

## CRITIQUING LIKE A MASTER: DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING IN AN INTERNATIONALISED COURSE

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### The teaching-learning challenge

Even though I have been teaching literature and literary criticism at Comenius University in Bratislava (UNIBA) for nine years, I have been troubled with the fact that students who choose to sign up for these courses find them much less captivating than the subject would warrant. In particular, there seem to be four interconnected issues. First, students are simply not interested, probably because they do not see the use and the relevance of learning about literary criticism. Due to the influence of social media, the quality of criticism is melting away in various types of online outlets (Jokelainen 2013). Second, courses in literature tend to focus on the national literature of a country, which may seem too localised for students living in a globalised world. Third, the way students learn is not inspiring, either. Both teachers and students seem to prefer passive learning methods. Students' tendency to sit still and listen to their professor is less stressful than taking responsibility for active participation but it negatively affects their learning as literary criticism can be best learned by doing. Fourth, and relatedly, students' ability to think critically remains underdeveloped, but critical thinking is at the heart of good quality literary criticism.

I have decided to remedy this fourfold problem by designing a new course called 'Literary Criticism in the Era of Social Media', which built upon the concepts of internationalisation and active learning. By drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data from oral student feedback, the institutional student evaluation form, assessments of student work, a reflective teacher's journal and classroom observation, I argue that putting these two concepts into practice can lead to higher levels of engagement and enhanced critical thinking skills among students.

### Pedagogical method

I chose to focus on both literary classics and social media in the course for two reasons: first, to help students understand the differences in quality between literary criticism and opinions expressed in social media, and second, to encourage their engagement. However, the main features of this newly designed course were internationalisation and active learning with stress on thinking, talking and writing freely and critically about literature.

I am committed to navigating students to acknowledge that we all are sometimes literary critics and that interpretation of culture, not only literature, is an important part of our lives. In the contemporary globalised world, culture is not only the cornerstone of literary studies but also key to internationalisation, that is, to 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education' (Knight 2003: 3). Literary criticism—including its methods and forms—is shared across cultures and the most impor-

tant books of world literature are part of the globalised culture we live in. Furthermore, literature is often culturally determined, and thus, it is necessary to understand foreign cultures to write quality criticism of literary works. Literary criticism that moves away from the local (national) to the global (international) has greater potential for students to identify with, and thus, engage with more closely.

‘Literary Criticism in the Era of Social Media’ embraces a student-centred approach to learning putting students ‘at the heart of the learning process’ (Hoidn 2016: 440). To achieve this, active learning is essential. Of active learning methods, I chose peer learning, which ‘emphasizes the sharing of experience of all participant students’ (Gogus 2012: 2572), because it allows students to recognise the value of each other’s perspectives while taking their first steps thinking, speaking, and writing about literature. While designing the course, I was working with the idea that the students would not be just criticising literary works, but would work as each other’s critics and reviewers. Student-centred peer learning goes beyond enhancing student learning (e.g., Boud 2001; Cooper 2002; Topping 2006) by putting into practice the principles behind literary criticism that students must speak openly, express their opinions, and use arguments to explain their points.

I moved away from a heavy focus on lectures and toward active learning by flipping the classroom experience. Students were required to ‘read material before coming to class, so that class time can be devoted to discussion, peer interactions, and time to assimilate and think’ (Mazur 2009: 51). Accordingly, students were assigned one or two texts (between two and fifteen pages in length) to read at home before each class session, and thus, I could replace lecturing with such peer learning activities as discussions, student presentations, and group work. This hands-on approach is likely to make students more involved. Therefore, going into the course I expected that (H1) the combination of internationalisation and active learning, and specifically peer learning methods, would lead to higher levels of engagement among students.

Another purpose behind introducing these activities was to increase students’ learning via developing their ability to think critically. Critical thinking is ‘an active, intellectual process where the individual will observe, analyse and reflect on new knowledge and integrate it into their current understanding. Critical thinking can be applied in a variety of learning platforms such as reading, written work and discussions’ (Thyer 2016: 1). Similarly to Simon (2018), I see critical thinking as challenging for university students. Therefore, I selected active learning exercises that I felt were best to support critical thinking and give students repeated opportunities to express their opinions either in spoken or written format. In addition, I ensured a classroom atmosphere in which students could freely speak their minds without feeling the need to bow to a higher authority on the subject. As a result, I expected that (H2) peer learning exercises would improve students’ critical thinking skills.

