

Emily Danvers  
University of Sussex, UK

Troubling the concept: an exploration of difference within students' experiences of critical thinking in higher education (0133)

Programme number: K8.3

Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

Keywords - undergraduates, criticality, affect, identities, diversity

Critical thinking is closely aligned with the higher in higher education; it is both a core element of 'graduateness' and a cornerstone of the mission of higher education institutions. However, although the discourse of critical thinking is ubiquitous in higher education, it is often misunderstood as tangible, transferrable and measurable whereas in practice it is complex and contextualised. In this paper I will argue that critical thinking is a tacit social practice that is not ideologically neutral and that this has implications for understanding and accounting for difference in the academy. The intention of this paper is to interrogate and trouble the practice of critical thinking across three thematic possibilities— firstly, relating neo-liberalism to the technologisation of critical thinking; secondly, unpacking the social context of criticality; and finally, exploring the affective consequences of embodying criticality. Although this is primarily a theoretical paper, each thematic possibility will be illustrated with preliminary data analysis of interviews with 14 first-year students at the small research-intensive university in the UK, to be collected in October 2013.

Evans (2004) argues that higher education has shifted from a world where critical thought was prized to a world where universities are instead expected to fulfil the roles of the marketplace and act as training grounds for employment, leading to the 'death' of critical thinking. Reflecting back on the undergraduate students I have worked with previously, they often sought a quick fix within written assessment; seeing critical thinking as something as easy to judge its presence in writing as it is to check for correct spelling. Similarly, academic staff appeared to pigeonhole critical thinking as a measurable learning outcome but struggled to conceptualise, recognise and assess it. This seemed at odds with notions of critical thinking as a counter hegemonic; a form of individual and social transformation (Foucault, 1998; hooks, 2009). While critical thinking may not be 'dead', potentially these vignettes relate to the performance of a technicised, neutralised form of criticality. This has interesting parallels with Ball's (1995) warning about a lack of theory in educational research working to 'tame' the academy. I argue that re-configuring the power within criticality is increasingly important at a time when, for example, work on student 'lad culture' in higher education (Phipps & Young, 2012) demonstrates that the academy remains a discriminatory space.

Addressing whether critical thinking as an intellectual standard accounts for diversity is also important at a time when the relationship between higher education and financial reward is being problematised (Morley, 2007). If notions of intellectual gain remain, what is the relative value of critical thinking as a positional good in a social world that differentiates opportunity on the lines of class, gender, race and culture?

Bailin et al. (2000) discuss how the concept of critical thinking acts as a normative enterprise to regulate standards of writing and behaviour in higher education. Furthermore, Burke, (2012) outlines how critical thinking, like academic writing, acts as a form of exclusive practice that privileges particular gendered forms of knowledge and knowledge making. If critical thinking is an intellectual value that makes education 'higher'; to what extent is the performance of critical thinking reliant on knowledge and language practices that are accessible only to the few? This paper, and the interview research, will explore normative models of critical student identity and student's perceived understandings of how they relate to and potentially reshape these identities. This critical identity formation will be explored in relation to Archer's (2000; 2007) work on the *internal conversation*, a process by which agents shape and reshape their internal, reflexive dialogue in order to move through the structures of an increasingly morphogenetic social world. I will argue that students necessarily negotiate their critical identities in relation to this privileged discourse and that, consequently, the enactment of critical thinking needs to be understood as socially contextualised rather than reduced to a set of cognitive competencies.

Finally, this paper will explore the affective and embodied aspects of criticality. Barnett (1997) argues that we should abandon notions of critical *thinking* for a more social, embodied understanding of critical *being*. I will argue firstly that this notion of 'being' needs to be further interrogated as critical behaviours are enacted through classed, raced and gendered *beings*. Secondly, I will explore the emotional consequences of critical behaviour using Ahmed's (2010; 2012) theorisation of the affective aspects involved in occupying a counter-hegemonic, critical space. In particular, Ahmed talks about how human happiness is defined through our ability to be sociable, where those who do not share our ideas about goodness are read as 'killjoy's. This is similarly echoed by Ehrenreich (2010) who discusses how critical thinking presents an uncomfortable challenge in our increasingly 'positive thinking' society. Criticality may then potentially be at odds with the need for undergraduate students to develop positive social relationships with fellow students.

By 'troubling' the concept of critical thinking from these different angles, this paper will emphasise the importance of asking questions about power, privilege and difference in order to understand the complex social context and affective consequences operating within the seemingly transparent intellectual values of higher education.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham [N.C]: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham [N.C]: Duke University Press.
- Archer, M. (2000). *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. (2007). *Making our Way Through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailin, S., Case, R., Coombs, J. & Daniels, L. (1999). Conceptualising Critical Thinking. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 31(3), 285-302.
- Ball, S.J. (1995). Intellectuals or Technicians? The Urgent Role of Theory in Educational Studies. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 43(3), 255-271.

- Barnett, Ronald. (1997). *Higher Education: A Critical Business*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education.
- Burke, P. (2012). *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond Widening Participation*. London: Routledge.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2010). *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America*. New York: Picador.
- Foucault, M. (1998) *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*. London, Penguin.
- hooks, b. (2009). *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* . New York and London: Routledge.
- Morley, L. (2007). The X factor: Employability, Elitism and Equity in Graduate Recruitment. *Twenty-First Century Society*, 2(2), 191-207.
- Phipps, Alison and Young, Isabel (2012) *That's what she said: women students' experience of 'lad culture' in higher education*. London: National Union of Students.