

Educational Turning Point in Albania: No More Mechanic Parrots but Critical Thinkers

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Abstract

Since 2004 Albanian academics have been making efforts to establish the best Western practices of academic writing associated with critical thinking and writing skills for university students. In this article, I will shed light upon the special challenges and peculiarities the establishment of Academic Writing discipline has encountered in Albania over the years of educational transformation in the broad framework of democratic political transition. I argue that the socio-political indoctrination of the society during five decades of communist dictatorship has delayed the cultivation of critical thinking, reading and, consequently, critical writing skills for academic and occupational opportunities. Moreover, the research will not be limited only to causal factors of delay, instead, it will pave the way to recommendations that accelerate the successful acquisition and possession of such crucial academic writing skills for Albanian university graduates and academia in general.

First, I provide literature on definition of critical thinking and its improvement through writing courses; next I depict the typical political indoctrination of students during communist dictatorship tracing the legacy of mechanic reading and the huge lack of critical discourse even among the academic staffs themselves; later on I discuss the contemporary academic focus being placed upon the need of critical academic writing to prepare independent thinkers successful to face the democratic transition. Finally, and most importantly, I offer substantial suggestions and recommendations how to implement successfully the Western Academic writing tradition in the higher education curricula by taking into consideration Albania's educational legacy.

Keywords: Albania, Critical thinking/writing, Communist indoctrination, Recommendations

1. Introduction

Ever since the demise of communist regime, Albanian students have been struggling with attempts to improve their learning styles to critically absorb the massive flow of information from voluminous literature. Moreover, in order to pursue academic studies at prestigious international universities, these students have been confronted with the urgent needs to be analytical, critical and independent writers at fulfilling the academic requirements of these demanding institutions that are already built upon widely acclaimed quality standards. Furthermore, the good command of analytical and critical writing skills for fulfillment of university requirements offers further prospects for a tangible positive impact on the creation of a democratic culture where students can speak up their minds freely in the academic community as well as in the international academic networks. Moreover, the provision of students with updated, professional and analytical skills turns to be an emergency for the future of Albania particularly, in the vein of the European integration process, —to have its own competitive human and intellectual capital.

Establishing a culture of critical and analytical writing at Albanian higher educational institutions presents a multidimensional beneficial objective: building up an educational system that boosts analytical reading, objective interpretations, factual analysis and critical evaluation of highly sophisticated theoretical and empirical data. Consequently, a number of inter-related causal factors and processes are involved not only in building up the culture, but even in explaining its peculiar challenges, country context and, especially the impact of the previous educational philosophy in Albania. This article will provide insights on the challenges and barriers of students' learning styles with focus on their critical thinking and writing skills. It will argue that the socio-political indoctrination of the society during five decades of communist dictatorship has delayed the cultivation of critical thinking, reading and, consequently, critical writing skills of students in an effort to fulfill their academic requirements and occupational goals. However, the research shall not be limited only to root-causes identification; instead, it will argue the salience of analytical and critical writing skills for Albanian higher education and also it will offer feasible and conducive recommendations towards promotion and acceleration of such skills to Albanian university students to the same degree as their peers in international universities.

First, this article will shed light upon the educational philosophy that guided Albanian higher education during nearly fifty years of communist dictatorship. The aim of this insightful chronicle will be not only to describe but also to measure the unprecedented negative impact this political indoctrination has left to Albanian society even today, by delaying the rapid acquisition of analytical and critical thinking, independent written expression and the analytical interpretation of any social phenomena. The literature will vary from academic theoretical sources to empirical, statistical reports from national and international literature. Next, I exhibit the actual efforts and reform in academic writing carried out by Albanian universities during the lengthy years of democratic transition from early 1990s till the ongoing academic year 2014. Lastly, based on best international practices with close concern to this debate, I provide feasible recommendations aiming at accelerating the establishment of critical thinking and writing culture along with reinforcing quality standard in the learning

and lecturing process at Albanian universities in compliance with the international academic norms.

