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# **An intervention program for practising critical thinking: on-shore and off-shore students blogging together**

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An intervention program was devised to assist off-shore students develop critical thinking skills through blogs. On-shore students were assisted in setting up group blogs and off-shore students engaged in discussion with the issues raised. In this manner one academic taught 40 students face to face who then reached out in critical discussion with 70 other students to create a community of critical thinkers.

**Keywords:** critical thinking, off-shore students, blogs.

As a learning skills advisor I have a responsibility to support all students in developing their critical thinking skills. This project developed as a way to respond to the needs of students who are studying for a degree from an Australian university whilst living in their own country, otherwise known as off-shore students. I began this research with the assumption that the online environment would be a difficulty to overcome, that students from a Confucian heritage (Green, 2007) education background tend to lack critical thinking skills and dispositions, and that the key task would be to find the best method to 'translate' my face-to-face workshops into an online model.

The design of the intervention program was based around these concerns and involved building an online link between two groups of students enrolled in two completely different units being run by two different academics. As a group project worth 25%, on-shore students had to construct and maintain a blog for the semester in which they discussed the set readings, analysed the graduate attributes they had achieved and discussed the ethical responsibility of a professional. Off-shore students were asked to make three comments over the course of their trimester on the on-shore students' writings and these comments were worth 5% of their overall grade. Blogs were chosen as an on-line space that allows students to express and explore their ideas with the appropriate facilitation (Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005).

The joy of critical thinking and research is being surprised by the world, and I now realise that the three assumptions that underpinned the design of the intervention program were false and that by building an on-line community, using pedagogical practises and language that model 'good thinking' across the on-shore/off-shore student divide, all students gain an enriched experience of critical thinking. This is the story of that discovery.

## **Critical thinking and the Confucian Heritage (CH) student**

For a number of years there has been a discussion in the scholarship of teaching and learning over the differences in learning styles and approaches between students from different cultural and educational backgrounds (Biggs, 1991). The perceived lack of fit between students from a

Confucian heritage with the analytical approach to thinking critically in western academic culture is often understood as a clash between different pedagogical modes: transmission, teacher-centred education which constructs a passive, dependent student as opposed to active, independent, student-centred learning; and between a naive and a mature epistemology. It is also often constructed as a difference between students' motivations to learn: intrinsic motivation (the love of learning for itself) being seen as leading to deep approaches to learning and extrinsic motivations (receiving a reward for your learning efforts) leading to shallow choices and just-in-time strategies (Marton & Saljo, 1976). Further to this deep/shallow divide, Biggs (1991) suggests a third approach: the 'achieving learning approach' where the student focuses on how to achieve good results in learning and then chooses effective strategies for learning (time management, good organisational skills etc.). The choice of learning strategies in Biggs' model is cue conscious: students take cues from teachers as what to focus on.

However approaches to learning are theorised, the CH student is generally seen by Australian academics as lacking independent learning skills, being overly dependent on instructions, being too focused on quick learning via memorisation of facts and unable to analyse and synthesise material. It is a construction of the CH student as being group-oriented, uncritical and respectfully subservient to authority in contrast with their individualistic, critical and more adversarial Western counterparts (Stapleton, 2002, p.250).

Whilst many of these assumptions construct the CH student in a negative light, there is also an acknowledgement that these students are hard-working and conscientious. The so called 'paradox of the Chinese learner' (Watkins & Biggs, 1996) is that, whilst these assumptions should lead to students who do not succeed or who are only mediocre in the western higher education system, many CH students are extremely successful in their academic studies. There is then a need to re-examine these assumptions about CH students.

### **Epistemological beliefs**

The approach a student takes to learning reflects their assumptions and perceptions of the relationship between the assessment, the teaching environment and epistemology.

When students consider knowledge as a product that exists external to and unrelated with their learning experience, they situate themselves as consumers rather than producers of knowledge. Their task is to receive the external transmission of knowledge from the experts, incorporate this into their knowledge bank (and prove they have done this by reciting it back in tests so they can be classified as experts in a field of knowledge). The difficulty with this model of knowledge is that it leaves out the changing nature of knowledge and does not account for the debates and contests over what is counted as knowledge. It is a partial and limited account of the construction of knowledge and is often called a 'naive epistemology' as opposed to a 'mature epistemology' which recognises that knowledge is historically, socially and culturally situated and constructed.

Nist and Holschuh (2005) suggest that there is evidence that epistemological beliefs affect students' choices in the use of learning strategies. For example, a naive epistemology is associated with use of memorisation techniques whilst a mature epistemology leads to iterative reading and writing techniques. Students with a naive epistemology will also tend to assume a 'fill in the gaps' approach to assessment tasks which makes it difficult for them to

fully grasp the requirements of tasks that involve synthesising or analysing material (Nist & Holschuh, 2005; Phan, 2008).

