**What is the role of critical thinking in vocational further education? A practitioner’s point of view**

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# Introduction

**What does it mean to be an autodidactic, dyslexic artist poet-academic bringing practice and practice-focused research into academia?**

I am dyslexic and a reformed resistant writer. A study by the Royal College of Art (2015) states that 29 per cent of students identify as dyslexic. This percentage refers only to students in art schools and colleges. Part of the impetus for undertaking this chapter was my experience in the lowest sets on my early journey through the education system. Critical thinking (CT) was my autodidactic strategy. I ‘read’ many English Literature classics using books on tape. I joined book clubs to hear what other people said about the texts and to join in discussion. I have found critical and creative thinking to be an empowering tool enabling me to think through doing and reflecting. Access to Higher Education (AHE) students with low academic achievement have little recourse to philosophy, debate and CT in the current educational system. CT A level ceased this year and General Studies A level ended in 2015 (Pells, 2016).

In terms of the parameters of the research, this is a small scale pedagogicarts, social science and ethnographic study based in Gimmerton College of Art (pseudonym), a specialist arts institution recently granted university status. Gimmerton College of Art offers a wide range of arts and crafts disciplines designed to industry standards. Ontologically AHE is built on the European model of art education. This curriculum was founded in 1919 in Germany in the Bauhaus art school (Fiedler and Feierabend, 1999). I teach level two diploma, a course for adults, up to level seven, postgraduate Masters level study, at Gimmerton College of Art. I have taught further education (FE) in a variety of settings both out in the community and in a college setting.

Participants in this study are predominately AHE students, with a focus on their FE experiences. They are from mixed socio-economic backgrounds living within a 40 mile radius of Gimmerton. They are wanting a change and are teen parents, homeless, migrants and refugees, professional early retirees, the under-qualified, dealing with mental health issues, domestic abuse victims, sex industry workers and unfashionable celebrities. The original data collected find themes of student aspiration both to higher education (HE) and to employment. In these narratives there is also a desire for transformation through education (Brown, 1998: 177), an escape from poverty through social capital (Bourdieu, 1993), and a desire for wellbeing.

The research design collects data from 30 volunteer participants. This includes 15 book club members, ten interviews and five critical incidents. Methods and interventions include a web-based survey and a diary project, but these interventions will only be discussed briefly in this chapter. Narrative inquiry has been important in listening to participant stories and interpreting the connections. It is story making, utilising such methods as field notes, stories and life experience as the units of analysis. Narrative inquiry is advocated by Gregory (2009), who suggests that story, myth and narrative are a vital part of our identity, although Adichie (2009) warns against the idea of a single narrative repeated and becoming dangerously inflexible, if taken to extremes.

The chapter is a piece of action research (AR). The aim of the chapter is to develop strategies and interventions that may shape AHE students’ spoken and written English skills using CT. These strategies are intended to be useful for FE practitioners but with transferable qualities that may be applicable to a wider audience of pedagogues. This chapter introduces CT in the framework of a vocational FE institution. In line with British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines all participants and institutions are anonymised. This chapter works with widening participation, vulnerable adults and non-traditional students in the post-compulsory education sector. The chapter references current thinking about CT in education, locally and globally. It is anchored by the writings of educational theorists Brown (1998) and Lipman (2003). The line of inquiry asks: is it possible for CT to be taught or is it only possible to create situations to support the development of CT?

The methodological stance for this chapter is qualitative, using an interpretivist/hermeneutic epistemology (Scott and Usher, 1996: 18). The double ontology of the art school and the world of pedagogy is discussed. Postmodernism is a contextually useful framing. The researcher and author are the same person. Where appropriate they will be using the possessive ‘I’. Scott and Usher (1996: 10-11) state that ‘Effective practitioners ought to try to be researchers of our own practice’. Auto/ biography is a methodological approach borrowed from Burke (2001) used to add reflexivity to the text.

