Willful Ignorance and the Death Knell of Critical Thought

**Abstract**

Independent, critical thought has never been more important in the United States. In the Age of Trump, political officials spout falsehoods called “alternative facts” as if they were on equal footing with researchable, scientific data. At the same time, an unquestioning populace engages in acts of “willful ignorance” on a daily basis to support their unfounded beliefs. In order to create a generation of independent, cognizant, and critical citizens, this nation’s students must be taught to think dialectically in the classroom. Then, and only then, will people be able to assess important issues for themselves in order to engage in a truly democratic society.

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**Introduction**

This is the dawn of the Age of Trump in the United States, and for many, especially non-Christians and people of color, it is fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. This emerging fear is apparent in higher education, where academics are being called out in a modern-day McCarthyism by websites such as Professor Watchlist, which is meant to out professors who espouse a liberal bias and anti-American values (Flaherty, 2016). Students become spies in the halls of academia when a professor’s beliefs conflict with their own, rather than embracing critical thought for themselves and questioning the validity of those arguments they disagree with. We live in a world of “willful ignorance” (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004), where people often resist accessing information that is easily and readily available to them (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) yet contradicts their personal beliefs. We have become a nation of knee-jerk, keyboard warriors, and for many, social media and 140 characters on Twitter dictate the extent of their knowledge. At the same time, politicians now go on television and combat truth with “alternative facts” (Bradner, 2017), as a method to blur the lines between reality and fantasy in order to advance their agendas. It is for these reasons that “we have reached a watershed moment, when the enterprise of basing our beliefs on fact rather than intuition is truly in peril” (McIntyre, 2015a, p. B10).

Several theories have emerged as to why critical thought appears to be of little importance in the twenty-first century (Author, 2017). According to McIntyre (2015a), the internet is partly to blame since, “It facilitates not only the spread of truth but also the proliferation of crackpots, ideologues, and those with an axe to grind. With the removal of editorial gatekeepers who can vet information, outright lies can survive on the Internet” (p. B11). The internet, described by Zygmunt Bauman, as “an infinitely capacious, and exponentially growing, waste-information disposal bin” (2010, p. 25), overwhelms not only the senses, but also the critical self. Without the ability to analyze information and critically assess such an abundance of material hitting us at breakneck speed on our televisions, computers, and smart phones, one often finds and aligns with whichever material supports her/his own belief system, referred to as “confirmation bias” (Nickerson, 1998) or “selective exposure” (Valdivia, 2010).

Standardization and high-stakes assessment in this nation’s K-12 schools have also been accused of leading to a diminished state of critical thought. While not actually successful in creating high-quality education and schools (Comber, 2015), high-stakes testing has negatively affected teachers and education today (Hampton, 2005; McNeil, 2005). This is due to the fact that teachers and administrators are pressured to focus so heavily on standardization of both education and assessment that exploring complex societal questions becomes secondary in the classroom (Quezada, 2008). Educators appear to be moving away from teaching students to think critically in US schools (Kumashiro, 2008) since they are pressured to teach to the test so their students may perform successfully on the required annual standardized assessments (Jones, 2007; Spring, 2010). Since the US education system continues to “maintain schools as sites for cultural reproduction and indoctrination” (Macedo, 1993, p. 187), teaching students to think independently and critically is simply not important.

No matter the causes for the apparent lack of critical thought in our schools, youth today need a critical education to create critical stances (Freire, 1998). Therefore, if the difficult questions are not asked, if the difficult answers are not sought; there will be no positive social change, just a perpetuation of the status quo. In order to address the vast amount of social, racial, economic, and environmental challenges facing the next generation in the US (e.g., racism against Muslims, continued amassment of money by the wealthiest 1%, building a wall along the border with Mexico), critical thought, in particular dialectical thought, must be taught in both university teacher education programs and this nation’s K-12 schools. In this article, I will explain the concept of dialectical thought and how it can be applied in primary, secondary, and university classrooms. I will also discuss the concept of willful ignorance and its prevalence in US society. Ultimately, this article will explicate how using dialectical thought in the classroom can provide educators with a method to combat uninformed, willful ignorance, and by doing so, can lead to a more analytical and aware populace.

