

In Russia a Project is More Than a Project: Critical Thinking for Higher Education¹

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The authors of the RWCT for Higher Education international project set out to involve the university communities in East European and Central Asian countries in the process of educational reform by providing new approaches for active learning and for the development of critical thinking. Two approaches were offered for implementing the project. The first, CTAC (*Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*, Temple, 2002), introduced strategies for developing critical thinking that could be implemented in university courses. The other, CTFUS (*Critical Thinking for University Students*, Meredith & Klooster, 2002) contained a course entitled *Freedom and Responsibility*. Built around the main ideas of the RWCT program, this course highlighted freedom and responsibility as key factors in the development of critical thinking. All in-country teams—irrespective of which of the two approaches they chose—were encouraged to take into account local conditions, the needs of local university communities, and the requirements of the relevant educational authorities.

The original RWCT project was based on the dissemination model, training consecutive generations of teachers, each of which was expected to train the next generation. Such a model is undoubtedly effective if the trainers have sufficient time and material resources to carry out thoughtful and labor-intensive work with participants, including tutoring and the provision of regular feedback over a long period. However, when time or funds are limited, the efficiency of the “train-the-trainers” model is considerably reduced. This weakness soon becomes apparent in the quality of the results, as quick consecutive training sessions, without sufficient time for reflection, may garble the best-intended ideas. Besides, many faculty members believe their own scholarly knowledge to be adequate, and resist any suggestion that their effectiveness as educators could benefit from changing their approach to teaching. Therefore, while they might be willing to engage in theoretical discussions on the topic, they may still be deeply reluctant to apply new ideas to their own practice. Because university culture is oriented toward theory and research, we were afraid even at the very start of the project *RWCT for Higher Education in Russia* that a “train-the-trainers” design might lead merely to a rash of ill-informed interpretive theoretical articles. All the above-mentioned concerns substantially influenced our decision to avoid the network model typically used by the RWCT project.

In designing the Russian higher education project we also considered—and rejected—the traditional reproductive model: a training seminar in which we would simply offer an overall strategy for introducing RWCT, and then suggest that participants implement the strategy in their own universities. Such a model has certain guaranteed effects. At best it provides positive effects that can always be traced back to their source, at least for a short time. At worst, it can't do any harm to the educational process. However our rationale against using the reproductive model was clear:

-The target group of the project was university faculty (i.e. guardians of certain scholarly traditions and members of particular teaching cultures) and they (in particular, teachers of teachers) would likely aspire to adapt, and even to transform, the suggested ideas and methods to fit their own contexts and conditions. They would certainly not be interested in any project that was simply reproductive in nature;

-Final outcomes of reform projects can be unstable and short-lived, limited only to the time of the project or having only a brief post-project impact.

A project in Russia is more than just a project. This fact is confirmed by our experience with RWCT. In most cases it becomes a cause, or an instigating force. On the one hand, project ideas can lead to the development of many other local (and sometimes global) initiatives. On the other hand, a project can be a resource for its participants' self-development and professional growth. In addition, it often proves to be a powerful tool for bringing together and maintaining a community of like-minded professionals, who continue to collaborate even beyond the framework of the project. For all of these reasons, we understood that it was crucial to work out an appropriate project strategy. We knew it would eventually determine the success not only of the project itself but also of many other things around it.

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Project as research: A ‘free flight in preset directions’

We took into account that groups from different cities (Saint Petersburg, Samara, Nizhni Novgorod, and Novosibirsk) were going to participate in the project, and that each of those regions had a very different local educational situation, different administrative support, and different needs. However there was one factor that united all the groups. In higher education one of the key activities is research. A major goal is to equip students to participate in and contribute to a research culture. The value of research lies both in the product (a contribution to a particular professional area), and the process (a general approach to scholarship). Thus, we chose an open research design model. This decision acknowledged that project goals could not be uniform for all regional groups, nor for individual participants—and that they weren’t expected to be. Consequently, after the first workshop, during which regional groups were introduced to the international strategy of the RWCT for Higher Education project, they were each asked to develop their own research theme, and to shape it according to the needs and character of their region.

The regional applications submitted were anonymously reviewed by the national RWCT experts. This peer review process was a productive forum for the exchange of opinions, recommendations, and questions among representatives of different regions. Reviewing applications from other regions helped participants not only to introduce necessary amendments to their own applications, but also to get a more substantial idea of the research undertaken by their colleagues, and to plan connecting points for regional projects. Figure 1 outlines the main research directions chosen by participants. In developing their approaches and strategies, regional groups took into account their knowledge of possible future participants’ potential interests and main strengths.

