

Pentecostalism's Potential for helping theological students develop the essential critical thinking skills related to MA and MDIV level studies in preparation for the theory and practice of Pentecostal ministry

ABSTRACT. Critical thinking can often be a new and challenging concept for students moving from BA to MA/MDIV level studies. This paper suggests that use of critical thinking skills are a highly important aspect of MA/MDIV level study and a non-negotiable requirement for those students who are studying so as to be better equipped for Pentecostal ministry. Students from certain background situations may find mastery of critical thinking skills particularly difficult. The paper highlights the potential inherent in Pentecostalism to aid development and use of critical thinking skills. The paper also identifies a variety of student backgrounds that are less conducive to critical thinking and offers principles with the potential to help students from such backgrounds to acquire skill and confidence in critical thinking in preparation for the theory and practice of Pentecostal ministry. Some practical tools are also offered to help facilitate critical thinking.

Introduction

It is recognised that the skills associated with critical thinking and even the function of the term itself are not universally agreed upon by teachers (Burbach, Matkin, and Fritz 2004) or understood in the same way by students (Lloyd and Bahr 2010) ¹ yet the term is recognised as sufficiently important to warrant a growing body of literature both in print and online. Glaser's pioneering work (1941), defined the ability to think critically as 'involv[ing] three things:

1. An attitude of being or state of mind to thoughtfully consider the problems and subjects that come within a range of one's experiences;
2. Knowledge of the methods of logical enquiry and reasoning; and,
3. Some skill in applying those methods.'

Lloyd and Bahr (2010) suggest the common ground of definition of critical thinking since then 'has [nonetheless] related to its being an individual cognitive skill with the [same] three distinct characteristics' suggested by Glaser. Halpern (1999), attending to the disposition aspect, asserts that students needs to be willing to use the skills accumulated and not merely know about such skills. More recent definitions tend to take willingness as a given with greater focus on the components required for practical application of critical thinking. See, for instance, Facione (2000) who defines critical thinking as a set of cognitive skills involving analysis, interpretation, inference, explanation, evaluation, monitoring and making corrections to earlier reasoning.

Acquisition and development of these characteristics of critical thinking is usually an expected part of Masters level studies in terms of students learning to interact with diverse and often competing academic views in specific subject areas. However, students might be better prepared for their post-graduation ministry if critical thinking is inculcated as an ongoing life and ministry skill rather than having it associated as belonging to a study category related only to the academic setting. Students entering Masters level studies from a Bachelors studies background may find the new level of study, with learning that necessarily includes critical evaluation, a great deal more demanding than previous studies. In addition, the context of the task may influence students' perceptions of critical thinking (Jones 2005), and the cultural background of the student may also inhibit openness to the critical thinking required (Brookfield 1987; Sng 2011). Sng (2011, 164) urges 'there is no difference in the concept of critical thinking among the different nationalities of Asian students [in reference to the perceptions of those in the research sample] but there is a need to consider their cultural backgrounds in a course that is designed to help them learn and apply critical thinking skills.'

¹ See, for instance, Scott (2007) and Shah (2008) for research related to student perceptions and critical thinking in the USA and Malaysia respectively.

It might be argued that the epistemological preferences of some cultures do not give sufficient priority to logic and reasoning for critical thinking skills to be appreciated or suitably developed. However, all cultures have a place for logic at some level whether consciously or subconsciously and so will make conscious or subconscious logical choices to avoid unwanted scenarios or for the furthering of desired outcomes. Being aware of the background of the student will help in the provision of appropriate means to develop the needed critical thinking skills.

It can be a temptation for the student to compartmentalise the difficulties of critical thinking as a temporary unwelcome part of academic studies rather than, more helpfully, see acquisition of these new skills as a tool for adult learning that is lifelong learning (Elder 2004) for both personal development and ministry. This paper looks to offer principles with the potential to encourage all students, including those from particular backgrounds that are not conducive to critical thinking, into greater confidence and use of these important life and ministry skills that are a non-negotiable requirement for those students who are studying so as to be better equipped for Pentecostal ministry.

Essential components for adult learning as seen in adult education theory

It is well understood that learning in adulthood differs from pedagogical learning and that this has important implications for theological education. Ott (2001: 212) describes how initiatives such as TEE (Theological Education by Extension) in the nineteen-sixties broke away from the traditional practices and understanding of theological education in the same way that the secular field of adult education saw a move away from the concept of 'pedagogy' to Malcolm Knowles' 'andragogy' whilst also introducing such terms as 'life-long learning', 'self-active learning', 'self-responsible learning', and 'self-directed learning.' Knowles' andragogy (1970) provided watershed guidelines for the processes of both teaching of adults and learning by adults.

