

Knowing Myself: Socio-Cultural Representation in Critical Thinking Education in Transnational Higher Education in Ghana

Coomerene Muilerman-Rodrigo
The Open University, UK

ABSTRACT

In recent decades, critical thinking in higher education has garnered more attention, due to the prevailing sense that it is essential for the development of critical citizens. However, critical thinking largely appears to be characterized as originating from a Global Northern philosophical tradition and embodying abilities that lead to academic success. Perpetuating this hegemony of regional knowledge as universal devalues knowledge traditions of the Global South and often leads to ‘othering’ of knowledges and ways of knowing rooted in their cultures and philosophies, delimits the scope of critical thinking and makes it challenging for the subject to resonate with its learners. This research examines the critical thinking curriculum in British transnational higher education in Ghana, critically interrogating the student learning experience and the wider issue of cultural imperialism enacted by the Global North through transnational higher education, and offers some suggestions derived from participant interviews to reimagine the curriculum.

Keywords: critical thinking, transnational higher education, African education, curriculum

In recent decades, critical thinking in higher education (HE) has gained prominence, partly due to the prevailing sense that it is essential for the development of critical citizens (Davies & Barnett, 2015) – a popular definition is ‘reasonableness, reflection, and the process of making decisions’ (Ennis, 1996: 166). However, critical thinking in HE largely appears to be characterized as originating from a Global Northern – or Western (both terms will be used interchangeably in this paper) – philosophical tradition and embodying a value-free, transferable, set of abilities that lead to academic success, particularly in academic writing (Asgharzadeh & Nazim, 2018; Hammer & Griffiths, 2015). In international and transnational higher education (TNHE – also known as TNE), it is the totem around which both providers and students have assembled, used to position Western forms of knowledge

as the desirable standard and assess intellectual capacity through assessments (Song & McCarthy, 2018).

However, this is problematic on several levels. Firstly, establishing and perpetuating the hegemony of regional Global Northern knowledge as 'universal' devalues knowledge traditions of the Global South and often leads to 'othering' of knowledges and ways of knowing rooted in non-Western cultures and philosophies (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Raghuram, 2012). This inevitably delimits the scope of critical thinking education as well as the boundaries of cross-border pedagogical activity that should, by its very definition, be inherent in TNHE and assumes homogeneity in the learning experiences of different cultural groups (Leung & Waters, 2017; Ziguras, 2008). It could also make it challenging for the subject to resonate with its learners, consequently disconnecting the curriculum from learner identity, culture and society (Moje et al., 2009).

TNHE is a rapidly-expanding sector, particularly for UK universities: in 2020-2021, the UK – the second largest global provider of TNHE (JISC, 2021) – reported an increase of 12.7% from the previous year with 510,835 students studying via UK TNHE (Universities UK, 2022). TNHE is defined as the movement of academic programs and providers between countries, thus distinguishing it from international education, which refers to the movement of students across borders (Knight, 2016). The awarding higher education institution (HEI) – often a university in the Global North – is the home country and the foreign country in which the programs are delivered – often a country in the Global South – is the host country (Knight, 2016). The students following these programs range from citizens of the host country to third-country citizens, i.e. expatriates resident in the host country or regional or international students who have relocated for the specific purpose of attending the TNHE institution (Knight, 2016). Amidst visa challenges, rising costs of international education and the aftermath of uncertainty created by a global pandemic, TNHE often indicates fewer barriers to accessing education (to those who can afford it). Circumventing these potential issues and being able to obtain what is commonly regarded as a prestigious international qualification (Leung & Waters, 2017) could persuade future students and their parents to choose TNHE. However, there are also concerns about TNHE being a vehicle for neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism, particularly through curricula (Ziguras, 2008).

