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Critical Thinking in Business Education

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Introduction

If there is one key idea that defines higher education as 'higher' it is critical thought (Barnett 2007:151). The need for critical thinking has been approached from different perspectives and with different ends in sight, but these approaches all tend towards the concept of a dynamic and healthy economy and society. Here the mission of higher education and its relevance to the world around it would seem to be truly connected, although the exact task and role higher education has here is contested.

Within democratic systems there is an assumption that citizens apply rational thought to their participation in democracy. Healthy democratic systems need critical thinkers that are capable of grasping complex issues and competing demands, whether it be as active citizens, passive voters or jury members (Glaser 1942). It is important to develop this ability as much for our own betterment as for bettering humanity generally:

> *"Critical thinking is based on two assumptions: first, that the quality of our thinking affects the quality of our lives, and second, that everyone can learn how to continually improve the quality of his or her thinking."* (Paul 1993:23).

In developed economies there has been a significant shift away from low-skilled, mass industrial production and a rise in areas of flexible specialisation and service industry that demand knowledge and intellectual ability to be applied in rapidly changing circumstances. This potentially has a polarising impact on social mobility with an emerging class structure around better paid jobs that demand better knowledge and intellectual ability sharply contrasted with the remaining poorly paid unskilled jobs (Bell 1976; Reich 1992). For Rifkin (1995) this could be even starker with the shrinking of the public sector coupled with more technology to replace unskilled work leading to fewer jobs in both categories.

From an employer's perspective, critical thinking skills are vital in the move from industrial society to increasingly complex decision making in work (Paul 1993; Reich

1992) as well as coping with the pace and scale of change in technology and work (Bell 1976; Halpern 1999). Particularly the business world has increasingly stressed the need for critical thinking in graduates for handling large volumes of information in decision-making, with increased competition and pace of change leading to a need for a more strategic outlook and more innovative approaches to processes and products (Braun 2004:232; Khalifa 2009:591; CBI 2009:4,8).

While the above discussion has drawn closer to the traditional focus of the business school, it is important to emphasise the interconnections that are relevant to the role of higher education within wider society: to recognise that society, education, industry and commerce are heavily indebted to the concept of critical thinking and that they are intricately connected to each other within society. Barnett advocates the concept of a "curriculum for critical being" (1997:102-115) aimed at developing students' capacity for criticality in the three domains of *knowledge* (critical reason), *self* (critical self-reflection) and *world* (critical action). Barnett challenges universities not only to take critical being[ness] seriously, but also to reflect, refashion and transform themselves. While Barnett cites the lesson of German universities acquiescing to the Nazi regime (1997:103), a less emotive example might be accepting donations from sources that do not promote criticality and may actually repress critical thinking, such as the Gadaffi donations to the London School of Economics.

The employability debate, and how higher education adopts practices to increase employability, has been high on the agenda for some time, especially following widening participation and the consequent increase in the graduate pool of workers in the labour market. Foreman & Johnston comment on the employer-driven 'soft' skills agenda:

> *"oral and written communication, team working, listening and problem solving are as important as academic qualifications in preparing people for employment."* (1999:375).

What is distinctively 'higher' about these skills? Only problem-solving skills may have some obvious connection to areas of critical thinking, but critical thinking is much more than this. More recently the Confederation of British Industry (CBI 2009) has been more explicit about the need for critical thinkers as well as graduates with other 'soft' skills. Importantly, the 'soft' skills can be applied at any level, but it is the critical thinking skills that will be associated with the higher responsibility, higher status and more highly paid jobs. Critical thinking may also be central to the ability of workers to be more flexible and adaptable 'lifelong learners', for it is critical thinkers that will be better equipped for the challenges of adaptability, developing new and transferable skills and knowledge, coping with changes of career, new professional requirements and new models of working. In addition, the current marketisation of higher education is likely to stimulate a much stronger focus on student perceptions, as the individual student is firmly put in place as the paying "customer" of higher education.

