

Literature Reviews: Critical thinking and reflection

- Barnett, R. (1997) *Higher Education: A Critical Business*. Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press. *Pages 2-5*
- Brown K. and Rutter L. (2006) *Critical Thinking for Social Work*, Exeter: Learning Matters. *Pages 6-7*
- Cottrell, S. (2005) *Critical Thinking Skills Developing Effective Analysis and Argument*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. *Pages 8-9*
- Moon J.(2005) *We Seek it Here.... A new perspective on the elusive activity of critical thinking: a theoretical and practical approach*. An ESCalate publication *Pages 10-12*

BOOK REVIEW: "Higher Education: A Critical Business" Open University Press / SRHE 1997 by **Ron Barnett**

REVIEWER: John Hilsdon, University of Plymouth 2007

A Call for Permanent Revolution?

Now ten years old, "Higher Education: A Critical Business" remains a classic. It is highly regarded by many academics, being one of the most frequently cited works on the topic of 'criticality' in higher education. It is a book about the work of universities which asks questions about the nature and uses of knowledge. Does it also have relevance to those wanting to learn about critical thinking for studying at university? At the micro level of 'how to' its usefulness may seem limited – but anyone's approach to criticality is likely to be influenced by this book if they are prepared to read it in depth. It represents some serious 'thinking about thinking' - although its approach is broadly social-philosophical rather than being about developing particular skills for thinking, or an exploration of cognitive processes. For these reasons, it is likely to suit some readers more than others.

At the outset, Professor Barnett describes his notion of 'critical being' as including thinking, self-reflection and action: "*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). In this sense critical being is an approach to life, thinking and criticality that a university educated person should aspire to.

Barnett suggests that critical thinking, though long held to be an activity fundamental to universities in the 'west' is not a sufficient concept for the modern world – it is critical being we need. He argues that we have no account of what critical thinking really is and that this lack of attention to criticality undermines the stated objectives of our higher education systems to enable graduates to 'take on the world'. He warns us against the 'critical thinking industry' (for which, read the mechanistic 'study skills' approach) with its instrumental agenda, serving only particular purposes or subject related functions ('disciplinary competence') yet ignoring the need to critique the overall enterprise and context of higher education itself.

Critical being is a fundamentally existential notion or project. Barnett talks of the need for those aspiring to criticality to develop their own social and personal epistemology. In other words, as society places different kinds of value on different kinds of knowledge, individuals need to be able to be aware of – to place themselves - in their wider social context and see how their own notions of what counts as knowledge are influenced. Such self-critical awareness encompasses the notion of contesting or challenging what is 'given' – rather than merely seeking acceptance or assimilation within a disciplinary community. Barnett calls this the 'transformatory' purpose of higher education

– that we are not only changed as individual persons through our learning, but can also facilitate change in the world as a result. Referring to the underpinning role of critical theory in his own development, Barnett speaks of an emancipatory experience through critical being – a process of releasing ourselves from the shackles of beliefs or knowledge systems which serve to limit human potential.

Modern society seems not to be in control of itself – the various social and environmental crises, of which we are now more acutely aware than at the time Barnett was writing, are indicative of the fact that the ‘enlightenment project’ has gone wrong! His response is to repudiate an elitist notion of higher education as totally inadequate to the issues human society now faces. Instead, we need a higher education that places criticality at the centre of its enterprise.

Criticality can be seen in terms of levels and domains. As regards level, we begin with skills for questioning, progress through an awareness of the standards of reasoning within disciplines, and work towards a wider ability to undertake critique by bringing new perspectives to bear. The three domains of criticality Barnett identifies consist of knowledge (critical reason), the self (critical reflection) and the world (critical action). To date, our universities have concentrated rather narrowly on the domain of knowledge – and in many senses remained at the level of skills rather than moving towards critique. Critical thinking seen as the deployment of cognitive skills by individuals is inadequate - it is *“thinking without a critical edge”* (p17).

Barnett brushes aside the debates between those who see critical thinking as context dependent or as independent. He thinks that whether students already have some kind of innate critical thinking capacity that can be developed, or whether they need to be working within the context of a discipline to develop this capacity is the wrong question. Focussing on this leads to debates about whether or not there is a single set of skills for thinking that educators can engender in their students, or whether they are specific to disciplines. In this *“critical thinking takes on the burden of supplying a general culture of the mind to the whole higher education system”* (p 64). Rather than becoming bogged down in this, his concern is rather with the purposes of being critical – and for this he argues we need to examine the three domains referred to above: of knowledge and ideas; of experience of self; and of action in the world.

