ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Bakhtin's Theory Of Argumentative Performance: Critical Thinking Education In Japan

There may be no rational way to convert our point of view people who honestly hold other positions, but we cannot short-circuit such disagreements. Instead, we should live with them, as further evidence of the diversity of human life. Later on, these differences may be resolved by further shared experience, which allows different schools to converge. In advance of this experience, we must accept this diversity of views in a spirit of toleration. Tolerating the resulting plurality, ambiguity, or the lack of certainty is no error, let alone a sin. Honest reflection shows that it is part of the price that we inevitably pay for being human beings, and not gods.
(Stephen Toulmin, 1990, 30)

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in critical thinking on the part of Japanese educators. They have been attempting to realize the paradigm shift from knowledge and memorization-oriented education to critical thinking and opinion-formation education. Actually, in 2001 the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology proposed the 'Educational Reform Initiative' that emphasized the power to think (Suzuki, 2001a, 17). Also, in 1994 the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET) formulated the Special Interest Group on Critical Thinking across the Curriculum.

In this essay, I would like to discuss first the definition and curriculums of critical thinking. Second, let me explain why the Japanese people need to learn critical thinking skills. Next, let me offer the cooperative learning method as an example of a critical thinking-oriented classroom based on Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts. Fourth, let me present sample programs of critical thinking education in Japan. Finally, I would like to propose a critical thinking course combined with English education for the Japanese students.

2. The Definitions and Curriculums of Critical Thinking Education

To begin with, critical thinking can be defined as the ability to analyze information and ideas from multiple perspectives carefully and logically. It also asks students to critically examine commonly accepted beliefs and claims. Therefore, some say that critical thinking is "thinking about thinking" (Sproule, 1987; Suzuki, 2001b).

There are several approaches to critical thinking in the United States as well as Europe. Although it is impossible to cover all specific curriculums, let me present some major cases. First, a critical thinking movement started in the American educational community in the late 1970's (Sproule, 1987). As a result, a number of American schools now make critical thinking courses mandatory for graduation. Rather than focusing on rote memorization and testing, the students are required to learn how to think logically and present critical ideas.

At the college level, there are two types of courses that are held to be most effective: 'logic' courses directed by the philosophy department and 'argumentation' courses directed by the speech communication department. For instance, in the early 1980's the California State University and College (CSUC) system decided to include a semester-long course in critical thinking as a graduation requirement. The CSCU requirement is stated as follows:

Instruction in critical thinking is to be designed to achieve an understanding of the relationship of language to logic, which should lead to the ability to analyze, criticize and advocate ideas, to reason inductively and deductively, and to teach factual or judgmental conclusions based on sound inferences drawn from unambiguous statements of knowledge or belief. The minimal competence to be expected at the successful conclusion of instruction in critical thinking should be the ability to distinguish fact from judgement, belief from knowledge and skills in elementary inductive and deductive process, including an understanding of the formal and informal fallacies of language and thought (Ganer, 1989, 1).

Thus, as Patricia M. Ganer argues, the CSCU system has perceived that the "efforts entailed in teaching and learning argumentation closely parallel the desires for the development of such analytical skills on the part of college graduates" (1989, 1).

Another model of critical thinking education is the one in the Netherlands. Until about 1950, according to F.H. van Eemeren and R. Grootendorst, the study of argumentation in the Netherlands was either purely practical or a continuation of the classical logic and rhetoric tradition. They explain: "In the former, the aim was to search out clues to the improvement of the practice of argumentation. In

the latter, argumentation was dealt with only when in the context of explaining logic or the rhetoric of Aristotle *cum suis*" (1987, 56).

In later years, Stephen Toulmin provides an analytic model which "works on the assumption that when a person puts forward an argument, he[/she] always defends a claim (…), which by means of a justification often only implied, is linked to the claim" (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1987, 56). The soundness of argumentation is largely dependent on the support that renders the plausible justification. Chaim Perelman presents an audience-centered view on argumentation, or "a description of argumentative techniques used to win the approval of an audience of a certain point" (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1987, 56). Also, recently there has been a rise of important trends in informal logic. A number of authors assume, in a variety of ways, that argument is carried out in colloquial language, and this has a clear bearing on their approach (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1987).
Eemeren and Grootendorst identify the three minimum components that any sound argumentation analysis should comprise:
1. the analysis of argumentative discourse,
2. the identification of fallacies, and
3. the evaluation of argumentation (1987, 60-61).
Since no human activities occur in a vacuum, critical thinking curriculum should not be intended to merely learn the theory of argumentation in itself, but be designed to teach the method to cope with communicative situations. In fact, Dutch critical thinking instruction has been developed as one element of interpersonal and public communication, and not merely as a skill to distinguish inadequate logical inference schemes from adequate ones (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1987).

