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# Critical Thinking: Time for a New Theory?

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# It's scary, apparently

- How CT is seen by some in Texas
- Not, we may assume, an issue with logical thinking
- Critical thinking is dangerous
- NB: Socrates lost his life for corrupting the young of Athens by asking questions
- And today, whistle-blowers lose their livelihoods
- And in some countries, critics are put in prison (including students and academics)
  - & in other countries (UK), 'critical thinking' slips out of the lexicon.

# And yet

- Evidence
- Not only that students are not very good at it
- But that they even may regress in higher education
  - But why might that be?
    - We have to come back to this matter.

# Some (initial) technical problems

- Context-free or context-laden?
  - CT in nanotechnology differs somewhat from CT in literature studies and from CT in sociology ...
- Disciplines or special units?
- Curriculum or Pedagogy?

# Pitfalls (1)

- Privileging the humanities
- CT skills and dispositions – their relationships ...
  - Skills of reasoning and argument are not to be despised – to the contrary)
    - But tacit assumption: look after the skills and the dispositions will follow. No!

## Pitfalls (2)

- ‘Critical Pedagogy’ – ideological – but has some merit
- ‘Our discipline naturally encourages critical thinking’ (so no change needed)
  - [CT can lead to entrapment, because the educator is liable to be entrapped, not least by her/his disc frameworks]
  - So beware of Greeks bearing gifts
    - *No simple solutions (to complex issue of being critical in the C21).*

# But what is CT?

- (a) Skills in evaluating theories & evidence in a *discipline*?
- (b) An ability to identify '*fake news*' in the wider world (& post-truth age)?
- (c) An ease in certain kinds of *logical argumentation*?
- (d) A propensity to spot & to call out bad *work practices or organizations*?
- (e) A disposition to be *self-critical*? (Hearing the critics before they speak.)
- (f) A will & the courage to *speak truth to power*, ie to hold the powerful – incl the state – to account.

ie, 'CT' – a *contested concept* – a *multiplicity* of problems

NB: 'It's all of these' is no get-out.

# The theoretical situation - & A theory

- CT (skills)
- CB (dispositions)
  - The 2 warring tribes
    - Which has priority?
      - Both are nec, non-reducible, and need separate attention.
- + CA (critique carried into the world)

**So** 'Criticality'

. (and at different levels, and with differing scope – so lots of possibilities)

# Curriculum or pedagogy - again

Problem:

- Relationship of CT/ CB/ CA to Curric & Ped
  - Extremes:
    - CT disciplines and immediate skills – Curriculum
    - But the more towards CB and CA – Pedagogy
- ie, the *pedagogical relationship* – the student space – becomes critical.

# The C21

- Disputatious – multiplicity of views
- ‘Post-truth’ world – alternative facts
- A-rational
- A world of supercomplexity
- Living with it
- But more so – living with it purposefully
- Not paralysed into inaction (whistle-blowers).

# What is higher education in C21?

- What is has always been – but now more so!
- Being evaluative of the world
- A sceptical stance
- And now having the courage to act it out
- And the courage also to be self-critical

# A necessary curriculum

- Choices - *making* a choice
- Here I stand (for now)
- Controversial issues – difficult situations
- In any subject – always disputes (incl hard sciences –  
– NB problem of non-reducibility)
- Facing up to multiple views
- Being tested and stretched
- A curriculum of risk.

# A necessary pedagogy

- A spacious pedagogy
- Not easy
- The student's tale
- Being asked to discern
  - Sense from nonsense? No, sense maximising.
- Being asked to declare
- Unsettling - A pedagogy of strangeness.

*NB: The paradox of CT – unsettlement is good for retention*

# *Being* critical

- Being critical – has been too cognitive
- The dispositional and the active sides
- Need to be given much more weight
- But the cognitive *also* needs to be given more weight!
- Being is crucial – but at the highest level, it requires cognition – deep knowledge and understanding
- Consider the whistle-blower in the health sector
- How develop the dispositions and a preparedness to act?
- <sup>14</sup> - Perhaps start with action – action learning/ civic spaces

# Openness

- Being critical in & for an unknown world
- Requires an open education
- Unpredictable outcomes
- Unforseeable events
- Not learning 'outcomes'

# The virtues of criticality

- Courage
- Persistence/ steadfastness (under fire)
- Diplomacy
- Authenticity
- Wisdom
- Care & Precision (the words matter, the argumentation matters)
- Openness
- Self-displacement - 'The student as global citizen'
  - These are NOT 'skills', but are matters of sheer being.

# Glimpsing a new theory of criticality

## - an ecological approach

- Seeing higher education as interwoven with the world
- - with the *ecosystems of the world* – knowledge, society, economy, natural environment, persons, learning ...
- Criticality now to be *recast* as stretching out and across these ecosystems
- The critical student – lives, evaluates and acts purposively (and critically) in the world, with all of its challenges
  - Where there are no definite ways forward ...

## *Trouble at t'mill*

### – the institutional environment

- Aiding & abetting or diminishing & constraining?
- Permitting trigger warnings & safe spaces
- Allowing controversial speakers on campus
  - & shouting down such speakers
- An environment of open critical engagement:
  - Do we allow all-comers a right to speak?
  - Does critique have its limits?

## Conclusions

- CT is more necessary than ever before
  - A world of dispute, manipulation and power
- The problem space of CT has to be widened (beyond skills)
- *A new theory* - CT has to be understood as *CB in the world*  
(‘being critical’/ students as critical persons)
- And that has large implications for higher education
- For Curriculum *and* for Pedagogy
- But difficult choices to be made – at all levels of a university
- What is clear is the absolute necessity for criticality
- No criticality – no higher education
- Vital if the university is to realise its responsibilities in C21.



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