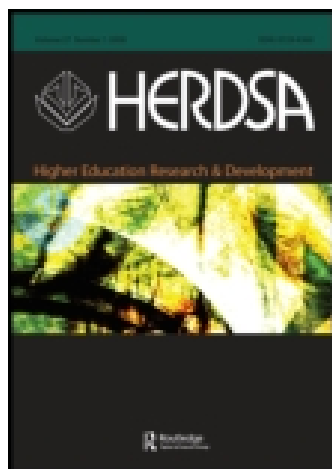


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Critical thinking in the Oxford tutorial: a call for an explicit and systematic approach

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Critical thinking in the Oxford tutorial: a call for an explicit and systematic approach

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This paper summarises a study focusing on the extent to which the Oxford tutorial fosters critical thinking in students. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a largely ignored area of research regarding teaching pedagogy and classroom practice. The results of this study successfully reveal that participating tutors were primarily concerned with fostering students' abilities to clarify central questions, define key terms and question important assumptions (principally within the writing of essays). Participating tutors were less focused on fostering other essential critical thinking skills and dispositions including: (1) intellectual analysis and the internalisation of new ideas, (2) intellectual evaluation and (3) intellectual traits of mind. The primary hypothesis suggested by this study is that students are more likely to internalise those intellectual skills and dispositions that are explicitly and systematically discussed and required than those that remain implicit (and seem optional).

Keywords: classroom practice; critical thinking; Oxford tutorial; student learning; thinking skills

Introduction

This paper, based on a study recently conducted at the University of Oxford, documents attempts on the part of tutors to foster critical thinking (CT) within the Oxford tutorial. This study sought to shed light on: (1) how participating tutors conceptualise CT and the extent to which they teach it; and (2) how students conceptualise CT and the extent to which they are acquiring CT skills, abilities and traits within the tutorial.

This study is situated in a relatively rare and privileged position: it is focused on a paradigm (the Oxford tutorial), which is highly regarded worldwide and yet has been researched only superficially; and it is centred on a topic (critical thinking), which is internationally valued (at least rhetorically), is increasingly embedded in the language of the purposes, missions and standards of education from primary to postgraduate level and yet has never been researched directly in terms of the tutorial.

Given that this is the first study to focus on the tutorial from a critical thinking perspective, and being limited in terms of sample size, it is best seen as breaking ground rather than as a finished product; raising questions rather than coming to definitive conclusions; exploratory rather than evaluative.

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Literature review

The Oxford tutorial

First of all, what is the Oxford tutorial? Naturally it would be impossible to fully explore all of its features in a brief paper. However, the core concept can be easily expressed: it is a pedagogical framework involving low student-to-teacher ratios (usually ranging from 1:1 to 4:1). For each fortnightly tutorial, pupils are typically required to write a short essay, which focuses the tutorial. Students generally read aloud or summarise their work, after which the tutor and/or peers offer comment and critique.

The Oxford tutorial is a highly respected educational framework (Beck, 2008; Palfreyman, 2008) and no more than a cursory investigation is necessary to find the language of critical thinking explicitly and implicitly embedded within its course handbooks (for example, students are asked to ‘critically analyse’, ‘critically engage’, ‘question underlying assumptions’).

Yet what do we know, directly and conclusively, about the extent to which the tutorial fosters critical thinking? Unfortunately, very little. Robert Beck (2008) remarks: ‘our admiration for the Oxford tutorial rests on belief only ... not on hard evidence’ (p. 1); and Paul Ashwin (2005) decries the ‘paucity of research into the Oxbridge Tutorial systems’ (p. 632). Indeed, except for anecdotal accounts or histories of the university in general, we have only the recent studies of Ashwin (2005, 2006) and Ashwin and Trigwell (2003), Moore’s (1968) *The tutorial system and its future*, Beck’s (2008) ‘The pedagogy of the Oxford tutorial’ and Palfreyman’s (2008) *The Oxford tutorial*.

