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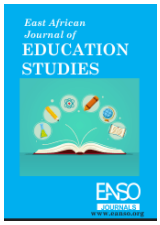

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Original Article

Optimising Critical Thinking in Graduate Education: The Role of Guided Facilitations

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ABSTRACT

As the professional world becomes more complex, the ability to think critically is increasingly recognised as a vital skill for success. This study explored the impact of guided facilitation on the development of critical thinking skills among graduate students at Gulu University. The aim was to investigate how structured facilitation, involving reflective exercises and guided interactions, helped students apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, deepening their understanding of intricate issues. A qualitative methodology was employed, gathering insights through interviews and focus group discussions with current graduate students, recent alumni, and faculty. The findings indicated that participants considered critical thinking fundamental to academic achievement and future career success. Guided facilitation was identified as a powerful tool for enhancing analytical thinking, problem-solving, and the ability to synthesise multiple perspectives. Graduates reported significant improvements in their capacity to dissect complex problems, assess evidence critically, and generate innovative solutions. Additionally, the study highlighted the value of incorporating culturally diverse facilitation strategies, which broadened students' understanding of different socio-economic realities relevant to their fields. However, the study also revealed challenges in the consistent application of guided facilitation within the curriculum, suggesting the need for better integration and institutional support. In conclusion, the research underscored the effectiveness of guided facilitation in strengthening critical thinking. By bridging theoretical concepts with real-world applications, guided facilitation enhanced students' problem-solving and creative thinking, equipping them for future challenges. The study advocates for the increased incorporation of guided facilitation in graduate programs and recommends further research to assess its long-term impact on critical thinking development.

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INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is an essential skill for graduate students, enabling them to critically assess complex ideas, participate in meaningful academic discussions, and approach problems with innovative solutions (Facione, 2015). It is widely recognised that critical thinking is fundamental to success in graduate education, yet many students struggle to cultivate these skills on their own (Sternberg, 2018). Although critical thinking is crucial for both academic and professional growth, students often require more than passive learning experiences to develop these competencies. This gap has prompted educators to explore more effective pedagogical methods. Guided facilitation, which involves structured support from instructors to encourage student reflection and active engagement, is emerging as a promising approach to enhancing critical thinking (Brookfield, 2012). This study aims to explore how guided facilitation can support graduate students in developing their critical thinking abilities.

Traditional methods of teaching, such as lectures and memorisation, often fail to provide students with the opportunities they need to actively engage with and reflect upon the material being studied (Willingham, 2017). These passive forms of learning are less likely to foster the analytical and reflective thinking required for tackling complex academic and real-world problems. Consequently, educators are increasingly turning to more interactive methods, such as guided facilitation, which not only allows students to engage more deeply with the content but also encourages them to critically evaluate and apply their knowledge (Garrison & Akyol, 2013). Guided facilitation provides students with opportunities to think critically, engage with others, and reflect on their learning in a supportive, structured environment, helping them to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2020).

Guided facilitation, as an educational approach, varies in its application across disciplines, from the humanities to social sciences and natural sciences. In each field, the role of the facilitator can differ, but the common goal is to provide students with a framework for developing deeper critical thinking skills. In the humanities, for example, guided facilitation might involve reflective discussions on complex texts, encouraging students to analyse different interpretations and viewpoints. In contrast, in fields like business or engineering, facilitation may focus on helping students navigate real-world problems and make decisions based on critical analysis (Schmidt et al., 2016). Understanding the diverse applications of guided facilitation is important for tailoring this approach to meet the specific needs of students in different academic contexts, ensuring that it maximises their critical thinking potential.

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While guided facilitation shows promise, it is not without its challenges. One of the key issues in its implementation is the inconsistency with which it is applied across educational programs. Without systematic integration and institutional support, guided facilitation may fail to reach its full potential in fostering critical thinking. Moreover, the rapid changes in various academic fields require that the facilitators continually adapt and update their strategies to remain relevant (Adams & Green, 2023). Despite these challenges, the benefits of guided facilitation in developing critical thinking are clear, and addressing these barriers can help ensure that it becomes a central component of graduate education.

This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the role of guided facilitation in higher education by investigating its impact on graduate students' critical thinking development. Through an exploration of student experiences and faculty perspectives, the research will provide valuable insights into how guided facilitation can support the cognitive growth necessary for academic success and professional competence.

