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**Can poetry develop critical thinking skills? Narrative enquiry in an art college poetry writing group.**

Hello my name is Frances Norton, I am senior lecturer in art and design at Leeds Arts University in the North of the UK, I am also a second year student at the University of Sunderland studying a PhD in education. The title of this paper is:- ‘Can poetry develop critical thinking skills? Narrative enquiry in an art college poetry writing group.**’** The significance of the paper highlights the importance of connection and story facilitated by the poetry writing group in order to develop critical thinking skills for students at an art college. The central theme is the development of spoken and written English in a vocational setting where students would rather paint a canvas than write about the process. Could connection and be discovered through community of inquiry, narrative and critical thinking? The purpose of my session is to create a discussion around the role of critical thinking in vocational education.

This is a small scale ethnography (Burke 2001) making use of practitioner research (McNiff 2014). The paper has an underlying question anchored by two theorists, Ken Brown (1998) and Matthew Lipman (2003). Can critical thinking be taught or can we only create opportunities for its development? This will be investigated through qualitatively and thematically analysing data. There are eighteen self-selecting volunteer participants. Data is collected from participants using narrative enquiry methodologies and interventions (Gregory 2009). These include video interviews in small groups and using the poetry written in fiction based analysis. The ontological particularity of the art school is the framing for this paper, the epistemological stance is interpretive. Themes of metal health wellbeing and increased confidence in written and spoken English, and a community of inquiry are discussed in the findings. Recommendations are made as to how critical thinking could be developed in curriculum design in the future, and in the wider field of pedagogic policy making. (See p 94.of the abstract booklet)

The research for this paper is conducted at Gimmerton College of Art. This is an anonymised institution name. The institute offers a wide range of arts and crafts disciplines from printmaking to digital animation. All these pathways are designed to industry standards. I teach level two diploma to level seven masters. There are around 2600 students.

**In the Context and problem,** Brown (1998: 1) believes there is a thinking skills deficit in UK education. The Canadian Ministry of Education states that all students will need to develop a flexibility and a versatility undreamed of by previous generations (Shaheen, 2007). This could be supplied by the use of critical thinking skills. Foresight review into Lifelong learning 2016 states, “Better skills enable freedom of opportunity, provide people with the tools to adapt to a changing world and promote social mobility, inclusion and wellbeing.” The world is changing and students need to be adaptable, problem solvers. Many participants are from Widening Participation areas in the city (Kennedy 1997). Elder and Paul (2007) comment that, “Critical thinkers are clear as to the purpose at hand and the question at issue. They question information, conclusions and points of view. They strive to be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. They seek to think beneath the surface, to be logical and fair.” This would seem to be a good framework to start from for the research. The Foresight review (2016, p.4) states that, “Improving our skills base is critical to increasing prosperity in the UK, as well as delivering considerable benefits to society as a whole…Developing our skills is not just an aspiration, but with a changing job market is essential.” Developing thinking skills means students have something extra to offer when they enter the job market, making them more adaptable.

**Can Soft skills diffuse risk using critical thinking?** Leeds City Council (2015 p.19) policy states that critical thinking generates independent thinking skills, self-confidence and a sense of identity. Welsh Assembly Government (2008 pp. 11-19) sees critical thinking as a way of encouraging soft skills. Emotional, spiritual issues, and moral standpoints, elements that make us human are recognized and encouraged as an aspect of critical thinking. Often our Access, non- traditional students have many issues and nowhere to air them. Soft skills avoid world risk issues such as fundamentalism, racism and sexism by equipping students with empathy and understanding, challenging stereotyping and prejudice, defusing risk.

**What are the Local-global perspectives on critical thinking in education?** The Children’s Commissioner for England (2017), discusses ‘Fake News’. She raises important issues of misinformation allowing harmful assumptions, and destructive othering in the classroom. Critical thinking allows students to spot fake news and deflect disinformation that is designed to ‘mislead and create divisions in our society.’ Continuing in this vein the theme for the Education World Forum 2019 asks, “What we should do with what we know.” The riches of the internet are still somewhat a Tabula Rasa. The answer to every question is in our pockets, but it all has an agenda, an editor, and a bias. The Education World Forum theme is about the information digital age. How can students make information work and find moral, judicious, globally beneficial ways to decipher it. Gibb from the Department of Education (2018) speaks about critical thinking as one of the key strategies to increase cultural capital and increase social mobility. Aspirationally he says, “A successful curriculum should enable pupils to participate in the great conversations of humankind, and it should prepare students to thrive in an ever more globalised and competitive economy. “