Figure 1		Description of regional projects taking part in the RWCT for Higher Education Project in Russia	
Saint Petersburg	Samara	Novosibirsk	Nizhni Novgorod (+ Kirov)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research into opportunities for joint implementation in universities of such programs as RWCT for Higher Education, School–University, and Students’ Education Company • Creation of a school–university complex using the project resources • Encouraging the collaboration of schools involved in the RWCT program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of participants’ research in the Samara regional project • Competence-guided approach to education • Research into the influence of the project on the development of students’ social competencies (school practice, functioning of student government organizations) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research into opportunities for coordinated dissemination of RWCT in Siberian universities (Kemerovo, Novosibirsk, Barnaul, Rubtsovsk) • Research into processing of scholarly (humanitarian) information and into specific aspects of scholarly texts • Research into ways to attract administrative resources for project implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-study of the regional group as a potential model for a unified university community organized for joint project work • Main research focus: the influence of joint group work on overall project success (the character of the relationship as a model for other groups, e.g., university, inter-regional, creative)

Figure 2 **Creating a Research Portfolio**

1. The purpose of your research portfolio is to support the development and analysis of a course based on the RWCT approach. Think up a title for the section/s devoted to this task.
2. Please choose about 8 or 10 of the suggested headings (see below), or formulate some on your own.
3. Be prepared to present the results of your work and share the reasons for your choices.
4. Overall assignment for the workshop (and work in the interim period): Organize your portfolio using the chosen headings. Supplement the information provided in the workshop with articles from periodicals, seminar plans, and consultation with experts and your peers.
5. Choose the sections you would like to fill out by the end of our course. You may create additional headings.

Suggested Headings

- **I am Ready to Share!** Under this heading you can place materials (lesson plans, methodology recommendations, texts of your talks and lectures) that reflect your own activities in the periods between seminars. Other possible headings: **Creative Activities**, **The Stages of Studying CT**, etc.
- **Methods and Strategies.** Here you will put materials connected to the methods and strategies offered to you at the seminar, or other related materials that you find independently.
- **Theory.** Here you place materials devoted to theoretical aspects of the topics of study.
- **Glossary.** Terms pertaining to the material being studied.
- **Reflections on Actual Lessons and Lesson Plans.** Here you may place schemes for lesson analysis (which will be introduced at our seminar, through demonstrations or as hand-outs).
- **Experiences of Colleagues from Other Countries.** During this seminar you will learn about the RWCT experience in other countries. You may place related materials of value to you (notes, questions, impressions, addresses) under this heading.
- **Unanswered Questions.** If you have questions that remain unanswered, put them in this section.
- **Written Work.** Here you place written work undertaken during the seminar.

Other possible sections: **Discoveries**, **Criticism**, **What is Critical Thinking**, **Tips for Supporting Beginning Researchers**, **Insights from the Last Seminar**, **Unsent Letters**, **Colleagues' Creative Work**.

First workshops and first reflections

The RWCT for Higher Education in Russia project became a serious challenge for the Russian RWCT trainers. Dealing with university faculty requires the highest qualifications, and the ability to work flexibly with a rather critically minded audience. Besides, project goals and objectives were ambitious and bold.

In fact, the trainers in this project had to become researchers themselves, and use various tools to structure and enable their own reflection on the process, and on the results of their work. Figure 2 shows one example of such a tool, developed by I. Zagashv and used by the St. Petersburg regional group.

The ongoing provision of feedback, both at the seminar sessions and through individual consultations, was crucial to the success and impact of the course. Such feedback allowed participants to conduct ongoing revisions of their plans in response to comments, questions, suggestions, and stated expectations (quite often resulting in significant changes to their designs for the course), and allowed them to work productively between the sessions. In Figure 3 shows examples of comments written by participants at the end of the first seminar in Nizhni Novgorod, when they were asked to fill out a self-evaluation form and reflect on their personal achievements, problems, and wishes.

Conference as a joint inquiry

Towards the end of the initial implementation of the RWCT for Higher Education project in Russia, the participants were full of new ideas, which in many cases they were already applying— in the new curricula and courses they had designed for their students, in the seminars they held for their colleagues, and in the articles they had written for university publications. Course participants had moved beyond learning the RWCT basics and were incorporating the questions raised by this approach into a program of teacher-research; and, more importantly, they were modifying their daily practice.

