

Supporting Critical Thinking in Higher Education

Considerations for Strategic Discussions

Martin G. Erikson
University of Borås, Sweden

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The ubiquitous concept of Critical Thinking

- One of the most central concepts for teaching and learning in higher education.
- Follows a philosophical tradition going back to Socrates but have evolved along the way, not the least through Immanuel Kant's decree *sapere aude*.
- Mirrored in Humboldt's educational visions for the Berlin University.
- An important aspect of employability.
- Today, also a protection against fake news and downplay of scientific knowledge.

But how deep is our understanding of what we mean by critical thinking, and is it a shared understanding?

The ubiquitous concept of Critical Thinking

Unless we have a clear and shared understanding of what we mean by critical thinking, it is at risk of being reduced to an 'educational virtue signal'.

- We must understand what capabilities we should promote in our students:
A matter of quality and empowerment of teachers.
- The professoriate and the management, from vice-chancellors and down, have shared responsibility for clear concepts, in all aspects of T&L.
- Thus, demystifying CT is a strategic matter for all academic leaders.

The purpose of this paper is to present features of critical thinking from the literature with implications for strategic academic discussions about T&L.

Can we say "what critical thinking is"?

Critical thinking according to some...

A tool for more trustworthy conclusions¹

A single definition for all disciplines³

A matter of applying certain cognitive processes⁵

Strict logical reasoning⁷

Includes dispositions to engage in CT

Aims at a formulation of critique¹¹

Should promote social justice¹³

Critical thinking according to others...

A tentative scepticism²

Definitions vary across disciplines⁴

A matter of criteria and outcome⁶

A process with emotional components⁸

Delimited to a way of reasoning¹⁰

Aims at a balanced judgement¹²

Excludes notions of 'good thinking'¹⁴

Table 1. *Examples of opposing positions found in the use of the concept 'critical thinking' in higher education literature.*

Source: Erikson (in preparation)

A danger of defining critical thinking?

Any definition of the concept of critical thinking is just a social agreement.

- There is no critical thinking ‘out there’, to be observed, beyond our conceptual understanding.
- A ‘contingent concept’ or ‘social construction’.
- To argue that critical thinking *is* something that exists beyond our more or less explicit theoretical definitions would be a *reification*.
- A risk of relativism? Table 1, shows the multitude of views of critical thinking in the use of the concept – handling this is the challenge.

I suggest we find common ground in academic values, looking for an approach to CT which is possible to apply in practice in different educational settings.

The normative nature of critical thinking

The main common ground for the perspectives presented in Table 1 is that the authors believed that critical thinking was valuable and important.

- Critical thinking is almost always discussed as something intrinsically good.
- The striving for it becomes a virtue in itself.
- A fear of questioning something that is (1) conceptually unclear, (2) intrinsically good, and (3) associated with philosophy?
- As a result, we lack the kind of analytical interpretations that should be a landmark of academia (and, indeed, of critical thinking)?

Should we even ask what critical thinking is?

Instead of asking what critical thinking “is”, a more fruitful question might be: “What do we want to see in our students if we should be able to claim that they develop critical thinking?”

Ennis (1993) stated that critical thinking should be seen as “reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (p. 180).

- This can either lead to a ‘final’ belief or a set of actions, or the conclusion that more information is needed.
- Points towards the formulation of arguments, where a critical thinker should be able to distinguish between arguments, opinions and emotions.

A caveat about realism

The risk of unrealistic expectations about rationality or ‘intellectual superpower’ should not be underestimated when critical thinking is discussed.

- A lot of examples of high expectations in the literature. “The critical thinker should always be curious”, etc...
- Ennis’ (1993) call for “*reasonable reflective thinking*” adds a bit of realism in the expectations on critical thinking, and should be seen in that context.

The notion of ‘critical’ in critical thinking?

A distinction between ‘critical thinking’ and ‘critique’.

- ‘Critique’ can mean different things in relation to critical thinking:
 - Positions where the critique is the purpose, and is not challenged.
 - Positions where the critique is a potential outcome.

Critical thinking in the sense advocated in this paper is about the letter perspective – the aim is not to be critical but it is a possible outcome.

- Critical thinking as recognizing things that are critically important?
- An educational environment where critique becomes an intellectual stance can be seriously destructive.

Critical thinking and knowledge

Critical thinking is thinking about something. The students need a profound knowledge-base on which we they apply critical thinking.

We can also assume that there is knowledge that can support critical thinking.

- Understanding the provisional nature of knowledge claims.
- Knowledge about scientific method.
- Self-knowledge, for example defining oneself as someone with certain ideals, skills and/or responsibilities when encountering complex material.

The teacher ought to be able to support critical thinking by supporting the development of such knowledge.

What critical thinking is not

Critical thinking should not be confused with good or righteous thinking.

- Accepting the teacher's values is not critical thinking.
- The teacher must not expect that the student endorse certain values as an aspect of critical thinking.

Critical thinking should not be confused with new ways of thinking.

- The risk that students are overwhelmed by new insights and confuse it with critical thinking.
- The law of the instrument – giving students a wide set of tools.
- *Therefore, students need various kinds of tools and critical thinking includes the ability and willingness to select a proper too.*

Summing up so far, in other words...

Teaching critical thinking is mostly about being good at what higher education has been supposed to be good at at least since the days of Immanuel Kant.

- Give the students a deep knowledge-base to think critical about.
- Force them to argue and take stand in debates and feel confident about it.
- Make them recognize uncertainties and approach these with the help of structured logical thinking, applying research methods when suitable.
- Make them understand the differences between arguments, opinions and feelings and feel pride in being able to do so.

Sounds difficult? That is why it should be a matter of strategic importance.

A greater challenge for teachers than for students?

Demystifying critical thinking expose the demands and responsibilities placed on teachers in higher education

- Being able to arrange teaching activities that support critical thinking.
- Being able to recognize, support and assess critical thinking.
- The challenge of students reaching conclusions the teacher disagrees with.
- On the other hand, critical thinking might be a road to making students actual co-producers of knowledge.

For strategic discussions on critical thinking, we need to include also how to support and develop the teachers' abilities, dispositions and motivation.

Conclusions and implications

As a strategic goal, support of critical thinking should create an educational culture for departments and institutions, which helps the individual teachers becoming more secure and professional in their roles.

Details in the educational setting as a whole can support as well as hamper the ambitions to make students critical thinkers. For example:

- Are policies about course evaluations aiming to see if students are satisfied or to see if they are feeling challenged? Thus we create expectations.
- Do the academic developers have an adequate understanding of critical thinking, and clear expectations placed upon them to support it?
- Can we create learning outcomes supporting critical thinking?

Last but not least...

Critical thinking is not just an end in itself. A capability for critical thinking has a potential to further learning, not just being a result of it.

Students who have a capability for critical thinking are more successful students. That emphasize the strategic importance of supporting critical thinking.

How this can be done in practice at institutional and departmental level is an practical question: a matter for development projects, a matter on which we can share our experiences, and a matter for empirical research.

- The End -