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**Critical Thinking in Curriculum Practice: The Case of Higher
Institutions of Learning in Uganda**



Critical Thinking in Curriculum Practice: The Case of Higher Institutions of Learning in Uganda

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the nature of critical thinking in curriculum practice in higher institutions of learning in Uganda. The study is based on Makerere University Business School, as a case study of institutions of higher learning in Uganda.

Methodology: The methodology used is textual analysis of curriculum documents, non participatory overt classroom observation and focused interviews of the lecturers who teach the observed classes, to determine whether in practice, critical thinking is actually taught to learners.

Findings: It is the finding of this research that the curriculum practice in Uganda generally uses methods that do not strongly support the development of critical thinking skills in learners. The over-dependence on the lecture method causes the learners to fall short of the key Taxonomic words that build critical thinking skills in learners.

Unique contributor to theory, policy and practice: This study is a unique contribution to theory and practice as it shows the implementation of critical thinking in the classroom in Uganda in relation to Bloom's Taxonomy.

Keywords: *Critical Thinking, Curriculum Practice, Bloom's Taxonomy*

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Uganda is one of the many African countries that are grappling with the issue of youth unemployment (UBOS, 2016). In 2020, the youth unemployment rate was 7.08% (www.statista.com) where most experts generally deem a rate of 3% - 5% as being ideal and healthy (www.investopedia.com). The National Development Plan (NDP III) 2020/21 – 2024/25, points to low labor productivity of Uganda's human capital (38 percent) and low human development (at 0.516). This is principally attributed to a weak human capital foundation, lack of appropriate knowledge skills and attitudes, and high youth unemployment, among other reasons. Today, one of the critical realities that Uganda's government is facing is how to stir the current unemployed youth into gainful employment in the face of the 21st century job market. About 30% of Uganda's institutionally qualified youth cannot find jobs (Gateway Research Centre, 2020).

On recognizing that Uganda's youth lack employable skills or have skills that are irrelevant to the existing job market, the Government, over time, decided to focus on curriculum review at the different levels of education with a focus on business, technical, vocational education and training (BTVET) (Ahabwe & Mbowa, 2014). Entrepreneurship was also introduced as a subject to impart practical knowledge and skills to enable youth to become job creators (Ahabwe & Mbowa, 2014). In addition, the Ugandan Government put emphasis on science by paying higher wages to science teachers, building science laboratories, and allocating more government-sponsored slots (75 percent) for science students at universities and higher institutions. At the tertiary level, mandatory internships and courses that teach skills that employers need were introduced (Gateway Research Centre Policy Brief, 2020). Uganda also implemented several programs aimed at creating employment specifically for youths. These included the youth fund, *bonna bagaggawale*, *Entandikwa* scheme, and other schemes that tried to provide an enabling environment for the private sector to create jobs and build the skills and requisite knowledge that make youth more employable (Ahabwe & Mbowa, 2014). High youth unemployment has still persisted.

No significant government effort has been put into exploring whether youth or graduate unemployment could be arising from the nature of critical thinking in Uganda's higher institutions of learning. In section 16.2, Paragraph 384 of the NDP III, it was noted that within the Plan's five years (2020/21 – 2024/25), Uganda was to focus on addressing the challenge of low labor productivity by improving the productivity of labor through strengthening the foundation for

human capital; improving quality of education at all levels; and developing labor competences. No documented inquiry has been made into exploring critical thinking skills in higher institutions of learning. No investigation has been done to evaluate the actual implementation of the facets of critical thinking through curriculum practice in Uganda's higher institutions of learning. Yet critical thinking skills are 21st-century skills that are in high demand by employers in Uganda and other parts of the world (Aheisibwe et al., 2021; Musisi & Bukirwa, 2019). This study is therefore addressing a gap in literature and policy.

The purpose of this study is to establish the critical thinking skills embedded in Uganda's Institutions of higher learning with the case study of Makerere University Business School (MUBS). One of the ways in which facets of critical thinking are expected to be implemented in curriculum is through the teaching and assessment methods prescribed in the curriculum documents. If the teaching and assessment methods in the curriculum do not favor an effective transfer of critical thinking to the learners, it means that the facets of critical thinking will not be effectively transferred to the learners.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are three broad theoretical approaches to critical thinking: the philosophical approach, the psychological approach, and the educational approach (Lai, 2011). *The Philosophical Approach* focuses on a critical philosophical thinker: notably, the thoughts and nature of the thinker (Ennis, 2015; Lai, 2011) and not the thinker's actions. The approach emphasizes the disposition and character of the critical thinker instead of the processes associated with critical thought. The limitation of this approach, therefore, is that it principally focuses on the thoughts or intentions of the thinker and not the actions of the thinker, for not all philosophical thinkers are, in reality, practicing what they philosophize (Atabaki et al., 2015; Sternberg, 1986). *The Psychological Approach* focuses on how people think: the thought process that the thinkers go through to conclude an issue (Atabaki et al., 2015; Lai, 2011). The psychological approach considers critical thinking the intellectual process of conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, or evaluating information and is therefore limited in that it principally looks at the mental behavior or actions of the thinkers (Atabaki et al., 2015; Lai, 2011; Sternberg, 1986) and not the process of instilling critical thinking in learners. *The Educational Approach* on the other hand focuses on learners' skills to groom future problem-solving and decision-making skills (Sternberg, 1986). One of the commonly quoted sources of the educational approach to critical thinking is Bloom's Taxonomy (Dwyer et al., 2014) which was created to classify the thinking acts that result from educational experiences (Dwyer et al., 2014; Grieco, 2016). Bloom's taxonomy highlights the

