**Script for presentation at FACE conference 3-5 July 2019**

**What can critical thinking do for Access? Can transferability speak to specificity in a Further Education arts institution?**

**Slide 1 title slide**

Hello my Name is Frances Norton I am a senior lecturer and course leader teaching level two diploma to level seven masters at Leeds Arts University. I am also a second year PhD student at the University of Sunderland.

What can Critical thinking do for access?

In this paper I have investigated how Critical Thinking could be developed with FE students. Does critical thinking need to be specific to the context or is it better to create transferable skills? I have sought to develop practical applications through practitioner research by using several critical thinking interventions. I have researched what issues access students have and if Critical thinking can work through and around these problems. Further the paper asks can critical thinking aid in progression and lead to greater access to Higher education?

**Slide 2 acknowledgements**

With thanks to ETF, Leeds Arts University and Northern College for funding and supporting this research.

**Slide 3 the institute**

Frances: research is conducted at Gimmerton College of Art, set in the North of the UK in a post-industrial cities. There are 2600 students across FE and HE, the College has recently been granted University status. The institution is located on split sites; one in the city centre for the FE cohort and the other building a mile away for the HE courses. Its location brings students from the city and outlying parishes. For the aspiring art student Gimmerton is an attractive destination for a gateway to the creative industries. The institute offers a wide range of arts and crafts disciplines from printmaking to digital animation. All these pathways are designed to industry standards.

**Slide 4 context and problem**

Vocational FE students appeared to be resistant to the written element of the course work, while being enthusiastic about practical sessions. Adult learners at level 2 and 3 often have low literacy levels, low self-confidence and a narrow view of the world. I want to understand how to develop critical thinking skills, in order to develop student skills, and so the critical thinking can aid progression. Build transferable useful skills, whilst contextualising critical thinking within the specificity of the pathway of art and design they are following. To increase confidence, boost a sense of belonging. To that end we devised a number of CT interventions and piloted them at Gimmerton.

Critical thinking

* Brown (1998: 1) believes there is a thinking skills deficit.
* 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).
* 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.”
* Kennedy (1997) outlines the need for adult learning to reach into the community, and education to work for social cohesion as well as encouraging social mobility.

Transferability and specificity

* Transferability is an idea written about by Brown, (1998. P.2) he states that, ‘A notorious problem is that putatively generalizable thinking skills fail the test of transferability between subject matters.’ This notion addresses the idea that transferability can only occur with specificity rather than generalisation.
* Gibb (for the DoE 2018) states that ‘the importance of subject domain specific knowledge to skill acquisition and transferability should be more widely understood.’ Reiterating the significance of subject specifics in the way expertise and insight is taught.
* McPeck (1981) supposes that, if CT skills have to be developed independently in each subject, how are they of any use in dealing with the problems of everyday life? This could equally be applied to vocational subject, if CT must be developed separately in each different pathway, this would call for a huge curriculum rewrite.

Issues in Access

* Johnstone (2018) states that ‘75 % of mental health problems are established by the age of 25’.
* And the Office of National Statistics, (2018) states, 19 % of the UK student population displays common mental health disorders.
* There are 51.1% of the current FE cohort with common mental health issues at Gimmerton
* The potential effect of this are:- suicide, self-harm and risk taking behaviours. Radicalisation, idealism which can lead to extremism, violence, addiction and illegal actions in the name of that group.
* Social, cultural, health, economic, or political factors mean some students do not get a fair opportunity to achieve when at school age. (Broadhead et al 2019 p. 2)
* It was assumed Access students would bring academic standards down in universities (Parry 1996 in Broadhead 2019 p.2)
* Vulnerable Access students are at risk of falling prey to these effects

**Slide 5 literature**

literature focused on for this research focuses on:

* ‘practitioner in the sector’ authors, Broadhead and Gregson (2018), Burke 2001 and Coalter (2008);
* Lipman 2003 advocates philosophy in education and Brown 1998 writes on thinking in education,
* Vygotsky, linguistics and socio cultural theory
* Freire 1968, stands for education for all.
* Biesta. (2010) writes on philosophy of education .
* Fielding et al 1995 promotes community of practice.
* Gregory 2009 and Clandinin and Connelly (2004) write on narrative inquiry.
* Craft of teaching and Practice led research Sennett 2008 and McNiff (2014)

**Slide 6 methodology**

* The ontological underpinning of this thesis is heuristic in that it explores the subjective experience of developing critical thinking with and within a group of students.
* The epistemology is qualitative framed by an interpretivist paradigm. That is, studying social phenomena, as education itself is socio-cultural.
* This presentation works with 222 self-selecting participants.
* The research design is that of a small-scale, pedagogic arts and social science study.
* Research approach is Practitioner Research, community of inquiry and narrative inquiry.
* As a qualitative study the thesis does not have variables or control groups.
* As an insider and an outsider we are part of the interventions, both as participant and researcher
* The 4 Critical thinking Interventions have included:- 12 week Diary project, 6 month book club, 6 month poetry writing group, and 5 week debate club.
* This presentation focuses on the Poetry Writing Group.

