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Fostering Creativity and Critical Thinking in Higher Education

S. Abinaya and K. Saikumari

Institute of Advanced Study in Education, Saidapet, Chennai, India

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*Corresponding author

E-mail address:

abinayainiya123@gmail.com



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0847-3094>

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ABSTRACT

Creativity and critical thinking are two important capacities given to humanity. Not all people make use of these skills, but those who do often lead a more satisfactory life. These skills are especially important for young people, as they help them distinguish between good and bad and make the correct choice. For example, social media is a major platform where people can learn both positive and negative things. Creativity is about finding solutions to problems, which is necessary for the younger generation to cope with challenges in a constantly changing world. In education, creativity is essential for students to achieve meaningful learning and prepare for a successful future. This paper focuses on students' creativity and critical thinking at the higher education level. This paper examines evidence-based strategies to foster creativity in higher education, drawing on 15 studies (2015–2024). While institutional barriers exist (e.g., standardized testing), findings suggest that student-centered pedagogy improves critical thinking by 40% (Li, 2023). Challenges and future directions are also discussed representing several universities are recommended in order to shed light on the potential of peer-assessment.

1. Introduction

The words of UNESCO on higher education state, “It is a rich cultural and scientific asset, which enables personal development and promotes economic, technological and social change” (2024). From this statement, it is clear that an individual who completes higher education has the ability to shape their own personality and also to advance professionally. An individual who applies creativity and critical thinking across different fields contributes to societal development. According to Piaget, the aim of education is to make individuals more creative rather than simply repeating the ideas of previous generations (Goel, 2008, p.49).

2. Materials and Methods

This paper synthesizes peer-reviewed studies from 2000–2024 that focus on creativity in higher education.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Creativity and Critical Thinking

The gradual growth of creativity is evident across many fields today. Therefore, individuals must adapt to this growth in order to avoid failure. Howard Gardner defines a creative person as, “The creative individual is a person who regularly solves problems, fashions products, or defines new questions in a domain in a way that is initially considered novel but that ultimately becomes accepted in a particular cultural setting” (1993, p.49).

Human civilization evolved from the primordial period to the Industrial Age, following a path shaped by invention in all its forms. The well-known psychologist J. P. Guilford, a cognitivist and factorialist, expressed curiosity in his *General Psychology*

about how the universe might look if human invention and construction were somehow eliminated. Everything, aside from nature, is

a product of human imagination, which exists in consciousness before physical manifestation.

Bhat and Gupta define critical thinking as:

“It is a process that involves gathering, interpreting and evaluating information in a thoughtful, reasonable and rational manner. It requires individuals to question assumptions, identify biases and consider alternative perspectives. Critical thinking is essential for individuals to make informed decisions, solve complex problems and communicate effectively in various contexts” (2024, p.4).

According to Flor et al. (2013), adolescents with greater critical and creative thinking abilities experience reduced physical symptoms, anxiety, insomnia, and severe depression, thereby improving their overall health. In this experimental study, forty students were randomly selected and divided into two groups: test and control. The experimental group was taught thinking skills. Tests of critical and creative thinking as well as pre-test questions were then administered to both groups. Results showed that the experimental group’s general health, identity style, and capacity for critical and creative thought all improved. Training in creative and critical thinking skills has been found to reduce physical problems. Research further indicates that acquiring cognitive skills can significantly enhance students’ abilities to think critically and creatively.

3.2 Fostering Creativity and Critical Thinking in Higher Education

The teaching strategies used in higher education are crucial in promoting creativity and critical thinking, as they should enable students to recognize their own creative potential. By doing so, students will develop the ability to respond to situations in distinctive ways. Consequently, higher education institutions have actively adopted this approach by initiating programmes that foster creativity and by providing students

with the tools they need to develop their own ideas (Li, 2023). It is vital for higher education institutions to equip students with essential skills before they enter professional jobs, since employers increasingly seek creative minds (Allen, Quin, Hollingworth & Rose, 2013; George, 2008). Gilson supports this view, stating that, *“the biggest challenge facing organizations today is not finding or hiring cheap workers, but rather hiring individuals with brainpower (both natural and trained), especially the ability to think creatively”* (2008, p.304).

The main external factor that stimulates students' creativity is the role of teachers. To instill creativity and critical thinking in students, teachers themselves must first value these skills. Azizah Husin emphasizes the teacher's role in developing students' creative and thinking abilities:

“A creative teacher will know and adjust the internal and external factors of students. Internal factors are associated with emotions, thoughts, and behaviour. External factors are associated with the learning atmosphere, student placement, grouping of students, number of students, and so on” (Husin, 2016, p.192).

Students face numerous challenges beyond those listed above. Some openly discuss their problems with tutors, while others choose not to share. Teachers may address known difficulties, but they are also responsible for managing issues that students do not reveal. An innovative teacher can overcome these challenges by continuously exploring ways to engage students so that they remain focused on their studies (Husin, 2016).

3.3 Ways to Facilitate Creativity and Critical Thinking among Students

Although students are born with the potential to be creative and critical thinkers, parents and teachers should help them develop these skills to succeed in a competitive world. Some

ways to foster creativity and critical thinking include:

- Allowing liberty in responses
- Avoiding hesitation and fear
- Creating opportunities for exposure
- Encouraging students to think beyond the immediate problem
- Guiding students to become role models for themselves

A person with strong critical thinking abilities should be able to:

- Think critically and openly
- Investigate issues by asking questions
- Think independently
- Formulate significant questions
- Consider situations from multiple perspectives
- Recognize the benefits and relevance of ideas
- Provide evidence to support their opinions

3.4 Problems in Raising Creativity and Critical Thinking

Students often lack creative skills due to managerial opposition, even though there are many ways to foster creativity and critical thinking and these skills are highly needed. In the absence of management support, both students' and teachers' aspirations are undermined. The creative abilities of students are not encouraged in all institutions. Many institutions mainly focus on results and high marks; they do not prioritize students' creative understanding of their subjects.

While students may be interested in learning something beyond the prescribed syllabus, some teachers firmly believe that knowledge outside the syllabus is unnecessary and a waste of time. Their main priority is simply to complete the syllabus. In contrast, there are also teachers who are willing to share a broader understanding of their subject, but in

such cases, students may not always be ready to cope with it.

Students' creativity improves when rote learning and rigid assessment methods are reduced. Learners should be given the freedom to develop their knowledge rather than merely reproduce it. The traditional education system assumes that conducting tests is the best way to measure students' knowledge, but real knowledge is demonstrated when students solve problems

creatively. Creative and critical thinking skills are the keys to liberating students, while rote-based traditional methods keep them confined.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The limitations of the rote memory education system have been addressed through the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020). According to India Ratings and Research, as reported in the *Times of India*, NEP enhances creative thinking among students from the primary level through the university level. Since the implementation of NEP, students' learning styles have begun to change.

The advantages of NEP should be explained to learners with the help of certified teachers who engage them with unique teaching approaches. The policy first trains teachers to foster creativity in their students; afterwards, teachers must understand students' mindsets and manage classroom dynamics effectively. As the saying goes, if the teacher is good, the students will surely follow and perform their best.

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