.

Teaching critical thinking in the Japanese classroom

Japanese secondary schools do not have a reputation for teaching critical thinking, yet students often report deep and moving learning experiences, especially taking place in the context of personal relationships with teachers or peers. Japanese elementary educators use group investigation or discovery learning which is quite compatible with critical thinking. In fact, although elementary school *han* groups have an informal structure, their members often experience more independence and responsibility for their own learning than students in other countries (Benjamin, 1997).

Basic critical thinking skills are also developed outside of formal academic training as part of the natural process of cognitive development of adolescents, as they experience the conflict and ambiguity of a change in roles from children to adults. Japanese secondary education's focus on rote memorization and examination skills may impede critical thinking training in the classroom, but it cannot stop the natural human development of basic thinking skills.

A list of basic and advanced critical thinking skills might include: attributing, comparing and contrasting, classifying, sequencing, prioritizing, drawing conclusions, determining cause and effect, analyzing for bias, analyzing for assumption, evaluating, decision making, brainstorming, visualizing, personifying, inventing associating relationships, inferring, generalizing, predicting, hypothesizing, making analogies, dealing with ambiguity and paradox, and problem solving (Fogarty & Bellanca, 1986, p. 2). Recent feminist critiques also include creativity, intuition, valuing subjective experience, connected knowing, believing vs. doubting, disclosing meaning, enhancing understanding, and contraries as aspects of critical thinking (Phelan & Garrison, 1994; Cronin, 1997; Wheary & Ennis, 1995). Many of these skills are basic life skills and are learned without formal academic training. The goal of critical thinking pedagogy is to enhance these skills and help students to apply them to the investigation of themselves and the world around them. The first step is to assess our students strengths and to take a structured approach to enhancing the micro-skills listed above.

Beyond the learning of specific skills, critical thinking training involves the expression of ideas. Training for the expression of ideas can take place in classrooms, which have a particular classroom culture, influenced by the cultures of students, teachers, and the surrounding community. Teaching critical thinking, then, requires an attention to interpersonal relations within the classroom, between students themselves, and between each individual student and teacher, in order to facilitate students' expression of ideas. Two factors which

affect the interpersonal relations involved in the expression of ideas in Japanese classroom culture are the importance of peer groupings and the formal, public nature of teacher-student exchanges.

Within the informal peer group, consensus is valued more than the expression of individual ideas. Following this, in the Japanese classroom the *relationship* function of language seems to be emphasized more than the *information* function. Students will often engage in consensus checking with peers before they will answer a teacher's question (Cogan, 1996). The informal peer group will have an important influence in critical thinking training, in what ideas and how ideas are expressed, whether the teacher wishes it or not.

Teacher-student relations in the classroom can be very formal and status differences can make public (in front of all class members) teacher-student dialogue difficult for Japanese students. Nevertheless, many critical thinking pedagogical approaches used in Japan are imported from overseas and rely on practices, such as public teacher-student didactic dialogue, expressing disagreement in public, or risking public mistakes, that ignore this aspect of Japanese classroom culture. Some teachers may have expectations of student behavior that are based on non-Japanese cultural ideals (Ryan, 1996). Some argumentative or confrontative approaches to traditional critical thinking skills pedagogy, for example, those copied from North American or British pedagogical approaches, may not be appropriate in a Japanese classroom.

This is not to say that the traditional approaches should be abandoned. A course in debating, public speaking or academic writing might benefit from a traditional approach. When adapting foreign lesson plans, teachers should analyze the cultural and interpersonal content goals of the curriculum and train students in only what is appropriate to these goals, eliminating the approaches which are not necessary in a Japanese context. First, culturally or interpersonally risky classroom behaviors should be separated from critical thinking content, taught, and practiced in a low-risk manner. After the behavior has become commonplace for students (for example, raising one's hand to volunteer information) it can be practiced with more challenging content. This scaffolding, or step by step building of skills, is as necessary in interpersonal relations training for the expression of ideas, as it is in language learning.

Speaking in a foreign language, making mistakes, sharing personal information and expressing opinions, all aspects of communicative critical thinking language lessons, carry elements of social risk. The classroom can seem like a risky place if students do not know each other and the teacher. Creating a safe space within students' circle of interpersonal relationships makes risk taking easier. Structured Personal Encounter (Ito, 1998) or values clarification techniques (Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1971; Moscovitz, 1978) can be used to facilitate communication, information sharing and a sense of safety in the classroom.

Critical thinking in the Japanese women's college curriculum: Critical content and method

How can we create learning challenges that allow students to explore and understand themselves and the world around them more deeply? How can we help students develop the tools or skills that they need to investigate and reflect critically on the world around them? As hooks (1994) argues, a student-centered approach taking account of the personal, social-political realities in students' lives is the best way to facilitate the development of critical thinking.

Freire (1970) argues for a pedagogical process of reflective action, where teacher and students enter into a dialogue and create knowledge and meaning together. In dialogue with students, a curriculum develops. Freire's approach is based on problem-posing. Wallerstein (1983) develops Freire's idea in a language teaching setting:

Problem-posing is the tool for developing critical thinking. It is an inductive questioning process that structures dialogue in the classroom. Teachers formulate questions to encourage students to make their own conclusions about society's values and pressures. The problem-posing method draws out students' shared experiences of society.

Problem-posing. . . begins by listening for students' issues. Based on the listening, teachers then select and present the familiar situations back to the students in a codified form: a photograph, a written dialogue, a story, or a drawing. . . . Each situation contains personal and social conflicts which are emotionally charged for the students. Teachers ask a series of inductive questions which move the discussion of the story from a concrete to a more analytic level. The problem-posing process directs students to name the problem, understand how it applies to them, determine the causes of the problem, generalize to others, suggest alternatives or solutions to the problem. (p. 17)

Freire's approach -- of listening to students and designing codes to provide content -- focuses students' critical thinking on the issues that are important in their own lives. Their lives and world become the raw stuff, from which together, students and teacher create the educational content of the class. Their voices and their experiences as Japanese, as women, as coming from many locations, become central.