In the same era Kolb (1984) made an important contribution to the field of theory underlying Adult learning by presenting 4 different learning styles practiced by adult students in an academic setting. He differentiated between preference for presentation and handling of material in either abstract or concrete form, along with either active or reflective engagement according to the student's personal preference.² Kolb further suggested that, despite personal preference for either active or reflective learning, the curriculum for any subject offered to adult learners would be enhanced by intentionally placing an element of reflection.³ Adults tend to compare new information with currently held understandings and subconsciously make choices about the perceived value of continuing to engage with the new information (or not). In this way, reflection is the starting point from which comparison, contrast, and evaluation necessary to critical thinking develops.

The place of Pentecostalism's Holy Spirit empowering as a vehicle for encouragement into critical thinking

A foundational principle for encouraging students from any background into critical thinking is to help them ground it in their relationship with God. In this way all of their study and attempts at critical thinking are seen as part of their being and doing in relationship with God and not compartmentalized into 'spiritual' versus 'academic' boxes. Openness to the creativity of the Holy Spirit is foundational to Pentecostal spirituality in any context. Students should also be encouraged into the intimacy with God that Pentecostalism enables⁴ along with the potential for greater

² Rose (2002, 28) suggests that no significant developments have been made in theory related to adult learning. Rather, any developments offered have tended to relate to practical application in classroom settings. Indeed, the Cognitive development theories such as the stages of Baxter Magolder's (1996) Epistemic reflection model and King and Kitchener's (1994) Reflective judgment model, which incorporate Perry's Scheme of intellectual development (Perry 1970) all describe stages related to the students progress in rather than theoretical process of learning. Similarly, for Bloom et al's (1956) seminal 'Taxonomy of educational objectives'.

³ See for instance the practical application offered through Dialogue Education (Vella 2002) which provides a learner-centred framework that attends to intentional and directed reflection through facilitator-listening and invitation to participation and discussion.

⁴ See D-Davidson (2002).

sensitivity to the creativity of the Holy Spirit that comes as one develops in an increasing intimate relationship with God.

Students can be encouraged that sensitive and sensible reflection can be expected as God reveals mysteries through His Spirit to those open to such leading (1 Cor 2:9,10). The intimacy with God that enables one to think His thoughts after Him keeps one open to the myriad and powerful possibilities of reflection that can't help but bring fresh and creative ideas from Him when living 'under the sway of the Spirit'.⁵ Rather than the unwelcome negativity of criticism and destruction often associated with critical thinking by the less experienced, students can find themselves interacting with diverse and competing ideas in a healthy and creative way that is part and parcel of their spiritual growth and desire to increasingly be and do in growing intimacy with God. This then not only has potential to impact their current studies but also their future or ongoing Pentecostal ministry when a range of choices related to the theory and practicality of ministry will be presented, some in more subtle ways than others, and will require the use of critical thinking skills and Spirit-leading for appropriate choices and decisions to be made. In this sense, study and critical thinking become vehicles for Pentecostal ministry in their own right so that ongoing learning becomes a welcome result of acquiring and using critical thinking skills in co-operation with the Holy Spirit.

Suggested specific principles for helping student from backgrounds less conducive to critical thinking

Burbach, Matkin, and Fritz (2004) suggest that active learning techniques appear to increase critical thinking. Similarly, Braun (2004) urges that active learning exercises provide the platform for students to practice critical thinking. Encouraging students to engage in the crucial activity of reflection assumes a willingness on the student's part to play an active role in the learning process. For students from a passive learning background⁶ it is particularly important to recognise that active learning will require a new approach to learning in its own right so that passive learners will need help to move into being active and then also, as urged by Kolb, reflective learners. D-Davidson (2011; 2012) provide transferable principles for helping passive learners into active learning. These principles also provide keys for helping students from other backgrounds less conducive to critical thinking as will be discussed below.

A foundational principle suggests that awareness of the potential creativity of the Holy Spirit can help passive learners see themselves as able to be interactive in co-operation with the Holy Spirit, particularly when a spiritual outlook is encouraged that has the student intentionally seeking to grow in intimacy with God (D-Davidson 2012). This is of primary importance for students coming from any background that is not conducive to critical thinking as well as being an inspiring moving 'onwards and upwards' motivational factor for those who do.