**Dialectical Thought**

Dialectical thought has a wide variety of definitions and applications (Brincat, 2014) and is used in a multitude of fields today, such as social work and international relations. For the purpose of this article, the working definition will be an amalgam of several concepts. To begin with, Manzo (1992) posited that dialectical thinking is the ability to analyze specific issues “from multiple perspectives and to arrive at the most economical and reasonable reconciliation of seemingly contradictory information and postures. [It] is a form of analytical reasoning that pursues knowledge and truth as long as there are questions and conflicts” (p. 1). According to Brincat (2014), dialectics is a method of thinking or an approach. It:

understands things through their own development, change, and movement, and, in their relation and interconnectivity with all other things. Insofar as it is a form of reasoning or thinking, dialectics emphasizes the contradictory sides of things or the unity of opposites—the conditions pertaining within a thing that are opposite to each other, and yet, at the same time are both dependent on, and presuppose, each other. (Brincat, 2014, p. 588)

Dialectical thought also asserts that there is a connection between power, knowledge, and domination (Giroux, 2001). According to Giroux (2001), “Thus it is acknowledged that some knowledge is false, and that the ultimate purpose of critique should be critical thinking in the interest of social change” (p. 18). Therefore, with its assertion of constant change (Edwards, 2011), dialectical thinking is not only a process of inquiry, but rather, a process of revolutionary praxis (Thomas, 1977). When taken together, dialogical thought is defined here as the process of thinking critically about a particular topic, yet moving one step beyond critical thought; dialectical thinking breaks down and analyzes the precursors to specific social justice issues and then adds the component of social change (praxis) (Author, 2017).

Dialectical thinking is often attributed to Karl Marx in his *Grundisse* (Marx, 1941/2002) and his analysis of capitalism (Ollman, 2015). For this piece, dialectics will be explained through the works of Bertell Ollman (1986, 1998, 2003) and his belief that dialectical thought is a “way of thinking which brings into focus the full range of changes and interactions that occur in the world” (Ollman, 1986, p. 42). Ollman (1998) breaks down the complex theory of dialectical thinking into four major steps, like in a dance, since you can move forward, back, to the left, and the right in one’s thought process. In Ollman’s “Dance of the Dialectic” (1998), in order to think dialectically, the first move is to *analyze* an issue and look for connections and patterns in the present day. The second step is to *historicize* or look at the most important conditions in the present and find their causes in the past. The next move is to *visionize* or move important social contradictions from the past to the present and to their resolution in the future. The last step is to *organize* and arrive at a moment of praxis. In other words, at the end of the “dance,” a person reaches a point of understanding about a particular issue and chooses to act upon those realizations while gaining a deeper understanding of the issue at the same time (Author, 2017).

In US society today, issues are often simplified and misrepresented in the media, and this leads to gross misunderstandings of important social justice issues (e.g., racism, classism). Yet, as occurs quite often, the media repeats messages, or “fake news,” that are not based on truth. Bauman (2010) warned that, “Making associations may be murderous, particularly if they are hammered home with dull monotony and deafening loudness” (Bauman, 2010, p. 57). A way to combat the perpetuation of falsehoods in the media is through the use of dialectical thinking. Unfortunately, there is little to no real-world application of dialectical thinking in K-12 schools or at the university level, at least as described in academic literature (Author, 2017). The lack of a dialectical presence in academic literature certainly does not mean that dialectical thought does not have an important place in this nation’s schools. To the contrary, it has been asserted that, “In order to seriously address this nation’s issues (e.g., poverty, racism), students must be able to break down arguments, see the facts from all sides, and then come to a clear, independent decision free from hype and hearsay” (Author, 2012, p. 71). In a time of willful ignorance in the US, I contend that teaching dialectical thought is more important now than ever before.

**Willful Ignorance**

We are all ignorant of certain concepts and ideas; in reality, no one can know everything about all things. It is important to understand that ignorance and willful ignorance are two very separate ideas. According to McIntyre (2015b), ignorance is simply lacking true knowledge of a subject, while willful ignorance is “ignorance coupled with the decision to remain ignorant … [it is] marked by the conviction to shut *both* eyes against any further investigation, because one is so firm in one’s belief that any other sources of knowledge are not needed” (p. 4). Wieland (2016) echoed this sentiment when he explained how willful ignorance is ignorance that is caused by one’s own will rather than outside forces. In other words, “For when there are such easily available sources of accurate information out there, the only excuse for such stunning ignorance is *the desire to remain so*; one has actively chosen not to investigate” (McIntyre, 2015b, pp. 4-5). While it is possible for one to be willfully ignorant and not even be aware of it, one often employs willful ignorance because it serves one’s own best interests (Wieland, 2016). In reality, this can be displayed in many areas; for example, political discourse.

