Critical thinking

The information on these pages has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project

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1. Introduction

Much has been written on the supposed lack of critical thinking skills amongst international students. There are even (false) claims that there is no equivalent for the term in some cultures or languages such as in Chinese.

International students need to be explicitly taught the forms of expression of critical thinking and inquiry which are expected within their particular context and discipline. Equally, lecturers interested in internationalising their pedagogy and curriculum (See Internationalising the curriculum section of this resource bank) need to learn about other possible forms of expression of reasoning and writing in other cultures so that they can recognise and reward these.

2. The main issues: getting started

For teachers, a place to start is by examining what you and others with whom you work mean by 'criticality' and whether you need to revisit assumptions about how the concept is understood and demonstrated within this context. This can then assist in decisions about how these skills can be taught and assessed so that international students have a better opportunity to learn and be rewarded for their skills and knowledge. There are a number of issues which first need to be considered:

2.1 Is critical thinking universal or culture-specific?

Many see 'critical thinking' as fundamental to Western thinking. The concept features prominently in Western higher education, described as a desirable attribute or transferable skill that students must apply and demonstrate. The concept of 'critical thinking' is highly contested, however, and opinion amongst theorists is divided about whether critical thinking or ways of reasoning are universal or culture- and context- specific, and indeed what constitutes critical thinking (Mason, 2008).

These debates imply that 'critical thinking' skills are not intrinsic but may have more to do with the ways that they are expressed and performed within specific teaching, learning and assessment contexts. Peters (2008) argues that thinking and reasoning are not homogenous phenomena and different cultural forms of reasoning and argumentation exist. Some theorists believe that critical thinking and reasoning do have universal features although notions of specific 'critical skills' are culture-laden, as they 'have to come from somewhere' (Evers, 2008). Turner (2006) argues that definitions of critical thinking are often unclear, and 'emerge from cultural knowledge traditions rather than universal measures of higher learning'.

International students themselves report feeling judged as lacking certain 'critical' skills and feeling constrained by what they see as narrow definitions of critical thinking and writing (Phan Le Ha, 2001; Viete & Peeler, 2007, Viete & Phan, 2007, Yoshino, 2004). Yoshino argues that assumptions about the existence or absence of critical thinking skills based on whole systems of cultural practice (which in the case of 'Chinese learners' comprises a billion and a half people) is itself an example of a lack of criticality.

"It is particularly infuriating to hear problems with such rhetorical styles attributed to imagined inadequacies in the student's education in their home country. I have often had conversations in which it has been suggested to me that Oriental students come from backgrounds in which originality and critical thinking are valued less than acceptance of orthodoxy. Apart from the lack of critical thinking apparent in the use of the category Oriental, such analysis is misleading because it confuses differences in style of expression with a lack of academic rigour. What it fails to understand is that a prizewinning English academic essay translated word for word into Japanese is likely to be received as clumsy and ill thought out." (Yoshino, 2004)

Mason (2008) draws on the work of Paul (1982) to argue that criticality goes beyond a mechanistic demonstration of a certain skill set but itself needs to encompass a broad worldview:

"Critical thinking includes a deep knowledge of oneself, which takes both intellectual courage and humility. A strong critical thinker is able to understand the bigger picture holistically, to see different worldviews in perspective, rather than just to critique the individual steps in a particular argument… Dialogue with others who are different, have different worldviews and cultural backgrounds, is an essential feature of critical thinking… Critical thinking is thinking aimed at overcoming 'egocentric and sociocentric thinking'."

2.2 Different forms of critical thinking and writing

Given the contested nature of a concept that is nevertheless said to be foundational, it is little wonder that students new to an academic environment may be confused about precisely what is required of them. Although the term is often used in module descriptions and assessment criteria, it is rarely defined or articulated. In a study of academics at an Australian university, Hang (2005) found a 'remarkable lack of common understanding of the term'; many claimed that although they could not easily define the concept, they 'knew it when they saw it' and equally, knew when criticality was missing. This approach is not helpful to new students unfamiliar with what is required in reading, writing and speaking in their new learning environments.

Critical thinking can take different forms in different cultures. Critical and creative thinking have long been characteristics of education and intellectual traditions in China, for example, but may manifest in different ways (Cortazzi & Jin, 2010; Turner, 2006) such as more active listening than verbal participation (Chuah, 2010; Ryan & Louie, 2007). Phan (2001) argues that international students may feel 'silenced' or stifled by having to adopt thinking or writing styles that are confined to one particular method of expression. Charnock (2010) reports that one Chinese student when advised to 'be yourself' in his writing meant that he was in fact being asked to write in a way that wasn't himself. She argues that lecturers need to recognise the 'varieties of writing that stem from different kinds of intellectual and social engagement with the world' (Charnock, 2010, p. 543).