There is an attempt in this book to explore the thorny issues of postmodernism (exploration of differences in views about the nature of truth, implying a relativistic approach) versus universal rationalism (especially the Habermassian concept of standards of reasoning and criticality that all humans should agree upon as indispensable in examining claims to truth). Barnett weaves his way around the issues and concludes that it is at least possible, with a real commitment to criticality, to open up thought to critique both from

the use of critical standards derived from within the discourses of its own discipline AND from standards developed in other subject areas: we can *"... be both locals and cosmopolitans with respect to critical thought"* (p33). It is the bringing in of notions associated with selfhood such as will, authenticity and emotion that enable those of us involved in higher education to transcend overly cerebral approaches, and to embrace an emancipatory vision of critical being: *"... to live the critical life in higher education, and engender a critical spirit"* (p34).

Drawing attention to the increasingly 'action' oriented ways of knowing that are permissible in universities, Barnett cites as examples action-research, problem-based learning, learning outcomes and competency based curricula. Where is the role of critique in such approaches, where reward mechanisms such as self-assessment against performance criteria seem to imply that the skills under development are beyond question? When operational competence replaces academic competence, there are limited opportunities for critical thought, Barnett argues – yet our need for the latter is now greater than ever. His position is that we need to develop a conception of reflexivity which allows collaborative approaches rather than mere individual reflection. In this we have to understand the modern (post-elite) university as an organisation that can provide new cognitive resources for the community through *"the reconstruction of the critical university"* (p59). Such an organisation would be characterised by *"open conversation where the end is uncertain"* (ibid), not just between academics but between management and all other staff. This will be a challenge and will be resisted *"because the cost-benefit returns will be poor"* yet *"the managerial role has to be reconceptualised as opening up the possibility of academic community"* (ibid).

Barnett sees his vision of a critical university as a vehicle for bringing about *"a learning society in its fullest sense"* (p167) – where students are encouraged to critique both ways of knowing and of acting in the world rather than focussing narrowly on skills and 'what works'. For such a university, three conditions are necessary: First, *"students have to be exposed to multiple discourses"* (ibid) – and not just intellectual ones, but practical and experiential ones too, within their programmes of study. Secondly, they must be exposed to *"wider understandings, questionings, and potential impact of ... (their) intellectual field"* (p168) undertaken by reaching out from the academy and engaging with society at large as a part of the enterprise of study (this would certainly accord with at least the *form* of current thinking as represented by the Leitch report (2006) on the future of education). Thirdly it requires a *"... committed orientation on the part of the student to this form of life. The willingness to see ones own world from other perspectives ... the willingness to risk critique ... this calls for heroic dispositions on the part of students"* (p169).

My own reading of this book has been a journey of highs and lows. I have just re-read it after about six years, for the purposes of writing this review. I

remembered it with affection from my first reading. The picture Barnett uses as his frontispiece, of the student standing unarmed and with unbelievable courage – with real critical spirit - directly in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989, is still arresting and moving. It encapsulates the remarkable notion of commitment to emancipation that Ron sees as ideal in our higher education academies ... and yet, though I travelled with Ron, I have departed from him a number of times along the way. I have returned, willing to hold to critical being as an ideal worth striving towards. I cannot help but imagine that the response of any academy to relentless criticality (like the 'permanent revolution' of Trotskyism!) would be unlikely to be supportive – for how could the academy itself survive such onslaughts? How might disputes be settled or decisions made?

Of course, he concludes that a higher education for the critical life will *"... not be comfortable, for students, for their lecturers (now become educators) or for wider society"* (ibid). And yet, as higher education *"... becomes a business securing its position in the marketplace,"* Barnett warns, it must also take its *"rhetoric about criticality seriously"* and *"... 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 transformatory element into society"* (p170). How exactly the academy will be able to secure its market position whilst also promoting this uncomfortable criticality and demanding these heroic student dispositions is not quite clear! Nonetheless this book offers a beacon towards which we might strive. In relation to critical thinking it makes very worthwhile reading since it takes us beyond the individualistic, the skills-based or the discipline-specific ideas that prevail in most other literature in the field. Moreover, it gets us thinking anew about what we are doing in universities, for whom and for what purposes – and that can only be to the benefit of us all.

Ronald Barnett is Professor of Higher Education and Dean of Professional Development at the Institute of Education, University of London. His books include 'The Idea of Higher Education' and 'The Limits of Competence'.