All students, whatever their cultural background, need to move beyond a naive epistemology to form a complex view of the construction of knowledge. It is important that they are assisted in this development by academics who make their own critical thinking explicit and visible (Tishman, & Perkins, 1997; Van Gelder, 2005). In this respect, the learning needs of the CH student are no different to any other student. By bringing students from different cultural backgrounds together into an active community where lively discussion occurs over contested concepts, a more mature epistemology is developed. It was, therefore, decided to try to create such a community on-line through blogs where students could discuss closely held beliefs and unpack implicit assumptions together.

### **Motivation and teacher dependency**

Part of the perceived difficulty in creating a climate of critical thinking is that students' motivation is often considered to be primarily about gaining good grades so they can get the best job and make the most money to have a wonderful life! 'What,' might the student ask, 'does critical thinking have to do with any of that?' This extrinsic motivation to learn is often associated with CH students but is prevalent amongst all students. The debate over the values and outcomes of intrinsic /extrinsic motivation on student learning may possibly be misleading. As Green (2007, p.332) points out, "While western psychology sees intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as exclusive, Chinese students' adoption of deep approaches to learning may be motivated by ... [mixtures] which could include a concern for relationships with teachers and peers, desire for material reward, and 'yes, possibly, even interest'."

Tang and Williams (2000) also suggest that the most often used tool to inquire into student motivation is open to different cultural interpretations and therefore the results may not be sound. Nevertheless, there can still be a serious gap between students' and academics' expectations of what a university education should involve. A key aspect of different expectations, in terms of teaching critical thinking, is that students' motivation for learning is also caught up with the boundaries of the teacher-student relationship which is extremely sensitive to cultural considerations. Within the Western construction of this relationship there is a paradox that tends not to be explicated to students that I, as a teacher and authority, want you, as the student, in my power, to take what I say and challenge, interrogate, analyse and critique it. This is an extremely uncomfortable task for CH students as it transgresses deeply held forms of respect for authority and the importance of maintaining 'face' (Hofstede, 1980).

Critical thinking is risky. As teachers, academics have to build trust with their students to assist them to deal with this 'paradox of power'. One of the ways that CH students may try to meet their need to feel sufficiently safe to take the risk of thinking critically is to reach out to academics and try to build a relationship that mirrors past student-teacher relationships they have experienced. There is often a close relationship between students and teachers in Asian cultures, which may be similar to a parental relationship. As Biggs (1991) points out, some students approach to learning strategies is 'cue focussed' and one of the difficulties between CH students and Australian academics is cues are often misread. If Australian academics cannot create a context of safety for CH students via the close relationship that the student seeks, then an alternative must be offered to the student. One way to achieve this is to build a community of critical thinkers (within a blog) in which the academic takes a mainly silent role.

## **Group oriented**

The construction of the CH student as more inclined to group work than their western counterpart has been picked up in the literature on student approaches to learning (Tang, 1996). However, group work as a pedagogical practice is an opportunity to make transparent to students that a mature epistemology assumes that knowledge is always partial and one method to overcome this limitation is to debate, discuss, share and question thus allowing us all (student and teacher alike) to increase our partial individualistic perspectives and gain a better understanding. Every time academics move students into group work is an opportunity for them to develop a more mature epistemology.

## **The developmental model of 'critical thinking'**

Critical thinking includes an element of meta-cognition, as not only do we ask our students to be open minded and balanced in their assessments of evidence we also want them to monitor, plan and adjust their thinking over time. Kuhn (2000) reserves the term meta-cognition for "... statements about thinking about what we know, that is they refer to declarative knowledge (knowing that)..." and uses the term meta-strategy to refer to "... thinking about how we know (procedural knowledge)..." which she further divides into meta-task "... knowledge about task goals and meta-strategic knowledge about the strategies one has available to address these goals" (p.180). At the meta-task level the performance of goals is attempted.

The division of meta-cognition into declarative, procedural and performative statements about knowledge is a useful way to teach critical thinking, as part of the difficulty in teaching critical thinking is that the only way to learn is to do it. By giving students feedback at the procedural knowledge level it is possible for them to improve their performative statements about knowledge. It is also important to recognise, as the developmental model does, that learning meta-cognition is not a one-off experience but a continual process of adjustment and choices of approaches to thinking that only occurs through in-time and appropriate feedback.