different levels of higher-order thinking that learners should experience as they go through higher levels of education (Calma & Davies, 2021). The top-order qualities of Bloom's Taxonomy of application, critical appraisal, evaluation, and synthesis are aspects of critical thinking of self-regulatory judgment, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and contextual consideration. A learner that exercises the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy applies critical thinking dispositions (Calma & Davies, 2021).

As such, critical thinking, through the Educational approach, and as defined by Educational theorists like Bloom (1956) relates to "the active, persistent and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey, 1933, p.9). Here, critical thinking is defined as an action (active, persistent consideration) a reflective thought (a belief), and an educational aspect (a form of knowledge) (Sternberg, 1986). Other scholars have defined critical thinking as a type of high-order thinking that involves controlled and measured thinking processes, as opposed to low-order thinking and mere perceptions (Calma & Davies, 2021; Widana et al., 2018). In this study, I will explore the existence or not of critical thinking in MUBS' curriculum practice.

Curriculum refers to the tools and materials students interact with to achieve identified educational outcomes (Qassimi & Wade, 2021). Curriculum includes the knowledge and skills the students are to learn; the learning standards or objectives to be achieved; the units and lessons taught; the student tasks and projects; the literature, books, presentations, materials, videos, articles, or readings to be used, and the assessments and evaluation methods. Curriculum also embodies the teaching-learning experiences as guided and directed by the relevant school, as carried out by the teachers in the classrooms. (Steiner, 2017; Su, 2012). Curriculum can be understood in a threefold fashion: as a concept, as practice, and as a field of study (Deng, 2022; Green, 2022). This study will focus on curriculum as a practice, particularly, the curriculum practice of MUBS BCOM students, by looking at select curriculum documents and the teachers' classroom practice as they teach the curriculum content.

Curriculum practice refers to the face-to-face, body-to-body, interactive, and affective dynamics of teachers and students working together in the same setting (Green, 2022). In curriculum practice, teachers do most of the talking in the classroom, with students talking to some degree, in various ways, but also reading and writing, as instructed. Practice includes the language used, the voices and bodies in play and at work, of the teacher and students, sitting, raising their hands, answering back, exchanging glances, and perhaps passing notes, attentive or not (Green, 2022). I seek to analyze the curriculum practice of MUBS to establish whether there are aspects of critical thinking

in the said practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study was a case study, as it was meant to generate in depth, multifaceted understanding of complex issues in their real-life context (Schoch, 2020), just like in the current study where the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of critical thinking (a multifaceted concept) in its actual application in MUBS. In this study, three data collection methods (document review, observation, and focused interviews) were used, to determine the nature of critical thinking skills prevalent in MUBS BCOM curriculum practice. The target population was the undergraduate Bachelor of Commerce (BCOM) program for years 1 and 2. The analysis involved the curriculum content and classroom practice for the BCOM program for years one and two course units and the lecturers that taught the observed course units. The sampling method typically used for case study research is purposive, non-random sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Ridder, 2017). As such, this study purposively selected the curriculum content documents that would provide the information needed for the study objectives. This then dictated the course units to be observed and the lecturers to be interviewed, as the lecturers that were observed.

Case studies usually require an integrated, holistic comprehension of the case, which is generally constructed by qualitative data from document reviews and participant interviews (Flick, 2009; Stake, 2005; Ridder, 2017). As such, the study used document review, overt non-participant observation, and focused interviews. Data was then triangulated to obtain a detailed description and understanding of the issues (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 2005). The study then used document reviews to analyze the existence or not of the facets of critical thinking in the BCOM curriculum documents. Document reviews are a systematic collection, documentation, analysis, interpretation, and organization of data obtained from existing documents (Bretschneider et al., 2017). Reviewing existing documents helps researchers understand the history, philosophy, and operation of what is under analysis and the organization in which it operates. The study analyzed the main BCOM curriculum document, and eleven course outlines for eleven subjects taken by BCOM students from years one and two and then used overt non-participant observation to observe the curriculum practice (teaching and assessment methods) at MUBS. This was through sitting in the selected classes with the knowledge of the lecturers under observation. It involved the researcher observing all the aspects of the implementation of the curriculum course outlines and noting what the teachers and students were doing (for example, by interpreting their body language and gestures) and what they were not doing (for example, ignoring instructions or refraining from asking for help or assistance) (Laurier, 2016).

