

Research Workshop for Students in the Center of Japanese Studies, University of Indonesia: A Community Service Activity

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Abstract

This article believes that university students should possess a higher level of critical thinking skills after they graduate, which can also be evaluated from their thesis writing project. The capacity to formulate a logical research problem based on empirical observation and academic evaluation is the indicator we are trying to have, thus, assess. This assessment is not the only agenda we are having in this community service activity; we also try to improve and elevate students' capacity of understanding how research works by providing further mentorship consisting of brainstorming and discussion sessions to ignite their critical thinking capacity. Nevertheless, this activity has a guiding question whether university students are able to critically identify and formulate research questions for their thesis writing project. By accepting and archiving their ideas and research proposals, we have found three important findings. First, the students are still struggling to start and set up their research proposals since many of their empirical observations are based on the subjective perception of reality, inspired from self-centered activities like hobbies and subjective preferences. Second, these subjective interpretations manifest into the low awareness of the existing previous literature for their own research, hence, making their research topic to be far from possessing an urgency of writing both empirically and academically. Third, it was also imperative that most of the students are not fully aware of the options of theoretical and conceptual framework they will use as the analytical lenses, left alone its definitions, its applications, and its debates.

Keywords - *Community service, critical thinking, research workshop, university students*

Abstrak

Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa mahasiswa harus memiliki keterampilan berpikir kritis yang lebih tinggi setelah mereka lulus, yang juga dapat dievaluasi dari proyek penulisan skripsi mereka. Kemampuan untuk merumuskan masalah penelitian yang logis berdasarkan observasi empiris dan evaluasi akademis adalah indikator yang kami coba capai dan evaluasi. Penilaian ini bukan satu-satunya agenda dalam kegiatan pengabdian masyarakat ini; kami juga berusaha untuk meningkatkan kapasitas mahasiswa dalam memahami bagaimana penelitian bekerja dengan menyediakan bimbingan lanjutan yang mencakup sesi brainstorming dan diskusi untuk mengasah kemampuan berpikir kritis mereka. Namun, kegiatan ini memiliki pertanyaan penuntun, yaitu apakah mahasiswa mampu secara kritis mengidentifikasi dan merumuskan pertanyaan penelitian untuk proyek penulisan skripsi mereka. Dengan menerima dan mengarsipkan ide-ide serta proposal penelitian mereka, kami menemukan tiga temuan penting. Pertama, mahasiswa masih kesulitan memulai dan merancang proposal penelitian mereka karena banyak observasi empiris mereka didasarkan pada persepsi subjektif tentang realitas, terinspirasi dari aktivitas yang berpusat pada diri sendiri seperti hobi dan preferensi subjektif. Kedua, interpretasi subjektif ini berujung pada rendahnya kesadaran akan literatur yang ada sebelumnya untuk penelitian mereka, sehingga topik penelitian mereka jauh dari memiliki urgensi penulisan baik secara empiris maupun akademis. Ketiga, sebagian besar mahasiswa juga tidak sepenuhnya sadar akan pilihan kerangka teoritis dan konseptual yang akan mereka gunakan sebagai lensa analisis, apalagi definisi, aplikasi, dan perdebatan terkait.

Kata kunci - *Mahasiswa, Pelatihan Penulisan Akademik, Pemikiran Kritis, Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat*

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INTRODUCTION

One if not the most lucrative benefit to be enrolled as a student in a university is to hone critical thinking capacity. After the invention of ChatGPT, a language-based AI model, to be able to think independently and conceptualize something are some priceless skills to have and possess (Griffiths, 2023). There is no general definition to understand what is critical thinking as a skill, however, Dr. Norman Herr helped us by narrowing it down into certain applied skills that are frequently knowledgeable to identify: (1) Able to synthesizing arguments; (2) having the capacity to deliver clear message; (3) able to identify thwarted, irrelevant facts and illogical arguments; (4) able to inductively or deductively evaluate a conceptual framework; and (5) able to evaluate by the available evidences. (Dominello, 2024). These critical thinking skills are not set, but trained and improved during our study in a university, thus can be indicated by many sets of methods, let it be from a quiz, assignments, tests, etc. These activities are done to evaluate the understanding from the students, thus to evaluate whether they have applied their critical thinking skills, or not.