It is important to be able to recognize examples of willful ignorance in our everyday lives if it is to be addressed in the classroom; therefore, the following is a perfect example of willful ignorance and what it looks like. Soap opera actor and reality TV star, Antonio Sabato, Jr., was interviewed by an ABC News panel soon after his speech at the Republican National Convention in July 2016. When discussing then-President Obama, Sabato, Jr. asserted that:

First of all, I don’t believe that the guy is a Christian. I don’t believe that he follows the God that I love and the Jesus that I love…Obama, I mean, that’s not a Christian name, is it?...I know Christians. I am one and I don’t believe he is. (youtube.com)

When asked by one of the interviewers why Sabato, Jr. felt this way, he responded:

It’s in my heart, man. That’s it. I just see it for what it is…We have had a Muslim president for seven-and-a-half years… I have a right to believe that and you have the right to go against that. But I believe it. (youtube.com)

Throughout President Obama’s two terms in office, it had been asserted, quite vociferously by some, that he is a Muslim. This is despite the fact that there has been a great deal of evidence that confirms that he is a Christian (Drobnic Holan, 2010). All it takes is a quick Google search to find specific, detailed, independent, fact-based investigations to prove this point, yet after almost eight years as president, Sabato, Jr. still believed Obama was a Muslim (which was perceived as negative). Sabato, Jr.s’ feelings were not based on facts, but rather, his gut told him so (“It’s in my heart, man”). This is a perfect example of willful ignorance because, “The strategy of willful ignorance is not to fight theory with theory and statistic with statistic. It is instead to say, ‘I refuse to believe this,’ and then filibuster in the court of public opinion” (McIntyre, 2015a, p. B11). Therefore, even though there are a plethora of websites detailing Obama’s Christian religious beliefs, Sabato, Jr. chose not to accept the factual evidence (or simply did not seek it out) and justified his position based purely on his own opinion. He then asserted that “I have a right to believe that and you have the right to go against that. But I believe it” (youtube.com). Therefore, in Sabato Jr.s’ eyes, his beliefs, unsupported by actual fact, carry the same weight and authority as actual facts do since he chooses not to believe them. In other words, one can either choose to believe a fact or not, but that is your choice. According to DiAngelo and Sensoy (2009), in regard to willful ignorance:

if the new knowledge does not support existing knowledge, the call for more data or better evidence serves as an institutionally coded block to protect *not knowing*. This ‘not knowing’ is not simply a lack of enough information or critical thinking skills; it is a specific discursive move that functions to counter the challenge to institutionalized relations of power. (p. 449)

Based on this line of thinking, Sabato, Jr. maintains his position of White power and privilege by refusing to accept that Obama is actually a Christian, because in his eyes, being a Muslim is somehow un-American and goes against US Christian values. Obama’s being a Muslim makes him less than, and because of that, affirms Sabato, Jr.’s justification for Obama’s being a bad president. From this example, it is clear that Sabato, Jr. used willful ignorance in his opinion formation of President Obama. Refusing to engage in critical thinking is dangerous for all who live in a democratic society. Fiction becomes fact and fact becomes reality. Therefore, to combat willful ignorance and to become “conscious” (Van Dijk, 2000) of one’s thought process, learning to think dialectically can be of great assistance.