In order to fairly evaluate the lecturers, it was essential to observe them more than once. Existing research generally recommends four observations to obtain a reliable estimate of teaching quality at different points during the school year (Frey, 2018). However, there was not enough time to achieve this. Instead, the researcher observed each lecturer for two classes and then conducted focused interviews with the lecturers whose classes had been observed. Focused interviews were meant to discover the significant aspects of the entire situation under analysis, answer or address any existing discrepancies in existing information, and understand any deviant answers to the research (Merton & Kendall, 1946). The focused interviews were conducted with the lecturers that taught select course outlines, depending on their availability and willingness to participate in the research, as a follow up to the overt classroom observation sessions. The documents reviewed included the main BCOM curriculum document (BCD) and the course outlines for the following course units: Business Communication (COM), Marketing Communication Strategy (MCS), Strategic Management (SM), Macro Economics (ME), Entrepreneurship Development (ED), Fundamentals of Accounting (FA), Quantitative Methods (QM), Introduction to Taxation (ITX), ICT for Business (ICTB), Human Resource Management (HRM), Elements of Production Management (EPM), Business Statistics (BS), Business Administration (BA), Business Law (BL) and Company Law (CL).

Observation was for both the online and onsite lecturer-learner interaction of the lecturers that teach the identified course (unit) outlines. Particular interest was placed on the curriculum practice through the nature of the interaction, the language used by teacher and learner, class sitting arrangement, any group interactions, the nature of questioning used, and the manner of learners' responses to explore the nature of critical thinking embedded in the classroom. The researcher then interviewed the lecturers to substantiate the observation findings from the classroom practice. To effectively explore the nature of critical thinking in MUBS curriculum practice, the study looked at the teaching and assessment methods used in the BCOM program curriculum documents. To do so, the study used text extraction, as one of the tools of textual analysis, that enables a researcher to extract and point out key phrases in a text that relate to the subject matter of research. The following were the study findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Teaching and assessment practices in curriculum documents

In the BCOM Program document and reviewed Course Outlines, it was noted that there were several course units that did not indicate the teaching methods used. These included ITX, MCS,

EPM and QM. It should also be particularly noted that the BCD did not mention any method of classroom teaching. There were also several course units that did not indicate the methods of assessment to be used. These were ED, FA, ITX, BL, MCS, QM and BS. This therefore warranted the researcher to go into the classroom to observe the practice used in these course units, so as to make a more accurate analysis of the methods of teaching and assessment used in these course units. Group discussions, practical sessions and case studies were noted to be most common critical thinking yielding teaching methods noted in all the documents under review. The methods of assessment listed in the BCD and ME were noted to be irrelevant with respect to practices that yield critical thinking in learners. The common methods of assessment were class presentations, situational exams, and case presentations.

When the above-mentioned teaching and assessment methods were subjected to Bloom's Taxonomy, the study was able to clearly identify which teaching and assessment methods yielded which aspects of critical thinking. The researcher particularly looked for the following four Taxonomic words, as derived from the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy: Create: Teaching and assessment methods that encouraged learners to produce new or original work, principally, the science of teaching and assessment with focus on the analysis of what the students did. Evaluate: Teaching and assessment methods that encouraged learners to justify a stand or decision, with focus on the analysis of what the learners did. Analyze: Teaching and assessment methods that encouraged learners to draw connections among ideas, focusing on what the learners did. Apply: Teaching and assessment methods that encouraged learners to use information in new situations, with focus being on what the learners did.

It was noted that none of the documents reviewed had teaching and assessment methods that inspired learners to Create. The BCD and three course units did not encourage learners to Evaluate (ITX, MCS and QM). Phrases that denoted the taxonomic word 'Analyze' were noted to exist in all the documents reviewed except for FA, ITX, BL, MCS, EP, BS, ME and QM. On the other hand, phrases that meant the taxonomic word 'Apply' were only seen in the BCD, ICTB, and FA. This showed that some programs had teaching and assessment practices that promoted critical thinking, whereas for others, the documents were silent on the same.

Observed teaching and assessment practices

The most common teaching method in all the classes observed was the lecture method. The lecturers taught directly to the students, principally teaching concepts, as the students asked questions where they did not understand, when prompted by the lecturer. Group discussions and

presentations were also noted in one class (BC), where learners were allocated questions in groups and were expected to present their findings to the class. The key assessment methods (summative) were tests, with the most common being multiple-choice questions. Short answer questions were also noted, especially with respect to testing concepts, except in FA, where they tested analysis. Problem or real case questions were noted in ITX. Most assessments were summative assessments in the form of coursework with formative assessments given by a few teachers (mainly BC), in the form of group work and classroom participation during the class.

Focused interviews on observed teaching practices

To understand the teaching and assessment methods used by the lecturers during the observation phase, the researcher conducted follow-up focused interviews with the lecturers whose lessons and assessments had been observed. The researcher interviewed twelve lecturers (LEC CT 1 – 12) including six female and six male lecturers. Two were doctorate holders, and the rest were master's degree holders. The goal of the focused interviews was to understand why the lecturers had conducted the observed classes and assessments the way they had.