Critical thinking is not set to a singular definition. According to many different sources, critical thinking can also emphasize (1) the process of receiving information, thus, followed by questioning assumptions and judgments (*The Importance of Critical Thinking*, 2016), (2) the ability to conjure questions, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and establish a decision (*What Is Critical Thinking?- Student Academic Success*, n.d.), (3) the capacity to call a judgement based on the application of rational thinking (Scriven & Paul, n.d.); and (4) the awareness of self-reflective thought on one's action or behavior (Hitchcock, 2018). Both students and professionals who fill their work by engaging with a lot of new materials, critical thinking may apply on seeking the credibility of its sources, its main arguments, and identifying subjective biases that can disrupt an objective standpoint. These applications of critical thinking are also believed to lead people into a more meaningful life since the critically evaluate one self, both actions and thoughts, are the routines that they have manifested into daily habits (Chagas, 2020).

To be specific about students and without diminishing any other particular methods to evaluate critical thinking skills of the university student, this article will argue that students' thesis, or also known as *Tugas Akhir* (TA), can also be used as a method to evaluate their applied critical thinking capabilities. Certain points argued by Dr. Norman Herr in the previous paragraph, '*having the capacity to deliver a clear message*' for starters, can be evaluated by a thesis writing done by the students. The students will also be asked to apply their understanding of any theoretical and conceptual framework they have learned from the program they have enrolled, thus, will be instructed to apply those towards the formulated problem of the research. To put it into a perspective, critical thinking skills can be evaluated from students' effort to write their own thesis writing to form a new finding and novelty.

Apart from the debates whether thesis writing is supposed to be an assignment required to pass and graduate from a university or not, this article will argue that there is an urgency that both a lecturer and a researcher should seek and understand more concerning their student's critical thinking skills if it is applied to thesis writing. To help facilitate and see more out of this urgency, a question that can be formulated as the drive of an activity of community service is to ask **whether university students are able to critically identify and formulate research questions for their thesis writing project**. Consequently, the objective of this community service is to seek students who are still unable to apply their critical thinking into applied skills like thesis writing assignments. This community service is also beneficial not only to help us visualize the university student's critical thinking skills capacity, but to also provide them proper guidance and tutorship for their thesis writing process.

METHODS

First, we would like to name our community service as 'research workshop', and is done inside the Japanese Studies Center, University of Indonesia (PSJ-UI). The subject of the activity is to provide opportunities for the students to have a collective session of brainstorming, debates, and personal,

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close-up discussion with their mentors to work on their critical, and logical thesis writing. These selected mentors are either a graduate or undergraduate of a master degree program from University of Indonesia—one of the best of their classes during their bachelor’s degree—that is now working professionally as a lecturer, professional, or in pursuit of their doctorate degree.

This research workshop is also done by hybrid, which means open to both offline and online interactions, on and off the class discussion between the students and the mentors: indicating that organic interactions between students and their mentors are possible to happen. With a total participants reaching up to 30 university students, we prepared up to 10 mentors to facilitate their need and guidance concerning their applied critical skills on the thesis writing.



Picture 1.

A poster of our community service as an effort to publicize the workshop

Second details are regarding the activity of the community service itself. The workshop is open to the public on its design, however, the applicants are under two variable control unto it: (1) the workshop is limited to only for students enrolled under the study of social and humanities studies; and (2) Japanese Studies as their main general theme. In the technicality, the participants are allowed to participate in two offline sessions, both respectively on 19th and 26th of July 2024.