What does this literature tell us? Setting aside the work of Ashwin and Trigwell for the moment, Moore’s treatise, Beck’s essay and Palfreyman’s collection are, quite clearly and openly, biased (in the non-pejorative sense) defences of the tutorial system. They highlight the best of the tutorial, but are not empirical investigations, and do not claim to be.

For a more scientifically-based perspective, let us turn briefly to Ashwin and Trigwell’s examinations. In a quantitative study of 2330 Oxford undergraduates, Ashwin and Trigwell (2003) concluded that those Oxford undergrads with a deep approach to learning (tied to ideas associated with critical thinking, such as questioning assumptions, connecting key concepts and thinking through main implications) were more successful in exams, judged teaching quality to be higher and felt more confident, supported and motivated than students who relied on surface approaches to learning (approaches associated with uncritical thinking).

But how many students approach their tutorials in a deep and critical manner? In a much smaller qualitative study (28 students), Ashwin (2005) concluded that two thirds of the students interviewed (18) adopted surface approaches to learning and only three students articulated conceptions that were in the ‘deepest’ category (p. 640). According to Ashwin (2006), tutors did not fare much better: only 5 of 20 expressed the deepest approach to teaching in the tutorial, the same number that expressed the most superficial approach.

Critical thinking

In this study I was concerned with understanding the manner in which tutors defined critical thinking using their own words (see the methodology section), as, of course, it is the tutors’ own conceptions of CT that naturally drive the manner in which they

teach it. However, to identify areas of investigation within which to develop interview questions, it is necessary to have some idea of the broad and non-controversial framework of critical thinking into which individual understandings can be placed.

Unfortunately, internal debate in the field of critical thinking often centres on disagreements between theoreticians rather than on their agreement (Hale, 2008). This obscures the significant common ground that does exist and gives the false impression that the field is disjointed or, colloquially, that ‘no one agrees about what critical thinking *is!*’ Hale convincingly argues that, while theoreticians often emphasise different aspects of critical thinking, virtually all agree that it entails analysis and evaluation of thinking with a view towards improving it, that it includes the development of intellectual traits and that it should be applied to one’s own thinking, the thinking of others and thinking within subject disciplines (for examples, see Ennis, 1991; McPeck, 1981, Nosich 2009; Passmore, 1972; Paul & Elder, 2002; Peters, 1974; Scheffler, 1973; Scriven & Fisher, 1997; Siegel, 1990).

Thus, in keeping with this literature, we can divide critical thinking into the following broad dimensions:

- Skilled intellectual analysis: the ability to divide important intellectual constructs into constituent parts so as to internalise and evaluate them.
- Skilled intellectual evaluation: the ability to determine the quality of intellectual constructs and their parts.
- Intellectual improvement: the ability to creatively devise strategies aimed at correcting weaknesses and improving strengths (which have been identified through analysis and evaluation).
- Intellectual traits: characteristics of mind necessary for developing fair-minded critical thinkers, such as: intellectual perseverance, intellectual integrity, intellectual courage, intellectual empathy, intellectual autonomy. It is argued that such traits guard against the development of sophistic or self-deceptive thinking.
- Knowledge of the problematics of thinking: including intrinsic tendencies such as egocentrism and sociocentrism, which trap the mind in oversimplified and prejudiced mental states.

Furthermore, these dimensions need be applied to various contexts:

- To thinking generally (one’s own thinking, the thinking of a professor, colleague, friend, parent, lover ...);
- To subject disciplines (each of which have specific and sometimes unique forms of analysis and evaluation);
- To personal life, both with regard to significant decisions (buying a car or house, making career decisions ...) as well as day-to-day activities (such as health, diet and exercise, parenting, voting and politics, managing finances ...).

These lists are not exhaustive, but illustrate some of the many ways in which critical thinking can be conceptualised and applied, a number of which emerged in the study described herein.