One of the things noted in the classroom was the use of the direct lecturing method in almost all the classes observed. This raised the question; why all the lecturers were using the direct lecturing method. Some explained that they used the direct lecturing because they were introducing and explaining concepts, and also, the nature of the class dictated the use of the lecture method. For instance, LEC CT 1 explained that, *“I used the lecture method in this class because my goal was for the students to learn the theories of the subject and understand them. This is because this is an introductory class. Later on, we will be able to apply what they have understood in the practical classes in the semester.”* Citing the fact of the subject matter being hard, LEC CT 12 articulated that, *“the class is mainly a lecture method because of the nature of the subject. The subject matter is generally hard for business students, so they have to understand the concepts fully before they get into group work and discussions. This I could only achieve through the straight lecture method, where I explain the concepts to the learners for them to understand them fully.”*

The size of the class was another justification for using the lecture method as LEC CT 6 argued, saying, *“I used the lecture method because the classes are very big. Dividing them into smaller groups for discussion is not very effective because only a few of the students in the groups will participate in the exercise. At the end of the day, very little learning will be achieved by all the learners. I will then not be sure whether they have understood the principles. But when I use the direct lecture method, I am able to know that they have all been taught and they have all*

participated in the class and have understood the subject. Therefore, when I examine them later on in the tests, I will not have any doubt that they did not understand what I am examining them on, for I would have taught them myself directly.”

With a more holistic analysis, LEC CT 4 and LEC CT 12 noted that the lecture method is the appropriate method of instruction for the University undergraduate level in Uganda. Students evaluate information better when they receive it verbally from the lecturer. For instance, LEC CT 4 said, *“for undergraduate students in university, the lecture method is the best method. This is because courses start from the introductory aspects. You are teaching content for the first time, unlike at the master’s degree level, where you are building on. In an undergraduate class, you are teaching the learners many things; you are teaching them how to read, public speaking, research, analysis, etc. So you need to use the lecture method. You also complement it with other methods. But the other methods can’t be the main method because of the graduate level of the students - undergraduates. Direct lecturing has to be the main method.”*

Other lecturers felt the lecture method was more engaging than other teaching methods. LEC CT 8 and LEC CT 10 noted that the lecture method involved the students more, and there were things the students would not do because the lecturer was right in front of them and could interact with them directly. For example, LEC CT 8 noted that, *“the lecture method is more engaging. You are able to tell the mood, demeanor, and reaction of the students. You get real-time feedback and responses on whether the subject is being delivered well, whether the learners understand what you are teaching, or whether they are getting challenged. If you use group work, you cannot tell who participated and who did not. In the lecture method, you can ask questions, and you will see that usually, only one or two people answer. You can see that others are not answering, and you engage them. You are able to enlist as many answers in a fairly short time. You hear from as many students as possible.”*

All the lecturers interviewed agreed that the lecture method they were using achieved the course objectives. Thus, if the course objectives promoted critical thinking, then the lecturers would be deemed to implement critical thinking in the learners.

The next question to address was whether the lecturers believed that the lecture method they were using was supporting learner engagement. Learner engagement has been noted to groom critical thinking in learners. There were mixed responses to this question. Some felt the lecture method supported learner engagement, while others did not. LEC CT 8 and LEC CT 12 thought it did. For instance, LEC CT 8 agreed, saying, *“the direct lecture method helps with the attendance of students*

physically. You are able to tell when students are not in class, and you can send warnings, and they will then attend the next day. When the students are present, sometimes, the questions asked by the lecturer cause the learners to think, especially where there is a random selection for answering". However, LEC CT 4 and LEC CT 9 had mixed feelings. For example, LEC CT 4 responded that, "it depends on the student numbers. If you have a small class, many students will be involved. This is because you can call students by name, give impromptu tests to test learning, etc. But where they are over 150 students, many will not respond. So it may not be as effective in learner engagement for big classes.

However, LEC CT 9 said, *"it depends on who is teaching. The direct lecture method is wide. One might or might not ask questions, use brain teasers, etc. So the learners might not be involved. If learners do not ask questions, then student involvement is not good. But if room is given for inquiry, then the learner can be involved. Its however below 50%. About 30%."*

From these perspectives, it is noted that learner engagement is achieved depending on the lecturers and class sizes. What is common in all the responses was that some form of learner engagement is achieved, but variation is in the degree of effective engagement.