Certainly it would be an exaggeration to say that everything turned out well, or that everyone succeeded in fulfilling the goals of the project. Some participants in the first seminars were unable or unwilling to go along this road as far as others, and remained reluctant to depart from their habitual practices. And unfortunately, not all of our colleagues received support from their department

administrators, and thus some of them were compelled to return to their old routines. Despite all the objective and subjective difficulties, everyone who adopted a research stance invested their souls in the project and benefited from their participation in it.

We decided that the final conference should have an international focus and include outreach. It was a unique opportunity to get together with colleagues from other countries, where the project had a different logic and character. We required a special organizational format for this conference, one where people who did not know each other would have enough time to exchange opinions, discuss problems, and jointly find solutions.

It became clear to us that not only the project, but also the final conference itself, could be held as an open joint inquiry. But to organize such a format successfully it would be necessary to meet some important conditions:

- All participants should be given a chance to express themselves, to tell others about their experience, and to exchange opinions.
- At the beginning of the conference, participants should have an opportunity to share and discuss hot topics. This would then focus the important issues, and ideally would help frame the way participants presented their sessions and listened to sessions presented by others. Evidence and insights from the sessions would help participants either confirm or refute the hypotheses they had initially formulated for resolving the problems identified.

Figure 3 Achievements—Problems—Wishes		
Achievements	Problems	Wishes
<i>It is nice that while working in the Jigsaw mode each student is active and performs several roles at once. Regrouping is a very practical idea, too. Adds lots of dynamics. All students are involved. And they get thorough, lasting knowledge. Great work!</i>	<i>I am concerned about lack of time and existing regulations. I'd rather not break a unit into two lessons, as a lot will inevitably get lost. However, it may be hard to fit all this into one lesson or even into two successive lessons. All this is effective, but it demands all your intellectual and emotional resources—it must be very tiring.</i>	<i>It would be desirable to get the unpacking (which was done for us orally) in written form too. For example, to post the major points on the blackboard, though, naturally, there is little time for this.</i>
<i>I learnt of new methods and strategies for working with students, and I now have lots of new ideas on how to make my lessons more lively and interesting.</i>	<i>How will I adapt these methods and strategies to the actual learning space in a particular university? Can this unusual form of work build trust with students?</i>	<i>I'd like to learn more about how individual teachers have applied the suggested approach in different universities.</i>
<i>I now understand the essence of collaborative learning and its stages. The enhanced lecture turned out to be independent study of a certain problem.</i>	<i>I see a problem with the application of such methods in regards to the subject I teach.</i>	<i>I am at a loss as to what to say, as all this is very new for me.</i>
<i>I learnt about the existence of this approach and ways of working in this mode. Now I am looking at the subjects I teach with new eyes, and I will definitely find a place for using the new approach in my practice.</i>	<i>There is a discrepancy between basic textbooks and texts traditionally used by students and the requirements of the RWCT approach to texts. Also there is too little information about this approach.</i>	<i>I wish you success and stamina!</i>

- Small mobile research groups would need to be formed. However, participants should still be free to choose their individual path at the conference, and attend any sessions of interest to them.
- Every day some time should be allotted for individual and group reflection, in both oral and written forms.
- Research should be open and transparent. Presentations of jointly conducted research should be the highlight of the conference; and whenever possible, these presentations should become a starting point for new research, encouraging collaboration of people from different cities and countries, collaboration without borders or biases.

The conference plan offered below may be useful for those who wish to hold a similar event and make it memorable for both participants and organizers.

Preparatory stage of the conference

In the planning stage, key decisions were made: the general direction (conference research); the central theme of this research (Critical thinking as a tool for developing an open university community); format and mechanisms for facilitating interactions and exchange during the conference; titles for the five themed sections (we called them tracks) that were to be announced in advance; themes for research groups that were to be formed on the spot (and thus the themes were kept secret until then); and formats for presentation of results.