Central research questions

The central research question in this study was: ‘What critical thinking skills and traits are presently being fostered by tutors and internalised by students in the Oxford

tutorial and which forms are seemingly less valued or perhaps not as deeply understood?’ To answer this question, three sub-questions were explored.

First, both tutors’ and students’ conceptions of critical thinking needed to be brought to the surface. Here the key question was ‘How is critical thinking understood by participating tutors and students?’ The goal was not to look for any putative ‘correct’ answer, but rather to explore tutors’ and students’ conceptualisations of CT, as well as their perceptions of how, and the extent to which, they were teaching or learning it.

Second, this study was not confined to analysing *perceptions* and *beliefs* only. It also sought to explore whether and to what extent critical thinking was *actually being practiced* by tutors and students. Key questions: In the case of tutors: ‘What specific strategies were employed within the tutorial to foster student development of CT?’ In the case of students: ‘How successful are students in deploying those concepts in their intellectual (and even personal) life?’

Finally, and by implication, it was important to note those essential dimensions of critical thinking that were seemingly not being fostered. Key question: ‘What critical thinking skills, abilities and traits seem undervalued or unnoticed (by tutors and/or students)?’

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three tutors (all male) and seven students (four male/three female) in the middle of the second (Hillary) term. Additionally, four tutorials were observed, one from each tutor and two from one.

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, as well as the difficulty in gaining access to such an intimate environment, tutors were identified informally through suggestions made by a contact in the department of politics, within which all tutors worked. Only second-year students were chosen as they have more tutorial experience than do first-years (and potentially more maturity and reflectiveness) yet do not have the burden of impending finals, as do third years, which might have introduced a level of stress and potential for negativity among student participants. All students except one were taking the Politics, Philosophy, and Economics (PPE) course, a combined degree at Oxford.

Tutor and student conceptions of critical thinking were explored through semi-structured interviews. Tutors and students were questioned on each of the key categories of critical thinking identified in the research literature. Thus, tutors and students were probed in the following directions:

- What is your conception of critical thinking?
- What role does critical thinking play within the tutorial?
- How did you develop your conception of critical thinking?
- How do you approach learning new ideas?
- What criteria do you use to judge the quality of intellectual work?
- What is the importance and role of intellectual traits in the tutorial?

Tutors were also asked:

- How do you go about teaching critical thinking in your tutorials?

Students were also asked:

- Do you feel that you are developing your critical thinking skills as a result of your tutorial experience?

This semi-structured approach ensured that each tutor and student was queried regarding key components of critical thinking implicit in the literature, while allowing the flexibility to explore topics spontaneously as they arose (Marton & Booth, 1997; Pring, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The stability of question categories enabled direct comparisons to be made between teacher and student responses regarding the same intellectual topic.

Each interview was conducted on a one-to-one basis in places of convenience and comfort to the interviewee; all within college rooms or student accommodation. Vague or overly general responses were followed by requests for examples. These interviews were recorded and fully transcribed (totalling over 60,000 words).

Observations were aimed at collecting more objective data to supplement the subjective accounts given by tutors and students. The primary purpose was to determine the extent to which self-identified attempts on the part of tutors and students to teach or employ critical thinking strategies could be observed.

Initially it seemed important to explore both sides of the tutorial experience (tutor and student) so as to be able to compare the views of specific tutors and their own students; thus I decided to interview not simply tutors and students, but tutors *and their* students. To accomplish this, tutors were invited to participate first and students were chosen from among those being taught by the tutors. In retrospect, this connection with individual tutors was not as significant as originally thought. This was largely due to the high level of convergence between tutors' conceptions of critical thinking within the study and, if students' accounts are to be believed, between most tutors in the department of politics.

Five tutors were invited to join the study. One did not reply to emails and another declined due to a busy schedule. The other three agreed to participate. Eight students were invited to join the study. One did not reply to emails, the other seven agreed to participate.