Statement of the Problem

Graduate students often struggle with critical thinking, particularly in environments where they are expected to engage with complex concepts and demonstrate advanced cognitive skills (Kuhn, 2019). Traditional teaching methods, while effective in content delivery, may not sufficiently cultivate the skills needed for deep, analytical thinking (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Guided facilitation techniques, which encourage student reflection, discussion, and critical analysis, have not been extensively explored in the context of graduate education. This study addresses the gap in understanding the potential benefits of such an approach for enhancing critical thinking in this context.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the effectiveness of guided facilitation in enhancing the critical thinking skills of graduate students.

Research Objective

- To examine the role of guided facilitations in enhancing critical thinking among graduate students.

Research Question

- How do guided facilitations promote critical thinking among graduate students?

Scope of the Study

This study specifically examined the role of guided facilitation in enhancing critical thinking through reflective practices, peer discussions, and instructor feedback. Gulu University is located in Gulu City, Northern Uganda, approximately 335 kilometres north of Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. The university's main campus is strategically positioned about 5 kilometres from the city centre in the Laroo-Pece Division, along the Gulu-Kitgum road. Geographically, Gulu City is bordered by Amuru District to the west, Pader District to the east, Omoro District to the south, and Lamwo District to the north. The study covers a comprehensive period from 2015 to 2024. This nine-year period provides an opportunity for a comprehensive analysis of how the integration of guided facilitation into graduate curricula has evolved over time. It also offers a broad view of how critical thinking skills have been cultivated among students throughout this period, highlighting changes in educational practices and their lasting effects on student development.

Significance of the Study

This research may contribute to the field of graduate education by providing insights into how guided facilitation can be used as an effective tool for developing critical thinking skills. The findings may have implications for educators, curriculum developers, and academic institutions seeking to

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improve the quality of graduate education and better prepare students for the demands of the professional and academic world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Guided Facilitations in Promoting Critical Thinking among Graduate Students

The development of critical thinking is central to graduate education, where students are expected to engage deeply with complex concepts and contribute meaningfully to academic discourse. Critical thinking is often defined as the ability to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information in order to form well-reasoned judgments and solve problems creatively (Facione, 2015). In the academic context, critical thinking is viewed as a multifaceted skill that incorporates various cognitive abilities, such as logical reasoning, problem-solving, and the ability to assess evidence critically. Two key theoretical frameworks widely cited in higher education are the works of Paul and Elder (2014) and Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Paul and Elder's critical thinking framework outlines essential components such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation, which are integral to the development of a critically engaged learner. Similarly, Bloom's Taxonomy provides a hierarchical model for cognitive skills, ranging from basic knowledge recall to complex cognitive processes like synthesis and evaluation. These frameworks underline the importance of analytical and evaluative thinking in fostering intellectual growth and academic success at the graduate level.

In addition to these theoretical frameworks, several pedagogical strategies have been identified in the literature as effective in promoting critical thinking among students. Active learning, for example, encourages students to take an active role in their learning process, fostering engagement and deeper cognitive processing. Methods such as problem-based learning (PBL), flipped classrooms, and collaborative group work have been shown to enhance critical thinking by creating opportunities for students to analyse real-world problems, engage in critical discussions, and reflect on their learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). Inquiry-based learning, where students pose questions and explore answers through research and investigation, further encourages critical thought by placing students in the role of knowledge creators rather than passive recipients (King, 2014). Collaborative learning strategies also support critical thinking by providing students with opportunities to interact with peers, exchange ideas, and collectively problem-solve, which often leads to a richer understanding of complex issues.

Within this broader context of pedagogical strategies, guided facilitation has emerged as a promising approach for enhancing critical thinking in graduate education. Guided facilitation, as described by Brookfield (2012), involves educators providing structured support to foster student engagement and reflection. In this model, facilitators actively guide students through complex content, using techniques such as questioning, feedback, and reflection to help students process and critically engage with the material. This approach creates a dynamic, interactive learning environment that encourages deeper cognitive engagement and reflective thinking. According to Brookfield (2012), guided facilitation can be particularly effective in helping students develop higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, by offering scaffolding that allows students to explore issues in greater depth. By creating a space where students can engage with content in a meaningful way, guided facilitation facilitates the transition from passive learning to active, reflective participation.

