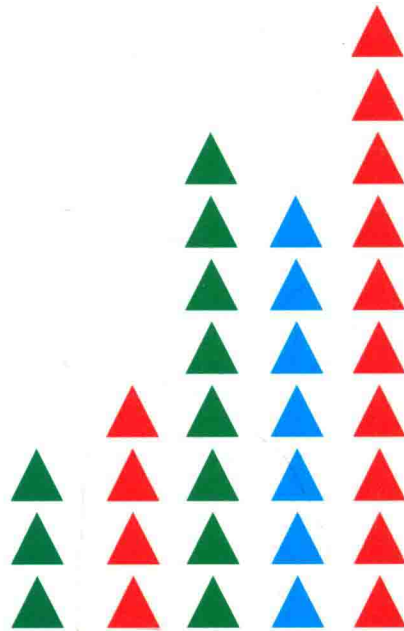


CRITICAL THINKING AND LANGUAGE

THE CHALLENGE OF GENERIC SKILLS AND DISCIPLINARY DISCOURSE



Tim John Moore

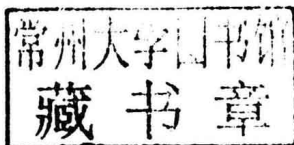


B L O O M S B U R Y

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Disciplinary Discourses

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For my parents — Bo and June

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Problem of Critical Thinking

To purify the dialect of the tribe ...

—T. S. Eliot
Four Quartets

For the learning of every virtue, there is an appropriate discipline.

—Bertrand Russell
A History of Western Philosophy

1.1 Introduction: Words and Worlds

In his famous book of terms, *Keywords*, Raymond Williams discusses the disorienting effect that language can have on an individual when they enter a new realm of experience. Williams felt this effect himself upon his return to Cambridge University in 1945, after an interruption to his studies during the war years. Although his time away was relatively short, he was sure that in this intervening period the language of the university had somehow changed. In contemplating what for him was ‘a new and strange world’ around him, Williams remarked to a colleague: ‘The fact is that they just don’t seem to speak the same language’. (Williams 1976: p. 9)

For Williams, the most noticeable new word in the argot of the postwar campus was the term ‘culture’. He said that not only was he hearing the term much more often, but that it also seemed to have acquired new and different senses, which, at the time, he ‘could not get clear’. This experience was the motivation for his writing *Keywords*, which he describes as his ‘record of inquiry into a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions ... of practices and institutions’ (p.13). Williams’ hope in writing the book was to make some sense – both for himself and for others – of a vocabulary that we all use, and which we seek ‘to find our way in’. (p. 22)

The present book is motivated by a similar interest in a particular word and also by a similar difficulty in 'getting its meaning clear'. The word – or rather expression – I have in mind is *critical thinking*. As it was for Williams, my first encounter with this term, along with a sense of its manifold importance in the academy, also coincided with an experience of returning to a university. In the early 1990s, after a period of living abroad, I re-entered the university system both to take up studies in applied linguistics, and also to commence work as a study skills tutor at a large Australian university. The tutoring position, which involved the teaching of academic and language skills, was a relatively new type of work in Australian universities, having emerged out of the many changes that were occurring in the higher education sector around this time (Chanock 2005). These changes – which saw not only large increases in the number of students participating in higher education, but also changes in the types of social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds they came from – meant there was a need for universities to devote themselves in dedicated ways to assisting certain cohorts of students to adapt to the demands of tertiary study.

In the work that my colleagues and I did with students over the ensuing decade – consisting mainly of academic writing classes, and advice sessions for individual students – a notion that was never far away in our discussions and deliberations was the idea of being *critical*. The term, for example, was frequently present in the assignment tasks set for students, the discussion of which formed the basis of many of the writing classes we conducted (e.g. *Critically discuss X. In this assignment, you need to show your critical understanding of Y, etc.*). More tellingly, the term was often present as a key element in much of the written feedback provided to students on their completed assignments – often, sadly, when a piece of work had, in the lecturer's judgement, fallen short of the expected standard (e.g. *This work is too descriptive and not sufficiently critical, etc.*). In many of the academic skills manuals that began to be published at the time, and which slowly filled our office shelves, the idea of students needing to be critical was also a recurring theme.