Nevertheless, there were mixed reactions on whether the lecturers believed that the lecture method they were using yielded critical thinking in their learners. Some agreed to the assertion with some qualifications. LEC CT 10 and LEC CT 11, in particular noted that, *"it did, depending on how it is used. If questions are given in class, then it does. If I pose a question for the entire class to think about and we discuss it as a class, then it will make them think critically. This is also true when students think about something outside the classwork and ask a question no one has ever asked before. Then they are exercising critical thinking. When they also supplement onto what I say in class, even when I haven't asked a question, I take that to mean that they are thinking about what I am saying. The lecture method is better than group presentations, where learners just download content from the internet without understanding because they are just presenting the work. After a day, they will not remember the content."*

Whereas LEC CT 8 confessed that, *"yes, the method yielded critical thinking, but it could not stand alone. It must be supported with other teaching methods. Some students benefit better from other methods. For example, critical thinking requires learners to read before they come to class, but if students don't comply, it cannot work."* Others disagreed with the fact that direct lecturing yielded critical thought. For instance, LEC CT 9 stated thus:

"To a large extent, the lecture method doesn't instill critical thinking skills when compared to the

case method and the individual take-home assignments where students brainstorm answers. It only does at 20%. It only helps those who are interested in class. It is not effective in passing on critical thinking because many times after class, you can ask a learner what you have said, and they cannot even re-echo it. Yet, if the work was hands-on or a problem discussion, they would be forced to think about it and apply the knowledge.”

It can thus be noted that according to the lecturers, it is not a guarantee that when one uses the direct lecture method, the learners will obtain critical thinking skills. Several aspects have to be put into consideration so as to achieve learner critical thought using the direct lecture method.

Nevertheless, how did lecturers conceptualize critical thinking? All responses obtained pointed to critical thinking as stemming from thinking, analyzing, internalizing, interpreting, and applying the information obtained. For example, LEC CT 12 defined it as *analyzing information, interpreting it, and coming up with a judgment*. LEC CT 10 deemed critical thinking as developing or exhausting a given concept and being able to derive its meaning, relevance, and applicability. LEC CT 9 said it was the ability to identify a fact and analyze it to one’s advantage or goal to reach a reasonable conclusion. LEC CT 8 said it was looking at the subject matter and having in-depth knowledge of it, being able to break down the subject and elements with deep analysis. LEC CT 4 also looked at critical thinking as looking at an issue in depth, beyond the surface and all that is involved. This shows that the lecturers were aware of critical thinking and, therefore, should be able to appreciate the objectives of instilling it in learners.

Focused interviews on the observed assessment practice

The study also conducted interviews on the observed assessment methods used by the lecturers. From the classroom observation, it had been noticed that most of the assessments were in the form of multiple-choice questions (true or false questions or choosing the best option from a, b, c, or d) and short essay questions (around five marks per question). It was therefore important to know why the lecturers used this type of assessment. Regarding the Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQs), some lecturers noted that the MCQs are effective in covering a wide span of subject matter, making learners think critically, and testing understanding of the subject. They believed that MCQs foster critical thinking. LEC CT 9 and, in particular LEC CT 8 noted that, *“MCQs help assess the learners’ knowledge over a wider span because answers are closely related in MCQ. So it will take a student who has read to come up with the right answer. They promote critical thinking.”* LEC CT 12 also agreed that, *“to be able to understand MCQs, you need to understand the information. You can’t answer if otherwise. You must read, understand and then understand the circumstances around that information. So that makes the learner read and analyze. Not like they are reading*

newspapers.”

Moreover, LEC CT 4 also said, *“MCQs yield critical thinking because a student has to sit alone and choose between 3 to 4 options that are close. The student has to be critical. They have to be really keen on how they answer.”* Some lecturers however disagreed with the critical thinking aspect. They felt that MCQs did not yield critical thinking in learners. For example, LEC CT 10 disagreed that, *“MCQs do not yield critical thinking. Students are not able to think about the questions. They only read around the topic to be examined and do not go deep into the substance. MCQs are limiting to students’ thinking. They are also easy to copy, and there is no real depth for the learners.”* LEC CT 10 and LEC CT 11’s perspectives were also supported by LEC CT 6 in claiming that MCQs simply test understanding. LEC CT 6 stated that, *“MCQs enable us to test whether the learners have understood the subject. They do not investigate the application of the subject matter, which is done by the short answer questions. The MCQs test understanding of the subject matter.”*

Some lecturers also celebrated the fact that it was easy for them to administer the MCQ tests which were easily done online, through the MUBSEP portal. The test would be uploaded on the portal and the students would answer on line. They felt that the use of technology helped the learners adopt to the changing world of education blending with technology, which sharpened their critical skills in line with world trends. For example, LEC CT 6 said, *“when we use MCQs, all we do, as lecturers, is set the tests. After that, the grading is done automatically, online, and in record time. All we have to do is download the results as soon as the test is done and students receive their results. This is a very efficient way of operating as an institution. The students are able to adapt to the use of technology in education, and this sharpens their skills as learners.”*

In the classroom observations, the lecturers were also noted to use short answer questions and the question was, what did they seek to achieve through that? They generally noted that the short answer questions tested application of subject matter. This is because one would need to know the subject being tested and then apply it in explaining or cricking/ discussing the question, under a limited time frame. They also noted that it was not easy to cheat when answering short answer questions, as opposed to the MCQs. For example, LEC CT 5 noted that, *“the short answer questions help with the application of concepts. If you just give calculate questions, you will have the same answers. So you ask the short answer questions that will lead to the application of the technique taught so that each student can come up with their own technique.”*