A second principle to aid development and use of critical thinking skills recognises the adult education theory which urges that "[adults] learn more easily in those areas where the 'distance' between their experience and the new material is not great" (Rogers 1992: 17). In this respect, providing a means for practical application of theory learned soon after it is learned can not only promote active learning but also increase the experience base from which new knowledge can then be more easily received. The ideal situation sees, for instance, theory related to ministry skills being worked out through opportunities for practical ministry as soon as possible. Beginning with overseen classroom 'practice' exercises in groups, or through one to one activity, the student gains some experience as well as the confidence to then move into real-life situations. As the student actively engages in praxis, the reflection needed for self-evaluation of thinking and action will necessarily and inevitably become part of the learning and growing process. A further benefit sees avoidance of some of the difficulties associated with the practicalities of entering ministry after graduating from an institution.

⁵ Jones (1930, 91).

⁶ The 21st century presence of passive learning educational systems is documented in both Western and Asian literature. For Western contemporary sources see, for instance, Greenlee and Stück (2004) and Durkin (2008). An important Asian source is found in Zhu Muju (2002) of China's National Education Bureau in which it is reported that passive learning is preventing students from being able to think for themselves and/or take initiative in the learning process, so that change is sought.

Where opportunities for immediate or early praxis are not available, an alternative is to build elements of Problem based learning (PBL)⁷ into the curriculum (Madueme and Cannell 2007). Whilst these may well not be real-time real-life ministry problems, the student is encouraged to seek guidance from the Holy Spirit in formulating ways of resolving the issues. In co-operation with the Holy Spirit the student is in a position to amass material for his or her own 'ministry issues database' for further use with future ministry-related issues.

A third principle recognises that apart from students coming from a passive learning background, resistance to active learning may also appear to reflect adult immaturity factors such as when students appear unable or unwilling to take responsibility for their own learning. This may be due to students having underdeveloped understandings of teacher/learner roles and/or epistemology of the learning process. A way of helping such students involves engaging them in a series of collaborative problem-solving exercises where they can discover that the content of their combined input becomes a form of 'uniquely-devised' knowledge. They can then be introduced, for instance, to material such as Baxter Magolder's (1996) epistemic reflection model and/or King and Kitchener's (1994) reflective judgment model to see that their new experience verifies the possibility of moving from lower to higher stages of interaction with facts and fact-building knowledge in both concrete and abstract forms. Through this they can also be helped to see that the teacher/learner roles are not necessarily the previously perceived dichotomistic categories, and that learning can be seen as an ongoing adventure into Holy Spirit-led creative discovery rather than an activity bounded by academia-enforced ceilings.

A fourth principle relates to other students who appear unable or unwilling to take responsibility for their own learning who may, perhaps, come from backgrounds with cultural tendencies that do not encourage vocalisation of misunderstanding let alone presentation of perceptions that are alternative to those being presented by the teacher figure. This is particularly the case with students from face-saving cultures. Vocalisation of misunderstanding or incomplete understanding would cause the student to suffer the embarrassment of losing face. Offering suggestions or questioning the teacher figure's class input would, according to the face-saving cultural understanding, be tantamount to showing disrespect to the teacher and cause the teacher loss of face. Similarly, questioning the ideas and concepts of authors would constitute an attitude of superiority to which the student does not feel entitled. Since Masters level study requires such critical interaction with competing ideas, students from face-saving cultures are at a particular disadvantage (Durkin 2008: 15-27).

Elder (2004) suggests that 'The primary barrier to good reasoning is native egocentrism. Problems arise because individuals are often conditioned to value certain people or groups differently. Critical thinking helps students learn that the ideologies of all groups, even our "own," must be analyzed and assessed. By questioning different viewpoints, students can develop the intellectual integrity needed to evaluate the reasoning of others.' So, a helpful starting point for students from face saving cultures is to inculcate openness to other points of view whilst purposefully exposing the students to the beliefs of other and non face-saving cultures. Oritz (2000) encourages building 'classroom communities' in which students engage in discussions built around personal information related to different values and cultures. As students express their opinions freely they can't help but learn more about each others' values and customs. They are in a safe setting where learning to both accept and question alternative views provides a platform for inevitably also examining and evaluating their own presuppositions. They are also in a position to discover what new understandings the Holy Spirit would lead them into.

