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Personal Experience and Professional Development through Critical and Creative Thinking

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PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH

CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING

A Synthesis Project Presented

by

BENJAMIN A. OKAFOR

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston,

in partial fufillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

June 2004

Critical and Creative Thinking Program.

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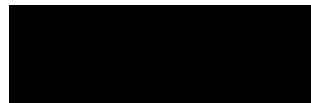
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Critical and Creative Thinking Program

ABSTRACT

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH

CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING

June 2004

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M.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Associate Professor Peter Taylor.

This synthesis describes my journey as a student in the Critical and Creative Thinking

(CCT) Program and shows the impact the program has had on my life. I was able to fashion a

future career for myself with the help of the courses I took along that journey.

Finding the CCT Program in 1993 showed me a way to get beyond my bad

undergraduate educational experience. My experience in the first two courses, Critical Thinking

and Creative Thinking, was exhilarating.   I was able to apply that experience and knowledge in

dealing with the serious misfortunes of my family in Nigeria and building a family in Boston.

The experiences when I rejoined CCT, which I describe course by course, have helped me to

become a better thinker and a creative individual. I was able retrieve my long lost zeal for

political activism and take the bold step of becoming an anti-corruption activist, beginning with a

website dedicated to fighting corruption in Nigeria.

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PROLOGUE

One of the daunting problems that most undergraduates face is career choice. Very few are lucky to have known what they are supposed to pursue. I happened to be one of those people who were confused as to what they really wanted to be in life. I had an interest in music, but I had no experience in music training in my elementary and high school careers. For me then to think that I could pursue music at college level and do well in it seemed far- fetched. I sought advice from very good friends who advised me not to go into music, and if I was still interested in music, that I could still minor in it. I was reluctant to heed that advice. But when I was reminded that the majority of the successful musicians did not attend music college to play music, I was completely convinced that taking my friends' advice was the right thing to do.

I ended up studying Mass Communication at the University of SouthWestern Louisiana with emphasis on Radio and TV Production and a minor in Music. When I graduated from College, I found out that I had not done my homework very well. If I wanted to get employed in this country, especially in the field of my study, I would have to give up my Nigerian accent. Unfortunately, giving up an accent is not something easy to do, even as much as you want to. I have had it since I was very young. At this juncture it was obvious that I did not choose the right career and that I had made a very bad error. I had not done the good career research work I thought I had at the onset and it was obvious that my degree was worthless. My accent has always stood in my way to getting job in Mass Communication. I was forced to look for jobs that had nothing to do with my area of studies.

This situation dealt a serious blow to my self-esteem. I had worked so hard to make ends meet in obtaining that degree and I was completely confused about how to remedy the situation

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until I moved to Massachusetts. The only option left for me was to correct whatever mistake I had as an undergraduate in my graduate school undertaking. I assured myself that I would do something in my graduate program that would be beneficial to my career problem. In my search for a good school that is moderately inexpensive, I found that University of Massachusetts fulfilled that criterion and the Critical and Creative thinking Master's program at the University was the right program for me. I concluded that with a Master of Arts in Critical and Creative Thinking I would be able to jumpstart my creative faculties. I also believed that what I could learn in the Critical and Creative Thinking program I could apply in many ways in my life. I applied to the program in 1992 and was accepted. Whether by design or by accident I registered for two courses in the spring of 1993: Critical Thinking and Creative Thinking. These two courses changed my life. I started believing in myself again after many years of doubt in who I was, and I knew then that it had been too early to give up on education.

Just as I was making this transition with all the hopes and aspirations that came with it, I hit another big snag in life. This misfortune could not have come at a worst time. I was still experiencing the pumped up ego of better things to come and of a future that seemed well defined. I was making plans, saving money and planning how to get back to school come fall (since summer would be too hectic for me) when the bad news came. My father was dead. Then three months after my father died at the age of seventy-two, I received more bad news. My eldest brother was robbed and murdered by armed robbers in Nigeria after they snatched his car from him.

If the death of my father was not quite enough to break me, certainly the news of my brother's horrible death was. I was so devastated by the events that my faith in the Lord was beginning to shake. Nothing made any sense to me anymore. I was the only breadwinner in my

family and everybody was looking up to me for what I could do for them just by virtue of the fact that I was living in United States. It was assumed by my family that I was well off, when the fact was that we were all struggling to make ends meet. With the death of my brother, who had two young daughters that needed to be taken care of, I saw my dreams of my academic pursuit in shambles. The responsibility of those kids fell directly in my lap, for I knew that if I did not take care of them, nobody else would. I traveled to Nigeria depleting every savings I had. First I had to reassure everybody that we would prevail during these trying times. As an African, it was important to me that we performed every traditional custom involved with the burial. I came back to United States after spending two months in Africa helping my mother through the grieving process.

I did not go back to school. Just a little past one year after my brother died, my mother became sick. My father's death was difficult for my mother, but it was my brother's death that was the straw that broke the camel's back. My mother was completely withdrawn, she never cared about anything in life anymore, and she lived like life was not important anymore. The only thing she never let go off was her Christian faith and bible. She was a highly devoted Christian. Six months later, in 1995, she died of lung cancer. I could not go back for her burial. I had one brother left whom I handed over the whole responsibility of the burial while I footed the bill. The whole episode was too much for me to bear. It took me several years to get back to my senses and to reapply for admission. What follows is my account of the lessons I learned during my two periods in the CCT Program and during the interregnum between those periods.

CHAPTER 1

THE IMPACT OF THE INITIAL COURSES IN CRITICAL AND CREATIVE

THINKING

I started this write up by mentioning that the first two courses completely changed my life. Throughout my undergraduate education, I had not experienced the impact that these two courses had on me. The lessons that I learned in these courses, along with the format of the assignments, were completely new and exciting to me.

I started to look at things differently. Not only did I look more in depth, but I also had the urge to deliberate on my perceptions. As Davis stated, "The way we look at things may lead to a new way of interpretation" (Davis, p. 111). Coupled with this new way of thinking was the various CCT exercises that helped to increase my perception as well. One such useful exercises dealt with reading meanings into various visual puzzles. In this exercise, students were presented with drawings or shapes that had various shapes embedded on them; the task was to visualize those hidden interpretations. The most important accomplishment for the teacher was for the students to change their normal way of seeing or looking at things. In order to achieve this, one must be able to change attitude or, as it is popularly said, "to think outside the box". The excitement of solving those puzzles and the new experience of it all was overwhelming.

I have never considered myself a creative person; creativity was something that I thought was left for the genius. However, after taking creative thinking, I discovered that people who identify themselves as being self-actualized individuals are also considered creative. "There is this overlap in self actualized individual and special talent creativity" (Davis, p .7). Knowing that I can improve my creative being, that there are exercises I can engage in that will help to reduce

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my perceptive blocks etc., was encouraging to me. It helped me build confidence.

I embraced Davis's theories, my personality changed, and I became very confident of myself. As a result of this, I undertook one of the greatest risks unimaginable for my final project for the class. For a black person to chose to act like Lucille Ball in class assignment was unbelievable. As the instructor, Prof. Schwartz rightly pointed out, I exemplified risk taking and courage, two of the greatest factors that influence creativity (Davis, p.70). But it was obvious that in my selecting the topic and individual to profile, I was not perturbed in any way other than adding more problems and challenges to the assignment. I would have been more comfortable acting like Sammy Davis Jr. or Red Fox of the Sanford and Son, but creativity had taken hold of me. I had discovered something very precious and I was not going to let go. For the first time in my life, I started to change my perception about education.

