

‘Learning to Transform or Teaching to Conform? : The role of criticality in vocational higher education.’

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Abstract

The role of a university as a provider for teacher training through the P.G.C.E. programme is increasingly threatened due to mounting socio-political factors that have a gathering ominous prescience for this route into the teaching profession. The recent policy announced by the government regarding the implementation of new apprenticeship schemes (DfE, 2017) exemplifies current political thinking. The teaching profession has become increasingly acclimatised to political initiatives that are designed to alleviate or solve recruitment and retention issues that have become inseparable from the term ‘crisis’. It is against this backdrop that the role of the university as a provider of criticality and transformative learning as an academic platform for attaining the status of a primary school teacher is appraised. Where does criticality sit in the creation of primary school teachers who will be positioned within an education sector that increasingly conforms to statistical success at the expense of individual professional autonomy? This paper seeks to investigate established and current thinking around the topic of criticality and how it can then be incorporated into a teacher training programme to enhance the quality of the learning experience and acknowledge its role in the formation of discerning professionals.

Criticality; Purpose and Definition

The position of criticality and critical thinking as an educational rite of passage that enhances, elevates and enlightens the learner is articulated by Dunne in his comprehensive journal *Beyond Critical Thinking to Critical Being; Criticality in Higher Education and Life* (2014). Dunne advises that the prevalence of criticality as the bedrock of higher education can be seen to be in tandem with employers who value and demand graduates who can think and act creatively to problem solve thereby enhancing productivity and commercial outputs. Academic staff produce curricula across the disciplines that is interspersed with phrases that include; critically evaluate; critically assess; critically appraise; critically analyse, all as testament to the importance and position given to this aspirational cognitive state of being. Dunne also points to a range of international examples of assessments (p.87) designed to measure critical competency deployed by higher education institutions and some employers. Critical knowledge, according to Dunne, bestows epistemological knowledge that transcends other knowledge forms that are formulated by uncritical knowledge absorption without question (p.88). He also refers to Bok (2006) who asserts that although criticality and critical thinking are all pervasive in modern higher education institutions, these are generally inept at reaching their stated goal and cites studies that show large numbers of students displaying

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only 'marginal' gains in critical thinking attributes. Reasons for this are complex and the tests themselves, whilst an indicator of intention and purpose, are themselves not free from contention, something that will not be discussed here. However, they do provide impetus for evaluation of how effectively curricula incorporates the teaching of criticality and critical thinking.

The purpose of critical thinking and the indicators that a person has progressed towards a state of critical being is articulated by Facione (1990) who tells us that the ideal critical thinker is one that;

'...is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal prejudices, prudent in making judgements, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of the inquiry permit.' (Table 1, p.2)

The last section of this definition that alludes to restricted circumstances has particular relevance for the discussion here that investigates the confines of institutionalised conformity for aspirant teachers at both higher educational and practice-based levels and the implications for criticality.

In his landmark text *Higher Education a Critical Business* Professor Ron Barnett championed his critical triumvirate of thinking, reflection and action as a vehicle for the production of a more intrinsically developed learner when he extolled that, 'critical persons are more than just critical thinkers. They are able critically to engage with the world and with themselves as well as with knowledge' (1997, p1). Barnett's expansion of critical thinking to the more encompassing cognitive terrain of criticality was seen as a riposte to what he described as the increasing influence of 'performativity' within higher education when he indicates that, 'as instrumentality and performativity tighten their grip, so higher education for critical being becomes a necessary counter and a means of injecting a creative and transformative element into society' (p170). Performativity, through league tables, performance indicators and the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (DfE, 2016), can be seen to have developed substantially since this book was published. This could further be seen as an endorsement of Barnett's assertion that critical discourse is the inevitable casualty of systemic bias towards an operational, practical competence that can be measured and statistically recorded in accordance with industry data requirements at the expense of academic competencies that are not afforded the equivalent status and do not lend themselves to statistical evaluation as readily.

Transformation or Conformity?