This research was conducted for an MA in Education and critically examines the critical thinking curriculum in the international branch campus (IBC) (Knight, 2016) of a UK university in Ghana, a former British colony. Students largely follow undergraduate and postgraduate modules developed in the UK (with some exceptions) and graduate with UK degrees. Students are primarily from Ghana and the West African regions, but also include some expatriate citizens. A compulsory subject in the Foundation Program is Critical Thinking, Research and Academic Writing, which aims to 'equip students with the key skills' (Redacted name, p. 1) to succeed at university. Due to the management structure, the Foundation Program was designed by the UK university's local partner in Ghana, but subsequently reviewed and approved by the former.

This research critically interrogates elements of socio-cultural relevance and representation in the curriculum and its impact on the student learning experience, contextualized within the wider issue of cultural imperialism enacted by the Global North through providing education in the Global South (Ziguras, 2008). The student voice is engaged to reimagine elements of a new curriculum that relates to a multiplicity of African

identities, strengthens learner agency and develops more cogent academic literacy in TNHE in West Africa. Furthermore, it highlights two gaps in the existing literature: the general paucity of TNHE research in West Africa (Gunter & Raghuram, 2018) and TNHE research that goes beyond management issues and focuses on representative curriculum design and the student learning experience (Leung & Waters, 2017).

This research sought to answer the following questions:

- (i) *How can the critical thinking curriculum be reconstructed from a socio-cultural paradigm within the context of Ghanaian culture and philosophy?*
- (ii) *How do Level 3 undergraduate students experience and engage with the critical thinking curriculum?*
- (iii) *Does the inclusion of 'student voice' support better academic literacy in this reframing of the critical thinking curriculum?*

However, it must be noted here that, although the initial research questions focused on Ghanaian culture and philosophy, both the existing literature and the participants' responses addressed the wider issue of the inclusion of African culture and philosophy in the critical thinking curriculum.

This study is divided into five sections: a literature review of the key concepts of critical thinking, TNHE and the literacy-identity relationship; methodology; data presentation and discussion; reflections on research questions; and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transnational Higher Education

Leung and Waters (2017, pp. 1277-1278) caution that TNHE is increasingly influencing the definitions of what and whose knowledge is regarded as legitimate and valuable and how it should be 'taught, learnt and produced'. They note the implicit hierarchy embedded in teaching and learning processes and a tendency to consider the different learning cultures of host countries as deficient, rather than diverse. While there is some appreciation of local lecturers' abilities to contextualize lessons, TNHE relationships are more generally characterized by the need to control and monitor interactions between the two entities (Leung & Waters, 2017). This leads to a 'cultural distance' between the 'producers and consumers' of TNHE, a practice of cultural imperialism in international education that traces its origins to colonialism when imperial powers implanted education as a tool to further stabilize their political and economic interests (Ziguras, 2008).

One legacy of this practice is that curricula in TNHE are often generic and largely independent of the local contexts and real-world situations in which they are taught. What is considered 'generic' and 'universal' is often from the specific point of view of curriculum developers in the host HEI, which risks deficit theorizing of learners (Ziguras, 2008). Moreover, the locally-employed teaching staff who are best-placed to contextualize curricula to student needs are often not considered qualified or experienced enough – or perhaps given the agency – to do so (Ziguras, 2008).

Critical Thinking Education

Brookfield (2015) approaches critical thinking from the critical theory tradition, asserting that the intellectual purpose of critical thinking education is to provide learners with the tools to develop a worldview that situates personal experiences within a political framework. Thus, a critical thinker is one who can recognize the manipulations of dominant ideologies, understand how hegemony operates and challenge those unequal systems they inhabit (Brookfield, 2015; Luke, 2012).

Felix (2016) similarly argues that critical thinking in HE should aim to develop critical individuals who question tacit assumptions about the world, deconstruct dominant discourses and are reflexive about their own acceptance of and role in promoting them. This approach fosters criticality, reflection, critical action and a 'consciousness-raising attitude' towards HE itself (Felix, 2016, p. 43; Freire, 1974), including the hegemony of the Global North in defining and imposing knowledge as is relevant in this research.

