

Critical Reading and Writing

One of the greatest challenges facing teachers when they engage with research and/or return to further study (often after a considerable period of absence from it) is how to engage with the literature (which often seems very daunting) and confidence issues around writing. With the focus upon a 'Masters-level profession' emerging from Donaldson, the issue of criticality has come to the fore as this is central to what constitutes Masters-level work. This raises questions for teachers, such as those discussed below:

What do we mean by criticality and is it the same as criticism?

Many people make the mistake of assuming that criticality = criticism and, on this basis, they presume that what is expected of them is to criticise the texts which they are reading. However, whilst it may be the case that there may be an element of criticism inherent within it, this is to fundamentally misconstrue what criticality is. Criticality means a capacity to stand back from whatever the source may be (whether an article, documentary, film) and to examine it from a range of perspectives and angles in order to come to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under question and to critique the arguments made. Do they stand up? Are they backed by an evidence base? What weight can be given to the evidence base? (Is it from a reliable source?) Is there a logical thread of argument? Are the conclusions firmly based in the evidence offered? Are all voices heard? Are there gaps in the argument? Etc. Having done this, it is imperative that any counter-arguments put forward are also based upon a firm and rigorous evidence base such that the same set of questions as above could be posed. Remember that, just as you are expected to demonstrate criticality in your reading, likewise, it must also be demonstrated in your own writing.

Is criticality just related to academic reading and writing and research?

One way to think of criticality is to think of it as a 'habit of mind' (Costa and Kallick, 2000) that goes along with dispositions towards thinking and learning such as curiosity, having an open mind and a quest for truth (Ritchhart, 2002). It's not just something that should 'come out of a box' when faced with the quest of reading or writing academic literature or being engaged in action research. It is something which should permeate your whole way of thinking and become part of your daily life. This is particularly important for teachers and teacher leaders given the wide range of policies, initiatives and interventions which come your way: how do you distinguish between the 'snake oil' and initiatives of genuine worth and merit? How can you instil in pupils criticality if you don't model it in your own practice?

How can criticality be developed?

As indicated above, one of the key aspects is to develop the 'habits of mind' referred to above but whilst habits of mind are essential what is also required is the thinking skills which are the building blocks of criticality: being able to compare and contrast and synthesise ideas; analyse and problem-solve, amongst others. Whilst 'Curriculum for Excellence' is intended to foster these thinking dispositions and skills,

unfortunately, when the pressure is on, there is a tendency to see these as luxuries and we revert to patterns of learning which may be productive in the short-term (we, and our pupils, are able to regurgitate what has been 'learned' in the exam context) but are hugely counter-productive in the longterm (we cannot apply our knowledge in real contexts) – we have 'built on sand'. We rely on memorisation by rote, highlighting, writing short notes in the margin, all of which 'by-pass the brain.' We do not work with our knowledge such that we develop the depth of understanding required.

One way in which criticality can be developed is to pose a set of questions with which the source can be interrogated. Thus, when reading, rather than simply highlighting or précising what the author has said, we search for the answers to our questions within the text. An exemplification of such, is the critical frame forwarded by Wallace and Wray (2011: 37-41) which is exemplified below:

- Why am I reading this? (ie. what am I trying to find out?)
- What are the authors trying to do in writing this? (eg. report on research, review others' work, develop theory, express particular views or opinions, criticise what is currently done, advise about what should be done in the future)
- What are the authors saying which is relevant to what I want to find out? (What is the essence of the message conveyed by the text? How does it relate to my interests?)
- How convincing is what the authors are saying? (evaluating the quality of the argument and digging beneath the assumptions made by the author)
- In conclusion, what use can I make of this? (what is your stance towards this text? To what extent are you likely to draw upon it and in which respects?)

Criticality as 'Hunting Assumptions'

Stephen Brookfield discusses criticality in terms of 'hunting assumptions' or searching for the biases in the positions which people forward. This we do as teachers through our own autobiographies (the narratives we construct around our experiences as teachers and learners), through examination of the student experience, through our colleagues' eyes and through the literature. In so doing, issues relating to power emerge. He proposes four sets of questions through which underlying assumptions and biases can come to the fore:

Epistemological (relating to the nature of knowledge)

Questions which could be posed relate to the validity of the claims forwarded. They question the nature of the evidence offered in support of the argument and the extent to which the claims made are grounded in unquestioned assumptions and biases.

Eg.

*To what extent are the claims made grounded in documented evidence?
To what extent is the writing culturally skewed?*

Experiential (relating to our own experience and knowledge)

Questions which could be posed ask us to relate the essence of the text or source to our own knowledge base and experience.

Eg.

How does this accord with my own experience as it applies to this field/topic?

What things are missing from this account which, to me, are important?

Communicative (relating to how information is communicated within the text or source)

Questions which could be posed relate to the form, style and presentation of the text (and political issues underlying them).

Eg.

Whose voices are heard within this text or source? (are some voices silenced or muted?)