Barnett (1997) articulated that criticality is transformative and enables a person to engage with the world and the process of attaining critical enlightenment should not be curtailed by those who would advocate that critical pedagogy is dependent upon the discipline within which it is framed. This is a view that needs to be increasingly asserted in order to equip the contemporary learner with the sufficient insights and evaluation skills that are needed to navigate the complexities of twenty first century life. Arguing whether criticality is subject specific is tantamount to academic infighting that can crucially detract from the bigger societal picture for which Barnett seeks to equip the learner. This is not a charge that can be laid against Giroux (2011) whose views are of increased relevance due to recent political events both domestic and global. Giroux, whose book *'On Critical Pedagogy'* (2011) can be read as a rallying cry for educationalists to oppose the all invasive neoliberal consumerism that pervades all aspects of society including education. He argues that this infiltration has reached the point where learners at all levels are seen as future economic units that interact with an increasingly corporatised education process (p.107). Giroux says that this is a behaviour that can lead to a potential breach of the contractual understanding between society and democracy within which the role of education was to provide critically enlightened citizens. Education is thus reduced to the role of job training. Students and learners are moulded into future employees (p.49). How then, will the citizen of today be equipped to decipher and extract veracity from the magnitude

of information to which an individual is increasingly exposed? How does an individual extract rationality and reason from technically progressive sources where fact, fiction, truth and propaganda are presented with equal status? Criticality and its position within the transformative learning experience, as expounded by Barnett, could be seen as an indispensable arbiter in the pursuit of meaning within the field of education and beyond. The transformative learner who is equipped with critical thinking skills will be resistant to a conformity that can be offered by limited and restricted knowledge pathways that are themselves increasingly unlimited and unrestricted.

This cultural backdrop places a heavy burden of responsibility upon the education industry and in particular the training of future teachers. Universities are increasingly perceived as simply trainers for industry and the professions. Learners, particularly in the case of the P.G.C.E., have been transformed into trainees that are then 'inserted into an engine of material and symbolic production and social reproduction. Serving the powers that be in this way becomes the role of the university.' (Marquez, 2006, p.151.) The language, attitudes and behaviours of those educators who are training trainees as opposed to teaching students will differ. Where does criticality sit as a priority for those who are being trained to conform to an industry standard that is increasingly hegemonic? This is a question that needs to be answered at a pan-institutional level.

The transformation to the persona of a critically armed teacher is increasingly dependent upon the ethos of schools that are performatively judged by statutory testing and assessment requirements and those practices that can meet them. (Giroux 2011, DfE 1997, Ofsted). This balance of power in favour of schools has infiltrated higher education institutes who are increasingly dependent upon them, particularly in the case of the P.G.C.E., for survival as a teacher training provider (Ofsted, 2015). This concern was emphasised by Sir David Bell, the Vice Chancellor of Reading University in a keynote speech to the Science Foundation in 2015 when he appealed for the School Direct programme to be reviewed after the next general election (something that is now unlikely), due to its threat to 'good and proven P.G.C.E. teacher training providers'. It would be reasonable to assume that this threat has permeated the pedagogy of the university in those courses that have a school-based practice element at levels such as these. The student teacher on a P.G.C.E. is therefore held within an acquiescence of imbalance between these two interdependent components for a professional status in which they may have limited opportunities for influence that goes beyond the perfunctory. The student may be a consumer of the teacher training programme but the limitations of their choices are exposed due to a financial commitment and institutional hierarchy that can compromise them into a role of passivity and conformity that may not fit with their predetermined perspectives of the teaching profession and the persona of a teacher.

Criticality and its capacity to nurture innovation and progressive change does not sit comfortably within a framework of increasing conformity. The accommodation of the position of criticality as a teaching principle within a conformist landscape will require innovation, analysis, critical reflection and the application of criticality to current practice.

Criticality, Curriculum and Theory

Performance measures, as discussed previously, are a significant contributor to the formation and design of curricula content. This is a factor that can be problematic in that assessment criteria and learning outcomes will be tailored to a learning system that is readily conducive in supporting predetermined, prevailing, performative monitoring systems. (Barnett et al, 2001, p.436).

This view is compounded by Bourner, (2003, p.2), who considers that reflective and critical thinking are difficult to measure and curricula design is lacking in the capacity to evaluate and promote

reflection and criticality for this reason. Bourner articulates further when he forwards that the lack of explicit assessment criteria for a specific concept or skill, criticality being such a concept, culminates in a decline in both interest and importance of that which is not assessed. These twin factors, performance indicators and lack of clarity in defining, recognising and assessing thinking skills, are considerations that will have implications for both curriculum design and practice within a P.G.C.E. programme. Bourner suggests a framework for evidencing the demonstration of reflective and critical thinking through a list of potential questions that can underpin a search for advanced knowledge, adjustments to practice and the development of cognitive processes. A questioning mind is central to the formation of a critical thinker as a person who engages with content with the purpose of finding more. This is where the distinction between deep and surface learning can be made. Where the learner goes beyond the acts of reviewing and describing into the domains of questioning, reasoning, and evaluating for the purpose of enlightened enhancement. Subjectivity is a reason that Bourner cites for the lack of certainty regarding the assessment and recording of both critical and reflective thinking. This is true but it is also true that this is a factor that will not be eradicated as teaching staff will always display a degree of autonomy that is both inevitable and desirable, although quality safeguards must be maintained.

