

FACILITATING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH NEWSPAPER ARTICLES AND EDITORIALS

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Abstract

Newspapers play a key role in disseminating information, shaping opinions and influencing people. Among students they are not only instrumental in fostering healthy reading habit but are also significant in developing their critical reading skills. Students, due to information explosion, face a problem of information overload, and it is therefore important to use the newspaper articles and editorials to equip them with enhanced communication and critical reading skills. The aim of this paper is to highlight the role of newspapers in facilitating critical thinking skills. Apart from garnering the meaning of unknown phrases, newspapers are a treasure trove of cultural expressions and give insights into the social, economic and cultural sphere. To facilitate this method the instructor must ask different group of students to read at least editorials of four newspapers, critically read them and discern the ideology lacing it. This paper will display the manner in which critical reading done through newspapers sharpens the students' thinking skills and provides avenues for higher order reading. It trains the students to summarize important points and analyse the ideas expressed in each editorial. The complex interaction between the text and the reader gets a renewed dimension when one engages in the critical reading of the newspaper articles and editorials.

Keywords: *Newspapers, ideology, editorials, critical reading skills, communication*

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William Kottmeyer in her essay ‘Classroom Activities in Critical Reading’ says;

By the term “critical reading skills” is meant those skills in which the reader projects his own judgments, attitudes, and appreciations into juxtaposition with the reading material. Critical reading is essentially the highest and the most complex form of reading. The physiological and the psychological processes involved in the reading act are, of necessity, so firmly habituated that they do not intrude into the realm of conscious effort, and the mind is enabled to judge, compare, evaluate, and criticize.(557)

To facilitate this avowed urgency of independent thinking in an era of post truth where emotionally surcharged populace is easily susceptible to unconscious influences either in print or electronic media; a critical and comparative reading of newspaper editorials or the articles featured in the newspaper turns out as a great resource for the reader or listener to reach a reasonable state of objectivity. An objective faculty is essentially a perspective wherein a student is able to read or view things keeping aside the personal notion of likes and dislikes in abeyance. This disposition towards developing an unbiased and nonpartisan approach is also in sync with the prerequisite which aim at fulfilling the basic tenets of education. In addition to objectivity, an enhanced critical reading skill would also bring analytical ability, a spirit of enquiry, an eye for details other than improved vocabulary as its peripheral benefit.

The significance of critical reading cannot be overemphasised as Perahia’s (1976) finding mentions of the time successful students spend reading, more than 50% spent in critical reading (300). The ability to read critically calls for more than literal comprehension as it involves divergent thinking, analysis and inferential capability.

Barbara Pace in her critical essay ‘Between Response and Interpretation: Ideological Becoming and Literacy Events in Critical Readings of Literature’ alludes to Bakhtin and points out that ‘ideological becoming is an unending struggle among the “various available ideological points of view” that compete for “hegemony” in human consciousness. These points of view are embedded in the language we use to mediate and understand our experiences. There is another category which is a sequel to “internally persuasive discourses” arising out of life experiences and the voice of other individuals. The comings to meaning of

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these ideas bring about an underlying interconnectedness based on our own understanding and appropriation, and sink into a process of ideation influencing and shaping our worldview.

Implications of Bakhtinian theory can be stressed to a development of critical theory and independent thinking which is an outcome of an individual's encounter with multiple perspectives. Referring to this coalescing Pace asserts,

As students take up different stances, they learn to recognize how perspective can mask or expose the social and political assumptions that influence reading and responding to texts. In other instances, diverse perspectives arise from the diverse ideas that students share in postreading activities (e.g., Athanases, 1998; Enciso, 1997; Knoeller, 1998; Landay, 2004). Knoeller, for example, demonstrated that students who had participated in discussions that questioned dominant readings influenced one another's analyses.(585).

As this paper dwells on developing critical thinking through reading of newspaper editorials, feature articles or prime time news hour debates or discussion, it is imperative to discuss various kinds of press theories and its consequent evolution. These theories are formulated on certain principles and media's existence has always been contingent upon their conformity with those ideological leanings.

Authoritarian theory:

In ancient Greece, Plato, Hobbes expressed their allegiance to this theory which regards the state as sovereign and refuses individual freedom. In modern times, German thinker Engel propagated this theory advocating dictatorship and censorship of the press. According to this theory, ruling classes believe in zealously guarding freedom of thought and expression. This germinates from the idea that the state should take precedence over individual's right to freedom of expression.

Libertarianism or Free Press theory:

With the advent of printing press dating back to 17th century England when printing press made it possible to print several copies in reasonable rates, the advocacy of restraint started being challenged greatly. VoxPopuli (popular will) gained precedence over the power of the state. John Locke, John Stuart Mill, John Milton advocated freedom of press. John Mill's "On Liberty", Milton's "Aeropagitica" professed and advocated eloquently the need for freedom of speech and expression. Milton said, "Let truth and falsehood grapple" underscoring a need for allowing a free play of thinking and reading. This theory offers power without social responsibility.

