Constructing Critical Thinking with Psychology Students in Higher Education: Opportunities and barriers

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This paper considers ways in which critical psychology can be introduced with undergraduate psychology students and presents opportunities and barriers in a psychology unit.

Key words: Critical psychology, critical theory, learning and teaching, higher education, collaborative learning, discourse

‘Critical thinking’ is a concept which has become widely discussed in debates around innovative learning and teaching in higher education. It has long been considered a valuable skill for students to develop. However, a closer examination of the use of the term reveals essentialised versions which are superficial. This paper will review theories which stem from critical psychology and will examine their value for teaching in psychology. It will then present examples of psychology teaching experiences which have attempted to incorporate these principles, reflecting on what can be achieved and on the barriers which make such practice difficult.

The desire to develop ‘critical thinking’ skills in students of higher education is expressed by governments, academia and psychology alike. Increasingly, often in response to the labour market, governments advocate generic skills which all graduates should develop in degree courses. Critical thinking is positioned as one such desirable graduate attribute. In the UK for example, it first emerged as a generic skill in the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997, Recommendation 21), and in Australia as a key graduate attribute in the Higher Education Council’s ‘Achieving Quality’ (Australian Government, 1992, p. 22). While the complexity of national skills or attributes has now increased, with universities taking up similar but varying forms of generic graduate outcomes,
critical thinking remains one of the primary items (e.g., as one of six attributes psychology students should graduate with; Carrick Institute, 2000).

Skills in critical thinking are additionally viewed as integral to psychology (Cotter & Sacco Tally, 2009; Hickinbottom, 2007; Solon, 2007). Curricula and textbooks describe its importance and advocate development of skills which go beyond mere knowledge reproduction (see for example: Burton, Westen, & Kowalski, 2012, p. 67; Gerrig, Zimbardo, Campbell, Cumming, & Wilkes, 2012, p. 14). A closer examination however reveals theory and practice which can be argued to be superficial, drawing on notions of critique which align themselves with positivist assumptions which themselves are not critiqued (Cotter & Sacco Tally, 2009). Prilletensky (1994) argued that psychology corrals its notion of critical thinking within positivist science and logic, failing to critique those paradigms for their usefulness. This leads he argues, to critique which focuses on ‘methodological rigour, logical reasoning in deriving conclusions and adequacy of generalisations’, and not examination of the ideology these approaches are grounded in (Prilleltensky, 1994, p. 4).

This problematic use of the term ‘critical thinking’ extends into psychological research about critical thinking. In a study on its development in psychology students, Solon (2007) examines students’ abilities to detect the difference between deductive and inductive, valid and invalid, relevant and irrelevant arguments (p. 96). These skills involve an examination of logic and reasoning, but are limited in critical terms, and don’t for example involve questioning ideologies and power relations. Cotter (2009) describes a broader set of criteria which include challenging assumptions, evaluating and analysing arguments, and considering meta ‘cognitions’ (p. 3). However, Cotter’s research goes on to demonstrate significant problems with psychology’s understanding of critical theory: it ‘measures’ critical thinking by using multiple choice questions, which is a poor method to access complex levels of thinking and reasoning. A substantial lack of critical thinking can also be found when the study, inexplicably and without reflection, compares the skills of students of different ethnicities. Hickinbottom (2007) argues that in its approach to teaching, psychology often actually discourages critical thinking among students. She argues that the discipline is often engaged in maintaining and upholding dominant paradigms; on retaining the status quo rather than continually transforming. For students this can result in indoctrination into ways of thinking and compliance with the dominating arguments of the moment, rather than the space and encouragement to ask questions of psychology.

In the field of critical psychology the notion of critical thinking extends further than these approaches and offers significant possibilities for transformative, innovative pedagogy. The field of critical psychology is by its very nature non-homogenous and difficult to pin down: it aims to be responsive to context. It retains more generally however, a focus not just on social issues outside, but on an examination within; a focus on the institution of psychology itself. A valuable focal point is the careful examination of pre-existing knowledge
and taken for granted assumption (Collins, 2004). Where mainstream psychology might look to generate data first, and question methodology less often, critical approaches to psychology interrogate the foundations of research and can therefore be argued to be essential practices to undertake with those starting out in the field. Knowledge is questioned for its discursive, symbiotic relationships with power (Foucault, 1978–97). Examining introductory textbooks for undergraduate psychology quickly increases the value of this approach: most communicate essentialised versions of psychological theory and do not convey even disagreements which are widely discussed in a field. They often present theories (and discourses of science) as unproblematic ‘facts’ which are misleading for students and offer no space for critique (for example ‘critical thinking’ involves: ‘making a logical and rational assessment of information, assessing … strengths and weaknesses’ (Burton et al., 2012, p. 67)).