**What is haptic criticality in vocational education?**

Haptic criticality, a touch based critical thinking is a thinking through doing. Vocational students such as mechanics, hairdressers, chefs and designers use their hands to solve problems (Sennett 2008, Korn 2013). Haptic criticality is essential to equip vocational students for problem solving in industry or self-employment. Haptic criticality is a translation of practice through critical thinking into the language of academia. Ofsted’s 2010 report, *Learning: Creative Approaches that Raise Standards*, encourages critical thinking and creativity. As Hyland, (2017) puts it, knowledge becomes a thinking hand. Barrett and Bolt (2007) believe it is muscle memory that imputes a deeper understanding of practice. Inherent tacit, practical wisdom reveals philosophical contexts for making, as advocated by Broadhead and Gregson (2018) in their recent publication, *Practical Wisdom and Democratic Education*. Haptic criticality is about using critical thinking skills to enhance tacit thinking – thinking with the hands. Creating, using haptic criticality.

**Literature**

Themes of critical thinking in education are being researched and practical strategies are being found. Strategies come from ‘practitioner in the sector’ authors such as Broadhead and Gregson (2018), investigating critical thinking through practice for an Access course, bell hooks (2007) states that critical thinking is powerful, it enables the students to self-actualize, self-motivate, across class, gender and race. Weston (2007) introduces bite size statements on how to improve critical thinking. Mezirow (1991) advocates transformative education through critical thinking skills and that learners use their own life narrative to make sense of new information. Wittgenstein’s mind games and Gertz (2000) and his ethnographic and anthropological understanding of philosophy and critical thinking. Brown (1998) recommends teaching critical thinking but reminds us that the specificity is all important, casting out universality as useless and a waste of time. Lipman (2003) on the other hand pushes for experiential critical thinking that can only be accomplished through his programme of Philosophy for children, commercialism has set a seal on his big idea, if we can afford it we can buy into his utopia of critical thinking. And yet Lipman’s (2003) thought married to Mill’s Utilitarianism (1859) and Frieire’s education for all (1968) would go a long way to bridge the class gap.

**Methodology and methods**

Bolt and Barratt (2007, p.2) state that arts research is experimental like art itself, pushing emergent methodologies that may often contradict what is expected of research. Within the ontology of the art school, epistemologies include practitioner research and narrative inquiry as a methodological approach, adding reflexivity. Pedagogy is a socially constructed reality, with power dynamics. Postmodernist theories can unsettle assumptions and decolonise educational theories. Qualitative mixed methodologies are inclusive and illuminative (Kara 2015: 26). This paper works with self-selecting participants. The research design is that of a small-scale, pedagogic arts and social science study. As a qualitative study the thesis does not have variables or control groups.

**Interventions and ethics**

Data is gathered using a 6 month poetry writing group with 18 members. With regards to ethics, I work with British Education and Research Association BERA (2018) guidelines allowing anonymity to participants and institutions and protection of the collected data. This paper collects data from my students, this brings up the ethical issue of the insider and the outsider. A lecturer who is also a researcher using their own students as participants and keeping field notes. (Bell2005; Denscombe 2003; Kara 2015).

**Participants**

The first category of participant is a young adult school-leaver. Participants such as Anthony, a croupier who takes bets seven nights a week in a local casino. He also supports a young family but wants to eventually go to university. Coalter (2008) considers that social capital is used to bond the group. She considers how the small world of a Further Education classroom relates to the larger networks of the workplace, community, and Higher Education. The second category of student is older, highly intelligent, well qualified, perhaps disenchanted or ‘burned out’ as one student put it, such as Maia, who is a GP, and told me, ‘Needy patients have broken me.’ **Critical thinking and Social mobility is an important issue,** According to the Department of Education (2018, p.13), the UK economy has an entrenched productivity gap relative to other advanced economies; and social mobility is low by international standards and does not appear to be improving. Freire (1968) and Brown (1998) both advocate education as social mobility (Kennedy 1997) and as a route out of the poverty trap of minimum wages. Students, Vili and his brother Vé have increased the whole family’s social capital (Bourdieu 1993) by entering education. The brothers are both pub chefs. Their plan is to be script writers and work in local film and TV industries.