Bali's (2015) pragmatic approach to critical thinking focuses on the processes of teaching and learning in a university classroom. Critical thinking is 'culturally biased' (Bali, 2015, p. 317) and Global Northern universities teaching non-Western students should heed four considerations: variability in students' cultural capital and familiarity with critical thinking; recognition that critical thinking pedagogies are not culturally neutral; barriers posed by linguistic competence; and the impact of the wider socio-political environment on learners' ability to apply critical thinking beyond the classroom. Dismissing these often leads to deficit or reductionist theorizing of Global Southern students in Global Northern classrooms, both transnational and international (Ziguras, 2008).

Lea and Street's (1998) classification of student writing in HE provides a useful model to reframe critical thinking education. This model comprises three approaches: study skills, academic socialization and academic literacy, in a progressive order, with each subsequent stage encapsulating the previous. At present, critical thinking education at the institution of this research is largely consistent with academic socialization, which includes acquiring study skills and induction into academic culture. However, understanding it through a socio-cultural lens implies realigning it more closely with the academic literacies approach, which has, at its core, learner identity, power and voice through linguistic practices and discourse (Lea & Street, 1998).

The Literacy-Identity Relationship

Freire's concept of the dialectical word and world is integral to the literacy-identity relationship: language helps learners to anticipate and understand the world, so that reading the word leads to reading the world (Freire, 1982, 1993). The discursive engagement in and through literacy is a dynamic process defined as much by the curriculum, as it is by learners' realities. This word-world duality extends beyond analytical reading and writing to encompass conscientization, i.e. critical consciousness with a 'historical awareness' (Freire, 1974, p. 25), which highlights the need to investigate whether a curriculum that includes African philosophy could develop a critical consciousness of learners' African identities.

Moje et al. (2009, p. 416) analyze five metaphors for identity in literacy: 'identity as difference, sense of self/subjectivity, mind/consciousness, narrative and position', underlining the importance of learner identity and agency. Creation of meaning through

literacy practices and interaction with others who have a multiplicity of learning experiences help learners to make sense of their own and others' identities and perceptions (Moje et al., 2009). This corresponds with Appiah's (2006, p. 16) definition of the four labels of social identity – ascription, identification, treatment and norms of identification – that construct an individual's understanding of self.

Historically, African philosophy was ruptured by colonization and systematic de-Africanization, particularly through religion and the rejection of 'paganism' (Wiredu, 2002, p. 1). Subsequently, considered inferior to the Western tradition, it was relegated as social anthropology (Waghid et al., 2018; Wiredu, 2002; 2004). Contemporary African philosophers confront the challenge of defending the richness and diversity of African philosophies (Wiredu, 2002, 2004) as well as justifying the oral history tradition characteristic of African narratives (Waghid et al., 2018). This persistent attitude appears to have been translated into critical thinking education in my research context, creating a distance between my West African students' word and world and resulting in a dissonance that could impact on identity (Waghid et al., 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Reflexivity

My ontological position is constructivist, informed by the critical theory paradigm, and my epistemology is interpretivist, deriving from the subjective nature of individual and social action (Costley et al., 2010). Moreover, reflexivity (Hamdan, 2009) necessitates acknowledging my insider-outsider status as a South Asian researching a problem in a West African education context. While there is a shared history of colonialism between my students and myself, the legacies are different (Harpalani, 2009). Thus, I engaged as a collaborator with my participants in this research, a positionality that articulates solidarity among those who share experiences of colonial oppression (Le Grange, 2018).

Research Design

The design frame of my methodology was action research. With its commitment to knowledge embedded in socio-cultural practices and interactions between the individual and the social (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003), action research naturally resonates with the critical and interpretivist paradigms of this study. The participatory nature of action research, where participants have the space and agency to influence educational practices, is especially relevant to my situation (Kemmis, 1988). As I am neither Ghanaian nor even West African, it would have been presumptuous to reframe the critical thinking curriculum from a Ghanaian perspective without my participants' collaboration. Moreover, this process also supported the development of student voice (Lea & Street, 1998).