Discussion, debates, and guided questioning also provide techniques which can help facilitate critical thinking skills (Braun 2004) and particularly in the small-group setting. The use of debates in the business world

⁷ Problem based learning (PBL) was first introduced in the McMaster University, Ontario, Canada in the 1965 Medical studies curriculum (Spalding 1969) as a result of the observation that students appeared to be learning knowledge that they were nonetheless unable to spontaneously apply. The aims of PBL through integration of material across disciplines, personal reflection, and use of small-group work, include heightening ability to solve problems, motivation of self-directed learning and encouragement of lifelong learning. Hmelo and Ferarri (1997, 401) further explain that 'Problem based learning engages trainees in a cyclical process of problem framing, self-directed learning and hypothesis formation, and testing to solve an ill-structured problem.'

classroom setting has been seen to not only supplement traditional lecture (Dickson 2004) but also to encourage critical thinking (Vo and Morris 2006), as well as effectively facilitate critical thinking (Roy and Machiette 2005).

Along with small-group work, another helpful principle to aid the development of critical thinking skills involves the use of mentoring. Students from passive learning backgrounds, face-saving cultures, and even those with a personality that does not lend itself to volunteering ideas and/or opinions in public can all be helped by having a mentor alongside in the learning process. The mentor could be an older or more advanced student so that one to one discussion frees the student needing help from the potential embarrassment of speaking out publicly. Trying out his or her ideas on the mentor provides a safe setting in which to practise critical thinking before the student brings the ideas to the bigger group or classroom setting. At the same time the two have the opportunity to pray together and seek the Holy Spirit's leading where there are particular areas of the difficulty. Another possibility is peer tutoring and mentoring which, as well as providing the spiritual benefits, also has benefits in teaching and learning for both the mentor and the mentoree (Topping 1997).

A further important principle in conjunction with those suggested above involves ensuring there is an element of intentional reflection built into the activities – not merely a post-exercise individual or group appraisal but also the encouragement of ongoing reflection and evaluation with each new step in the progression of a learning activity. Reflection in co-operation with the Holy Spirit further opens the student up to myriad insights and creative possibilities.

Some practical tools to help facilitate development of critical thinking skills

Introducing the concept of critical thinking to students is preferably done before their study program actually starts, at a new students' orientation for instance.⁸ Knowles (1990, 57) points out that 'Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it' so that the starting point could be to introduce the term 'critical thinking' and contrast the difference between merely gaining knowledge with being able to interact with and evaluate knowledge. The student needs to be made aware that Masters level study requires the development and application of such critical thinking skills.

Some starter keys for introducing basic tools for critical thinking might include awareness of basic Aristotelian logic i.e. what is black can't also be white at the same time, vocabulary related to conditional logic and causality, and 'fuzzy' logic or logic with direct and/or indirect limitations e.g. using questions such as 'does the sun shine at night?'

Lauer (2005) describes beginning his classes on Critical Thinking in the USA with an activity in the first class in which he held up an index card and asked,

1. "What color is this?"
2. "Why is it white?"
3. "How would you change the color to blue?"

He points out that it is important to recognize that the content of the questions advances in complexity along with increasingly diverse possible answers. If the group of students is large, it would be advisable to form smaller discussion groups with a *rapporteur* to represent each group's reflections and suggestions. Where there are or might be students from passive learning backgrounds or other backgrounds less conducive to critical thinking, the small discussion group approach would provide the platform for such students to listen and learn from others as well as reduce the potential for the intimidation found in a larger group setting.

⁸ However, introduction and attention to the academic skill of critical thinking may easily get 'lost' in the midst of so much other new and important information.

Suggestions for an exercise to aiding understanding of the need for and development of critical thinking skills for students in the theological education context:⁹

Present the students with a list of statements and questions related to an issue that has more than one way of resolving the issue.

Example – the issue of Paul's rejection of Mark as a ministry partner (Acts 15:36-40):

- A. Paul did not appear willing to give Mark a second chance when he refused to allow him to come on the second missionary journey.
- B. Could Paul have given Mark a second chance?
- C. Should Paul have given Mark a second chance?
- D. Paul should have given Mark counseling in the areas of commitment and/or perseverance.
- E. Paul was wise to release Mark to travel with Barnabas.

In small groups, have the students comment on each of the statements and questions in terms of agreement, disagreement, conditional agreement and/or other alternatives. Have a *rapporteur* bring each groups' comments to the wider group.

Then have all the groups discuss and resolve the next question: If Mark really wanted to join Paul and Barnabas on another trip together what might Mark have said or done to help to appease and persuade Paul?

