

# Forum Komunikasi

Journal of the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies



Volume 6 No. 1, 2006 – ISSN 0127-8991

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# articles

## Journalism and Thinking Skills

Azman Azwan Azmawati

### Introduction

The increasing complexity of issues that mass media covers and the challenge to present it in the most profound approach is indeed a demanding task. Recent developments – locally and internationally – are testimonies that journalists can no more simply hold on to the gift for words in order to come out with an effective reporting. In today's ever-challenging world, be it political, social, economics – a critical, analytical, creative and profound reporting is the order of the day. Today's world does not need a journalist who merely simply fits her/his notes into the existing newspaper category, which is hard news and feature. This simple non-intellectual kind of reporting is no longer acceptable by the readers. Readers want a broader and comprehensive outlook on news. Facts need to be dissected and presented in a critical and analytical manner. Therefore, a revolution in the journalism curriculum must take place if we want to see a more proactive reporting.

Why is there a need to look at the curriculum? As put by Rakow, L.F (1993), "The curriculum is not simply a thermometer that measures the state of the field. It is a thermostat that regulates its

future direction. If we want to change the future, we must change the curriculum”.

Coming from this simple premise, this paper intends to synergies Journalism and Thinking Skills as a field of specialization. Hence, what kind of contribution can Thinking Skills make to the journalistic education?

The whole notion of this paper is about advocating future journalists to think critically about the world. It will look at the inclusion of Thinking Skills in the local journalism curriculum in order to train individuals to interpret thoughtfully about today's complicated information as well as to communicate information competently. This is especially relevant in the age of knowledge economy (k-economy) where the nation is gearing towards becoming a developed and knowledge-rich nation by the year 2020 (Economic Report 2001/2002)

I am advocating Thinking Skills because it is a very imperative field of study that can contribute significantly in all areas especially if one is dealing with a sea of information that needs to be disseminated to the masses, intelligently and competently. Since Thinking Skills has never been included explicitly in the journalism curriculum in Malaysia, I strongly believe it is time to incorporate one.

### **Journalism Curriculum**

According to Altschull, journalism curriculum with an emphasis on practical training is an American invention and it has not established a strong foothold in other nations with market economies. In Western Europe, little support is evidenced for such curriculum at institutions of higher learning. Disputes over which is more valuable for journalists, specific hands-on training, or emphasis on scholarly research have not ceased to this day— is the throbbing question (Altschull, J.H 1984)

In most cases, journalism curriculum in the institutions of higher learning provides the elements of practical instruction of news making and traditional academic discipline. Fuller, J (1996) recognizes that journalism schools are instrumental in professionalizing news reporting, writing and editing. Curriculum often includes history of journalism, the social role of the press, the moral and ethical issues confronting the field and the cultivation of skills. Apart from that, the undergraduate curriculum also requires students to take courses concentrating on a social science discipline such as political science, history or economics in order to provide a base knowledge of the institutions newspapers write about.

Thus Fuller argued, these elements of journalism education – practical instruction of news writing and editing skills, introduction

to the social and moral dimension of the work, and general grounding in a traditional academic discipline – needs to be rethought in order for journalism education to help transform the practices of the business of tomorrow. Curriculum therefore must be able to prepare future journalists in dealing with complex issues.

In the local scenario, the teaching of journalism started as early as 1970 with the first programme at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) followed by Institut Teknologi Mara (now known as Universiti Teknologi Mara) two years later. The emphasis on technical knowledge has greatly influenced the way in which the university curriculum of journalism programme is constructed. For example, most of the journalism curriculum offers writing skills, language, knowledge in providing content (social sciences and the humanities), knowledge of communication as a field of study and production skills (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2002).

The specific course on Thinking Skills has never taken a place in any of the journalism curriculum offered in the local universities. In fact was not even a part of the journalism courses. However, USM attempts to provide a balance between theoretical and practical approaches so that the students can be trained as thinkers who can be critical and creative by introducing critical courses such as Communication, Power and Conflict.

### **Thinking Skills: What and Why?**

I shall begin by introducing what is thinking and thinking skills in general in order to give a broad idea of what I am relating to. There is no one satisfactory definition of thinking since most definitions are fitting at one level or other. One definition of thinking is “mental activity” is acceptable but not very helpful. On the other hand, a definition of thinking as “logic and reason” is correct but covers mainly one aspect. Edward De Bono (1991) define thinking as the deliberate exploration of experience for a purpose”. Purpose according to Bono, can be understanding, decision-making, planning, problem solving, judgment, action and so on.

Ruggiero, V.R (2001) defines thinking as a conscious mental process performed to solve a problem, make a decision or gain understanding. In sum, thinking is the most reliable guide to action that we human possess. Ruggiero categorizes thinking into two broad categories: creative and critical. The essence of critical thinking is evaluation. It is therefore can be defined as the process by which we test claims and arguments and determine which have merit and which do not. In other words, critical thinking is a search for answers, a quest. Critical thinkers probe questions and employ questions to analyze issues.