### **The course, the students, and the lecturer**

The new course, 'Literary Criticism in the Era of Social Media', was designed primarily for Bachelor's and Master's international students, but was also offered to home students in the Department of Journalism at the Faculty of Arts of UNIBA. The class met once a week for two hours during the thirteen weeks of the winter 2021 semester. The course was taught face-to-face during the first part of the semester, but after 8 November 2021, educational activities took place online via Microsoft Teams due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The change did not harm the course, and students were willing to discuss topics and remained active in the online environment. Unfortunately, because the pandemic drastically limited student mobility, there were only three students in the course, one international student from Italy and two home students from Slovakia. Each student was from a different discipline: journalism, marketing communication, and library and information studies.

After successfully completing the course, the students were to become familiar with the essentials of literature and literary criticism; to understand how to read, interpret, and analyse books; to be able to write book reviews; and to be aware of the differences between traditional and online media. Students were assessed on two critical essays (80%) and the level of their engagement during active learning exercises (20%). For the essays, students wrote two reviews of Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People*. One review was prepared for traditional media, e.g., a literary magazine, and the second for a social media platform like Instagram. Both reviews were evaluated from substantive (evaluation, presence of critical thinking, using arguments, ability to express point of view) and formal (language quality—grammar, stylistics and correct usage of literary terminology) aspects.

The classes had similar structure during the semester. At the beginning there was usually a short interactive mini-lecture (approximately 10 to 20 minutes) with Wooclap or Kahoot questions about the topic. These questions helped me to see if the students had read the assigned material and how they perceived the concepts. The greater part of every class was devoted to peer-learning activities (up to three per class) connected to the day's topic. Students either worked together as a team or alone and participated in such activities as information searching, working with social media, reading, writing, interpreting texts, discussing etc. I ended each class with a brief summary of the topic and told them what to expect in the next lesson.

As for the specific peer-learning activities and exercises, here I will describe three typical classroom assignments to illustrate the exercises I used to achieve the learning outcomes. The first was based on two interconnected activities about social networks to consider the importance of literary criticism in globalised culture. One exercise focused on so-called bookfluencers—i.e., influencers specialised in literature—and Instagram posts about books. Students had fifteen minutes to do research to find, characterise, and then present in class about two bookfluencers from their country and their activities. Then we discussed the findings and compared Slovak and

Italian bookfluencers. In the next exercise, students explored influencers (or persons they follow on Instagram) to find out how much of their content is focused on books. Once they presented on the literary-critical aspect of these Instagram accounts, the class had a lively discussion about the similarities and differences between various Instagram accounts based on their attentiveness to literature, the types of books and genres included, and the culturally rooted aspects of the views presented. The aim of this activity was to help students appreciate the importance of literary criticism in a globalised world and to identify similarities and differences across national cultures with the help of social networks, and thus learn about each other's cultures.

Second, since both the study and practice of literary criticism are strongly connected to critical thinking and the development of these skills was one of the key objectives of the course, students completed several exercises to develop their critical thinking. For example, they were asked to prepare a collaborative review of the first book of the Harry Potter saga. In accordance with the advice given in the reading material and my fifteen minute mini-lecture about how to analyse and interpret literary work, the students chose one aspect of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone such as the plot/story, characters, space and time, or the narrator. In the next twenty minutes, each student prepared a bullet-point list based on the analytical aspect they chose. Finally, the students put the information together and collaborated to write a joint book review based on both their individual reading experiences and knowledge of literary theory. The Harry Potter series also served as an intercultural binder, since all the students knew the books quite well and considered them among their favourite books.

Lastly, by the end of the semester, the course focus shifted away from media and popular culture toward academic-level literary criticism. The final class examined the methods of literary criticism and was almost entirely dedicated to students individually and collectively evaluating five analytical approaches to literary criticism. Since by then they had a solid knowledge of and experience with literary criticism, it was reasonable to expect them in thirty minutes to individually determine the strengths and weaknesses of the reviewed methods, when and how the methods can be used, what findings the methods can show etc. Afterwards, the class discussed, compared, debated and augmented their findings. Finally, I closed the class—and the semester—with a brief summary of the most important takeaways from the course.