What form does language take and what/who influences it? (Eg. who decides when we move from SEN to ASN or multi-agency working to inter-professional working? How (and why) does this come about?)

Political (relating to issues of power)

Questions which could be posed relate to power relations which may not be self-evident.

Eg.

Whose interests are served by this policy/text/source?

Who is the text written for?

What is the underlying ideology? (Brookfield, 1999, 185-206)

Use of comparative frames

Wallace and Wray's and Brookfield's critical frames are only two of many critical frames which can be used and both require regular practise to become proficient in their use. However, with a specific topic in mind, it can be very valuable to develop your own critical frame as, in this way, you can use the same set of questions to interrogate each text which you read. This then enables you to synthesise and compare and contrast the different perspectives forwarded by the authors, demonstrating the criticality which is required. A table can be constructed so that you can see at a glance how each text addresses your questions. The questions can then be used to structure your writing, either using them in their current form as sub-headings or turning them into headings. For example, 'What do we mean by criticality and is it the same as criticism?' could be turned into 'The relationship between criticality and criticism.'

An exemplification of a comparative critical frame (fig. 1), within the field of leadership development and responding to the questions, 'How is leadership conceptualised within this text?' 'What is leadership?', is provided below. (Note that direct quotes are in italics to distinguish them from the author's own notes – a very important issue if plagiarism is to be avoided!).

How is leadership conceptualised within this text? What is leadership?

Forde, McMahon and Dickson	Reeves and Drew [Chartered Teacher]	Forde, McMahon and Gronn [NFRH]	Crawford [SQH]
Leadership for all at all stages of the career trajectory	<p>... <i>teachers, rather than school managers, initiate and implement change in relation to curriculum and pedagogy, legitimated by the quality of their professional knowledge and practice (Sachs 2002)</i>. [713]</p> <p>In the case of Chartered Teachers the <u>legitimation</u> via professional knowledge and practice comes about through:</p> <p><i>Validation: shaping the learner as postgraduate</i></p> <p>As set out for Masters level study in The Scottish Qualifications Framework (the Framework) (SCQFB 2004, 9) articulating capacities (for example, 'demonstrate</p>	In this case, those preparing for Headship through the National Flexible Routes to Headship.	In this instance, the novice <u>Headteacher</u>

Figure 1: Extract from comparative critical frame

Finding a voice

The academic literature can appear very intimidating for those who are not used to it and it can be daunting for teachers engaging with it in ‘joining the conversation’ through writing. As highlighted above, the same standards of criticality need to be evidenced in your own work which is why it is very important to back up any arguments made with a strong and secure evidence base. However, early attempts at academic writing can come often across as “He said”, “She said” and “I have no opinion.” This is often exemplified through sentence after sentence or paragraph after paragraph beginning with the name of an author followed by a description of what they have said (with no real analysis) and it demonstrates that the process described above of synthesising and analysing the literature has not been sufficiently thorough. The way to avoid this is to engage deeply with the literature in the first instance and then to think through your argument. Having done so, back up your argument with the literature but avoid a ‘cherry picking’ approach where you ignore any contra-arguments or evidence which goes against your own (dearly held) views. Such an approach leaves you open to criticism of bias.

References

Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Costa, A. L., & Kallick, B. (2000). *Discovering and Exploring Habits of Mind* (3rd ed.). Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Ritchhart, R. (2002). *Intellectual Character: What it is, Why it matters, and How to get it*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wallace, M., & Wray, A. (2011). *Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates*. London: Sage Publications.

Recommended Texts

Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This is a superb, thought-provoking text that has become a standard. It is also a joy to read.

Wallace, M., & Wray, A. (2011). *Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates*. London: Sage Publications.

This is an outstanding publication that provides in-depth guidance about how to read and write with criticality, offering excellent practical advice whilst also providing a theoretical justification.

Kamler, B., & Thomson, P. (2006). *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision*. London: Routledge.

Whilst this text is written with doctoral supervisors in mind, it provides excellent guidance for the more experienced writer trying to find their voice.

Costa, A. L., & Kallick, B. (2000). *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind: 16 Essential Characteristics for Success*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

This book builds upon the previous work of the authors of examining what constitutes habits of mind to looking to the implications for pedagogy.

Ritchhart, R. (2002). *Intellectual Character: What it is, Why it matters, and How to get it*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This book emanates from the work of David Perkins and his colleagues at Harvard to examine intellectual character and how it can be developed. Although more of a theoretical text, it has much of worth and value to say.

Wyse, D. (2006). *The Good Writing Guide for Education Students*. London: SAGE.
Redman, P., & Maples, W. (2011). *Good Essay Writing: A Social Sciences Guide*. Maidenhead, Kent: The Open University.

Both of these texts offer general guidance about planning for, structuring and the process of writing within the context of the social sciences.

Taggart, C., & Wines, J. A. (2008). *My Grammar and I (or should that be 'Me'?)*. London: Michael O-Mara Books Ltd.

For those who require a gentle reminder about grammar and punctuation.