Critical Consciousness and Empowerment Issues in Undergraduate Classrooms:
A Study at Taif University in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

It is important to practice critical skills in the classroom in order to empower learners and to have a critical consciousness, such as critical thinking, dialogue, and problem solving. In the present study, undergraduate students' perceptions (by gender) of the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom at Taif University, Saudi Arabia is investigated. Freire's conceptualization of critical consciousness is used as the study's theoretical framework. That conceptualization is focused on critical thinking, dialogue, and problem-solving. A quantitative approach is utilized with a self-administered questionnaire in collecting data from the respondents. The results of this study indicated that Saudi undergraduate students' perspective was positive about the practice of the three elements of critical consciousness. Furthermore, there were statistically significant differences at $\alpha = 0.05$ among undergraduate students' perspective on the practice of critical consciousness, including dialogue, critical thinking, and the total practice based on their gender. The direction of the differences was a benefit for females.

KEYWORDS

Critical Consciousness, Empowerment Issues, Taif University

1. INTRODUCTION

Critical consciousness is one of the essential components for empowering individuals to achieve lifelong learning. According to Brookfield (1995), if learners are empowered to practice critical skills and activities that concern self-expression, consciousness is increased and can lead to individuals' transformations. Furthermore, Shor (1992) and Freire (1973) emphasized that critical thought helps learners understand their life and educational attitudes. It is important to practice critical skills in the classroom in order to empower learners and to have a critical consciousness, such as critical thinking, dialogue, and problem-solving. Therefore, this study's aim was to discover undergraduate students' perceptions about the practice of critical

consciousness in the classroom at Taif University, Saudi Arabia. The research also determines if there is a difference, by gender, among the undergraduate students' perceptions of the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom.

2. TAIF UNIVERSITY IN SAUDI ARABIA

Taif University is located in Taif, Saudi Arabia and is a public university established in 2004 (Taif University, 2018). The university's mission is "to develop, support and convey knowledge through effective educational and research administration according to the international standards to ensure reinforcing sustainable development efforts" (Taif University, 2018, para. 1). Its vision is to be "a globally distinguished and integrated educational and research environment" (Taif University, 2018). Some of the university's goals are to develop and to upgrade academic programs as well as syllabi to meet the needs of Saudi society in light of new educational theories, thoughts, and technology; to encourage and to support faculty's sustainable research; to prepare teachers with a depth of knowledge in different specialization areas and to improve their skills; and to prepare teachers to utilize modern teaching methods that improve the educational process.

Taif University is new and seeks to be an international university. Additionally, Taif University cares about sustainable development. To achieve these goals, the university needs to help students develop their critical-thinking skills which will support lifelong learning. If students become lifelong learners, they may pursue continuing education for academic or personal reasons. Therefore, critiquing is an important skill that should be taught at in universities. Anari and Zamanian (2014) stated that the critical individual has become a promising area of discussion in educational research. Prior to describing the study, it is first important to understand the concept of critical consciousness, on which the study is founded.

2.1. Critical Consciousness

The concept of critical consciousness "conscientizaçao," or critical awareness, was used in the field of adult education by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Critical consciousness was defined as having an in-depth understanding of the world and the resulting freedom from traditional methods (Freire, 1973). On the other hand, Shor (1992) defined critical consciousness as "the way we see ourselves in relation to knowledge and power in the society… the way we use and study language, and… the way we act in school and daily life to reproduce or to transform our conditions" (p. 129). According to Darder (2015) and Freire (1973), critical consciousness does not happen automatically or naturally. However, it is an organic process of human engagement that needs critical pedagogical interactions. Thus, critical consciousness not only comes through intellectual effort, but also through practicing critical pedagogical methods.

Freire (1973) and Gadotti (2014) stated that there are three forms of consciousness: semi-intransitive consciousness, transitive consciousness, and critical transitive consciousness. In the first stage, semi-intransitive consciousness, people's consciousness is limited, so their focus is almost totally on survival. With the second stage of consciousness, naive transitivity, individuals start to increase their awareness in the world, and then, they can reflect on themselves and their responsibilities. This stage is characterized by the practice of polemics instead of dialogue. In the third and final stage, individuals move into critical transitive consciousness which is marked by having a critical awareness as a result of educational efforts. Therefore, individuals have a detailed interpretation of problems and the world, enhance their ability for critical engagement, avoid distortion when recognizing problems, ignore preconceived notions when analyzing problems, refuse passive status, and empower their capacity to practice critical thinking and dialogue. Overall, if learners do not reach the third stage remaining in the first or second stages, they may face empowerment issues.

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