Data Collection

I used the following data collection methods:

- online narrative interviews on Zoom with 10 Level 3 undergraduate students, to understand their experience of the module, situate critical thinking beyond the boundaries of its curriculum and assess its impact as an approach to learning.
- asynchronous, anonymous, online forum on Padlet for the students to share ideas about reframing the curriculum, drawing from their socio-cultural contexts; and
- synchronous, online, reflective session on Zoom and Padlet to review anonymously a broad thematic analysis of responses from the interviews and forum, identify key themes for inclusion in a revised curriculum and elicit feedback on the research process.

Narrative interviews provide a safe space for reflection on sensitive issues of identity and agency; due to their unstructured nature, they also encourage illuminating conversations, particularly when confidentiality is assured (De Fina, 2009). Meanwhile, student engagement as a research method occurs at the consultation, partnership and leadership levels (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015), which is relevant to the second and third phases of data collection. By treating my participants as partners and including their ideas in reimagining the curriculum, the forum exemplifies the collaborative nature of action research (Kemmis, 1988). The third stage, the reflective session, was an exercise in consultation that contributed to the rigor and credibility of the study. Reflection is an effective way to evaluate the relatability of the curriculum in specific socio-cultural contexts (Dunne & Ryan, 2016), which aligns it with the critical theory paradigm of this research.

Sampling

I used a purposive sample of Level 3 undergraduate students. After receiving the necessary gatekeeper permission, I sent an email to all Level 3 students with some details of the research, emphasizing that participation was completely voluntary. Ten students volunteered. The composition is largely representative of student demographics in TNHE (Knight, 2016).

Name	Gender	Country	Followed critical thinking course	Education history
Marianne	Female	Ghana	Yes	Local school, Ghana
Peter	Male	Ghana	Yes	Local school, Ghana
Catherine	Female	Ghana; Benin	Yes	Local school, Ghana
Daniel	Male	Ghana	Yes	International school, Ghana
Andrea	Female	Chile	No	Secondary school, France
Cindy	Female	Ghana	Yes	Local school, Ghana
Justin	Male	Ghana	Yes	Several semesters at a US university
Isaac	Male	Nigeria	No	Local school, Nigeria

Xavier	Male	Côte d'Ivoire	No	Local school, Côte d'Ivoire
Michelle	Female	Ghana	Yes	International school, Ghana

Seven had taken the Critical Thinking modules in their Foundation year; three had directly entered the first year of undergraduate study. Generic Western names (not African) are used as pseudonyms to avoid any participants being identifiable.

I conducted and recorded ten narrative interviews, each between 45-75 minutes in duration, on Zoom. Six participants contributed voluntarily to the anonymous forum on Padlet and eight participants engaged in the final reflective session, conducted via Zoom and Padlet. The data collection was organized to cause the least disruption to their examination schedule and took place during the COVID-19 pandemic when universities were closed.

Data Analysis

Given the qualitative and narrative nature of my data, I opted for thematic analysis. Braun and Clark (2006) identify six phases of thematic analysis, with which I engaged (though not in a linear manner), using a theoretical (or deductive) approach guided by my research questions.

First, I familiarized myself with the interview transcripts and the online forum, noting down ideas; subsequently, I re-read it and generated some codes that were collated into three broad themes derived from the research questions: (i) content for a new critical thinking curriculum, (ii) skills to include and (iii) themes/issues to highlight. Next, during the reflective session, I presented these themes to my participants, giving them the space to review, correct or retract any information shared. I also requested them to 'like' (vote for) up to five entries in themes/issues to highlight that they considered the most relevant for inclusion in a potential critical thinking curriculum. They were also given the opportunity to share feedback on the research process.