BOOK REVIEW: Brown, K and Rutter, L (2006) *Critical Thinking for Social Work*

Reviewer: Eloïse Sentito, Learning Development, University of Plymouth (July 2007)

Useability: a clear and easy format

This 50 page handbook for post-qualifying and other social work degree students offers a surprisingly in-depth and comprehensive guide to adopting a critical approach in their thinking, writing, and practice. Presented in book form with discursive passages (mostly clearly labelled) combined with text boxes, bullet points, tables and activity suggestions, it is at once weighty and accessible. The FAQs section at the beginning really does address the questions that I think a reader might have. The overall structure and organisation of material is logical, and they offer good coverage of the material named in the chapter titles: 'Critical thinking'; 'Learning and the application of new knowledge in practice'; 'Critical Reflection'; 'Writing reflective academic assignments' and 'Critical Practice'. Each chapter opens with a very useful box highlighting learning outcomes and assessment criteria, modelling the excellent practice of transparency. Of course these criteria, the examples and the reading are geared towards these particular students, but the discussion, advice, models and principles behind the activities and the rest is very much transferable; I would refer any student to much of this guide, especially those in related disciplines involving critical reflection, such as the other caring professions.

Theory and practice: a good balance and a holistic approach

The book is clearly well-researched, and though the authors claim to have kept theory to a minimum, the impression given is one of scholarly rigour, but with an accessible and helpful emphasis on practice in work and study. Theory is usefully drawn upon with clear links to practice, and I think they are successful in not overwhelming the reader with supporting literature but rather emphasising the way in which theory informs practice, showing both its value and the pragmatics of linking the two. As well as presenting some mostly well-selected models from others' work (e.g. Cottrell's clear and enlightening differentiation between descriptive and analytical writing), they also offer helpful-looking pointers to further reading.

There are several examples of the authors' professed holistic approach, such as their preference for embedded critical thinking rather than skills bolt-on (Chapter 2), although I felt that this was somewhat undermined by their recommendation in the final summary that critical thinking requires 'experience and practice in order to be learnt effectively'. However, I am mostly convinced by the integrity of their approach, and an example in support of their claim is a discussion, which empowers the learner, of the value of practical experience and felt/intuitive responses that make up practice

knowledge which, they emphasise, can be as important as academic knowledge when applied critically (p14).

Level: language and discussion sometimes too specialist

Relatively informal but nonetheless serious, the writing style is engaging, generally clear and straightforward, and, for an academic reader, this book is a comfortable read. At times however I felt the language became too specialised for the intended audience, especially in the opening chapter, where talk of critical 'concepts' and 'standards' could be alienating. By the same token, whilst the reader is given generally helpful one-word explanations of terms such as 'empirical', it is ambitiously [in my opinion] assumed that all these students would be comfortable with terms such as 'premise'. Similarly, the discussion of rhetoric here (e.g. deductive v. inductive arguments) is quite advanced, possibly daunting and, I would argue, not of obvious relevance or easy absorption when presented in this quite academic way.

In subsequent chapters there are examples of interesting (to me) but possibly off-puttingly abstract intellectual discussions that could at least benefit from simpler introductions, breakdowns, explanations and/or subheadings. Cust's supposed definition of a critical practitioner (p37) is presented in an overly complex schema that is difficult to follow, after some discussion that doesn't answer in a clear way the implicit (why not explicit?) question of 'what is a critical practitioner?' The crucial message (to do with assumptions and judgment) at the end of the first chapter could also usefully be more directly stated.

In summary: mostly straightforward; sometimes demanding; always interesting

However, not being patronising is a definite strength, and the topics as well as much of the discussion are interesting, important and relevant, and, especially where they are directly and simply described, the value of this book is clear. And the actual pragmatics usually *are* simple and direct, as for example in Chapter 4, where the tables are mostly really clear and helpful, and the advice on developing a point and structuring arguments and paragraphs is good penny-dropping stuff.

So my main doubt is regarding level. Granted, a 'Critical Thinking for Dummies' guide would probably be severely oxymoronic (and many worse things besides), but reading *Critical Thinking for Social Work*, I kept coming back to the thought that those students who would be interested and intellectually able enough to easily engage with this text are probably not the ones who need to read it. That said, despite requiring a bit of effort from the reader (and perhaps a bit of skimming and skipping), Brown and Rutter offer a mostly invaluable, much needed and stimulating demystification of lecturers' expectations of student work. In conclusion: well worth the effort! Can they please offer a more generic one for all undergraduates too?!

