

# Assessing the Impact of Critical Thinking Schools: Evaluation Analysis

Since 2010, Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) has been organizing Critical Thinking Schools (CrTS) as part of its programs. The main objective of the CrTS is to enhance participants' critical thinking and analysis skills through learning about the differences between thinking and critical thinking; complemented by activities such as text analysis, data verification, identifying fake news and misinformation, and decoding propaganda messages. As different from media literacy trainings, these Schools focus on the intentions contained in texts, and the power relations that are expressed through those texts. It is not always possible to check the veracity of miscellaneous information; also, power manipulations are attempted not only in-and-by news media, but also in opinion pieces, as well as other texts, social media posts, books, textbooks, films, podcasts, etc.

These Schools are customized for specific professional groups, students, or the general public. They follow a logical structure, focusing on dismantling stereotypes and myths, analyzing texts for signs of media manipulation, and developing project thinking and logical planning skills. EPF's experience shows that many participants undergo a transformative experience after completing the three-day program. They often revise their views, adopt new approaches, or even change their way of thinking as a result of dismantling stereotypes.

In the course of the past year, EPF held three Schools for young people from all regions of Armenia. In pre-school questionnaires, as well as during the CrTS, many participants stated that manipulative content is encountered in the news on an almost daily basis, primarily focusing on political and security issues of significant public concern. These news pieces feature sensational headlines and distorted information. A portion of the participants hold the belief that following the second Karabakh war and its outcome, the psychologically oppressed and depressed Armenian society is becoming more vulnerable to media influence. As for the participants themselves, the most impactful approach to combat media manipulations is through education, specifically by enhancing media literacy within society. The post-school assessments reveal that the participants' knowledge and comprehension expanded not only with regard to media manipulation, but also in understanding the underlying cause-and-effect relationships, challenging stereotypical thinking, and embracing a comprehensive examination of phenomena and concepts. This, according to post-questionnaires, is useful both in everyday life, and in professional settings. As one participant notes:

*"In my daily life and work, the critical thinking skills I acquired in school will enable me to challenge and dismantle stereotypes, avoid manipulation, and prevent the negative consequences of manipulation."*

Another one notes:

*“As I am a political scientist, these skills will enhance my ability to analyze political events and statements with a deeper understanding.”*

Several participants openly acknowledge that prior to attending the program, they frequently fell victim to unconscious manipulation, without critically examining the text, words, and their contextual implications. As one participant openly expressed:

*“Until now, I never paid attention to stereotypes, and I used them automatically. I now see that I often have been a manipulator myself. Moreover, I fell under the influence of propaganda as I did not have appropriate knowledge. However, everything has changed now. I can assert with confidence that I am departing from here with a profound sense of enthusiasm and fulfillment.”*

*“Working with media texts was very interesting and challenging, because texts with complex and often unpleasant connotations were chosen. However, this work helped to look deeper and often notice or find what is missing at first glance”,*

notes another one.

Throughout the teamwork exercises participants methodically deconstruct each sentence and reconstruct the meanings of texts, deriving contextual understanding to detect possible manipulations contained therein; after the exercises, they note that they understood the purpose, sub-purpose and hidden implications of the materials.

Participants contend that it is the ongoing practice of comprehensive analysis and self-education that will aid in avoiding the pitfalls of stereotypes, but it is equally important to possess the courage to embark on this journey. One participant expressed the view that:

*“Each individual must discover the inner strength to challenge stereotypes,”*

while another emphasized the need to

*“fearlessly embrace change, both within oneself and in others, to transform stereotypical thinking.”*

Several participants highlight reflection as an effective approach for dismantling stereotypes, with the term being unfamiliar to many before the CrTS. As one participant expressed,

*“the first step is cultivating reflection skills,”*

which involves the capacity to view situations from a detached standpoint or through various alternative perspectives. Another participant stated that his initial focus would be applying reflection to himself, by questioning his own beliefs, and subsequently

*“attempting to extend it to the people around me.”*

The after-school opinions of participants show that they unanimously agree that CrTS successfully facilitates a shift from “surface” thinking to deeper discussions of issues and problems. Moreover, their perspective has shifted significantly since realizing the impact of stereotypes on shaping society’s future. They now perceive any shallow or limited stereotype as a direct instrument which is perpetuating societal underdevelopment. Many participants state that they have developed a strong capacity to navigate decision-making tasks by overcoming the influence of stereotypes, which otherwise could complicate the process and lead to wrong choices. Through the application of critical thinking, they approach situations from a comprehensive perspective, considering all aspects before drawing conclusions. And as one participant notes:

*“The school has opened my third eye.”*

Attendees noted that the school provided them with the means and methods to approach questions and problems at a more advanced level. They learned to critically analyze news and articles, considering factors such as authors’ motives and the context in which information was presented. According to the participants’ evaluations, they were able to challenge several stereotypes while attending the school, including unfounded glorification of one’s nation, gender stereotypes, preconceived notions about what women can or cannot accomplish, etc.

In post-course questionnaires, participants provide examples of how they plan to apply the skills they learned in their daily life or work. They aim to base their judgments on reasoned explanations rather than emotions; consider issues from various perspectives when engaging with their surroundings and undertaking projects; bring about changes at their university by expressing their opinions clearly even if they differ from the majority; and approach questions with a broader outlook by considering different viewpoints.

In this paper, we analyzed the opinions of a group of 84 participants attending three different schools, ranging in age from 14 to 30. Since we began working on critical thinking in 2010, EPF has successfully addressed the needs of about 600 beneficiaries by equipping them with critical thinking skills.

However, the demand now is to extend our efforts to a much larger portion of the population, as critical thinking skills have become *a sine qua none* in today’s complex world. These skills are essential for citizens to navigate information more effectively, avoid manipulation, and make informed decisions. EPF took the initiative to develop the first-ever manual on critical thinking in Armenian, which has already published two editions. Building on the experience gained through conducting CrTS, EPF plans to expand and publish the third edition. EPF has also created a brochure outlining how to incorporate critical thinking and other necessary skills, like project-learning and agency-building, into the state school curricula to enhance civic education (available here). Thanks to the support of its donors, particularly the EU and Sida, EPF aims to promote this approach at both school and university levels in 2023-2024.