Even before the Browne review (October 2010) of HE funding , the introduction of loans and charging for courses had led to concerns that learning and teaching approaches were being undermined by student concerns over debt, poverty and the burden of having to take paid employment (Thomas 2002:423). However, the Browne review has launched a full-blown market model, leading to students having to pay the full costs of teaching in most subject areas, due to the government removing teaching grants from all but a few protected areas. The model of the student being the customer of higher education has some important implications. It may serve to introduce market mechanisms that legitimately highlight areas of learning, teaching and assessment, but it also carries with it the difficulties of a passive consumer disposition.

Research in this area has been carried out in the US, where there has long been a market in higher education. Carlson and Fleisher's work finds that:

> *"Customer-students expect good grades, independent of the quality of their work. Students firmly believe that if they attend class and try hard, their final grades should be Bs and As. Students feel free to complain about professors' grading or testing." (*2002:1104).

They go on to point out that what students want is not similar to what they need with, for instance, the ability to shop around for courses or modules on the basis of the minimum work required and the highest grade averages.

Market indicators to inform student 'choice' such as retention rates, graduate employment and graduate earnings are also difficult things to measure, and these are some of the tangible outcomes, whereas quality of life, appreciation of good film, music, and literature, as well as citizen qualities, present intangible outcomes with even more difficulty in attempting to measure, let alone market.

Pfeffer and Fong also examine negative aspects the marketised business school model, and caution on the perceived successful US business school model:

> *"even as they are accused of irrelevance and doing a poor job of preparing students (e.g., Porter & McKibbin, 1988), business schools simultaneously stand accused of being too market driven, pandering to the ratings (Gioia & Corley, 2003), failing to ask important questions (Hinings and Greenwood, 2002), and… losing claims of professionalization as they 'dumb down' the content of courses, inflate grades to keep students happy, and pursue curricular fads (Trank & Rynes, 2003). Students and recruiters are increasingly viewed as customers to be served by business school administrations; however, 'as students become viewed as customers, business values begin to drive the academic agenda, and the result is a compromising of the values and the very character of higher education'* (Porter et al 1997: 19)" (2004:1502).

For business schools it may be, that in seeking to serve the customer and embracing the values of the market that it is preparing the student for, it undermines those values of criticality that are so important to it and limits the potential of the individual and the wider role of higher education.

What is critical thinking?

While critical thinking is often cited as a core concept, there can be some confusion and disagreement in defining it due to conceptual complexities coupled with different approaches (French & Tracey 2010; Lloyd & Bahr 2010). Mindful of a Western centrism, the study of various forms of reasoning and argument evolved through a long and prestigious line of great thinkers from Socrates onwards. The focus of this paper is on more contemporary attempts to distil the elements that are unique to critical thinking within this Western tradition.

Glaser has defined critical thinking as:

> *"...(1) an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experiences, (2) knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning, and (3) some skill in applying those methods."* (1942:5-6).

Critical thinking can be found in the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. Within this domain, the skill levels increase through the stages of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation as well as representing a move from "concrete to abstract" (Krathwohl 2002:212). It is in the last four areas that we can identify the skills conventionally associated with critical thinking.

However, the view that the term "skill" can be applied to critical thinking has some difficulties (Johnson & Siegel 2010). If critical thinking is skills based, then it is a set of skills rather than a single skill which Siegel accepts (Johnson & Siegel 2010:54). Yet from Glaser we also have the concept of a 'disposition' which, it is claimed "...unlike skills, cannot be taught; they can only be cultivated through such activities as modelling." (Reece 2002:6). This leads Siegel to ask of critical thinking skills:

> *"...are they rightly thought of as skills, or rather as abilities, dispositions, habits of mind or something else? Are they the sort of thing that can be taught? Are they subject-specific, or more general?"* (Johnson & Siegel 2010:51).

There are others who explicitly champion the skills approach and the extension that, if they are skills then they can be taught and are transferable (Fisher 2001). Among these Halpern countered the case that critical thinking is context-bound and not transferable across academic domains, unless thinking skills are taught explicitly for transfer "using multiple examples from several disciplines, students can learn to

improve how they think in ways that transfer across academic domains" (1999:69-70). Importantly, disposition and skills may be seen as intrinsically linked, with disposition as 'attitude' towards thinking critically (Halpern 1999:72; Facione 2011:10).