BOOK REVIEW: Critical Thinking Skills (2005) by Stella Cottrell
Palgrave Macmillan, 250p.

Reviewer: Jonathan Smart, University of Plymouth, Academic support services (2008)

My first impression of this book concerned the thoughtful layout of the text, using clear headings, bullet-points and readily-assimilated chunks of information. The introduction sets the scene effectively in this respect, and includes a 'roadmap' (pp. x and xi) giving the reader an overview of the layout of the book with an abstract summarising the contents – very useful. I'm not so sure, however, why the glossary is in the front as opposed to the back, though perhaps this is me bowing to convention. Each chapter lists the intended learning outcomes at the outset, the maximum number being kept to five, thus avoiding the likelihood of the learner feeling overloaded. I also found it useful to revisit the learning outcomes at the end of chapters, thus enabling me to reflect upon what I had read, reinforce the learning, and ensure that there were no key points that I had overlooked.

The page design and layout demonstrates a familiarity with the design of open learning texts, by avoiding too great a density of text, breaking up the pages with headings, using small shaded panes of information, different fonts and humorous cartoons (these can occasionally seem rather patronising, but they do serve to lighten up the subject and often make a point clearer). There is a useful summary at the end of each chapter. The emphasis overall is upon deep, active learning rather than a passive and surface approach – this is achieved both by the aforementioned design and the inclusion of action planning summaries, exercises and self-tests (this exploits the fact that almost everyone likes quizzes and finds them an engaging way to learn, a fact that has increasingly brought interactive technologies into the classroom and lecture theatre). I was surprised that no more than a passing reference (p. xi) is made to the importance and function of reflection and the role it has in critical thinking.

Locating and evaluating sources of evidence is covered in Chapter 8 and helps the student to distinguish between primary and secondary sources as well as that which is reliable and unreliable and promotes the critical evaluation of information. These are essentials for learning in the digital age, and in some respects, one could argue that this is the heart of the matter and encompasses the core issues in information literacy.

A particularly useful Chapter 11 involves critically evaluating pieces of writing, incorporating a checklist to help learners analyse according to various criteria. I would think that this would be particularly useful for those students making the transition from descriptive to analytical writing, as it encourages them to look beyond what is facing them in the text and to dig a little deeper. One of the elements in the list of criteria concerns whether the writer has referenced their work which is a good opportunity to express my puzzlement about the referencing used in this book. The first instance of citing references occurs at the end of chapter 2, where a standard Harvard style is used. From Chapter 3

onwards, however, the style of referencing takes on a form I have never encountered that puts the title first *followed* by the author in the citation – the works frequently appear not to be cited in-text (as far as I can see) and even if it was just intended to be a bibliography, it would still be a pretty unconventional way of doing it. Sanity returns (temporarily) with Harvard at the end of Chapter 8, (appropriately perhaps, as this chapter deals with conventional referencing, and in so doing flatly contradicts what the reader sees in practice in the book) only to embark on some sort of a freewheeling mixed economy of styles (end Chapter 9). Since we are trying to teach our students consistency, this surely goes somewhat against the grain. I hasten to add that this is not me being pedantic – I’m truly puzzled by the approach to referencing in this book and freely admit that I might be missing something. Overall, Sheila Cottrell manages to dispel any misapprehension that critical thinking is only for the high-octane, academically elite student, by cutting through some of the mysticism and making accessible what could be perceived as an otherwise ‘difficult’ area. This she achieves through using design, layout and an interactive style and content that provides an opportunity for the student to engage with an area which could otherwise be misconstrued as the domain of the few. In an age where many feel that excessive reliance on the Internet and its profusion of digital information, not all of which is reliable, is draining the learner’s cognitive and analytical powers, it is the application of critical thinking that will augment the student’s toolkit of skills that are essential not just for their period of study, but as an essential component for citizenship and lifelong learning.

BOOK REVIEW: Dr Jenny Moon (2005) *We Seek it Here...* A new perspective on the elusive activity of critical thinking: a theoretical and practical approach. An ESCalate publication

Reviewer: Julia Dawson, University of Plymouth (2007)

Subject and aim of the publication

We seek it here.... is, as the title says, about the activity of critical thinking. It aims to help the reader define and understand the concept of critical thinking and convey this effectively to students.

Usability: Well laid out, contains sufficient detail and is easy to use

This publication is aimed primarily at staff teaching at HE level, but may also interest students who wish to know more about critical thinking.