Given the two models of critical thinking education mentioned above, I would like to point out that critical thinking must be recognized both as 'method' and 'attitude' in the sense that the critical thinking education should go beyond merely generalized reasoning or thinking, pedagogies in which critical analysis itself may play but a small role. Recent critical thinking education tends to focus on message-sending skills, or 'method', rather than on message-evaluating stance, or 'attitude'. J. Michael Sproule notes how the recent trends focus on "analytical operations as applied to problems presented in textbook form and occasionally complemented with either introspective self-analysis or original compositions by

students" (1987, 13).
According to Nickerson, Perkins & Smith (1985), a survey of educational programs focusing on thinking identifies five general approaches prevalent today. The first of these approaches – that of cognitive operations or basic skills – usually focuses on such essentially content-free activities as comparing and classifying. A second approach, heuristics, encourages introspection and employs prepared booklets and exercises that convey strategies for dealing with problems. Today's third approach, formal thinking, often relies on Piaget's model of cognitive development, endeavoring to take students from the level of concrete operations to that of higher-order abstractions. Tests assess the progression from concrete ideas to make abstract methods of discovery including classification and the formation of hypotheses. A fourth prominent contemporary approach is that of instruction in language and symbol manipulation. This pedagogy includes attention to such matters as semantics and computer languages, and sometimes becomes a fairly complex program of education in constructing original written compositions. A final category, termed 'thinking about thinking', is an approach characterized by the philosophy-for-children movement. In this program, students consider their own processes of thought, attending to such elements as inference, styles of thinking, generalizing, recognition of contradiction, causes and effects.

Therefore, as Sproule concludes, "[r]ational constructs such as reflective thinking or the informal fallacies are useful so far as they go; but message-centered pedagogies carry a danger" (1987, 14). Sproule further argues:
"These instructional programs promise to fully empower students as critical consumers of communication, while at the same time ignoring such crucial features of modern suasion as the differential access to the mass media of social groups, the importance of visual imagery on television as compared to verbal argumentation, the use of entertainment as a vehicle for persuasion, and the ability of advocates to embed self-serving ideologies in such ostensibly neutral sources of information as news and popular films. It is likely that contemporary pedagogies of critical thinking will provide only weak inoculations until they include attention to such key players in the media age as news organizations, media managers, public relations counsels, advertisers, pollsters, and market research analysts" (1987, 14).

Thus, it is clear that we need to expand the instruction of critical thinking from the method of critical analysis and message-sending pedagogies to the critical

evaluation of social and cultural issues so that the students can form and develop their critical attitude through the instruction. Unfortunately, until recently, the Japanese educational community has not developed adequate critical thinking practicum based on its historical background and social situation. Therefore, in the next section, let me discuss why now is the time for the Japanese people to instill critical thinking in their educational system.

3. Reasons why the Japanese Need Critical Thinking Education

The year 2001 was the first year of the Japanese government's 'Educational Reform Initiative' based on recommendations in the final report of the National Commission on Educational Reform (Suzuki, 2001a). Recently, debate has surfaced over the commission's proposal that Japan reduce the current curricula by approximately 30 percent at primary and middle schools in 2002 and at senior high schools in 2003.

Most agree that the existing Japanese education system is not without problems. Although it has achieved higher education standards than those in any other advanced nation, including the United States, it has forced Japanese students to burn the midnight oil and neglected to find and foster unique talents among them. Proponents of the proposal, on the one hand, believe that the new system will bring about the *yutori kyoiku*, or a more relaxed educational environment. Some of them contend that the current memorization-oriented and knowledge-based method is responsible for producing many students who have a learning disability at high schools. Opponents, on the other hand, worry that the proposal to reduce the curricula will invite a significant decline in educational standards. They believe that this will become especially obvious in 2006, when the first group of students to have completed high school under the reduced curricula will start university. They argue the traditional system is essential for maintaining Japan's competitiveness in the fields of science and industrial production.

I argue that the debate should not center merely on how much education the students need, but on the content of the new curricula. Those involved seem to be siding with either the present system or the reduced curricula. My view is that the direction of the change is right, but that the Japanese need to discuss the content more. Otherwise, the proposal would be a case of plowing the field but forgetting the seeds.