Conference tracks

- Managing innovation in higher education through the introduction of new educational approaches
- The role of critical thinking in developing competent specialists in any field
- University research: new perspectives
- The development of critical thinking in creating a university community
- The monitoring and analysis of the results of innovative activities to inform strategies for developing critical thinking in undergraduate and postgraduate students and young faculty members in universities

Formats for research presentations

- Themed conference sessions, with interactive talks up to 15 minutes (daily, noon–7 p.m.)
- Mini-seminars, up to 30 minutes (optional, in the evening)
- Round table discussion, up to 45 minutes (optional, in the evening)
- Poster presentations, during a dedicated time

Work at the conference

In September 2005, about 100 conference participants came to Moscow from all parts of Russia and from 14 other countries. They arrived with their prepared presentations and their preliminary choices as to what to attend marked in the conference schedules. At this point, all this looked like any other typical conference. However, on the very first day— at the registration desk, in fact—each participant was asked to choose a color... and this color identified the participant as a member of one of eight research groups, each consisting of 10 to 12 people.

Work of the research groups

It was expected that the work of these research groups, which was to last only three days, would provide participants with a model for scholarly collaborative activity. Each group was expected to develop a product, a written or graphic account of their collective reflection about their research project. This work was guided by facilitators, who encouraged the groups to compile all their results in group portfolios.

During Stage 1, participants were given 10–15 minutes to get acquainted, with the help of warm-ups and other strategies. In Stage 2, research project goals and problems were formulated and refined by means of various analytical strategies such as Venn Diagrams, Fishbone, etc. During Stage 3 each participant revised his or her own preliminary schedule of conference sessions with the goal of collecting relevant material for the group's research portfolio. Members of each research group were expected to attend different sessions, to get the best possible coverage of conference topics. Possible routes were discussed in pairs or groups, and were planned using graphic organizers. During Stage 3, participants also agreed upon categories for their group portfolio, identified materials to be included in the portfolio, and discussed formats for presenting their information (graphic organizers, key words, essays, *discussion web* or *joint inquiry* charts).

Participants in our conference identified the following key problems for research, and designed their conference routes accordingly:

- Effective mechanisms for RWCT project dissemination

- Using RWCT to achieve the goals of the Bologna Declaration²
- Opportunities for personal and professional growth offered by RWCT
- RWCT's potential role in innovation in higher education;
- Effects (positive and negative) of introducing RWCT principles into universities
- Interrelations among RWCT and other innovations in higher education
- Cultural and philosophical considerations involved in reforming education (issues of globalization, and reforming in view of national, cultural, and philosophic traditions in the multipolar world);
- Common patterns and differences in the dissemination of RWCT among target groups in various educational establishments.

Conference procedures

The conference was organized into five themed tracks. Sessions for each of the different tracks were held concurrently. Participants were free to choose the section they attended (although of course members of each research group made sure that they visited different sections, to maximize their coverage of the topics). The sessions in each track were coordinated by a facilitator chosen from among conference participants. Responsibilities of the facilitators included:

- Opening and setting up the room for the session
- Making sure that all required equipment and materials were in the session room
- Beginning and closing the session at the scheduled time
- Introducing the speaker to the audience
- Chairing a discussion following the speaker's presentation (If the audience did not have enough time to ask all their questions, the facilitator collected them and passed them over to the speaker to respond to at other times)
- Ending the discussion and summing up the session
- Providing a written report on the session to the conference organizers.

Poster presentations

All the regional teams in the Russian RWCT for Higher Education project offered poster presentations at the conference. (This opportunity was also given to individuals who had submitted applications in advance.) The regional teams received the following recommendations for their posters:

- The theme and the contents of the presentation should correspond to the goals of the regional research project (for example, the theme of the Nizhni Novgorod group research—RWCT as a potential model for a unified university community—should be reflected in their presentation);
- The stages of the research project should be displayed, and all materials should meet the criteria for research effectiveness established by the regional group;
- The presentation should include results of monitoring of the project's efficiency/productivity;
- The presentation should include examples of students' work and photos showing actual work with university audiences;
- The presentation should be interactive and designed to meet the needs and expectations of the audience;
- The presentation can be arranged into several thematic areas.

The poster presentations proved to be very successful. Attendees moved from stand to stand according to their interests, as presenters spoke about their activities and responded to questions. A Visitors' Book was provided for comments and reactions.

The conference comes to a close

² The Bologna Process aims to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010, in which students can choose from a wide range of high quality courses and benefit from reciprocal recognition and transfer of academic credit. The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible, comparable, competitive, and attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents.