Afterwards, I reviewed the themes again, creating several sub-categories within each overarching theme, drawing from the literature; e.g. the theme skills to include was re-categorized as study skills, academic socialization and academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998). Throughout this process, I endeavored to bear in mind that I was not so much 'giving voice' to my participants as categorizing and depicting information shared in a specific context (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Challenges and Research Ethics

Ethical challenges to accessing data often feature power dynamics, specifically in interviewing participants who knew me as a lecturer; equally, familiarity posed a risk to researcher objectivity (Kim, 2012). Moreover, I needed to be sensitive to the curious contradiction my participants faced: using their Western-centric critical thinking education to challenge the shortcomings of that self-same curriculum in the colonial language of English (Wiredu, 2002).

Despite the strangeness of the pandemic, the participants were collaborative and open, primarily as they are students with whom I have worked for four years and there was an existing foundation of familiarity, trust and understanding (Mercer, 2007). Moreover, the ‘new normal’ of teaching and learning in virtual spaces during the pandemic (Davids, 2021) changed the perception of participating in research interviews online from an unusual event to an everyday, occurrence.

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

There were two key findings. Firstly, the development of an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998) in the participants’ mindsets and attitudes appeared to be an unintended outcome of the critical thinking curriculum. Secondly, while they appreciated everything they had learnt in the module, the participants also displayed an awareness that it had undermined their African identities and articulated the desire for a more relatable and diverse curriculum (Moje et al., 2009). Underpinning these findings is the paradox of critical thinking: in attempting to develop students into critical thinkers academically, it also provides them with the means to critique critical thinking as a subject by adopting a critical theory approach (Felix, 2016).

Divergent Views of Critical Thinking

Participants conceptualized critical thinking in diverse ways. One participant wrote in the forum that ‘... critical thinking involves breaking down information analytically and the ability to coherently engage with materials and reconceptualize [sic] them in one’s own way’ – a popular view shared by several others. Another participant wrote that it was ‘not the blind imbibing of knowledge and information and taking it as the gospel’. They further shared different opinions about situating critical thinking in different cultures. Catherine believed that it could be contextualized because ‘... We all have different environments and we have things that are exclusive to us’ and Justin said that ‘it should be the same process, but with different information, different context’, distinguishing the cognitive processes associated with critical thinking from its cultural practice. Meanwhile, Andrea likened critical thinking to water because it is ‘the same everywhere’, but also asked: ‘Who are [sic] more likely to use critical thinking?’, denoting an implicit hierarchy of cognitive skills.

This spectrum of opinions could perhaps be attributed to what Wiredu (2002, p. 54) calls the ‘involuntary intermixing of Western and African intellectual categories’, an effect of the ‘colonial mentality’ – which is not unexpected, given that they had chosen to read for degrees from a UK university. What is noteworthy, however, is that several also clearly expressed an increasingly ‘critical spirit’ (Wiredu, 2002, p. 54) in their views and practices.

Critical Thinking and Academic Literacies

A significant finding was that the competences and attitudes acquired through the critical thinking module exemplified all three models of student writing in HE (Lea and Street, 1998). This contradicted my initial theorization that the module emphasized only academic skills and academic socialization. While the participants all appreciated a strong

focus on academic skills, e.g. essay writing, and academic socialization, e.g. argumentation, they also expressed opinions congruent with the development of academic literacies.

During her interview, Marianne expressed that she wanted her identity to be clear in her academic writing, despite having to follow a certain academic style: '... That's one of the main reasons why I really 'talk' in my academic papers'. This echoes the idea that there may be a tension between a student's identity and the module, leading to meaning-making, discovery and self-recognition (Lea & Street, 1998). This conflict was particularly relevant to Marianne, as she simultaneously grappled with her feminist identity. Engaging at the academic literacies level helped her to position the personal within a political framework (Brookfield, 2015), reject the Global Northern feminist movement, which she felt was mostly 'tailored for white women' and 'not necessarily open to Africans', and, subsequently, self-identify as an 'an African feminist'.