In the discussion on curricula design Barnett et al, (2001), contribute that knowledge, action and the formation of the self as a critical being should be integral to the learning process. To this end, they advocate that these constituents of curricula design should be recognised across the educational spectrum from national policy to classroom practitioner (p.448). A more equal balance between criticality, critical thinking and reflection and reflexive thinking could be seen as being conducive to the learning process and the formation of a well-equipped teacher. However, the nature of the learning process within a P.G.C.E. programme and its constituencies of school and university, as outlined previously, could see the tendency for critical and reflective thinking requirements to be compartmentalised. Reflection is a process that schools are familiar with in a way that criticality does not currently enjoy as it seen as belonging in the constituency of the university or connoting dischord. To accord with Barnett (ibid), who sees criticality as being inherent in the self, this is an approach or tendency that needs to be resisted and adjusted so that both sets of skills are applicable, desirable and pertinent to the settings of university, school and beyond.

The integration and interdependency of the skill sets of both reflection and critical thinking are two themes advocated by Dwyer et al, (2014). For curricula to prepare the twenty first century learner for the complexities of modern life a more integrated, holistic approach should be applied to curricula design. However, how such an approach within curricula design would be assessed and taught is recognised by the authors as being lacking in proven theory. To this extent, criticality itself is applied when they evaluate that reflection and criticality are interdependent and that a degree of competency in the former may be required in facilitating learning in the latter (p.51). Correlated evidence, at least, is presented in claiming the interdependency of critical and reflective thinking. Dwyer et al suggest a framework for learning that will address the deficiencies in the explicit framing of assessment and learning criteria. This is reproduced below, (fig. 1), and could be used as a platform for incorporating implications into the teacher training programme.

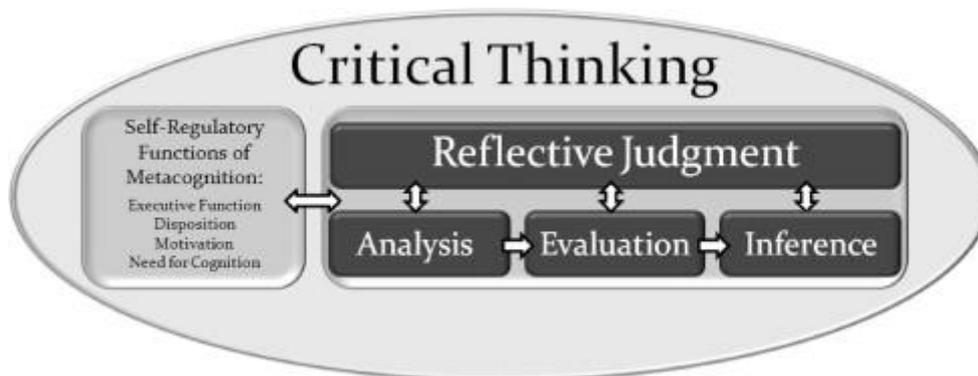


Fig. 1

The adoption of such an integrated approach to the teaching of thinking skills that can lead to reasoned conclusions will be beneficial to teacher training programmes that currently view them as specific and confined to the setting in which the learner is placed. Integration, coupled with the recognition of reflection and critical thinking skills as interdependent, would bestow the learner with the competencies and thinking attributes commensurate with that of a professional teacher ready to practice within the complexities of the twenty first century classroom.

Criticality and the Teacher Training Context

Criticality as a holistic, intrinsically embedded concept has the capacity to equip a student teacher with the skills required to negotiate the contemporary classroom where practice is an increasingly complex, transitory and politicised construct. To meet the new challenges surrounding assessment practices to measure progress some schools have adopted innovative approaches that have incorporated a more intensive assessment system into the teaching timetable in order to ensure quality and reduce teacher workload which is an increasing concern in the profession. (Cooper et al, DfE, 2015). Alternatively some schools have imposed dubious assessment regimes that have impacted negatively upon teacher workload with consequences for teacher retention, a practice that has been identified as unsatisfactory by Dame Alison Peacock the head of the forthcoming Royal College of Teaching (*I* News, 2017).