Meanwhile Scanlan (2001) traces back critical thinking as a field of knowledge to some 2,500 years ago during the time of Socrates. Socrates showed how empty meaning often lies behind the persuasive arguments of those in authority. He accomplished this by using tools and techniques that were in every journalist toolbox: probing questions, search for evidence, willingness to question assumptions and focus on what people do as well as what they say.

Scanlan therefore defined critical thinking as the act of drawing inferences or conclusions from a body of interpretation. It is about using one's analytical reasoning power in the pursuit of facts and the quest of truth and being open-minded enough to change one's mind in the face of conflicting evidence.

In summary, to reiterate Bono, thinking is the operating skill through which intelligence acts upon experience. Everybody is blessed with intelligence but how one makes use of one's intelligence, make a difference to a person. One might just fall into the intelligence trap whereby one can only see one perspective of a subject by proving someone else is wrong. The education system all over the world has been stressing on the notion that the prime purpose of education is to teach the students to think. But, how many schools have thinking skills on their curriculum as a direct course throughout education? If thinking is so fundamental a skill as argued by Bono (1996), why should it not be taught explicitly?

Thinking skills is just not about critical thinking. Critical thinking perpetuates the old-fashioned view of thinking established by the Greek Gang of Three - Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. According to this view, analysis, judgment and arguments are enough. While judgment thinking has its place and its value, it lacks the generative, productive, and creative and design aspects of thinking which are so vital. Many of the present problems around the world persist because traditional education has mistakenly believed that analysis, judgment and argument are enough. Our success in science and technology comes not from critical thinking but from the possibility system. The possibility system moves ahead of our information to create hypotheses and visions. Critical thinking does have a part to play because when you know your hypotheses are going to be criticized you seek to make them stronger. But critical destruction of one hypothesis has never produced a better one; it is creativity that produces better hypotheses (Edward De Bono, 1976).

For that reason, teaching thinking skills is more than teaching the students to think but also the art behind the thinking in order to produce students who understand the society as a whole and how it functions. In this regard, we need to make journalism education more intellectually challenging in its own right, with the help of thinking skills.

## Discussions and Recommendation

Over the years, the issue of communication education, including journalism as a field of study, never fails to attract the debate and a point to ponder over among scholars, locally and internationally. Hall (1982) argued that the American tradition continues to dominate the communication education whereby skills are taught without much questioning. He strongly stated, "The study of communication is conducted in a narrow context and lacking of understanding the wider spectrum of the society".

The issue of functionalism being the dominant philosophy of the current local communication programmes in the local institutions of the higher learning stands as the most prevailing subject. Zaharom and Mustafa (1994) argued that:

In Malaysia, it is clearly functionalism, then, that has left an indelible influence on education, communications education being no exception, so much so that greater emphasis is now placed on technical competence and vocational skills. These skills are by no means unimportant, but they are not crucial elements in the education of good communicators, including journalists, and they are even less crucial in an academic setting. What is essential is an education which conscientious and provokes critical awareness .

They further argued that it is crucial for an examination of the local communication education "in order for genuine alternatives to emerge, and for a more critical and socially relevant for of local media education to evolve".

Zaharom Nain (2003) recently emphasized his position on the local communication education and the crucial need of more critical and analytical graduates. He reinstated:

Where there have been reevaluations made of theoretical orthodoxies, such reevaluations have somehow not been thought through and applied in the practical components. As an illustration from USM, while communications undergraduates are introduced to courses in critical political economy and

theories of imperialism, for example, they are certainly not encouraged in their practical courses to question imported news values, techniques, forms and formats, let alone think up alternatives. The emphasis still very much remains on the construction of media artifacts according to certain technical specifications and not on the construction of available artifacts. (Zaharom Nain: 2003)

What is apparent here is the idea of not producing critical, analytical and creative graduates by the local institutions of higher learning. Zaharom (1994, 2002, 2003) and Umi Khattab (2002) have been criticizing the idea of local universities religiously adapting to the functionalist philosophy, basically to stress the imbalance in the system where the “theoretical part is very much taught in isolation from the practical”. As a result, what we get in the end is the “uncritical and unanalytical” products that will continue the media tradition of conforming to the status quo.

This clearly shows the fact that “a product” that is able to think critically, analytically and creatively is very much desirable if we want to see changes taking place in the media landscape. Communication as a field needs to be reexamined; journalism also as a field, needs to be reexamined if we want to see a more critical, analytical and creative end product. It is very pertinent if we want to achieve the knowledge economy and knowledge society, fast, as strongly aspired by the government.

On the notion that we are not producing enough, if not at all, graduate with a critical mind that can see beneath the surface, I totally agree with Zaharom and Umi Khattab. There is definitely a vital need for some kind of major reform in our media curriculum but I am not about to pronounce a drastic leap from the so-called American tradition to the critical perspectives.

Zaharom himself has allegedly pointed out that “the history of studies on the media and communications has been a history of some hostility and volatility, with different schools of thought being in constant conflict with each other” (2002). For that reason, I am not going to add more salt to the wound if I can “wrap the wound” and treat it rightly until it eventually heals.