I had gone through four years of college and had a hard time fathoming the impact this had on my life, other than the credential. The fact that I could not get employed with my degree only made matters worse. I am one of those that hate to waste precious time in something that is not beneficial or productive, no matter how useful or important it might sound to others. I concluded that any education that has nothing to do with vocational training like engineering, medicine, or architecture is not education. For this reason, I despised humanities courses, but I was blaming the wrong thing. The manner and way I was educated in my undergraduate years can never be compared with the way courses in Critical and Creative Thinking were offered to students. For the first time I saw what education could be and what I saw was worthwhile. I began to value the classes to the point that I was reading not for grades, but for understanding, and I was enjoying the benefit. The selection of courses and the way the Professors taught the students were something that I had never experienced before. The courses ahead seemed as

interesting as the ones I was taking and fitted together towards one goal.

As many students who took Critical Thinking and Creative Thinking will also admit, it was tempting for me to assume that I had acquired all the necessary teachings needed in creativity in those two classes and to take the risk of going back into the world to put theory into practice. For many CCT students, the satisfaction derived from the experience is overwhelming in that one feels a sense of accomplishment one never felt before as a student. At the risk of overemphasizing my point, I seriously urge every prospective student of Critical and Creative Thinking to consider making these two courses their first choice. It opens up various avenues that influences the way one proceeds both in life and in every other thing you do as a CCT student.

CHAPTER 2

INTERREGNUM: NINE YEARS OF INCUBATION

As I mentioned in the introduction, I was beginning to enjoy my new found joy in the academia when tragedy struck: the death of my father, the heir of the family, and my mother all in a period less than three years. As a result of the tragedy that befell my family between 1993 and 1996, I cut short my education after just one semester. It was not until 2002 that I was able to go back to the program. Of interest to my readers is what really went on those intervening nine years of doldrums, or rather incubation. Because incubation is an important part of creativity, I will call it incubation.

Even though I was still in shock and grieving the loss of three of my family members, those nine years enabled me to put to practice what I learned from the two courses. Where everything seemed to have abandoned me, my creative knowledge stayed with me. I used the opportunity to deliberate on the things that really matter in life. The experience ended up opening aspects of my life that I must have suppressed or ignored. I got married and started a family. In my reclusive meditation, I asked myself many questions. During this time, I continued to remind myself of the newfound dream of master's degree that almost seemed shattered; and was waiting in the wings. I began to fashion my life to suit the new status quo. I must admit that there were times I was apportioning blames to wherever I deemed fit. Several times, I question the Lord why such calamity should fall on me. But I knew that such behavior would not yield anything beneficial, and I knew that I, and I alone would determine my destiny.

I reminded myself of the wisdom my father imparted to me when leaving for United States of America: whenever anything happens, whether as a result of your own or someone

else's making, and when there is no way I could change the outcome, it would do me no good to spend my energy blaming myself or brooding on what might have been. It was best to pick up the pieces, study the incident to understand how to prevent it from happening again, and move on. I consider this a creative way of looking at problems. After all, looking for where to lay blame never does any good, but learning from it does. I realized that tragedy is also associated with creativity. Hurtful as it may seem, it also opens up avenues to many things that can be beneficial if well handled. In my own case, handling tragedy well means getting married and having three children, which has put me on a different level in life.

One advantage that came out of my long absence from my graduate career was that I was able to grow and mature. Sometimes I wonder why things happen the way they do, and perhaps there is a reason for the things that happen. In retrospect, I tend to believe that the tragedy or the events that happened in my life were actually beneficial in a way. It took my focus and redirected it. It allowed me the opportunity to deliberate on how I intend to pursue my life. I believe that if I had continued in the CCT Program without interruption, that I would be a very different person. Above all, I now consider getting married and having three wonderful children as one of my best accomplishments. Before my family tragedy, I used to be in hurry about everything. I have learned to slow down and take things more easily. Creativity cannot take place in an individual that hurries over things. Creativity requires long gestation, sometimes a pause in all action: to take root it requires meditation, reflection, and metacognitive processes. Over the nine years that I was away from the CCT program I never forgot the project I had embarked on. I constantly reminded myself of my Master's degree program, and I pondered many times on how to best apply it in my life.

Two traits of creativity are as follows: "Tolerance for ambiguity and complexity" (Davis,

p. 39). Life already by itself is complex. And certainly the deaths of my family members added to the complexity. I was left with the responsibility of caring for two nieces. They were thousands of miles away.   I not only had to make sure that they continued their education, but also had to make sure that their mother was taken care of as our customs warrant. I was considered to be better placed than my only other brother still alive, who was living from hand to mouth at that time. Additionally, at the time the tragedies struck, my six sisters were still in school, and they themselves needed to be helped in continuing their education and in other financial matters. My eldest brother had been the one helping me to keep the family going, but when he died everything fell in my lap.

I decided that I needed a companion who would help me through the pain and deal with the new complexity. I knew that loneliness could be very troubling. It could increase my stress level and lead to depression, and anger, and that could impede success, and affect one's ability to get out of the present predicament (Wood, p. 1.2). Nothing fruitful comes out of a depressed individual, so also, creativity does not flourish in the midst of anger. I needed to put on a lion's heart to continue and that is what I did. Education had to wait while I solved those urgent problems.

During this period I realized that my concept of learning had changed from my days as an undergraduate when my goal was geared towards getting degree and getting through with education. With that attitude, I found out in the end that the degree is not worth anything. I learned to not go to school to acquire a degree even though that appears to be the end result, but to acquire knowledge. If the inspiration to come to the new world is the love of liberty, my inspiration is the love of knowledge sent me back to school. I had begun to value real education: Education that is geared towards making a vivid impression in one's life. Education that is

geared towards visible changes and comprehension. Education that would have lasting

impression in one's life

In Science In Progress (1999), Nina Greenwald explains the constructivist nature of

learning:

> learning that takes place when the learner is the one who looks deeper to create meaning
> and develop understanding ...learning that goes deep well beyond simply " knowing",
> such as being able to do thought demanding - things with a topic like finding evidence
> and interpreting information in new ways (p.14).

The students are not to blame because we did what was expected of us. Learn and pass the test.

We were like parrots who were able to imitate the master's voice and repeat whatever he says.

One of the advantages that came out of a delayed education is being able to take part in a modern

form of curriculum that did not exist before. As the schools improve on ways to teach students,

we were able to partake in this windfall with the younger generation. So the time wasted was not

after all wasted as such. Indeed, those were my most productive years in life. As long as we

engage ourselves in activities that are productive, there is nothing to lose in one diverting or

being derailed from a course unexpectedly. With this new philosophy, I was ready to rejoin the

CCT program.

By the year 2000, married with three children, I found myself faced both with the

responsibility of raising them and with the desire to go back to school. I concluded in 2002 that I

could not wait to raise them all before going back to school to complete my master's degree. I

reapplied to the CCT program and was readmitted. Even with the extra responsibility of my

children, something I did not have to contend with previously, I registered for two courses,

which was the maximum I felt I could carry while keeping body and soul together. The

following chapters will analyze my experience with the courses and the impact they have heard

on me.