Despite the growing recognition of guided facilitation's potential, there is limited research exploring its specific impact on graduate students' critical thinking development. While some studies have examined the role of facilitation in undergraduate education (Garrison & Akyol, 2013),

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fewer have focused on its implementation at the graduate level. This gap in the literature is significant, as graduate education often requires more advanced levels of critical thinking and cognitive engagement. Graduate students are expected not only to comprehend complex theories but also to critique, challenge, and extend these ideas through original research and scholarly debate. As such, the role of guided facilitation in fostering these advanced cognitive skills is crucial, yet underexplored. In particular, there is a need for studies that investigate how guided facilitation strategies can be effectively integrated into graduate curricula to enhance critical thinking in a systematic way.

One of the challenges in promoting critical thinking in graduate education is the inherent difficulty of measuring and assessing such a complex and multifaceted skill. Many traditional assessment methods, such as exams or written assignments, do not adequately capture the depth of critical thinking that occurs during interactive learning experiences. Guided facilitation offers a potential solution to this challenge by focusing on formative assessment methods that emphasise feedback, discussion, and reflection. This process allows students to demonstrate their critical thinking abilities over time, rather than through one-time assessments, making it a more comprehensive approach to developing and evaluating these skills. Moreover, guided facilitation's emphasis on peer interaction can also enhance students' ability to critique their own thinking and approach problems from multiple perspectives.

Furthermore, research on the integration of guided facilitation into graduate programs suggests that it can be particularly beneficial in interdisciplinary contexts. Graduate students are often required to engage with a diverse range of theories and methods, drawing from different academic disciplines. Guided facilitation can support students in navigating these diverse perspectives by providing structured opportunities for them to synthesise and critically assess the various approaches they encounter. This process can lead to more innovative and integrative thinking, as students learn to apply critical thinking strategies across disciplinary boundaries.

In summary, the literature highlights the importance of critical thinking in graduate education and identifies several pedagogical approaches, including guided facilitation, as effective means of fostering this skill. Theoretical frameworks such as those proposed by Paul and Elder (2014) and Bloom (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) underscore the need for higher-order cognitive skills in graduate education. Pedagogical strategies such as active learning, inquiry-based learning, and collaborative learning all contribute to promoting critical thinking, but guided facilitation stands out as a particularly effective method for creating a supportive, reflective, and interactive learning environment. Despite the growing interest in guided facilitation, there remains a need for more research focused on its application in graduate-level education, particularly in terms of its impact on critical thinking development. By addressing this gap, future research can provide valuable insights into how guided facilitation can be systematically integrated into graduate curricula to better prepare students for the intellectual demands of their fields.

Research Philosophy

This study was informed by critical theory, particularly the concept of critical inquiry as developed by Jürgen Habermas. Critical theory focuses on critiquing and transforming societal structures, rather than simply describing them. This makes it an ideal framework for exploring how guided facilitation enhances critical thinking by fostering reflective dialogue and challenging established norms. Habermas's notion of critical inquiry emphasises communicative action, suggesting that meaningful knowledge arises through open, rational discourse in which participants critically engage with and question their assumptions. Within this study, this theoretical

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approach guides the examination of guided facilitation, focusing on how it helps connect theoretical knowledge with real-world applications while stimulating discussions that challenge traditional perspectives.

Critical theory was selected over other epistemological frameworks because it provides a deeper understanding of how guided facilitation can foster critical thinking by encouraging students to critically analyse societal structures and accepted norms. This approach is consistent with contemporary scholarship, as highlighted by Darder (2017) and McLaren (2015), who argue that critical theory plays a vital role in addressing issues of power, inequality, and social justice in educational settings. By incorporating these perspectives, the study enhances its academic credibility and situates itself within the broader conversation on transformative education, particularly regarding how guided facilitation can engage students.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which proved highly effective for exploring intricate phenomena. This method enabled the collection of rich, detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences, offering a deeper comprehension of their motivations and challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). By employing techniques such as personal interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, the study utilised triangulation to strengthen the validity and reliability of its findings (Flick, 2018). The qualitative approach was more appropriate than alternative methodologies in this context, as it adeptly captured the dynamic and context-dependent aspects of educational environments, providing a thorough understanding of the relationship between pedagogy and the development of critical thinking skills (Maxwell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Research Design

The study utilised an exploratory case study approach, which was well-suited for investigating complex and relatively underexplored phenomena within their natural settings (Yin, 2018). This design allowed for an in-depth exploration of how guided facilitation influenced the development of critical thinking skills across different educational environments, providing valuable insights into the context-specific factors that shape learning outcomes (Stake, 1995). By focusing on particular instances where guided facilitation was implemented, the research captured the diverse ways in which critical thinking evolved in various courses or academic departments.

