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Contemplating Criticality

BALEAP Conference 2023

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Key Questions

- What are we talking about when we talk about **critical thinking**?
- What **skills and dispositions** are required for critical thinking?
- Are current ideas of criticality **problematic** and potentially **biased** against certain types of students?
- What are some potential **solutions** for these questions?

Group Discussions



- What experiences do you have of teaching critical thinking?
- What methods and approaches do you use to teach it?
- How can we help students overcome the challenges of CT in a new language or academic culture?



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Critical Thinking in the Masters Course

Background and Rationale



- Critical thinking is a **key skill** for Masters students (QAA 2020)
- Often found on **assessment rubrics** and included on EAP/academic skills courses
- Commonly reported and self-reported as a **weakness** among East Asian students (Egtim, 2022; Liyanage et al., 2021).
- This may be **cultural** (e.g. Atkinson, 1997) or due to **language struggles** (Floyd, 2011; Manalo et al., 2015; Rear, 2017)

Defining Critical Thinking



- There is **no single definition** of what critical thinking is (Johnson & Hamby, 2015).
- Ennis (2015): “reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (p.32). But what does “reasonable, reflective thinking” **mean**?
- Do we **need** a clear definition? Are **descriptions** of critical thinking sufficient? What about **examples** of critical thinking?



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Critical Thinking and International Students

Critical Thinking and International Students



Weaknesses in CT not limited to international students, but it is a noted problem. Two explanations:

- Cultural factors lead to **different reasoning approaches** in academic writing (Atkinson, 1997; Kaplan, 1966; Qin, 2017).
- Critical thinking hindered by **thinking in L2** (Egtim, 2022; Floyd, 2011; Rear, 2017).

Critical Thinking as Social Practice



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- Atkinson (1997) argues that ‘critical thinking’ as expected in the Western Masters essay is more a reflection of certain traditions - what he calls a ‘**social practice**’
- “By social practice, I mean the kind of behavior in which an individual is automatically immersed by virtue of being raised in a **particular cultural milieu** and which the individual therefore “learns””. (p.73). An example is “common sense” (p.73).
- He uses the fact that we **struggle to define** critical thinking to support this claim - we can think critically but we don’t have the language necessary to explain what we’re doing.
- He concludes that “**Critical thinking is cultural thinking**” (p.89) - a reflection of certain values and practices socialised through traditionally elite schools.

Critical Thinking Hindered by L2



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Rear (2017) conducted an interesting experiment:

- Two Japanese groups were prepared for a spoken debate. One group prepared in Japanese, one in English
- Both debates were evaluated by 3 Australian debate judges. The Japanese debate was translated into English
- Japanese (L1) - more sources (5.5 compared to 3.3); weaker arguments in English (e.g. “We don’t agree with this”).
- “It appeared as though the English speakers’ minds were **so preoccupied with finding the appropriate words to say**, there was **little mental space available** for a proper consideration of argument and counter-argument.” (p.11)”



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Skills and Dispositions for CT

Skills and Dispositions



- Ennis (2015) identified 18 skills/abilities and 12 dispositions that make up CT. This was used as a basis for a conception of CT.
- A questionnaire was sent to students in Education and academic skills tutors about the key skills and dispositions required for critical thinking. 24 students, 6 tutors responded.
- Sample responses and word clouds on the next slides.

Skills (selection)



- Critical thinking skills include brainstorming, interpretation, analysis, problem -solving, creativity and innovation
- Combining different opinions from different authors. Ability to write logically in the essay to express their argument and counterargument.
- Objective analysis and evaluation of an issue from multiple perspectives without any bias
- The importance to seek the pros and cons along remedies for the cons
- Independent thinking skill
- Reflexion on literature into the essay ; diversity of thinking aspects ; skills in reading and writing critically

Skills (all)



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Dispositions (selection)

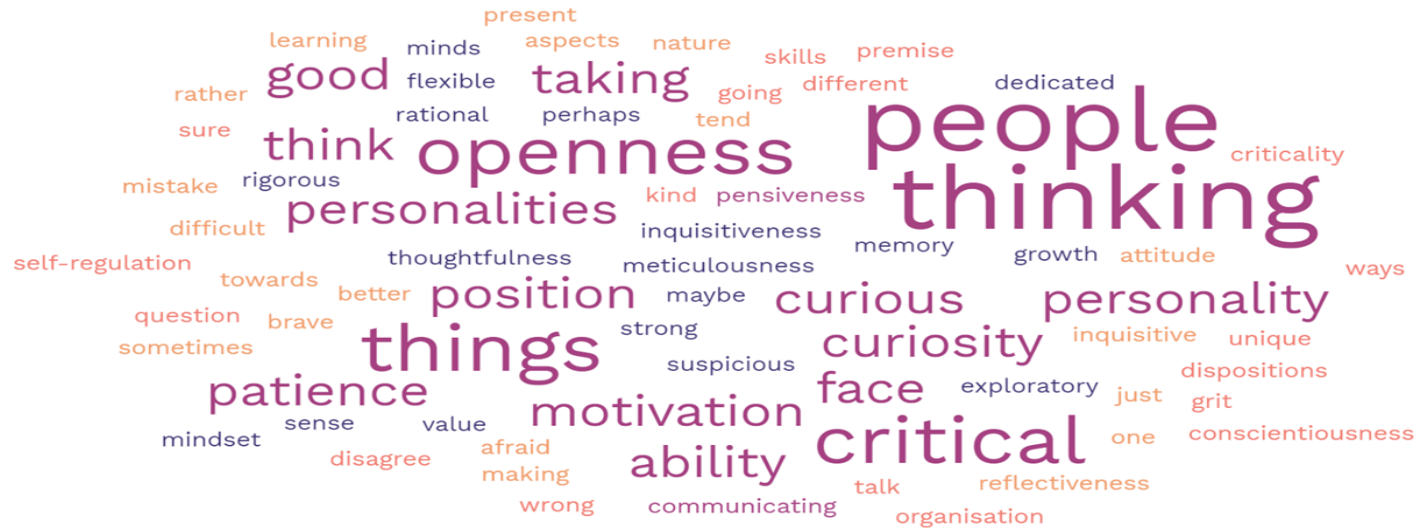


- Be good at communicating with other people
- Curiosity, thoughtfulness, inquisitiveness, not taking things at face value.
- being suspicious
- Brave, I think? Sometimes it is difficult to present our critical thinking if we are afraid of making mistake
- Conscientiousness, organisation skills, self-regulation, motivation, and openness.
- I disagree with the premise of this question. There are as many ways into criticality as there are people, so it would be wrong and potentially dangerous to pursue this association.

Dispositions (all)



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Conclusions from Study

- Interesting data - but is it **useful**? Does knowing the skills and abilities help our students demonstrate CT in their work?
- Potential for one word (critical) to be replaced by others (e.g. analysis, evaluation) without really exploring their meaning or **use**.
- More success with using successful **examples** of critical thinking in writing, and having students analyse it - inductive rather than deductive approach



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Group Discussions

Group Discussion

[Padlet](#)



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- What do we mean when we talk about critical thinking/criticality?
- How can we best convey this to students, and how can we incorporate alternative approaches?
- Do we even need a definition of critical thinking?
- Are current ideas of criticality problematic and potentially biased against certain types of students?

Group Discussion 2



We've talked about various problems and concerns with teaching critical thinking in EAP. Now it's time for the solutions!

Talk together about your experiences of teaching critical thinking in your EAP classes. What did you do that worked well? Share your experiences with your group and add them to the Padlet.

Reflection



- What did you gain from this session?
- What would you like to learn more about?
- What will you apply to your own teaching?

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