Criteria for evaluating the quality of data and findings developed in this study: data analysis and generalisability

The quality of data in this study was determined according to the trustworthiness and authenticity of participant responses. These two features were maximised through deep questioning of participants focused on gathering rich and detailed examples. As Cooper and McIntyre (1996) put it, 'the intention of this approach is to ensure interviewee's accounts are grounded in their perceptions of the actual events ... where interviewees do make generalised remarks, the researcher requests exemplification. It is, therefore, possible to distinguish between responses that are so grounded and those that are not' (p. 37). Thus, clarity, precision and depth of responses was taken to indicate deep understanding, whereas vague, muddy or superficial examples were seen as evidence of partial or superficial understanding.

Data was analysed in relation to explicit concepts and principles implicit in critical thinking scholarship. Teacher and student responses were also compared against each other to determine the extent to which tutors' attempts to teach critical thinking were effectively impacting student understanding.

As the sample size in this research does not justify large-scale conclusions, this project aims only at 'naturalistic' generalisability (Stake, 1995), in which the reader, and not the researcher, does the generalising. It is hoped that by developing data that is richly contextualised, this study should help readers determine the extent to which the tentative hypotheses generated are helpful within their own context.

Critical thinking in the Oxford tutorial

The results show that, with regard to critical thinking, participating tutors were primarily concerned with students' ability to clarify central questions, define key terms and question important assumptions within the writing of their tutorial essays. Participating tutors were less focused on helping students develop approaches to: (1) learning new ideas (the process of which was often seen as divorced from, and prior to, critical thinking); (2) intellectual evaluation (which participating students said they most commonly based on intuition); and (3) the development of intellectual traits (which students said were often lacking in peers, and which were largely missing from both tutor and student articulations of critical thinking). Tutors in the study were found to believe that these latter skills, abilities and traits would develop naturally, without the need for explicit teaching. As we shall see, student responses do not support this belief.

In line with tutor emphasis, students explicitly saw themselves acquiring skills in writing essays, including clarifying central questions, defining key terms and questioning important assumptions. On the other hand, students expressed no clear approaches to the understanding of new ideas, to intellectual evaluation nor to the cultivation of intellectual traits.

The primary hypothesis suggested by this study is that students tend to develop those intellectual skills and abilities that are explicitly fostered and reinforced by multiple tutors and tend not to acquire those that remain implicit or seem optional. As the degree of explicitness is not an issue unique to the tutorial, this suggestion, if justified, would have implications not only for Oxford, but for teaching critical thinking more generally.

Area of convergence: the writing of essays and critical thinking

It was in the area of essay writing that tutors' and students' conceptions of critical thinking converged most. All participating tutors and students interviewed mentioned that the first task when writing an essay was to clarify the question asked by precisely articulating the meaning behind key concepts, as well as identifying the assumptions underlying their use:

- Tutor A: In considering a problem, or an issue, [a critical writer] tries to isolate the absolutely *core question or questions* that are involved, attempts to look rigorously at both the *logic* of suggestive answers and at the empirical basis of any *assumptions* that have been made.
- Student J: So I've actually been taught how to [test assumptions and explain terms]. Teachers and tutors have recommended that I do that. And that's only something I've done recently. ... So I remember essays from even last term. I hadn't really explained the *question*. I hadn't really teased out any *assumptions* in the *question*, I hadn't done any of that. And my tutors had hit me up on that. So it's since then that I've taken that into account.
- Student E: Well first of all, in an essay, I look at the title of the essay, whereas before I would have looked at it and just gone straight into it and answered it, now I like

to *define the terms*, which almost takes half an essay sometimes, to find out what everyone means by the terms they used and what they're asking really as opposed to the *surface meaning of the question*, which I've never done before. And that's kind of a big change. (emphases added throughout)

Observations confirmed this focus, as every observed tutorial began with a discussion of key terms within the essay question and the assumptions behind them. Tutors' shared emphasis and explicitness on these three intellectual skills (defining key concepts, clarifying central questions and bringing to light important assumptions) within the realm of essay writing apparently translated into meaningful and significant learning on the part of participating students. This indicates that when powerful concepts and strategies are made explicit and systematically required, students are capable and willing to internalise and apply them.

