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The war in Ukraine as an opportunity to teach critical thinking

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Abstract

Although the war in Ukraine is the most extensively documented conflict ever, it is difficult to discern what is real, fictitious or from a state misinformation campaign. In the battle of spinning media narratives, the truth easily becomes a casualty. We explore the war in the context of various historical key events and reject a possible application of Baudrillard's perspective that 'there was no Gulf war' to the current conflict. We note the eerie resemblance of Russian media fabrications with the Nazis' big lie technique. The enormous toll of the war on Ukraine and the world is clearly stated. The war in Ukraine and the battle over the accuracy and legitimacy of history, knowledge and reality remind us of the crucial importance of teaching critical thinking. Critical thinking helps us see through manipulative and politically distortive usages of language to suit ideological purposes. In using the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to teach critical thinking, we can follow a generic model of gradual sequencing that prominently features modelling and scaffolding. In an era of weaponised lies and alternative facts, critical thinking has a central role in education, from kindergarten to university, with the purpose of education being the creation of an informed citizenry. Although critical thinking – and teaching critical thinking – are challenging, it is when both teachers and students realise their own responsibilities for creating a learning community that learning is at its most useful and critical thinking becomes empowering.

Introduction

Why should an opinion piece in a Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching concern itself with the war? There is more than one reason. Numerous articles in JALT have thematized a previous large crisis: the Covid-19 pandemic. In a recent editorial, we discussed that crisis as a *polycrisis*: a convergence of multiple intersecting, simultaneously-occurring crises that have taken the shapes of health, economic, environmental, social, political and educational crises (Rudolph et al., 2021). We have also argued before that "higher education does not exist in a vacuum" (Rudolph et al., 2021, p. 6).

When reflecting on Putin's 'special military operation' (the name for the war in Russia's synchronised media), we are reminded of Hitler's and Stalin's genocidal regimes. There is a German saying: "Wehret den Anfängen!" (literally: "fight the beginnings!"). This can be imperfectly translated as "nip things in the bud!", referring to dealing with the seeds of dangerous things. Obviously, we are way past the beginnings and much of the world – including our two home countries: Germany and Singapore – has woken up to the threat that Putin poses. It has condemned the illegal invasion of Ukraine and Russian war crimes.

A famous poem by German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller described the Nazis' incremental persecution of everybody who was different from them and the silence of Germans during the Third Reich, including that of the author:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

(Niemöller, cited in Martin Niemöller, 2012).

Citing Niemöller is not meant to claim any perfect parallel to what is currently happening in Ukraine and Russia and to what might occur at a later point. Other imperfect comparisons would be Nazi Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland in October 1938 and what happened to Czechoslovakia in March 1939; and the invasion of Poland on 1 September, 1939, and a subsequent false sense of security, with the war being dubbed a 'phoney' one, due to the relative military inaction in the eight subsequent months.

What these comparisons, however, allude to is that now is the time to speak out. They are a reminder that *all* education is inescapably normative and hence political. If further justification were required, it is the job of educators to pursue the elusive ideal of the truth and to combat fake news, disinformation and misinformation. Many universities' graduate outcomes specifically refer to the importance of

critical thinking and critical reflection. So here is a guilt-edged opportunity to teach our students how to differentiate the garbage from fact-checked knowledge proper and to think critically about a key event.