# Background, context and problem

**What is critical thinking?**

CT has its historical roots in philosophy; the phrase ‘critical’ was added first by Dewey (1934) and then later in the 1960s after Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). Elder and Paul (2007) state that CT can be applied to any subject, content or problem in which the thinker improves the quality of their thinking; they go on to argue that CT is a missing link in education and that the speed of technological and workplace innovation makes criticality more vital in this changing economy. Coalter (2008) and hooks (2007) agree that CT enables students to self-actualise and selfmotivate across class, gender and race, adding that CT is an important tool of the globalised and constantly shifting ways of being at work. Students will be employed in areas that did not exist 20 years ago. CT has a role to play in getting students ready for this flexible economy.

**Who are the AHE students?**

The first category of AHE students is young school-leavers such as Anthony, a croupier who takes bets seven nights a week in a local casino. He also supports a young family. He plans to become a graphic designer, but it will be a five-year process. His choice rests on a fear of failure and of having to stay in a limited career. Coalter (2008) considers that social capital is used as a heuristic device to examine the mechanics of classroom activity, the bonding of the group and how the small world of an FE classroom relates to the larger networks of the workplace, community and HE.

Boreas illustrates how re-engagement with education through FE can result in social mobility. Boreas, from a post-industrial fishing town, was on recreational drugs and could easily have drifted into education and slipped away without completing or gaining a qualification. He joined the book club and the community of inquiry gave him an added reason to keep attending the course when it became challenging. Baker (2017) examines how FE and the choices students make about their futures are shaped by the way they critically think through the social capital at their disposal. The Department for Education and Gibb (2018) elucidate on current social injustice and how it can be righted through increased social capital and CT in the curriculum to give all post-compulsory students a fair chance at further education. Freire (1968) and Brown (1998) both advocate education as social mobility and as a route out of the poverty trap of minimum wages. Vili and his brother Vé have increased the whole family’s social capital (Bourdieu, 1993) by entering education. Their plan is to be script writers and work in local film and TV industries. Vili has many obstacles: course costs, a growing family of three toddlers and a partner out of work. He perceives education as a way of healing his educational past and becoming a role model to his children.

Socrates says a life unexamined is no life at all. Baggini (2005), as noted in *The Guardian*, hints at an academic elitism that leaves ‘unexamined’ the lives of the low wage demographic. Hairdressers may verbally analyse and make critical judgements of their last cut, which in FE we would call a peer review using speaking and listening. Mechanics working in pairs may collaborate, diagnosing and recommending solutions to complex mechanical problems, which Fielding et al. (2005) and Gregson et al. (2013) would call collaborative working and joint practice development. Thinking through practice happens in many vocational and educational contexts.

The second category of AHE student is older, highly intelligent, well qualified, perhaps disenchanted or ‘burned out’, as one student put it, from a professional career, such as Maia, who is a GP and told me, ‘needy patients have broken me’. She has come to art school to escape the drifts of paperwork. Another student, Vulcan, went to an international school in Italy where the emphasis was very much on academia; art was discouraged. Lyssa describes herself as a ‘butterfly mind’ who, unlike Vulcan, was encouraged to take up arts and crafts at a young age whilst books were put out of her reach. ‘Maybe mum was protecting me from difficulty or frustration’, she comments.

**Vocation and practice**

Gimmerton College of Art like other FE institutions has a long history of providing a practical pedagogic experience for students. Hyland (2017) states that vocational students often find theory ‘difficult’ and avoid it whereas practice can be intuitive (Sennett, 2008). They have come to college to learn and develop practical skills and they are indisposed to write or think critically. Walker (2003) states that his athletic training students prefer competencies and proficiencies, and the disposition toward CT exists but is weak.

**Resistance to writing**

Resistance to writing and CT could stem from several reasons. Disciplines have their own language; this specific lexicon could appear to represent a secret club to which students are excluded. Another barrier to learning is dyslexia which is particularly prevalent in art schools. In a web-based survey undertaken for this research, 38.9 per cent of respondents identified as dyslexic or having a learning difference. They may be just disinclined to write because of poor experiences early on. Participant Gudrun put it thus: ‘I was the Aspi-girl [here she is appropriating slang meaning Asperger’s Syndrome] sent to isolation every day, at school’. This has led to learners like Gudrun being disengaged and resistant.

