

# Dissoi Logoi: fostering cognitive dissonance through teacher development

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## Introduction

For its 2015 symposium, the Centre for English Language Proficiency at the University of Malta invited Prof Michael Burke to give a keynote speech on critical thinking in the ELT classroom. Burke (2015), a professor of rhetoric at the University of Utrecht, started by considering the benefits of the rhetorical exercise of *dissoi logoi*. This exercise is meant to enable individuals to develop a richer understanding of an issue by compelling themselves to evaluate it from an opposite perspective to their own. Also known as *dialexeis* due to the two-fold nature of an argument, *dissoi logoi* provides access to a deeper truth (Kent Sprague, 1968). By arguing both sides of an issue, individuals are forced to consider a position that may run counter to their beliefs. Even if they still determine that their opinion is superior, they will have become aware of a position that might be equally valid. This article explores the significance of enabling ELT practitioners to engage in *dissoi logoi* as part of teacher development. It also posits how in the process teachers might experience cognitive dissonance, which can instigate a critical re-evaluation of their beliefs and practices.

## Critical Thinking

In Protagoras, Plato describes how the eponymous sophist propounded the idea that there are two opposing sides to every argument. As a champion of the objective truth, Plato lambasts Protagoras's relativism. Nonetheless, over the centuries the ability to argue both sides of an issue has become recognised as a necessary skill, especially in professions like law and

politics. Burke (2013) considers it an essential means of developing young people's critical thinking:

Indeed, this idea of getting students out of their comfort zones and forcing them to take on a persona and argue against what they personally believe in, against their very values and subsequent attitudes, is a critical exercise that I believe all university students should engage in. (p. 9)

Young people's ability to consider an alternative perspective needs to be cultivated given that this is a manifestation of critical thinking, which is crucial for the attainment of a country's social and economic goals (Burke, 2013). In fact, Burke (2013) affirms that "an intellectually critical youth citizenry" (p. 4) needs to be shaped by means of a rhetorical pedagogy that gives primacy to young people's ability to reason critically and communicate clearly.

In his keynote, Burke emphasised the significance of developing young people's critical thinking skills. These skills constitute "thinking that is of course not entrenched in dogma (although committed to reason), is willing to consider multiple perspectives, is informed, sceptical, and entails sound reasoning" (Mason, 2008, p. 6). According to Cottrell (2005), "Learning to think in critically analytical and evaluative ways means using mental processes such as attention, categorisation, selection, and judgement" (p. 1). Critical thinking skills enable young people to engage in "thinking about thinking—we engage in it when we consider whether our ideas really make good sense" (Moore & Parker, 2009, p. 3).

Research shows that such thinking can be developed in the ELT classroom (Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015). This leads Yilin Sun (2014), the president of TESOL, to affirm her belief in the necessity of cultivating students' critical thinking:

One of the most challenging tasks for language teachers when working with English language learners is to engage students in critical thinking and encourage them to ask questions that go beyond factual information... As a teacher, we need to value and nurture our children's natural tendency to learn by questioning and help them become effective questioners, critical thinkers, and active language users.

Similarly, the ELT author John Hughes (2014) argues that critical thinking needs to be taught in the language classroom for a number of reasons: communicative language tasks require critical thinking; the use of authentic meaningful texts demands a critical approach; in the digital age people need critical literacy to evaluate the sources of texts; critical thinking activities lead to whole-brain language learning; critical thinking enables language examination candidates to perform better; and critical thinking is crucial in higher education and in various professions (pp. 5-7). A number of studies illustrate how critical thinking activities in a lesson can lead to significant improvements in learners' English proficiency and academic achievement (Liaw, 2007; Yang & Gamble, 2013). Given the fact that its benefits extend to language learning, ELT practitioners need to employ pedagogical practices that cultivate critical thinking in their learners.

