



Website context: Learning from internationalisation → The Curriculum

The culture of critical thinking

Dr Michael Davidson, Academic Development Advisor, for PESL

Overview

This paper examines western ideas about 'critical thinking' and explores the possibility of the notion as a cultural concept. Notions of 'critical thinking' evident in the UK are unpacked, and the implications of getting to grips with what academics mean by critical thinking, for learners entering higher education both from home and abroad, are considered. Ideas about approaches to teaching critical skills are also briefly considered. The paper makes use of the work of Professor Ron Barnett (1997), a UK academic who has examined the idea and role of critical thinking in relation to higher education.

Is 'critical thinking' a universal idea?

Theories of learning and teaching in higher education associated with UK University cultures present the idea of 'critical thinking' as a universal principle. It could be that new learners entering our institutions, whether from home or abroad, are assumed to be familiar with the practices and expectations of these principles of critical discourse, when in fact these are new to them. The probability exists that the internationalisation of higher education includes the tendency to universalise the educational practices of Western Anglo-Saxon countries, including the notion of critical thinking (Vandermensbrugge 2004ⁱ). Examining the wide range of definitions of 'critical thinking' has led Atkinson (1997) to consider this notion as being a socially constructed concept, embedded in western culture and valued by societies that are more individualist rather than collectivist (or those societies which value critique more than consensus).

The problem with the concept of critical thinking

Egege and Kutieleh (2004:75ⁱⁱ) review some definitions of critical thinking and highlight the fact that what counts as evidence of critical thinking is rarely shared with the student, even though academics from all backgrounds "can reliably ascertain the presence or lack of critical thinking skills" Egege and Kutieleh (2004:79). If it is recognised that critical thinking is a cultural construction, dependent on context, and if we wish to avoid teaching it from either an assimilationist or deficit position, it is essential that university teachers teach the skill explicitly. This is difficult to do unless we can produce guidelines which demonstrate what critical thinking, writing and doing look like. These writers (ibid) argue:

A reasoning capacity may very well be something that all humans have; it may be a generic cognitive capacity. This does not entail that good reasoning is universally valued in all cultures or that it is valued in the same way. Even if good reasoning skills are considered desirable by most people, in most cultures, what counts as evidence of good reasoning is not universal. What Western academics recognise as evidence of good reasoning, the tools used to reason with, the language and structure of the argument, actually represent a cultural rather than a universal method.

If critical thinking and writing as practised in western universities is not something universal, even if reason is, acknowledging this greatly assists in teaching critical thinking skills to students unaware of its requirements in a culturally sensitive way.

Barnett's (1997) work: critical pedagogy

One example of well developed notions of criticality is evident in the work of the UK academic, emeritus Professor Ron Barnett, University of London. According to Barnett (1997:1) 'critical thinking' is a defining concept in Western education which enjoys wide endorsement, and yet we have no proper account of it. Generally speaking, notions of critical thinking are linked to doing well in western universities, even though there is little consensus about what it is. Usually the context in which it is used defines its meaning. For newcomers to academic culture, whether international or home students, a lack of context knowledge makes the idea of critical thinking difficult to access.

Barnett (1997:3) also cautions against the subversion of critical pedagogy, or of notions of critical thinking focusing on knowledge and the self (excluding the world) that have an instrumental and rather benign agenda. Such forms of critical thinking, represented in the 'critical thinking industry' are "intent on delivering given ends with ever greater effectiveness," thus the wider purposes of higher education are forgotten and the notion and practice of critique declined. Indeed the critical thinking that is valued is restricted to applying theory to practice, but not questioning dominant interpretations

The 'Western' approach to teaching 'critical thinking'

How individuals define 'critical thinking' does not necessarily reflect a universal learning model or thinking process. Traditional UK academia has historically been heavily invested in notions of critical thinking that have cultural roots (perhaps in the philosophies of the ancient Greeks, Hegel, Marx, Giroux and the Frankfurt School, including Habermas). Fundamental to these approaches is competitive or adversarial discourse and dialogue which make use of a range of argumentation skills. Proof and justification are vital in these traditions, and arguments are often linear; critical analysis is another vital part of this paradigm. In the Western tradition people are taught from an early age to evaluate ideas, things, people and events, and to make claims about these things. Students are encouraged to adopt a claim-based orientation to oral and written texts, and are urged to assume a position of 'reflective scepticism' when it comes towards knowledge claims (McPeck 1981:7 cited in Elsegood undated:3ⁱⁱⁱ). Claim-based texts and arguments often present difficulties for those coming from different backgrounds who may have difficulty distinguishing between what is debatable and what is non-debatable and have difficulty discerning the writer's 'voice'.

