

# The Unbearable Vagueness of Critical Thinking in the Context of the Anglo-Saxonisation of Education

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*This paper examines the stereotypical view that Asian students cannot think critically. Although critical thinking is often presented as a generic skill, crucial to success at university, definitions of the concept vary widely. Critical thinking can therefore only be understood by placing it into the context in which it is used. This disadvantages many international students, who often have not acquired the cultural competencies necessary to read in context, and who are unfamiliar with the concept of critical thinking as a learning experience. This paper also advocates more clarity and openness about learning practices, including critical thinking, and recommends more receptiveness towards learning practices adopted in other countries. If Australia wants to continue to attract international students and to be considered as offering a truly international education program, there is a real need for academic staff to develop intercultural competencies.*

critical thinking, international students, internationalisation of education,  
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## INTRODUCTION

Australian universities, largely for economic reasons, are enrolling more and more international students. Adapting to study in Australia is often a big challenge for those students. To adapt to and do well in the Australian education system, international students have to acquire competency not only in the English language, but also in Australian educational practices, which are largely culturally defined. Critical thinking, as one of these practices, lies at the core of university study in Australia.

This paper examines critical thinking as one of the practices embedded in Australian education. It acknowledges that the concept, because of its multiple meanings can only be understood in context. As such, critical thinking only appears to cause problems for international students who are unfamiliar with the concept and unable to recognise it in context. Despite this, critical thinking is presented as a key skill by the Australian education system.

This paper further argues that more openness to critical thinking as a learning practice and a better understanding of learning practices that exist in other countries might be a better solution than the traditional stereotyping of international students as rote learners.

Australian academics appear to demonstrate very little knowledge of education practices in other countries. There seems to be an entrenched belief that Australian practices are somehow better than those existing in other countries. There is also a need for Australian academics to understand and accept that different educational systems have their own conventions. Therefore, it is necessary for academics to consider international students not as students disabled by their lack of familiarity with English and the learning conventions that exist in Australia, but as students who come with different strengths who have a contribution to make.

### **THE INTERNATIONALISATION OR ANGLO-SAXONISATION OF EDUCATION**

International students come to Australia with expectations that come from their past experience and, whether they realise it or not, they must learn to adapt to new circumstances in order to succeed academically. This includes incorporating priorities formulated by the Australian education system and often adapting to new ways of studying and preparing assignments.

Because most Australian academics are so familiar with Australian, or more generally Anglo-Saxon university practices, they present these practices as being natural and often assume that the conventions surrounding these practices are either universally known, or that they should be universally applied. Since Western Anglo-Saxon countries (mainly the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia) are instrumental in the internationalisation of education, there is a trend towards the universalisation of the education practices of Western Anglo-Saxon countries.

The internationalisation of education has also been called Westernisation of education (Biggs, 1997, p.5). In practice it is much more an Anglo-Saxonisation of education. Many Anglo-Saxon writers, for example, Biggs (1997) and Ryan (2000) focus on the educational differences between Western and non-Western cultures, but appear to disregard the complexity and diversity of Western education practices. The implication that all Western cultures adopt English or American conventions and standards is far from true. Sullivan's (2002) research into cultural and societal differences in assessment across Europe is indicative of the diversity in assessment and teaching styles that exist within Europe itself.

Overall, international students favour English-speaking countries as places to study. There is clearly an increasing worldwide demand for study in English-speaking countries. Educational institutions in those countries offer both a study and also a cultural program in English, which has very much developed as the international language. It is mainly for this reason that students from non-English-speaking countries are prepared to pay a lot of money to study in an English-speaking country. Thereby they hope to acquire internationally recognised linguistic and cultural competencies, which can be very useful in a global context. In many countries, obtaining an English degree is seen as the ideal path to preparing young people as individuals and as citizens to operate in the global village marketplace. Many international students also recognise the importance of a degree from an English-speaking country as a passport for the world.

The Australian education sector has been quick to respond to this demand by offering fee-paying courses to international students, thus attracting large numbers of students, particularly from Asia. The fact that those international students are mainly seen as lucrative business opportunities conflicts with education principles and does not recognise any other potential inputs, such as alternative frameworks for learning theory.

### **THE NECESSITY TO ADAPT TO DIFFERENT LEARNING PRACTICES**

Too often Australian academics portray international students, particularly Asian students, as not being able to reach the high standards existing in Australia. Asian students regularly are the objects of stereotyping, but the extent to which these stereotypes fit reality can and has been debated (Ellwood, 2000). Therefore, in general, international students continue to be widely criticised for their poor English skills, for their inability to think critically, for their propensity to memorise rather than to learn through understanding, and for their extensive practice of plagiarism. Underlining many of these stereotyped ideas is the assumed certainty that the principles of the Australian education system are unquestionably superior, rather than just different, than those existing in Asia. Generally this goes hand in hand with, if not a disregard for, a very superficial understanding of students' previous learning experiences.