A deeper approach to critical thinking is not easy to achieve and needs to go well beyond these descriptions provided in textbooks. It requires a questioning of ideas and assumptions which otherwise remain unspoken and taken for granted. It entails thinking beyond concepts which are presented and thinking past authority (encouraging the problematising of very well known theories and researchers for example). Contradictions must be examined; interrelations should be explored; competing concepts must be contrasted and effects and consequences should be interrogated, well beyond the consequences which are overtly communicated by interested parties (Collins, 2004). Above all it is important to ask whose interests are served by the presenting of knowledge in particular ways.

This paper therefore argues that the term ‘critical thinking’ has often been appropriated to mean something simplistic and easy to achieve: the field of critical psychology and related critical theories offer something deeper and a potential for psychology teaching in higher education to achieve transformative pedagogy which aligns itself with social justice issues. It offers possibilities for psychology to transform itself from students up, allowing for innovative, contemporary change rather than traditional adherence to the status quo. In the examples of practice that come next, a reflection of the processes involved in developing critical thinking skills with students will demonstrate transparent efforts to engage in complexity and critique in learning, and will reflect upon students’ experiences of such challenges.

Language and subjectivity: aiming for critical thinking
Language and Subjectivity is a third year undergraduate unit (the year preceding honours) which is part of the psychology degree at Charles Sturt University (NSW, Australia) and introduces students to critical approaches to language (a ‘unit’ here is one subject in a wider degree course and students usually take three units per semester). The unit is part of a degree by distance and thus is carried out almost entirely online (with a 2.5 day residential school). Between 100–150 students register for the unit each year, and there is a principal teacher
(the author) and usually two or three supporting teachers. Materials include topic guides and readings, and members have an online space to discuss and access the materials. For a subject related to discursive theories which by their nature benefit from discussion, the remote online environment makes it particularly challenging. The unit uses contemporary theory to consider the constructed nature of language, discourses and subjectivity: it does so while drawing on students’ experiences of social phenomena both ‘outside’ university like school education, but significantly also phenomena students are presently experiencing in university. In this way the unit directly examines institutional discourses which occur at global and local levels of higher education and psychology, which the students are experiencing within the subject itself but also more widely as they progress through a psychology degree and are invited to perform the subject position of ‘student’. It examines discourses that inform the unit itself: on one hand critical theory and on the other barriers around the unit that make such theories difficult to put into practice. This reflexive nature of the unit aims to develop extended skills of critical thinking in students, enabling them to ask questions of areas which usually remain uncontested. Content and activities change each year in response to feedback from students and developments in theory and research: this paper focuses on one incarnation from 2010 and 2011.

An epistemology of critical learning and teaching

In developing this unit there was a desire to engage with students with content informed by critical psychological approaches, including poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and feminism. In addition however there was strong focus on the learning and teaching processes themselves to be informed by critical theories. This required some problematising of the taken for granted assumptions embedded within teaching and developing a kind of epistemology for the unit. This process is ongoing, but was initially engaged in by the team of teaching staff who contribute to the unit before the structure and materials of the unit were developed.

Traditionally students are positioned as passive, grateful recipients of education and teachers as authoritarian disciplinarians (Freire, 1970). A critical approach should involve the reduction of this power inequality, not just as a social justice issue, but to create a richer learning experience for both teachers and students. Collaborative practice is not always possible and there are many barriers in any institutional educational space. Notably for example, the process described here of problematising and designing the unit was done by teaching staff largely without students. While it was informed by experiences with students, regulations are such that a unit must be designed prior to teaching it and this reduces possibilities for collaborative learning. To go some way towards addressing this, the benefits and limits of collaboration are problematised transparently with students as a learning opportunity. Interesting discussions arise from this method at times, as occasionally students expect authoritarian
teaching and equate an absence of such with an inability to teach: these instances serve to deepen reflection on discursive assumptions of what higher education should look like.

In introducing a critical approach to language, much emphasis is placed upon the way that knowledges are different from various standpoints. This can be challenging for students who have been presented with an unproblematised positivist position throughout their education: that there is a universal way of knowing and that science (and by extension psychology), strives to reach it. Practices such as exams and assessment reinforce this idea that one needs to access and then reproduce the ‘right answer’ in one’s studies. Furthermore, assumptions of teacher authority imply that the individual/individuals positioned as ‘teacher’ have those answers. A major aim of the unit is to problematise these assumptions and to reflect on their conditions for production and their consequences.