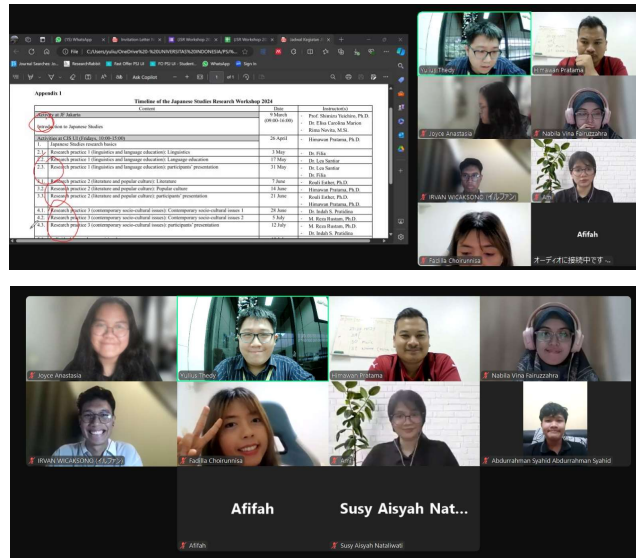
Table 1. Process of Data Gathering

19th July		26th July		2nd August
Brainstorming	Submission of	Brainstorming	Submission of final	Participants presents their thesis writing proposals
Discussing	writing framework	Discussing	thesis writing framework by PPT	
Mentoring		Mentoring		

On the first encounter on 19th of July, the mentors were instructed to initiate conversation and discuss the topics of their paper’s research problem formulation, research questions, and the theoretical framework that they are going to use on their thesis writing. From this activity, the mentors are then instructed to ignite the students’ critical thinking to start a session of collective brainstorming with an objective to improve their thesis writing project.

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Picture 2.

Preparation done by the mentors and staff of the community services.

To facilitate the students even further towards the objective of the activity, between 19th and 26th of July, the mentors and the students were allowed to have their own independent, informal session of discussion outside of the class. This initiative is encouraged since the expectation on the 26th of July both the mentors and the students can start to finalize the work by making powerpoint slides of their thesis writing, thus, submitting it to their mentors to be archived and evaluated further.

Table 2. Activity on Day 1

July 19, 2024	09:30 AM - 10:00 AM	Welcome and Opening Remarks by Workshop Coordinator
	10:00 AM - 12:00 PM	Mentor-Student Breakout Session: Initial Review of Working Papers
	12:00 PM - 13:00 PM	Lunch Break & Networking
	13:00 PM - 14:30 PM	Focused Discussion: Refining Research Questions and Methodology with Mentors
	14:30 PM - 15:45 PM	Group Feedback Session: Peer Review and Open Discussion
	15:45 PM - 16:00 PM	Closing Remarks and Day 1 Summary

Table 3. Activity on Day 2

July 26, 2024	09:30 AM - 10:00 AM	Recap of Day 1 and Introduction to Day 2 Activities
	10:00 AM - 12:00 PM	One-on-One Feedback: In-Depth Review of Research Progress
	12:00 PM - 13:00 PM	Lunch Break & Peer Networking
	13:00 PM - 14:30 PM	Group Session: Overcoming Challenges in Japanese Studies Research
	14:30 PM - 15:45 PM	Final Discussion: Preparing for Publication or Presentation
	15:45 PM - 16:00 PM	Workshop Conclusion and Certificates Distribution

Generally, there are three main activities during the whole of our community activities, however, the data collection process only occurred on 19th and 26th July 2024. Further details regarding the activities can be explained as this: (1) *brainstorming* sessions are trying to encourage every students to establish their own thesis writing topics, thus, emphasizing that there is no right or wrong yet for them to be concerned of; (2) *discussion sessions* are trying to provide feedbacks and opinion from the mentors towards their students concerning their thesis writing topics, putting emphasize whether their topics are legitimate to be used as a research proposal or need more clarity and logic on their writings; and (3) *mentoring sessions* also emphasize that whatever the students are doing, they will be under the guidance of mentorship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this subchapter, there are two discussions that will be put into the spotlight. As a start, we will provide further information of details concerning the chosen topics by the students for their thesis writing topics, and at the same time will also generally describe what are the main students' concerns that emerged from the discussion with their mentors. Then we will continue to identify the findings from this community service, and to summarize the underlying obstacle that university students will most likely encounter during their work on a thesis writing project as an effort to evaluate their critical thinking skills.

