Chapter 5

Staff Perceptions about the Role of Writing in Developing Critical Thinking in Business Students

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Introduction

As one of the “tools” needed in a technological society, critical thinking (CT) has become a highly valued outcome of a liberal education in America and in many other Western countries.\(^1\) In practice, it has been widely accepted as “a defining concept of the Western university” (Barnett, 1997, p. 2). In Australia, together with analytical skills, CT skills have become one of the most fundamental goals of higher education and are advocated by the Australian Vice Chancellors’ Committee\(^2\) as an educational goal for effective teaching and learning. CT is thus supposed to permeate teaching and learning practices in most Australian tertiary courses, including business programs.

Nevertheless, the widespread focus on CT does not hide the fact that CT remains a complex construct and its interpretations particularly vary across different disciplinary areas. Many educators seem to have a vague understanding of what CT is and how it can be taught (see, e.g., Johnson, 1992, and Atkinson, 1997). A number of recent studies on CT instruction at the Australian tertiary level (Davies, 2000; Jones, 2004; Moore, 2004; Phillips & Bond, 2004; Tapper, 2004; Thompson, 2011).

\(^1\)Mainly refers to developed English-speaking countries such as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

2002) reveal that teaching CT appears problematic, with criticisms mainly focusing on inconsistencies identified in both CT instruction and assessment. This is obvious since different understandings of the nature of CT will lead to various pedagogical implications in CT instruction.

Of the strategies for developing CT, writing is often perceived to be an effective tool to foster better thinking skills, but it has not been used to its full potential in teaching students to think critically. Consequently, students often have little understanding about its importance and see it as merely a classroom practice, which has no real, meaningful effect on their way of thinking. Furthermore, inadequate support or guidance for enhancing thinking through the writing process might make it difficult for students, particularly (international) non-English speaking background (NESB) students, who are unfamiliar with Western styles of learning, to demonstrate the thinking skills that their teachers want to see. Even if they succeed in their academic study, this is no guarantee that they have become analytical and critical thinkers.

This chapter aims to explore staff’s perceptions of CT and the role of academic writing as a way of developing CT ability among students of a business faculty at an Australian university. It also investigates staff’s views about effective ways which business lecturers and language and learning support (LLS) staff can use to enhance the development of students’ CT through writing. The study found that, while there were some common understandings of CT amongst the surveyed and interviewed lecturers, it was an elusive notion for many and even had negative connotations for some. Writing was perceived to be an important and useful means of fostering CT, but the use of writing to develop business students’ CT was limited to formal writing assignments. This chapter also offers a number of implications for CT teaching and relevant recommendations for the business curricula of the context under study.

Conceptions and the Teaching of Critical Thinking

There are various ways in which CT is interpreted in the literature. The current debate centers around two main issues: how CT is understood and how it is taught. Because of the conflicting and even competing ideologies underlying approaches to this notion, many diverse understandings of CT are emerging.

From a philosophical point of view, CT is seen as the norm of good thinking or as an intellectual virtue needed to approach the world in a reasonable, fair-minded way (Gibson, 1995). This set of “pure skills” (Siegel, 1988, p. 6) comprises abilities for the “correct assessing of statements” (Ennis, 1962, p. 83) and for seeing things from others’ points of view. Drawing on cognitive psychology, most psychologists such as Vygotsky (1962), Widdowson, (1990), Halpern (1997), and Kuhn (1999) conceptualize CT as higher-order thinking skills. For example, Halpern (1997) defines CT as

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3Refers to a student population who are often described as overseas/international students from non-English speaking countries (where English is not used as a native language).