Another theme that is highlighted in definitions is that of reflective practice, where critical thinking "... is thinking that is routinely self-assessing, self-examining, and self-improving." (Paul 1993:25). This link between critical thinking and reflective practice can be found in Dewey's early 20th Century enquiry into thinking, when he defines reflective thought as:

> *"active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends"* (Dewey 1910:6).

Paul is more explicit about the importance of reflection, stating:

> *"Critical thinking is distinguishable from other thinking because the thinker is thinking with the awareness of the systematic nature of high quality thought, and is continuously checking up on himself or herself, striving to improve the quality of thinking."* (1993:23).

Ennis (2002: html) incorporates this reflective feature in his notion of critical thinking as "reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do". This aspect of reflection is formalised overtly in the idea of metacognition – "thinking about thinking" (Fisher 2001:5), explicitly examining the key stages and processes of critical thinking. Definitions share the theme that critical thinking is an 'active' thing, not just receiving information or knowledge, and that it is a reflective process. This allows for the possibility of developing critical thinkers through our learning and teaching practices.

Implications for Learning and Teaching

In considering issues related to developing students' capacity for critical thinking, we also need to take cognisance of other challenges such as the high levels of international students that study in business schools, and the reality that post-1992 UK business schools have a high level of diversity in the social, educational and cultural background of all students.

At a general level Lloyd and Bahr reflect on Barnett's point that "critical thinking , while regarded as essential, is not clearly or commonly understood" (2010:13). They also tackle the question of whether critical thinking can be taught in isolation as a 'stand alone' subject showing that students tend to perceive critical thinking more in terms of its *purpose*, rather than a *process* in itself, which is what academics tended to focus on. Hence they suggest that "learning *about* critical thinking may be an essential and complementary strategy to learning *through* critical thinking" (2010:14). French

and Tracey also comment on this feature, claiming that:

> *"it is unlikely that, without a basic understanding of the skills and concepts that comprise critical thinking, participants will be able to develop the skill"* (2010:3).

There are also assessment implications if there is a lack of clarity in defining, or different understandings of, critical thinking, or no serious attempt to explicitly involve critical thinking with existing subject matter. Assessment tasks may just require standard answers focused on knowledge and comprehension (Lauer 2005). Thus there is an argument to infuse critical thinking into existing subject matter to provide a more appropriate pedagogy and that this will be less "inert" and also contribute to the transferability of skills and knowledge (French & Tracey 2010:4; Wright 2002). This argument of "infusing" critical thinking contrasts with a tacit approach where critical thinking skills are taught indirectly and implicitly "without spelling it out to students" (Zabit 2010:27). There must be caution, though, as depth and breadth may work against each other and increasing content demand on modules may work against the development of critical thinkers (Begbie 2007:14).

Here, it is argued, a metacognitive approach to teaching and learning is central to developing the critical thinker, making clear the ontological and epistemological approaches within subject areas and using metacognitive monitoring:

> *"determining how we can use this knowledge to direct and improve the thinking and learning process. While engaging in critical thinking, students need to monitor their thinking process, checking that progress is being made toward an appropriate goal, ensuring accuracy, and making decisions about the use of time and mental effort. .. [Metacognitive monitoring] is made overt and conscious during instruction, often by having instructors model their own thinking process, so that the usually private activity of thinking is made visible and open to scrutiny"* (Halpern 1999:73).

In terms of cultural diversity, Oritz (2000) shows that using difference as a feature can enhance critical thinking through sharing personal information and backgrounds, with students and teachers reflecting on their own and others different values and cultures. Critical skills are employed in understanding alternative values and culture and reflecting on your own values and culture, whilst critical being constructs a new cultural environment in the classroom community. This approach would also serve to examine and clarify different understandings of critical thinking itself and different cultural approaches to values within critical thinking, simultaneously being clear about what is expected of students in terms of critical thinking and assessment. Another positive implication of the more diverse background in post-1992 UK business schools is that they are more likely to have students with significant life experiences, including parenthood and the world of work, due to the wider variety of ages indicating this reflective approach to building critical thinking in the classroom community may be fruitful.