The study incorporated a triangulation strategy, combining interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, to strengthen the validity of the findings by cross-checking data from multiple sources (Flick, 2018). While the exploratory case study design may limit the ability to generalise findings broadly, the inclusion of multiple cases and detailed attention to the specific contexts in which guided facilitation was applied enhanced the depth of understanding and contributed to the refinement of educational theories related to critical thinking development through guided facilitation (Maxwell, 2013).

Sample Population

The study involved a carefully selected sample of 23 participants, comprising ten current graduate students, three lecturers, and ten recent graduates from the 2015 cohort. This diverse group was chosen to capture a wide range of perspectives on the impact of guided facilitation in fostering critical thinking skills. Participants were selected based on their shared experiences with guided facilitation, ensuring their insights were directly aligned with the study's objectives. The sample size was determined through the principle of data saturation, where recruitment continued until no new themes or

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insights emerged, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

This varied participant pool offered both immediate and retrospective viewpoints. Lecturers were included due to their involvement in designing and implementing guided facilitation activities. Current students provided real-time insights into the effects of these methods on their critical thinking, while graduates contributed perspectives on how these facilitated experiences influenced their professional growth. Efforts were made to include participants from various academic disciplines and experiences, adding depth to the findings. The study adhered to ethical standards, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality.

Sampling Technique

A homogeneous sampling strategy was employed, focusing on individuals with direct experience of guided facilitation in their academic journeys. This approach was selected to enable a deeper exploration of how guided facilitation affects critical thinking across different participant groups (Palinkas et al., 2015). By selecting participants with shared experiences, this method facilitated meaningful comparisons between the perspectives of lecturers, current students, and graduates, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

This strategy was preferred over other purposive sampling methods as it allowed for a focused analysis of a specific educational experience, ensuring the relevance and richness of the data. To minimise potential biases, a transparent and systematic recruitment process was implemented, utilising university records to achieve balanced representation across groups. Challenges such as participant availability and logistical barriers were addressed through flexible scheduling and remote interview options, ensuring broad participation. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, ensuring comprehensive and reliable findings (Guest et al., 2020).

Data Collection Methods

The study utilised multiple qualitative data collection methods, including interviews, focus group interviews (FGIs), and document reviews, to gather diverse insights on guided facilitation within the Master of Education in Educational Management program. Semi-structured interviews provided an in-depth and flexible exploration of participants' views, offering detailed accounts of how guided facilitation supports critical thinking development (Creswell & Poth, 2018). FGIs encouraged collaborative discussions among students, revealing both common experiences and differing interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Document reviews added contextual depth by analysing educational materials, ensuring that findings were grounded in actual practices and aligned with the goals of guided facilitation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This triangulated approach enhanced the study's validity by cross-referencing findings from multiple sources, providing a comprehensive understanding of how guided facilitation fosters critical thinking.

Data Collection Instruments

Three primary instruments were used to collect data: a semi-structured interview guide, a focus group interview (FGI) guide, and a document review checklist. The interview guide was carefully designed to address the research objectives, featuring open-ended questions that encouraged participants to share natural, conversational responses while focusing on key aspects of guided facilitation, such as its effects on critical thinking and learning outcomes (Bryman, 2022; Hancock et al., 2009). The FGI guide aimed to elicit diverse perspectives by encouraging interactive discussions around relevant themes (Morgan, 2023). The document checklist provided a systematic framework for reviewing academic materials, using criteria like relevance and credibility to ensure consistent and reliable evaluation (Bowen, 2020; Creswell, 2012). Together, these instruments

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enabled a detailed exploration of guided facilitation and its role in fostering critical thinking among students.

Quality Control

The study implemented rigorous quality control measures to ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of its findings, guided by the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Credibility was achieved through triangulation of data sources, member checking, and thorough verification processes to ensure that the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives (Fetters, 2020). Transferability was supported by providing rich contextual details, enabling others to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts (Sharma et al., 2021). Dependability was ensured by documenting each research step in detail, enhancing transparency and allowing for replication (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Confirmability was maintained by carefully recording all research decisions and basing conclusions solely on the data to avoid researcher bias (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). These measures were vital in maintaining the integrity of the study and ensuring the validity of the findings.