The ability to infer and discern meanings beyond academic texts was another element of meaning-making that was strengthened through the module. Daniel described it as 'being able to decipher... to look deeper into what you're looking at, because not everything is what you see at face value'. Justin further underlined the necessity to apply what he had learnt during the course in the real world and challenge what might seem suspect, including in the media, saying: '... you see there's a bias going on... It makes you want to question it. And you should'.

This point illustrates the critical theory approach to critical thinking, which provides learners with the scaffolding to confront the Machiavellian ideologies of their inequitable world (Brookfield, 2015) and also implies that, through engaging with academic literacies, the participants have developed criticality (Felix, 2016). However, it should be noted that developing criticality and identity through engagement at the academic literacies level is an indirect consequence of the critical thinking course and certainly not one listed in its learning outcomes.

Socio-Cultural Representation in Curriculum Development

Developing criticality through the curriculum has enabled the participants to critique it for its lack of representation and diversity. Many participants expressed a strong wish for a curriculum more familiar to their African identities. They felt it would be more engaging and, as Peter said, 'most certainly get them [other students] familiarized and acquainted with critical thinking because these [his suggestions] are things they can easily relate to'. They also suggested that a more Afro-centric curriculum would give them a sense of their history and, in turn, a more astute understanding of their current realities – in other words, the tools to read their world by reading the word and a desire for critical consciousness with a 'historical awareness' (Freire, 1974, p. 25). As Michelle commented: '... you get to see so many flawed ideas on where we came from. And so, I guess, that it's going to negatively influence where we eventually go'. This was corroborated by Cindy who felt that a historical and socio-cultural approach to critical thinking would help to define African unity. She added that the focus of African history often seems to be on slavery – but: 'They had lives before slavery'.

These views encompass both the five metaphors for identity (Moje et al., 2009, p. 416) – and the four labels of social identity (Appiah, 2006, p. 16). It strengthens the argument

that literacy practices are intrinsically socially- and historically-grounded; thus, a critical theory approach foregrounds the multiple identities of learners over the cognitive processes of learning; thus, centralizing knowledge from the Global South could lead to an 'intentional inquiry' into hegemonic structures (Brookfield, 2015, p. 534).

Some participants also questioned the standards imposed on them by Western education, considering a 'generic' approach futile because what is 'generic' is often demarcated by Western researchers and the link to African contexts was tenuous, at best (Ziguras, 2008). Michelle said: '... if there is not that intentional effort to find things that are specific to Africa, the generic things you would find are usually things that would pertain to the Western world and the Western way of behavior and ideology'. She also specifically emphasized the privileging of the written tradition favored by the West over the oral tradition distinctive of many African societies: 'I think oral traditions is [sic] seen as less credible...'; however, as another participant pointed out in the forum: '... everyone, no matter the medium through which they express their thoughts, does so through their lens of subjectivity... so it really does not matter whether or not it is written or oral'. This recalls the historical rupture of the African identities through colonization, which led to 'indigenous forms of education, created and honed in African countries by African people' being historically criticized as 'somehow inferior to forms from the Western world' (Waghid et al., 2018).

Several participants emphasized that the curriculum should be more inclusive in its approach, exploring beyond Ghanaian culture and philosophy so as not to exclude any of the diverse student population (there are approximately fifteen nationalities). Isaac suggested that 'the cultural aspect, depending on... what region it is in Africa, whether that's central, west, north, south or east' is paramount to critical thinking education. Others, too, wanted to learn more about more cultures and philosophies. Marianne said: '... if we're going to tell a story, then we have to make sure everybody in the class is included and feels like they have something to share'. This echoes the interaction and relationality of socio-culturally-grounded learning, which contribute to making sense of others and discovering how they, in turn, are identified by others (Moje et al., 2009).

