

DROPS Critical Thinking Workshop for University Students in Kabul **August 2017**

Critical thinking is the foundation on which scholarship is developed and analyzed. It's crucial for students to exercise the skills and tools of critical thinking that would allow them to effectively dissect scholarship in their respected fields. In many countries, critical thinking is incorporated in the curriculum at school and university levels, but Afghan students do not have that opportunity. Therefore, depicting a need for compensatory programs to teach students critical thinking outside university and school curriculums. To assist in this regard, DROPS has developed a workshop to provide participants the opportunity to further exercise their skills in critically engaging with scholarly work through a gender lens.

DROPS developed a comprehensive and inclusive curriculum that promoted an introductory approach to critical thinking and covered three major sections Concepts, Argument Analysis, and Reasoning. Moreover, at the University of Afghanistan the workshop had an additional section that covered Research Methodology because the students knew better English and needed methodology lessons. This section was to assist student in evaluating different forms of research and assessing the credibility and reliability of the information they access in academia. The section primarily focused on evaluating the difference between quantitative and qualitative research method. This section covered three major themes variables, operationalizing, and different methods of data collection. The main goal was to have students excel at not only identifying and evaluating research methods but gain experience in conducting research.

In order to achieve optimal results, the workshop incorporated additional supplemental activities that included required readings, independent and group exercises. The combination of activities and exercises assisted in further strengthening the foundation for students pursuing higher education. This workshop was conducted at three private university in the city of Kabul Khurshid University, Gawharshad Institute of Higher Education, and the University of Afghanistan. At Khurshid University and at the University of Afghanistan there were 15 students, whereas at Gawharshad there were 5 participants. There was a mix of students who were fluent in English, and some who were not familiar with English at all. Therefore, the slides were translated into Farsi and there was also a translator in the case of any language issues that arose.



Figure 1: Girls working on activity at Khurshid University



Figure 2 Students at Khurshid University

The workshop commenced with an icebreaker called Human Bingo. For this activity, students had a worksheet with numerous statements. The students were encouraged to go around and ask their peers if this statement were true for them, and if so, they put down the name of that individual. For instance, one statement was “Speaks 5 languages” so students had to find a peer that could speak five languages, and put their name down. This paved a creative way for students to exercise communication skills. It emphasized the importance of acquiring information from others in the most convenient and efficient way possible, and how they could hone these skills through critical thinking.



Figure 3 Soraya Parwani



Figure 4 Students at Khurshid



Figure 5 Group discussion, students at Gawharshad

The main goal of the first section, Concepts, was to have students begin to consciously think about the subconscious reasoning that leads them to make the decisions they do. The purpose of this was to have students question a lot of commonly held beliefs, and utilize this when approaching literature they need to dissect. This was done by familiarizing students with the difference between critical thinking and critical reading. Moreover, terms such as concepts, referents, propositions, and connotations were introduced. In order to obtain optimal results for student’s retention, the term was first introduced and then, as a big group we would work through an example. When the students depicted a strong level of understanding through group exercises, they were then challenged by having to address more complex examples to think outside the box. For instance, the concept of “Friends” was first introduced to students so they could gain a strong understanding of what concepts and referents are. Successively, a more complex concept was then introduced which was security in Afghanistan. By introducing a relevant reference to everyday life as an example for a concept, students were able to apply their previous knowledge from other sources or personal experience. This promoted a high level of engagement and made the students that participated contributing stakeholders in the conversation.

The second section of the workshop was argument analysis. This part of the workshop covered the building blocks of developing strong arguments, and subsequently, effective ways to analyze arguments. By deciphering and breaking down the process of reasoning and the formation of coherent sound arguments, students were then able to differentiate between strong and weak arguments. In order to apply what they had just learned, students were required to assess various examples of arguments on their worksheets individually. Many of these examples were in reference to gender inequality within Afghan society. After students worked individually on their exercises, they would then have to engage with their peers by sharing their perspective with the whole group. For instance, as a class we read a conversation between a father and his daughter about attending school, and then analyzed the logical reasoning for each argument provided by the two parties. This also provided the students with an opportunity to communicate their dissent if they did not agree with their peers. Thus, becoming an effective way to exhibit the importance of persuasion and convincing evidence as key elements to argument strength.



