



## **Critical Thinking and Collaboration: Reflections from Students' Experience in a College Communication Course in the Philippines**

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### **Introduction**

The growing demand for professionals equipped with excellent English language skills is a priority among educational institutions. Studies show that a range of strategies from curricular innovations, technology integration, and stakeholder involvement is deemed critical in developing graduates fit for the workplace (Valdez et al., 2018; Widodo et al., 2017). Moreover, since educational institutions are responsible for inculcating favorable values among their learners, course designers are tasked to create courses that integrate global issues and competencies for specific skill areas. In the case of English language education, course design research has revealed that tasks should develop effective communication skills and competencies in critical thinking and effective collaboration (Tian & Lowe, 2013). Inherently linked to critical pedagogy (Benegas & de Castro, 2016), critical thinking can be viewed as the employment of different skills in deliberating on a particular issue allowing the individual to make logical/sensible decisions (Cotrell, 2005), and that it develops reflexivity. That is, while critical thinking holds a questioning stance of underlying assumptions about different issues, even one's assumptions are also interrogated (Pennycook, 2001). These points about critical thinking all point to the idea that learning is a social process. As such, collaboration is a much-needed component of the teaching-learning process. Similar to activities beyond the classroom setting, problems are solved from a range of analytical and methodological lenses-providing a more powerful means of addressing issues. In the Philippines, the introduction of the K-12 curriculum in 2013 has emphasized a need to develop skills in a deeper and more engaged fashion (Commission on Higher Education, 2013). The additional two years in basic education set expectations that students will have gained the necessary competencies to cope with more complex content when they enter college. For instance, the current curriculum for communication courses emphasizes the competencies for enhancing communication skills in addressing real-life issues through an interdisciplinary approach (Valdez & Lapidid, 2015). Given these points, this paper argues that learners' agency, augmented by an interdisciplinary approach to instruction, is developed through critical thinking and collaboration.



## Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded on the notion of critical pedagogy, which highlights the importance of viewing education as a process of engagement between teachers and learners (Freire, 2005). As such, the teaching and learning process is not merely a passive one and unidirectional but rather involves question-posing, collaboration, and meaningful dialogue. As a problem-solution-oriented approach, critical pedagogy recognizes the need that teaching and learning are not merely a process of acquiring knowledge. Instead, it aims to sensitize learners with relevant socio-political issues in the community (Giroux, 2004); it entails posing questions and seeking solutions to existing problems in society go beyond the four walls of the classroom. Critical pedagogy is collaborative; it recognizes every student's contribution as an essential resource in solving problems. Further, collaboration in the context of critical pedagogy entails dialogic communication in which ideas and perspectives are examined through meaningful dialogue (Bahktin, 1980).

In the ESL context, critical pedagogy may translate into meaningful advocacies (Mambu, 2011). Mambu's (2011) investigation was done via examining and producing different texts to challenge dominant beliefs in society. Capitalizing on technology use, Navera et al. (2019) used memes to have students respond to problematic texts circulating via social media, which may sustain problematic assumptions about practices, communities, and individuals. Lin (2008) used hip-hop features in her English language classes to help learners realize the importance of language lessons in their future careers. As these studies demonstrate, critical pedagogy capitalizes on the immediate resources available to students and teachers, an open environment of inquiry and problem posing and explorations for solutions, and seeking possibilities for transformative action. Like the present investigation, the current work examines the students' beliefs in developing critical thinking and collaboration, which are essential skills in problem-posing or solving and meaningful dialogue in a communication course in the Philippines.

## Methods

### Research Design

This study employed a case study approach to qualitative research design, an approach to research that "seeks depth rather than breadth" (Duff, 2012, p. 98) as it is an established research design that aids in describing and investigating phenomena. The experiences shared by the students in their essays were gathered, coded using Atlas.ti, and described.

### Participants and Setting

The study involved 90 ESL students enrolled in Purposive Communication at a private university in Manila. The majority of the respondents graduated from private basic education institutions in Manila, following the newly implemented K-12 program. Further, students who participated in the study mostly belong to teacher education and engineering programs.