Egege and Kutieleh (2004:80) point out how different all of this is to classical Chinese tradition for example, which relies on analogy and circular reasoning. Ideas about critical thinking, critique, and critical being in the West are likely to be heavily context dependent and even within local institutions views about what constitutes the essence of criticality, will differ.

Teaching critical skills: a socio-cultural cognitive model

According to Egege and Kutieleh (2004:80) working in an Australian university bridging programme, the appropriate model for teaching critical thinking skills is one that embraces both socio-cultural and cognitive aspects of students' experience, rather than information processing or behavioural models. Biggs (2003), again

working in the Australian context proposes a similar model for adapting to the socio-cultural perspectives of learners, and a similar concern to avoid what he calls 'conceptual imperialism'. Such models relate students' perception of learning and strategies for learning tasks so that learning is mediated through social, cultural and individual backgrounds and the learning situation within the current learning context. This is important because it attempts to avoid both a deficit model and an assimilationist approach in teaching critical thinking skills. In the experience of these writers, making the cultural assumptions, attitudes and practices explicit for international students, together with encouraging students to make their own cultural assumptions explicit provides learners with a choice in terms of which cultural practices they wish to take on board. This in turn leads to student empowerment when their cultural assumptions are reflected upon. What has emerged is a threefold strategy for teaching critical thinking:

Stage 1: Critical thinking as we understand it in the West is not universal. Make learners aware of the history and cultural assumptions informing the particular approach to criticality in an institution or discipline.

Stage 2: There are culturally different approaches to knowledge acquisition. One of these is critical thinking. For the Greeks this was critical knowledge, informed by knowledge; the Chinese method was driven by pragmatism (Lloyd, 1996 cited in Egege and Kutieleh 2004:81) - a more circular approach incorporating anomalies and thus using accommodation rather than an adversarial approach.

Stage 3: The techniques and mechanisms expected in the Western critical approach are very particular. Making these explicit to international learners (and to home students also seeking access to this specialist knowledge) is vital. This requires self-reflection on the process of critique by academics who are aware of the arguments they accept and reject. By making the criteria of successful argumentation explicit, learners will understand the role it plays in the discipline and university.

Teaching in cross-cultural contexts to enhance critical skills

Anglo-celtic secondary school students who move to higher education within the UK may display difficulty in coping with university curricula, especially if they move to different regions of the country. Students moving from non Anglo-celtic regions of the world to the UK also experience problems when entering the UK system. The difference is the latter's difficulties are usually ascribed to 'culture'. Biggs (1997:121), considering international students in the Australian context, holds the view that "language issues aside, the problems presented by the cultural gap between school and university are different from those experienced by non Anglo-Celtic international students in extent, not in kind". Teaching effectively in cross-cultural contexts requires teachers to distinguish between genuine cultural issues that influence learners and their teachers, and the stereotypes that entrench difficulties. Such stereotypes may relate to passivity, criticality, plagiarism, and rote learning to name a few. At the very least perceptions of academic difference should be treated with caution.

Dr Michael Davidson
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ⁱ Vandermensbrugghe, J. (2004) "The Unbearable Vagueness of Critical Thinking in the Context of the Anglo-Saxonisation of Education" in International Education Journal Vol 5, No 3, pp 417-422. Available online:

<<http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/iej/articles/v5n3/vandermensbrugghe/paper.pdf>>

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ⁱⁱ Egege, S and Kutieleh, S. (2004) Critical Thinking: Teaching Foreign Notions to Foreign Students. International Education Journal Vol 4, No 4, 2004 pp 75-85.

<<http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/iej/articles/v4n4/Egege/paper.pdf>> Accessed: 17 July 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elsegood, S (undated) "Teaching Critical Thinking in an English for Academic Purposes Program using a 'Claims and Supports' approach"

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