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## Education's Space

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## Education's Space

*Yousef Alsalem*

### **Abstract**

This academic writing explores how using activities that build students' critical thinking skills will improve students' creativity, innovation, and cooperation. A review of the literature found that using exercises to develop students' critical thinking would help them to perform many valuable skills that they will need in their lives. Using activities that build students' critical thinking skills can be approached by everyday problem-based learning environments. The researcher found that critical thinking promotes creativity and imagination, which increases students' capacity to see the world from different perspectives. It is significant to teach students how to use their curiosity so that it leads them to acquire critical thinking skills. One practice observed in the very active immersion phase was how the teacher asked higher-order questions that increased student learning and self-reflection. In conclusion, the implementation of using hands-on activities and reflection will enhance critical thinking skills. Education always has space to discover.

### **Space**

In 2015 when I was teaching in Jubail City in Saudi Arabia, I remember it was August and very humid outside the school. I had the chance to meet my friend Hassan for the first time. He is a science teacher. He had asked our principal Ali about having open classes once a week, which would give his students the time to do what they like or allow staff to come up with new ideas of their choice. Our principal didn't agree with Hassan's idea. Hassan and I were very interested in

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making this a part of the culture of our school. At that time, I didn't know about critical thinking activities; all I knew was how to keep our students busy with hands-on activities. Our principal Ali disliked our ideas. One day Principal Ali said "You have made a mess in our school" because we applied our plan even as our principal didn't like it. The more we did our activities with our students, the more the parents supported us. Parents noticed that their kids loved school and did not want to miss school. One parent who was struggling to make his kid love school said, "Education needs to change, so we must give up traditional teaching." Another parent said "My kid decorates his room better than this classroom." When we heard that students and parents were ready to see change, the teachers did not have any reason to delay. One winter's chilly day, we went to a bakery shop near our school where there were more than five teachers. We discussed how to make our school better in educational outcomes. At that time, we felt that our school really needed to be changed for the better. In fact, we should believe that if we as teachers were determined to achieve goals, we would always situate ourselves as a good example to our students. We still did our activities until one day the supervisor came to our school. He was surprised with what we had achieved with our students from science experiments to drawings. He said to us, "You teach with love, even with simple things." After the supervisor's visit, our principal started to move from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset and accepted more activities to be applied in the classroom.

The Saudi 2030 policy initiative began as an effort to develop many aspects of society, one of which is education. This policy will improve all the elements that are related to Saudi education, for example students, teachers, administration, curricula, and buildings. In fact, as teachers, we are a very important element that will help to achieve the Saudi 2030 goals. The Ministry of Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is seeking to develop general and basic skills of all teachers and students to enable them to have the tools they need to face modern life requirements, in addition to specialized skills for each profession that cover all professional fields for the young generation.

Education plays a very important role in this policy initiative. Specifically, its main purpose is to educate individuals within society, to prepare and qualify them for work in the economy as well as to integrate them into society and teach them the values and morals of society. The role of education in the Saudi 2030 vision will also be responding to the economic, technological, and community shifts. As our world experiences increased globalization, 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning skills will assist our students in succeeding in a world that progressively requires students to build their critical thinking.

My topic of building students' critical thinking will play an important role in the Saudi 2030 policy initiative. For example, by practicing and building critical thinking skills, teachers are allowing students not only to solve problems but also to come up with new and creative ideas to do so. Building students' critical think-

ing will teach students *how* to think not what to think. It is crucial that teachers involve students in the process of their own learning instead of just telling students to memorize the right answers by giving students the time to be involved and engaged to keep their curiosity alive. Through critical thinking activities, teachers will ask students to engage their own minds, and their own skills by questioning and attaining understanding not just knowledge. My topic of building students' critical thinking will impact the social, economic and political situation in Saudi Arabia. As previously mentioned, the main purpose of education is to teach individuals within their community, to prepare and qualify for work in the economy as well as to integrate them to be involved in political issues. The role of building students' critical thinking in Saudi 2030 is to grow students into productive, creative and innovative citizens that use their knowledge and skills to enhance our country. My topic of building students' critical thinking will enhance gender equity. One of the main purposes of applying critical thinking activities in the classrooms is to enable students to be open-minded, to accept others' gender or ideas. That will be achieved through the Saudi 2030 Vision.

Building students' critical thinking is vital for the 21st century to help students to implement many helpful skills that they will need in their lives. Teaching critical thinking can be done through various methods or strategies, and it is a process through which students observe, discuss, evaluate, and reassess information (Bahatæg, 2019, p. 2). Developing critical thinking in students in the educational process also gives them the ability to solve challenges and see reality from different perspectives (Rashid & Qaisir, 2016, p. 14). Critical thinking also promotes creativity in thinking. Building an environment in the classroom that uses critical thinking activities by applying a problem-based learning approach will help students to be creative and innovative (Birgili, 2015, p. 2). Critical thinking, therefore, should be involved in the teaching learning process with lessons on increasing an awareness of context, developing skills, and using higher-level questioning (Alghafri & Ismail, 2014, p. 3) as it will increase students' capacity to develop their knowledge, creativity and innovation. Developing students' critical thinking skills from an early age is important. Critical thinking skills should be an essential part of elementary education (Bahatæg, 2019). Educators will increase students' access to, understanding, and analysis of information by developing cognitive skills at early ages and teaching elementary-aged students not only to answer questions but also how to ask them (Duesbery & Justice, 2015, p. 2). Elementary educators, therefore, should be aware of how important it is to start to create a classroom that is full of activities that promote critical thinking.