CHAPTER 3

ENVIRONMENT, SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

I came to Peter Taylor's class ignorant of what it would be about. Like all the courses in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program, this course was unique and puzzling at times, but united towards one goal: educating one as a critical and creative thinker. The idea of keeping a "Professional Development Work Book" was first introduced to me in this class. Each student had to compile a record of reflections on what was learned in class and keep records of important notes, papers and other organizational materials. There were no limits to what one could include in the professional development workbook (P. D. W.). I find this to be extremely important because after the semester, the P. D. W. was the only source of information about activities one engaged in while taking a particular course.

In my P. D. W., I included all the assignments I did in that class. At first this was an awkward task for me as I was used to only taking notes in class and I was very bad at organizing things. But, in the end, it became a way for me to organize myself very well. I carried this concept into all classes whether it was required or not. Handouts of every subsequent class are grouped in a binder and forms a book of its own. My now extensive collection of P. D. W.'s helped me immensely in writing this synthesis. The experience will go a long way to influence my work outside of the academic arena.

This class became a gateway to many things of which I was ignorant. We examined historical and scientific facts to find out how some of them were distorted. Bertrand Russell in his article "Appearance and Reality" (as quoted Bowie et al. 2000), stated: "In daily life, we assume as certain many things which, on a closer scrutiny are found to be so full of

contradictions that only a great amount of thought enables us to know what it is that we really believe"(p.251). In one class we discussed that nature was never a constant phenomena as understood in medieval times when religion played a role in science, but was meant to undergo changes. We were also exposed to the importance history plays in our understanding of the events in our time. Without detailing historical facts, every theory that follows from a false historical account will lead to a false result, and all evidence derived from it will be falsely conclusive.

Another new concept I learned in this class was the use of the Intersecting Processes Diagram. This new concept is used to come to more heuristic approach of analyzing facts. In the article of Pearce "Inventing Africa" Intersecting Processes Diagrams were used to digest the effects of the Italian invasion of East Africa in 1887. In my reflection titled: "Teachings from Intersecting Diagram", I wrote:

> one important point worth mentioning with the use of the Intersecting Processes is the power of graphic representation. The Intersecting Processes Diagram will undoubtedly stimulate a heuristic approach which makes one ask more questions with regards to the topic at hand. The use of graphic representation will call into action the brainstorming effect which then enhances the heuristic processes of the mind. The more mind boggling something becomes, the more in depth the search for knowledge..."

In the Pearce article I was able to uncover the hidden fact behind present day African wild life and the historical reason behind it. The fact that African plains were more of savannah land than the wild life sanctuary it is today had been a mystery to me.

One of the articles we read, "The Tragedy of The Commons," re- emphasized my belief that human beings individually cannot be trusted to make the right judgment without some form of governmental control. This has always been the basic tenet of my political belief, though I needed something to validate this belief. I found it in this article. Since then, I have always used

the "Tragedy of The Commons" as the basis of my argument of why we need more government rather than less government intrusion in our lives. Without some of the laws that the U. S. government enacted, the good we see today in humans would not be there. Human beings are restricted in their actions not on the basis of their willingness, but because of the consequences of doing otherwise.

CHAPTER 4

COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

While I was having a rude awakening about what to believe and what not to believe in "Environment, Science, and Society," I was also having a dose of creativity and what makes humans creative in my Cognitive Psychology class with Professor Schwartz. It should be noted that I had never taken any undergraduate Psychology classes. Whenever I had the option, I opted for Philosophy instead. I had the opportunity this time, and it proved to be very challenging and rewarding.

In this class, we revisited some of the important factors that influence creativity ranging from perception, problem solving techniques, memory, cognitive development, knowledge representation and expertise, and a host of other issues that are vital to people developing their creative abilities. I was introduced to the idea of effectively reflecting on assignments in order to show in depth knowledge of what I had learned. By reflecting, one does not only show in depth knowledge, but also gives an interpretation on one's own words that makes sense to writers and readers. This concept of reflection is far removed from the old style of memorizing materials just for the sake of passing exams only to forget the materials few days later.

One of the exercises we carried out in class, which also resulted in my final paper, was on attention and perception. (Sternberg and Wagner, p.49-84). We analyzed various ways we can improve our attention and perception. This ranges from the feature analysis model where the attention is paid to the parts of images so as to associate them as such. For example, we can associate the letter "U" and "C" with the component part of a curved line. This formula could be used in teaching alphabets to kindergartens.

In this class we also dealt with mnemonics. This technique calls for the use of strategies to enhance memory. There are many ways this could be done, but I will limit myself to just two: (1). The first letter technique can be summed up as follows: in algebra, the order of mathematical operations is Brackets first, then Of, Division, Multiplication, Addition, and Subtraction. The first letter technique to remember this algebraic rule would be to form a word with the first letter of every word associated with the rule: example:- Take B from bracket, O from of, D from division, M from multiplication, A from addition, S from subtraction and what you get is B. O. D. M. A. S. It is easier to remember this word than the rule, and once you remember this one word BODMAS, the rule and sequences are embedded in it.

(2) The Hierarchy technique is defined as an outlining technique where items are arranged in a series of related categories from the most general to the more specific. Humans tend to remember or recall the items in a list much better using the hierarchy technique than when trying to recall this list in a random fashion. For example, when one is given the following words to remember— shovel, water, sand, gravel, cement, head pans, buckets, mason, carpenter, and handymen—the hierarchy form would look like this:

HANDYMEN

(Human labor)   CARPENTER, MASON

(Utensils)   HEAD PAN, BUCKETS, SHOVEL

(Materials) CEMENT, GRAVEL, SAND, WATER.

By representing these items in this manner, we have established a hierarchy structure in which recalling the items will be easier than when trying to recall items arranged in a non structural, random form.

The problem solving techniques that I learned in this Psychology class that stuck with me

was learning the ability to overcome our mental set and functional fixedness. This definition of mental set was given by Professor Schwartz in class: "A mental set can be referred to a mental rut or overbearing rigidity to problem solving, whereby we constantly apply the same principle in problem solving without the ability to try something else." Functional Fixedness refers to the manner and way humans look at objects. We tend to assign specific meaning and uses to a particular object and fail to look at other features of the object that may be helpful in problem solving. The meanings and uses we assign to objects tend to be rigid, and therefore leave no room for flexibility. When that happens, humans tend to be limited or uncreative in problem solving tasks. This process is referred to a situation in which our top - down processing is over reactive and making us rely too heavily on our previous concepts and expectations. One example of not being fixed was Professor Schwartz using his credit card to cut cheese in a hotel room when he realized that he had failed to bring a knife.

The last example I will give pertaining to the numerous experiences I gathered from taking Cognitive Psychology is the assignment that we were given to showcase the enormous differences in knowledge organization when an expert is compared to a novice. In this challenging assignment, we were to find a novice and an expert in a field of our choosing. Selecting the profession and going about finding the subjects were not easy tasks. It was a time consuming assignment as we were supposed to tape or record the interviews. We did the assignments and I was thrilled to see the various differences between two well-educated individuals. How they differ in ways of looking at things familiar and unfamiliar to them—the power of an expert as opposed to a novice in an unrelated territory.

I re-enforced my creative learning, which had been first kindled ten years earlier when I took Critical Thinking and Creative Thinking. Since then, I have changed my way of perceiving

things. I look at things considering all possibilities. This involves looking from a bird's eye view or turning it upside down to make sure that no stone is left unturned. There is no doubt that I have become and will continue to be a good thinker, and this is miles away from what I used to be.