Mason (2008) has examined the whole notion of critical thinking and has drawn on the work of philosophers of education to show that critical thinking is viewed in many different ways and can encompass a variety of skills such as:

- reasoning

- asking probing questions

- evaluating arguments and evidence

or can be described as 'dispositions of the mind' such as:

- a critical attitude or orientation

- a moral perspective or set of values that motivates critical thinking - knowledge about concepts such as premises, assumptions or valid arguments

- a deep and wide knowledge of a particular discipline and its epistemological structure (and so a 'critical thinker' is only a critical thinker within that discipline)

3. Possible solutions: suggestions for action

3.1 Examining your own beliefs and expectations about critical thinking and writing

Lecturers wishing to internationalise their pedagogy and curriculum (See Internationalising the curriculum section) need to first consider and identify what they consider to be critical thinking skills within their discipline and context and how these can be taught and assessed. These debates should also occur at the wider programme level so that students within a course or discipline are taught and judged on criteria that are broadly aligned.

You may wish to consider:

- What types of critical thinking concepts and skills are involved in your discipline?

- How do you describe critical thinking in learning objectives and assessment criteria?

- Are your definitions based on a 'technicist' approach describing only a limited set of skills?

- What do these critical thinking skills look like and how can they be taught?

- How are students expected to demonstrate their mastery of these skills?

3.2 Teaching critical thinking, reading and writing

It is important for (all) students to develop skills of analysis and evaluation but it must be recognised that these take particular forms in different academic cultures and disciplines and even within different courses and modules. You need to explain the form that critical thinking and inquiry takes and how it is expected to be expressed within your discipline and in relation to your own assessment tasks. Critical thinking relies on foundational skills such as good reasoning, critical reading and analysis, and critical writing including note taking. All of these need to be explained and modelled in terms of their relevance within particular disciplines and contexts.

Teachers may not know how to help students to become aware of their previous styles and what they are expected to do in their new context or may not recognise the criticality they are seeing. Charnock (2010) argues that outward manifestations of behaviours by some international students, such as students from Confucian-heritage cultures, may be mistaken for a lack of participation or engagement. She argues, 'lecturers may mistake their good manners for a lack of critical thinking or originality, and read their suggestive style as a failure to take responsibility for their ideas' and that lecturers need to recognise different writing styles, 'In Anglo-western academic culture, the writer is responsible for direct and explicit construction of meaning, while Confucian-heritage writers show respect for their readers by presenting material without spelling out its relevance, and allowing the reader to draw inferences from it'. (Charnock, 2010)

Critical thinking skills need to be addressed prior to the writing stage and should encompass skills of critical reading. This means that students first learn how to take a critical stance in their reading and then apply this knowledge to their own writing.

There are many ways that you can teach your students how to develop skills of critical thinking, reading and writing:

- Show specific examples of the expression of critical thinking and writing from previous students' work in the same assessment tasks

- Show examples from your own work that demonstrate criticality

- Model your own thinking and writing, eg. 'When I read this, the first question I ask myself is…'

- Highlight words and phrases that are commonly used by academics in the field to indicate a critical stance eg. 'can be questioned in terms of', 'fails to consider the possibility that…', 'this may or may not demonstrate…'.

- Demonstrate how to take notes in ways that avoid direct copying but begin with an engagement with and the transformation of ideas and knowledge in what they are reading (ie. never highlight or copy, apart from essential direct quotes)

- Encourage the use of 'higher order' thinking skills

Blooms' taxonomy is a useful tool for encouraging students to move beyond knowledge comprehension and application and to 'higher order' thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation and the HEA UK Centre for Legal Education 'Writing learning objectives using Bloom's taxonomy'. See Related links on the download page for this document.

Charnock (2010) suggests a framework for working with students to identify (and hence construct) the goals of writing:

First, we can set out a number of goals that writing usually aims to fulfil:

- The writing should present a topic/question/problem to the reader

- The reader should understand why this is worth discussing

- The reader should understand how the ideas and information presented relate to each other and to the topic

- The reader should understand the important features of the topic, and/or the answer(s)/solution(s) to the question

- The writer's conclusions should make sense to the reader
  For each of these goals, we can then ask:

- Whose responsibility is this? (Writer and/or reader?)

- How is it achieved?

- Is there anywhere in the text that we see this being done?
  (Charnock, 2010)

You can also provide students with a framework that can assist them in critiquing writing and research reports, again helping them in their own writing, such as:

- What is the contribution to knowledge claimed?

- What is the central argument? Is it defensible?

- What conceptual background does the author use as the starting point for this enquiry?

- What methodology underpins the enquiry?

- Was the collection and analysis of data appropriate, rigorous, ethical?

- Does the evidence presented substantiate the claim to knowledge made?