Socio-Cultural Representation in Research and Teaching

A sentiment voiced by several participants was the difficulty of finding academic research by Africans for Africans about Africa (Gunter & Raghuram, 2018). Much of the research appears to be by Western scholars and conveyed a general sense of pathologizing Africa due to their limited understanding of the lived experiences of Africans. Justin said he had volunteered for my study because he wanted to encourage research in Africa, about Africa; the fact that I am not African did not matter as long as the research was accessible to others. Xavier said that when he 'started university, I made up my mind that every issue that I have to write has to be related to Africa'. Catherine, too, had decided that every assignment she submitted would be related to Africa, because she felt very strongly about this gap in the research:

... My friend and I decided from Year One that we're always going to write papers more on Africa because it's hard to sometimes find papers by Africans for Africans. So, we always pick topics that are close to home.

Cindy further substantiated this point:

... It's funny to type in a topic related to Africa, right, but then most of the top articles you see, the most cited, are written by Westerners... it was sometimes even Chinese names. Why are you telling our stories? Why is it that we are not telling our stories?

These observations are possibly connected to the predominance of 'policy research' driven by major donor agencies and the financial-intellectual objectives of international development, which wield a neoliberal impact on educational research (Urwick, 2014, p. 55).

Michelle conjectured that the systemic barriers, tokenism and 'othering' faced by non-Western academics could have affected research output, particularly in and about Africa. She felt that academics from the Global South had just enough space to tick diversity criteria – but not enough that they could speak about their experiences without being 'seen as the other'. Consequently, views of the Global North continue to be perpetuated: '... many of these theorists are Western people... Of course, you're going to be theorizing about your experiences. And to that I say: that is very myopic'.

Several participants had positive remarks about the lecturers. Andrea said that 'the lecturers make the modules', creating safe and open classrooms conducive to discussion and debate. Cindy praised how they actively encouraged research related to Africa, even supporting students to be published. This is unsurprising because the lecturers are mostly African; as such, they try to make learning more relatable to their students. This resonates with Leung and Waters's point (2017) that locally-engaged lecturers help to surmount some of the boundaries and friction in TNHE.

However, deficit theorizing and the lack of agency were felt through the assumptions underlying curriculum development and assessment. It was stressed that the problem facing education in Africa was not of 'intellectual capability – it's more of the knowledge' (Isaac). Michelle added:

I remember clearly that in Critical Thinking II we had to write one essay. And in that essay, we had three articles which are given to us. And I think all those articles were Western articles, were written by people in the West focused on events that happen in the West. It would have general application to events in Africa... But there wasn't that explicit connection.

This highlights the 'cultural distance', cultural politics and cultural imperialism of TNHE (Ziguras, 2008, p. 44), which has an impact on learners' distance from the curriculum (Moje et al., 2009).

REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How can the critical thinking curriculum be reconstructed from a socio-cultural paradigm within the context of Ghanaian culture and philosophy?

In the interviews and forum, my participants shared many suggestions for reconstructing the curriculum; the overall need for socio-cultural representation in

curriculum development, research, teaching and learning was appreciably prominent. The emphasis was on a curriculum that was not limited to Ghanaian culture, but related to diverse African identities, through history, philosophy and culture, congruent with the Freirean word-world synergy and the need for criticality (Felix, 2016).

I categorized their suggestions into sub-themes:

- (i) *critical thought leaders* (historical, e.g. Kwame Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara; contemporary, e.g. Chinua Achebe, Filomina Steady; pop culture, e.g. Burna Boy);
- (ii) *African history, culture and philosophy* (e.g. transitions of power, Adinkra symbols); and
- (iii) *Literature* (e.g. *The second-class citizen*, Buchi Emecheta).

Moreover, during the reflective session, they voted on several issues that could be addressed in a revised curriculum, e.g. Pan-Africanism, African class systems and inequality. These suggestions explore the socio-cultural, political, historical, moral and ethical dimensions of critical thinking (Bali, 2015; Cowden & Singh, 2015) and, with some effort, could be included in a revised curriculum, making it more relevant and engaging for students, without compromising the university's academic standards.