Cognitive Psychology was a very difficult class for two reasons: It was the first Psychology class I took as a student and I came back to school in 2002 with more challenges than in 1993. Since Cognitive Psychology was so difficult, I knew that I had to do a lot of work if I were to be successful and go on to complete the CCT program. At one critical point, exhausted from my work and family obligations, I made the blunder of not recording an assignment correctly. When I spoke with Professor Schwartz about it, he told me that the last two assignments were the only chances I had to make it. But one thing was going for me was the fact that I was not going to give up on anything. The financial sacrifice was too great. I trudged on, confident that I would come out with flying colors. I did finish the class to my satisfaction. It was a real test of will, but I made it.

CHAPTER 5

FOUNDATIONS OF PHILOSOPHY

In the fall of 2002, I took two courses "Practicum" taught by Peter Taylor, and

"Foundations of Philosophical" taught by Arthur Millman.   I had become more in tune with the

rigors of education and had reassured myself that I was equal to the task. I was going into this

semester more selfassured and more willing to face any obstacles than the previous semester.

This semester I was taking a Philosophy course, and Philosophy has always been my favorite

subject. With regards to the philosophy class I knew what to expect. But for me Practicum was a

mystery (Chapter 6).

The Philosophy class I took was a lot different than what I expected. The selection of the

readings was well crafted to go along with the assignments. The selection of the topics was

directed towards improving and challenging the students in improving their thinking ability. The

in-class discussions and exchanges of opinions helped me to gain more insight into readings, and

to see from different points of views of other people's opinions concerning how they view things

different from one another. Shari Tishman, in her synthesis of 1984, quoted Edward D'Angelo in

his book The Teaching of Critical Thinking (1971):"Critical thinking is the process of evaluating

statements, arguments, and experiences. An operational definition of critical thinking would

consist of all the evaluating attitude and skills used in the evaluating process"(p.7). We students

were constantly evaluating each other's perspectives and making informed judgments, and at the

same time we were increasing our critical thinking ability. The idea of students taking turns to

express their thoughts and feelings pertaining to various subjects was so enriching that it would

have been less productive if the instructor evaluated everybody's ideas and made comments

only. Additionally, prior to giving back our writings on the topic of the week, the instructor would first allow us to engage in this dialogue that brings out individual perspectives.

The class introduced us to early philosophers and their works. Many of the works made impact on me, especially Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, and Meno which dealt with Socrates the great Philosopher. I was amazed at the skill with which Socrates engaged Euthyphro, who had accused him of the crime of impiety. Socrates regularly used questions to educate or answer questions posed to him. Socrates' questions were designed to answer the question posed to him by virtue of the answer to his question. By posing questions to problems, one finds out that most questions can be answered by more questions. Using Socrates' method of posing questions to problems, one can find that most questions are ill defined, which makes our ability to come up with answers limited. By Socrates posing questions, his subjects are able to see their limitations in knowledge. This method of inquiry is known as Socratic argument. Socrates also believed that in order to learn, one must pretend not to know. We can learn from Socrates that it is our limited knowledge that is responsible for unanswered questions. We also learn that the quest for knowledge begins with questioning that which we are ignorant of.

I have incorporated Socrates in my search for knowledge. I constantly use this process whenever I am confronted with a problem. By asking questions, I become more equipped with the necessary weapon to tackle the problem. Sometimes, in the process of posing more and more questions, we are led to uncover issues that are unrelated to the original question but go a long way to enrich our own knowledge.

In addition to the readings, we were required to turn in written assignments every week based on that week's reading. One great benefit to this strategy was that it was an indirect way for us to reflect on what we read. It is not just reading, but when you are asked to make sense of

what you have read and come up with two or three pages, you know that it calls for reflection.

Reflection, as we all know, is a way to increase one's critical thinking ability. Shari Tishman in

her synthesis described Personal and Interpersonal Growth, by quoting Lipman:

> The fictional behavior that students are encouraged to emulate is largely a process of
> interpersonal discussions, and reflections and revelations that follows. The class
> discussion that should follow each chapter of the novel will promote the student's
> awareness of one another's personalities, values, interests, et cetera. "This increases
> sensitivity," Lipman claims, "is one of the most valuable by-products of classroom
> communication (p.16).

Directly or indirectly, we were tapping from each other's vast wealth of experience and

knowledge otherwise not available if we were not engaging in such classroom discussions of

topics. I came out of this class being able to value group process versus believing that one

person has all the answers. I was able to put aside my own inclinations, and I have come to

believe that there is something missing in that line of thought. This can only be exposed by

allowing others to participate or at least air their views on issues.

The idea of group process had been emphasized in every CCT course. It began to take a

root in me that I needed to be more willing to give room for other views. Prior to taking courses

in Critical and Creative Thinking, I had not been able to let that thought sink, even though I was

aware of group process in my undergraduate program. The difference is that when teaching is

based on theoretical approach, and no practical aspect is involved, it does not take deep root in

the minds of the students. We took exams as undergraduates and answered correctly about all the

factors that influence successful group process in exams, but that's about all there was. We never

practiced group work enough to make it a part of my life, nor was there any emphasis on why it

was needed. I discovered in the CCT Program that the benefits of the group process manifest

itself to the class members as we appreciate the perspectives that emanate from every one of us. I

found that some people's views often run counter to other people's. In Philosophy, under the

Professor's watchful eyes, we were able to have intense discussions that bore witness to the wealth of ideas that the group process technique can bring forth. Now that I have crafted a post-college career in politics, I will not forget to value the inclusion of others in whatever decision I make.

At the beginning of the semester, the Professor read a written work by a student whose work he felt was exceptional. Such practice encouraged all of us to put more energy into our writing, and there is no doubt that this helped to improve our writing. Though I thought it would be a weekly routine, that practice was not repeated. In order words, we were put into competition unknowingly. What a way to wake people up!

There was no doubt that we enhanced our critical thinking ability in "Foundations of Philosophical Thought." The semester closed with individual performances based on what we read in class. I performed a skit, "Socrates Comes Alive," in which I imitated Socrates in his method using the class as my audience. The topic of discussion I chose was the impending war on Iraq. I, as Socrates, took the stage and started with questioning students posing as senators, who voted for the War Powers act why they did what they did. I put into practice the Socratic argument using questions to answer questions that the students put forth. I was very thrilled to see how this came out in real life situation. We generated more issues than we expected at the onset. I could see how this could be a very good learning tool. Simple question ballooning into more complex questions. It was a fun two weeks to see various students perform various skits and the creativity they brought to the drama that took place.

CHAPTER 6

PRACTICUM

(PROCESSES OF WRITING AND REVISING/ BUILDING OF A CAREER)

The Practicum course, taught by Peter Taylor, became the building block of a career for me. Everything took a turn for better as the sub-title suggests. The goal of the class was to prepare us to be good researchers and synthesis writers. I went into the class admittedly not being a good writer, but I improved a lot from the experience I had in that class. The class was designed to take us on a journey of different phases of research unique to all of us, a research process quite unlike the usual research with which we were familiar.