Russia's psychedelic propaganda

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Boris Nemstov, a former Vice Premier of Russia, commented: "Russia is quickly turning into a fascist state. We already have propaganda modeled on Nazi Germany's. We also have a nucleus of assault brigades, like the SA" (the *Sturmabteilung*, the Nazi party's paramilitary wing that helped Hitler rise to power: cited in Ostrovsky, 2017, p. 40). Hours after Nemstov said this in an interview, he was assassinated. In Western eyes, Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, 2022, evokes memories of Hitler's and Stalin's wars and atrocities and tempts us into a black-and-white, Manichean narrative of good (Ukraine) versus evil (Russia). Joe Biden has called Putin a "war criminal" and a "butcher", seemingly calling for regime change and accusing the Russian president of "genocide" (cited in Ghosh, 2022). In contrast, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president and an erstwhile comedian (whose *Servant of the people* can be binge-watched on Netflix), has literally become a poster boy for democracy and the fight of David against Goliath. A reflection on Putin's previous military adventures renders the invasion of Ukraine less surprising. Putin led Russia during a war against Chechen separatists, oversaw Russia's victory in its war against Georgia and ordered a military intervention in Syria against rebel and jihadist groups. It was also under Putin that Russia annexed Crimea and sponsored a war in eastern Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine is the most extensively 'documented' ever, with enormous streams of data from disparate source materials being crafted into narratives that often are first available on social media before appearing on multiple news media platforms. We carry the war around with us in our pockets, uninterruptedly exposed to endless updates, alerts and alarms on our mobile phones. Even – or perhaps, ironically, especially – for viewers with uncensored access to a plethora of different media, it seems near-impossible to discern from all the amplified noise what is real, fictitious or from a state misinformation campaign. In the fog of war and in the battle of spinning media narratives, the truth easily becomes a casualty. It is the Russian media that have created a particularly fascinating spectacle.

Putin's reign has been characterised by a gradual shift toward totalitarianism, endemic corruption, the repression and incarceration of political opponents and the lack of free and fair elections (Gill, 2016; Reuter, 2017; Frye, 2021). The intimidation and suppression of independent media is an unsurprising part of this trend. Early in Putin's first presidency, he brought Russia's television networks under the control of the Kremlin. After more than two decades in power, the state also controls newspapers and radio stations, providing guidance on what to cover and how. After the beginning of the invasion, the last remaining independent Russian media have been shut down and many Western social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have been banned

or blocked (*The Economist*, 2022d). The synchronized Russian media spin tales around the themes of Ukrainian Nazis, Western machinations and Russian heroism. Putin's claim of 'de-Nazification' is absurd but strategic. Zelensky is Jewish and whilst Ukraine is as imperfect as other Western countries are, it was, prior to the war, a vibrant democracy with a free, globalised economy. As opposed to Putin's Russia, it stood for freedom and hope.

It is true that during World War II, some prominent Ukrainian nationalists (some of whom were anti-Semitic) sided with the Nazis because they thought Hitler would grant Ukraine independence. Interestingly, in "Soviet post-war propaganda, Ukrainian nationalists were caricatured as the fascist enemy of the good Soviet citizen" (*The Economist*, 2022b). A contemporary search for Nazis would lead to Mariupol's Azov battalion, a paramilitary group in Ukraine's armed forces that uses SS (the Nazi elite corps, the *Schutzstaffel*) insignia (and that has, as a result, been characterised as 'neo-Nazi'). The conquering of Mariupol thus serves the Kremlin's narrative that it is 'de-Nazifying' the country (*The Economist*, 2020a). In Russia's manipulative propaganda, such an extremely thin empirical base is sufficient to spin tall tales that the "infamous" Azov "has left a trail of war crimes and civilian murders in its wake... British troops created and trained the group, fostering its Nazi ideology and adherence to neo-pagan cults" (*Izvestia*, May 11, 2022, cited in *The Economist*, 2022d).

In the Russian media, the war in Ukraine is framed as a re-enactment of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), with Ukrainians cast as Nazis, and in a cult of aggression, violence is hailed as proof of masculinity (*The Economist*, 2022c). The Russian defence ministry released a video in April 2022, featuring a commander of a battalion that carried out a *zachistka* (a 'mopping-up operation' during which soldiers go from house to house and murder civilians) around Kyiv:

My great-grandfather went through the entire second world war and up to the year 1953 chased the fascist devils... through Ukrainian forests... I am a glorious successor of this tradition. Now my time has come and I will not disgrace my great-grandfather—and I will go all the way (cited in *The Economist*, 2022c).