Unfortunately, the lack of explicit direction for engaging in other important intellectual tasks left students unsure and often confused as to how to perform them.

Critical thinking often seen implicitly rather than explicitly in tutorials

It was clear that a significant amount of student time and energy was wasted due to a lack of clarification regarding their required tasks and how they should approach completing those tasks. Tutors seemed to almost embrace this implicit approach, while students seemed frustrated:

- Tutor C: Being able to write an essay, being able to present a structured argument ... these are essential parts of intellectual pursuit. They're nothing the tutorial is a particularly productive forum for explicitly teaching, but they're a by-product of the way that tutorial teaching works ... we're developing those skills along the way. ... But the tutorial is not necessarily the forum in which these skills can be addressed.
- Tutor A: There is increasingly a tendency to try to formalise [the tutorial], to give people rules. On occasion I have to preside over training sessions for graduate students in this. I try not to make it too obvious that I think this is an utterly pointless activity because if they're any good they will throw the rules away or write them for themselves.
- Student J: Well I think that's the thing with the tutorial system is that your tutors are very rarely actually explaining things to you. ... So I remember the first time I came up here and I got an email saying 'read these chapters in a book, read this book as well, and write this essay'. And I hadn't received any tuition, hadn't been to lectures, this is completely new! ... So I had three days to read 200 pages and write an essay on a subject I'd never done before. So you can't be, in a tutorial, like with this essay that you think is utter shit and you don't really understand what you've written ... and I'd be so nervous about that in the tutorial that it was really difficult to actually learn anything, because I was so nervous about the whole thing.

While not possible to fully document in this brief article, the interviews and observations clearly demonstrate, in over 60,000 words and 100 pages of transcripts, that much of what is sought after within the tutorial remains implicit and somewhat mysterious. By keeping critical thinking at an implicit level, much is left to chance in terms of what students will internalise in a deep and transformative way. Indeed, research suggests (Pedder, 2006) that pupil learning is improved when tasks are made explicit; the corollary, of course, being that when tasks remain implicit, pupil learning is reduced.

It is perhaps not coincidental that those domains of critical thinking in which faculty understanding was most implicit were the same that produced the weakest and most problematic responses from students. This relationship is briefly explored in the next two sub-sections.

Intellectual analysis and the learning of new ideas

One area of concern revealed through this study was the manner in which students approach the learning of new ideas. Tutors seemed to separate tasks of understanding (of ‘clarification’ or ‘filling in gaps of knowledge’), from true ‘critical thinking’, a conception that excludes the important analytical function of critical thinking. As tutor B put it: ‘You’ve got to comprehend before you can criticise’ In other words, for tutors and students, ‘critical thinking’ was often equivalent to ‘critique’ or ‘being critical’ and most students in the study seemed to reflect their tutors’ belief that one must have command of a mass of facts before one could begin to think critically about them:

- Interviewer: So you said in philosophy you need to think a lot before you can analyse – what does thinking entail that’s not analysis?
- Student I: I think it’s understanding. That’s what I mean by it. ... I think for me critical thinking is less a role because I’m trying to get the basics down and I’ll think through the issues once I look at them again. Whereas I need the issues at the moment.
- Student D: As long as you have enough depth of knowledge [you] can critically think about things, because if [you’ve] only been doing stuff for a couple of days or a couple of lessons then [you’re] not really going to have the resources to think critically about it. [You’re] just going to be picking away an argument based on not very much.
- Student C: I just want to say that there is a difference between critical thinking and learning [long pause] stuff. Like reading an article and loads of books. I think the tutorial system probably is good at stimulating a critical way of thinking ... but that’s at the detriment of actually learning the stuff that you’re meant to read.