The class started off with the instructor telling us to think about what we want to research for our final paper. He emphasized that it was important that we choose a topic that is interesting to us, something we would be willing and happy to work with for a long time. I took that advice very seriously, as Professor Taylor informed us we may want to use this research for our synthesis. The syllabus was divided into sections called "Phases of Research." The overall vision was: "I can convey who I want to influence /affect concerning what (Subject, Audience, Purpose)" (Taylor, p.A1). We had in-class exercises, such as brainstorming on our topics and sharing of ideas with other students on what we have chosen and what we hope to achieve in the end. These in-class exercises helped us to contribute to each other's areas of interests.

During the brainstorming exercises, I came up with the idea of researching and finding a way to solve the problem of corruption in Nigeria my country of origin. Throughout my life, because I have always been concerned with issues of corruption and injustice, some of my friends had told me to enter into Nigerian politics. Even though I have spent a number of

years in the United States, I find myself still worried about the way things are going in my home country. When most of my friends are not interested any more, and can only thank God that they are able to make it out to the United States of America, I still find myself troubled with all the bad news that emanate from Nigeria.

I was politically active when I was in high school in Nigeria. At a point, I organized a demonstration about the bad food students were served and I was able to convince the students to abandon their dinner. The demonstration got out of control and some students decided to haul the food to the principal's home. The demonstration resulted into three days of riot and no school. The Secretary of Education came all the way from the capital to talk to students. The five ringleaders of the demonstration were summoned and I was labeled the organizer. We insisted that our demands were legitimate and that we needed changes. As a result, the school food services were improved and we were not punished, to the surprise of many students. The only negative outcome was that I was stripped off my dormitory prefect position.

I have never thought of being a politician, but I have always wanted to be a person that affects changes. So in "Practicum," when we were asked to choose a topic the only thing that kept creeping into my mind was how to curb corruption in Nigeria. I have always believed that the reason why so many countries are not making progress centers on corruption. I decided that my paper would be on the "strategic ways of eliminating corruption in Nigeria." (I must admit that I did not frame it directly like this, but only after several revisions.) Professor Taylor advised me that no one can ever stop corruption entirely, and with that comment, I was able to reframe the boundaries of my topic.

The process of writing in this class was very slow and demanded that we create a dialogue with the instructor throughout the written work. This, I must admit was very

frustrating, especially since I had never done anything like this before. Very early on in this class, we were asked to write a thesis question and a paragraph description of our proposed projects. This was constantly revised throughout the semester and on each occasion, there was an improvement. "The point of quick revising is to turn out a clean, clear, professional final draft without taking as much time as you would need for major rethinking and reorganizing,"(Elbow, p.32). Frustrating as it was for me, I knew that the outcome was very beneficial.

It was obvious from the onset that this was not going to be the research I was familiar with. We were asked to make connections to initial informants—we needed someone outside the class to guide our inquiries in their early unformed stage. In addition to this, we were asked to make connections to libraries and any other sources to "find out who's done what before/who's doing what (through writing and actions) that informs our evolving projects," (Taylor, p. B.1). In gathering our sources, we were introduced to the annotated bibliography. This sounded new to me. Initially, I did not bother about the word "annotated," so I went ahead and gathered the usual bibliographies just to find out how ignorant I was. Well we are in the process of learning so the instructor took time to educate me on what annotated bibliography was. I was pleased with the usefulness of it. It was nothing but a brief introduction of the subject matter of the source you are quoting. This helps you to remember what you are doing and from where that information is coming from. You don't have to go back and re-read the whole thing again. I will cite an example of one of the sources I used, which illustrates what an annotated bibliography is:-

Perry John Peter. Political Corruption and Political Geography. Ashgate Publishing Limited Vermont.
This writer offered similar overall policy change like government restructuring salaries of civil servants that is often given as excuse for corrupt practices. Shortening of tenure in government posts. Detachment of administrations from political pressure, legislative oversights, efficient work flow and pride in work...

This form of bibliography helps to embody the true meaning of the content of any source. When writing the body of the work, you don't have to look for the book again to re-read what the topic is all about. You simply refer to the annotated bibliography. The syllabus gave a more vivid illustration of the uses and purpose of annotated bibliography as follows:-

> The primary goal in asking for annotations is for you to check the significance of the reading against your current project definition and priorities. Annotations, therefore should indicated the relevance of the article to your topic. An annotated bibliography also allows you to a) compose sentences that may fine its way into your writing, and b) have your citation already typed in (use the format/citation style you intend to use for your final report) (Taylor, p.B-2).

An annotated bibliography therefore has several uses and purposes, one of which is helping to organize to make future work easier. I find it also useful in reducing the bulk of paper work and maintaining a clean work area. You put away books you have tapped for resources.

In addition to the above strategy of annotated bibliography, the idea of mapping was introduced in this class. Mapping a topic increases our ability to come up with a coherent argument. While there are many ways to map out one's strategies, the one that I favored most was having a central topic and building out from the center. The revision process was applied to the mapping as with the writing, and each time I revised my map, there was an improvement. Again, the revision process was burdensome at times, but the result was always rewarding.

Another component of the "Phases of Research was the idea of "Summarizing the different sub-arguments (Taylor, p. D1). In my own case, writing about a hot issue, such as ways to curb corruption in Nigeria, I knew that there would be a lot of opposition to my ideas. Summarizing the different sub-arguments gave me the opportunity to take opposing side of my thesis statement, looking from the perspective of those that I want to counter. After brainstorming about this assignment, I decided that the only way to uncover the real counter

argument was to take the issue to the Nigerian community in Boston. Indeed, it was a shocking revelation. Even though my brainstorming produced some vital information, what I heard from those who opposed my idea were in no way close to my imagination. Suggestions like "you are only going to foment more trouble in Nigeria" and "you are bound to fail because there is no way you can stop corruption in Nigeria" made my blood run cold. I could not believe what I was hearing. Above all, speaking with the Boston area Nigerians awakened my knowledge of how people have given up on the issues concerning our home country. I knew then that if I was to do something that would make a difference, it would involve a lot of creativity. This class was beginning to open up avenues of which I had been previously oblivious. This was all due to the detailed phases of research I was undertaking in "Practicum."

The aspect of the research that I was not able to accomplish to my satisfaction was in the area of interviewing. The research called for us to seek out experts in our topic areas and interview them. I was able to interview some people, but not the caliber of people I wanted. To be able to do that, I would have had to travel to Nigeria to seek them out. Unfortunately, there was no time or resources for that. Even those people in the United States that could have been helpful could not be reached in the time allotted.

I admitted previously that my writing skills are not what they could be. Two reasons for this were my long absence from school and being employed in a field that did not challenge my writing ability. Yet it was shocking to me how badly my writing skill had deteriorated from my undergraduate years. So when we were introduced to the idea of freewriting, one could imagine how difficult it was for me. Professor Taylor often asked us for ten minutes of free writing before the class period was over. I remember biting the tip of my pen not knowing how to start or what to put down. This exercise continued, and I started seeing myself improving on every

exercise.

The book that was recommended for the freewriting exercise was <u>Writing With Power</u> by Peter Elbow. This book was very helpful in rekindling my writing habits and I recommend this to anybody who would be a writer. The opening paragraph explains freewriting well:

> Freewriting is the easiest way to get words on paper and the best all around practice in writing that I know. To do a freewriting exercise, simply force yourself to write without stopping for ten minutes. Sometimes you will produce good writing, but that's not the goal. Sometimes you will produce garbage, but that's not the goal either. You may stay on one topic, you may flip repeatedly from one to another; it doesn't matter. Sometimes you will produce a good record of your stream of consciousness, but often you can't keep up. If you can't think of anything to write, write about how that feels or repeat over and over "I have nothing to write" or "Nonsense" or "No". If you get stuck in the middle of a sentence or thought, just repeat the last word or phrase till something comes along. The only point is to keep writing (Elbow, p.13).