Let me examine the arguments of both sides. First, *yutori kyoiku*, which aims at the development of individual talent rather than rote learning, is a good idea in

itself. In debating a policy, it is important to assume both the risks and consequences associated with the proposed change. If people change something within a system, that change entails expected as well as unexpected consequences, both within that system and in others. For instance, it is uncertain how the curriculum change will affect entrance exams, or what kind of programs will be needed to help teachers cope with the changes. The real issue is not only determining what goals to pursue in education – the people concerned also need to spend more time figuring out how to build a better system. They need to develop a program that meets each individual's needs and nurtures his/her talents, helping them to grow.
The opponents' argument is based on a faulty assumption. Japanese students used to study hard to enter competitive high schools since they had no choice. In the 1970's or 80's, people often heard the phrase *yon-to-go-raku*, which means: "To pass, you must sleep only four hours a night. If you sleep more than five hours, you will fail."

However, the recent declining birth rate of Japan is making the process of entering a well-known school less and less competitive these days. According to the *Asahi* Shinbun (2002), the birth rate of Japan used to be around 2.1 between 1965 and 1974. When it became below 2.0 in 1975, and has been declining. For instance, it was 1.33 in 2001, which is not only an all-time low but also the lowest among industrialized nation. So, children are losing a reason to study so hard under the increasingly less competitive entrance examination race.
Therefore, it is necessary to provide them with attractive programs and freedom of choice in the curricula at every level of education. It is well known that since the Meiji Restoration (1841-77) Japan has set 'catching up with the Western advanced nations' as the ultimate national mission. As a consequence, its higher education whose apparatus are imperial or national universities were apt to be knowledge-transmission centered. It is until recently that the need to emphasize critical inquiry-oriented education to let the students think on their own. Needless to mention the contemporary period when its academic, scientific, technological disciplines are dramatically transforming, it is essential to develop the critical thinking abilities of the students (Shimura, 2001).

Clearly, now is the time to introduce critical thinking as an essential component in Japanese education. What is needed is no longer to provide one-sided teaching, but to engage in cooperative-learning, which is often conducted in the United

States classrooms. By ‘cooperative-learning’. I mean the interactive learning process between an instructor and each individual student so that the students can learn each other from others’ comments and questions. However, it is relatively unknown that even in the United States such a teaching style had not started to grow until the student movement in the 1960s (Suzuki, 2001c).

Before the transition, their teaching style was similar to its Japanese counterpart. Although American professors used to lecture a lot, asked their students to memorize information, and tested their knowledge in paper exams, the student movement in the 1960s changed such a rote memorization and test-oriented system. The students wanted to learn how to think, rather than mere knowledge and information, which have little flexibility. The professors, then, came to be required to foster and develop the students’ ability to provide solutions to real-world problems. Nowadays most American professors spend less than a one-third of their class hours for lecturing, and spend the rest on discussion and the questions and answers.

When only professors are allowed to speak in a class, and students are not allowed to ask questions, it is much easier for both sides. The professors have no need for up-dating materials since the students make no complaint regardless of what they lecture. As a result, the professors can use the same lecture notes every year, and the students only need to borrow the notes from old students who have taken the professor’s class already. Under this situation, many students are tempted not to attend the class, and this is often what happens in Japan.

I believe that the key to achieve the cooperative-learning classroom in Japan is Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of a dialogic model of the world. So, in the next section, let me consider the relationship of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory and critical thinking.

4. Bakhtin’s Theory of Thinking

There are three ways in which Bakhtin’s theory can contribute to the formation of successful critical thinking education. First, it is important to recognize Bakhtin’s conception of the truth as dialogic. Namely, he emphasizes the importance of an ongoing, unfinalizable nature of dialogue, which takes place at every moment of daily life:

The dialogic nature of consciousness. The dialogic nature of human life itself. The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended dialogue*. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes,

lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium (1984b, 293).

Hence, Bakhtin concludes that "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (1984a, 110). Existing forms of knowledge rather monologize the world by making an open-ended dialogue into a monologic statement.