2. Defining Critical Thinking and Its Significance

There is an immense literature committed to definition of critical thinking and other interdependent educational issues stemming from the misconduct or handicapped interpretations of critical thinking, and its correlation to writing skills (Lewis & Smith, 1993; Gallagher, S. A. 1998; Magno, 2010; Howard, Thomas, & Austin, 2015). The most prominent source of reference to critical thinking definition is the one made by Dewey (1987). He minutely explains what critical and reflective thinking is by highlighting that ‘it is a constant mental battle to inquiry, explore into unknown insights to come up with your own judgments rather than accepting any suggestion or fact obliviously in ‘face value’ (Dewey, 1987). Moreover, he discusses the indisputable role of thought to distinguishing the individual from other animals; without the capability to think humans would react instinctively, not being aware of ‘what he is about’.

Dewey’s classical writings on critical thinking and its importance to society and political reform have been further utilized even in the contemporary literature of the 21st century by researchers and educators dealing with active learning and methodologies that positively enhance active citizenship to democracy building and consolidation. For instance, Murphy (2010) researched on the interdependent relation between critical literary and independent thinking arguing that they are crucial to economic, social development of the Republic of Ireland, —his case study. He argues that a very successful approach to promoting critical thought and citizens ‘engagement is the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry Methodology pioneered at the Center for the Study of Social and Global Justice at the University of Nottingham (Murphy, 2010, p. 39). It is of great significance that Murphy in 2010 accentuates the importance of active participation and independent thinking of British and Irish citizens to contribute into the national political, economic challenges of the country despite that fact that these countries represent a successful higher educational tradition and above all have not been deprived of the freedom of thought and of any other democratic principles by any type of dictatorship in sheer contrast to Albanian citizens.

Albania signed membership in the Bologna Process in 2003 and, as such it was requested improvement and restructuring of the academic programs aiming the Western accreditation of the current programs in accordance with the EU standards as stated in the Bologna Process (Ministry of Education of Albania, Final Report, 2015). This higher educational restructuring and reform targeted at lifelong learning and sharpening of marketable skills explains why Western academic writing and critical thinking tradition is indisputably being pursued and to be achieved by Albanian university instructors. However, prior to reforming and betterment of the system, an examination is needed of the writing cultural heritage that the Albanian higher education has already embarked to this moment.

3. The Misleading Educational Approach during Communism

Typical of dictatorships, indoctrination of communist ideology in Albania was achieved

through ‘brain invasion’ by treating students and academic elites as instrumental and ‘mechanic parrots’ to regime’s political credo. While focusing upon the legacy of communist regime in higher education, ever since its establishment in 1944, the communist government prioritized in its agenda not only the national scale education but, in particular, its pure reflection of communist ideology (Raymond & Walter, 1994). Indisputably, the goal of the regime was not only to eradicate illiteracy in the country: instead, to cultivate into Albanian youth the principles of communism as interpreted by the communist party and, finally, to educate children of all social classes on the basis of these principles (Raymond & Walter, 1994).

Lott starts his article on interdependence between totalitarian governments and their educational indoctrination with the acclaimed argument that ‘a better educated populace is more likely to support democracy’ which is the reason—according to him—why such governments tempt to prevent the building of analytical and/or independent thinking in their societies (Lott, 1999). Lott’s theory makes clear sense for the public education case of Albania during the totalitarian regime of Enver Hoxha. The regime gave priority to wiping out massive illiteracy and to invest a lot of money on building schools as the only instrumental tools to back up political agenda of the dictator and its communist bureau.

To illustrate, the 1946 Reform on Education Law explicitly accentuated that all school texts had to be compiled in strict compliance with the Lenin-Marxist principles (Raymond & Walter, 1994). In addition, the utter Soviet conceptual orientation was consolidated by the 1950s with concerns to both communist ideological propaganda and central government control. Even the three higher institutes founded in 1951; the Higher Pedagogic Institute, the Higher Polytechnic Institute and the Higher Agricultural Institute were utterly built up upon Soviet models. Significantly, the core school textbooks were utterly Soviet translations applying Soviet teaching methods, curricular and ideological mainstream (Raymond & Walter, 1994).