Brown (1998: 1) believes there is a thinking skills deficit, a gap in knowledge and response in school leavers. Learners being able to express themselves verbally and in written work is a requirement of awarding bodies. Learning outcomes demand CT and written annotation, and if students are resistant or feel they cannot do it, they will put off writing and eventually disengage from class. CT is useful for completing university applications. Critical and creative skills are also sought after by potential employers and providers of apprenticeships. To increase chances of social mobility and social capital, CT skills could be instrumental in escaping the poverty trap and gaining a professional qualification. They could improve employability, increasing transferable skills and movement out of the gig economy. The Canadian Ministry of Education states expansively that all students will need to develop a flexibility and a versatility undreamed of by previous generations and to employ critical and CT skills (Shaheen, 2007).

# Theoretical framework

**Local-global perspectives on critical thinking in education**

Leeds City Council (2015: 19) sees CT as a tenet of the religious education (RE) curriculum placing it in the discursive and reflective parts of that syllabus. The syllabus document says that CT generates independent thinking skills, self-confidence and a sense of identity. However, why is CT under the umbrella of RE? Religious studies like its secular counterpart Personal and Social Education (PSE) is not the only way to involve students in higher order thinking skills. Sennett (2008) argues that working with the hand is also a way to critically investigate the world. Epistemology is not just sedentary, CT can also ask us to think through doing.

The Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (2008: 11-19) sees PSE as a way of equipping citizens for life within the larger forum of the UK and as global players. The Welsh PSE curriculum actively encourages a development of soft skills. Emotion, spiritual issues and moral standpoints, elements that make us human, are recognised and encouraged as an aspect of CT. However, if CT is domain specific as Brown (1998) argues, then are we not limiting students to believe that CT is only applicable to religious or PSE debate?

Discussion by Longfield (2017) raises the controversial issue of ‘fake news’, saying that the important thing is to make sure that students develop vital CT skills. Students with CT skills would then be able to spot fake news that is designed to ‘mislead and create divisions in our society’. CT is the ability of students to read information on the internet and not to take it at face value but make up their own minds about it.

Continuing in this vein the 2019 theme for the Education World Forum (EWF) is:

What we should do with what we know: Developing education policy for implementation, impact and exponential success.

Every answer to every question is at our fingertips in the minicomputer that is our smart phone, if we know the right questions to ask. CT helps us ask pertinent questions, make decisions, use right judgement and wisdom, and think around and through problems. The EWF theme is about the information digital age. Our students, not necessarily digital natives, need to be creative craftspeople with information. They need to make information work in education and find moral, judicious, globally beneficial ways to use it, engaging CT skills to decipher it. Speaking for the Department for Education recently at the EWF, Gibb says:

...a successful curriculum should enable pupils to participate in the great conversations of humankind, and it should prepare pupils to thrive in an ever more globalised and competitive economy.

(Department for Education and Gibb, 2018)

This, he says, is to be achieved by utilising CT skills.

# Foundational thinkers in critical thinking: Brown and Lipman

**Can conditions to support critical thinking be developed?**

The educational philosophy of Freire (cited in Beck and Purcell, 2013) examines how learners can direct their own learning by promoting debate and dialogue utilising critical reflection which would then lead to a development of problem solving skills to create solutions to important issues. For FE students in any vocational area, these issues range from design skills and engineering problems to softer skills such as relationships and connection to or interaction with others. Brown (1998) agrees with the Victorian philosopher Mill, stating that CT and education in general is liberation and personal empowerment. Lipman (2003) has very strong views believing that schools and the school systems block children from independent and critical thought. This idea that students are receiving a curriculum which side steps criticality in favour of creating biddable students is quite a radical statement, and speaks of governmental complicity in creating an educational programme for a compliant population. Piaget (1973: 127) firmly believes that education promotes ‘understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups’; he states emphatically that education maintains peace.

**Is it possible for critical thinking to be taught?**

Brown (1998) says that CT can be taught but adds a caveat that it cannot be taught in a generalised way, which he sees as a mistake, and that it must be domain specific, using ‘disciplinary languages’. He also considers that the transferable nature of CT skills is deemed mythical because of their specificity. Oakeshotte (1933) agrees with this delineation which accords with Lipman’s (2003) theories about autonomous learning and letting students discover for themselves a path to CT.