The layout is clear and effective, using sub-headings, bold text, text boxes and bullet points to break down the content for ease of reading and comprehension. The focus of the content is generic, with examples taken from a variety of disciplines and also from daily life, to provide a clear understanding of the concepts. Further detail on the theory is provided in appendix 1, 2 and 3. Appendix 4 provides the reader/teacher with a set of descriptors which work through the stages of thinking in undergraduate education.

The publication covers all levels, from foundation to post graduate, and takes widening participation into account, making it a very usable publication in today's HE environment. It is written in two sections, theory and practice, each ending neatly with a concise bullet point summary.

Theory and Practice: Presented in two complementary parts

In part one the author demonstrates thorough research of the topic and refers to many of the key authors and literature sources on critical thinking. This section forms a theoretical base which helps to define what critical thinking means to different people in different situations. It demonstrates that there are a variety of views held and approaches used to teach critical thinking. Many of these views are conflicting, and this conflict is neatly built into an argument which concludes with Moon's notion of critical thinking.

Moon argues, for example, that in Kneales (2003) study skills book for students, critical thinking complicates rather than clarifies, and that Paul and Elder's (2004) miniature guide packs too much in and is too complex to support students. She supports the theories proposed by Brookfield and Barnett and the practical stages offered by Baxter Magolda and to some extent Cotterell. The conclusion she draws from the literature finds that:

“Critical thinking is a capacity to work with complex ideas whereby a person can make effective provision of evidence to justify a reasonable

judgement. The evidence, and therefore the judgement, will pay appropriate attention to context.”

Moon believes that critical thinking should be applied at different levels of development. She argues that it should be seen as a developmental process, that the learners view on critical thinking will be conceptualised by the stages of epistemological belief. To illustrate her point she draws on research work conducted by a variety of academics (page 8) including Baxter Magolda (1992, 2001) and Kember (2001).

In her analysis she also considers the relationship critical thinking has with reflective learning and building arguments. She warns of the dangers of separating these terms in the classroom, when they are intrinsically linked.

This awareness of the difficulties of understanding and teaching the concept of critical thinking helps to guide the reader into part two, which focuses on the practical application of the theory. Moon proposes several ways in which students can be encouraged to think critically. It may be through interactivity in the classroom, in depth reflective practice as part of a PDP, or through examples of real student work where they can see where and how critical thinking has occurred. She points out that assessment is a strong motivator and it can be used to encourage the thinking process if the right pedagogy (such as engaging students in peer review or setting criteria for assessment) is applied.

The author recognises that students will be at different stages of knowledge, in different areas of their discipline and offers practical steps to enable learners and teachers to recognise these stages. As in part one, she uses examples from real life situations to enhance understanding and she returns to the close links between deep reflection and critical thinking, proposing a useful selection of activities both written and oral to encourage students to move towards contextual thinking. These activities include learning journals and self appraisal, challenging the students' range of knowledge and encouraging metacognition. Taking account of the fact that students need time to pause and think, and need to enter into discussion and debate.

The final part of this section is based on the stages of understanding by Baxter Magolda (1992). These stages are 'absolute knowing' where the learner believes in absolute answers and there is a student/teacher relationship exists; 'transitional stage' where there is partial uncertainty; 'independent knowing', when the learner has their own beliefs; and 'contextual knowing' the final stage where judgements are made on the basis of evidence and the teacher becomes a partner. Moon includes a set of statements for students to consider in groups. They are given the description of the stages of thinking and asked to classify the statements. In doing so they are improving their awareness and raising their aspirations to reach the next level of thinking development.

Strengths

A key strength of this publication is the author's ability to bring the concept of critical thinking into everyday situations. By using real, non academic examples she demonstrates that students are thinking critically, but need to transfer this ability from the non academic to the academic context. She uses Baxter Magolda's (1992) stages of thinking to refine the process which all students (and staff) can follow as they develop towards independent and contextual learners.

She draws the theoretical and practical elements together effectively, enabling the reader to take the theory into the classroom and apply it through a variety of well designed activities.

Unless critical thinking is a key focus of a class or the subject of a research project, few people would read this publication in depth. However, in its favour, the summaries at the end of each section do provide a useful snapshot.

Summary: Effective and well balanced

Jenny Moon has pulled together current thinking and research on critical thinking and has presented a theoretical base and practical activities for encouraging students through the stages of the thinking process.

It is a comprehensive and well balanced piece of writing. It provides something for everyone, the theorists and the practical thinkers. Throughout the publication Moon refers to the work of other authors and uses this effectively to support both the theory and the functionality of the practical activities proposed.