Data Analysis

The study employed inductive thematic analysis to examine the qualitative data, enabling themes to emerge organically from participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). The process involved open coding, creating codes, and identifying themes that accurately represented participants' experiences with guided facilitation. Challenges such as managing subjectivity in interpretation and the time-intensive nature of the analysis were mitigated by implementing systematic coding practices and holding regular team discussions to maintain consistency and reduce bias (Thorne et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This inductive approach allowed for a thorough exploration of participants' experiences, yielding insights into the role of guided facilitation in fostering critical thinking. The findings also contributed to the development of new theoretical perspectives, enriching the discourse on effective teaching practices in higher education.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were a core component of the study's design and implementation, ensuring participant rights were protected and the research process remained credible. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the study's objectives and procedures and given opportunities to ask questions (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019; Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). Confidentiality was rigorously maintained through anonymisation and secure data storage following established protocols (Resnik, 2020; O'Leary, 2017). Interviews were conducted in private, secure settings, and remote interviews were conducted using encrypted platforms to ensure participant privacy (Shamoo & Resnik, 2015).

The study also prioritised gender equity, ensuring a diverse and representative sample to capture a wide range of perspectives (Harding, 1991; Buchbinder & Nayar, 2016). Flexible scheduling and multiple participation methods were employed to accommodate individuals in remote or underserved areas (Cook et al., 2000; Dillman et al., 2014). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and clear agreements regarding data ownership and usage were established (Wagner, 2010). These ethical safeguards were critical in protecting participants and ensuring the study's credibility.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study sought to explore the role of guided facilitation in enhancing critical thinking skills among graduate students at Gulu University. The findings, derived from interviews with a diverse group of participants, recent graduates (coded G1 to G10), current graduate students (coded FG1), and lecturers (coded L1, L2, and L3), provide an in-

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depth understanding of how guided facilitation contributes to the development of critical thinking in academic settings. These findings are categorised into five main areas: Perception of Guided Facilitation, Nature of Guided Facilitation, Benefits of Guided Facilitation, Impact of Guided Facilitation on Critical Thinking, and Actual Critical Thinking Skills Promoted in Graduate Students.

Perception of Guided Facilitation

The perception of guided facilitation was overwhelmingly positive, with both students and lecturers recognising its value in enhancing the learning experience and fostering critical thinking skills. Participants highlighted the shift from traditional teaching approaches to a more student-centred model, where students actively engage in the learning process, with the facilitator guiding rather than dictating the learning outcomes.

Lecturer (L1) emphasised the transformative nature of guided facilitation:

"Guided facilitation reshapes the role of the lecturer from a content deliverer to a guide and mentor. The emphasis is on student engagement, allowing them to lead discussions and reflect critically on the material. This, in turn, stimulates critical thinking as students start to take ownership of their learning." (L1, personal communication, August 15, 2024).

A graduate student (G3) shared their experience of the shift in learning dynamics:

"With guided facilitation, I no longer just memorise content. Instead, I engage in discussions, critique ideas, and formulate my own opinions based on evidence. It's a learning approach that encourages deep thinking and reflection, rather than just surface-level understanding." (G3, personal communication, August 18, 2024).

This shift in perception demonstrates a growing recognition of guided facilitation as a vital tool for promoting critical thinking by encouraging students to become more active and independent learners.

Nature of Guided Facilitation

The nature of guided facilitation was described by both students and lecturers as flexible, dynamic, and interactive, creating a space for collaborative learning and critical engagement. Guided facilitation often involves strategies such as case studies, group discussions, and problem-solving exercises, which require students to apply theoretical concepts to real-world scenarios.

Lecturer (L2) elaborated on the pedagogical strategies used:

"Guided facilitation is not about following a strict syllabus or lecture-based teaching. It involves designing activities like debates, case studies, and group work where students can test their ideas, learn from others, and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter. This approach nurtures critical thinking by encouraging students to question, analyse, and reframe concepts." (L2, personal communication, August 20, 2024).

Graduate student (FG1) commented on the structure of guided facilitation:

"The sessions are structured around discussions and activities. We might start by reading a case study, then analyse it in groups, and finally present our findings. This allows for deeper exploration of the subject matter and helps us connect theory with practice. It's more engaging and less passive than traditional lectures." (FG1, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

These insights underline the interactive and student-driven nature of guided facilitation, where learning is not merely passive absorption but an active process of engagement, discussion, and application of knowledge.