Over the past two decades, Russian television has created a world where "nothing is true and everything is possible" (Peter Pomerantsev, cited in *The Economist*, 2022d). The effect of such propaganda has been described as "psychedelic" (*The Economist*, 2022d): one cannot trust anymore in anything one sees or hears. After an initial triumphalist reporting, anticipating a *blitzkrieg* – though calling the war a 'war' is a crime in Russia – the tone of the reporting has become increasingly hysterical. The 'special military operation' in Ukraine is but one front in a war with the West that is trying to destroy Russia. The Russian media construct some kind of parallel universe:

Atrocities occur, but as a mirror of what Western audiences see. Civilians in Bucha, a town north of Kyiv, were not massacred by Russian forces who briefly occupied the area, but by Ukrainian soldiers. Western secret services arranged the bodies on the roads for journalists to find... Audiences are told that Russian troops have taken extra care to avoid civilian casualties, which is difficult because Ukrainian Nazis tend to hide in apartment blocks. Russian television uses this purported caution to explain why the operation is taking so long. If acknowledged at all, casualties are portrayed as heroes. The sinking of Russia's flagship Moskva cruiser on the Black Sea was explained as an accident unrelated to combat (*The Economist*, 2022d).

As early as 2014, Borenstein (2014) discerned three tropes in Russia's propaganda: (1) a long-delayed sequel to the Great Patriotic War (World War II); (2) atrocity propaganda – the Ukrainian enemy is not just fascist, but satanic ("Ukrainian fascists... crucified a three-year old boy in front of their mother"); and (3) the non-existence of Ukraine – with Putin having said repeatedly that "Ukraine [is] not even a real country" (cited in Borenstein, 2014). In order to try fathom why Putin would do something as seemingly crazy as to start a war in Europe, it is useful to understand his doctrine that all post-Soviet states are considered strategically vital and part of Russia's sphere of influence (Tsygankov, 2015). A series of colour revolutions in some post-Soviet states in quick succession – the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 – led to frictions in the relations with Russia.

During 2004's Orange Revolution, huge demonstrations overturned the result of an election rigged in favour of Putin's candidate, Viktor Yanukovich. After the Maidan unseated his kleptocratic ally Yanukovich once again in 2014, Putin invaded Crimea. Putin has described Ukraine as "Little Russia" and "not even a state" that was created on a whim by the Bolsheviks (cited in Düben, 2020). After the February 2014 Revolution of Dignity that ousted President Yanukovich and made him flee to Russia, Putin described the people that came to power as "nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites" (cited in Dreyfuss, 2014). In Putin's version of history, Russians and Ukrainians "are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus' is our common source and we cannot live without each other" (cited in Düben, 2020). The Kievan Rus' was a medieval state that united most of the East Slavic tribes and that adopted Byzantine Orthodoxy in the ninth to 11th centuries.

There is an unholy alliance between church and Putin. Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, described Putin's presidency as a "miracle of God" (cited in *The Economist*, 2022f). When it comes to the invasion of Ukraine, the church leader is implicitly supportive, denying that Russia is the aggressor and claiming that genocide is being perpetrated by Ukrainians against Russian speakers in the Donbas (*The Economist*, 2022f). Patriarch Kirill claims that Russians and Ukrainians come "from one Kievan baptismal

font" and share "a common historical fate" (cited in *The Economist*, 2022f), thus supporting Putin's mendacious narrative that Russia is liberating its neighbour.

The Russian Empire considered Ukrainians to be ethnically Russian, referring to them as "Little Russians" (Abdelai, 2005), who were in need of russification (Bassin et al. (Eds.), 2015). For instance, in 1804, the Ukrainian language was banned from schools, and in 1876, most Ukrainian language books were prohibited (Steele, 1988). Then, in 1932-1933, something incredibly nefarious and horrible occurred: Stalin inflicted a famine on Ukraine that killed around four million people (Applebaum, 2017). Applebaum (2017) argues that starvation was used as a deliberate attempt to suppress Ukrainian nationalism during the *Holodomor* ('extermination by hunger'). By confiscating the last grain from hungry peasants and then blocking them from leaving their farmlands, Stalin waged war on Ukraine by means of starvation with the aim to Sovietize Ukraine (Applebaum, 2017).