In order to produce critically engaged young people it is necessary to evaluate their education and ascertain whether current pedagogical practices in an assessment-driven educational culture sustain critical thinking in the classroom. If, as is most probable, these are found to be lacking then it is possible that one of the factors responsible for this failure is teachers' own inexperience at harnessing rhetorical methods of learning for the benefit of their students. Burke (2013) suggests that these methods constitute a fundamental knowledge base that all teachers should develop:

A systematic understanding of classical rhetoric will allow contemporary educators to discover the many rhetorical means of learning available and in doing so add considerably to the contemporary teaching and learning toolkit, and in particular to the toolkit of critical thinking, critical writing and critical speaking. What is needed is a conscious, systematic deployment of some of these ancient rhetorical methods of learning, not a subconscious

and arbitrary approach, as now appears to be principally the case. (p. 4)

Recognising the value of rhetorical methods such as *dissoi logoi* for ELT practitioners wishing to cultivate students' critical thinking leads to an acknowledgement of the idea that teacher development should assume responsibility for equipping educators with the relevant knowledge and skills.

### **Cognitive Dissonance**

Enabling teachers to master such a rhetorical exercise as *dissoi logoi* might lead them to experience cognitive dissonance or disequilibrium. The experimental social psychologist Leon Festinger (1957) explains that human beings seek internal consistency which when destabilised results in psychological discomfort. In order to minimise cognitive dissonance people tend to shun situations or information that could act as its source. They do so because they are reluctant to confront beliefs, ideas or values that run counter to their own. Cognitive dissonance leads people to adopt a number of strategies: transform their existing beliefs and ideas; reconcile opposing beliefs by means of new ideas; or minimise the significance of a dissonant element. Festinger (1957) points out that "If little or no dissonance exists, there would be no motivation...to seek out new and additional information" (p. 127). As a consequence of cognitive dissonance, people manifest information-seeking behaviour. Hence, cognitive dissonance can be seen as essential to authentic learning given that it is experienced whenever one is presented with information that challenges an entrenched position.

In the case of teachers, cognitive dissonance may be experienced in the course of evaluating beliefs and practices that are antithetical to the ones forming part of their identity, or when provided with the opportunity to notice a discrepancy between their beliefs and practices. The use of *dissoi logoi* in teacher development may lead ELT practitioners to question their faulty conceptions and modes of operation and substitute them with more valid ones (e.g. empirically based strategies). It spurs teachers to critically reflect on who they are as practitioners, and why they hold certain beliefs and engage in certain practices.

### **Conclusion**

As one of the pillars of Burke's (2013) rhetorical pedagogy, *dissoi logoi* engenders critical thinking. He maintains that "Critical thinking, speaking and writing abilities are not innate... What is needed is instruction in theory, coupled with practice and further exercises in analysis, imitation and paraphrase" (Burke, 2013, p. 17).

What this implies is that ELT practitioners require instruction in critical thinking. To break the vicious circle of educators who do not teach critical thinking because they themselves were not taught critical thinking, it is paramount that teacher development endows them with the knowledge and skills needed to address the present lacuna.

To cultivate critical thinking in young people it is not enough for teacher development to restrict itself to stuffing educators' bag of language teaching tricks. If we expect ELT practitioners to teach critical thinking then it is imperative that their own critical thinking is allowed to flourish. They need to develop the ability to think about their thinking so as to recognise its strengths and weaknesses, and consequently reconsider their viewpoint and reconstruct their thinking in an improved form (Judge, Jones, & McCreery, 2009, p. 4). Teachers need to be provided with the capacity to think critically on their beliefs and practices, evaluate ideas that challenge their deeply held opinions, and assess the

opposing side to arguments they might take for granted. This would enable them to position themselves as critical thinkers rather than adhere to fossilised beliefs and practices or unquestioningly comply with a set of dictates that might have become the norm in ELT. The true measure of effective teacher development seems to be the ability to wrench oneself out of the groove and reconsider all one knows about teaching and learning.

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