### **Sources of data and analytical methods**

To test my hypotheses, I worked primarily with qualitative data, which I cross-checked with some quantitative measures. The low number of students made the large-scale use of quantitative data impossible, and the second hypothesis that investigates the quality of critical thinking almost exclusively required a qualitative approach based on in-depth analysis of student work. I used five different sources of data.

First, I relied on oral feedback from the students that was collected on three different occasions during the semester. On the first occasion, I asked about their reasons for choosing the course, on the second about their satisfaction with the course, and finally about their overall opinion about the whole semester. While these discussions took place at the end of three classes, students could be open and honest about their opinions as they knew these would not affect their grades but would help me improve the course in the future. I recorded their responses in writing. Second, I kept a reflective teacher's journal throughout the semester. After every lesson, I took a few notes with special attention to the engagement of the students, their responses to the activities, their interest in the topics, and their questions.

Third, a colleague from the Department of Journalism came to visit the class on 25 November and provided feedback on both my and the students' activities. I used the observation form that the colleague filled out and the follow-up discussion regarding active learning and internationalisation.

Fourth, to discern progress in the students' critical thinking, I used the two critical essays the students wrote during the semester: their initial paper about their favourite book, which was a short, 500-word paper completed after the very first class, and the literary criticisms written for traditional media, as described above. Evaluating the two essays written at the beginning and end of the semester allowed me to trace any progress. This assignment not only revealed important information about how the students thought about literature, what they found important when writing reviews, and their level of critical thinking—which helped me tailor the rest of the semester to their needs—but also served as a starting point for my analysis.

I relied on two methods to evaluate whether or not students improved their critical thinking. First, I used four criteria based on the formal and substantive aspects of these works. These were: (1) clear and proper arguments; (2) use of literary terms; (3) interpretation rather than description of the reading experience; and (4) overall style, content, and quality of writing. The first two criteria considered the number of arguments and literary terms in the book reviews. Regarding the third criterion, I looked at the presence of evaluation of the book (yes/no), and for the last criterion I rated the texts from zero to ten points depending on the stylistics and content quality (zero was minimum, ten maximum).

In identifying the exact level of critical thinking, I relied on Plack et al.'s (2007) modified version of Bloom's taxonomy for the analysis of reflective—and other—writings. The taxonomy is presented in the three levels: (1) knowledge and comprehension (data gathering), (2) analysis (data analysis), and (3) synthesis and evaluation (conclusion drawing) (Plack et al. 2007: 287). I analysed the student essays by identifying critical thinking actions through the use of verbs associated with each level of critical thinking in the revised taxonomy. Afterwards, I counted the number of occurrences of each verb and added together the numbers within each category.

Finally, the newly designed student evaluation form of the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University, provided both qualitative and quantitative data. My students agreed to be part of the pilot testing and two of the three students did fill out the questionnaire. Of the 22 questions, I selected two open-ended and six quantitative questions relevant for this analysis. As for the open-ended questions, they asked students about what they most valued in the course and what they would like to change in the course. The quantitative questions asked students to express their opinions on five-point Likert scales (strongly disagree, agree, neutral, agree, strongly agree) regarding a series of statements about active learning, classroom atmosphere, their own learning experience and the activities during class sessions (for the exact questions, see Table 1). Because of the small number of respondents, I used their actual answers rather than measures of descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Statements in the student evaluation form used in this study.

There were enough opportunities for discussion and other learning activities.
There was an atmosphere, which I found encouraging for my learning.
This course has helped me to develop knowledge through problem solving, independent thinking or completing exercises.
This course has developed my creativity, which is an ability to produce new ideas and original solutions of problems based on acquired knowledge and skills.
I have contributed to the discussions or other learning activities.
By the end of this course, I developed a better understanding into the studied matter than I had at its beginning.