## **Methodology and data analysis**

The design of the on-line intervention program incorporated the above issues and, in particular, dealt with the issue of building the confidence and trust of off-shore students to think critically by having them comment on blogs run by an academic who was not involved in teaching or grading them. Whilst the off-shore students made individual comments onto the blogs, the on-shore students worked together in small groups as a blogging team and were coached in how to give peer feedback to each other on their thinking routines (Ikson, Land & Turgeon, 2005). This latter teaching strategy accomplished three objectives: it mirrored work practices and helped students develop team work skills, it made the whole process more fun and it allowed some of the debate within the team to be explicated onto the blogs for off-shore students to notice. It therefore made more explicit to all of the students that critical thinking is a communal activity.

Altogether, 110 students participated in this pilot intervention. At the outset, all students were advised that these blogs would be on the World Wide Web and therefore public documents in an open access domain. After the intervention program was completed and all students had finished their units, it became apparent that a wealth of interesting data had been generated into the public domain by these blogs which was conducive to an ethnographical analysis.

The approach taken in this research is primarily ethnographical in that the focus is on examining the dialogue generated by students in the 'real' setting of undertaking an assignment within a unit. The methods and the methodology of ethnography can tend to collapse into each other (Hammersley, 1990). However, the key procedures of an ethnographical study followed in this research were that:

- students' behaviour (as in writing on the blogs) was part of their normal everyday activities as a student
- data was collected by observation
- limited structures and directions were given so that students would feel unconstrained;
- a small group was used, and
- the analysis of the interactions of the students was in terms of what was considered to be significant and meaningful to them. (Brewer, 2000 p. 18-19)

As this research draws on dialogue that was posted into the public domain (open access blogs on the world wide web) only data that is part of the public record has been used. Ethics approval is not therefore an issue for this discussion and whilst the information currently in the public domain does include some references to first names, all references to individuals has been deleted in the following discussion. It must also be emphasised that the research does not include any of the comments made by students who were taught by the researcher and that the intervention program was designed so that there would be no explicit relationship of power or authority between the off-shore cohort, whose comments are analysed, and the researcher.

The qualitative data generated by this ethnographical approach was analysed to identify the themes that emerged in the dialogue (Halliday, 1978). As there was only a relatively small amount of data this was done by collating and categorising the comments on the basis of how often a theme was raised and how long the thread of discussion continued on that theme and what learning meta-task to the theme were taken by the students.

A basic tenet of ethnography is that the data must be allowed to 'speak for itself' and that the patterns or themes which emerge from the study of the data are primary (Glaser, 1992). Imposed categories are to be avoided as they will influence and alter the results. In keeping with the methodological assumption in ethnography that small amounts of 'captured conversations' can mirror larger issues, these comments presented here are potentially representative of off-shore students.

## Results

The 40 on-shore students created five blogs and generated 126 postings, most of which were lengthy; the 70 off-shore students generated 180 comments, again many of which were extended written pieces. Whilst the off-shore students were supposed to make three comments each, many of them failed to make their final comment. This may have been due to the fact that they were on a trimester timetable and the on-shore students were on a semester timetable. Thus some of the impetus for the dialogue fell away when the on-shore students ceased to participate on the blogs as their study period finished earlier than the off-shore students. The major themes that generated the most and longest discussions were on those issues that were important to students and which were seen as culturally different between the

two cohorts: such as the length of working hours, the necessity of being prepared to do unpaid overtime, and the significance of the concept of ‘guan-xi’.

The most surprising result was how much the off-shore students wrote onto these blogs, particularly in terms of the length of some of the comments. This was only worth 5% of their overall grade but many of them spent a great deal of time and effort on their postings.

### **Analysis of the postings**

The textual analysis showed that five important meta-task learning skills were employed by a significant number of the off-shore students:

- quoting and questioning
- controlling peer’s writing quality
- linking between learning moments
- building arguments with evidence
- building the confidence to voice opinion.

The style of writing that the off-shore students often used was to begin a comment by quoting the previous writer’s words, and use this as the launch pad for their own critical question. As this is a standard practice in the academic culture it was heartening to observe this behaviour in students who are often perceived to be passive and non-critical. For example:

*“‘Continuous learning is encouraged both by the company and government.’  
After reading this sentence, it makes me ponder how true is it in Singapore  
workplace culture?”*

*“‘In the Australian society, everyone is equal; unfortunately, in the Asian culture  
there is a lot of discrimination, where upper class members can highly arrogant  
and snobbish’. With reference to the above sentence I find the statement  
inaccurate and offensive. How can one define Asian culture when Asia is made up  
of hundreds of different races with individual cultures?”*

At the beginning of the blog project, as the unit co-ordinator, I made a few comments on my students’ comments to model the appropriate level of critical analysis and style of comments expected. I did this in the first two weeks and made three comments (about three or four sentences long) on each of the blogs and then allowed the students ‘clear space’ and became a reader rather than a writer of the blogs. An example of my style of input was:

*“And do I agree with the statement that: ‘we also understand that in the ‘world  
out there’, ethical standards have already been set for us to follow and are  
beyond our control much less contribution.’  
Hmm ...that’s a tricky issue since I would want to argue that part of the ongoing  
role of a professional is to help shape and to change the ethical standards in  
society. If we always accept what is given how can change ever occur?  
What do you think?”*

However, after a few weeks a slightly more chatty style started to develop amongst the off-shore students until one of them said:

*“A short note that sidetracks this topic: As this academic exercise is for the purpose of reflecting on the professional development, I think it is essential that we endeavour to eliminate basic spelling and grammatical errors for a more professional presentation, even if a blog post is considered to be more casual in nature. This also serves as a reminder for myself. Cheers!”*

This monitoring of the writing style and willingness to take responsibility for quality control within a peer group is, I think, a wonderful example of an independent self-reflective learner. After this comment by this student the next series of postings reverted to a more thoughtful academic style of writing.

A key aspect of being an independent learner is the habit of drawing together the different strands of learning and weaving them into the tapestry of our thinking. Through this process we begin to turn knowledge from something that is ‘out there’ into a rich, subtle internalised comprehension ‘in here’. Thus, we begin to create rather than just consume knowledge. In the blog project the off-shore students began to do this when they referred to other learning moments as evidence to support the point they were making.

*“Also as discussed in class by the lecturer, employees maybe sent for training by employers but very often, their newly acquired skills are seldom utilized after they return to their workplace.”*

They also began to use evidence from their reading to support their position as the discussion became more complex.

*“For example, as X and M have touched on, guan xi is a huge factor to play in Singapore. In Singapore, due to a large Chinese majority, ‘personal influence is best described by the term guan-xi’ (Lim, Goh and Sriramesh 2005), which is loosely translated as relationships. According to research findings on Tan (2000) done by Lim, Goh, and Sriramesh (2005), ‘guan-xi is the art of leveraging relationships to get a job done... characterized by a deeper sense of obligation, trust, and face-giving between the relevant parties’. Face must be allocated to all the parties involved, and any loss of face by any party might be taken negatively.”*

Then, towards the end of the blog students began to voice their feelings and thoughts about the difficulty of expressing themselves and in doing this it became clear that they were practising meta-cognition.

*“I understand the concept of assertiveness i.e. to stand up firmly for yourself, but to a conflicts-avoiding person like me, being assertive is tough. However, it will remain as a fact that being assertive is a skill and a personality character that I have to learn. As a junior employee, I have to admit that I am at times, intimidated by my superiors and often do not have the confidence to voice my thoughts thought that may not be true outside of the office. Haha. Still, in the corporate environment, western or otherwise, I am starting to feel that employers do not want obedient employees who do not speak back and be assertive enough to voice out their own thoughts”*

This textual analysis shows that later comments became more engaged with the issues under discussion and showed greater confidence in both language and argument style.



The students' commented on each other's ideas, they discussed topics and readings, they engaged with issues, asked questions of each other, they monitored the quality of the discussion and if it became too chatty suggested to each other that they should stay in a more 'academic mode', in other words, they behaved and acted as independent learners who were thinking carefully and critically about the task they had been set.

## Reflections on the project

Technically the project worked well because it was part of an institutional pilot project on blogging and there was expert and helpful assistance provided by trained staff. This meant that it was easy to set up 'shells' which the on-shore students working in groups could customise, plus the on-shore students were provided with a one hour training session.

Pedaogically the project was successful because the assessment of the on-shore students' blogs was clear and the purpose was linked into the overall aims of the unit. There was both the opportunity for general discussion leading to an 'infusion' of critical thinking to explore issues that were of interest to the students plus the opportunity to teach specific strategies to the on-shore students. The on-shore student were explicitly told their assessment was not related to their technical prowess as bloggers or the amount of content they could 'stuff into the blog' but was related to their group work skills. There also was no pressure on the off-shore students to do more than write a few comments over a trimester and so it was easy for them to take a chance to explore and to be creative as it was only for 5% of their overall grade. Blogging was, to use the Peter Elbow term, low stakes writing (Elbow,1981).

Creating a space where students felt safe to explore their ideas, where there was time to think slowly, where challenges to accepted assumptions were welcomed and where there was a shared interest in finding out how other people think and why they think that and how they validate their thinking all led to a sense of community amongst the on-shore and off-shore students. By having a variety of prompt questions available, by having the opportunity to observe other students struggling with the writing of an argument, by being able to question the authority of the teacher (who was not their unit coordinator and thus had no power over them), allowed for an on-line culture of critical thinking to be built for off-shore students.

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