

# CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND EMPOWERMENT ISSUES IN UNDERGRADUATE CLASSROOMS: A STUDY AT TAIF UNIVERSITY IN SAUDI ARABIA

Sarah M. Alajlan, Ph.D. <sup>1</sup>

Obaidalah H. Aljohani, Ph.D. <sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This study aims 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. Paulo 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. In this study, empowerment issues relate to students who practice silence, marginalization, and dependence. 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 in the classroom. The problem-posing pedagogy was the highest practice. 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. However, in problem-posing pedagogy and the empowerment issues section, there were no statistically significant differences at  $\alpha = 0.05$  among undergraduate students' perspective based on their gender.

**Keywords:** student perceptions, critical consciousness, Saudi Arabia, Paulo Freire, conceptualization

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.

## Taif University in Saudi Arabia

According to Taif University (2018), the university is located in Taif, Saudi Arabia and is a public university established in 2004. 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, para. 2). Some

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Taif University, Saudi Arabia s1s3s1@hotmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Taif University, Saudi Arabia dr.aljohani@outlook.com

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.

### **Critical Consciousness**

The concept of critical consciousness “conscientização,” 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.

### **Empowerment Issues**

In this study, empowerment issues refer to the lack of critical consciousness in the classroom which may cause silence, marginalization, and dependence. Therefore,

empowerment issues are related to a traditional pedagogical method that is utilized in the classroom. According to Freire (1996), this method is known as “the banking model of education”; the teacher is the depositor of information and knowledge, and the students are the repositories. The relationship between teachers and students is as follows: teachers are considered to be knowledgeable while students do not know as much; teachers think, and students are thought about; additionally, teachers talk, and students listen: submissively and passively. Consequently, the more students work at storing information, the more they accept the passive role, and then, it is less likely that they will develop the ability of critical consciousness. Both hooks (1994) and Shor (1992, 1996) emphasized that traditional educational practices are counter to the idea of critical consciousness. King (1991) called these methods damaging practices, or miseducation, which foster dysconsciousness, “an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs)” (p. 135).

According to Al-Harbi and Al-Mahdi (2016), in Saudi Arabia, one of the challenges for educational systems is the teacher’s traditional role. With this role, teachers use traditional methods that depend on rote memorization and repetition. Al-Harbi and Al-Mahdi (2016) concluded that there was weak teacher preparation at some educational colleges which still utilized traditional methods. This preparation also led to many negative effects such as, extending oppressive methods to deal with students, denying people the opportunity to develop their critical-thinking skills, and creating a lack of human relationships. One solution for this challenge is changing the student-teacher preparation at Saudi educational colleges to create lifelong learners. According to Colley, Bilics, and Lerch (2012), in order to establish intellectual training for students to participate in the world, thinking critically must be a focus of higher education. Due to the importance of critical consciousness (critical thinking, dialogue, and problem-solving) not only in the classrooms but also in the learners’ lives, Taif University seeks to develop its services to compete globally.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Saudi University’s values and goals are derived from Islamic teachings which encourage people to be active learners and critical thinkers. For example, one verse in the Quran reads “say, travel through the earth and observe how Allah did originate creation” (Quran, n.d., Al-Ankaboot, Verse 20, p. 398). This verse is a clear call to think deeply and see the universe and to meditate about diverse cosmic phenomena (Alajlan, 2016).

In the modern era, Paulo Freire is known for promoting critical pedagogy. He believed that every student is able to think critically and not be a passive receiver of knowledge from a teacher. Additionally, he mentioned the relationship between the teaching and learning process; he also stressed that the teacher should help students to promote their thought (Freire, 1973). Therefore, in this study, Freire’s critical consciousness is used as the theoretical framework. The elements of critical consciousness include critical thinking, dialogue, and problem-solving. The three elements connect with each other; for instance, true dialogue and problem-solving require critical-thinking skills. All these elements could occur at the same time.

Colley et al. (2012) stated that critical thinking is “a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion” (p. 1). Freire (1996) explained that critical thinking explores the real life as a process of transformation, so thinking does not separate from action. Also, if dialogue does not engage in critical thinking, true dialogue cannot exist. He stated that educational dialogue is considered as a “horizontal” relationship where both teachers and students talk reciprocally. Dialogue is communication that connects learners so that they are able to act critically in order to transform reality. Moreover, dialogue prepares learners for reflective action (Shor, 1992; Shor & Freire, 1987). Freire (1996) indicated that problem-solving is constructed with innovation, motivating true reflection on and action with reality. In problem-solving, the teacher and the students analyze and discuss their feelings, experiences, and knowledge of the universe together; with this method, students discover the problems around them and see themselves as something that can be transformed.