Point out to the students that:

1. It is important to pay attention to detail in wording and be alert to such as cause and effect implications, and unwritten implications. E.g. note the difference between 'could have' in statement B. and 'should have' in statement C. and the moral implications that arise from the latter phrase.
2. It is important to differentiate between facts and subjective opinions.
3. Graciousness would prefer that there can be no 'right' or 'wrong' answers in relation to subjective opinions but some opinions might be distinctly more feasible to work out in practice than others.
4. There is usually more than one way of resolving a problem.
5. There is a danger of previous convictions becoming a filter which might limit openness to other perspectives and ideas. Urge students to prayerfully and reflectively examine their reactions and responses and to be aware of their own prejudices.

On the practicalities of working out solutions to problems, point out to the students that:

1. Some questions and problems are best answered in terms of black and white solutions e.g. a hungry baby's immediate need is food; to change a flat tire, the flat tire must be removed first.

⁹ Apart from the exercise listed in this paper, Paul and Elder (2003) seek to help students understand critical thinking as a process. They provide three sets of eight questions to help students identify and evaluate information. The first of the sets of questions is related to analysis of the logic of an article, essay, or chapter in a book. The second relates to understanding the logic of an entire textbook. The third provides a process through which to evaluate the author's reasoning. The question sets are specifically designed in and for the context of developmental education, but provide transferable material that would be helpful in and for other contexts. Another set of questions which forms a useful tool for students, can be found in 'How to analyze online journal articles' at <http://molloy.libguides.com/content.php?pid=26223> (Downloaded Oct11th 2012). Given the vast amount of unregulated material on the internet that necessitates the use of critical thinking for appropriate evaluation, Halpern (1999) offers a four-part model for teaching critical thinking skills which attends to the student's need for (1) instruction, along with the (2) disposition to use these skills, (3) structure training so as to be able to identify when particular thinking skills should be used and, (4) metacognitive monitoring or reflective thinking skills.

2. Other issues and problems may have something of a 'grey' area in resolution e.g. when removing the flat tire, the wheel nuts must all be removed but it does not matter which of the wheel nuts is loosened first.
3. Issues related to 'grey' area solutions are usually more complex than issues with black/white, either/or solutions.
4. Critical thinking skills require discernment to suitably analyze the problem, identify priorities, list possible solutions, and then evaluate which solution is best under the circumstances and in relation to the specific context of the problem as well as in the light of both short term and long term implications and possible consequences.
5. The same skills can be applied to questions and issues related to both the concrete and abstract realms. i.e. when faced with diverse and competing ideas in literature related to theological fields, the same critical thinking skills are used to: examine the views on offer, analyze where and why there is competition between the views, identify the roots of presenting problems rather than merely engage with the symptoms, identify one's own priorities related to the issue, consider which views remain plausible, own one's new, altered or extended view and/or look for the possibility of a synthesis of ideas so as to bring a new contribution to the existing literature of the field.

Conclusion

The paper has sought to show that whilst critical thinking skills are an essential part of theological education at Masters level, it is important to encourage an outlook which sees the acquisition and use of critical thinking skills as more than an exercise in the academic setting and as a skill for lifelong learning.

The paper has suggested the primary importance of inculcating an awareness of the potential inherent in Pentecostalism's immediacy of power and wisdom through interaction with the Holy Spirit. Further, encouraging students to seek deeper intimacy in their relationship with God also has the potential to enhance the creative possibilities of the Holy Spirit in and through the critical thinking skills employed in their studies.

The paper has also pointed out that some students inevitably find it harder than others to acquire critical thinking skills. Students coming from backgrounds that are not conducive to critical thinking may find the acquisition of such skills particularly, and discouragingly, difficult. Therefore an awareness of students' backgrounds is of utmost importance in order to be able to help such students have the willingness to develop critical thinking skills along with a safe environment in which to acquire them and put them into practice. Practical suggestions have been offered toward that end.

Given the very real presence of globalization which sees Pentecostal students from all over the world studying at Masters level in theological institutions in countries other than their own, it behooves theological educators worldwide to be aware of the potential difficulties and engage with ways to help students into critical thinking so that in the formative stages of study they are also prepared both academically and spiritually for the still-to-come challenges of Pentecostal ministry. The catalyst of critical thinking acumen, which is essential to all Pentecostal students, has the potential to set them on a lifelong learning path in their future ministries colored by healthy critical thinking which is gloriously and creatively in step with the Holy Spirit.

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