It seemed, from these experiences, that in the practical domain of helping students to adapt to this new learning environment, the idea of being successful at university was understood increasingly in terms of the degree of 'criticalness' that students could bring to their studies. This, for me, was an interesting development, partly because I could not recall the term being used much at all in the days of my own undergraduate study some 15 years earlier in the 1970s. My growing awareness of the term was also sharpened by the difficulties that both my students and I had in 'getting the term's meaning clear' – both as some general capacity that needed to be adopted, and also, at times, as some specialist form of engagement seemingly demanded by particular contexts of study.

It also became apparent around this time that the term 'critical' was not only being used in the everyday domain of study in the disciplines, but was also gaining currency in a larger rhetorical arena – in the area of national higher

education policy. In the 1990s, in Australia and elsewhere, a new agenda began to emerge in the sector, one that saw a shift from an 'inputs' approach to policy, with an emphasis on efficiency and productivity, to a focus on 'outcomes' and 'quality' (Ballard and Clanchy 1995). Central to this project was the imperative for universities 'to describe the attributes that graduates should acquire through their exposure to a high quality education system' (Australian Higher Education Council 1992: p. 32). Thus, in the ensuing years, university administrators applied themselves energetically to 'auditing' the many academic programmes offered by institutions to try to come up with an account of what it was that students would possess, or what it was hoped they would possess, at the end of their degrees. In such processes, which have continued unabated into the new millennium, one of the attributes that it is universally agreed students should develop is the ability to think critically. (Barnett 2004)

1.2 Issues of Critical Thinking

The notion of being critical thus seems to have assumed a reified position in our universities; and indeed the phrase 'critical thinking' has become, as Williams might describe, a keyword 'in our most general discussions of practices and institutions' (1976: p. 13). For John Swales, the term has become a surrogate for one of the defining characteristics of the academic world (Swales, personal communication). However, while many accept the term as a fundamental way of characterizing contemporary higher education, there are many questions and problems that seem to surround its use. The first of these is the basic definitional question – what do we mean precisely when we speak of 'critical thinking'? I indicated earlier my own difficulties in coming to some understanding of the term; the same difficulties are reported widely in the literature (Fox 1994; Atkinson 1997; Chanock 2000; Candlin 1998). Dwight Atkinson, for example, suggests that even though critical thinking has become such a widely discussed concept, many in the university find the term an elusive one:

academics normally considered masters of precise definition seem almost unwilling or unable to define critical thinking. Rather they often appear to take the concept on faith, perhaps as a self-evident foundation of Western thought – such as freedom of speech. (1997: p. 74)

Along with questions concerning the meaning of critical thinking, there are other issues one must confront. For example, does the term refer to some kind of universal 'generic skill' that is readily transferable to a multiplicity of situations, or is it better understood as only a loose category, taking in a number of diverse modes of thought dependent on specific contexts. Related to these basic epistemological questions are questions of pedagogy. If we wish our students to

become critical thinkers, how is this best achieved? Should there be, for example, dedicated generalist courses in 'thinking', or is it best to teach this ability to students within the context of their studies in the disciplines. Indeed, is it necessary to teach critical thinking at all? These are all important questions, and the answers that are proposed for them have the potential to have a major bearing on the way that university curricula are understood and developed.