International non-English-speaking students who come to Australia are confronted not only with problems of functioning in a different language, but also with the need to adapt to a different educational culture. The importance of academic adjustment goes well beyond language and cultural factors (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; 1997). Some of those adaptation problems are rooted in past learning experiences. International students bring with them learning experiences that may be very different to what they experience in Australia. What worked back home may no longer be considered valid in Australia. This leaves students with the task of rebuilding a new understanding of what works and what does not. As Sullivan (2002, p.72) indicates, “familiar codes are broken and the attempt to decode the new ones is not a straightforward task”.

Different cultures value different skills and therefore different learning practices. According to Ryan (2000), differences affect modes of participation, teacher-student relationships, learning styles and approaches to learning, attitudes to knowledge and learning. While the Australian education system seems to emphasise personal development, in many countries the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge is given more importance. This can of course, be linked with the emphasis in Western English-speaking countries on the individual rather than on the group. In many Asian countries, the group is more important than the individual.

In many cases, students’ previous learning experiences, which were assets in their own countries suddenly become obstacles and are, in some cases, even defined as inferior practices. It is not the object of this paper to examine and compare the quality of students in Australian universities with those attending universities in other countries. However, there is no convincing evidence that Australian students are of a better calibre because of the learning practices they follow. On the contrary, according to Biggs (1997), students from East Asian educational systems outperform Western students on the same academic achievement tests.

### DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING

Although critical thinking lies at the core of university education in Australia, its meaning is not always clear and an awareness of context, which may elude international students, is necessary to identify properly the possible meanings of the concept. The idea that the ability to think critically is required to do well at university is widespread, but the concept is vague and does not seem to have the same meaning for everybody, in every circumstance (Atkinson, 1997; Ennis, 1992). Because of its vagueness, the context in which the concept of critical thinking is used plays a key role in defining it. Unfortunately, contextual knowledge is precisely what many international students appear to lack, since it is something that normally develops over many years through immersion.

Existing definitions of critical thinking can broadly be divided into two categories.

- 1) **The ability to develop a capacity to reason logically and cohesively.** As such, this refers to the capacity to carry out a set of logical operations, to evaluate categories and forms of knowledge in order to determine their validity. Critical thinking is, in this case, also about the capacity to apply theory to practice.
- 2) **The ability to question and challenge existing knowledge and the social order.** This definition of critical thinking is inspired by Marxist tradition and based on the use of reason to examine historical and social realities to uncover hidden forms of domination and exploitation. Thus, for Brookfield (1987, p.15) critical thinking is about taking democracy seriously; it is about “identifying and challenging assumptions and exploring and imagining alternatives”. Benesh (1993) argues that critical thinking is a search for the social, historical, and political roots of conventional knowledge and an orientation to transform learning and society.

According to Wacquant (2001), it is necessary to bring these two categories of definitions together, so that the capacity to reason logically can be used to broaden critical thinking and allow for the freedom to think about the world beyond the restrictions imposed by dominant interpretations of the world.

It is this multiplicity of definitions of critical thinking that has led Atkinson (1997) to look at critical thinking as a socially constructed concept, a non-overt social practice rather than a well-defined and teachable set of pedagogical behaviours. For Atkinson (1997) critical thinking is essentially embedded in Western culture, since it can only be valued by cultures that see individuals as primary units, and who favour the idea of individual conflict and dissension rather than consensus and individual thought.

### **CRITICAL THINKING AS A LEARNING PRACTICE**

Critical thinking has become a practice developed and promoted by Western English-speaking countries, particularly from the 1970s onwards. At the same time, courses providing the knowledge most valuable to practise critical thinking have been taken out of schools' and most universities' curricula. This is particularly true in courses such as history, philosophy, and logic that have been replaced by more practical courses.

By doing so, educational institutions have adopted learning curricula in line with the priorities of a system demanding practical education, producing students who do not need much further on the job education. This is in line with demands made by workplaces that nowadays seem to prefer young graduates who can do the job, to young graduates who can think critically. University courses such as classical languages, history, and grammar have often been replaced by more practical courses such as marketing, public relations, and tourism for example. It can easily be argued that by concentrating on the understanding of those immediately useful skills, which have a direct business application, the possibility for students genuinely to think critically, is greatly reduced, since no strong background is provided for them to do so.