The Purposive Communication course has been crafted in response to the K-12 Program and compliance with the mandate of the Commission on Higher Education (henceforth, CHED). According to CMO-20-s-2013 of the Commission on Higher Education, it is a course about "writing, speaking [,] and presenting to a different audience and for various purposes" (Commission on Higher Education, 2013, p. 1). Furthermore, the course intends to develop students' communicative competence and intercultural awareness through various tasks for them to communicate effectively both in local and global contexts and the learners' academic and professional undertakings. The course also incorporates multimodal outputs, such as the inclusion of technology-based activities in its tasks and course requirements.

Due to the autonomous status of the university granted by CHED, additional requirements can be added in specific courses. The university in the present study has included essential competencies such as critical thinking, effective communication, creativity and collaboration, and interdisciplinary in all the newer college courses, including the Purposive Communication course. Specifically, the course aims to hone students' ability to communicate ethically, effectively, and professionally. It adheres to the principles of the task-based approach; hence, it has four major tasks: a problem-solution essay, advocacy campaign material making (poster, video, others), advocacy letter, and panel discussion. For these tasks, students choose one goal from the United Nations' 16 SDGs to advocate and identify a local organization that works on similar advocacy. All major requirements are related to the focus issue and advocacy. Part of the minor requirements of the course is the e-portfolio, reflection papers, and the process requirements for all the major tasks.

## Procedure

Data gathering took place between August to December 2019 through the students' final reflection essays. These essays were part of the course requirements, specifically, the electronic portfolio (e-portfolio). For the prompt, the following was used to elicit the needed data.

*Among the skills that you listed, identify the three skills that were best developed for each communication task below:*

1. *Problem-Solution Essay*
2. *Panel Discussion*
3. *Infographic making / Advocacy Project*

From the essays collected, the initial coding was assigned to each meaningful section of information from the essays. The coded data were compared, and themes that emerged from the data set were finalized. In qualitative research, coding is a logical way of organizing data according to themes that aid in interpreting the data (Révész, 2012). Using Atlas.ti, the salient themes from the dataset were extracted and further analyzed by the researchers.

## Results and Discussion

From the eleven (11) initial codes, two major themes emerged in the students' reflection essays: critical thinking and collaboration.

### Critical Thinking

Critical thinking was one of the dominant themes that emerged in the analysis of the students' essays. The three major communicative tasks of the course - writing a problem-solution essay, planning and staging a panel discussion, and creating an infographic - were reported to have consistently enhanced the students' critical thinking skills through various opportunities to pose problems or questions resolutions, and self-reflection.

The students shared their significant experiences where they could be allowed to think critically by "[examining], from multiple perspectives, issues that affect them and evaluate solutions to different problems" (Baez, 2004, p. 47). In two of the essays, the students described their experience in completing the communicative tasks of the course as:

*For example, in our problem solution essay, we were asked to give three possible topics for the paper in one meeting. At that time, we had to use our critical thinking skills to find three of the worst problems in our country, find a possible solution to it and propose it to our professor. (4:1)*

*During the brainstorming phase, we had to think of a possible topic we would like to address in the Philippines and to come up with a suitable topic, we had to consider different factors. Our chosen topic was to address the growing plastic pollution problem by integrating it in the production of concrete. Before ending up with this topic, we had to carefully consider the feasibility of the study in the Philippines and the possible impact it may bring to the community. Through this activity, it made me more critical of different scenarios which may arise. (16:1)*

Both accounts show that brainstorming was essential for students in identifying social problems encountered from experience and observed through social media. Aside from this, they needed to identify at least three complex issues within the United Nation's SDGs, and these issues must be relevant in their local setting. In the reflection of one of the students, he said that their group identified "growing plastic pollution" as their focus issue for their problem-solution essay and advocacy campaign. The authenticity of the learning experience is believed to promote critical thinking skills and to increase the likelihood of critical thinking skill transfer across domains or disciplines (Halpern, 1998). Therefore, affirming the claim of critical pedagogy that the teaching and learning process endeavors to acuminate the learners' sensitivity in terms of the relevant socio-political issues in their respective communities.