How do Level 3 undergraduate students experience and engage with the critical thinking curriculum?

The participants made astute observations about the dissonance between the curriculum and their realities and cultures. Many of them questioned the ostensibly 'generic' curriculum material imposed on them, asserting that the 'generic' was defined by the Global North and therefore represented a limited viewpoint, with unconvincing links to their lived experiences. They also emphasized the dearth of research by Africans about Africa (Gunter & Raghuram, 2018). Indeed, their comments illustrate the fracture of African identities through colonization (Wiredu, 2002) and cultural imperialism (Ziguras, 2008) and the need to reframe contemporary critical thinking education to reflect African culture, history and philosophy – a reminder of the need for universal respect of multiple stories (Waghid et al., 2018;).

Does the inclusion of 'student voice' support better academic literacy in this reframing of the critical thinking curriculum?

The participants mostly agreed that they had benefited from the course, especially in developing their analytical writing skills; some added that the course had given them the confidence to develop their voice. However, they strongly felt that their African identities were being excluded from a curriculum that was not sufficiently diverse or representative (Moje et al., 2009; Appiah, 2006). More significantly, an unintended learning outcome was the development of an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998), allowing the participants to mature into 'critically conscious' actors (Freire, 1993) who challenged the curriculum from a critical theory paradigm (Brookfield, 2015). This criticality has strengthened the student voice, allowing them to 'imagine alternatives in which inequity might be minimized' (Felix, 2016: 9), thus supporting more effective academic literacy (Lea & Street, 1998).

Limitations and Contributions

This was unfunded practitioner research carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic to fulfil a Master's in Education; as such, there are some limitations, including the sample size. It would be interesting to replicate this study with a larger sample and in different TNHE institutions from other countries for comparison. Moreover, this research does not include the aims and motivations for the providers, students and host country governments. These could be explored further for a serious critical understanding of the state of higher education and the prevailing mindsets of local communities and governments in the Global South, especially their views of TNHE. More broadly, this research would be useful in interrogating the critical relevance of curriculum design and the student experience in TNHE, areas in which there is currently limited research, particularly in West Africa. It also provides several illustrations of adapting research methods in a global pandemic, using Padlet for data collection and workshops, which contributed to a collaborative and transparent research process that the participants appreciated in their anonymous feedback.

CONCLUSION

This research attempted to re-examine and reframe the critical thinking curriculum of a UK TNHE institution in Ghana. Adopting a critical theory approach, it endeavored to be guided by the student voice – particularly crucial as I grappled with the insider-outsider status (Harpalani, 2009) of a South Asian conducting research in West Africa: a trusted teacher, yet also on a learning journey facilitated by my participants' perspectives and insights.

While my participants' suggestions for a more representative and equitable critical thinking curriculum could be implemented with some strategic willingness and effort on the part of home HEIs, what is fundamentally required is a paradigm shift in TNHE policy and power dynamics, from an objectivist ontology of transferring knowledge to practicing a critical, socio-cultural approach to curriculum design, teaching, learning and research. In practical terms, this would mean acknowledging that TNHE is 'anything but the unproblematic transfer of knowledge' (Leung & Waters, 2017, p. 1277) and starting from the premise that cultural, pedagogical and linguistic borders connote diversity and richness, not deficiency (Ziguras, 2008) and that there are multiple critical thinking traditions rooted in different cultures (Bali, 2015). Not doing so would result in knowledges and academic traditions of the Global North continuing to be perpetuated as superior and supreme, thereby consigning knowledges and academic traditions of the Global South to a 'dreadful secondariness' (Said, 1989, p. 207).

Note

I would like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable comments.

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COOMERENE MUILERMAN-RODRIGO is a PhD student in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies at The Open University, UK. Her major research interests lie in the areas of curriculum mobility, transnational and international higher education and equitable education. Email: Coomerene.Rodrigo@open.ac.uk. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4116-2386>.