**Mental health wellness is a huge issue in college,** the Office of National Statistics, (2018) states, 19 % of the UK student population displays common mental health disorders. Mental health issues among Gimmerton’s students has risen from 44.4 % to 51.1 % from 2014 to 2019. Poetry therapy is used by the NHS, expressive writing and wellness through group reading, therapeutic storytelling, healing through autobiography, and life-world care, seeing the person as a whole entity including the emotional, creative side (Mcardle 2001, Shipman and McGrath 2016 and Hemmingway, 2011). College has none of the nursing or occupational therapists on hand, however collaborative approaches, working closely with colleagues from Student Welfare to support students with mental health issues seems to be effective. Poetry Writing Group participant, Lamia states, “I think for me it's been a sense of belonging, I expected to feel really embarrassed but I actually don't. It's quite scary but it's a nice kind of scary. You never feel like you're the odd one out.” Lamia has a history of anxiety and depression. She goes on to say that the poetry group has really made a difference to her college experience, and that, “I have grown more confident in my own voice and look forward to continuing writing poems and taking part in important discussions once I leave - a prospect that would have seemed incredulous at the beginning of my journey here. “ The art college is a place of strongly held passions and beliefs, students can sometimes be dramatic making a bold statement with what they wear or believe and the art they make. Mental health issues can lead to vulnerability and being more open to radicalisation, from the far right, animal rights groups, politics and religion. Critical thinking can help think around the persuasiveness these groups operate with.

**Data analysis of the poetry group is carried out inductively**. It is iteratively linked and analysed in a cycle of reading, labelling and coding, to discover patterns and themes. Inductive analysis is used to process the data, looking at the particular to make inference to more general cases Campbell-Galman (2013).

Andrews et. al., (2008 p.1) states ‘In the last thirty years narrative is increasingly accepted social research. Possibly all social researchers are doing narrative enquiry in some way.’ narrative inquiry acts as a key to unlocking the data, stories and connections between participants. Desjarlais (1997) and Meyerhoff (1980) call language a potent truth telling medium. Writing poems and speaking them out loud is a powerful aspect of truth telling. Participants have commented on their widening vocabulary. It is empowering for participants to be a whole person, freed from the social norm of classroom power dynamics (Durrant 2015). Within the group, participants speak and write about all aspects of their lives, accessing wellbeing and lifeworld care Hemmingway (2011). The ‘I poem’ is a form of data analysis, and it is fitting to use a poetic form to analyse a poetry writing group. (Kara 2015, p.17) a theme from the video interviews was their enjoyment of creative writing. This discredits the idea that students don’t want to write. “I can express quite strong feelings, it makes me burn sometimes when I when I think about things that I have written about” Gelos. “I think any time that you do any kind of writing it improves your writing ability. “ Carpo. Other notable themes were students enjoying group bonding, social cohesion and a community of inquiry; mental health wellbeing, and mindfulness, Collaborating, Seeing the bigger picture, not just about individuation, English language skills for students from other countries and Studentship for adult students. All sowing seeds for deflecting risk.

**The tentative findings are that ,** In this world risk environment, local-global, small world/whole world paradigms holds the key to understanding one another’s stories. Our petite narrative in a UK classroom reflects the lived experience of students and their barriers to learning. There seems to be a need for social bonding to enhance social cohesion and the value of being heard and having a voice. In the poetry group, analysis clarifies themes of students enjoying group bonding, social cohesion; addressing issues of mental health wellbeing, and mindfulness, also development of English language skills for home students and from other countries. Using critical thinking to go beyond cultural locators, moving towards social mobility and increased cultural capital. The poetry group offers participants an intergenerational, cross cultural space to tell their story, which could enable social cohesion in college and in wider citizenship areas. The practice of critical thinking or haptic criticality allows more use of phronesis or wise judgements.

**Recommendations**

This research may need a ‘health warning’ in this current antagonistic political climate towards education. My recommendations of social intervention via soft skills could be viewed as ‘un-scientific’ due to the use of emotional intelligence methodologies. The poetry group data is analysed interpretively in a small scale ethnography are not the same as hard statistics. The challenge for me now is to inject this critical thinking creativity into the curriculum. We need to expand our ideas of where education can happen. The online space is flexible and portable. Learning in informal learning spaces such as community centres, pubs, coffee shops or galleries takes education to where learners are has been the consensus in feedback. This can only happen through collaboration of agencies and Joint Practice Development. Incorporating the ethos of critical thinking and widening participation (Kennedy 1997), in order to develop an education system that is inclusive and diverse. As educators and policy makers we need to value our students and their stories, see them as whole people in the context of world life care. Reflect back to government and policy makers the findings of practitioner research, that using critical thinking to treat students as whole people involves caring for the educational, emotional and mental health wellbeing of learners. This involves a whole community co-operation, from colleges, NHS, community workers, local business and industry, all working together to enact and develop community wide connection so critical thinking is developed in an epistemological way. Using critical thinking skills to connect people, and fuse horizons.

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**thankyou for listening**

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