3.3 Assessing critical thinking

Differences in expression do not mean absence of underpinning skills. Turner (2006) argues that international students may under-perform in assessments because of 'a lack of initiation into cultural practices rather than inability to engage with critical thinking'.Interestingly, many international students are in fact quite critical of the narrow view of 'criticality' that they encounter. Chinese students, for example, are often critical of the fact that critique only extends to the work of others, and not of the self, or of essay writing techniques that only require a superficial knowledge of texts and citation of small extracts rather than a deeper understanding of a whole text. As one Masters student commented, a requirement of any level of postgraduate study in China requires a critical self-reflection, which is not necessarily found in or required of their Western counterparts.

In your assessment of students' work:

- Do you just state 'evidence of critical thinking' as an assessment criterion or do you give examples of what this means?

- Do you look for evidence of learning, not just reproduction of academic norms?

- How do you respond to apparent copying?

Reproducing text is a common early stage in newly-arrived learners into UK higher education but it may display the student's knowledge and understanding (this doesn't mean that you should do nothing about the copying, but that copying should not automatically equate to a lack of criticality).

For more about assessment and feedback see the relevant section of this resource bank.

3.4 Assisting your students to develop critical thinking and writing skills

Apart from the suggestions above about how you can improve students' critical thinking within your own teaching and assessment practices, you can encourage (all) students to independently develop their own skills. Most universities have learning support advisors who can provide a range of resources on developing critical thinking. Many provide specialist sessions on academic skills; these are most effective when they are conducted jointly with academic staff so that they can be tailored to the specific requirements of the discipline and the assessment tasks.

Finally, you can recommend to your students a text on critical thinking and writing (such as Cottrell, 2005). These are usually available in university libraries or bookshops. A range of study skills handbooks are available, such as The Ultimate Study Skills Handbook (Moore, Neville, Murphy & Connolly, 2010).

4. Top resources

Cottrell, S. (2005) Critical thinking skills: Developing effective analysis and argument. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mason, M. (Ed). (2008) Critical thinking and learning. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Bennett Moore, Z., Faltin, L. & Wright, M. (2010) Critical Thinking and International Postgraduate Students in Discourse vol 3 pp63-94

5. What is the evidence?

Further reading

Chan, H. M. & Yan, H. K. (2008) Is there a geography of thought for East-West differences? In M. Mason, (Ed), *Critical thinking and learning*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 44-64.

Charnock, K. (2010) The right to reticence. *Teaching in Higher Education* 15(5) 543-552.

Chuah, Swee-Hoon (2010) *Teaching East-Asian students: Some observations*. Higher Education Academy Economics Network. See Related link on the download page for this document.

Cortazzi, M. and Jin, L. X. (2010, September). *Creativity and criticality: Developing Chinese approaches to learning.* Plenary at the Transnational Dialogues in Higher Education: Responding to the Needs of the Asian Learner in Higher Education Conference. Portsmouth, University of Portsmouth, 17 September 2010.

Mason, M. (Ed). (2008) *Critical thinking and learning*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Moon, J. (2007) *Critical thinking: An exploration of theory and practice.* London: Routledge

Moore, S., Neville, C., Murphy, M. & Connolly, C. (2010) *The Ultimate Study Skills Handbook*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill International.

Peters, M. (2008) Kinds of thinking, styles of reasoning. In M. Mason (Ed),*Critical thinking and learning*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 12-24

Phan Le Ha (2001). How do culturally situated notions of 'polite' forms influence the way Vietnamese postgraduate students write academic English in Australia? *Australian Journal of Education*, 45(3): 296-308.

Ryan, J. & Louie, K. (2007). False dichotomy? 'Western' and 'Eastern' concepts of scholarship and learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (39)4, 404-417.

Turner, Y. (2006) Chinese students and critical thinking in postgraduate Business and Management degrees: Teasing out tensions of culture, style and substance. *International Journal of Management Education,* 5(1) 3-12.

Viete, R. & Peeler, E. (2007) Respectful encounters: Valuing each other in teacher professional learning contexts. In A. Berry, A. Clemans, and A. Kostogriz, (Eds), *Dimensions of professional learning: Professionalism, practice and identity.* Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.

Viete, R. & Phan, L. H. (2007) The growth of voice: Expanding possibilities for representing self in research writing. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 6 (2), pp. 39-57.

Yoshino, A. (2004) *Well-intentioned Ignorance Characterises British Attitudes to Foreign Students.* The Times Higher Education Supplement, 16 July, p. 18.

6. Related resources

Bennett Moore, Z., Faltin, L. & Wright, M. (2010)- Critical Thinking and International Postgraduate Students in Discourse vol 3 pp63-94

Critical thinking: developing students' independence - Rebecca Moor et al. University of Nottingham

Bennett Moore, Z., Faltin, L. & Wright, M. (2010)- Critical Thinking and International Postgraduate Students in Discourse vol 3 pp63-94

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