1.3 The Critical Thinking Movement and its Critics

All this uncertainty is not to suggest, however, that the idea of 'critical thinking' has remained an unexamined one, and that it has somehow entered our institutions without some effort to properly interrogate and understand it. Indeed, the years since the term's 'coming of age' in the late 1980s (Paul 1989) have seen the emergence of a burgeoning literature on the subject. Much of this has emanated from a group of scholars known collectively as the 'critical thinking movement' (Barnett 2000). This group, mainly based in the US, but also increasingly active in the UK and Australia, has devoted itself conscientiously to the definitional question, producing a variety of accounts of critical thinking – both in the form of kernel definitions (e.g. Ennis 1987; Paul 1989; van Gelder 2001), and as taxonomies of constituent skills (e.g. Ennis 1987; Facione 1990). Definitional work of this type has provided a solid educational foundation for the concept, and has opened the way to the development of a great variety of critical thinking courses and materials, and also a variety of methods for testing students' acquisition of these skills.

While scholars in the movement have done much to advance the cause of thinking within contemporary education, it needs to be noted that their ideas have not been fully embraced by all; indeed, many of the ideas they advance have become the object of the same kind of critical scrutiny that they typically advocate for all other fields of inquiry. A number of criticisms have been made. One of these concerns the multiplicity of definitions that have emerged from the movement's ranks. While considerable intellectual effort has gone into this enterprise (Facione 1990), it is not altogether clear that out of these processes, the concept has ended up being a substantially clearer one. Some critics have gone so far as to suggest that all this definitional work from within the movement has only managed to make the idea of critical thinking more confusing than it once was. (e.g. Capossela 1993: p. 1)

Another problem is that the definitional debates conducted by the movement have tended to be somewhat detached from the domains in which critical thinking actually needs to be applied – that is, in the disciplines of students' study. It has thus been suggested that there is a tendency to treat the concept as an abstract and philosophical one, and to rely mainly on methods of introspection and intuition to develop and refine its meanings (Norris 1992). Some critics

have suggested that what is produced ultimately out of such processes are definitions of a more normative nature than ones based in any actual reality, thus casting some doubt on the validity of many of the ideas proposed (Atkinson 1997). Indeed, it is questioned whether such generic concepts represent an accurate description of the critical thinking that goes on in various fields of study, or whether they amount more to some idealized – and possibly even misleading – version of it. (Atkinson 1997)

The types of problems identified here are sometimes characterized as metaphysical ones. Writing in an earlier period about the problems of definitions generally, Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the difficulties philosophers often find themselves faced with stem from an urge to take some concept and to define it in an abstract way. Inevitably, out of such processes, he argues, many different and alternative meanings are generated leading unavoidably to a 'state of puzzlement' (Wittgenstein 1958a). But for Wittgenstein (at least in his later incarnations), it is folly to imagine that words have some independent, metaphysical meaning; the only solid semantic basis they can be said to have is that which emerges from the way they are used in everyday discourse – hence Wittgenstein's famous dictum: 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language' (1958a: p. 20). For Wittgenstein then, the solution to any difficulties concerning words and their meaning is not to 'think' about them on some abstract plane, but rather to observe how they are used in the 'rough ground' of human activity.

– 1.4 In Search of Critical Thinking: An Investigation

The preceding ideas provided the basis for the present work. In the case of our term 'critical thinking', it may be that 'to get some clarity' about its meaning, we need to go to the 'rough ground' of the places where it is actually practiced in the university – that is to say, in the disciplines, and to explore the term in its everyday uses. The present work has sought to do this by investigating conceptions of critical thinking as they are understood and taught about by academics from a range of disciplines. The investigation has specifically sought answers to the following questions:

- i. What does 'critical thinking' mean to individual academics teaching in different disciplines within the university?
- ii. In what ways, and to what extent, can we say that there are disciplinary variations in these meanings of critical thinking?
- iii. What implications might the answers to questions i and ii have for the teaching of critical thinking in the university?