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Benefits of Guided Facilitation

Guided facilitation was perceived as a highly beneficial pedagogical approach, contributing not only to improved academic performance but also to the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and confidence. The key benefits included enhanced engagement, improved understanding of complex concepts, and the development of a more confident, autonomous approach to learning.

Lecturer (L3) discussed how guided facilitation boosts student engagement:

"The greatest benefit of guided facilitation is the increased participation from students who previously remained passive. With this approach, students are more likely to contribute to discussions, share their ideas, and ask thought-provoking questions. This active participation fosters a culture of critical inquiry." (L3, personal communication, August 25, 2024).

Graduate student (G7) reflected on their personal development:

"Before guided facilitation, I was hesitant to speak in class. Now, I feel empowered to share my thoughts, debate ideas, and challenge assumptions. This approach has helped me develop both my academic and interpersonal skills, including my ability to express myself clearly and confidently." (G7, personal communication, August 27, 2024).

The testimonials from both lecturers and students underscore the broad range of benefits that guided facilitation offers, from increasing participation to fostering confidence and independent thinking.

Impact of Guided Facilitation on Critical Thinking

The study highlighted the significant impact of guided facilitation on students' critical thinking abilities. Students reported that they were encouraged to not just absorb information but to critically evaluate, question, and analyse the material. Guided facilitation provided a platform for students to explore alternative viewpoints, challenge assumptions, and develop well-reasoned arguments.

Lecturer (L1) observed improvements in student critical thinking:

"Students are now more analytical. They don't just accept what's presented to them; they evaluate and critically engage with the content. In facilitated sessions, I've seen students ask questions that probe deeper into the subject matter and encourage reflection." (L1, personal communication, August 19, 2024).

Graduate student (G5) described the change in their thought process:

"Guided facilitation has made me more sceptical of information. I now question the validity of sources, analyse the strength of arguments, and evaluate the logic behind conclusions. It's transformed how I approach academic work and even daily decision-making." (G5, personal communication, August 21, 2024).

The significant impact on critical thinking skills reflects how guided facilitation encourages students to go beyond rote learning and engage in higher-order cognitive processes like analysis, evaluation, and synthesis.

Actual Critical Thinking Skills Promoted in Graduate Students

Participants identified several specific critical thinking skills that were enhanced through guided facilitation. These included the ability to analyse complex issues, evaluate information critically, synthesise diverse perspectives, reason logically, and think creatively. These skills are crucial for academic success and professional development.

Lecturer (L2) highlighted the synthesis skills developed in students:

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"Guided facilitation encourages students to synthesise information from multiple sources. They are able to draw connections between different ideas, integrate knowledge from various disciplines, and apply it to new, real-world situations. This skill is crucial for problem-solving and innovation." (L2, personal communication, August 24, 2024).

Graduate student (FGI) discussed the improvement in their evaluation skills:

"I now approach every piece of information with a critical eye. I assess the credibility of sources, the logic behind arguments, and the evidence supporting conclusions. This has helped me develop a more rigorous and discerning approach to academic work." (FG3, personal communication, August 26, 2024).

Graduate student (G9) shared how their creative problem-solving skills had been enhanced:

"Guided facilitation pushes me to think creatively. Instead of focusing on one right answer, I now consider multiple solutions to a problem. This approach encourages innovation and has been incredibly useful in both academic and real-world problem-solving." (G9, personal communication, August 28, 2024).

The development of these critical thinking skills—such as analysis, evaluation, synthesis, logical reasoning, and creativity—reflects the effectiveness of guided facilitation in preparing students for complex decision-making and problem-solving in their academic and professional lives.

Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that guided facilitation is an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing critical thinking skills among graduate students at Gulu University. By shifting the focus from passive learning to active, student-driven inquiry, guided facilitation empowers students to engage more deeply with academic content, develop higher-order thinking skills, and collaborate effectively with peers. The approach fosters critical thinking by encouraging students to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information, while also promoting creativity and independent problem-solving. The benefits of guided facilitation, as reflected in the participants' experiences, suggest that it is a powerful tool for nurturing critical thinking and preparing students for academic success and future professional challenges.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study explored the role of guided facilitation in enhancing critical thinking skills among graduate students at Gulu University. The findings highlighted significant improvements in students' engagement, critical thinking abilities, and overall academic performance. The discussions below examine the key themes that emerged from the study, including the perception, nature, and benefits of guided facilitation, its impact on critical thinking, and the specific critical thinking skills promoted through the approach. These findings contribute to our understanding of how intentional, student-centred pedagogies can support the development of critical thinking in higher education.

