Teaching Critical Reasoning, the MTV Way

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Introduction
This paper presentation explains how music videos or MTVs can be used creatively to teach critical reasoning. Critical reasoning refers to the identification, analysis and evaluation of arguments (see Tan, 2007 for more details). Two MTVs, John Lennon’s “Power to the People”, and Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” are used to illustrate the key thinking concepts. Due to time constraints, this presentation focuses on the analysis and evaluation of arguments based on the following 6 questions:

- **Analysing and Evaluating Arguments**

  (1) How are the terms defined in an argument?
  (2) What type of premises, conclusion and argument are given?
  (3) What are the criteria for a good argument?
  (4) Are the premises true or acceptable?
  (5) Do the premises support the conclusion?
  (6) Are there other relevant known factors to take into consideration?

The music video by **John Lennon**, “**Power to the People**”, shows John Lennon, with Yoko Ono and thousands of people, participating in street protests and confronting the police. The lyrics tell us:

> A million workers working for nothing
> You better give ’em what they really own
> We got to put you down
> When we come into town

We could construct the following argument:

(1) A million workers are working without being paid.
(2) Women are being controlled by men.
(3) People in the world are oppressed.
How are the terms defined in an argument?

The music video shows him out in the streets leading mass protests, chanting slogans and clashing with the police. The lyrics provide us with several reasons why many people are oppressed and deprived of their rights:

(1) is about exploited workers who are not paid for their labour:

“A million workers working for nothing, you better give them what they really own.”

What does the key term “controlled” in (2) refer to? The lyrics tell us:

“How do you treat your own women back home, she got to be herself, so that she can free herself.”

The context informs us that “controlled” refers not so much to women being physically controlled, but to them being subservient to men in society.

An close look at the premises helps us understand how the key word “oppressed” is being used in (3) (the conclusion). It refers to the state of being denied of your rights to fair wage and gender equality.

What type of premises, conclusion and argument are given?

This argument consists of two premises and one conclusion. In terms of scope, the premises refer to a million workers and many women from all over the world in the 1970s. This is a simple argument with independent premises and one conclusion.

It is helpful to refine the argument by stating the scope and elaborating on the meaning. By doing so, we are applying the principle of charity – constructing the best possible argument on behalf of the arguer so as not to misunderstand him or her. We could construct this argument:

(1) A million workers all over the world in the 1970s were made to work without being paid.
(2) Most women all over the world in the 1970s were being denied of their rights by men.
(3) Most people all over the world in the 1970s were denied of their rights to fair wages and gender equality.

What are the criteria for a good argument?

After analysing the arguments, it is necessary to evaluate them. This refers to the process to determine if the argument is a good and acceptable one. Due to space constraint, this
section focuses only on inductive arguments. An inductive argument is one where it is claimed that if the premises are true, then it is probable that the conclusion is true.

A good argument must fulfil the following three criteria:

(1) all the premises are true/acceptable (Truth/Acceptability Criterion) and
(2) all the premises are likely to support the conclusion (Support Criterion) and
(3) all the premises contain all known relevant information (All Known Relevant Information Criterion).

An inductive argument that fulfils the Support Criterion is known as an inductively strong argument. An inductive argument that fulfils both the Truth/Acceptability Criterion and the Support Criterion is known as a cogent argument. We can identify three questions to help us evaluate different types of arguments:

- Are the premises true or acceptable?
- Do the premises support the conclusion?
- Are there other relevant factors to take into consideration?

The following sections will address the 3 questions accordingly.

(4) Are the premises true or acceptable? The Truth/Acceptability Criterion

The first criterion is whether the premises given are true or acceptable. We usually use the words “true” or “false” when the premise involves factual claims which can be verified. On the other hand, it is preferable to describe a premise as “acceptable” or “not acceptable” when we talk about value claims which rely more on moral values. For premises to be true or acceptable, they should be supported by evidence.

An example of an inductive argument is taken from a music video John Lennon, “Power To the People”. This is the argument we have constructed earlier:

(4) A million workers all over the world in the 1970s were made to work without being paid.
(5) Most women all over the world in the 1970s were being denied of their rights by men.
(6) Most people all over the world in the 1970s were denied of their rights to fair wages and gender equality.

(1)  (2)  (3)

To evaluate the argument, it is necessary to see if the premises are true. Premise (1) is a factual claim which could be verified by checking with the happenings in the world. We can verify if it is true that a million workers were working without being paid in the 1970s. We could refer to words of experts on their research on workers during that
period. We could also interview people who had personally experienced being made to work without pay during that period.

Premise (2) is more tricky as it is about women being denied of gender equality. To answer this question, we need to clarify what we mean by “women”, “rights” and “most”. For example, an American who subscribes to liberal democracy may argue that women in the Islamic countries such as Iran are controlled. To this American who is talking about women in Iran, Premise (2) is therefore true. But the Iranians may not think so. Interestingly it was reported in the newspapers that there are Muslims who think the opposite – that the Muslims themselves are protecting the rights of the Muslim women and the West is in fact violating the women’s rights. In terms of testimony too, women living in Muslim countries may or may not think that they are being controlled by men. And what kind of rights are we talking about? During the time of John Lennon, the feminist movement was at its height. The rights of women included not just the right to education and employment, but the right to abortion and lesbianism. Are we talking about these kinds of rights? More information is needed for us to decide if this premise is acceptable. But given the wide scope of this premise (most women all over the world), it will be difficult to accept this premise as it stands. This argument therefore has not satisfied the Truth/Acceptability Criterion.