Are there echoes of Stalin's *Holodomor* in Putin's war? Whilst Putin described communism in 1999 as "a blind alley, far away from the mainstream of civilization" (cited in Matlock, 2020), he also described the fall of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" that has left Russia pillaged and shamed (Putin, 2005, cited in *The Economist*, 2022e). It is increasingly obvious that his project of a Great Russia seeks to not only become the heir to the Soviet Union, but also to the Tsars. An interesting biographical snippet that Putin's grandfather was a personal cook to both Lenin and Stalin (Putin says, 2018) speaks volumes. To claim present-day eastern or southern Ukraine as part of 'the historical South of Russia' or 'primordially Russian territories' seems preposterous, as "there was no substantial Russian presence in these territories at any time prior to the 19th century" (Düben, 2020). Equally false is Putin's revisionist assertion that Ukraine's south-eastern borders were established 'with no consideration for the ethnic make-up of the population'. In 1926, ethnic Ukrainians still far outnumbered ethnic Russians in all territories of eastern Ukraine. Only the *Holodomor*, Stalin's genocide, changed that (Düben, 2020).

Against Baudrillard's anti-epistemology or 'the war in Ukraine is not taking place'

The Russian media and public are not allowed to use the word 'war'. Putin threatens journalists with up to 15 years in jail if they do not parrot official falsehoods, thus re-Stalinising Russian media. From that distorted and psychedelic perspective, there is no war in Ukraine. If French philosopher Jean Baudrillard were still alive, he would probably echo that sentiment (that a war in Ukraine is not taking place), albeit for different reasons. Infamously, Baudrillard (1995) had declared in 1991, that there was no Gulf War. Of course, this is an outrageous statement: direct casualties as a result of the first Gulf War are officially estimated at 100,000, not factoring in subsequent loss of life due to disease and starvation (Patton, 1995). However, Baudrillard was neither a raving lunatic nor a conspiracy theorist. Through his controversial writings, he raised serious questions about

reality, truth and history.

According to Baudrillard, what we perceive as reality is in fact hyperreality. Hyperreality consists of both the 'unreal' – or the virtual that Baudrillard also calls simulacra – and the 'real'. Whether voluntarily or subconsciously, illusion and reality become entangled in our perception that is often based on our preferred interpretation of events. The Gulf War was a heavily televised war, television entertainment that was produced akin to reality TV (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011). For the first time, a global audience was able to view images from a war that were relayed 'live' from the battlefield (Patton, 1995). In another first, it was possible to watch the footage of the trajectories of real missiles hitting their targets, due to cameras assimilated into the military devices (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011). Due to a new level of control over the images and the reportage by the U.S. military, it became possible to portray the war as 'clean', focusing on the superior U.S. weaponry and with relatively few images of human casualties – none from the Allied forces (Patton, 1995). In Baudrillard's (1995) view, the Gulf War was a CNN spectacle in which commentary and propaganda were disguised as information and facts. The media coverage of the Gulf War was akin to a Hollywood blockbuster that was released simultaneously and worldwide: "every screen was treated to the same images of the same smart bomb" (Borenstein, 2014).

It could thus indeed be said that the Gulf War, as we viewed it on television and as we claimed to know it, did not take place (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011). Nonetheless, Baudrillard's perspective is deeply troubling and problematic. While Baudrillard does not deny the existence of reality, he regards himself as a 'reality agnostic' which means that reality is essentially unknowable and that every event is a potential simulacrum. As truth is a claim that relies on reality, this also makes Baudrillard 'truth agnostic' and a 'history atheist' (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011). As knowledge becomes unknowable and no event can be treated as 'real', Baudrillard's position is anti-epistemological.

While Baudrillard makes some intriguing points about hyperreality and simulacra, it would be a big mistake to follow him all the way in adopting his reality-agnostic and anti-epistemological stance. Such a position would make us doubt everything and play into the hands of master-manipulators like Putin. The German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings on certainty (1970) may provide a cure for Baudrillardian scepticism. The radical sceptic who wants to doubt everything misses the point that our doubt is only meaningful within a system of certainties. Moreover, in order to doubt something, reasons are required – this renders a radical, all-encompassing Cartesian doubt impossible and nonsensical. For instance, doubting the existence of something in the outside world is only meaningful if we are not doubting the meaning of our own words. Wittgenstein's (1970) approach can be regarded as somewhat therapeutic in showing the 'unreasonable', unnecessary and in the end, impossible nature of a skepticism that questions everything. Another perspective on questioning whether the Gulf War was indeed a 'war' is provided by American linguist and social critic Noam Chomsky. In Chomsky's view, war in the sense that it "involves two sides in combat, say, shooting at