Perception of Guided Facilitation

The study found that both lecturers and students held a positive perception of guided facilitation, viewing it as a powerful pedagogical tool for fostering critical thinking. Participants noted that guided facilitation transformed the traditional role of the lecturer from a content deliverer to a guide and mentor. This shift aligns with existing literature suggesting that student-centred approaches, such as guided facilitation, promote more active learning and engagement compared to traditional teacher-centred methods (Canning, 2019; Freeman et al., 2014).

Lecturers emphasised the importance of creating a classroom environment that encourages active student participation, which is consistent with findings by Bonwell and Eison (1991), who argue that active learning strategies, including guided

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facilitation, stimulate higher-order thinking. Moreover, students reported feeling more empowered and involved in their learning process, which is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory. According to Vygotsky, learning is enhanced when students are given opportunities to engage in collaborative activities that require active problem-solving and critical analysis.

Lecturer (L1) mentioned that guided facilitation "turns the traditional teacher-centred classroom into a more dynamic, student-centred space." This resonates with research indicating that student-centred learning environments foster deeper engagement and critical inquiry (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

Nature of Guided Facilitation

The findings revealed that the nature of guided facilitation is highly interactive, flexible, and adaptable to various academic contexts. Participants emphasised the use of case studies, peer discussions, group work, and problem-solving exercises as key strategies within guided facilitation. These methods align with active learning principles, which have been shown to significantly enhance critical thinking by promoting analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information (Prince, 2004; Michael, 2006).

The interactive nature of guided facilitation encourages students to question assumptions, discuss ideas with peers, and apply knowledge to real-world scenarios, all of which are central to developing critical thinking skills (Paul & Elder, 2006). By moving away from traditional lecture formats, guided facilitation encourages a more holistic and reflective approach to learning, where students actively engage with and critique the content rather than passively receive it (Doyle, 2011).

Graduate student (FG1) described guided facilitation as "more engaging and less passive than traditional lectures," which supports the argument that interactive, student-centred approaches increase both engagement and critical thought (Freeman et al., 2014).

Benefits of Guided Facilitation

The study found that guided facilitation has several benefits, including enhanced student engagement, improved understanding of complex concepts, and greater confidence in critical analysis. These benefits reflect the broad impact of active learning on student outcomes. According to a meta-analysis by Freeman et al. (2014), active learning methods like guided facilitation significantly improve student performance, engagement, and retention compared to traditional lecture-based teaching.

Participants in this study also noted the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and confidence. These benefits align with the findings of studies that show the positive effects of collaborative learning on students' interpersonal skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Furthermore, the active participation fostered by guided facilitation contributes to a deeper understanding of content, which is crucial for developing critical thinking. As Lecturer (L3) stated, guided facilitation "increases student participation," which is a key factor in enhancing learning outcomes and critical inquiry (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

Graduate student (G7) reflected, "Now, I feel empowered to share my thoughts, debate ideas, and challenge assumptions." This points to the increased self-confidence and critical engagement fostered by guided facilitation, which is consistent with research by Topping (2005), who found that peer discussion and group work enhance both critical thinking and self-esteem in students.

Impact of Guided Facilitation on Critical Thinking

The study's findings underscore the positive impact of guided facilitation on critical thinking, particularly in terms of analytical skills, evaluation,

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and problem-solving. Students reported that the approach helped them critically evaluate information, question assumptions, and engage in deeper analysis of academic material. This is consistent with critical thinking models that emphasise the importance of evaluating arguments, considering multiple perspectives, and applying knowledge to new contexts (Ennis, 2011; Facione, 2015).

Lecturers observed that students were more likely to question the validity of arguments and explore the implications of different viewpoints, which aligns with the work of Paul and Elder (2006), who suggest that critical thinking involves the ability to evaluate evidence, detect fallacies, and form well-reasoned conclusions. Lecturer (L1) noted that guided facilitation had "helped students become more analytical" by encouraging them to critically engage with content, rather than merely accepting it. This approach fosters metacognitive awareness, enabling students to monitor and assess their own thinking processes (Schraw & Dennison, 1994).