If the three elements of critical consciousness are not utilized in the classroom, that situation may lead to empowerment issues. To illustrate, Shor (1992) stated that, between empowering and traditional pedagogy, students develop positive or negative feelings about the learning process. With negative feelings in the classroom, students may exercise silence, marginalization, and dependence. According to Freire (1996), in banking education, students are treated as objects of assistance. On the other hand, with problem-solving, students are critical thinkers. Therefore, the goal of this study is to discover undergraduate students’ perceptions about the practice of critical consciousness at Taif University. Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of this study.

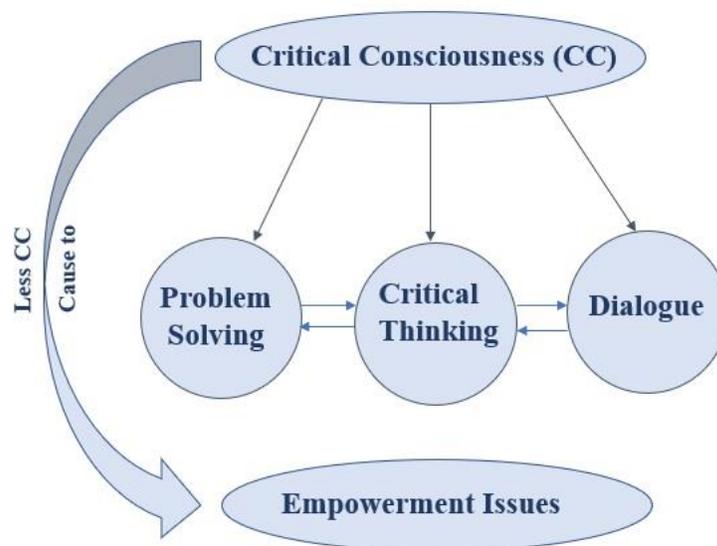


Figure 1. The theoretical framework of this study

## **Methodology**

This study aimed to discover undergraduate students' perceptions about the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom at Taif University. The research also, determined if there was a difference, by gender, among the undergraduate students' perceptions about the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom. Freire's thought of critical consciousness is utilized as the study's theoretical framework. The elements of critical consciousness involve critical thinking, dialogue, and the problem-solving.

### **Population and Participants**

The target population for this study was undergraduate students in the college of education at Saudi Arabia's Taif University. The total population consists of 2285 students (236 males and 2049 females). The study was administered in the spring 2018 semester and was conducted with 584 undergraduate students (80 males and 504 females) in the college of education.

### **Instrument**

A survey method was utilized for this quantitative research which depended on the questionnaire. The instrument was designed to answer the following research questions: What is the Saudi undergraduate students' perspective about the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom at Taif University in Saudi Arabia? Is there a significant difference, by gender, among the undergraduate students' perspectives for the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom at Taif University in Saudi Arabia? This questionnaire had two parts; the first part was developed by the researchers which requested demographic information about gender (female or male). The second part was adapted by Alajlan (2016) in order to meet this study's goal of undergraduate students' perspectives regarding the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom. This part consisted of two sections: critical consciousness including 26 items (dialogue, 1-12; problem-solving, 13- 20; and critical thinking, 21-26), and empowerment issues, including 15 items. The items had a four-point Likert scale that ranged from 4=often to 1=never.

Alajlan (2016), developed the instrument in English and it was then translated into Arabic by translators who had mastered both languages. Then, the instrument was translated back into English. The final Arabic version was reviewed to make sure the questionnaire was consistent and accurate. The questionnaire had good indices of construct validity as measured by the pilot test. Alajlan (2016) calculated Cronbach's Alpha and indicated a reliability of .90 which is acceptable and strong in educational research.

### **Data Collection and Analyses**

Data were collected by using a survey. Taif University's College of Education. The link was sent via an email message. To answer the research questions, the researchers used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to conduct quantitative analysis which

contained descriptive analysis, including mean, and standard deviation. A T-test was done to determine if there were significant differences for male and female undergraduate students.

## Results

The answer to the first question, regarding the Saudi undergraduate students' perspective about the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom at TU, showed that the total mean for the practice of critical consciousness was 3.14, and that the standard deviation was 0.400. Therefore, the participants were positive about the practice of the three elements of critical consciousness, and the level of experience was "occasionally." According to the mean, the order of the critical consciousness' elements was as follows: problem-solving, 3.22, dialogue, 3.12; and critical thinking 3.07. The results of this statistical analysis are presented in Table 1 which illustrates the practice of critical consciousness.