Even during the preparatory phase of the tasks, the students acknowledged that critical thinking skills were explicitly honed. Students explored various socio-political, economic, and environmental problems during their topic or issued brainstorming, posed questions, and eventually decided on the topic for the tasks at hand. It required them to pose relevant questions and consider issues from multiple perspectives to arrive at a more comprehensive solution. Moreover, they needed to ensure that their chosen problem and proposed solutions were supported by evidence from research and a critical understanding of concepts. This phase allowed the students to observe the intellectual examination of the initial ideas for further examination.

Critical thinking was further evidenced in the panel discussion. Students took on different roles with specific perspectives and were asked to pose relevant questions, as described by one student below.

*Since a panel discussion involves different points of view on a certain topic, critical thinking was needed to truly understand how these perspectives affect or contribute to the issue. I did extensive research on my role as a panelist, and even though I was focused on my own perspective on the issue, it still involved branching out from my role to the other panelists' role because everything was interconnected. (10:1)*

Beyond defining the issues used for the communicative tasks, the students believed that their critical thinking abilities were developed when they analyzed the problems to propose a plausible solution. They were asked to examine data, analyze assumptions and biases, consider other interpretations (Wade, 1995), make connections, and argue and justify arguments. They worked towards finding solutions to the issues raised, constantly re-assessing their proposed solutions, as seen in the essay excerpts:

*In every activity that we did, there wasn't a set of like formulas to follow, like in other courses such as chemistry or mathematics. You were given a task, and it was up to you to decide how you wanted to do it and that requires critical thinking. (4:1)*

*Having to think of an advocacy, we were all challenged into thinking critically on what issue hasn't been addressed a lot before and along with this, we had to think of solutions that were feasible and applicable in our community's conditions. (2:1)*

The goal of the tasks, as supported by the reflection or insights of the students, is to develop students' thought processes, which the students articulated as critical thinking.

In addition to problem-posing and resolving issues, students claimed that critical thinking was also improved when they had to *"assess their experience or performance in each activity"* (7:1). Their final requirement of an electronic portfolio, including the reflection essay, also enabled them to reflect on their learning experience during the course: both their learning progress and difficulties. These self-reflection opportunities espoused critical thinking through metacognition, where a learner was made aware of his or her thinking in performing a specific task (Jaleel & Premachandran, 2016) that would eventually help him or her perform the task better.

Interestingly, the students also suggested that critical thinking dispositions, defined as "attitudes or habits of the mind" (Facione, 2000, p. 64), were developed while working on the communicative tasks. Critical thinking dispositions may include "open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, flexibility, and respect for, and willingness to entertain, others' viewpoint" (Bailin et al., 1999, pp. 294-295). Because they had to work in groups and play different roles (especially during the panel discussion), it was vital that the students were open and respectful of different ideas and opinions. One of them shared, *"I had to work with different people with different opinions as well as relay my own opinions to them without causing miscommunication"* (10:2).

## Collaboration

An essential aspect of developing dialogic communication is collaboration. These are seen in several activities which the students found relevant. First, since students in the course came from different disciplines, varying perspectives are expected. One student claimed that *"maintaining a professional atmosphere even during opposing viewpoints (20:1)"* was commonly encountered. To address this, negotiation of meaning and adjustments in contribution are what teachers engage themselves in, as emphasized below.

*I was able to learn these rules in the course. I also learned the importance of collaboration, as I found it somewhat difficult to connect all the ideas of my group mates. The flow of the paper was hard to control, and follow at the start, and we had to make major adjustments to resolve this issue. (1:4)*

The student's experience supports the view on collaboration as an active process of constructing knowledge (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2010). It allows learners to foster tolerance, negotiation, and meaning-making as they attempt to arrive at a group decision. It becomes a tool for learners to improve their learning capital used in their professional undertakings. Furthermore, Chatterjee and Coreia (2020) posit that the collaboration of the dispersed composition of learners in an interdisciplinary class shapes what they call a "sense of community" (p. 55). This practice also shapes the desired values of a community, therefore affirming that educational institutions inculcate favorable values among learners.