Throughout the conference, even as all the other activities were going on, the research groups were working diligently. All their preliminary work was carried out using strategies practiced by the RWCT teachers, such as RAFT, Cubing, K-W-L, Thinking at Right Angles, Thick and Thin Questions, Bloom's Daisy, etc. By the end of the conference they were ready to sum up the results of their work. First, each member of a research group gave a brief presentation to the group, and then they all worked together to prepare a joint publication, using a *written jigsaw* strategy (See Figure 4). The most interesting products presented by our conference research groups are offered in the Appendix. All texts are published in the conference collection (Zair-Bek, 2007).

Figure 4 Written Jigsaw (by S. Zair-Bek)

1. Brainstorm three or four possible topics for publication
2. Subdivide into creative groups and produce texts in Written Round Table mode (Kagan, 1990).
3. Regroup into temporary working groups to discuss results and to produce a semifinal text.
4. Return to creative groups to revise the texts and develop the final product.

Sprouts from a seed...

The RWCT for Higher Education project in Russia is over. Now we can examine and summarize the outcomes, and evaluate them in light of the initial plans. It would certainly be a mistake to believe that the project changed the system of higher education in Russia, which has developed over the course of centuries. However, what really counts for us is that there now are people who have internalized the project ideas and incorporated them into their daily practice. We see sprouts all around. In Saint Petersburg and Nizhni Novgorod a new project has been started: Support of Education Reform through New Educational Standards, Programs, and Curricula. In Novosibirsk the RWCT trainers are now working with the fourth generation of faculty who will use the RWCT approach in their practice. RWCT trainers from Saint Petersburg have created a special critical thinking course for the Intel business corporation, and their colleagues from Nizhni Novgorod have developed courses for business managers of various levels. A project in Russia is always more than just a project. It is a source of new ideas and new projects, a stimulus for creativity and for uniting like-minded professionals. Therefore, the project has not really ended. It has sown the seeds of doubts and questions, new achievements and successes, seeds that have sprouted and are already yielding new crops.

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RESEARCH GROUP 1

Goal: To ensure the “survival” of RWCT; to find ways to develop and sustain RWCT methods in a traditional education system.

The basic focuses of research:

- RWCT values

Credo: “Teach the model by modeling teaching”

The program values: active learning, academic honesty, flexibility, competence, workshops, motivation, evaluation, reflection, connection with life, students, success, understanding.

- In-service professional training is the optimal environment for introducing RWCT

Credo: “It is never too late to learn.”

Conclusion: What is necessary for survival?

- To gain positive experience of program dissemination using all personal resources available to the teacher
- To create a group of adherents (creative/project group) united by their readiness to disseminate new ideas and to grow as professionals
- To contribute to various other projects in which critical thinking can be useful (for example, Education Against Corruption)
- To support the ongoing improvement of educators’ professional skills on the basis of content area and integrative connections
- To make the experience gained through the project accessible to all (bank of programs, curricula, etc.)

RESEARCH GROUP 2

Theme: Approaches to institutionalization of the RWCT approach and philosophy in the context of the Bologna Process

Issues:

- What methods can be used to introduce the RWCT project in higher education?
- How do we develop a bank of relevant texts and methodology literature?
- What is the role of the RWCT International Consortium in implementing the project in higher education?
- How can we monitor the efficiency of implementing RWCT in particular universities?
- How do we maintain continuity in education between the school and university levels?
- When using RWCT strategies, how can we evaluate the creative component of students’ work?
- Does RWCT develop social skills?
- How can we avoid stereotypes in RWCT?
- How can we combine tradition and innovation?
- How does the modern philosophy of education understand the notion of quality?
- What difficulties do faculty face in the transition to a “credit” system?

Why should RWCT be a resource for promoting the Bologna process?

- The RWCT philosophy is aligned with the educational concepts adopted by the countries involved in the Bologna process.
- The RWCT framework and methods support the philosophy, making it well-grounded and current.
- RWCT includes both students and faculty in vigorous intellectual activity.

Possible approaches:

- Integration of philosophy and technology into a separate academic discipline
- Interaction with other programs, and openness to other trends in education that share a common philosophy
- Purposeful and constant evaluation of effectiveness, with ongoing updates and revisions

Causes for optimism:

- Interest in the RWCT program is growing.
- RWCT experts and trainers now have considerable experience, and have a great desire to work.
- We have the support of our efficient and flexible Consortium staff.