Ethics.

* I work with BERA (2018) guidelines, Sunderland, LAU and ethics approval.
* The study is representational and avoids deceptions in dealings with participants who have an information sheet and sign a participant agreement form. They are free to leave the study at any point.
* The presentation aims to protect and anonymise participants and institutions. Confidentiality of identities and institutions is kept safe in encrypted files and locked draws.

**Slide 7 participants/ data**

A six month project with 18 participants meeting weekly at lunch time. Linguistics and language is a powerful truth telling medium in participant groups states Desjarlais (1997) and Meyerhoff (1980), the language used by participants in the Poetry Writing Group when writing poems and then speaking them out loud used as an aspect of truth telling is potent. Participants have commented on their widening vocabulary through listening to poems written by other participants. it is empowering for participants to be able to be a whole person, freed from our power dynamics and roles of student and teacher (Durrant 2015). Within the group participants speak and write about all aspects of their lives, accessing wellbeing and the lifeworld care element spoken about by Hemmingway (2011).

The participants are adults from 18-60 plus. from a mixed socio-economic background. Participants are vulnerable adults and some from professional backgrounds. A number have disclosed and undisclosed mental health issues and some are homeless or couch surfing.

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 go to university. Coalter (2008) considers that social capital and the small world of a FE classroom relates to the larger networks of the workplace, community, and HE.

The second category of student is older, well qualified, perhaps disenchanted or ‘burned out’. As Maia, a GP, and told me, ‘Needy patients have broken me.’ She has come to art school to escape the drifts of paperwork.

**Slide 8 analysis**

The two most accepted themes from Poetry Writing Group are that critical thinking is a skill, a practice, a muscle that needs developing and that by using questioning critical thinking could increase reflection. Participant Janus states “I think that sort of pushing someone through teaching them in that Socratic way is what really, really makes the deep critical thinker”. There was a lot of talk about giving oneself permission to have an opinion. These are cultural and class barriers to overcome in Poetry Writing Group. Some of these obstacles are socially constructed and some are self-imposed based on the individual’s social locators. Participant Skerion states “It’s like the only way to know if there is a line, is to cross it.”

Creating a safe space for creativity, and expression of feelings, a non-judgemental arena for ideas and points of view is important to participants. What came out strongly among the poetry writers is the theme of a social conscience. The idea of self-restraint, having a moral compass, a kind of internalised citizenship, a set of precepts by which one is deemed decent, kind, caring, considerate, creative, not just individually focused but aware of ones contribution to the community as a whole.

**Slide 9 Tentative findings**

Frances: critical thinking is useful to access students. Critical thinking does develop transferable life skills while being contextualised and with elements of specificity. There are themes of students enjoying group bonding, social cohesion; addressing issues of mental health wellbeing, and mindfulness, also development of English language skills for students from other countries. In the poetry writing group, being open to new ideas and thoughts as well as developing speaking and listening skills, and going beyond our cultural locators, moving towards social mobility and increased cultural capital.

These interventions offer 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 allows more use of wise judgements in areas of progression to HE.

**Slide 10 recommendations**

Frances:

* The central theme of the presentation asks, What can critical thinking do for Access? Can transferability speak to specificity in a Further Education arts institution?
* This research may need a ‘health warning’ in this current antagonistic political climate towards FE.
* A Department of Education report states, “There is a lack of evidence on how current practices operate to improve quality and improve learners’ outcomes.” (Owen 2018) this presentation hope to address this statement.
* My recommendations of social intervention via soft skills could be viewed as ‘un-scientific’ due to the use of social science, interpretivist, qualitative methodologies.
* Interventions analysed interpretively in a small scale ethnography are not the same as hard statistics.
* The challenge for us is to seek to inject CT creativity into the curriculum.
* Burke 2002 states neoliberal ideas that Access is an economic benefit rather than social justice principals. Wellbeing and social justice needs to be put back at the heart of Access education.
* As educators and policy makers we could expand our ideas of where education can happen, especially for adults. The online space is flexible and portable. Learning in informal learning spaces such as community centres, pubs, coffee shops or gallery space takes education to where adults are.
* This can only happen through collaboration of agencies and Joint Practice Development.
* Reflecting lifelong learning and widening participations policy into the curriculum, in order to promote transferable criticality and community of inquiry.
* As educators and policy makers we need to value our students and their stories, see them as whole people.
* Reflect back to government and policy makers the findings of research, that treating students as whole people involves caring for educational and mental health wellbeing.
* This could involves a whole community co-operation, from colleges, NHS, community workers, local business and industry, all working together to enact lifelong learning, develop community wide connection so Access learning is understood and welcomed in an epistemological way. Using critical thinking skills to connect people, and fuse horizons.

**Slide 11: Referneces**

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**Slide 12: Thank you**

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