Social Responsibility theory:

Formally it was initiated at the United States by the Commission of The Freedom of Press, 1949. They found that the free market approach to press freedom has only augmented

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the power of a single class without contributing much to the need of the less well-off classes. The constantly evolving emergence of mass media namely, Radio, Television and Film suggested the need for some means of accountability. Duty to one's conscience was the primary basis of the right of self-expression.

Soviet Media/ Communist theory:

This is derived from the ideologies of Marx and Engel as it laid down the function of mass media as the means to educate the masses and workers. The media, down the ages, has revolved round these theories. It has owed its allegiance to one or the other theory, and in accordance to the need and demands of a society in a constant state of flux, has shifted its contour.

William Kottmeyer's suggests that media's immanence in the socio-political sphere and its consequent influences upon masses, be it proponent of any kind of theoretical model, calls for a deeper investigation into the ways as to how propaganda operates. Kottmeyer writes that on the basis of finding of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis which directed significant attention to the problem of analysing propaganda. Propaganda may be defined as the opinion of one group expressed for the purpose of forming or changing the opinion of others, usually from selfish motives. The seven basic propaganda techniques or types as identified and described by the Institute are incorporated into the critical comprehension of the editorials which are the exercises in question. A brief discussion of these types of propaganda can do considerable justice in unearthing the undercurrents of text and bring into the fore an investigative outlook rather than a mere acceptance of information.(558)

Kottmeyer remarks that there is a discernible oblivion amongst college students to read text critically which almost hold to be sacrosanct. She further goes on to saying how this often turns out to be a demarcating factor between the successful and less successful students. The methodology applied for this exercise is based upon juxtaposing two newspaper editorials mostly with recognisably varying ideological standpoints. The variant tones of the two articles, diction and underlying affirmation or negation form the basis of the reading which reader attempts to analyse by drawing an analogy of the aforementioned parameters.

This is designed keeping in mind a typical tutorial class of fifty minutes comprising thirty students where six selected students would come prepared with day-wise summary of the two previously decided newspaper articles. From the weeklong reading of varied articles, one prominent news issue will be given for detailed discussion on the premise of the guidelines mentioned. The discussion may last for about twenty-five minutes wherein the initial half would contain the brief account of the write-ups in hand followed by a general discussion and understanding of the issue.

It is also found to be useful to be given two ideologically variant news channels where students listen to news hour debates or discussions, listens to the kind of analysts invited and

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tries to gauge the role of the moderator who often represents the ideological affiliations of the channels under study.

From the context Indian readers and viewers following newspapers or channels can be assigned for a comparative analysis like The Hindu and The Indian Express or The Asian Age and The Free Press Journal and a few other prominent newspapers and news channels.

An instance of this methodology is analysed with the aid of the editorials of The Free Press Journal and The Asian Age dated 6th January 2017. Both the editorials have featured the recent declaration on the part of the government to advance the date of the budget. The Free Press titles its editorial as “Budget date new bone of contention” and begins with a general statement on the recent controversy laden performance of the present government.

The article then goes on to placing some facts as to how the advancement of dates to February 1 has led to the present state of contention. This declaration, some leaders of the major opposition party believe came in the wake of the announcement of date of the 1st phase of poll on February 4, 2017. Their contention is that it might influence the electorate. The article then explicates government’s stance as to how the FM describes it as a precursor to a healthy practice if all the measures can be implemented from April 1, 2017. It also justifies how these various measures will be equally implemented to the entire country. These elements primarily related facts. We start sensing a tendency to influence on the part of the writer when a word such as ‘paranoia’ is used to describe opposition's reaction. The dig at its dwindling self-confidence is also a case in point. There is also an attempt to justify government’s stance by questioning the guarantee of its positive approval by people. Further, a rhetorical question posed for EC to decide if elections can hold up a national fiscal announcement which finds a seeming answer in “emphatic ‘no’ indicating editor’s tilt. However, the article concludes drawing the significance of upcoming polls for both the government and the opposition without reference to the issue of budget intelligently taking recourse to sideways.

The Asian Age maintaining the facts as that of Free Press Journal, adding the details of names of the states, makes a very strong statement that it is hard to imagine the potential unaffectedness of the early declaration of the Union budget. It further says that this scuttles a model code of conduct. In passages to follow it says that the decision is a “shame” and questions government’s neutrality. This is also seen as an act wooing the public “acting as a balm on the wound caused by demonetisation” which is also a tacit pronouncement on the government’s move to deal with black wealth. Calling budget an instrument to win voters, the editor mentions how PM Narendra Modi plans to boost a flagging economy by announcing to reduce taxes and Mr Jaitley seconds the idea which is mostly viewed by the editor as an election gimmick. Mr Jaitley defends this move further by saying that it should not be a matter of concern as there is nothing specific for the states going for polls which is dubbed “as less than a clever technicality.”

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Finally the edit closes drawing the failure of the role of EC to anticipate the piquant situation and giving it an appearance of influencing the poll outcomes and tartly calling it “a bad day for the spirit of democracy.”

This was a possible exposition of the method and many layers can be unearthed from apparently simple sentence construction which Bakhtin holds as an ideology formation with the amalgamation of individual consciousness and multiple perspectives.

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