Another important factor that helped to make the freewriting exercise work so well was that I constantly revised what I wrote as per Professor Taylor's strategy, and this practice of revising made me a better writer. Above all, I invested a good deal of my time—the whole semester—on how to turn out a good paper. Not just any paper, but a paper dealing with a subject that is very pertinent to me: strategic ways to eliminate corruption in Nigeria.

Because this was an in depth research project, I was exposed to a lot of issues dealing with corruption and ways to eliminate it and numerous efforts others have made towards this goal. The more I found out, the more I dug. During this class, I concluded that working towards eliminating corruption in Nigeria is what I will be investing the rest of my life doing . This class became the clarion call for me to pursue a career that I indirectly was gifted to pursue, but ignorant of how to make the first plunge. I am indebted to this class as the impetus to my political future. For creativity to take place, there must be favorable conditions that nurture that creativity (Shekerjian, p. 44-45). The Practicum created that condition.

CHAPTER 7

EVALUATION OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

(LEADING TO THE THINKTANK WEBSITE)

I was energized by the two classes I took in the spring of 2003, in which I found what I

intended to do to after graduation—contribute to making Nigeria a better country. I became more

firm in my belief that most foreigners who are here in the United States on voluntary studies

should go back to their places of origin to contribute their wealth of knowledge from United

States. I say this with the exception of those who are fleeing persecution or other forms of

political repressions. Even at that, they should not fail to go back when their countries become

stable again.

I will discuss first my experience with the class "Seminar in Evaluation and Educational

Change," a course that teaches one how to be a good researcher, especially on issues pertaining

to school improvement.

The Instructor for "Evaluation" was Professor Peter Taylor, with whom I had many

classes by this time. The goal of the course was to teach "Action Research," which is quite

different from traditional school research that calls for authenticating existing knowledge. Action

research calls for a group process—unlike traditional research in which an individual may be the

sole researcher. Action research involves the cognitive process of reflection, as well as the use of

traditional research, interviews, questionnaires, and observations to guide the efforts in

continuous improvements (Schmuck, p.20). The seminar in evaluation was also geared towards

teaching how to effectively evaluate the results of research or other works. Evaluation became

the only tool needed to authenticate our work. This process involved the use of diagrams like the

"Evaluation Clock" (Taylor 2003).

I will not go into details in regards the class activities, but will communicate only those activities that are relevant to the issue at hand. As a whole class project, we researched why the CCT program was not diverse as it is could be. For this project, the class was divided into small groups as the Action research method demanded, and each group was given a specific task to perform. In my group, I was assigned the task of data collecting. This assignment compelled me to make several visits to the Office of Institutional Research at the University of Massachusetts campus. I had the opportunity of looking into documents of school statistics that otherwise I would have not thought to look into. The exercise was immensely rewarding.

The final project of this class was what really pushed my interest. We were to evaluate an educational change or a given situation. The evaluation was to come from our previous knowledge of practicum class and supposedly from the research paper that we have been working on for sometime. Choosing what topic to evaluate was a daunting task for me. The previous knowledge and the knowledge of the present class that called for a lot of reflections came to play immediately. I must admit that I brainstormed for several days without making any headway. The idea was to keep all our focus on our research paper from "Practicum" we have been working on. This was to further improve the final synthesis paper. At first, I was thinking over the issue as a whole. Evaluating my research work seemed very cumbersome. At this point, I had no choice than to invite the attention of the instructor, Mr. Taylor. I have done this several times, so I wasted no time in seeking his advice. He suggested to me that since evaluating the whole thing is impossible, there may be a portion of it to look at. I said to myself why have I not tried this in the first place. After all, my first creativity lesson was to think outside the box. I really was not impressed with myself. On the other hand, I was in a lot of stress. Stress from the

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group work that sometimes involved me having to come with my little two and a half year old son to school as I was making several trips to the Office of Institutional research. My creative ability was stunted at that point in time. I was really frustrated. The overall semester was very hectic for me, and it reflected on my grade.

I finally got it together. I decided that I will evaluate the creative aspect of my strategic ways to eliminate corruption in Nigeria. That is it, and nothing more. This was what I was going to do in my final project. I coined out the topic heading to read as follows: "Evaluating The Creative Ways To Eliminate Corruption In Nigeria."

In my research paper from "Practicum," I listed as one of the creative ways to fight corruption in Nigeria establishing a website dedicated to that cause. During one of my several interviews with Nigerians in the Boston community on the issue, I found out that one of the reasons so many of them seemed to not to be perturbed about the issue of Nigeria in general is that they are so pressed with family issues and work that little time is left to think about Nigeria. Who would be interested, after all, when bills are staring at your face or house rent or mortgage is due?

I decided that establishing this website would be less demanding on their time. As I documented in my paper, people could use their office hours to look into the website. They could also check the website as they checked their e-mails. This website became an avenue for me to draw the attention of Nigerians to the problems of Nigeria.

Last summer, I decided that the time was ripe for me to do it. I started the website, www.nigerianthinktank.org. The Nigerian Think Tank Society is a website for like minds who are committed to fighting corruption in Nigeria. It is one thing I am proud to have done, and something I am proud of that came out of Critical and Creative Thinking Program. It was a

creative journey quite unlike anything I had ever experienced, and I never envisioned anything like this could have come out of this program.

When I decided to go back to school, I was only concerned about improving my life and my chances of employment. To see my plans diverted in the manner it did was a surprise to me. I was doing something that I hoped could help better my life but not to have found a profession that was once a passion, but tucked away in the abyss of oblivion

CHAPTER 8

ANTI- RACIST AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

There is a lot to learn when it comes to the issues of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation in the United States school system, which is why I chose to take professor Lawrence Blum's course "Issues and Controversies in Anti-Racist and Multicultural Education." Understanding the intricacies of racial relations in the United States, as well as all of the evolving issues and problems associated with diversity, piqued my curiosity and compelled me to take this course. While this course did not directly contribute to my career building, the course fulfilled my initial motivation.

It is also important to note the fact that majority of CCT students are teachers, or would-be teachers; it makes a lot of sense to incorporate in the CCT Program a class that teaches how schools can be organized to accommodate various racial, ethnic and class differences. The fact that many laws have been passed to remedy the situation, and all to no avail makes it even more important that this country's teachers are equipped to deal with the problems of race, ethnic differences, and sexual orientations.

In as much as this course was designed to deal with the aforementioned issues, that did not remove the fact that this was a CCT course. The course involved many CCT skills such as reading on hot issues, such as, homophobia, race, and "white privilege." The class was also set up with the same format as Professor Millman's discussion sessions, in that students took turns debating and expressing their thoughts on the weekly readings and we engaged in discussions and reflections. The hot button issues we discussed were the vehicle to practice our CCT skills.

I particularly enjoyed the readings. Needless to say, the readings were exciting. One such

reading that made a great impact on me was by Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking The Invisible Knapsack." In this reading, the author narrated a whole number of privileges that white people enjoy of which they are oblivious. For example, a teacher in a classroom is more likely than not a white person, and the majority of the people in the class look like the teacher. This type of reading is thought provoking and challenges one's critical thinking by analyzing and making sense out of it.