Note that these answers (‘getting the issues’ versus ‘thinking them through’; ‘learning stuff’ versus ‘critical thinking’) contrast critical thinking with learning new ideas. This is a problematic conceptual separation and one that is not shared by theoreticians on critical thinking (see, for example, Ennis, 1991; McPeck, 1981, Nosich, 2009; Paul & Elder, 2002; Siegel, 1990). The grasping of content cannot be divorced from the process of evaluation, as the human mind begins to categorise and prioritise information as soon as it is encountered and not significantly later (Browne & Keeley, 2006; Paul & Elder, 2002).

Perhaps reflecting this lack of explicit analytical strategies, most participating student articulations explaining how they learned new ideas were vague or technical, rather than clear and critical. For example, student D remarked that his strategy was ‘once I’ve done all my reading I’ll make notes on each of the papers that are vaguely useful, and just sort of take out useful quotations and try to synthesise all that into a plan.’

We might juxtapose this remark against a more critically skilled, hypothetical, response such as: ‘When I attempt to understand the reasoning of a particular philosopher, the first thing I look for is the key concept that seems to tie together the entire theory. Then I look at the assumptions on which that theory is based and the key

question which the philosopher seems to be focused on. I then follow out the implications of the theory, asking ‘if this is true, how does it change the way I should live or the way society should be structured?’ Such intellectual moves are essential to deep understanding and they seem to be missing from the approach participating students used in analysing texts. To the extent that students are not being explicitly taught how to perform intellectual analysis as a vehicle to understanding a text, they are missing a significant domain for critical thought; the domain, for example, of close reading (Paul & Elder, 2006).

Intellectual evaluation

Intellectual evaluation was another area of critical thinking in which participating students lacked essential knowledge and skills. Though tutors had well-developed systems of evaluation for themselves, none articulated explicit strategies for teaching these systems to students. Rather, tutors appeared to assume that students would naturally develop skilled methods for evaluation by virtue of being asked to engage in evaluation frequently (remember tutor C’s comment that students would develop critical skills ‘along the way’). However, practice is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for intellectual development, as practice without intellectual discipline can lead to poor habits of mind. Practice without an emphasis on intellectual standards may lead students to internalise ideas, but those ideas may well be illogical, irrational and/or unreasonable.

Students’ explanations of intellectual evaluation strongly supported the need for more explicit instruction in this domain. Only one student gave a clear, though limited, response to the question ‘How do you judge the quality of an author’s reasoning or written work?’ (he cited criteria from formal logic). The other students seemed to be guided largely by intuition. Here were some explanations of how students describe themselves engaging in intellectual evaluation:

- Student I: A big part of it is my own intuitive instinct, my own preconceptions of that argument. And so in which case if I start to follow an argument and it corresponds with something I find quite intuitive then that’s quite helpful in judging articles.
- Student G: I find it really hard to read someone’s essay and critique it. I don’t know why, it’s like impossible – it’s like gibberish I don’t know why! ... But in the end I just kind of [go] through the plan of [an] essay and then just underneath in a different colour pen, just say like whether I think this is a good or bad idea, but I think that’s a bit sort of childish.
- Student F: Yeah well you often just get a – it sounds really like stupid but it’s almost just sort of what you think sounds right. It’s almost like an impulse. It’s almost an impulse decision. It’s just what seems more convincing ...
- Interviewer: So more intuitive then?
- Student F: Yeah, that’s the word, yeah.

Tutors seemed to agree:

- Interviewer: And when you have your students critique the other arguments, what kinds of criteria do you see them using?
- Tutor B: Well I think that’s much more ad hoc. They tend to assess in terms of what they agreed and disagreed with. That’s probably less helpful ... it tends to be more sort of, ‘well you know I agree with x, y, z, but I disagree with a, b, c’ ...