This approach taps into a vein of constructivist approaches that sees learning occurring through the interaction of our own experience and ideas: "learners have the ability to construct their understanding by drawing on their past and present experiences and reflecting on these." (Morgan 2009:2). Oritz indicates the value of this approach:

> *"Students who construct their own knowledge based on their worldview and experiences help others challenge authority—either the authority of the instructor or the authority inherent in the printed word. When the classroom climate invites critique rather than suppress it, all students benefit. Those with differing worldviews feel that their knowledge has a place in the academy, and other students both learn from these views and begin to understand that they can develop and project their own voice in the discourse. The idea that knowledge is not static but contextual is fundamental to the development of critical thinking"* (2000:74-75).

An important implication of a constructivist approach is that the role of teacher or instructor becomes more of a facilitator, taking on multiple roles to guide and support effective thinking, rather than the traditional lecturer role of leading from the front.

Egege and Kutieleh (2004) discuss the difficulties of inducting international students with different academic traditions into the norms of critical thinking within the Western university, contrasting Western thinking traditions outlined above with Confucian systems of analogy and circular reasoning. Important here is sensitivity in avoiding being perceived as cultural colonialists:

> *"Programs need to familiarise the student with the academic requirements of their institution while ensuring the student engages positively with the university without feeling that their own cultural and academic values are compromised. This is particularly challenging when it comes to teaching something like critical thinking"* (2004:77).

Placing the development of Western thinking explicitly into this programme, with the historical context around it, is one suggested way of sensitively exposing international students to both the cultural context of the thinking and its requirements.

Student engagement (Trowler and Trowler 2010) is also key to developing attitudinal change with the central importance given to 'disposition' in many of the definitions above and the real danger of the passive student customer. The passive consumer 'pays their money and gets the goods' and this is wholly inappropriate for an educational model. This is particularly illustrated by the customer dynamics of the gym, a lack of engagement will not lead to better health, muscular development or weight loss but will cost a lot of money.

Burbules and Berk (1999) caution not to confuse critical thinking with critical pedagogy, as critical pedagogy often has a social justice theme, while critical thinking skills are associated with attending to the reasoning process more than the underpinning values. Their position is highly contestable, however, as critical thinking is an integral tool in critical pedagogy. Moreover, some areas of business school teaching and activity would benefit from addressing social justice and questions of values as part of their own critical being, as well as that of the student. Pfeffer and Fong suggest a role for business schools:

> *"developing important, relevant knowledge and serving as a source of critical thought and inquiry about organizations and management, and by so doing, advancing the general public interest as well as the professionalization of management. In this role, business schools would stand connected to but also somewhat apart from business and other organizations, providing objective research and critical consideration of business, business practices, and their effects on people and society in an effort to serve not only business but also broader social interests and concerns." (2004:1503).*

Conclusion

The rationale for examining critical thinking focuses around a role for universities, and particularly business schools, to contribute to a healthy polity (both domestically and internationally), providing the space and support for students to reach their potential, contributing to economic development and enhancing the quality of the workforce, all through creating better thinkers. For the individual, this is about growing and maturing in thinking with a transformational potential on quality of life, as well as a skill set for employability.

Particularly in the UK post-1992 higher education sector there should be a heightened awareness of the transformational role both in terms of quality of life and in potential economic returns. The higher levels of diversity and the increased proportion of poorer students provide significant challenges, but they also provide opportunities to harness these characteristics as tools in developing critical thinking through the different experiences and perspectives they bring.

Furthermore, the successful creation of an institutional habitus based on transforming lives and developing critical being would create both the market data and social significance needed to drive a distinctive and successful institution; combining the power of the market with notions of social justice to deliver on the core academic, vocational and socio-cultural functions of higher education. This would also need the business school to develop its own ability to critically reflect and act in the context of management, business and society further providing an environment conducive to moulding disposition to critical thinking among a student body.

The reality of teaching in higher education is that styles and approaches of teachers vary while different subject areas offer different scope for critical study. It is not the intention here to dictate any particular practice; however, we can distil features that are of particular importance to infuse into learning, teaching and assessment within subjects. These are developing critical thinking skills and disposition to use these, to use them reflectively, taking a metacognitive approach, and to have critical being as the ultimate goal.

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