Second, it is necessary to consider everyday knowledge and experience as the source of all social change and individual creativity. Since Bakhtin believes that the everyday is a sphere of constant activity, unfinalizability is for him an essential concept. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson explain:

Bakhtin advances the term *unfinalizability (nezavershennost')* as an all-purpose carrier of his conviction that the world is not only a messy place, but is also an open place. The term appears frequently in his works and in many different contexts. It designates a complex of values central to his thinking: innovation, 'surprisingness', the genuinely new, openness, potentiality, freedom, and creativity – terms that [Bakhtin] also uses frequently. (1990, 37)

As a result, Bakhtin distinguishes between *znachenie*, or abstract or dictionary meaning, and *smysl,* or contextual meaning and the sense of a situation. Corresponding to these two kinds of meaning, it is necessary to draw a distinction between two kinds of understanding: passive and active understanding. Morson and Emerson again explain:

"Passive understanding" (Voloshinov's term is 'recognition') is what one uses to grasp the meaning of a sentence and is all that traditional linguists posit. … Each act of real, 'active understanding' is much more complicated than that. The listener must not only decode the utterance, but also grasp why it is being said, relate it to his own complex of interests and assumptions, imagine how the utterance responds to future utterances and what sort of response it invites, evaluate it, and intuit how potential third parties would understand it. Above all, the listener must go through a complex process of *preparing a response* to the utterance" (1990, 127).

Thus, every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that is anticipated. John M. Murphy argues that rhetoric, of all things, becomes the key example of this orientation. While monologic in their constitutional structure, rhetorical forms are oriented toward

the listener and his/her answer. Murphy argues: “Rhetoric engages in ‘responsive understanding’, recognizes that such under understanding is a ‘fundamental force’, and views the world of the listener ‘as resistance or support enriching the discourse’” (2001, 270).

Finally, the dialogic model of the world opens the possibility of creative understanding. Bakhtin argues: “There exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one’s own, and view the world [entirely] through the eyes of this foreign culture” (1986, 6-7). Bakhtin further contends that we should pursue what is called ‘creative understanding’:
“*Creative understanding* does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one’s own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*” (1986, 7).
Thus, Bakhtin viewed outsiderness not as a limitation for communication, but as the possibility of dialogue that enables us to understand a culture in a profound way. “For any culture contains meanings that it itself does not know, that it itself has not realized; they are there, but as a *potential*” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, 55). Given the importance of critical thinking education, let me present some possible critical thinking courses to be taught in Japan in the next section.

5. Sample Critical Thinking Courses to be Used in Japan
Critical thinking education should be so comprehensive that it may cover a wide range of activities in order both to foster analytical ability and cope with ideological manipulations. Since it is impossible to list and explain any and every possible critical thinking course curriculum for Japanese students, let me present three major cases of critical thinking courses for Japanese students in terms of objectives and significance.

1. *Debate course*: this course has three objectives. First, debate promotes a critical mind-set. In participating in educational debate, students can learn argument as a productive process to compare merits and demerits of the policy in question. Ideally, the students should form such an attitude, and be able to

propose alternatives to the proposal. In addition, debate provides a framework for critical analysis. For instance, the stock issue paradigm asks the following questions: 'Is there a need for change?', 'is the present system inherently incapable of solving the problem?', 'is the proposed plan capable of solving the problem?', and 'are there any disadvantages accrued from the adoption of the plan'? Finally, debate teaches the dichotomy of logic as a communication activity. In debate, you cannot avoid taking sides on an issue, but must clearly say 'yes' or 'no' and provide reasons for your position.

While traditional language education focuses on these areas in mainly formal and unnatural ways, debate creates the need for students to process information for meaning and to use language creatively in prepared arguments and spontaneous speech.

2. *Critical listening course*: In this course, when listening to news in English the students do the following: First, the test of evidence and source. E.g., 'is the evidence accurate, current, and true?', 'is the evidence appropriate (i.e., examples are typical)?', 'is the source accurately cited?', and 'is the source competent and unbiased?' Second, the test of analogies. E.g., 'are analogies appropriate?', and 'is the analogy figurative or literal?' (comparing two cities is a literal analogy: comparing a city to heartbeat is figurative). Third, the test of inferences, or reasoning. E.g., 'are there a sufficient number of examples?', and 'are there typical examples?' Finally, the test of causation. E.g., 'are a cause and its effects appropriately labeled?', and 'is correlation being confused with causation?'

3. *Cross-cultural understanding course*: This is a course to aim at fostering an attitude to understand the substance of other cultures without prejudice, obtaining accurate knowledge about them, and skills to achieve productive interactions with people of different cultural backgrounds. In the United States, Myron W. Lustig at San Diego State University and Jolene Koester at California State University, Sacramento, have written about 'Intercultural Competence'. They emphasized a need to learn such things as display of respect, orientation to knowledge, empathy, task role behavior, relational role behavior, interaction management, tolerance for ambiguity, and interaction posture (1996). Also, in Europe Mike Byram has developed the notion, 'Cross Cultural Awareness', at Durham University, Great Britain.