Gender related themes have many attractions:

"The topics a gender issues course can include--such as the family, gender roles, and sexuality--have an obvious appeal for students and educators. Such topics generate high interest, are relatively easy to relate to student experience, and have volumes of authentic materials . . . (Hardy, Yamashiro, & McMabill, 1995, p. 196).

Young adults are especially interested in gender related themes when they have some connection to their own experience of making decisions about how to be an adult in Japanese society. Gender related issues are popular in the Japanese media, especially in connection with personal and family relationships. Sexual harassment, in the workplace or on public transportation (*chikan*), and job discrimination are almost guaranteed to come up as topics of

free conversation in discussion classes with groups of women students. However, more than focusing on gender issues as class content, students should be encouraged to investigate any content which is introduced from the point of view of their own location as young Japanese women.

As students share their experiences and ideas, teachers listen and encourage a deeper dialogue through the posing of questions or problems. At times, use of students' first language may be best (Ito, 1998). To facilitate dialogue in the target language, however, small group discussions, journal writing, and private written exchanges between teacher and student work especially well in a Japanese cultural situation. Using these methods, students may feel less risk expressing their ideas or making language mistakes because they are in a group of their peers rather than in a public, class wide discussion with their teacher.

Small group tasks or discussions work well if they are clearly understood and have an observable outcome. Observable outcomes prompted by, "prepare a report to the class," "make a list," or "draw a picture expressing. . . ." give students a focus, let the teacher check progress, and facilitate dialogue with students about the task. There are many group methods suited to varied academic content and students' interpersonal needs (Ito, 1998; Edge, 1999; Moscovitz, 1978; Young, 1996) which are suitable in the context of Japanese classroom culture.

Reflective journals are also part of Japanese classroom culture (Roby, 1999). Journal writing can be used in class to get students to reflect on a question, experience, or event in order to begin a dialogue with the teacher or with other students. Excerpts from students' journals can become the content for future small group discussions. After discussions, *students can write about what they have learned or how their thinking has developed as a result of the class* (Lawrence, 1993).

With journal writing outside of class, students have time to choose their words and to express their thoughts at their own pace. Nelson, Nelson, & Martin (1991) suggest *think writing*, in which students write their reflections about something they have read or been moved by. Think writing focuses on ideas and feelings that are important to students and includes their reflective evaluation of these ideas. This involves the development of the skills to analyze and synthesize ideas, higher skills than the simple narrative of the usual student journal. Again, entries from students' journals can become part of the content of class when they are shared with other students, as a form of constructed knowledge. Journals can also focus on students' evaluation of their own learning -- "metacognitive areas of thinking about their thinking" -- which is another essential part of higher skills critical thinking training (Fogarty & Bellanca, 1986, p. 10; Woo & Murphey, 1999).

Teacher feedback is as important as sharing ideas with other students in critical thinking training. Private written exchanges facilitate feedback and create a dialogue between student and teacher. Teachers can ask the class a question and then respond individually to

students. E-mail is especially useful for written exchanges because messages can be exchanged at any time or frequency. E-mail can take the didactic form of the "Socratic method" without the pressure of public communication in the classroom. A dialogue at each student's pace and level results.

A content based EFL class, "Women in American Education," (Lachman, 2000) at Tsuda College, an all women's university, combined some of the approaches mentioned above. The instructor took a student-centered approach, with students being responsible for projects, for negotiation with the teacher concerning their learning and for teaching each other during a weekly presentation. The class also included e-mail dialogues with women students from the University of Oregon about issues in education.

At the core of the class was a weekly assignment, reading the letters of Tsuda Umeko, the founder of the university, who had studied in the United States in the 1870s, to her American host mother. Many of the students in the class had also studied abroad, and were struggling with the same kind of issues as Tsuda was when she wrote. Their assignment was to read through the letters until they found a section which spoke to them personally and to reflect on it. The focus was not on simply regurgitating the facts but on analysis and synthesis, exploring "Why does the letter excite or confuse you?" The journal readings were shared in class and became the content for discussion. This approach to constructing knowledge did not try to separate the objective and subjective worlds, but encouraged students to use both in order to create deeper knowledge and understanding of their own.

Conclusion

Scholl (1998) asks teachers to ask themselves, "How do I create space for creativity, critical thinking and intuition in my classroom?" In relation to our students as young people, as women, as Japanese, how do we create space for personal reflection, expression, evaluation, creativity, problem solving, and a deeper understanding of the self or others in every lesson? Following Freire and hooks, the best critical thinking training takes students' own lives into account.

Any critical thinking training that we might do, however, takes place in a larger culture that devalues women's stories and voices. Countering this with a focus on women's studies and critically reflecting with students on gender issues is one way to facilitate more successful critical thinking training. More than a focus on gender studies as content, however, it is important to train students to use *their own experience, both subjective and objective* to investigate the meaning of all content knowledge.

A student-centered, small group communicative approach to exploring class content is most useful. Reflective journal writing or e-mail exchanges are also useful because they are private rather than high risk public forms of communication. Both can become the content of in-class small group discussions or the format for a didactic Socratic dialogue between

student and teacher.

There are many methods of teaching critical thinking suitable for the Japanese classroom, but in carrying them out teachers should create a safe space for students to take interpersonal, cultural, and intellectual risks. Teaching also involves risk taking for the teacher. When teachers and students enter into dialogue and think critically together, neither teacher, nor student, nor their worlds remain unchanged.

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