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**Is critical thinking just a skill amongst others in the student's experience? (0103)**

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Philosophers of, and other commentators on, education have been debating for over five decades the place of thinking as something which can be taught, with the aim of fostering criticality in students. Opponents claim that critical thinking can only be fostered through the normal teaching of subject disciplines, which may be undermined precisely by their displacement by the introduction of thinking as an explicit curriculum subject. One interpretation of this view is that, if it is not explicit subject content, the critical thinking fostered through subject learning would instead be a type of 'skill' picked up by students. Some of those opponents (e.g. Johnson), however, view the explicit introduction of teaching thinking as also an attempt to insert the teaching of skills into a curriculum to detrimental effect.

I latch upon one of Frank Furedi's acerbic pieces to demonstrate the way that discussion and understanding about critical thinking has gone awry. He says that critical thinking is not a skill, aiming to save it (in, for him, its correct form) thus, as integral to intellectual endeavour consonant with the learning of academic subjects, which means also that it should not be codified in a list of learning outcomes. Fellow opponents of the skills agenda (overall) in higher education argue that more intellectual activities, "Learning at any level higher than the three Rs" (Maskell and Robinson, p78), are not skills but other sorts of thing entirely. For them, work such as plumbing, or riding a bicycle, are a matter of skills, since becoming proficient at these activities is sub-higher learning confined to the manual work sector or physical activity in general and so has no place in the Academy. But this view does a disservice to concepts both of skill and critical thinking and, despite the protagonists' intentions, actually sets back an appropriate response from the Academy against those who promote the skills agenda on behalf of e.g. the interests of other employers.

To attain a conclusion about critical thinking as a skill, we need to examine the concept of skill. The key to the issue lies at the ontological level, the level concerning what things which we seem able to refer to fundamentally are. Both camps, those supporting and those opposing the skills agenda in higher education, hold the incorrect, as I term it, "naïve realist" view about skills, which claims that skills are real things. Furthermore, when graduates have acquired these "skills", even though the skills in question are not obviously manual, they are represented as carrying these skill-like entities with them

and as able unproblematically to make use of them in any new work situation, as if the same mechanically transferable attributes were usable in just the same ways wherever the graduates find themselves. My selected critics of the skills agenda in higher education thereby use in this context what I call the “argument from realism” to claim that proper critical thinking cannot be a skill.

Against “naïve realism” about skills, I argue instead for “irrealism” as the correct ontology. This allows us to conceptualise the learning situation in terms of the possibility of thinking in a critical manner skillfully (as opposed to less skillfully). Winch helpfully identifies the mechanistic view of skills as a legacy of Adam Smith and Johnson rightly criticizes a current tendency similarly to view thought as computerized. But irrealism about skills is not thus hamstrung. Criticisms that the skills agenda is too generic to be meaningful (Johnson; Rowland, on the doctoral level) fail to take into account the tacit dimension (Polanyi), insofar as the generality of language can capture fully neither the specificity nor the particularity of processes and of experience (i.e. “raw feeling”: Kirk).

Barnett classifies the delimited and technical rules of reasoning as skills: “skills . . . are lacking in reflexivity. They do not allow for their own development and modification . . . The skill lies in the competence to perform instrumentally and not in the capacity to form a deep understanding of her environment and to critique it.” (Barnett, pp39-40) The underlying sticking point for him is that “skills are bounded repertoires of techniques . . . genuinely critical thought has an unbounded quality to it”. (Barnett, p81) And critical thought and reflexivity can lead us higher and ultimately to the level of action, action to change the world.

This placing of action at only the highest level is the clue to recommend serious revision to Barnett’s framework, however, to say that to attain each level higher of critical being is, simply, also to become more highly skilled at critical thinking. In sum, being skilled at critical thinking is to do it well, at least as a generalised judgement about particular acts and both general and specific actions. And talk of doing it well allows us scope to say more about value, i.e. what makes for good critical thinking, in its own terms and for the sake of wider purposes, with pointers to do it ever better.

With respect to the skills agenda in higher education, we in the Academy may now stand up and take action without being hamstrung by a metaphysically incoherent understanding of skills, the very understanding underpinning policy made outside the Academy and for outside interests. I show how the term “academic skill” (or “intellectual skill”) is not oxymoronic. If we embrace the language of skills, especially in critical thinking, having realised that our original subject teaching has always been about skills, the knowing how, as well as the knowing that, then we have the basis to claim that we should continue to be the authority on how to proceed in organising our respective subjects’ teaching programmes.

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