My American school experiences included two different opportunities: group planned school visits that were guided by an Arizona State University instructor and a host immersion school, in which I became a part of the school's learning environment. Both experiences provided me with different and varied learning. During my visits, and my immersion phase I noticed that the relationship be-

tween teachers and students was very strong. They had fully-equipped classrooms which had laptops, flexible seating, and stations. I was impressed that many classrooms had multi-age classes, especially for math, science and English. I had the chance to visit more classes in my host school, for example social studies, science, physical education, and a book fair in the school library in addition to meeting with teachers from different grades, for instance, preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. I saw positive engagement and interaction. As a result, my thoughts about education have changed since coming to America. I have explored many connections between teachers with teachers and teachers with students. I have learned that understanding a concept is much easier than memorizing. I have noticed that there is harmony inside the school which makes it a good environment for students and teachers. In addition, my thoughts about my topic have changed since starting the immersion in the host school. I have learned that teachers can apply activities that are related to critical thinking with simple materials. Before, I thought if I wanted to implement critical thinking activities, I would need to have large or complicated materials, but the reality is even with simple materials, I can do critical thinking activities. For example, my school mentor did many science experiments about how to inflate the balloon without air. This science experiment was very easy with very simple materials, which had positive outcomes for students. The materials can be found in every house: “baking soda, a lemon and a bottle of water.” My thoughts really changed from a fixed mindset with my not taking the initiative to a growth mindset.

Moreover, I believe that educators can learn a lot from my school experience. One of the benefits is that the teachers can be resilient and adaptable to any situation that may face in their school. Second, to be in a different culture and have different roles will teach you a lot as a teacher to get what is good for your way of teaching and your students. Lastly, my perspective about my topic was not clear until I was in the school immersion. My school mentor, my professional learning community (PLC) group, and my principal gave me feedback about my strategies and activities which honed my teaching skills. Consequently, my own students in Saudi Arabia will increase their academic achievement and their skills, too.

My action plan is to transfer all the knowledge and experience I gained from Arizona State University classes and the immersion in American schools when I return to Saudi Arabia. I believe that it is difficult to transfer knowledge and experience in person because of needing skills. My action plan will focus mainly on three parts, which I feel are the most important. Firstly, Saudi language teachers often do not ask students to use their imagination or reflect. American teachers often ask their students to journals about themselves, which improves their writing and imagination. Besides, American teachers let their students apply their language learning to other subjects like science and math. So, my action plan will add more value to communication with my students. Secondly, my action plan will involve more for parents in and out of school. Some Saudi parents have

expressed the wish to be more involved like they are in American schools. Transferring this idea to Saudi schools will help to build a strong relationship between school and parents. There is a gap between parents and school in Saudi school, but involving parents to volunteer and let them participate in their children's school will help a lot. Lastly, my action plan will create a PLC. Many American teachers find themselves in a PLC from the beginning year. PLCs assist teachers in knowing their work and planning from different dimensions. Saudi teacher needs to have build PLCs, which will give more space to reflect on their work.

The challenges teachers encounter in the 21st century are many, and I am going to concentrate on some of them. Information technology is one of the many challenges that Saudi teachers face, especially in the pandemic. Saudi teachers do not have professional development in how to use technology in the right way. Teachers, administrators, and all stakeholders need to deal with the obstacles by planning well. Moreover, a fixed mindset in teachers in Saudi schools have impacted negatively in many aspects. Therefore, it is very important for Saudi schools to create a culture of a growth mindset which helps all teachers to have professional development from time to time to keep the process of learning alive. Other obstacles that face me as a teacher who teaches in a Saudi school is the lack of teamwork.

However, there are some parts of Saudi Arabian education I would love to keep. There are many Saudi online educational platforms to assist teachers and families. These platforms were presented before the pandemic; now, these online platforms play essential roles by giving lessons for students and strategies for teachers. The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia always allows its teachers to develop themselves by offering programs, courses, and online courses. For example, I am part of the Khebrat 3 program, enabling Saudi teachers to be in school immersion with American teachers. The Khebrat 3 program gave many professional development opportunities like attending conferences, learning Google apps, and learning new strategies. It was an excellent opportunity to spend one-year collecting knowledge and experience from Arizona State University's classes to the school immersion. Because of this experience and other opportunities that the government gives us, I, along with many teachers, am an investment that will return to Saudi Arabia to make our education system stronger.

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