Furthermore, concerning substantial quality of education in general, schools had become a pure tool of Hoxha’s regime; seen as separate in their service from the communities they were supposed to contribute into (Bassler, 1995). In addition, due to its political-economic isolation the staffing, financing and professional development of academic staff was completely cut off from other contemporary professional networks in the region and worldwide. Bassler highlights that even the academic research in basic psychology was totally detached from other contemporary educational novelty in that field (Bassler, 1995). Moreover, classroom activity was severely under sharp control by the state-authorized curricula and learning materials. Also teacher training was totally confined to a narrow—teacher-textbook—a focused process in rigid compliance with political indoctrination guidelines.

In terms of Hoxhaist unique dictatorship, Nixon claims that ‘comparable to other world totalitarian systems of the Soviet orbit Hoxha’s ideology was fundamentally Stalinist and that Hoxha utilized large doses of nationalism to preserve legitimacy (Nixon, 2009). Moreover, referring to the same source, he kept Albania the most isolated country ever, detached from

Western Europe at the end of World War II, later on cutting off relations with Yugoslavia in 1948, breaking up with the Soviet Union in 1961 and even with China in 1978. This unprecedented isolation led the small country to economic massacre and, above all, to “incredible political fear, social paranoia and loss of self-identity” (Nixon, 2009). Certainly, this loss of self-identity was perfectly achieved and consolidated by the faulty educational approach of direct deprivation of free academic thoughts and analytical writings by staff and students.

4. From Problem Identification to Substantial Initiatives

As elaborated in the study so far, similar to other communist countries, educational sector of Albania was captivated by the political, economic and social fear. Hence, following its democratic political transition in the early 1990s, Albanian government found itself struggling to envisage a sustainable, economic, judicial, political and educational national strategy and as such pleading for support to international donors and professional experts. Part of these tedious efforts comprised the arrival of the first academic contributors from the Western universities. To illustrate, it is significant to refer to the concrete experience of Prof. Patrick J. Devlin from Glasgow University and Prof. Alan D. Godfrey from the University of Paisley in the UK. They contributed in 1994 with a two-year training program in exporting accounting education to Albanian counterparts. In their research they investigated the cultural educational influence while teaching in Albania with regard to an unprecedented reluctance of their training participants to indulge them into deep, analytical and independent learning. One example of the several difficulties encountered by them was that the extensive teaching material had turned to be ‘too abstract’; therefore, they were circumstantially enforced to provide Albanian participants with many concrete simplified examples (Devin & Godfrey, 2004).

The only explanatory conclusion they managed to reach was that the Albanian participants were used to superficial, external learning: ‘a typical learning approach of acquiring knowledge merely for passing examination’ (Devin & Godfrey, 2004). They refer to Sharma’s categories on classification of learners’ conceptions as the following (Sharma, 1997): (1) learning as memorizing; (2) learning as acquiring knowledge; (3) learning as application of knowledge; (4) learning as making connections between parts of a subject and between subjects; (5) learning as interpreting and understanding reality. According to this classification for learning concepts, the first three are external to students, whereas the others are internal. The latter accentuates the independent personal aspect of the learning process; unfortunately the Albanian trainees did not meet these highly abstract layers of critical and analytical thinking.

Interestingly, Cortazzi and Jin maintain that learning is a cultural process; cited by them as ‘different cultural communities may have different preferences, expectations, interpretations, and values and believes about how to learn or how to teach (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013). They argue that ‘cultural ideas of learning often subconsciously are absorbed in early learning in the absence of contrasting ideas and are not normally articulated; in addition, they are built up in interaction stemming from family environment as well as schooling socialization, and

finally, through educational periods transmitting and absorbing international cultural values at the wider world (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013).