each other... did not happen in the Gulf" (Chomsky, 1992, p. 51). Instead, both sides were involved in state terrorism (Chomsky, 1992). Chomsky's perspective on the Gulf War not having been a 'war' is comparable to the Estonian Prime Minister's interpretation that instead of a battlefield, Ukraine is a "crime scene", with there being "more civilian victims than... military casualties", Russia engineering "humanitarian catastrophes in cities such as Mariupol" and "[t]argeting civilians" which is a war crime (Kallas, 2022).

Putin's big lie

Putin's fabrications – around his 'special military operation' de-Nazifying Ukraine – are nothing but the latest big lie. The concept of the big lie occurs in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1939). It describes the use of a lie so colossal that no one would believe that someone could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously. Constant repetition in different media is important for the success of the big lie technique. Hitler falsely claimed that such a propaganda technique had been used by Jews to blame Germany's loss in World War I on General Ludendorff. This is related to the *Dolchstoßlegende* (stab-in-the-back myth), the revisionist claim that Germany was not defeated in war in 1918, but betrayed by internal groups. The actual big lie was the one by the Nazis themselves: that Germany was an innocent, besieged land striking back at "international Jewry" (that supposedly had begun a war of extermination against Germany) – consequently, Germany, according to the Nazis' big lie, had a right to annihilate the Jews in 'self-defence' (Herf, 2006). Aided by this big lie that was tirelessly propagated by Joseph Goebbels (the Reich Minister of Propaganda), Nazis thus managed to turn long-standing antisemitism in Germany into the Holocaust. (The concept of the big lie re-emerged in the 21st century when Donald Trump falsely claimed that the presidential election of 2020 was stolen through massive electoral fraud, leading to Trump supporters attacking the U.S. Capitol – and Joe Biden labelled that a "big lie" (Block, 2021).)

It is doubtful that Joseph Goebbels' oft-quoted characterisation of the big lie is actually attributable to him (Bytwerk, 2008):

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.

Although Goebbels may have never said this, it would have described the Nazis' big lie strategy quite perfectly. Putin's own big lie is eerily reminiscent of the Nazis. Andrew Wilson (2022) characterised the Russian invasion as "the War of the Big Lie":

"The Lie that Ukraine doesn't exist. The Lie that Ukraine has no right to full sovereignty because it is a puppet state of the West. The Lie that A invaded B because C is to blame—the West, the expansion of NATO, the USA's global hegemony".

Jailed Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny has said that the "monstrosity of lies" in the Russian state media "is unimaginable" -- and "unfortunately, so is its persuasiveness for those who have no access to alternative information" (cited in Day, 2022).

The catastrophic spectre of the war

Ukrainians have a long history of suffering and oppression:

Ukrainians have been oppressed by the Habsburgs, the Russian Empire, the Poles, the Nazis and the Soviet Union. Even Czechoslovakia once snaffled a slice of western Ukraine. Ukrainian oligarchs have acted like another set of exploitative colonisers since independence in 1991. In the 20th century alone, some 14m people are believed to have been killed in Ukraine through purges, famine and the Holocaust (*The Economist*, 2022b).

The current war is taking an enormous toll on Ukraine, with millions of people internally displaced, millions of especially women and children having fled the country, thousands killed, destroyed infrastructure and levelled cities. The Russian army is using terror, torture, rape and mass murder as routine tools of war (*The Economist*, 2022g). Russian soldiers and their commanders are guilty of many crimes, though they may never be tried for them. Russia's invasion itself is a crime of aggression, as spelled out in the statutes of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Russian war crimes include summary executions at Bucha and the bombing of the Mariupol theatre – the city's largest air-raid shelter that had the Russian word for children written in letters large enough to be seen from the sky. Russia's indiscriminate shelling of Ukrainian cities fulfils the ICC's definition of crimes against humanity: "a widespread or systematic attack directed against civilians" (cited in *The Economist*, 2022h).