In short, each activity serves an important function to instill critical thinking

ability in Japanese students. Specifically, debate teaches them how to analyze the problem logically and to argue public issues effectively. The critical listening program develops their ability of media literacy. And cross-cultural understanding helps them to form an attitude to think about their own culture and prejudice critically.

6. Conclusion

I have so far argued that it is the time for the Japanese educational community to introduce critical thinking courses. Although most people do not have the talent of a great musician or sculptor, all human babies do possess the ability to be creative. Unfortunately, such a creativity is often crushed by the time they enter school. This happens primarily because society emphasizes doing the right thing and finding the correct and only answer. Since people want to be accepted by others, they are usually afraid to be different from others. As a result, while they are children, they start trying to be the same as others rather than different. Therefore, it is important to free the students from the danger of normalization. Michel Foucault contends:

"The Normal is established as a principle of coercion in teaching with the introduction of a standardized education and the establishment of the *ecoles normales* (teachers' training colleges); it is established in the effort to organize a national medical profession and a hospital system capable of operating general norms of health; it is established in the standardization of industrial processes and products (…). Like surveillance and with it, normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age" (1995, 184).

Hence, Foucault concludes that "the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another" (1995, 184). Obviously, people should be freed from the social pressure of normalization, and be given the freedom to foster their creativity.

Specifically, I believe that the Japanese students could benefit uniquely from the critical thinking course offerings for the following reasons. First, they can get a better understanding of what argument truly is. Although most Japanese tend to avoid confrontation and to value harmony in society, argumentation can be viewed as a cooperative activity between the proponent and the opponent, intended to reach the best possible conclusion through an engagement in

critical/rational discourse.

Second, they can learn the importance of being open to other ideas. Japanese people are apt to follow the custom and precedents or to leave the decision up to superiors and seniors, but their attitude often hinders the development of new perspectives and novelty in activities.

Finally, they can realize the importance of taking a stance on difference issues. It is natural that different people have different opinions since they have different interests, value systems, and personal experiences. It is even necessary to state their own opinion and try to find the middle ground or possible combination of different proposals. Without the process of productive discussion and debate, people might end up with sabotage or unexpected repercussion after the plan is put into practice.

In the final analysis, I would like to see more courses in critical thinking at Japanese schools in the future because such courses provide the Japanese students with a clue of how to approach socially conditioned issues, and to analyze information and ideas from multiple perspectives carefully and logically.

REFERENCES

Bakhtin, M. (1984a) *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (the 1963 edition of the Dostoevsky book). C. Emerson (Ed. and tr.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bakhtin, M. (1984b) *Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book.* In Appendix 2 in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics.

Bakhtin, M. (1986) Response to a Question from the Novyi Mir Editorial Staff. In: *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. C. Emerson & M. Holoquist (Ed.). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Byram, M. (2002) Ethnographic Approaches to Cultural Learning. In British Studies Web Pages at < http://elt.britcoun.org.pl/c_arti.htm>

Eemeren, F.H., & Grootendorst, R. (1987) Teaching argumentation analysis and critical thinking in the Netherlands. Informal Logic, 9, 57-69.

Foucault, M. (1995) *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison.* New York: Vintage Books. (original published in 1975)

Ganer, P.M. (1989) *Critical thinking in the curriculum: The centrality of argumentation.* A paper presented to the Communication Association of Japan Annual Convention, Sapporo, Japan, June.

Twenties who are hesitant to give birth. (2002) Asahi Shinbun June 14, 25.

Morson, G.S. & Emerson, C. (1990) *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a prosaics*.

Stanford,CA: Stanford University Press.
Murphy, J. (2001) Mikhail Bakhtin and the rhetorical tradition. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 87, 259-277.
Nickerson, R.S., Perkins, D.N., & Smith, E.E. (1985) *The teaching of thinking*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
Lustig, M.W. & Koester, J. (1996) *Intercultural competence: Interpersonal communication across cultures.* 2nd ed. HarperCollins College Publishers.
Shimura, H. (2001) *What is my college targeting at now*? Kagaku, 71, 1341.
Sproule, J.M. (1987) Ideology and critical thinking: The historical connection. *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 24, 4-15.
Suzuki, T. (2001a) *Curricula debates should shift focus to content*. Daily Yomiuri April 27, 17.
Suzuki, T. (2001b) Forming arguments and thinking critically. *Daily Yomiuri* May 11, 15.
Suzuki, T. (2001c) The case for cooperative learning. *Daily Yomiuri* July 13, 14.