## Findings

Teaching three students from two countries and from three different fields of study about literary criticism was challenging, but in this course, these conditions also benefited students' learning. In this, an open and friendly atmosphere was crucial. Both students who filled out the end of semester evaluation form strongly agreed that the course atmosphere was encouraging for learning. The observer thought that during the discussion I 'gave every student the space to express her/his thoughts [and...] also encouraged students to answer the questions'. Furthermore, peer learning was noted and appreciated by the observer and the students alike. The observer found that a large part—51-75%—of the observed class was dedicated to peer learning. She felt that students 'could learn something new from each other, through an exchange of ideas, participating in activities and working collaboratively during the class'. Meanwhile, the students strongly agreed

that ‘there were enough opportunities for discussion and other learning activities’ and particularly appreciated the ‘opportunity to practice what was learned’ (student 1) and the ‘practical approach [to] learning through exercises and discussions’ (student 2).

Focusing on both social media and classical literary studies increased student interest, which is a prerequisite for high engagement level. One student praised how the course acknowledged the role of social media, and thus ‘the addressing of actual problems that we need to face nowadays’ (student 2). The observer found that ‘The lesson was interesting and stimulating’ and the students shared her opinion: in the survey, students strongly agreed that the course was stimulating as it developed their ‘ability to produce new ideas and original solutions of problems based on acquired knowledge and skills’.

Thus, the level of class engagement was high, although with some variations. Students saw positively their classroom participation and either agreed or strongly agreed that they contributed to the discussions and other learning activities. My reflective journal shows that willingness to speak up in discussions was growing during the semester. In the first meeting students were still very shy. The turning point came in the third lesson as they became more confident to present their ideas in front the others. Another important point was the shift to online teaching after 8 November 2021. Despite the challenges of the online environment, the students stayed active and in the peer observation form my colleague stated that ‘The students communicated with each other on the topic with ease and complemented each other’s thoughts’.

My reflective diary indicates the engagement level varied depending on the topic and activity type. The students were less active when dealing with the more theoretical topics and more engaged with practical topics. They were very willing to work in groups and to be active in discussion, while their enthusiasm was lower during writing exercises. The responses to the questionnaire indicate that active learning methods were highly appreciated by students. My colleague agreed that the students’ level of engagement was high during peer-learning activities, but during the other parts of the class as well. All in all, these provide support for the first hypothesis about student engagement.

The other hypothesis focused on critical thinking, which was evaluated by examining the students’ writing for evidence of critical thinking skills. As Table 2 shows, students’ literary essays improved in all four aspects. Although modestly, the number of arguments increased for each student from the first to the second paper. They also used more literary terms. The style and quality of their papers improved simultaneously, and in the case of student 3 rather notably. While two out of three students used descriptions rather than interpretations in their evaluation at the beginning of the semester, by the end of the course all three relied on interpretative evaluations, suggesting an improvement in critical thinking. Hence, all of the students were able to apply the knowledge they acquired during the semester, such as proper use of literary terms. Although high(er) quality book reviews necessitate higher levels of critical thinking skills, the above



results only allow us to presume that the observed improvements in literary criticism resulted from enhancement of critical thinking.

Table 2. Evaluation of students' book reviews

	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3	
	Review 1	Review 2	Review 1	Review 2	Review 1	Review 2
<b>Argumentation*</b>	1	2	1	3	0	1
<b>Use of literary terms*</b>	2	4	1	3	0	2
<b>Interpretative evaluation</b>	-	+	+	+	-	+
<b>Style and quality†</b>	7	9	8	10	4	8

\* Frequency of arguments or literary terms used

† 10-point scale

The level of critical thinking in students' book reviews was evaluated with the help of a modified version of Bloom's taxonomy (Plack et al. 2007), in which attention is limited to three—rather than six—levels of critical thinking: knowledge and comprehension, analysis, and synthesis and evaluation (Table 3, continued on next page). In general, all three students improved their thinking at each level from review 1 to review 2. Although the tendency to describe or state (level 1) facts or events about the reviewed books or literary approaches remained strong, the students also improved greatly in their analytical thinking (level 2). Most notably, the students did much better in synthesis and evaluation (level 3), which is of crucial importance for the genre of literary criticism. In fact, in the second review each student relied more often on skills of synthesis and evaluation than knowledge or comprehension or analysis, as opposed to the first review, when they did best in description. Thus, it is clear that the peer-learning methods developed critical thinking, which offers support for the second hypothesis.