However, though not mentioned in any educational debate in Albanian academia, Hoxha's misleading educational approach is best explained by the Confucian heritage culture. Therefore, in order to better grasp its legacy and the huge degree of harm been made to Albanian higher education for nearly half a century, I describe the distinctive features of Confucian-based education. Wang (2013) in his assessment of Confucian Heritage cultural background to Chinese learners uses the definition provided by Li (1993) as "a system of philosophical, ethical and political thought based on the teachings of Confucius". In concrete terms to learning traits, Ryan and Louie (2007, p 406) enrich further this discourse by characterizing the Confucian learners as "passive, dependent, surface/rote learners..." These Confucian features reflect relevantly the learning styles of Albanian students during communism, and accordingly the educational cultural heritage of the academic staff assigned to teach and indoctrinate them. As demonstrated above, Albanian students were disciplined, could memorize easily but had serious problems in taking independent initiatives for analytical and critical projects.

To brief this section, the first international academic initiatives incontestably reveal that the communist regime in Albania did not offer any inherited constituency of an educational approach that stimulates free thinking, analytical and independent interpretations of literature and/or its critical written feedback of any form in line with the widely standardized educational principles and norms in the West. This conclusion was also acknowledged by the Special Report on the Future of Higher Education in Post-Communist States in 2011. It asserts that "universities in the post-communist states have not developed an atmosphere and environment that would allow their faculty and students to engage in the free exploration and development of ideas that is, or should be, characteristic of higher education" (Special report—Interactivity Foundation and George Washington University, USA, 2011).

Moreover, it ascertained that critical thinking and open classroom discussions are often discouraged because most professors and students have—as directly quoted by the report, —'a deeply embedded fear of being punished for saying what they really think'. Therefore, the report strongly recommends 'the cultivating of freedom' as the key to development of higher education and innovation in the post- communist states. Driven from the pedagogic interest, while tracing back the half a century lack of critical thinking in Albanian higher education system, it results that deeply flawed thinking has been rooted in the teaching methods consequently; the fostering of the independent thought and knowledge transfer into the students has been delayed.

5. Evaluating Actions and Arguing for More Sustainability

Concerning critical thinking, writing and even the conduct of scientific research, Albania has to conform to the European standards in order to be granted a credible identity with regard to higher education quality. Furthermore, the necessity for analytical, argumentative and critical thinking/writing skills has become absolutely a most fundamental human need. Therefore, in the contextual framework of Albania's political transformations in the early 1990s, reform on

higher education was one of the most prioritized prerequisites of the country's European Integration agenda. Educational reforming measures have explicitly targeted the adaptation of the Western university model; placing the independent critical thinker-students at the center of the higher education programs.

To illustrate the international contribution into Albanian academic reforming, —the Civic Education Project has been among the first actors. It was launched in Albania during the 1993-1994 academic years with one Visiting Faculty Fellow at Luigj Gurakuqi University in Shkodra. After one semester, this lecturer moved to the capital—Tirana, which became the focal point of CEP activities during the next two years. CEP Albania operated at the University of Tirana, Aleksandër Xhuvani University in Elbasan, the Albanian Magistrates' School, and Luigj Gurakugi University in Shkodra. In the 2000-2001 academic year, the CEP expanded to three new departments—the newly created Department of Political Science, the Department of British and American Studies at Foreign Language Faculty, and the Department of Journalism, all at the State University of Tirana—and, in particular it worked closely with Aleksandër Xhuvani University in Elbasan. Apart from teaching in domains of law, political science, cultural studies and history, the CEP fellows made huge contributions to curriculum development, outreach activities attempting to build a cross-disciplinary approach of teaching at these universities.