On the other hand, the article titled "Barbie's Missing face," by Patricia Wen, shows how corporate interest can influence decisions on how culture and race will be portrayed in such an important thing as baby dolls. We all know the impact this can have on growing babies when dolls do not reflect their own images. Martel, the company responsible for making the dolls, made the point in the article that since the number of Asian babies who would want toys that reflect their looks is so minute that it would not be profitable to make toys at that quantity. In this case, there is no deliberate act to exclude toys that reflect the image of Asian people, rather an act based entirely on profit. Reflecting on issues like these will make one realize that not everything we see is racially motivated. We are therefore not bound to jump on the bandwagon of labeling everything as racism without taking time to look into the issue completely. The article by Claude M. Steel, "How Stereotype Can Shape Intellectual Performance and Identity," revealed how it was proven through the study done that when people are reminded of the stereotype that affects them before taking a test that they perform badly unlike when not reminded or tested in a given test that does not accentuate those stereotypes.

These three articles are representative of the many readings done throughout the semester. These readings not only challenged our thoughts, but also revealed the deep value of the sense and connection to multi-racial classroom environment. Teachers who are equipped

with such knowledge are well informed on how to teach and conduct classroom activities that do not reflect detrimental stereotypical behaviors.

One can also conclude that this can also have a detrimental effect on a work place where minorities are stereotyped, leading to lower productivity. For an employer who wants the best out of employees in a racially mixed setting, that employer would be well advised to take these diversity lessons to heart.

We also had speakers come to the class, which was useful and rewarding. One such visit was by one of the representatives of the famous program "Facing History and Ourselves." This program involves using historical facts that students are familiar with to teach subjects on racism and hate. One such example was the use of the Jewish holocaust to teach students on the atrocities of hate and bigotry. We had the opportunity to ask questions as we deemed fit.

In addition to discussions and speakers, we had the opportunity to watch videos on issues, such as homophobia and gay parenting. One such video portrayed students of Cambridge Latin Ring High School dealing with the issues of racism and homophobia. We were impressed to see the huge efforts and the creative ways students had developed to tackle those issues. We watched videos of teachers and sometimes gay parents themselves address students on the issues. The most rewarding aspect of this was to watch the children who were being raised by gay parents talk about how their families were so similar to everyone else.

In true CCT fashion, we turned in papers every week that reflect on what we read the previous week. In those exercises, we were to analyze the issues and comment on how we felt about the whole thing. One of the assignments required us to write about three incidents of racial situations either involving us or something that we witnessed. Being a minority person in the United States, I had no trouble whatsoever in thinking of one. For me, it became an opportunity

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to really take time to analyze the incident. The critical analysis of incidents written by students helped to broaden our critical thinking skills. We discovered that there can be several interpretations of a single event, and Professor Blum comments helped to cast a new light on my past incidents. I also found that critically analyzing my events served as a healing mechanism.

In summation, this class was very rewarding and particularly important to teachers and aspiring teachers in a mixed society like ours. It showcased the problems associated with multiracial and multicultural education that results from integrated school systems. One of the books we read called Kwanzaa and Me; the syllabus mandated we read it cover to cover. The book profiled different people from various racial and ethnic background who are living witnesses to the mixed racial and cultural experiences of everyday American schools. They narrated and told their individual stories. It was such a rewarding experience to see these people reveal the importance of many things that are taken for granted. One such discussion centers on a group of four graders who were doing assignment on black market. Suddenly, a white boy realizes and asked a question "Why are so many bad things called black"? (Paley, p .117-119). This is a multiracial and ethnic group of fourth graders. The discussion shifted from assignment on black market to debunking the myth of labeling everything black as bad. The students made a list of all the good things that are black and criticized the superstitious belief that a black cat signifies death. It shows that there is a lot that the little ones can teach the old folks like me.

It is amazing that, up till this moment, people who are clamoring against racism did not see the need to start putting pressure on society to stop labeling black as evil. The insensitivity of the society at large to continue to use the color black to represent bad or evil shows how far removed they are from wanting to stop racism in the society. No group of people will feel good when the color they are associated with is used in a derogatory manner.

This class may not have had much to do with creativity, but indirectly it involved those elements that appealed to the impulses of our critical and creative abilities. This class was a lesson on moral education that every teacher and would-be teacher and, to a larger extent, any good citizen who cares for the well being of the complex society we live in must strive to learn.

CHAPTER 9

PROBLEM BASED LEARNING.

(MAKING THE BEST OUT OF A BAD SITUATION)

I did not plan to graduate in the Fall of 2003. My plan was to graduate come spring of

2004. I intended to take only the synthesis preparation course this semester and postpone the

elective to winter session of 2004. The rumors of the Critical and Creative Thinking Program

being eliminated from the University scared me so much that I did not want to take any chances.

It was obvious that nobody knew what actually was going to happen to the program, so I took the

most appropriate action, which was to finish the program as soon as possible and worry less

about what happens next. This is how in the fall of 2003 I ended up writing my synthesis and

taking Nina Greenwald's CCT 611: "Investigating Authentic Problems Through Problem Based

Learning" (Seminar in Critical Thinking).

Problem Based Learning (P.B.L.) is an interesting way of acquiring knowledge. It is

different than subject based learning where the teacher presents one with what needs to be

learned and gives guidelines as to how to learn it. On the other hand, with problem based

learning, "your task is to discover what you need to know to address the problem posed."

(Woods, p. 2.1-2.2). P.B.L. can be anything from a research project, to a case study, to a design

project, or to a clinical encounter. P.B.L., as the name suggests, is based on learning through

problem solution. It is a group process in which the group should not exceed five members. It is

based on the principle that majority of the everyday problems are ill-defined, so the first task of

the group is to define the problem. Defining the problem involves knowing what the problem

statement says (Wood, p.3-8). In problem definition, one would find out to one's own surprise

how huge problems are. It is the duty of the group to narrow the definition to the group's area of interest they will be researching; this is often the most difficult part. The group needs to nail the problem to a manageable format. In doing this, we apply a mapping technique. To enable us to map the problem effectively and to pin point the area of interest, we apply the K.N.F and Why formula (What we know, What we need to know, and How we find out, and Why). P.B.L. is a learning based on group researching a problem with pre-set out rules and procedures that help to guide them throughout the task. For example, there is a chairperson at each meeting. This post is rotated. In my group, the chairperson's role went to the person who seemed to have the momentum of a given topic or task or day-to-day group activities. The P.B.L group must define themselves as stakeholders and must report to somebody or groups or citizens at large.

In P.B.L there is no closure in learning. It is a learning process that involves metamorphosis. It involves constructive and authentic learning. It involves bringing people of different background and making them work or learn to work together while respecting each other's differences. It involves grappling with real world situations. The instructor guides the students or groups and makes sure that they stay the course, but not in anyway to influence direction or outcome. Above all, the effectiveness of any group depends on what skills and knowledge the members bring to the task. Prior knowledge or the understanding of the task at hand is essential for group effectiveness as they will be researching into various fields that they might not be familiar with.