First, the selected topics that have previously been submitted by the students before the workshop started are collected and archived by the staff. This is principal since we would like to also assess their improvement of understanding before and after the activity has finished. The table below will provide further details about the topic that students have proposed as their thesis writing:

Table 4. Archived Participants' Research Proposal: Titles & Themes

Title of the thesis writing proposal	Japanese Social Studies	Cultural Studies	Japanese History Studies	Political Studies	Language and/or Linguistic Studies
<i>Hegemony of Heteronormativity in the Manga My Brother's Husband</i>	✓	✓			
<i>Representation of the Bubble Economy Era in the Game Yakuza 0</i>		✓	✓		
<i>Representation of Remilitarization in the Film</i>		✓	✓	✓	

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Godzilla Minus One

<i>Analysis of 21st Century Japan's Fuzoku Perspective Through the Representation of Sexual Culture History in the Series Shogun</i>	✓	✓	✓		
<i>Linguistic Analysis of "Ijimekotoba" in the Anime Black Clover Episode 1 by Yuuki Tabata</i>	✓	✓			✓
<i>Representation of "Ikumen" in the Film Ultraman Rising</i>	✓	✓			
<i>Forms of Social Deixis in the Series Japan Sinks: People of Hope</i>	✓	✓			
<i>Depiction of Ryukyu in Kimono and Obi Motifs by Touma Chinen</i>		✓	✓		
<i>Representation of Family Dysfunction in the Anime Nakitai Watashi wa Neko wo Kaburu</i>	✓	✓			
<i>Bullying and Sexual Identity as Social Issues in Japanese Society in the Film Kaibutsu</i>	✓	✓			
<i>Representation of Transgender Identity in the Manga Kocchi Muite! Miiko by Eriko Ono</i>	✓	✓		✓	
<i>The Use of "Fukushi Totemo, Hontouni, and Hijouni" in Affirmative Sentences in Japanese</i>		✓			✓
<i>Analysis of the Associative Meaning in the Word Futaba in the Lyrics of the Song Futaba by Aimyon</i>		✓			✓
<i>Comparison of the Narratives of Child and Adult Survivors of the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb</i>			✓	✓	✓
<i>The Position of Men and Women in Japan after World War II in the Drama Blackboard: Jidai to Tatakatta Kyushitachi Episode 1</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<i>The Use of the Polysemous Verb Awawaseru in Japanese Sentences</i>					✓
<i>Representation of Gender Roles in the Family in the Manga Gomashio to Purin</i>		✓		✓	
<i>Analysis of the Basic Kanji Book Vol. 1 as Teaching Material Development for Kanji Courses</i>	✓	✓			✓
<i>The Role of Communities in Changing Japanese Social Behavior in Supporting Palestine</i>	✓			✓	
<i>Metaphors in Skin Care Advertisements: A Semantic Study and Its Implications</i>					✓
<i>Comparative Study of the Perceptions of Toge Sankichi and Sadako Kurihara in War-Related Poetry</i>			✓	✓	✓
<i>Analysis of the Suicide Attempt Motif of the Main Character in the Novel Colorful in a Psychoanalytic Study of Sigmund Freud</i>	✓			✓	

<i>Representation of the Virtual World as an Escape in the Anime My Love Story with Yamada-kun at Lv. 999</i>	✓	✓	
<i>Translation Ideology of Cultural Terms in the Novel Twenty-Four Eyes by Sakae Tsuboi Translated by Tanti Lesmana from Japanese to Indonesian</i>	✓	✓	✓