Hence, I am giving an alternative to the perpetually “intense” situation while at the same time working up the right orientation that balances up both perspectives. Paradigm shift is about looking at other perspectives and therefore, that is exactly what I will be suggesting

**Incorporating thinking skills as a field in the journalism curriculum**

can contribute to the creation of a critical graduate in journalism specifically and communication generally. Many might think that this kind of marriage is a “marriage of convenience”. Some may argue over the necessity of adding another course in journalism – the difference it will make if we do not go down to analyze the root, especially if it is “just” another skill. Don t we already have enough skills in the present journalism curriculum?

On the one hand, I can deliberately say that I do agree to the notions that thinking skills is indeed another form of skill, and the idea of the long-established cycle continues, cannot be disregarded. If that is so the case, why then the blatant attempt to marry off the two fields?

My argument is: in order to improve the standard of professionalism and the notion of social responsibility among journalists, attention must be given to not only the theoretical knowledge, applied technical knowledge but also on how to “utilize the knowledge competently”.

As Ahmad Murad Merican (2002) simply puts it:

Journalism is not only a skill, or an instrument in the transmission of information, ideas and values, or as a technology with specific social, political, economic and cultural objectives, it is also an intellectual artifact, the guardian of thought and the intellectual landscape,

I strongly believe that thinking skills as one of the compulsory courses in the journalism curriculum will be able to serve this purpose – to act as that guardian of thought. One must not only look at operational and mechanism aspects of thinking skills but one must also understand the philosophical definition of thinking. These two aspects of thinking skills can be taught in an organized and meaningful way that helps journalism students to see beyond face value.

The philosophical aspect of thinking skills will expose the students to the basic principles of thinking – it is “about” thinking. Thinking about thinking will assist the student in greater understanding of the mechanics of the mind. Although it is a passive description of thinking, it does help to generate awareness and stimulate the mind – setting the train of thought into motion.

On the other hand, the skills aspect will expose the students to the practical operation of thinking. This is where the journalism students can essentially apply the thinking techniques into their “practical journalism skills”. For example, a graduate in journalism can then explore critically and analytically into the “so what” as

proposed by Scanlan (2000) apart from the traditional 5 Ws and 1 H questions. While upholding the American tradition of journalism education (5Ws 1H) - much to the disapproval of the critical perspectives (superficial) - the element of being critical, analytical and creative can be developed. The "so what" question can carry so many different interpretation, resulting into so many different branches of questions, leading to various answers.

The many techniques introduced by Edward De Bono, the leading authority in the direct teaching of thinking as a skill, for instance, are flexible and simple enough to be used as a basic instrument in the journalism practice, simultaneously with the other journalistic skills. The notion of errors in thinking, perception, logic, patterns in thinking, attention-directors, problem-solvers, various thinking styles, the six thinking hats, the six walking shoes and the famous lateral thinking - to state a few - are practical concepts that can synergies well with journalistic techniques like interviewing, news gathering and news writing.

While we are still proposing and pondering over the idea of introducing Thinking Skills as an important course for journalism education, many other institutions of higher learning have already taken the matter into serious consideration and some have already adopted the idea. For example, in 1993, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in Kansas City in "Revamping Journalism Education" recommended that "emphasis should be given on critical thinking in Journalism Schools" (Applegate, E. 1996). The faculty members of the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada at Reno spent a year refocusing their curriculum to integrate critical thinking skills into all their courses. The school's mission is to teach students to think critically and to apply that thinking to the collection, organization and communication of information through the public media.

The closest that we have in our own backyard is the attempt taken by Universiti Malaya. A course titling "Thinking and Communication Skills" was introduced with the aim to produce students who are able to (i) think critically and creatively and make decisions, and (ii) communicate effectively when making presentations. The course integrates the abilities within communication situations such as emphasizing empathy between speaker and the audience, interpersonal communication, the use of language and nonverbal messages ([www.learningdomain.com](http://www.learningdomain.com)). Although the media education faculty members did not design the course, the idea of marrying both fields is already a statement of recognition to the magnitude of both fields, thinking skills and communication.

I will not pass this local development as just an act to facilitate the students to be a critical thinker but I will take it as a preliminary step that will lead to the opening to more avenues in thinking skills

and journalism.

I am not saying that the idea of marrying off journalism and thinking skills will not be without complexities and difficulties. There will be. For one, to create the module that fits into the grand scheme of plan will definitely pose various technical and philosophical issues in journalism. Having said that, the idea is not too hot to handle; neither it is too close for comfort.

To sum up, it will definitely be naive for me to say that thinking skills will solve all the issues pertaining to the communication and journalism education or is the absolute answer to the understanding of the complexity in the society but alas...to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson: "All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make, the better" (O Hanlon, 1999:31)

### Notes

This paper was presented to the Communication Study and The Human Sciences. A Transdisciplinary Colloquium. Shah Alam, 30-31 July 2003.

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