**Dialectical Thought in Teacher Education Programs**

According to Darder (2015), “inequalities are reproduced through class, racialized, gendered, ableist, and heterosexist perceptions and distortions, which are embedded, wittingly or unwittingly, in prevailing attitudes of most well-meaning teachers” (p. 73). Teacher education programs can address these societal inequalities by requiring future educators to take the time to reflect on issues of inequity in US culture. By showing teachers how to think in a dialectical fashion, they can begin to reflect on why they believe as they do on given issues. Edwards (2011) posited that:

Ultimately dialectical thinking is about examining the past and future inside the present. Any critique of pedagogy has to be deeply embedded in concrete practices in schools whilst also aiming at teachers’ collective critical consciousness[[1]](#footnote-1) of the connectedness of their work to wider historical, economic and cultural spheres. (p. 55)

Elementary and secondary teacher education programs are the perfect place to learn how to think dialectically, for both themselves and for their future students. In US schools today, as well as society-at-large, it is believed that everyone is entitled to have an opinion and express that opinion; taking away that right is seen as being antidemocratic (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2009). But, there is a vital difference between expressing an opinion and having an educated opinion. DiAngelo and Sensoy (2009) have explained that, “While we are not interested in our students’ opinions *as they stand*, we *do* want students to examine their opinions. Opening one’s perspective to exploration and analysis is not the same as simply announcing them” (p. 453). With the explosion of social media and websites such as Twitter and Facebook, an uninformed person’s opinion appears just as valid as those of the experts. To the detriment of the populace, not many actually look any deeper to assess the validity of the uninformed person’s beliefs. Therefore, the goal for future educators must be to question and analyze their beliefs, no matter how small or how big. By doing so, their opinions are still opinions, but at least they become *educated* ones.

Teaching future educators to think dialectically takes both time and effort on the part of the professor and the student. The curriculum must be laid out in a specific, evolving fashion, in order to facilitate the learning of dialectical thought (Author, 2017). Ultimately, I believe that it is easier to introduce dialectical thinking by choosing to explore one particular issue that effects most, if not all, of one’s students at a particular time. Therefore, students in southern New Mexico might face different pressing issues than those in Vermont, for example. The issue to address can also arise naturally due to the present curricular focus in class. For example, if one is an elementary school teacher, s/he can choose an important theme from a given story or text to initiate the discussion of dialectic thinking. At the secondary level, a history teacher can choose a social justice concept based off of a specific historical time period, such as GLBTQ rights and the Stonewall Riots of the 1960s. This applies to all content areas across the curriculum. Once the engaging topic is chosen, then the learning can commence.

**Dialectical Thought in the University Classroom**

I will now present an example of how to teach students to think dialectically. For this scenario, I will use a social justice prompt from my university English elective course titled Survey of Latina/Latino Literature. At the beginning of the semester-long course, we address issues related to Latinas/Latinos in current US society; therefore, an important prompt was, “How are Latinas/Latinos represented in the media today?” The first step was to introduce and explore the various issues related to the chosen topic in the present day (analyze). Therefore, we explored how Latinas/Latinos are portrayed on US television and film by me first asking the students to discuss what they knew about Latinx stereotyping in the media, if they ever noticed the specific races/ethnicities playing particular roles on TV programs (e.g., criminals as opposed to doctors), and if they were able to identify any major Latinx actors in leading roles in current popular films and television programs.

It is important to note that it was essential for the students to be able to answer *why* they thought as they did – not in a defensive mode, but rather, as a way to explore their thoughts and feelings about their previously held beliefs and attitudes. Eliminating student defensive in the classroom is a multifaceted process that takes time to develop. In brief, through my use of humor, I attempt to create a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, one of openness and acceptance. I lead by example through my sharing of thoughts and feelings about societal issues in a calm and collected fashion, and I create the space for all my students to act in kind. As I say to my students again and again, they have the right to whatever opinion they hold as long as they can back it up (by data, etc.).

After the initial class discussion concerning their own thoughts about Latinas/Latinos in the media, we read the article “Latinos in Hollywood: Few Roles, Frequent Stereotypes, New Study Finds” (Latimer, 2016) to learn about the lack of Latinx characters on television and the stereotypes that are used (that is, if Latinx characters are present at all). We also covered the six major stereotypes of Latinas/Latinos in film by Charles Ramírez Berg[[2]](#footnote-2) (2002) (i.e., the harlot, the dark lady, the female clown, *el bandido*, the male buffoon, and the Latin lover) and how these six stereotypes are still prevalent today in US media.