Not necessarily requiring in-depth observation, the table 3 above shows that participating students are well aware of formulating good, academically thesis writing titles. The themes and topics suggested by the title are also showing they are well aware of the limitations previously agreed upon, adhering to the study of social and humanities and specifically on Japanese studies. These, however, are mere early assumptions that have zero implication towards the students' capacity on their applied critical thinking. Consequently, mentors were given some specific questions to further investigate their students' 'logical reasoning' concerning the titles they are working with. The questions are: (1) what are the formulations of the research problem of this research; (2) what are the existing and previous literature concerning the chosen topics; and (3) what are the theoretical and/or conceptual frameworks that will be used to further analyze the research. These questions were given on 19th July, during the discussion session between mentors and the students.



Picture 3.

Before and After the discussion session, day one (19th July)

Connecting the dots from the aforementioned questions, there are several findings that can be interpreted from the discussion sessions. First, almost every sampled participant within this research workshop starts their topic and thesis writing proposal from a very subjective, personal standpoint.

Personal standpoint reflects the process of them formulating the research objective, which is generated from their very personal lives, namely hobbies, routines, and empirical observation. This first finding does not necessarily assume that the method of the students on formulating their research topic is bad, however, it still lacks depth and objective structure. In the pursuit of objectivity, one may argue that we can use the existing literature, hence expanding the horizon of understanding beyond one empirical limitation of experiences. This suggestion leads us to the second question which tries to investigate more on the existing literature they have collected, read, and used.

Surprisingly, the majority of the sampled students are not necessarily aware that existing literature plays a significant role in their research. This explains the concerning situation where most titles have no urgency to be chosen as a research topic, left alone the proposed novelties both for the public nor scientific society. Some students are also not yet well aware on how to identify a research gap or its formulation of problems. These accumulated problems manifest into a single, underlying concern: the inability to logically explain and write their thesis writing proposal. We are well aware that these are the findings that we may encounter during the first day of our research workshop. To tackle these subjective-based, personally constructed reality of their thesis writing proposals, mentors are instructed to give some specific assignments to their students revolving around these tasks: (1) to find five relevant existing literatures relevant to their thesis writing; (2) to identify the gap between the existing literatures and their proposed thesis writing; and (3) to re-formulate a deeper, more critical problems for a better research question. The students are expected to provide better results to these tasks next week.



Picture 4.

A more personalized discussion, day two (26th July)

On day two (26/7), some of the students are showing difficulties on formulating the expected standard of their thesis writing, therefore, not necessarily handling the assignment very well. From further investigation and questions asked towards the students during discussion to address this

difficulty they are having at that moment, however, shows that their struggles are justified. The explanation on why these difficulties are justified can be classified into two simple answer: (1) they have worked too far for a research that begin with a wrong start, hence, a very long 'u-turn' to redo everything back from a scratch; and (2) they are not used to start writing from a more demanding task, namely identifying gaps by doing empirical observation and doing a literature review from the previous relevant academic research. These hardships are deemed to be important and necessary to experience.



Picture 5.

Some students decided to work separately, alone or with their pair, day two (26th July)



Picture 6.

Mentors and students posing cheerfully after a 'hard session' on day two ends (29/7)

CONCLUSIONS

This research workshop aims to seek whether university students are able to critically identify and formulate research questions for their thesis writing project. From this activity, we have found that the application of critical thinking during the formulation of a thesis writing by the sampled students is not yet the popular approach. This research workshop, nonetheless, was also designed to be beneficial to the entirety of the students to help them apply their critical thinking during their thesis writing process by providing a close, personal guidance and mentorship. This article will also want to imply that students require more patience during the entire early process of research gap identification,

which is very significant to the entirety of their thesis writing effort; since logic comes walking, so the thesis writing comes running.

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