

Transferability of student criticality: how far and in what ways? (0088)

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150 word abstract

Policy documents often talk about the transfer of graduate skills as desirable and unproblematic (e.g. University of Melbourne 2007; QAA 2008); the possibility of transferability of graduate-level skills in a globalised and post-industrial environment is one reason why governments have been willing to fund mass higher education. However, the literature suggests that such transfer is likely to be problematic (e.g. Livingston *et al.* 2004; Perkins and Salamon 2001; and Whitehead 1932). Through the vehicle of an ESRC-funded study of undergraduate criticality, this paper will examine how students transferred criticality at different points in their degree programmes and suggest how such transfer might be enhanced.

1000 word paper

Policy documents often talk about the transfer of graduate skills as desirable and unproblematic (e.g. University of Melbourne 2007; QAA 2008); the possibility of transferability of graduate-level skills in a globalised and post-industrial environment is one reason why governments have been willing to fund mass higher education. However, the literature suggests that such transfer is likely to be problematic (e.g. Livingston *et al.* 2004; Perkins and Salamon 2001; and Whitehead 1932).

Through the vehicle of a study of undergraduate criticality, this paper will examine how students transferred criticality at different points in their degree programmes and suggest how such transfer might be enhanced. Following Barnett (1997), criticality refers to thinking and actions across three domains (formal knowledge, the self, the world). Barnett suggests different forms of knowledge which operate in each of these domains: critical reason, critical self-reflection and critical action. Critical thinking, a narrower concept than criticality, is one of the transferable skills often mentioned in connection with undergraduates.

The empirical data on which the paper draw arise from a two year research project funded by Economic and Social Research Council, UK from July 2002-June 2004, *Development of Criticality among Undergraduates in Two Academic Disciplines: Social Work and Modern Languages* (ESRC Project R000239657). This project investigated the development of criticality among undergraduates in at the "University of Westford", a large research university, in the UK. It studied two contrasting disciplines, a traditional arts subject (Modern Languages) and a vocational social science (Social Work). The Modern Languages programmes offered a wide range of optional courses in fields such as literature, film, linguistics and language. In contrast, the Social Work students had to follow a prescribed range of programmes in the fields of social work, social policy, sociology, law and statistics, necessary in order to receive professional accreditation. The project involved a wide-ranging programme of data collection, including data on 18 case study students. For each student, there is a range of interviews and various related presentations

and pieces of writing, including notes, drafts and final assignments. The study thus gained access to detailed information about what students, their teachers and the departments were doing and why. This gave access to understandings of meanings, purposes and processes of the practice of criticality.

This paper will present a selection of the data to illustrate the transfer or otherwise of criticality. It will seek to explain the success or otherwise of transfer in conceptual terms, by drawing mainly on literature from psychology (e.g. Perkins and Salamon 1992).

The transfer of knowledge and personal resources is complex. This paper will suggest that certain types of criticality transfer are possible, but that others are more problematic.

Transfer of knowledge between Barnett's domains (formal knowledge, the self, action) seemed to be possible where such transfer was explicitly encouraged, discussed and assessed as in Social Work; where "thorough and diverse practice" of transfer assisted in development (Perkins and Salamon 1992). However, where such transfer was not explicitly encouraged and assessed, as with formal classroom theorisation to situations in the Year Abroad in the Modern Languages programmes, it was less likely to take place. Certain personal qualities such as confidence seemed to be at least somewhat transferable. The confidence developed during the Year Abroad and Social Work practice placements transferred to students' studies.

The data analysis highlighted various examples where transfer was difficult. Transfer of academic practices from one (sub-)field to another was hard (e.g. from sociology to social work, literature to history). Students with A levels, but not in subject areas relevant to particular units in their degree programmes, struggled to acquire field-specific knowledge. Knowledge and skills in, for example, literature or drama did not automatically transfer to, for example, social work or history and politics. Those who entered the university with a relevant academic background coped with field-specific demands more effectively early in their degrees.

Multidisciplinarity was an aspiration for some Modern Languages lecturers, but the problems caused by disciplinary barriers were acknowledged by others. We suspect that by the final year, the students had largely specialised in particular sub-disciplines, learning the necessary field-specific tools, rather than transferring between disciplines as multi-disciplinary beings.

There are issues about the transfer of criticality from one context to another. It appeared that criticality declined temporarily on transfer to higher education because of the change in context and resulting uncertainty about what was expected and how to achieve it. When required to move to a new arena of criticality (perhaps a new sub-discipline or a new field in the world), students often operated at a lower level of criticality than before as they lacked some of the necessary critical resources. However, if the person had previously undergone development in one area, s/he was likely to start with some

advantage in the new field, as certain relevant resources can be transferred, such as life experience, knowledge of how to manage learning, knowledge of what it is to be critical in another area, and so on. After graduation, some aspects of declarative knowledge were also likely to transfer. Presumably, for example, the Modern Languages graduates watched films and read literature differently from before their higher education studies. The students had developed the ability to write logically, to engage with the ideas of others, to apply explanatory frameworks, even if in field-specific ways. Confidence from the Year Abroad and practice placement experiences transferred to other aspects of studying. This confidence was likely to transfer to other aspects of life.

In sum, we should take care with policy claims about transferable skills for graduates. Some types of knowledge and personal qualities can be transferred while others are more problematic. It probably does not matter so much whether a student can function effectively in more than one academic field whilst at university, but how far and in what ways they can transfer what they learn from their higher education to their lives beyond graduation is important. It also matters that appropriate, effective policies at the higher educational level can be developed to encourage transfer of criticality to the post graduation experience.

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