The effectiveness and accuracy of these systems, usually provided by a commercial supplier, are exposed to limited evidence-based scrutiny by teaching staff, a limitation that has been exposed by the Education Endowment Foundation in their investigation into the role of research in the teaching profession (Collins, 2016). Evidence –based practice was also highlighted as needing more prevalence in teacher training programmes in the Carter Review into Teacher Training (2014). A document providing guidance for schools in the navigation and adoption of this new initiative, ‘Assessing Without Levels’ (DfE, 2015) anticipated such difficulties when they advised schools to resist utilising systems that incorporate a limited perspective of progress when they say,

‘Tracking software, which has been used widely as a tool for measuring progress with levels, cannot and should not, be adapted to assess understanding of a curriculum that recognises depth and breadth of understanding as of equal value to linear progression.’ (DfE, 2015, p32).

The Carter Review in its recommendations also highlights assessment as the weakest area of teacher training programmes across the sector. The implications for practice in how to approach assessment as a fundamental but increasingly contentious principle within the teaching profession are crucial.

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Against this assessment background – which is usually accompanied by prescribed planning that is married to the assessment criteria - a student is increasingly judged by their effectiveness in delivering that which is already in place at the particular school where they are studying. It is here that the role of criticality can be seen to be at its most vital, pertinent, relevant but, alas, absent. The role of the university tutor who supervises the student in their placement must be to foster a relationship within which the student can begin to assimilate the role of the teacher from an evaluative perspective that is couched in professional analysis and academic criticality.

Given that the primary sector, in London at least (Burgess, 2014), is considered to have had a resurgence in quality teaching the question of whether criticality has a purpose in a profession that is deemed statistically successful arises. Should we be championing criticality in a P.G.C.E. programme that has enjoyed and contributes to this success? Is the teaching profession increasingly seen as a context where criticality is devalued? A profession that is increasingly influenced by corporate principles may see the role of criticality as superfluous and disruptive. Improvements within the Primary phase of the education sector are undoubted. However, this must surely be read as a development that has taken place due to the instigation of analysis, reflection and evaluation that have been harnessed to a motivation to improve. This in itself can be read as a metaphor for the process of criticality.

Implications for Practice

Criticality, critical thinking and reflection are skill sets that are subjective, not least to curriculum and assessment design and the prioritisation that these elements are granted within a teaching programme such as a P.G.C.E. If, as the thrust of this paper implies, the modern teacher has to be armed with critical thinking and the transformative potential of criticality then this has to be elevated as a teaching goal to the forefront teaching programmes. The intention of the P.G.C.E., to produce a student teacher that goes beyond the condition of an approved, conformist, school-based practitioner needs to be made explicit in a way that is not currently the case. Thinking skills that can be problematic in being placed neatly into an accepted theory, as previously mentioned, can then fall victim to the realm of assumption when an assessment criteria devoted to assessing cognitive development is weak, absent or determined by a generic rubric (Bourner, 2003).

Analysis of the purpose and effectiveness of procedures such as assessment must become a more dedicated element of teacher training programmes in a way that is not currently the case. Whilst the university cannot be expected to consider procedures adopted by individual schools, agreed content should be devised that advocates the purpose, application and efficacy of teaching practice as a principle that transcends data.

Conclusion

Criticality is a platform for a transformative learning experience that will determine the qualities of a student teacher. Pedagogy is continuously subjected to socio-political demands that are subject to rapid change. Within this context of what has been termed 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 2009), must remain a willingness to produce a teacher that is equipped to navigate a profession within which they are a component that is integral to the emotional, economic and academic success of their learner. Criticality will elevate a student teacher beyond being simply defined as an unquestioning repository of predetermined pedagogical principles. However, the formation of this teacher will be determined by the interests and actions of the providers of teacher training programmes and their

readiness to create a critically aware learner-client who may also wish to evaluate the integrity and value of their own programmes. A programme that is designed to create a professional teacher that is fit for purpose, and therefore critically astute, will satisfy the demands of employers, the statistical demands of higher education institutes, and not least, the children under their guidance.

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