**What if the craft of practice is the key to critical thinking?**

Lipman (2003) judges that critical thinking cannot be taught but must be practiced in tacit, experiential learning. This could be said to have been seeded in Aristotlean phronesis, that is, practical doing wisdom, advocated by Broadhead and Gregson (2018). Phronesis or the ability to deliberate well is also reflected in vocational thinking, drawing on knowledge and experience. Practice focused learning is the primacy of the hand or the thinking hand, learning and thinking through doing and situated practice. Sennett (2008) writes about craft and its template of diligence, building stages of mastery in vocational subjects. Barratt and Bolt (2007) discuss practice focused research and its value to vocational practitioners. CT in FE is not neat and tidy; it is messy and it works in the interstitial spaces around these objects of teaching or not teaching. CT aims to infuse imagination, curiosity and higher order thinking in the students.

# Methodology

The question is, what is the role of CT in vocational FE? How do the methods and interventions chosen support the chapter question? I am not a social scientist, but I borrow from social science methods of interventions such as the book group. I am not an anthropologist but I borrow from new ethnography in field notes, interviews and critical incidents in a non-empirical post-positivist way, that is, I reject positivism in relation to this research project, and believe its ruthless pursuit of the ‘truth’ is unrealistic when viewed through a postmodern lens. I am not a philosopher or critical thinker, but I borrow from concepts and ideas that both support and oppose my research to construct a debate around CT. I am an artist and an educator – Deleuze and Guattari (2014) have developed a rhizomatic model to make connections. I have used this model to connect narratives between students and participants. The rhizome is not limited to people; it also encompasses concepts and theories, creative writing and image creation. This makes a whole-person connection of emotional, philosophical and practical outputs.

Practice led research is a new species of research, generative enquiry that draws on subjective, interdisciplinary and emergent methodologies. (Barratt and Bolt, 2003: 2)

Bolt and Barratt (2003) use the term emergent methodologies. They are researchers from an art and design context, as is the researcher. The thesis although situated in an art institution has deep roots in the theory of pedagogy and philosophy of education. The double ontology of the art school and the world of pedagogy through a postmodern contextual framing is part of the methodology. What I mean by this is explained by describing how I inhabit and am enmeshed by the ontology of the art school. When I talk about my experiences of the art school, underlying these are my socio-cultural, subjective and historical locators. I am a thirdgeneration teacher descended from Irish immigrants and Dalesmen. I have been an art teacher for 18 years. Education is for all and it should be the very best that we can give. I am an artist and poet and an educator; I have a need to be creative in all spheres of my life. In a lot of ways, I am very conventional. I am married with two teenagers; we live the same lives as millions of people live. I had cancer in 2016 and this has shaped and focused responses to life.

**Methods and interventions**

The book club shares pre-arrival reading with 15 participants. In addition, there are 10 informal interviews, five critical incidents and a web-based survey, sent to 454 participants which had 39 replies. These are not discussed here but will be detailed in my MPhil dissertation. Social media have been a very useful tool for communicating the project to a wider audience. Inductive analysis is used and begins with the particularity of the Gimmerton College of Art AHE cohort, looking for recurring themes to make inference to more general cases. Campbell-Galman (2013) explains that ‘bottom up’ inductive data sorting uses the data themselves to make ideas and theories. The data collection from the book club is iteratively linked. Field note data from the book club is analysed in a cycle of reading, linking, labelling and coding, to discover patterns and themes.

**Fiction and mental health issues**

Students attending Gimmerton College of Art with mental health illnesses have increased year on year. In level 2 and 3 AHE, over the last 5 academic years from 2014 to 2019, students with mental health issues have risen from 44.4 per cent to 51.1 per cent. Although it is not a therapeutic course, anecdotally some students may have been directed to art as part of treatment by National Health Service (NHS) professionals. Art therapy is a resource as a part of the NHS but FE has none of the nursing or occupational therapy experts on hand. The reading group may be useful not just to me, looking for ways to increase CT for students, but also for students, who benefit their wellbeing by being part of the group. An unexpected avenue of this research has shown me that the NHS is already using bibliotherapy and reading circles as part of treatment (Hill et al., 1995), that is, wellness through the strategies of reading, therapeutic storytelling, healing through autobiography, and life-world care, aiming to see the person as a whole – including their emotional and creative side (Mcardle and Byrt, 2001; Shipman and McGrath, 2016; Hemmingway, 2011).