After discussing the readings as a class, one of the students in the course, Josh[[3]](#endnote-1), asserted in his reflection paper that “Latinas in television and film are disproportionately cast as maids. This insinuates the idea that Latinas can typically be found in positions of servitude, placing them in a lower rung of society.” Sheila went on to discuss Sofia Vergara on the hit show *Modern Family* and how she represents the harlot, the female clown, and the dark lady all at the same time due to her overt sexuality and heavy accent. Therefore, in this initial phase, the students were beginning to understand the basic issues involving Latinx stereotypes in the media and how they provide negative messages about Latinas/Latinos. The next step in the “Dance of the Dialectic” is to historicize by looking at the past and seeing how particular issues and events led to the current state of Latinx stereotyping in the media.

In order to help the students begin to historicize, I introduced the documentary *The Bronze Screen*, which reviews the past century of Latinx actors in film and the roles they played. For example, I discussed the stereotypical Latin lover character in 1950s film and the actors who played them, such as Ricardo Montalbán in (the aptly titled) *Latin Lovers*. The students also read news articles and book chapters that focused on the history of Latinas/Latinos in US media, such as “Latinos on Television and in the News: Absent or Misrepresented” by Clara Rodriguez (1997). From this step of dialectical thought, Scott stated in his reflection paper that, “Latinos, in particular, have a number of recurring stereotypes that seem to persistently evolve as time goes on.” He went on to discuss the stereotypes of *el bandito* and its modern version, the drug lord. In addition, from looking historically at Latinx stereotypes throughout television and film history, Sandra found that she was “shocked in a good way because from this point on. I feel like my eyes are much more open to the world I live in, especially when it comes to how certain peoples are portrayed in the film industry and how harmful it can be.” After focusing on the major issues that arose and the patterns that emerged from those discussions (e.g., Latinas as maids and temptresses), the next move was to visionize.

In this step, the students needed to move any social contradictions from the past to the present and to their resolution in the future. Therefore, students began to identify important contradictions that they found due to analyzing Latinx stereotypes in the media. For example, the students addressed the contradiction of the lazy Mexican stereotype and the modern migrant farmworker. We discussed how the US media often stereotypes the Latinx as being lazy and ignorant, yet many Mexican immigrants perform backbreaking work in the fields for long hours and little pay. Addressing this example, Josh asserted that:

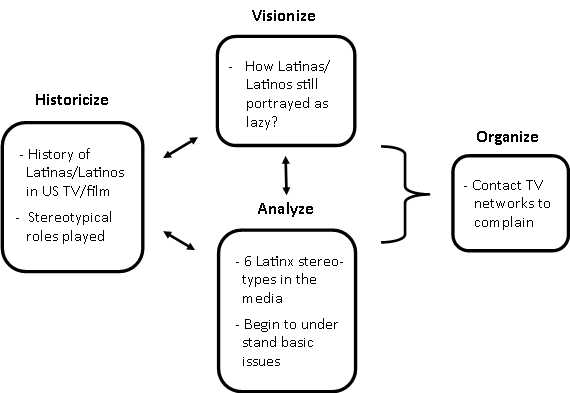
stereotypes cause serious damage to the national view of Latinos and Latinas, deceiving many into developing a negative opinion or further cementing and strengthening previously held prejudices. This stereotypical representation is detrimental to the daily lives of Latinos and can make upward mobility, or any success in society, considerable more difficult.

Furthermore, Leticia asserted that, “By playing these stereotypes, the people who watch [TV shows] start to associate…negative images about different races and ethnicities…which is harmful to humans.” In this stage of the “Dance of the Dialectic,” students such as Josh and Leticia were able to see the difficulties that stereotyping causes the Latinx community and how this impacts their future success in the US. After visionizing, the students were then asked to organize as the final step.

The last step (organize) asks the students to consider various methods to take action (praxis) about what new conclusions they arrived at while discussing the previous steps in the dialectical thought process. How to act, if they chose to act, was left to the students’ discretion. Therefore, one student decided to compose an email to the major television networks to complain about the continued misrepresentation (and lack) of Latinx characters on television. In her reflective analysis paper at the end of the unit, Sheila posited that, “To find a solution, one must first acknowledge the problem, so it is crucial that we study the representation of Latinas and Latinos in the media so that progress can be made towards a more accurate and positive representation.” In her reflective analysis at the end of the semester, Leticia reflected on the dialectical thought process and stated that:

By talking about these topics in class and being forced to do a little soul-searching myself, I definitely do not have the same thought process I had at the beginning of the semester…[Now] before I say my opinion on certain matters, I definitely know the reason why I have that opinion and am ready to back up my claim.