At the point of writing, NATO and the EU appear unusually united in a consensus that Putin's empire-building must be stopped in Ukraine. Not only Putin's own history, but also the ones of dictators like Hitler and Stalin, show that if Russia is allowed to prevail in Ukraine, there likely will be further 'special military operations' in other European countries. A democratic and free Ukraine is an existential threat to Putin, as it offers an alternative to his dictatorial regime. In the meantime, the war in Ukraine has unintended catastrophic consequences. As a result of limited Russian and Ukrainian food exports, there is the "spectre of a global food shortage" that could last for years, according to UN Secretary General António Guterres (cited in *The Economist*, 2022i):

The high cost of staple foods has already raised the number of people who cannot be sure of getting enough to eat by 440m, to 1.6bn. Nearly 250m are on the brink of famine. If, as is likely, the war drags on and supplies from Russia and Ukraine are limited, hundreds of millions more people could fall into poverty. Political unrest will spread, children will be stunted and people will starve.

Conclusion: the war as an opportunity to teach critical thinking

The preceding text shows that with the war in Ukraine, we are also in the heart of a political battle over the accuracy and legitimacy of history, knowledge and reality. With many millions of people's lives at stake, directly and indirectly, this is not an abstract issue. Getting our students to think critically is high on the agenda of many good teachers. But what does critical thinking actually mean? According to Stephen Brookfield (2012, p. 1), the basic process of critical thinking "entails (1) identifying the assumptions that frame our thinking and determine our actions, (2) checking out the degree to which these assumptions are accurate and valid, (3) looking at our ideas and decisions (intellectual, organizational, and personal) from several different perspectives, and (4) on the basis of all this, taking informed actions".

Brookfield (2012) has identified five distinct intellectual traditions that shape the understanding of critical thinking: (1) analytic philosophy and logic, (2) the hypothetico-deductive method of the natural sciences, (3) pragmatism, (4) psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, and (5) critical theory. Consequently, if we do not clarify our use of the term critical thinking, we invite miscommunication, as everybody is rooted in their own disciplinary orientations. However, the five paradigms of critical thinking are not mutually exclusive and despite some possible contradictions between them, we can use all of them. For instance, language tricks – such as repeating a distorted argument often enough so that it becomes fact – feature prominently in analytic philosophy, but such manipulative and politically distortive use of language to suit ideological purposes also interests critical theorists. The American tradition of pragmatism (associated with philosophers like Dewey and Peirce and not to be mixed up with opportunism) perhaps best describes what many teachers do: it is an experimental pursuit of student- and learning-centric outcomes. Being constantly exposed to new perspectives and considering them seriously keeps us open to surprises and makes us question our assumptions (Brookfield, 2012). Once we stop learning and thinking critically, we are in a downward spiral. Hence, we as teachers are ideally forever becoming.

Whilst critical theory presupposes relatively rigidly that our world is organised to keep dominant elites in power and stupefy the rest of us by getting us to accept dominant power as natural, obvious and common-sensical, it also has a self-critical strain (Brookfield, 2005). A simultaneously pragmatic orientation is further helpful as it allows for our axiomatic assumptions to be proved wrong. For example, after the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Soviet Union more

than 30 years ago, it was a common assumption that war in Europe would no longer be possible. This paradigmatic assumption has been proved to be false.

Brookfield (2012) helpfully differentiates three categories of assumptions: causal, prescriptive and paradigmatic. Causal assumptions are common and easy to identify: if we do this, then that will happen. However, causal assumptions such as 'as long as we engage Putin, he will not attack Ukraine' can be problematic, as recent events have shown. Prescriptive assumptions follow the logic of 'we are doing it this way because we know this is the way it should be done.' They refer to our regime of truth (Foucault's (1980; 2000) term for our types of discourse that describe what counts as legitimate processes in the construction and production of knowledge and truth). The most deeply buried assumptions are paradigmatic, as they frame our worldview. These lead us to decisions that seem so obvious that we may misconstrue them as 'reality' and the way the world is ordered. For instance, Goebbels had paradigmatic assumptions about supposed 'Jewish impurity' that led him to justify his extreme anti-Semitism and the Holocaust (Brookfield, 2012). Questioning our paradigmatic assumptions complicates our world and could even lead to its collapse. Hence, applying critical thinking to our paradigmatic assumptions may be the most testing intellectual ordeal.

