

The need to transform understanding

Employers value critical thinking skills as they improve personal performance, leadership and collaborative team working. Graduates who have the ability to independently and systematically analyse problems and make decisions are highly sought after employees.¹ However, we live in an age where the internet and social media brings greater exposure to misleading information and fake news disguised as authentic and credible. Fake news is becoming a national issue², and there is particular concern that the under 25's are unable to differentiate truth from fake news in headlines³. Jo Johnson, Minister for Universities defines a university as 'a place where students are developing higher analytical capacities, critical thinking, curiosity about the world and higher levels of abstract capacity in their thinking'.⁴ As educators we believe we have a duty to develop our students aptitude for critical thinking in this 'post truth' world.



Identifying the problem

There is a tendency for educators to make erroneous and unrealistic assumptions about how students think and learn. University education should empower students to pro-actively participate in their studies and develop effective skills for lifelong learning.⁵ From experience, students often appear to be uncomfortable when having to think more deeply about their learning. They appear to find challenging their own and others perspectives difficult as well as reflecting on what they have learnt in order to construct a balanced argument. Critical thinking represents a composite range of skills, each one a building block to transforming understanding and capacity for discernment.⁶ The problem lies not only in understanding the challenges students face but also in helping them make sense of the concept of critical thinking. Consideration needs to be given to identifying effective learning and teaching methods that facilitate an applied understanding of the required skills.



Transforming students by transforming our approach

Common Formulaic Approach

- Processing
- Accepting at face value
- Quick certainties

Enhancing metacognition and self awareness



Autonomous thinking

Approaches to developing autonomous critical thinking

Transforming students' personal perspectives and their approach to learning is vital. There is a clear need to focus on encouraging students to be open-minded, less passive and more reflexive and to nurture their confidence in challenging their own ideas and opinions and what they see and hear from others. Approaches to learning and teaching must be underpinned by transformative theory⁷ and lead students through the 'conceptual gateways' to a more accessible way of thinking about information and their disciplines.⁶ To do this we believe that educators need to challenge their own practice and transform how they facilitate learning and interact with students in the classroom. This is supported by Jo Johnson who says universities need 'a cohesive and self-critical academic community'.⁴

References: 1. Facione P. Critical Thinking: What it is and why it counts Available at: <https://blogs.city.ac.uk/cturkoglu/files/2015/03/Critical-Thinking-Articles-w6xywo.pdf> [Accessed 5.11.17]. 2. BBC Trending: The Rise and Fall of Fake News. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-37846860> [Accessed 8.11.17]. 3. Channel 4: Fake news - true or false? Available at: <https://www.channel4.com/news/fake-news-true-or-false> [Accessed 8.11.17]. 4. Evans G. The Jo Johnson definition of a university. The Times Higher Education <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/jo-johnson-definition-university> [Accessed 8.5.17]. 5. Johnston B. The First Year at University- Teaching Students in Transition. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill Education: 2010. 6. Meyer J. Land R. Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge(2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning *Higher Education* 49(3) 2005 pp.373-388. 7. Mezirow J. Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning. UK: Wiley & Sons: 1991.