

THE IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract. *This study gives description of the complex nature of critical thinking, particularly in the context of academic writing at Western universities. The focus is on postgraduate students, including those from 'non-Western' backgrounds, who are often perceived to struggle with incorporating a critical dimension in their writing. Through in-depth interviews with three postgraduate students, the research delves into their interpretations of critical thinking, the factors influencing its implementation, and their perceptions of personal development as critical thinkers. The findings indicate that despite diverse cultural backgrounds, the students possess a comprehensive understanding of critical thinking and actively engage with it. While cultural influences impact their writing styles, the students demonstrate the ability to learn and adapt to new discourse. Challenges faced include uncertainties in constructing arguments, insufficient subject knowledge, and issues related to the essay genre, such as authorial voice and assessment demands.*

Keywords: *critical thinking, skills, higher education.*

Critical thinking is arguably one of the central requirements and desired outcomes for most learners. The international student population is expected to adopt the established academic discourse in order to meet the requirements of successful writing at university. This means that they are required to show evidence of critical thinking in their academic essays in the form an argument, and by demonstrating related skills such as evaluation and analysis. However, students are either unaware of the importance of argumentation in writing or lack understanding of what is meant by the concept of argument, evaluation and analysis (Jones 2007, Wingate 2011). In a study on the experiences of a group of 'non-traditional' students in higher education, Lillis and Turner (2001) found that a recurring theme is that of student confusion about what is expected from them in terms of academic writing. As Andrews (2003, p. 120) points out, "When there is a mismatch between tutors' and students' expectations, trouble can ensue". The reason for the "trouble" - i.e. students' inability to write in the ways the academy requires - has been the focus of much scholarly research and debate. Sections of the literature have focused on the background of international students viewing certain cultures, especially Confucius-heritage cultures, as a barrier to the acquisition of critical and analytical.

The term 'critical thinking' carries a broad understanding of its significance, yet it remains a concept marked by uncertainty and ongoing debate regarding its definition and manifestation. The ambiguity surrounding critical thinking is apparent in the multitude of interpretations and definitions attributed to it. Different perspectives and scholarly discourse contribute to the complexity of grasping the full scope and nature of critical thinking. As a result, there is no singular, universally accepted definition, leading to ongoing discussions and varying interpretations within academic and educational contexts.

When critical thinking is applied to writing, the above abilities are expressed through the process of argumentation, producing an argument i.e., the essay, the dissertation. Argument can

be defined as a connected series of related ideas “intended to establish a position and implying response to another (or more than one) position” (Andrews 2003, p.3). Argument is regarded as the primary expression of critical thinking in higher education (Andrews 2003, Scott 2000), and the defining feature of the essay (Elander et al. 2006). As Bonnett (2001, pp.50-51) emphasizes: “Your essay is your argument, everything else makes sense because of it”. Despite the importance of presenting an argument in academic writing, students still lack an understanding of its implementation or labour under misconceptions. Elander et al. (2006) point out that in a previous study the majority of the students felt that argumentation means presenting their own original views or opinions. As Branthwaite et al. (1980) point out, the need for ‘original’ thought is more likely to be emphasized by students as it is by tutors, who generally do not regard ‘originality’ as a key criterion of successful academic writing. Another popular misconception is that argumentation is manifested solely through an adversarial stance in writing, by overtly criticizing scholars’ research or claims. However, as Andrews (1995) explains, an argument should be sensitive to, and engage with other points of view: evaluating, rather than criticizing the sources, and incorporating those claims which are closest to their own position.

As a higher education institution, a university is a place where the higher order thinking skills are taken place. Thus, every college student is expected to have higher order thinking skills. According to Bloom (1956), having higher order thinking ability means having the mental ability to be critical in analysing, applying, synthesizing, and evaluating facts or materials. Hence the critical thinking competence is very essential to master. Masduqi (2006) claims that college students who have critical thinking competence can optimize the intellectual tools in which the critical thinking offers that enables them to analyse, assess, and even improve thinking. Moreover, he asserts critical thinking skills plays important roles not only when the students are in academic life, but it also benefits when they are in work force. Hirose (1992) claims that university or college students are lack basic thinking skills performed in their companies. He also adds that many youths entering workforce are lack the basic skills to function effectively and they, commonly, lack the reasoning and critical thinking abilities needed to process the information.

Writing as a process is seen as a recursive rather than linear, meaning that it includes prewriting, drafting and revising activities. During the process, fluency is considered more important than accuracy by helping learners understand well their own composing process (Brown, 2001). In the context of academic writing, this process requires learners critical thinking in treating the information related to the issue to be developed into an essay. Learners need to stimulate the recall of information for the purpose of reproducing knowledge (Craswell, 2005). Writing leads to learner’s skill to identify a purpose, to produce and shape ideas and refine expression as well (White, 1995). This means that learners are generating ideas by using problem-solving process employing a range of cognitive and linguistic skills. Accordingly, the teaching of reading and writing critically is significant especially for tertiary students. It aims at developing skills of critical thinking as well as critical reading and writing practices.

The integration of critical thinking into the teaching of academic writing is emphasized, highlighting that effective writing instructors guide learners through the writing process, fostering the development of critical thinking habits. The recommendation from Tahira and Haider (2019) suggests that university departments and tutors should reassess their writing instruction and guidelines, making argument requirements explicit and understandable. Moreover, there is a call for a long-term reconsideration of traditional essay norms to accommodate a broader range of

expression. The suggestion to explore the cognitive abilities of writers during the writing process in future research opens avenues to investigate how critical thinking skills are practically applied. Understanding the cognitive mechanisms involved in integrating critical thinking into the writing process can provide valuable insights for refining teaching methods and enhancing the development of critical thinking skills among students.

In conclusion, the significance of critical thinking should remain paramount in every academic writing endeavor within higher education. Research and writing grounded in critical thinking are characterized by clarity and reliance on factual information. Embracing critical thinking in academic writing not only enhances the understanding of complex topics but also ensures the accuracy and reliability of the presented information. This approach contributes significantly to the advancement of science by fostering a rigorous and evidence-based foundation in scholarly works. Therefore, the cultivation and application of critical thinking skills in academic writing not only benefit individual learners but also play a pivotal role in the collective progress of knowledge and understanding within the academic community.

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