# Findings and discussion

**Book club**

The book club being a weekly lunchtime meet up makes it easier to keep in touch with participants and their experiences; there is a real feeling of continuity, of sharing the experience and trust. The emphasis is on speaking and listening, rather than reading and writing. There is transactional live discussion and constructive argument. There are in-themoment incidents and use of everyday speech and pattern of activity. I selected varied resources, books, graphic novels and videos, which catered for the different levels and abilities of the group as well as dyslexia and learning difference. I specifically chose writings that would be of relevance and interest to art students in order to connect stories and make associations, and create a sense of community and identity: Grayson Perry, Tracey Emin and Virginia Wolfe. There were plenty of political, economic, equality, diversity and inclusion discussions around the texts. This built up a community of inquiry in the group. Biesta and Goodson (2010) state that the interior conversations, whereby a person defines their personal thoughts and courses of action and creates their own stories and life missions, are situated at the heart of a person’s map of learning and understanding of their place in the world. Coalter (2008) considers that social capital is used as a heuristic device to examine the mechanics of classroom activity, the bonding of the group and how the small world of an FE classroom relates to the larger networks of the workplace, the community and HE.

**Informal interviews and critical incidence**

The informal one-to-one and pair interviews afforded me the chance to ask directed open questions and let the participants talk about what was important to them about criticality and creativity. In the book club participants expressed themselves briefly because there was a large group; the interviews were generally much more fruitful due to the permissiveness of this one-to-one situation. The journeys described by the participants showed the diversity of experience of vocational students who desire to work practically. Vulcan and Lyssa’s stories (mentioned earlier) came to light in this situation.

# Conclusion

**A health warning?**

Tentative initial findings consider a community of inquiry (Biesta, 2014) a useful tool for participants. Some of the issues touched on are equality, diversity and inclusion, a fair hearing of all participant voices, and the possibility to support the underlying mental health and wellbeing of participants non-professionally, bringing students out of themselves and into the world and into dialogue with the world (Biesta and Lutters, 2017: 37). Not presuming to have all the answers but directing participants to professional services if the need arises was also important.

Participants become agents of change in their own education and have the connection to and recognition of a wider community. This research has its biases just as I have mine, and therefore may need a ‘health warning’ in this current antipathetic political climate. My recommendations could be viewed as ‘unscientific’ due to the soft skills emotional intelligence methodologies used. Interventions analysed interpretively in a small-scale ethnography are not the same as hard statistics. Regarding FE Owen (2018) states:

There is a lack of evidence on how current practices operate to improve quality and improve learners’ outcomes.

There is, however, increasing evidence that FE is being researched and practical strategies are being found, and that these strategies come from practitioners in the sector. Authors such as Broadhead and Gregson (2018) and Coalter (2008) examine students with low qualifications on an FE course and their success in progression to HE. Lavender (2015) researches FE adult student resistance. McNicholas (2012) investigates inclusion for dyslexic students in an FE institution. Powell (2017) researches teacher trainers in an FE institute in a time of austerity. The DfE report goes on to say that ‘it will be necessary to improve the visibility and perceived status of the sector’ (Owen, 2018).

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and Suncett are funding and bringing up a new generation of FE practitioner researchers ready to ‘improve the status’ of the sector by their contribution to the debate. However, funding pressures on FE are likely to continue. In August, the Treasury instructed Whitehall departments with non-protected budgets, including FE, to identify areas of ‘potential savings’ (Carson, 2018). This is a worrying time for those of us in FE in a climate of cuts and budget squeezes.

**What does education make possible?**

Biesta and Lutters (2017: 54) believe that rather than asking what education produces, we should be asking what education means. Rather than asking what education makes, we should be asking what education makes possible. CT, through a series of propositions formulated through the pilot interventions of the book club and the interviews, appears to be a part of Biesta’s (2014) making possible. The two streams of students mentioned earlier are not separate entities but have learnt in the CT experience to work together. CT is furthered through an intergenerational experience. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 119) discuss this idea framed by the notion of mixing capitals, for example, the younger students help older peers with computers whilst the more experienced students can give advice on life issues and problem solving through tasks. CT is therefore phronesis, the learning through experience and wisdom (Broadhead and Gregson, 2017).