On whether the methods of assessment used support learner engagement with the content tested,

the lecturers had mixed feelings, for example noting that, *“the probability of one’s work being done for them in a take-home is higher than if you give the learners MCQs where they are forced to do the work themselves. MCQs tell you how much the student has learned. The learners are also able to know how much they know. It, therefore, causes them to dig deep. With MCQs, I am able to know how strong they are but give them a take-home, and they will cheat”* (LEC CT 4). Whereas LEC CT 11 said, *“short answer questions support learner engagement in learning by allowing students to express their understanding of a specific concept. But learners don’t read when they are told that the testing is of MCQs (especially true or false questions). Students are not interested in preparing for MCQs but do so for short answer questions.”*

The lecturers' belief that the assessment methods they were using could yield critical thinking in the learners yielded different responses, with some agreeing with specific methods while others disagreed. Some argued that short answer questions yielded critical thought. For example, LEC CT 9 noted that, *“short answer questions are able to assess whether a student can explain a phenomenon or theory and to what extent the student has understood and appreciated the principles.”* LEC CT 4 also stated that, *“short answer questions that test the ‘why’ yield critical thinking. Relating answers together forces the students to think deeper because they are working on their own.”*

However, concerning MCQs, the feelings were divided. Some believed they did yield critical thinking in learners, while others disagreed. For example, LEC CT 8 believed that, *“MCQs yield critical thinking because they are set critically. The aspects put into setting MCQs makes them a quick and deep analysis of one particular thing and how the learner relates it.”* But LEC CT 9 felt otherwise. They stated that, *“MCQs (especially true/false questions) do not yield much critical thinking and are the least method to bring out critical thinking in learners. The MCQs, which had four alternative options, were moderate in terms of yielding critical thinking in learners. Essay questions and problem questions were the top assessment methods to yield critical thinking because they relate to real-life stories and show learners how to relate their class work to reality.”*

The researcher asked the lecturers what other assessment methods they used that they believed yielded critical thinking in the learners. They noted to use presentations, take-home assignments, group discussions, short class tests/ spot tests of 10 min (3 – 5 questions), case studies, and research or term papers where students conduct short research on a particular topical area.

Interpretation of observations and focused interviews

In analyzing and interpreting the data from the observations and interviews, the study used the deductive thematic approach, which involves coming to the data with some preconceived themes that were expected to be reflected in the data based on theory or existing knowledge. The study used the common themes reflected in Bloom's Taxonomy, to determine if the common teaching and assessment methods identified through the observation and interview process support the Taxonomic themes already identified in this study. The guiding question was whether the teaching and assessment methods used could fit within the key words that underlie Bloom's Taxonomy (Create, Evaluate, Analyze, and Apply), as follows:

Apply: Do the teaching and assessment methods encourage learners to use information in new situations? Focus is on what the methods enable the learners to do. Analyze: Do the teaching and assessment methods encourage learners to draw connections among ideas? Focus again is on what the methods enable the learners do. Evaluate: Do the teaching and assessment methods encourage learners to justify a stand or decision? Focus here is on what the methods enable the learners to do. Create: Do the teaching and assessment methods encourage learners to produce new or original work? Focus is on what the methods enable the learners do.

It was noted that the lecture method does not support the characteristics of the taxonomic word 'create.' The same goes for the MCQs and short answer questions which do not fully encourage students to 'create.' This implies that the creative aspect of MUBS BCOM students may generally be low because the most common teaching and assessment methods used do not promote the aspect of 'create' in critical thinking. It means that the nature of critical thinking skills prevalent in the BCOM curriculum practice are short of aspects of the skill of 'create.' On the other hand, group work, presentations, and the problem questions in assessment support the critical aspect of 'create,' but as noted in the interviews, these are not used as much.

It was also noted that the lecture method does not fully support the characteristics of the taxonomic word 'evaluate.' This means that MUBS BCOM learners do not generally obtain the critical skill of evaluation through class lectures. However, the fact that the group work and presentations support the taxonomic word 'evaluate' means that if the students are fortunate enough to have plenty of group work and presentations, they may build the skill of evaluation. With respect to assessment, all the common assessment methods used support the characteristics of the taxonomic word 'evaluate.' This means that every time the learners go through an assessment, they exercise the ability to evaluate. The only challenge is that these assessments are generally only three times

a semester, which begs the question of whether that amount of exposure is sufficient to build the critical skill of evaluation in a learner.