The CEP started his activity as a preliminary reforming mechanism a decade prior to the EU educational launch known as Bologna Process; the latter was signed by Albanian government in March 2003. In the framework of the country's aspiration to integrate into the European Union, and in view of regional cooperation in the area of higher education, the Bologna Process has reinforced not only the significance and necessity to harmonize and synchronize university curricula, but it has explicitly underlined the role of higher education—to create active citizens competent to contribute positively to further growth of human society (Bologna Process- Bucharest Communiqué, 2013). In its March 2013 reference, the EU Education working group came up with three ultimate goals of higher education in the countries under Bologna Charter reformation: A) to prepare students for employment B) to prepare them for life as active citizens in democratic societies and among others to equip students with marketable skills (Bologna Process, Bucharest Communiqué, 2013). Definitely, Bologna process in higher education falls exactly in the same line with the classic and modern theoretical approaches on critical thinking, critical writing and its importance in shaping the reasonable, argumentative, analytical thinkers capable of coping with the global and regional challenges that the EU in particular and the international arena are experiencing.

Furthermore, academicians became increasingly aware of the need to introduce and amend core curriculum courses of Academic Writing at the first year of any Bachelor program at any public and private higher education institution in Albania since early 2000. These courses were mainly initiated by international scholars lecturing on project-based programs at certain universities or, otherwise, by Albanian returning scholars inspired from their international educational experiences. The aim of the course on Academic Writing was to introduce students to productive learning styles, effective critical reading strategies, and critical evaluation of primary and secondary sources, essay writing skills and high quality scientific

research publications. This prerequisite course has been pursued by the Research Methodology course at the postgraduate level of master and doctoral study cycles.

For instance, driven by a huge lack of adequate sources, Dr. Holger Kachelein, a German Lecturer at the department of Economics at the State University of Tirana compiled and published the course conveyor book *Academic Writing for Economics*. This book discusses mainly the preparatory stages of writing an academic course paper as a prerequisite to future scientific contribution in the debate of economics. It deals with general writing topics such as structural issues, technical paragraphing, elaboration of academic integrity, that is plagiarism awareness and other topics related to verbal presentation of the written assignments. However, this course book does not consider deeply the process of learning itself, the students' reading styles of abundant literature, the language of critique required in making a counter-case in the written assignment. It does not focus on the core critical skills of writing complex research, and/or being open to critical peer reviewers.

Moreover, as explained in the previous sections of this paper, these first introductory academic initiatives were mostly limited to identification of the huge lack of internal, analytical reading, thinking and writing learning styles of Albanian students, thus they were providing preliminary academic writing guidelines at isolated department level. However, the higher education institutions in Albania demanded a national strategy, and a comprehensive framework at national scale for the discipline of academic writing with a special focus on analytical and critical thinking, reading and writing skills acquisition to be institutionalized by experts of this field of research in long term perspectives. Therefore, driven by my experience as a student in Albanian universities, by my confronting experience at international western-approached universities (Central European University), and back as a lecturer in Albania still undergoing educational transformations, in this final section I provide the following future suggestions.

6. Concluding Recommendations

The paper discussed the lack of a critical thinking, reading and writing culture of the higher education system in Albania. It aimed firstly at explaining the negative influential role of communist dictatorship in the overall educational philosophy implanted ever since its beginning and the legacy of this Confucian culture in contemporary teaching and learning methodologies and approaches pursued at Albanian universities. As demonstrated by the descriptive analysis on the role of education which was described by Confucian culture heritage was solely the creation of disciplined, obedient, passive students capable of memorizing given concepts mechanically rather than contemplating, observing and synthesizing the assigned literature independently by themselves. Moreover, this learning handicap had been discerned by the early academic initiatives taken by international professors making efforts to improve and fill in this huge gap in certain fields of academia as accounting, political science, foreign languages and humanities in general. Moreover, the Bologna Process initiation in 2003 had already identified the necessity to support the improvement and standardization of Academic programs in non-EU countries as a 'must' reform prior to integration of Albania in all spectra be it economic, political, security and

educational.