Table 3. The levels of critical thinking in students' book reviews based on the frequency of occurrences of each action

	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3	
	Review 1	Review 2	Review 1	Review 2	Review 1	Review 2
<b>Knowledge and Comprehension</b>	Describe 3 State 2 <b>Total 5</b>	Describe 6 State 3 <b>Total 9</b>	Describe 5 State 1 <b>Total 6</b>	Describe 7 State 3 <b>Total 10</b>	Describe 2 State 2 <b>Total 4</b>	Describe 4 State 2 <b>Total 6</b>
<b>Analysis</b>	Analyse 0 Question 1 Explore 1 <b>Total 2</b>	Analyse 2 Question 3 Explore 2 <b>Total 7</b>	Analyse 0 Question 1 Explore 1 <b>Total 2</b>	Analyse 2 Question 3 Explore 2 <b>Total 7</b>	Analyse 0 Question 0 Explore 1 <b>Total 1</b>	Analyse 3 Question 2 Explore 2 <b>Total 7</b>
<b>Synthesis and Evaluation</b>	Conclude 1 Hypothesize 0 Evaluate 3 <b>Total 4</b>	Conclude 6 Hypothesize 1 Evaluate 3 <b>Total 10</b>	Conclude 1 Hypothesize 0 Evaluate 5 <b>Total 6</b>	Conclude 3 Hypothesize 4 Evaluate 4 <b>Total 11</b>	Conclude 1 Hypothesize 0 Evaluate 1 <b>Total 2</b>	Conclude 3 Hypothesize 2 Evaluate 4 <b>Total 9</b>

### Replicability in a different context

Incorporating social media into the teaching of literary criticism resulted in enhanced student learning. This is an approach to education that other fields in the social sciences and humanities could also benefit from. Teachers of sociology, economics, history, philosophy, archival studies, museum studies, or archaeology—disciplines often considered distant and disconnected from contemporary events and social media—could use the internet as an opportunity to teach, too. For example, exploring how a historical event, a sociological trend, an archaeological discovery or a philosophical approach is (mis)represented or (mis)used in the virtual world could be eye-opening for students. Similarly, students could learn to recognise how an event or fact is interpreted differently across various cultural or political contexts. The use of social media offers a chance for students to understand and cope with the fact that, despite the incontrovertible presentation of information in elementary or high school textbooks, often there are parallel truths. This would not only prepare them to be more open to other people's opinions, but would also be foundational for becoming critical thinkers in a global age.

### Conclusions

This chapter showed how peer learning combined with internationalisation facilitated classroom engagement and developed students' critical thinking. I found that turning to social media and popular contemporary literature when teaching about literary criticism was beneficial for student

learning, and thus demonstrated that teaching traditional university majors in isolation from the virtual world is counterproductive. Students need to understand how what they learn is relevant for their lives to be able to excel in disciplines that are more distant from their daily experience. Peer learning in an internationalised classroom can substantially contribute to the success of such an approach.

There are still some important issues to explore in the future. First, this study is based on a small number of cases (n=3). More data is needed to ascertain that the findings herein can be generalised. It would be also intriguing to see if the teaching approach presented here can work just as well when there are 12-20 students enrolled in the course. Second, there is much to learn about the specific benefits of using ICT tools (e.g., Wooclap and Kahoot) in teaching and learning processes (Bijmans 2020; Oulaich 2020), and, similarly, the use of social networks and its effect on students (Manca and Ranieri 2016; Evans 2013). Encouraged by the results presented in this chapter, I plan to explore these issues further in future iterations of this course and in my other courses as well.

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## Summary

This chapter discusses the internationalisation of the elective course 'Literary Criticism in the Era of Social Media' offered for both international and home students in the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. The course was based on peer learning methods and incorporated social media and contemporary popular literature into the curriculum in order to increase student engagement and improve students' critical thinking skills to address low student interest in literature in general and specifically in literary criticism. Relying on student opinions and course work, a colleague's classroom observation, and my own reflective journal, this chapter shows how this innovative new course helped students to improve their classroom engagement and critical thinking skills.

## Keywords

Bloom's Taxonomy, critical thinking, literary criticism, social media, student engagement



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