Part of this approach involves an attempt to engage with students’ experiences as ‘experts’ of social and cultural discourses (Parker, 2005, p. 8). This allows for an exploration of subjectivity and the production of discourses in one’s own accounts: a problematising of individualising, essentialising and psychologising discourse in text. This is particularly the case in an online unit where most discussion is written down and available for careful reflection. However, this is done alongside the understanding (partly from direct experiences with students) that critique of what is spoken or experienced is often understood as a personal attack – ironically even when questioning the very understanding of ‘person’. This problem means that students (and surely staff too) are at risk of experiencing critique as challenging, difficult, or worse upsetting and depowering. Critique which engages in complicated theory has the potential to be silencing and a barrier to learning. Critique produced by staff therefore aims to be somehow ‘careful’ or ‘gentle’, with a nod to social justice and care for individuals, while simultaneously faithful to critical ideologies. This is not easy, could certainly be argued to be contradictory at times, and is not something this paper argues is achieved wholly by the unit. The next three sections present some examples of activities which have been attempted, and reflect on the opportunities they create and barriers that remain.

**Online Blogs**

As an initial piece of ‘coursework’, students write an online blog which can be viewed by all members of the unit. They must write five posts and comment on two other student’s postings in order to pass. The task is deliberately less directed: there are no word limits or writing conventions and they can write about anything relating to the unit materials. Suggested questions are provided if students find them useful to answer, otherwise the task is self directed. The intention of this activity is to provide space for students to explore critical content, less hindered by institutional controls which promote acritical, passive learning. To begin with, some reproduce conventional discourses about learning
and assessment, asking for example ‘how many words should we have’ or ‘how should we reference’? These questions are not just answered but rather reflected upon for their problematic nature: ‘why would an assessment need a word count’; ‘what is achieved by this privileging of ‘references’ over your own understanding’? As described earlier, this is done with care, using for example humour or statements of solidarity (‘I totally understand why you would ask this!’) in an attempt to help students feel more at ease. This is somewhat at odds with a critical approach, but students have often conveyed feeling very confronted by these challenging reflections and this has been one way to help. It could certainly be argued that the teachers have not yet reached a less problematic way of introducing critical theory, but an alternative argument is that the discursive institutional space we inhabit as students and teachers does not provide the opportunity.

Once students are encouraged in this way, the work they produce tends to be prolific, complex and interesting. The process of posting to a large group is difficult and can be the first time students have done so. While they can choose to post privately to the teacher, the majority post publicly (this may not be a choice: students may well feel compelled to do so) to all members and this enables a process by which students experience critique of their own ideas, as texts which are products of wider social discourses. The posts provide a body of work to learn from which is not created by a teacher. Not all posts are highly sophisticated but many are just that and offer different examples relevant to theory, different ways of expressing and describing theory, and important questions of unit materials. In 2011 all students (except those who withdrew from the subject, six per cent of original cohort), completed the task, many wrote long, sophisticated posts which were not required to pass, and about a fifth of the students wrote more than five posts.

**One to one recordings**

The nature of a large online unit makes collaborative and dialogical education difficult. In order to reduce this problem to some extent, a number of one to one conversational recordings are produced between the teacher and one student. Students are asked to volunteer and given the confronting nature of the task a relatively small number do so. The student selects the topic for discussion, often something the student finds difficult or interesting, or a particularly difficult reading. This activity is designed to allow for some extended dialogue and aims to provide some reduction of teacher authority in the unit. It allows issues to be raised and discussed at length which other students will likely be struggling with or questioning. This brings a form of richer interaction to the unit that is otherwise difficult to achieve with a large online cohort. The activity has flaws:

1. Although it would be potentially useful to present example text from the activities, it is not feasible to obtain consent from the students who made posts or took part in recordings – all activities are conducted privately with the understanding that they will only be seen by the members of that unit, that year.
only a small number of students get this opportunity and these are likely to be a more confident group of students who are more positively engaged with the subject. There will also be lots of issues others struggle with which are not raised in this way, and students who would like to say they disagree with content but feel unable to. The act of collaboration is nevertheless a valuable one and those listening to the recordings report gaining a great deal. The topic of the conversation is carefully problematised for the assumptions and contradictions which might be taken for granted, for the ways in which subjects are positioned and the discourses which are embedded. Where these are difficult to understand, the length and depth of the conversation makes more possible an extended developing of understanding, where the student can problematise the account the teacher is giving and the teacher can modify that account to make things clearer, and vice versa.