With respect to the word 'Analyze' it was noted that the lecture method does not support the characteristics of the taxonomic word 'analyze.' The lecture method being the most prevalent method, shows that MUBS BCOM learners may not effectively develop the critical skill of analysis from the curriculum practice. Whereas the group work, presentations, and the assessment methods used support the characteristics of the taxonomic word 'analyze,' their occurrence, as noted from the observation and focused interviews, is too low to make a significant impact. The lecture method does not support the characteristics of the taxonomic word 'apply.' This means that generally, the MUBS BCOM curriculum practice does not facilitate the use of the critical skill of 'application' for its learners. Institutions of higher learning are supposed to be opportunities for the application of knowledge, but the most common method of instruction used does not promote this. As already noted, whereas the group work, presentations, and assessment methods used support the characteristics of the taxonomic word 'apply,' these are not frequently used, as noted in the observation and focused interviews.

Overall, the lecture method does not support all the four key words of the taxonomy. This means that the lecturers need to put more effort into the teaching methods used. They need to go away considerably from the direct lecturing method. They should substantially increase the use of group work and presentations, as they fully support all the four taxonomic words of critical thinking.

In literature, there are varying opinions on whether the lecture method really yields critical thinking in learners. No other teaching method is more widely used and criticized than the lecture method (Macaranas, 2022). Research shows that the traditional lecture method remains the predominant teaching method at higher institutions of learning (Viviers & de Villiers, 2020), and it is not optimal for critical thinking development (Carter et al., 2016). However, later authors such as Zamir et al., (2021) have argued that the lecture method is the most common and effective method university teachers use to instill critical thinking through telling lectures and storytelling. The pure (traditional) lecture method is typically discouraged by educators who adhere to learner-centered, creative, or innovative education (Macaranas, 2022). Dumitru et al., (2018) also posited that Lecture-Discussion Teaching was one of the most used strategies reported in the literature and by the teachers for instilling critical thinking in learners. As such, the lecture method may not be an optimal or ideal way of instilling critical thinking in learners (Carter et al., 2016), but it does not mean that it does not instill any critical thinking skills at all. It's not being optimal simply means

there would be a need to supplement it with other teaching methods, as is actually done in MUBS, where it is supplemented with case studies and group work.

With respect to the case studies, Mahdi et al., (2020) noted that if the case studies method were used in teaching, it would significantly contribute to developing students' critical thinking and decision-making skills. In MUBS, almost all course units noted the use of case studies or simulations, or problem question assessments (analysis). This method of teaching and assessment has also been called integrated assessment, which is based on real-world problems. They have been noted to infuse critical thinking skills in learners (Cloete, 2018). Even Halpern (1990) emphasized the need for university students to be taught how to think critically through real-life applications. By using case studies, MUBS is seen to use teaching and assessment methods that inculcate critical thinking in learners.

Group work, also known as Team-Based Learning, fosters critical thinking skills in learners. Students' thinking and writing improve as they engage in group discussions, reflect on assessment tasks, write and rewrite group discussions, and participate in class discussions (Kim, 2013). As such, it is expected that the group work in the learning and assessment used in the different course units in the MUBS BCOM curriculum should yield critical thinking in learners and maybe supplement the weaknesses of the lecture method.

In Espey (2018), where students worked in the same team of five to seven students throughout the semester, with daily interaction and engagement with course material involving both graded and ungraded activities, it was found that students felt that Team-Based Learning (TBL) significantly enhanced specific critical thinking skills in comparison to the 'typical' college course, and even more so, in comparison specifically to lecture-based courses (also see Carter et al., 2016). TBL sharpened critical thinking skills through peer feedback without imposing an excessive grading burden or need for continuous instructor feedback, as students provided feedback to each other. The discussion also changed the focus of the learning process from the single view of the instructor to the diversity of views within a group of students. It was noted, however, that there is a need to put a lot of thought and time into designing activities to stimulate productive discussion and generate the desired learning.

The real question, therefore, would be whether the group work in MUBS is as detailed as that advocated for by Espey in his study. In the Business Communications class, for example, the group work involved teams of ten students responding to a real-life question the lecturer gave. The groups were allocated by the lecturer bearing in mind random factors such as gender and tribe, and each

participant was expected to present an aspect of the group findings and be cross-examined on the group work as they were presenting before the class. In this way, learners were able to pay attention in the group because they would have to be able to speak for the group and answer random questions. This facilitated peer-to-peer critical learning and analysis of the subject matter.

Loes & Pascarella (2017) also pointed out a very important weakness of group work when they noted that the critical-thinking benefits derived from exposure to collaborative learning did not accrue equally to all students. In their study, they noted that students from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups did not exhibit gains in critical thinking as a result of learning collaboratively. This shows that in some instances, aspects of socio-economic circumstances impact the learners, and therefore, as pointed out in the previous section, must be considered when analyzing learners' critical thinking.