P.B.L is similar to Action Research in that it is a group project and is not teacher directed research. The differences are that in CCT 693 the whole class dealt with one particular subject whereas in P.B.L different groups dealt with different problems. Another difference is that Action Research is geared towards educational or institutional change, whereas P.B.L deals with

ill-defined problems and researching to gain knowledge by redefining the problem. In Action Research, the goal is to make a recommendation to improve an existing situation, whereas P.B.L is directed towards open-ended learning. Both are similar and different from the regular research in that they are not geared towards authenticating an existing fact or hypothesis, but geared towards discovery and making recommendations for the better.

I believe P.B.L is essential in learning. I envision myself sitting at a round table conference among political peers using the P.B.L approach to learn more about issues that are important: problem formulation, problem statements and redefinition of problems will be the order of the day. Applying the K.N.F and Why strategy or using the I.P.F (Interesting, Puzzling, and Find out) strategy to further define problems are techniques that have also found permanent place in me. The trend of CCT courses each using similar learning strategies helped me tremendously in my ability to retain and apply this knowledge. There is a connectedness in courses that helps foster such learning habits, and lasting impressions are made on students as they are repeatedly reminded of these strategies.

CHAPTER 10

PROFESSIONAL LIFE AFTER SCHOOL

At this point in my discussion, it should be obvious what my professional life would be when I leave the four walls of the university—political activism will be the next big thing to occupy my life.

In 1999, after many years of dictatorship in Nigeria, the country found democracy. Since then, Nigeria has gone through one democratic election (2002) which was badly mired in fraudulent practices never before witnessed in the history of the country. The ruling party of Nigeria (P.D.P) People Democratic Party, engaged in a nation wide rigging of the elections and returned all of its' ruling members back to power. It also happened that an area that was badly affected by this rigged election was the state where I hail from, Anambra. This is one state that the incumbent president was not supposed to win, but he rigged the election to win anyway.

Because Nigeria's new found democracy is so riddled with fraud, Nigeria is not in anyway better than during the periods under dictatorship. Nigeria replaced a dictatorship with a corrupt democracy and, in Nigeria, the two terms are not far from each other. The same practices, and some even more corrupt, are witnessed today like during those dark days of dictatorships. Today, political intimidation is a common practice. Political assassinations abound. In the light of the aforementioned, I intend to use my website to rally for support for true democracy and as a pressure device on the corrupt Nigerian government.

I intend for my website to find its way to the United States' Senate, and even the President of the United States regarding the appalling state of the democratic system of Nigeria. In as much as the good people of Nigeria are yearning for democracy, we do not wish to be

burdened with a corrupt system that is worse than even a dictatorship. The current Nigerian system is so corrupt that elections are nothing but a joke. Politicians running for office compete on the basis of who gives the most money to the political leaders. On election day, fake ballots are given to the masses while the real ballots are filled out and submitted through the back doors of the system. The political leaders already know who will fill a particular post even before elections are conceived. As a result, most Nigerians are deprived from taking part in the political process. We have illiterates and criminals who made their money through corrupt military dictatorships in the previous regimes ruling the country.

When democracy came to Nigeria, the citizens did not expect things to get worse. If there is another coup d'etat, it will be bloody indeed, and the thought of this keeps me focused on my goal of affecting change in Nigeria. Several times, I have tried to take my mind away from the political mess in Nigeria, but I find it very difficult to ignore. In view of the aforementioned, I have decided that tackling the issue of Nigerian politics is the only rewarding venture in my life right now. I have lived in United States of America for the past twenty- two years of my life, and I have also enriched my knowledge with the Critical and Creative Thinking program of The University of Massachusetts Boston. This knowledge and experience can only be better used in helping the good people of Nigeria in creating a decent society, one that their leaders have deprived them of for too long.

The Nigerian Think Tank Society is an organization of people of like minds who genuinely believe that corruption is the most important problem that needs to be tackled head on if that country is to grow and thrive. Our responsibility will be to first of all alert everybody, particularly those in the United States, that the time has come for us to do something. Every Nigerian is aware of the problem, but there has not yet been any form of organized protest or

front. This is what the Think Tank Society is looking to do. We will use our website to recruit members and to publish articles on corruption and other related malfeasance endemic to the Nigerian polity. Above all, I intend to use our organization as a pressure group to expose the corrupt nature of Nigeria's young democracy to the outside world, particularly to United States, as it imports one fifth of its oil from Nigeria. I intend to demand that actions be taken when corruption rears its ugly head. I intend to demand that criminal elements who use United States and other western countries as safe havens be returned home for trials.

One thing that the Nigerian Think Tank has noticed is the reluctance of United States to act when young democracies like Nigeria are committing atrocities. The reluctance of the United States to act in defense of democracy in Nigeria and other nations has led to the leaders of these countries to assume that they can get away with anything, including murdering political opponents. Nigeria's head of state, Obasanjo, is a case in point. The recent kidnapping of the present governor of Anambra state by an affiliate of the president has called to question whether Obasanjo is fit to rule. The kidnapper, instead of being hauled to prison, is being protected by an order from the president, and even given police and military escorts as he parades the streets of Anambra state. The president has declared that the kidnapping of the Anambra governor was only a political party affair instead of a treasonable offense. This type of absolute disregard for the rule of law is what the organization is bound to tackle. We have decided to take back the country from the corrupt regimes of the past. Recent news report revealed that the former military dictator of Nigeria, Babangida, is planning to run for office in 2005 under the present ruling party, P.D.P. The Nigerian Think Tank Society will fight vigorously to make sure that Mr. Babangida does not run for political leadership in Nigeria. For nine years, he devastated the country as a military dictator and did not do anything for the people other than organize three

elections that he cancelled. Nigeria is sick and demands the urgent attention that the Nigerian Think Tank Society is willing to give her. We will do our best to attract good intentioned Nigerians to this calling, and hopefully, we will do our best to make a change for good of our own people and the future generations to come.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

As I take my final bow in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program, I am reminded of the title of first text I used, <u>Creativity Forever</u>. The ability to critically analyze issues and to be creative does not end at the four walls of the school. As my piece has demonstrated, critical and creative thinking is not something that is alien to most people but something that we all are gifted with. We are constantly engaged in critical and creative thinking whether we know it or not. The need to be aware of what we are doing, as the course in Cognitive Psychology demonstrated, is the essence of our being aware of the numerous gifts we have been bestowed by the Creator.

Education in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program, coupled with my life experience, has yielded the future career I have begun to carve out for myself. The period I was away from the CCT Program helped me to develop, and in the process, engaged me in the most critical and creative thinking experience I have ever known. But the tragedy that befell me yielded something good in the long run. During those long years of absence, which were also very challenging times of my life, I used the opportunity to engage in most productive years of my life. I was able to critically analyze the situation and weigh all the options available to me, and I was able to make the sound decisions that have led me to this point. It is only now that I am taking stock that I have come to the conclusion that I did the right things—caring for my nieces, getting married, establishing a website, and finally becoming an anti-corruption activist. All the goals I set out for myself I was able to accomplish. I must not fail to mention that the people I met along this journey were also instrumental to my success, namely the wonderful faculty

members of the CCT Program. The students also worked in cooperation to pull everybody along, making sure that when one fell behind, that student was offered support. Finally, after all is said and done, I must admit this was a very difficult venture for me. Juggling family responsibilities, meeting up with monthly bills, and using my credit cards to pay for my school fees were no easy tasks. It has been a grueling two years and if this is the end, I must admit, it was worth the effort. I am very grateful to all those who have contributed to the fulfillment of this onerous goal, and I hope that all be blessed in a similar way.

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