

Subject: The development of critical thinking in teaching-learning among preservice communications teachers

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A comparative exploratory study was conducted to examine pre-service teachers' critical thinking (CT) abilities about the media (mass communications) in two teacher education colleges in Israel during 2001-2002 academic year. These abilities were tested after participants completed a systematic program that integrates teaching to develop thinking in the context of the media in two media studies courses. In developing critical thinking about the media, students are required to utilize rational considerations if they are to autonomously examine and assess information like wise consumers in an information society, and as thinking citizens in a democratic society (Masterman, 1997). Thus, students participated in a program that integrated aims entailing the acquisition of knowledge and concepts in a given subject (media, in this case), with aims concerned with developing CT through the use of appropriate teaching methods. (Zohar, 1996).

Despite the introduction of a number of such programs into the education system in the past decade, comprehensive integration of thinking education in teacher education institutions is still limited and based on individual initiatives (Zohar, 1996).

At present, teaching CT about the media doesn't exist in teacher colleges except as a constantly trumpeted supreme goal of media studies courses. This paucity is matched by the miniscule number of studies conducted about the connection between CT and media teaching (Buckingham, 1993; Cole, 1994; Luke, 1997, Feuerstein, 2002), and in the general domain of thinking within teacher education colleges in Israel e.g., Zohar, 1996; Weinberger, 1998). Thus, this is the first study in Israel to investigate the teaching of thinking in the media context among preservice teachers and its contribution to promoting their CT abilities.

The research study was intended to sharpen and clarify a number of characteristics in the CT teaching-learning complex in a subject-area course (the media). This approach conforms to the teaching of thinking, which is complex by its very definition (Harpaz, 1996; Zohar, 1999), as well as the difficulties it raises in its assessment (Norris & Ennis, 1989; Salomon & Perkins, 1989).

Hopefully, the results of this study will have implications for curricula to train communications teachers and promote the trend toward teaching-learning that develops thinking in teacher education subject courses.

The study focused on testing students' CT abilities after they experienced individual and group critical analysis of printed and TV texts. It also examined the interrelationship between theoretical and practical components shared by media studies and CT. In essence, the media studies approach as used here reflects the interrelationship between education and society, and is anchored in the ideas of education for democratic values. It follows Habermas' (1974) social-critical view about social institutions, and in this case the media as one of the dominant institutions in our society .

The choice of participants was based on the assumption that preservice teachers are agents for change in school, which according to the constructivist approach (Von Glaserfeld, 1995, Duit & Treagust, 1998) has the function of creating a learning environment that fosters autonomous thinking learners. Thus, it is to be hoped and expected that they will be more capable of guiding a generation of pupils to think critically about problems and issues they encounter in the media, as present and future citizens in a democratic society.

Based on this background, the aims of the study were:

1. To examine the critical thinking abilities of preservice teachers in the media context (printed and televised), following participation in an integrative program of thinking and media.
2. To identify the theoretical and practical components of the curriculum in communications and its contribution to promoting students' critical thinking.
3. To identify components of students' preliminary knowledge (attitudes and dispositions) about thinking about the media and implications for their learning and thinking.

A quantitative-qualitative methodology was chosen to provide an explanation for many faces of the research reality, such as the educational reality of the courses in the two colleges, and the students' personal-cultural backgrounds which affect the direct dialogue that is created with them (Sabar, 2000). In this case, the two groups represent the multicultural nature of Israeli society. The students hail from cities, kibbutzes and farming villages, and from the secular, religious and Arab sectors.

The following research methods were used:

- 1) Open pre-post questionnaires – to examine students' CT abilities toward a newspaper article and their preliminary knowledge about the media.
- 2) Personal interviews with a number of students – to evaluate students' thinking processes and dispositions about the thinking about the media.
- 3) Class discourse analysis after watching a TV program – to elicit students' reflective thinking after experiencing the program, with reference to their social-cultural context.
- 4) Analysis of lessons documented in each course – to create insight into the theoretical and practical components of the media program as a teaching-learning environment.

The data were processed using an inductive-thematic method (Sabar, 2000) that facilitates the identification of content categories according to an accepted set of codes, which was classified using terms taken from the fields of thinking and the media.

As this paper is being submitted, final processing of the data is being conducted. From the findings that have emerged, all the students have shown a new and more critical approach to the media. Among those whose experienced more systematic learning which infused the teaching thinking with the media, this trend was more salient than among the second group. The first group also manifested higher levels of 'metacognitive knowledge' about the learning process they underwent. This is knowledge students have about thinking which allows them to assess their own thinking processes according to criteria they have acquired (Bruner, 1985; Zohar, 1999) This could be seen in their attitudes and dispositions about communications texts, their skepticism and their tendency to raise questions that distinguish between opinion and fact, and clear statements that indicate critical awareness of manipulations by the media.

This study has special importance in view of the present state of teacher education programs in Israeli colleges. Media studies are still perceived as optional electives especially for elementary school education, and some colleges are still deliberating whether to include it in the curriculum at all. The study importance takes on even more immediate meaning against the background of the events of the El-Aksa *intifada* (uprising) that has been bubbling over and causing havoc and bloodshed since October 2000. It, like other events in the past, illustrates the centrality of the media in constructing reality (McQuail, 1989) and highlights the crucial importance of CT towards the media for our quality of life as citizens in a democratic society. Therefore, this study results should motivate directors of colleges to facilitate the creation of a teaching-learning environment that nurtures thinking abilities among future teachers, as befits the changing reality of the information and technology age in the 21st century.

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