- Interviewer: So you don't actually say 'ok when you're critiquing this person, you need to use these criteria'?
- Tutor B: No but I think I should do, just thinking about it [pause] now you ask it, I probably should say 'look, you know, what do you think are the criteria that I use? You should use the same sorts of things' ... but obviously your implicit point is right in that they should do it with criteria.

This last remark reveals some important insights, both for us and for the tutor. Despite the tutor's own skills of evaluation (just a few of the questions he asked were: 'Is it properly structured?' 'Does it flow logically?' 'Is it supported by evidence?' 'Is it coherent, rather than contradictory?' 'Is it persuasive?') and knowledge of students' struggles with evaluation, he had never thought to explicitly discuss the criteria he uses with students. Apparently, he simply assumed that through practice students would improve on their own, an assumption that does not appear to be justified by the student responses in this study.

The other participating tutors seemed to share this belief. Moreover, in observing tutorials, many student comments on the readings started with 'I agreed/disagreed with X, because ...' or 'I liked/didn't like Y, because ...' Though tutors then often attempted to probe students' thinking with questions like 'Why?', the students seemed to lack an explicit framework for articulating their thoughts. The result was a mix of subjective and objective evaluation, with the subjective most often leading the charge.

Thus, student critique is largely based on 'whether or not they agree' with the point. Paul and Elder (2008) identify this as an 'egocentric standard', which they characterise as 'it's true because I believe it' (p. 21). Under this paradigm, students use their own beliefs, rather than independent criteria such as those articulated by the tutors (clarity, logic, depth etc.), as the primary determiners of what is and is not so. In other words, arguments are largely unproblematic if the conclusions coincide with the beliefs of the student and false and problematic to the extent that they conflict with those beliefs. This manner of evaluation is inconsistent with the spirit of critical inquiry and can lead to intellectual sophistry and manipulation, as highlighted in the next section.

Intellectual dispositions

Not only did tutors not seem to include intellectual traits in their conceptions of critical thinking, in some cases they actively excluded them:

- Interviewer: To what extent do you look to develop intellectual traits of mind?
- Tutor B: I don't really know what you mean by traits of mind.
- Interviewer: Well, you talked in the beginning about an independence, a criticality, distrust of authority ...
- Tutor B: No yes, I don't mark down people for not showing – I mean those are the traits of mind that I try to cultivate. But I don't mark people down for not showing them that, you know, or for not going the whole way down the possible critical route ...
- Tutor A: The notion of forming someone's character, I *seriously* hope I have never done that because to be proud of doing that would be such a vain statement about my own sense of *my* character.

The lack of emphasis on intellectual traits on the part of tutors in this study is a concern, as it can implicitly encourage unethical and sophistic critical thinking (Ennis, 1991; Paul & Elder, 2008) – skilled but selfish thinking used at the expense of the

rights and needs of others. When sophisticated thinking is implicitly encouraged in the classroom, when the goal is simply to ‘win’ the ‘debate’, students may ignore insights in arguments to which they are not sympathetic and instead ‘attack’ or attempt to ‘destroy’ them (terminology that was used frequently in the student interviews).

Tutor A spoke of this problem quite directly and forcefully when he critiqued the way philosophy is taught at Oxford:

Tutor A: I have problems with our philosophers here, because the way philosophy is taught at Oxford, is almost entirely destructive. You are trained to go for the jugular and to take that reading [for example] which will best enable you to show that Kant was incoherent. I have no patience with that.