(5) Do the premises support the conclusion? The Support Criterion

While the previous criterion is concerned with the content of the premises - whether they are true or acceptable - this criterion is concerned with the relationship between the premises and the conclusion. It is not enough to have true premises for an argument to be convincing. This is because it is possible for an argument to consist of all true/acceptable premises, but the premises are not relevant or do not support the conclusion. This criterion states that the premises must be linked to the conclusion in such a way that if the premises are true/acceptable, then the conclusion is likely to be true/acceptable (for inductive arguments).

Recall our example of the music video by John Lennon, “Power To the People”.

(1) A million workers all over the world in the 1970s were made to work without being paid.
(2) Most women all over the world in the 1970s were being denied of their rights by men.
(3) Most people all over the world in the 1970s were denied of their rights to fair wages and gender equality.

(1)             (2)

(3)

The task here is to evaluate the argument by deciding whether the premises support the conclusion. Even if it is true that a million workers all over the world in the 1970s were made to work without being paid, and that most women all over the world in the 1970s
were being denied of their rights by men, does it follow that most people all over the world in the 1970s were denied of their rights to fair wages and gender equality? It is probable for the conclusion to be true although we are unable to determine the level of probability. This is because we are not given more information for (1). For example, how many workers are there all over the world in the 1970s? We need to know the percentage of workers who are denied of their rights to fair wages for us to decide if it is the case that “most people all over the world in the 1970s” are denied of such rights. If there were 1.5 million workers in the 1970s all over the world, and a million of them are denied of their pay, then it is highly probable for the claim that most people (two-third) were deprived of their wages. The same applies to (2). What do the arguer mean by “most women”? Given the lack of more information, it is fair to conclude that the premises do not strongly support the conclusion.

(6) Are there other known relevant factors to take into consideration? The All Known Relevant Information Criterion

Inductive arguments are based on probability – the more known relevant information one has about the subject-matter of the argument, the higher the probability. A relevant piece of information that is left out may drastically change the probability of an inductive argument.

Take this example from the music video by Michael Jackson, “Billie Jean”. It is about a man (acted by Michael Jackson or MJ) who is accused by a woman (Billie Jean or BJ) of fathering her child. MJ, however, claims that this is not true, that this is part of her “schemes and plans”, and that “the kid is not my son”. He gives evidence to argue that he is not the father of BJ’s son, and that all that he did was to dance with her. The music video shows photographs of an alluring BJ and the lyrics tell us that she looks like “a beauty queen from a movie scene”. Let us examine the argument:

1. BJ says that MJ is the father of BJ's son.
2. BJ and MJ had been physically intimate.
3. BJ’s son’s eyes look like MJ’s.
4. MJ is the father of BJ’s son.

This argument is an example of a case-building argument. Let us apply the Truth/Acceptability Criterion and the Support Criterion to this argument. Premises (1), (2) and (3) are true, as they are quoted by MJ himself in the song:

- Premise (1) from the lyrics:

  “She says I am the one.”
This is the evidence from the testimony of BJ who is the mother of the child.

- Premise (2) from the lyrics:

“Because we danced on the floor in the round… She called me to her room.”

This is the evidence from fact that they had indeed danced together and he went to her room. There is also circumstantial evidence that MJ and BJ had behaved intimately, and the probability that they had spent a night together.

- Premise (3) from the lyrics:

“That showed me a photo of a baby cries, eyes would like mine.”

This is evidence from fact that the baby’s eyes look like MJ’s. This also serves as corroborative evidence to (1) and (2).

So the argument fulfils the Truth/Acceptability Criterion. How about the Support Criterion? Even if all the premises are true, do they lend support to the claim that MJ has fathered BJ’s son? The support appears to be weak: it is possible for a woman to make such a claim, for a man to be physically intimate with a woman, and even for a baby’s eyes to look like the man’s, and yet for the man not to father her child. There is a probability but it is not inductively strong. The argument therefore is not a cogent argument. Are there known relevant information that is not mentioned? For example, relevant information could be that BJ has a long-time lover and he is already the father of her two other children, that she only danced with BJ, and that they only had a drink in her room. This information would then make the conclusion less probable. Or a relevant piece of known information could be that a DNA test on the baby and MJ was carried out. If the test shows that MJ is not the biological father, then this is a relevant piece of information that will make the argument not probable. This shows that relevant known information could sway an inductive argument either way. It is therefore essential that we have all known relevant information about the subject-matter of the argument.

**Conclusion**

This paper has introduced critical reasoning skills for us to analyse and evaluate arguments. For teachers, it is not enough to focus on the teaching of critical thinking skills in the classroom. The teaching of such skills needs to be supported by appropriate pedagogies and learning environment. Teachers need to provide a conducive learning environment (Costa, 1991; Swartz & Parks, 1994; Tan, 2007). Teachers can encourage a “community of inquiry” where students learn to share, critique and offer different perspectives on various issues (Lipman, 1991; Splitter & Sharp, 1995; Ennis, 1996). Such an environment is essential for students to participate freely, co-operate with one another, acquire the language of thinking, establish positive attitudes and perceptions about learning, and promote the productive habits of mind (Marzano, 1992).
References