Figure 6 Partner Activity, Khurshid University



Figure 7 Group Activity, Khurshid University

The third section of the workshop was reasoning. The purpose of this section was to have students recognize strong, logical arguments and the process of reasoning it followed. In order to do so, students were familiarized with two broad methods of reasoning, deduction and induction. The students assessed the merits and drawbacks of logical reasoning that follows either stream. For instance, the process of induction was introduced through examples and key points were shared. After a good foundation was established, examples were given to depict the slippery slope that could result in generalization by oversimplifying concepts. The specific example we used was Afghan women's desire to acquire higher education. We discussed the importance of samples and populations, and how we could potentially risk misrepresenting based upon the techniques we use to conduct sampling population. After introducing the topic, the participants were then encouraged to work in small groups to identify whether the arguments on their worksheets followed deductive or inductive reasoning. The practical application of the information they acquired was essential for them to identify their own process of reasoning and familiarize themselves with alternative perspectives held by their peers.

At the University of Afghanistan, the section Introduction to Political Science Research Methodology covered primarily qualitative and quantitative research methods. The goal of this section was to assist students in taking their abstract questions in regards to political science and help them operationalize and measure the variables they wish to study. For example, at the end of the section a group activity was to look at the broad concept of corruption and draw an outline of how to conduct research to measure this variable.



Figure 8 Individual activity, University of Afghanistan

Students were encouraged to create a theory and then share how they presume it would be the most efficient and reliable way to collect data. In order to practice the evaluation of data, students were required to have read “Outbound Health Tourism and its Impact on HealthCare in Afghanistan”, a research paper written by Ms. Freshta Karim, published in the first journal of DROPS. It was simpler for students to refer back to the method used by Ms. Karim in her paper to analyze the methodological approach to her research. Moreover, it provided a practical application of evaluating results of data that had already been collected. For instance, in Ms. Karim’s data there is a graph that represents the “Number of Afghans issued Medical visas for India”. Students had to assess the credibility of the data by evaluating the source and the relevance it holds to Ms. Karim’s research overall.



Figure 9 University of Afghanistan



Figure 10 University of Afghanistan

Overall, this workshop offered a nuanced approach that was flexible to be needs-based rather than follow a strict pedagogically constructed outline. This was essential in conducting a workshop with a group of individuals with extremely unique educational experiences in academia in the context of Afghanistan. The emphasize on small and group exercises enhanced the level of engagement from students while the usage of relevant references increased interest. These two techniques coupled together motivated the participants to work through more challenging topics

they were faced with. For example, in section one of the workshop we spent a lot of time trying to understand the importance of “Concepts” and its significance in academia. This was one the first terms that was introduced and it soon became clear that the students were having trouble comprehending it. Therefore, we worked extensively through numerous examples until all students depicted a strong understanding. Another area where I presumed we would have trouble was the focus of a gender lens in a class predominantly comprised of males. However, in issues pertaining to gender inequality the men were just as, if not more vocal in debunking gender roles and denouncing gender inequality embedded within various different aspects of Afghan society.

For instance, in section two one example used was a conversation between a father and daughter in regards to girls obtaining education.

Daughter: Can I go to school? If I do not go to school, I won't be able to get an education, and without an education I will not be able to become independent and will always have to rely on someone else

Father: No you can't– a) because girls do not need an education, your role is to stay at home and complete your role in the house; b) and I will support you and then your husband so you don't need to waste your time

The students deconstructed the example and generally agreed that the reasoning which was to substantiate the father's claims was flawed or fallacious. In order to practice argument construction, the next activity had some students argue in favor of the father and some were required to argue in favor of the daughter. This also depicted to the students the strength of an individual's argument is highly contingent on one's ability to provide strong evidence and their skills of persuasion. The purpose of workshop was not to overwhelm students with an exhaustive list of concepts in the field of critical thinking, but to depict the importance of critical thinking in everyday life and in academia. This workshop engaged individuals to question everything, and utilize the same tools to approach and assess academic literature. Moreover, including research methodology proved to be highly interesting for the students and DROPS will draw on the lessons learnt from these trainings and seek to expand it to other universities in Kabul.