Critical thinking is in most workplaces largely defined as the ability to carry out a set of logical operations. In many areas of professional life, critical thinking as questioning the *status quo* might then be seen as an obstacle. The sort of critical thinking that is valued consists of applying theory to practice, but certainly not critical thinking that might question dominant interpretations of the world. On the contrary, questioning dominant rules in Western society is not required to be successful professionally.

### **MEMORISATION VERSUS UNDERSTANDING**

Educational institutions, particularly in countries like the United States and Australia, have often abandoned other background course material, which requires memorisation. This is the case for instance, in courses teaching classical languages such as Greek and Latin, history, poetry, and grammar. This can be attributed to a negative attitude towards memorisation, which is seen as opposed to understanding.

Memorisation was for a long time recognised as a valid learning practice in English-speaking countries and still is in many Western countries as well as in most Asian countries. Today it is often denigrated as an inferior learning practice. Memorisation as a learning practice puts the accent on the accumulation of knowledge, rather than on the capacity to criticise knowledge. According to Ballard (1987, p.114), memorisation is popular in Asian countries because traditional knowledge is highly respected in those countries; while questioning and criticism is not part of the learning process. This has led to the stereotype that portrays Asian students as surface learners, who memorise, and have no deep approach to learning.

Perhaps memorisation and understanding should not be separated. Many European educational institutions that still teach traditional subjects have a place for memorisation as a learning practice. It is therefore not surprising that Marton, Dall'Alba and Kun (1996) found that memorisation and understanding were not necessarily separated and that memorisation is used by Asian students to develop understanding. Li and Chang (2001) also found that rote learning was used both to facilitate vocabulary acquisition and consolidate knowledge. According to Biggs (1996, p.63), the idea that Chinese students are rote learners is "a Western misperception arising [from] a mistaken interpretation of repetitive effort. Chinese students may be repetitive, but there is no evidence that they rote learn any more than their Western counterparts".

### **AUSTRALIAN ACADEMICS NEED TO BECOME MORE INTERCULTURALLY COMPETENT**

Organising learning practices hierarchically, in terms of their value to learning is clearly a culturally determined process. Maybe it is time for Australian educators to consider how they could benefit from being exposed to other countries' experiences. This would allow educators to evaluate their teaching practices from a different angle, while also gaining a better insight into what it means to be an international student in Australia.

In the face of the difficulties surrounding critical thinking as a concept, criticising international students for not intuitively being capable of thinking critically is not acceptable. Critical thinking is often problematic for national students, who have the advantage of understanding language and context better. Whatever the type or level of critical thinking demanded, extensive background knowledge is required to access a common sense understanding of the practice of critical thinking. International students often do not possess this background. The problem this creates is compounded by the complexity of English argumentation skills. A good understanding of English is a prerequisite both to access background knowledge and to express argumentation itself. As Davies (2000) argues, for many students coming from a non-English-speaking background understanding, constructing and criticising arguments represents a serious problem.

### **CONCLUSION**

Demanding critical thinking of international students might therefore involve a more pragmatic approach. This would consist first of examining learning practices, including critical thinking, for what they are: socially constructed practices and not superior practices or a superior form of thinking that is only accessible to the best. Then there might also be a need to examine how learning concepts, such as critical thinking, apply to different disciplines or courses. Finally, students should be made aware of what is expected from them and how they can practically fulfil these expectations. This is not merely assuming that they will understand and eventually adapt. Often students do adapt to learning requirements, often almost intuitively, but for many international students adapting intuitively presents too many hurdles. Therefore, there is a need to explain learning practices. What does critical thinking mean in the context of this unit? How does it differ? How is it done in essays and tutorials? Why do Australians value critical thinking so much? Burwood (1999) calls this, teaching explicitly. For him this is about "educators revealing their hand and making explicit to students the ground rules of disciplinary genres".

Explicitness might also involve the need for Australian academics to develop a better understanding of international students as learners. Since explicitness about learning practice involves discussing learning practices, it may also lead educators to examine, compare and hopefully conciliate different teaching and learning practices.

International students are too often considered for their economic value, while the benefits of the different cultural competencies they can bring to a university are often ignored. Few have

questioned what international students bring in terms of experience and knowledge and a lot of adjustment has been asked from international students. Little adjustment appears to have been done by teaching academics who seem to expect students to adapt. If universities are going to continue attracting international students and want to be successful at integrating and educating these students, they must also develop their programs by becoming internationally and culturally competent institutions. This cannot be done without the participation of academics themselves, who need to develop intercultural competencies.

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