Table 1

### *Results for the Practice of Critical Consciousness*

Elements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Problem-solving	3.22	.464
Dialogue	3.12	.411
Critical thinking	3.07	.619
The total practice of critical consciousness	3.14	.400
Empowerment issues	2.64	.549

In terms of problem-solving, the participants agreed that they felt a sense of empowerment when they solved a problem, and the mean for the item was 3.45. In the dialogue section, the students indicated that they listened to each other's thoughts and did not neglect any one's ideas; dialogue was characterized with caring and respect. For both items, the mean was 3.36. For the critical thinking element, the participants stated that they respected different opinions, and its mean was 3.54. For the practice of empowerment issues, the total mean was 2.64, and the standard deviation was 0.549. The experience level was "infrequently." As the most experience on empowerment issues, the participants indicated that they remained silent while the teacher taught, and its mean was 3.40.

The answer to the second question, regarding a significant difference by gender, the undergraduate students' perspective about the practice of critical consciousness, indicated that the value of the T-Test was statistically significant at ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). Therefore, there were significant differences among the undergraduate students' perspectives on the practice of critical consciousness, including dialogue, critical thinking, and the total practice. The benefit of the direction was for females. However, in the problem-solving and empowerment- issues sections, there were no statistically significant differences ( $\alpha =$

0.05) among the undergraduate students' perspectives based on their gender. The results for the T-Test that related to students' gender are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Results of the T-Test Related to Students' Gender*

Element Name	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Dialogue	Males	80	3.02	.380	-2.145	582	.032
	Females	504	3.13	.414			
Problem-solving	Males	80	3.20	.397	-.437	582	.662
	Females	504	3.22	.474			
Critical thinking	Males	80	2.89	.698	-2.725	582	.007
	Females	504	3.10	.601			
The total practice of critical consciousness	Males	80	3.05	.401	-2.146	582	.032
	Females	504	3.15	.398			
Empowerment issues	Males	80	2.55	.523	-1.665	582	.096
	Females	504	2.66	.552			

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study's aim was to discover undergraduate students' perceptions of the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom at Taif University. The research also determined if there was a difference, by gender, among the undergraduate students' perceptions about the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom. This study was limited to undergraduate students in the College of Education at Saudi Arabia's Taif University. Since a College of Education seeks to prepare students to be teachers, this study was important to understand whether undergraduate students have the critical skills which help them to become active and lifelong learners. Al-Harbi and Al-Mahdi (2016) stated that, what teachers learn in college is usually applied with their students. According to Arum and Roksa (2011), 99% of the faculty members stated that "developing students' ability to think critically is a very important or essential goal of undergraduate education" (p.35). Green (2015) emphasized that courses must be redesigned to help students be lifelong learners who can improve their critical-thinking skills long after a class is done.

Overall, the study's results show that Saudi undergraduate students occasionally practice the three elements (problem-solving, dialogue, and critical thinking) of critical consciousness in Taif University classrooms. This result agrees with Taif University's goal which is to have active and lifelong learners. Also, Taif University strives to build a generation that helps to drive the wheel of sustainable development. The participants indicated that the problem-solving was the highest-practiced element in the classroom, followed by dialogue and critical thinking. The means for the three elements totals are high and close to each other. This statement confirms that the three elements of critical

consciousness connect with each other when they apply. The most- practiced item in the problem-solving element is that students feel a sense of empowerment when they solve a problem. This result agrees with Freire (1996) who stated that problem-posing education empowers students to change their lives for the better. Additionally, Stenhouse, Jarrett, Williams, and Chilungu (2014) emphasize that, if teachers believe in their students to solve a problem that belief fosters the students' sense of empowerment; and then, students can notice problems and address the problems on their own.

Through dialogue and critical-thinking elements, students clarified that they listened to and respected each other's thoughts and differing opinions. In the classroom, the dialogue was respectful and caring. Therefore, the classroom may become an active learning environment. According to Freire (1996), love was the basis of dialogue; the dialogue needed some preconditions, such as love, humility, and hope. Moreover, participants infrequently exercised empowerment issues in the classroom. The highest-practiced issue was that students remained silent while the instructor taught. Students might remain silent because they consider silence as respect for the teacher. On the other hand, the lowest-practice issue was that students lost the ability to listen carefully to each other. This result stresses that students, as they mentioned in the dialogue section, really care about and respect each other in the classroom.

With this finding, it is obvious that female students exercised critical consciousness in the classroom more than males. At Saudi universities, female and male students study at separate campuses, so female students may have more opportunities to practice critical skills than their male counterparts. With the three elements of critical consciousness, the lowest-exercised ones were that teachers posed different problems, encouraged students to justify their claims, and prompted students to use a reflective journal that connected their experiences with reflections. It was clear that these practices related to the teachers' encouragement and were not practiced enough. Therefore, teachers should be trained to keep up with the newest teaching strategies in order to achieve the Saudi University's goals. The College of Education is where a student-teacher is prepared to be a teacher, so it should improve students' critical-thinking skills to be lifelong learners. Also, a qualitative study should be conducted in order to add richness or thick description to these findings. Interviews should be conducted with undergraduate students to obtain in-depth information about the practice of critical consciousness.

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