



# Beyond critical thinking to critical being: Criticality in higher education and life



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## ABSTRACT

For John Henry Newman, the *raison d'être* of higher education was to 'educate the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out toward truth, and to grasp it' (Newman, 1996, p. 103). But of course, assuming a realist stance, whereupon a singular objective truth exists in every situation, and moreover, that it can be known, Newman's enunciation merely begs the question: how exactly in a world of endlessly competing truths, does one set about choosing the correct one? What competencies or skills ought one employ in order to grasp *Aletheia/Truth*? Should higher education, either explicitly, or *via* a hidden curriculum that transcends domain-specific knowledge, imbue criticality? In view of the fact that we all make truth-oriented decisions on a daily basis, very little research has been conducted into the 'science' underlying the mechanics of precisely how we scrutinize evidence and use it to justify our decisions and belief systems (Rescher, 2006). This paper proceeds in four parts. Part one briefly outlines the centrality of criticality in higher education as it is found in educational policy and learner outcomes. Part two appraises the critical thinking movement, specifically its insistence on rationality as an organic heuristic entity. Part three argues how criticality has supplanted critical thinking as the *sine qua non*, of not just higher education, but life itself, whilst part four unpacks the embodied benefits embedded in a tripartite ontology of criticality. To conclude, I shall proffer a synthesis of the findings.

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of critical thinking has been heralded for quite some time as being one of the most desirable outcomes of higher education (Ennis, 1987; Facione, 1990; Paul, 1984; Siegel, 1988). Proponents of critical thinking refer to it as the elixir of modern education (Ennis, 1987; Facione, 1990; Fisher, 2001; Paul, 1984; Siegel, 1988). Taking up this very point in his inaugural speech, Professor Patrick Prendergast, the current Provost of Trinity College Dublin, emphasizes the importance of this leitmotif by drawing our attention to a recent Trinity survey of employer expectations. Results from this survey confirm that employers [of TCD graduates] ascribe vital importance to 'critical and independent thinking' and view such skills as *de rigueur* for life and the marketplace. Elaborating on this theme, Prendergast describes his vision for the university. He explains how he craves,

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students who are every day wiser than they were yesterday; students engaged in lifelong learning, who are sound in their foundations but not stuck in their opinions. . .that's [what] will reap most private benefit and sow most public good (Prendergast, para. 24, 2011)

Higher education commentators such as Barnett fervently endorse Prendergast's vision of the modern university. In his book, *Higher Education: A Critical Business*, Barnett (1997), expounds the educational value of criticality. In short, criticality comprises, 'critical thinking, analytical reasoning, critical self-reflection and critical action' (p. 6). Accordingly, these domains of criticality encompass: knowledge (critical reason), the self (critical reflection) and the world (critical action). For Barnett (1997), the underlying purpose of education and educators is to 'develop the capacities to think critically. . .to understand oneself critically and to act critically, thereby forming critical persons who are not subject to the world, but able to act autonomously and purposively within it' (p. 7). Freire (1970), Newman (1996) and Jaspers (1965), all embrace similar assessments, with the latter stating that higher education is a process of 'self-formation' through 'self-criticism' in which the learner is 'referred back to himself for all his decisions' (Jaspers, 1965, p. 48). Reflecting on *paideia* and the importance of self-agency, Peters (1973) asserts, 'to be educated is not to arrive at a destination; it is to travel with a different view' (p. 63). Criticality thus empowers graduates to 'travel with a different view' – a decidedly vital quality, because as Dewey (2012) puts it, 'education is not preparation for life; education is life itself' (p. 31).

## 2. Part one: national and international policy

Recent developments in educational policy across Europe and indeed further afield, have uniformly exalted the role of criticality in higher education (*A Test of Leadership*, 2006; *The Dearing Report*, 1997; *The Hunt Report*, 2011). Some policy documents even go as far as highlighting the lack thereof in their graduates. For instance, in the US document, *A Test of Leadership* (2006), one learns that, 'employers repeatedly report that many of the new graduates they hire are not prepared for work, [because they] lack the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today's workplaces' (p. 4). Such findings are at variance however with data extrapolated from several studies, all of which consistently reveal an overwhelming faculty support (between 92% and 99%) for actively integrating criticality in instruction (Gardiner, 1995; Paul & Elder, 1997; Thomas, 1999). Though the issue is admittedly complex, the basic thrust is straightforward: educational institutions are falling short on their goal of imbuing criticality.

Bok (2006), the former president of Harvard University, explains how he finds it ironic that 'faculty members. . .[agree] almost unanimously that teaching students to think critically is the principal aim of undergraduate instruction, but generally fail to help them do so' (pp. 109–145). Since outcomes describe what the student actually achieves, as opposed to what the institution intends to teach, Bok contends there is an urgent need to develop learner outcomes further in an effort to enhance teaching and learning (pp. 109–145). This yawning chasm between the rhetoric of educational policy/curriculum, (what the institution intends to teach), and the verifiable actuality of student learning, (what the student actually achieves), is examined in a large-scale longitudinal study, entitled *Academically Adrift*,<sup>1</sup> in which 2322 students drawn from around the US undertook a critical thinking test (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 4). Results from this study found that nearly half (45%) of the students in the sample exhibited no statistically significant gains in critical thinking after two years of the college experience (p. 35). In keeping with these findings, it comes as no surprise that the report concludes that, even though, '99 percent of college faculty say that developing students' abilities to think critically is a "very important" or "essential" goal of undergraduate education, commitment to these skills appears more a matter of principle than practice' (p. 35). The end result is that 'many students are only marginally improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing, during their journeys through higher education' (p. 37).

Perhaps in some way cognizant of these shortcomings, *The Review of Australian Higher Education* (2008) presents 'critical analysis and 'independent thought' as essential skills for twenty-first century graduates (p. 5). To this end, they administer an outcomes-based assessment tool called *Graduate Skills Assessment* (2000) to gauge critical thinking and problem solving skills amongst their undergraduate population. The purpose of the test is to assess students' generic skills (critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal understandings and written communication) just as they begin university and shortly before they graduate. A similar instrument is used in Mexico, called the *Examen Nacional de Ingreso al Posgrado*, which examines candidates' ability to infer, critically analyze and synthesize information (Nusche, 2008). The US have three main assessment instruments at their disposal, namely, the *Collegiate Learning Assessment* (CLA, 2002), the *Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress* (MAPP) and the *Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency* (CAAP). All these tests comprise some form of critical thinking and analytical reasoning, skills which are crucial in the humanities. Additionally, there are several other established critical thinking assessments in circulation, including the *Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal* (CTA), the *Cornell Critical Thinking Test* (CCTT), developed by Ennis and Millman, and the *California Critical Thinking Skills Test*.

Over and above these instruments, each assessment tool has given rise to a multitude of variants and offshoots. Much has been written on the technical and conceptual limitations inherent in these instruments, but space precludes a thorough examination here (see McPeck, 1981; Modjeski & Michael, 1983). What is important here is the pervasive nature of these

<sup>1</sup> This study used the Collegiate Learning Assessment tool to generate its data. In the US, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, (CLA), has been used by over 400 institutions in order to collect objective data on learning outcomes (Coates, 2010, p.32).

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