In addition, the presence of varying perspectives makes room for students to see views from different disciplines; thus, fostering interdisciplinarity among learners. This exchange of ideas proves to hone not only the critical thinking skills and but also their collaborative skills since the experience demonstrates that interdisciplinarity requires integration (Yang, 2009), bargaining of ideas (Spaling, 2002), and dialogue (Lattuca et al., 2012). These result in the appreciation of the differing perspectives of the discipline.

Second, collaboration provides students opportunities to strategize with their time and tasks, which are essential in college life. As two students mentioned:

*We also had to manage our time properly, since during groupworks, one does not have his own time because he/she still has to consider the time of other members of the group. (16:4)*

*I also developed my collaboration skills thanks to working with a group under a short deadline, which resulted in better organization and teamwork. (9:1)*

Being one of the 21st-century skills, collaboration is considered as one of the skills that higher education should reinforce (Weinberger & Shonfield, 2018). Interestingly, the course has been an opportunity for learners to collaborate and work more productively through effective time management. Usually, it is observed through maximizing the use of their social media platform to communicate online. Likewise, the students were encouraged to work on their team drives, which helped virtual collaboration among students.

Third, since the course requires students to develop advocacy projects, interaction with government or non-government organizations is essential. The negotiation of expectations about the purpose, intended audience, and outcomes is observed among stakeholders and the students.

*Reaching out to different people and adjusting the way you speak to various personnel such as the president and partner organizations were done in Purposive Communication. (12:3)*

Interactions, online or otherwise, take advantage of the students' diversity as it results in the learners' capacity to exercise their social skills in the form of reciprocity, flexibility, patience, empathy, and word choice (Weinberger & Shonfield, 2018). Thus, collaborative tasks serve as avenues for learners to collaborate with different people from different disciplines. In addition, collaborative learning is deemed an "enhanced social skills," which results in intergroup understanding, a byproduct of negotiation among members and between the teacher and students, and a series of dialogues (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

Based on the sub-themes under collaboration, it is evident that collaboration and critical thinking, reinforced by opportunities for appreciation of various disciplinary perspectives, contribute to shaping the educational capital of the learners, which allows the schools and teachers to fulfill their intended purpose through meaningful collaboration. The learner's agency is strengthened through the distinct design of the course. Teachers are not regarded as repositories of knowledge rather than teachers as designers and facilitators of meaningful dialogue between and among students from different disciplines and other key players contributing to society's transformation.

## Conclusion

An essential aspect of curricular reform is integrating tasks to strengthen students' agency, given different global concerns. In addition, incorporating critical pedagogy in designing courses should consider the need to sensitize students' awareness of relevant socio-political issues that affect both global and local communities. As demonstrated in this paper, examining reflections from students' experiences in an English communication course shows that critical thinking and collaboration are necessary components in allowing learners to practice their agency. Specifically, critical thinking enables learners to examine different sides of issues, which may be enriched through interdisciplinarity as knowledge in varying fields lends to greater collaboration among participants.

As a way forward, several directions can be pursued. First, as technology plays a significant role in classroom learning, practitioners can create tasks that capitalize on students' disciplines, which reflect real-world problems and tasks that encourage interdisciplinary discourses in the classroom. Second, as societies adapt to the new normal brought about by environmental changes (such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic), curriculum designers need to focus on relevant contexts where students can proactively participate in formulating solutions for communities belong. Third, since critical thinking and collaboration are important in developing students' agency, greater participation is needed among learners in negotiating curricular reform. In sum, as this study demonstrates, there is a need for

collaboration among stakeholders to empower learners in a more increased role as they are prepared to be the next problem solvers and innovators for the coming generation.

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