Graduate student (G5) expressed, "I now question the validity of sources, analyse the strength of arguments, and evaluate the logic behind conclusions." This mirrors the components of critical thinking outlined by Facione (2015), emphasising analysis, evaluation, and reasoning.

Actual Critical Thinking Skills Promoted in Graduate Students

One of the most significant outcomes of guided facilitation, as noted in the study, is the development of specific critical thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, logical reasoning, and creativity. These skills are essential not only for academic success but also for professional and personal problem-solving. The promotion of these skills through guided facilitation reflects the findings of several studies that highlight the importance of fostering a comprehensive set of critical thinking competencies in higher education (Paul & Elder, 2006; Facione, 2015).

The study revealed that students were better able to synthesise information from diverse sources, evaluate the credibility of arguments, and think logically to solve complex problems. These skills are key to higher-level thinking, as they allow students to approach problems from multiple perspectives and formulate innovative solutions (Ennis, 2011). For instance, Lecturer (L2) noted that guided facilitation "encourages students to synthesise information from multiple sources," which is a core component of critical thinking. Similarly, a Graduate student (G9) described how guided facilitation encouraged them to think creatively, exploring multiple solutions to problems rather than settling on a single answer.

The promotion of these skills through guided facilitation supports the findings of Facione (2015), who argued that critical thinking skills such as evaluation, synthesis, and creativity are crucial for developing well-rounded, independent thinkers capable of solving complex problems in any context.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

The study concluded that guided facilitation is a highly effective pedagogical approach for enhancing critical thinking skills among graduate students at Gulu University. The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that guided facilitation not only promotes active learning but also plays a crucial role in developing higher-order thinking skills in students. The positive perceptions of both students and lecturers toward guided facilitation, coupled with its interactive nature, underscore its potential in fostering a more dynamic and reflective learning environment. The approach encourages students to actively engage with content, question assumptions, and critically analyse information, leading to the development of essential cognitive skills such as evaluation, synthesis, and problem-solving.

By moving beyond traditional, passive learning methods and emphasising active, reflective

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engagement, guided facilitation empowers students to take ownership of their learning process. This approach fosters independence and critical inquiry, enabling students to apply their knowledge in diverse academic and professional contexts. The findings align with existing research that highlights the effectiveness of active learning and student-centred pedagogies in enhancing critical thinking (Freeman et al., 2014; Facione, 2015). In line with the study's results, it is clear that guided facilitation offers a promising strategy for cultivating independent, analytical thinkers who are well-equipped to tackle complex problems both within academia and in their future careers.

Guided facilitation, with its focus on structured reflection, peer interaction, and instructor support, provides a robust framework for promoting deeper cognitive engagement, fostering academic success, and enhancing critical thinking skills in graduate education. Therefore, it can be considered a vital pedagogical tool for the future of higher education, especially in disciplines where critical thinking is paramount.

Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of research on the use of facilitative teaching techniques in graduate education. It offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of guided facilitation in fostering critical thinking and provides evidence of its positive impact on student learning outcomes. By emphasising the importance of interaction, reflection, and collaborative learning, the study highlights the significant role of guided facilitation in promoting deeper cognitive engagement. Furthermore, it offers practical recommendations for integrating these strategies into graduate curricula, contributing to the development of more effective teaching practices that support the cultivation of critical thinking skills.

Recommendations of the Study

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to further enhance the effectiveness of guided facilitation in graduate education:

Incorporate Guided Facilitation as a Core Component of Graduate Programs: Graduate programs, especially those in fields requiring critical thinking and problem-solving, should integrate guided facilitation into their curricula. This approach will provide students with the opportunity to engage more deeply with content and develop essential critical thinking skills.

Provide Faculty Development Opportunities: To ensure the effective use of guided facilitation techniques, universities should offer professional development opportunities for instructors. These workshops and training sessions would focus on equipping faculty members with the necessary skills to implement guided facilitation effectively in their teaching practices, enhancing the overall learning experience for graduate students.

Encourage the Use of Reflective Practices: Reflective practices should be encouraged as part of the graduate education process. By integrating reflective exercises, students can deepen their engagement with the material, enhancing their cognitive skills and critical thinking abilities. Regular reflection allows students to assess their learning progress, identify areas for improvement, and make connections between theory and practice.

By adopting these recommendations, universities can continue to foster an environment that prioritises the development of critical thinking and empowers students to become independent, analytical thinkers capable of addressing complex challenges in their academic and professional lives.

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