Critically directed forum discussion

The unit’s forum is a space for written discussion throughout the semester: while many postings are questions about structure, such as submission dates and assessment guidelines, discussion of content aims to be actively directed by critical positions. It is hard to fully appreciate how difficult and challenging this can be for students, and is described well by one student in feedback they wrote after the unit ended:

For me the most challenging thing was to not have the ‘right’ answer. Initially I would post something to the forum desiring feedback from the teachers (and others) that what I had said was ‘right’. Instead the teaching staff would ask us to further review or expand on what we had said. The first couple of times this happened I immediately thought that I had got it ‘wrong’ and my instinct was to disengage from that discussion and possibly from posting to the forum. Initially it is very difficult to do anything apart from take the feedback or questioning personally even when it is explained that this is part of the learning process (Katharine Henning, 2011).

This account describes the student overcoming problematic assumptions that critique is an attack on the person and that positivist notions of universal knowledge are achievable, and as described earlier was something the unit aimed to challenge. This demonstrates the level of difficulty in engaging in such complex discussion with students, and while the unit is respectful of students, it does not move away from significantly challenging them. This excerpt also raises very significant questions about why students at third year psychology have found such discussion so absent from the many years of their education up to this point.

Discussion aimed for complex critique which was simultaneously respectful, again described well by Katharine:
I saw that others were having the same experience and, from other people’s posts could see that the comments from the teachers (and eventually other students) were not critical of the individual but rather delving further into the content of the posts. Once I could see this in others posts/responses I was able to see that the comments for my posts were also not critical of me but building a critical dialogue to develop ideas. This encouraged me to continue to post to the forum. Once I was comfortable with engaging in critical discussion with other participants in the course I rapidly started to understand points that teachers had made (including earlier posts) and also developed a better understanding of how discourses were affecting me. (Katharine Henning, 2011)

This process of problematising such assumptions that Katherine describes is something which is directly discussed during the unit. There is an explicit effort by teachers to engage with students in understanding that social and cultural discourses, some of which are more or less problematic from certain standpoints, can be found in any piece of text. This process is carefully explained and texts produced by teachers, texts belonging to the unit, as well as language found in psychology and higher education, are all critiqued through the forum to demonstrate this and challenge any assumptions that some texts should remain ‘unquestioned’.

Conclusion
The knowledge produced by the students in blog posts, recordings and the forum rebalances the content of the unit and draws on the expert experiences all members of the unit have of our social world and constructions of knowledge. One difficulty is that some of these texts can be acritical, reproducing rather than challenging problematic discourse. While these can be useful for discussion as described in this paper, pragmatically it is not possible to critique everything produced, or to know whether those critiques are understood. The unit still struggles with how to engage in critical practices with students without depowering or silencing. This issue is heavily encumbered by the institutional space in which we operate. For example, students have described how unsafe they feel posting publicly to a forum or blog their own opinions or disagreements with teachers, because they have been silenced and mistreated by other teachers before.

Engaging in this unit with students and receiving their responses allows for a problematising of ‘critical thinking’, and learning and teaching in psychology and education more widely. Every year a majority of students communicate strong positive feedback at the end of this unit (a minority provide negative feedback – not all students are pleased with the content!). Students also communicate throughout the unit, as Katherine described above, how challenging and difficult they find it. There is a sense each year of us engaging in substantial struggle before emerging a little more confidently at the other end. From a critical standpoint, these points are not recounted here to suggest
that the unit is concretely ‘better’ than others. An alternative reading is that these important responses from students suggest that this kind of pedagogy into critical theory has not emerged for them elsewhere in their long, illustrious experience of education. That students entering the third year of an undergraduate degree have often not encountered critical approaches such as these before warrants concern and reflection. Our collaborations in this unit extend the argument at the start of the paper that ‘critical thinking’ is taught in psychology in a superficial and problematic way. I would like to further argue here that our education at the ‘highest’ levels is producing compliance and maintenance of the status quo by failing or refusing to teach more transformative material.

The barriers to collaborative, critical practice with students are impossible to fully overcome: the principle teacher of the unit is responsible for the members and must make many decisions without their involvement. Structural practices of higher education like the hierarchical grading and the high competition for further study diminish the richness of many of the informal learning experiences. Students and teachers enter the unit heavily informed by dominant assumptions about what learning and teaching should look like, and find innovative experiences more challenging as a result. The response of this unit to these limitations as far as possible is to make them known to students, to problematise barriers transparently, and to use them as learning experiences.

Extending notions of ‘critical’, by questioning political and ideological assumptions, and asking ‘in whose interests’ should be considered valuable processes to undertake with students. These are important for students to understand psychology as they learn it, and for them to go out into community as practitioners who can ask questions of their practice in psychology as well as other organisations they and their clients experience. This transformative potential is an important element that critical psychology has to offer but simultaneously is hugely challenging: a psychology which is undergoing transformative processes aimed at better meeting the needs of community is nevertheless a fundamental and valuable ambition.

References