**Modeling of Dialectical Thinking**

In order to work through the four steps of the “Dance of the Dialectic” (Ollman, 1988) with university and/or primary/secondary students, there are several things that educators can do. It has been found that the use of both direct and indirect modeling of how to think dialectically can be beneficial for students (Author, 2017). Modeling can be accomplished in different ways; for example, one can use direct modeling in the classroom, such as through the use of diagrams. For visual learners, drawing diagrams via Whiteboard, Elmo projector, and Prezi presentation, for example, can help explain how issues are analyzed dialectically. With practice, a teacher can draw how concepts and ideas are able to be broken down into several parts for the purpose of analysis. Figure 1 is a brief example of how an educator can diagram the dialogical thought process in regard to Latinx stereotyping in US media. By going through this visual process, students can begin to form a new perspective about the chosen concept/idea being discussed (Author, 2017).

**Figure 1**

Indirect modeling, through the use of guided questions, can help bring students through the process of dialectical thought more easily. The use of guided questions helps move the students to content areas you want them to go. For example, if I want my students to think more deeply about Latinx stereotyping in the media, I can ask probing questions such as, “Is the Latin Lover stereotype really negative?” (analyze) and “What can be done to change the current state of Latinx stereotyping on US television?” (organize). By asking guided questions, a teacher helps the students move along the four steps of the “Dance of the Dialectic” and begin to see how the various ideas are related and interconnected.

Although teaching students to think dialectically is not an easy task, it is essential for the next generation of critical, independent-thinking citizens. Ultimately, dialectical thinking can be beneficial for students to:

better understand complex issues that are often over simplified by prominent sources, such as politicians and the media…By thinking about difficult issues in a dialectical fashion…students [are] able to see, more critically how a particular concept [is] formed. They…begin to make sense of the ideas and their individual parts (i.e., historical, economic, social, ideological), which construct said concept, and they…ultimately come to their own, newly formed conclusions. (Author, 2017, p. 30)

**Conclusion**

In the Age of Trump, since it appears that “[Making] America Great Again” will be accomplished through the use of fear (Ball, 2016), the process of dialectical thought is essential. Students must be able to see issues for themselves, understand how to see the concepts from all sides (and with historical context) and then decide how to act for positive social change. A perfect example of the Presidential administration’s use of fear is by the threat of the Other; in particular, that of the illegal Mexican immigrant. According to Bauman (2007):

The spectre of social degradation against which the *social* state swore to insure its citizens is being replaced in the political formula of the ‘personal safety state’ by threats of a paedophile on the loose, of a serial killer, an obtrusive beggar, a mugger, stalker, poisoner, terrorist, or *better still by all such threats rolled into one in the figure of an illegal immigrant*, against whom the modern state in its most recent avatar promises to defend its subjects. (p. 15; italics added by author)

Although there are a plethora of statistics showing how illegal immigrants add to the local economy (Soergel, 2016) and commit significantly less crime than US-born citizens (Pérez-Peña, 2017), building a border wall is still an issue that is being discussed in the White House. Erecting a wall along the United States’ border with Mexico might actually come to fruition if people do not begin to think critically and dialectically about issues such as immigration and stand up against unfounded bigotry and fear.

It is essential that future K-12 teachers be able to understand and internalize dialectical thinking in order to teach their own students someday. Unfortunately, according to Davidson (2014), “Despite education, ignorance plus ideology [leads] to stupidity” (p. 4). Dialectical thinking can help break this formula simply by having students reflect upon an issue, explore the facts that define it, decide how they truly feel about the concept, and then contemplate how to act upon those feelings. This method takes the “willful ignorance” out of the thought process. Thinking dialectically takes the past, present, and all of its infinite possibilities and helps create a more factual basis of reality. This is the solid ground we need as Americans, if we are to strive for equity and social justice for all, both in the classroom and in society.

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1. As characterized by Edwards (2011) as “an understanding of education and its relation to history and society” (p. 53) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The six major stereotypes by Berg (2002) bridges the stages of analyze and historicize since he addresses current roles as well as how they have been played throughout history. Therefore, the four stages of dialectical thinking are not static and can be approached in various ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All student names are pseudonyms [↑](#endnote-ref-1)