How can we use the example of the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to teach critical thinking? We can follow a generic model of teaching critical thinking that guides our students through various stages and does not throw them into the deep end of the pool. It is important to note that learning to think critically takes time. A first step is to model critical thinking and for instance, to share how surprised the teacher was at the beginning of the war and how it has played out so far. For instance, one paradigmatic assumption was that war in Europe would no longer take place, another that Putin would win the war very quickly in the fashion of a *blitzkrieg*. While modeling critical thinking, it is good to show our participants that we as teachers can err in our paradigmatic assumptions and have to be open to change them. Demonstrating that critical thinking may well lead to better decisions and more informed actions also seems like a good idea. As critical thinking is a social learning process, it can be practiced well in structured discussion groups. Teaching and learning to think critically also requires much scaffolding. It is good to start in a fairly simple and non-threatening way and only very gradually take people closer to a direct analysis of their own thinking patterns and assumptions. Going too fast too soon is a recipe for disaster (Brookfield, 1987, 2012).

Can nefarious leaders be considered critical thinkers? Goebbels was a master of ideological manipulation and due to his aforementioned paradigmatic assumptions, presumably thought of repeating the big lie ad nauseam as a legitimate strategy of using propaganda. If we restrict our concept of critical thinking to mental processes, his and fellow Nazi leaders' evil though strategic thinking makes them critical thinkers. Putin may have grossly overestimated the ease with which the war could be won, but when viewed from his perspective to restore the 'greatness' of Russia along the lines of tsars such as Peter the Great (Rainsford, 2022),

his thinking is certainly strategic and contains components of critical thought. However, Goebbels's or Putin's thinking would not qualify as 'critical' if viewed from a critical theory or pragmatist perspective. Critical thinking must also be viewed in context and cannot be evaluated separately from moral or political values (Brookfield, 2012).

How can teaching critical thinking help combat big and small lies? In an era of weaponised lies, fake news, 'counterknowledge', half-truths, 'alt truth' and conspiracy theories, truth matters (Levitkin, 2017). Critical thinkers question information and perspectives and seek to think beneath the surface in their reading. Critical thinking requires discernment. We need to be careful what sources we use, evaluate their credibility and ideally triangulate them with other trustworthy sources. The death of many newspapers and the fact that many people receive their news via social media is problematic in this context.

Bell hooks (2010) has argued that children in school are usually discouraged to think as it is 'dangerous' and it is better to be obedient. This discouragement of critical, independent thinking continues in traditional higher education (hooks, 2010). However, critical thinking has a central role in education. The purpose of education, from kindergarten to university, is often framed to be the creation of an informed citizenry. In our complex world, critical thinking may well be the most pressing educational, societal and political need. Accordingly, it is quite obvious that critical thinking should be a mandatory topic taught from kindergarten onwards.

In order to maintain the integrity of the critical thinking process, teaching critical thinking requires a radical openness from teachers who must be ready to acknowledge that they do not know everything and that the shape of knowledge is constantly changing (hooks, 2010; Brookfield et al., 2019). Critical thinking involves a reflective dimension and self-criticism is a necessary element of it. Critical thinking places demands on both teachers and students and requires the latter to be engaged. It can be discouraging when students resist critical thinking, yet when at least some students learn it, it can be very rewarding for both students and teachers. Ideally, when both teachers and students realise their own responsibilities for creating a learning community, learning is at its most useful and critical thinking becomes empowering (Brookfield et al., 2022).

This opinion piece may have raised more questions than it has answered. This is very much within the practice of critical thinking. Rather than commodifying knowledge within a neatly bounded package of facts, it may be better to end with questions such as the following (see Brookfield, 2012) that may also be applied to our text: What are the assumptions the authors operate under? Are they accurate and valid? Are alternative interpretations omitted? Are there inconsistencies in the text? What are the strongest arguments and why? Are parts of their arguments confusing? Are claims empirically grounded? Do authors' personal preferences masquerade as objective facts? Are there significant unacknowledged biases?

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