Dead, dumbed down or discontented? Undergraduate students, critical thinking and higher education

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Historically, higher education (HE) was intended to produce more democratic citizens capable of critically debating and creating solutions to society's problems .Yet Evans (2004) argues that HE has shifted to a world where universities are expected to fulfil the roles of the marketplace and act as training grounds for employment, leading to the death of critical thinking. Davies (2003) agrees that the prominence of neo-liberal discourses in HE – with their emphasis on individual self- surveillance, management and control act to stifle criticality and debate in the academy. Certainly, the conditions for critical thinking described by critical and feminist pedagogues (e.g. Freire & Ramos, 1996; hooks, 2009; Morley, 1998) including supportive student-teacher relationships, freedom to explore topics in depth and critical discussion in small groups, now appear at odds with large, impersonal lectures, the positioning of students as knowledge consumers and the re-conceptualisation of HE as a private, rather than a public good. A student activist at the University of Sussex further echoes the link between marketisation and the death of criticality:

> *This new ideation of the university is continually forcing us as students to think of ourselves as selfish consumers, rather than encouraging us to critically engage with the status quo for the benefit of others.*
>
> Segalov (2013) no pagination

Notions of critical thinking being marginalised through the circulation of neo-liberal practices, prompts an interrogation of the state of critical thinking in higher education's everyday pedagogical encounters. This paper explores whether critical thinking is dead or simply squeezed of conceptual space by working through two provocations – critical thinking as a technology of assessment and as a performative enactments of emotional self-regulation.

The data, which informs and illustrates this paper, is drawn from research with first-year undergraduates at a UK research-intensive university. Two discipline cohorts were studied – one academic and the other a professional/applied social science – via observation of a compulsory class for each cohort from October- December 2013. Semi-structured interviews of 15 students (7 from the academic and 8 from the

professional cohort) were conducted in October and November 2013, with a follow-up focus group with 4 students in May 2014. These various research encounters explored students' initial engagements with, and responses to, practices of critical thinking at university and their reflections on the role of critical thinking in their lives and futures.

Instrumentalising critical thinking

Barad (2012) claims that her students are so well trained in critical thinking that they can 'spit it out with the push of a button' (no pagination). Here she exemplifies the instrumental critical thinking practices associated with pedagogies of assessment that Evans (2004) argues increasingly dominate neo-liberal HE. While the students in the research revealed multiple, conflicting understandings of criticality in line with Fenwick & Edwards (2013) who see critical thinking as sustained by 'multifarious capillaries of associations and action' (37), certain discourses had a greater intensity. Many students appeared to take a systematic, instrumental approach to becoming and being critical, particularly in relation to their assessments. Bronwyn, a professional student, reflects about the role of critical thinking in her first-year studies saying:

> *We're being forced to think so much deeper. You know, you have to in order to fulfil the words and the learning outcomes.* (Focus Group)

Bronwyn strongly aligns critical thinking with a successful assessment performance. Consequently to maximise her intellectual investment, it seems logical to appropriate behaviours that produce positive results. While student conscientiousness in relation to assessment is not 'neo-liberal' in itself, as a consequence of the instrumental grammar surrounding criticality, students often described their critical thinking in highly technologised ways. For example, in the academic seminar I asked a student about how her essay was going and she said '*it's almost done, I just need to put the critical bit in* (Observation). This strong positioning of critical thinking as a technology was perhaps a consequence of the dominance of discourses of education's measurable value. Where the only critical thinking that 'counts' is that which is expressed through the technologies of formal and informal assessments, spaces for criticality do become highly constrained, as Evans (2004) proposes.

Psychologising critical thinking

Another dominant engagement with critical thinking, particularly echoed by students in the professional cohort, was critical self-reflexivity about who students are and their place in the world. This focus on 'emotion work' drew on specific enactments of self-surveillance that Davies' (2003) characterised as key to neo-liberal selfhood. For example, Emma describes:

> *My perception of critical thinking is that you can use it quite personally. You can use it to your advantage if you look at a situation…and think 'oh I did that well or I didn't' and then you can work on it… I think that if you are able to use critical thinking it can be really good for improving yourself.* (Interview).

The internalised direction of such emotion work draws on broader neo-liberal notions of performativity and the need to continually develop and demonstrate the 'brand called you' dominates continual professional development in most people-centred professional disciplines such as in Education and Healthcare. However, Davies (2003) is critical of the way that this creates the 'continually-changing individual' (p. 93) whose self-surveillance through a 'multiplied gaze' (p. 92) turns direction away from critique of the broader system of new managerialist governance – enacting a process of reflection rather than resistance. This potentially makes critical thinking internalised and purely self-referential, taming critical thinking inwards into a passport for self-improvement in the knowledge economy, rather than outwards, towards a broader questioning of educational practices or social structures.

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What this paper will argue is that critical thinking is not dead and that student participants deeply engaged with practices of critical thinking. Instead, critical thinking felt discontented by being squeezed of conceptual space through the dominance of a limited instrumental and psychologised vocabularies for understanding students' critical thinking. While such notions of are not in themselves inherently bad, what is at stake is when neo-liberal discourses become the *only,* or the dominant ideologies at work in constructing critical knowledge practices?

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