CT also happens outside of the classroom. Formal and informal learning environments such as art galleries, museums, libraries and book clubs, or writing a diary were in evidence throughout this research. Students began to schedule their own extra-curricular visits. They described beginning to imagine the horizon opening before them. They have gained an understanding that learning is not just confined to the prescribed and socially constructed areas of learning.

CT happens through judgement, and the ‘slow crafting’ exalted by Sennett (2008). Students and lecturers give themselves time to work things out on their own, to wait, to problem solve, and to challenge themselves, i.e. not to know the answers but to let the practice-focused research, workingthrough process inform thinking.

CT is also made present through team working, collaboration and joint practice development. Student participant Merope saw the project I was running for the MPhil, collecting stories of educational journeys, and decided to run her own data collection project, collecting student stories about precious objects and how her respondents made a connection to them. She may have come up with this idea on her own, or she may have been inspired to take a courageous step using CT to further her own project. In either case, sharing practice and ideas makes the research better and wiser.

CT is made present through equality, diversity and inclusion. Listening to each other and our real stories of struggle, getting it wrong, and the successes through adversity allows empathy for each other, for life situations, and cultural, religious and political viewpoints outside our previous experience. The sharing of these stories widens our scope of experience and difference.

**What is the importance of cultural context for critical thinking?**

Cultural context is so important when thinking about CT. The Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (2008: 11) paper emphasises the unique qualities and cultural heritage of Wales:

In personal and social education, learners develop an understanding of the nature of communities in Wales and the roles, relationships, conflicts and inequalities that affect the quality of life.

It is important to note that UK policy varies considerably from that of the Welsh Assembly. Carson (2018) states that central UK Government continues to control FE funding, but local authorities and Combined Authorities are pressing for greater devolution of the adult skills budget, implying that the cuts enacted on FE combined with 28 changes in FE legislation since the 1980s have led to a feeling in the sector of being undervalued in a complex and opaque system.

FE teacher identity is an important and under-researched area of a teacher’s life. Yeoman (2018) says we are taught as teachers to ‘speak our minds and leave our hearts out of it’. Bailey (2013) suggests that ‘an intensified regime of performativity in FE colleges has resulted in the dominance of an increasingly impoverished model of education’. Anecdotally, the teachers’ stories received when approached about CT research spoke of micromanagement and an overemphasis on paperwork; they were running at capacity and found it hard to commit to any extra-curricular research. Biesta (2014) believes that good education must involve taking risks, challenging the status quo and an end to playing safe. CT demands that we as teachers and the students together make discoveries, question, argue, debate and be good craftspeople by engaging in practice.

**What is the role of a community of inquiry for critical thinking?**

Through the interventions a community of inquiry was constructed. This gave participants a support network, a chance to read together and talk, and an added reason to keep attending and complete the course, as well as an opportunity to develop their CT and by extension their writing. Community of inquiry is supported by Lipman (2003) and Brown (1998: 189) who concur with the idea of educating students in an atmosphere of equality and joint inquiry to maximise access to the legacy of the critical traditions. Brown also states that this kind of classroom democracy is a high-risk strategy. Democracy is unpredictable; it does not have a predetermined outcome. He sees educational democracy as ‘the transformational power of critical thinking’ (Brown, 1998: 189).

Adding CT into the Gimmerton College of Art curriculum has had a marked effect on student response in discussion and debate. Participants are much more confident and articulate, and argumentative and discursive. I have observed a difference in response from the beginning of the year to the end and in the way students are ready to really talk about subjects in depth in lectures and in workshops. Can CT be taught or can we only develop ways of supporting it? Some initial scaffolding is needed. Examples and information on CT and ways it can be used are given to students along with a provision of space and time for the practice and the craft of CT in informal settings, and a subject specific practice-based strategy for students to try out some of the CT interventions, supported by lecturers.

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