Despite its lengthy democratic transition of nearly 25 years, Albanian students of these days predominantly rely on academic staff educated or ‘professionally promoted’ by the academic elite in communist Albania which forcefully imposed ‘faulty models of pseudo-critical thinking’ since it simply propagandized flawed reasoning by playing the tune of the communist party ideology. As a result, the current higher educational environment does not retain any tradition of critical thinking and writing. Hence, the cultivation of a culture of independent critical thinking and writing unbiased by any political ideology, demands the urgent curriculum amendments and tailored interactive programs to enhance independent analytical discourse in universities in Albania.

A. Drafting and consolidation of university courses on Academic on Critical thinking and Writing across curricula to be offered as a compulsory course either in English or Albanian language.

In order for the course to be uniformly delivered in terms of quality in central and local universities, the academic staff assigned to teaching such courses should immediately be trained and updated with contemporary theoretical discussions on definition of critical thinking, its correlation with reading and writing skills for academic and professional purposes and above all, they have to be exposed to the current Western teaching methods of active participation of students in reading and analyzing literature, as the basic prerequisites towards cultivation of free thinking, reading and writing. Teaching staff qualification definitely comprises the most sensitive link of the successful teaching-learning process in the much exhausted Albanian Academia by the totalitarian chains of dictatorship. In line with quality teaching, Albanian educators and researchers involved in the debate of productive learning styles, and particularly, the boosting of independent thinking and writing, should benefit from international partnership projects to further consolidate their theoretical input and practical capabilities. Signing partnership agreement with prestigious centers of writing and research for higher education lecturers is an emergency for Albanian universities to guarantee quality teaching and preparation of independent critical thinkers to succeed with the national and international challenges of the country lying ahead.

B. Creating a regional professional network of cooperation.

This professional network for students and tutors can be achieved through conferences, open forums and other social clubs, providing updated literature on successful critical writing traditions based on success stories, in particular focused on countries with similar social, political, cultural profile like Albania. For instance, there should be fostered the cooperation between Albania and new member states of European Union like Romania, Bulgaria, and other former communist countries whose educational culture suffered from similar weakness and inefficiency. The academic exchange programs on the theme of learning styles, foreign languages instructional approaches and, in particular the teaching of analytical and critical writing, should become a focal point within regional countries like Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and further. Through knowledge transfer among linguists and educators, integration of higher educational system among the region will be further

accelerated.

C. Establishment of Academic Writing centers should turn into a norm at each university.

These centers should provide not only individual tutoring but also facilitate peer tutoring, and group learning seminars as the most productive technique to active engagement of students in the learning process. It should be accentuated that apart from the final written product, it is very important that Albanian students get fully engaged in the writing process in order to enhance their socialization, respect for diversity of opinions, and tolerance towards professional criticism by instructors as well as their peers. Analytical writing needs to be the keyword of Academic Writing courses as the only gateway to successful research in Bachelor final theses, master program final thesis and other post graduate original research. Moreover, much in line with Bologna Charter requirements, high quality research has to be nurtured from English language instructors who mostly compile and deliver courses on Academic Writing. In particular, in countries like Albania that do not hold any academic tradition of novelty in research and higher educational teaching independence, the great focus on the amelioration of curricula courses of languages and academic writing in English turn to be of the most immediate measures to guaranteeing Bologna criteria and other international cohesive standards in higher education.

Albanian higher educational institutions should learn from the best practices applied in highly prestigious and reputable universities to name a few even Harvard University, Toronto University, Yale University, Oxford, Cambridge and many others (easily to be tracked via their official websites) do continue offering additional consultations to students about encountering issues during the writing process for university assignments. The widespread functioning and utilization of Academic Writing centers alongside Academic Reading and Writing courses across curricula in these renowned international universities demonstrates not only the importance of reading and writing skills acquisition for university studies, but it explicitly indicates the high degree of difficulty in grasping these skills. It is interesting to see such long-term consolidated commitments being made by higher educational institutions in the much prosperous and free Western minds, consequently it can easily be concluded what high degree of difficulty and necessity Albanian students have in absorbing such human and marketable skills.

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