The disciplines chosen for investigation were ones that had particular relevance to my teaching work – philosophy, history and the literary/cultural studies – all

humanities disciplines based at the university at which I was working at the time, hereon referred to as 'University X'. The investigation was carried out using a combination of interview and textual analysis methods, with a focus on how the concept of critical thinking is talked about by academics, and how it is constructed in a range of texts used by them on their teaching programmes. Broadly, the method of investigation fitted with John Swales' now famous methodological portmanteau, 'textography' – an approach described by him as 'something more than a disembodied textual or discursal analysis, but something less than a full ethnographic account'. (1998: p. 1)

In outlining the questions that informed the investigation, it is also important to indicate what is not covered in the work. The recounting of my teaching experiences earlier would suggest that the question of how students apprehend the idea of being critical is a most pressing one. While this is certainly true, the work does not actually consider critical thinking from the point of view of students. It is instead limited to investigating the perspective of teaching academics – or rather, those of a particular group of academics working in a particular range of disciplines. In this respect, the scope of the study is deliberately narrow. This is partly because students' understandings of notions of criticality have been investigated in a number of studies (e.g. Tsui 2000, 2002; Gellin 2003; Phillips and Bond 2004; Tapper 2004; Waite and Davis 2006), but also because the uncertainty surrounding the notion suggests the need for clarity from those who rely on the term in the everyday contexts of their work, and whose particular apprehensions of it would seem to be somehow crucial to the meanings it assumes.

Another limitation of scope is the study's focus on the idea of understandings and conceptions of critical thinking. Although this book is at heart interested in issues of teaching and learning in the academy, the focus is not on pedagogical matters as such; that is to say, the book does not consider such questions as how exactly critical thinking is taught to students on academic programmes, nor indeed whether it seems to be taught effectively or not. The interest rather is less pedagogical and more epistemological – though, as is suggested above, to have some resolution of these epistemological questions is arguably a necessary first step towards working out what can and should be done in the area of teaching.

The book follows a conventional structure. Following on from this introduction, a review of relevant literature is presented in Chapter 2, covering a history of the idea of critical thought in education, and an elaboration of current debates surrounding the concept. Chapter 3 provides an account of the study's methodology, as well as background about the disciplines studied. The findings of the investigation, which make up the main part of the book, are divided into two sections: Chapter 4 describes the findings from the interview component of the study, and Chapter 5 presents the findings from the textual analysis. In Chapter 6, the study's findings are summarized, and some cautious answers to the questions above are proposed. In the concluding chapter a final definition of the idea of critical thinking is offered.

Chapter 2

Critical Thinking: History, Definitions, Issues

2.1 Introduction

Included in Raymond Williams' *Keywords* is an entry for the term 'critical', or rather a variant of it – 'criticism'. Williams confirms the impressions one has of the problems associated with the term by commencing his account thus: 'criticism has become a very difficult word' (1976: p. 74). He goes on to suggest a range of meanings, including 'its predominant general sense of fault finding', 'an underlying sense of judgement', and also what he calls a 'very confusing specialized sense' the term has acquired in relation to art and literature. Williams speaks of the difficulties in understanding the term's various developments, with some meanings having only emerged recently, and others which appear to be 'breaking down'. (p. 74)

In this chapter, I begin an initial exploration of the idea of critical thinking, and seek 'some understanding of its developments' by referring to the extensive literature that has been written on the subject. The chapter begins with a potted history of the concept – including its importance in higher education – before looking into the major question of definitions. The chapter also considers the related issue of how much we might think of critical thinking as some generic quality, and how much as one shaped by specific domains of inquiry.

2.2 Critical Thinking and Education – A Brief History

The idea of critical thinking having a key role in education goes back perhaps as far as the idea of education itself. It can be dated back to at least the time of the Greeks, especially to Socrates and his desire to show his Athenian pupils what it meant to lead a wise and virtuous life. For Socrates, the key to such wisdom and virtue is critical thought: 'The unexamined life is one not worth living', he famously declared (*The Apology*). Socrates believed himself to be a teacher at heart – 'a midwife of ideas' was his description – whose role was to encourage his students to interrogate received wisdoms, and moral standards of the day in a spirit of untrammelled inquiry, and 'to follow the argument where it leads'. The Socratic method, one of dialogue and questioning, was to