It was noted in chapter four that Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs) and short answer questions were the most common methods of assessment used in MUBS, followed by real-life (problem) questions. One can use Bloom's taxonomy to identify MCQs that assess students' critical thinking skills (Zaidi et al., 2018). The study findings noted that MCQs and short answer questions mainly supported the taxonomic words of 'evaluation,' 'analysis,' and 'application,' but not creation. However, as Ennis (1993), critical thinking was represented in the three upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and that each of the levels, and all of them together, represented what ought to be education goals of higher institutions of learning. As such, the presence of any one of the taxonomic words is sufficient to denote the existence of critical thinking in the MCQs and short answer questions. Indeed Zaidi et al., (2018) also mentioned that well-written MCQs can support learner engagement in the higher levels of cognitive reasoning, such as application or synthesis of knowledge, which are aspects of critical thinking. However, the lecturers in the interviews noted that some MCQs might yield less critical thinking, depending on how they are set. The lecturers also pointed out that the students could easily guess and receive a correct answer in some instances, yet they did not employ any critical thought. This was also noted by Zaidi et al., (2018) when they stated that the faculty that write the MCQs might perceive that certain MCQs require higher-order thinking skills to process the question, whereas the learners only employ lower-order thinking skills to render a correct response. So it is not automatic that MCQs would yield critical thinking in learners. It depends on the lecturer setting them. As such, MUBS lecturers should pay attention to the setting used to ensure that they set questions that yield critical thinking in learners.

CONCLUSION

Prior to the start of this study, my assumption was that Uganda was facing a serious challenge with of youth/graduate unemployment and that the absence of relevant skills, like critical thinking skills in learners, was one of the reasons responsible for this situation. I therefore sought to inquire into the curriculum practice of the institutions of higher learning in Uganda, using the MUBS BCOM program as the case study, to inquire whether the graduates were taught critical thinking skills in class. My assumption was that the skills were not inculcated in class. Hence, the learners did not have these skills, leading to the big problem of youth/ graduate unemployment in Uganda. Overall, the data has shown that there is an element of truth in this assumption. The curriculum practice generally uses methods that do not strongly support the development of critical thinking skills in learners. The over-dependence on the lecture method causes the learners to fall short of the key taxonomic words that build critical thinking skills in learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need for the lecturers to pay deliberate attention to how they use the lecture method in the classroom, considering the lecture method is the most dominant teaching method, and it is generally not fully optimal in dispensing critical thinking in learners. The lecturers must be mindful of the limitations of the lecture method and therefore be intentional in using it to make it more optimal for critical thinking. Some of the lecture variations that could be used to improve the traditional lecture method could be interactive lectures, lectures as entertainment, lectures as a story, and lectures as a solution to a problem. Several lecturing tips can also be used to improve the lecture method. For example, the lecturer can identify real-life problems related to the subject matter and use them to raise initial questions to the learners. The lecturer can also present the lecture in a language suitable for and understandable by the students. (Putting into consideration the sociocultural environment). The lecturer should also remember to gain, draw, and maintain the student's attention and interest through stories, and real-life questions, among others.

The lecturers must also be competent in critical thinking. For a lecturer to be able to lecture with a critical perspective, they, too, must be educated to be critical, compassionate, and collaborative in transmitting information. When interviewed, most of the lecturers were cognizant of what critical thinking is and were mindful of the need to incorporate it in their classes. However, some were unsure if they achieved the same in their classes. As such, the lecturers would also need a refresher training of trainers that specifically reminds them of the importance of critical thinking in their classes and how they can best use the lecture method to instill critical thinking in learners

better.

Since the dominant lecture method used is not optimal for fostering critical thinking, there should be a deliberate increase in the use of other teaching methods. The lecture method works best if supported or accompanied by more interactive techniques. The MUBS lecturers are already doing this, as noted in the interviews. However, a lot more can be done. For example, they could increase their use of project-based teaching, as it is one of the most effective learning methods that instill critical thinking in students. Project-based learning is a modern teaching method that connects students' experiences with school life and stimulates serious thinking as students gain new knowledge. Project-based learning is a constructivist teaching strategy where students are expected to construct and interpret their new knowledge rather than memorize it. It is a group-work teaching approach through which students are exposed to situations regarding real-life issues and practices. Moreover, the learning process includes a series of complex tasks that occupy students' minds as they work on projects. In other words, open-ended, problem-solving, decision-making, or investigative activities are used to achieve desired goals in the learners, and the projects are designed on the basis of the issues being discussed.

Concerning assessment, it was noted in the study that depending on how they are set, the MCQs may not optimally inculcate critical thinking skills in learners. Some of the lecturers also pointed this out during the interviews. As such, it is important for the lecturers to pay special attention to how the questions are set to ensure that the set questions test higher-order thinking and application. This implies that MUBS avoids asking 'true, false' questions in the MCQs and focuses more on the questions that foster critical thought. This could be by:

- Presenting novel material. This can be done by paraphrasing class notes or textbook material to avoid testing for recognition.
- Using verbs that are matched to Bloom's higher levels of thinking.
- Flipping the question. That is, instead of listing a concept and asking the student to choose the correct definition, the lecturer can provide a scenario that demonstrates the concept and ask the student to choose the correct concept.
- Presenting a scenario, graph, table, chart, poem, or other visual or textual information that the learners need to recall and synthesize information.

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