Tutor A did go on to articulate a vision of intellectual traits (including intellectual empathy and humility) in reading; as he put it ‘to lead to some productive thought ... rather than reading it in the way which allows you to score points’. However, this seemed to be a peripheral rather than central concern. It did not appear to be an essential component of his or the other participating tutors’ pedagogical focus. The effects of this approach on students is suggested in the following:

Student C: I think some people have a knack for bullshit. To be honest a lot of people on my course do. I mean it just comes with the territory right? This is a politician’s degree, of course they’re going to be good at bullshit [laughing]. Like in my ethics tutorials last term, the guy I had tutorials with, he would do no reading but he was still able to just talk, like for lengths. He could have kept going if the tutor hadn’t stopped him [laughing], even though he hadn’t really done anything.

Interviewer: Some students have said that some students in PPE have this debating background where it’s all about thinking on your feet, making an argument, and who cares if you actually believe in it or not, it’s just convincing people you are right – would you say that’s a part of the course that you take or not?

Student E: I think it’s a PPE trait. Like it actually is! [laughing] and I really dislike it in people. That problem – they use so many words just to kind of talk talk talk talk to try and prove their point. You don’t know if they believe the point ...

Interviewer: And do you find that that method of doing things is rewarded by their tutor and the system in general or is the tutor saying ‘well be a bit more nuanced and maybe you shouldn’t argue so vociferously’ etc. etc.

Student E: I *do* think it is rewarded because they do tend to become better at thinking on their feet so they tend to learn to [bullshit] it almost, which they do quite a lot.

Interviewer: And the tutors don’t seem to sort of crack down on that?

Student E: No I don’t think so. I think I spend, well I’ve spent most of my X tutes in silence just kind of – from PPEist to PPEist, and unless there’s an issue that particularly grasps me I don’t tend to speak because I just watch. It’s like a ping-pong game. And if you try and speak you’ve got to speak across someone, there’s not an opportunity.

One can imagine the dangers of teaching that encourages ‘scoring points’ and ‘proving your point’ over an open-minded and empathetic exchange of ideas, especially considering that some Oxford students will become future political and business leaders. Nowhere in the interviews with tutors or students were important intellectual traits such as intellectual courage, intellectual integrity, intellectual perseverance, faith in reason or fair-mindedness explicitly mentioned.

Questions and hypotheses for further/future consideration

Results of this study indicate that, to the degree that participating tutors are effectively fostering critical thinking, their approaches, though perhaps different in appearance, are highly similar in substance and aim (e.g. the development of students' ability to clarify key questions, concepts and assumptions). To the degree that this is true across the university (which requires further investigation to determine), one hypothesis for improving tutorial supervision would be to *make more explicit* the key abilities Oxford tutors would like to see fostered in student thought. This articulation need not be static but might be, and likely would be, dynamic, matching the evolving sensitivities of the faculty. Questions for future research:

- (1) How do tutors' conceptions of critical thinking vary within departments, as well as across departments?
- (2) Does any department promote a common approach to conducting tutorials or do all departments leave it to the individual tutor, as was the case in the department involved in this study?
- (3) For those tutors more effective at fostering critical thinking, what pedagogical strategies do they use and how might these strategies be shared with other, less effective, tutors?

Participating students' conceptions of critical thinking, especially in reference to essay writing, were highly convergent with each other and with their tutors. Moreover, the fact that students were much less clear about how to perform intellectual analysis and evaluation seems to correlate with their tutors' implicit approaches in these domains. The hypothesis here is that *student internalisation of important ideas may improve when core concepts are discussed explicitly and adopted by multiple tutors*. Questions for future research:

- (4) To what extent do students use critical thinking tools in attempting to understand and internalise new ideas?
- (5) How do students engage in intellectual evaluation? How do they learn or develop criteria for assessment?
- (6) How, and to what extent, are these, and other, important critical thinking skills communicated to students?

That participating tutors seemed to place little value on the development of intellectual traits is worthy of special attention. That a number of both tutors and students in the study expressed concerns over a perceived disregard for important intellectual dispositions such as intellectual empathy and fair-mindedness indicates the need to study the role of intellectual traits in the Oxford tutorial more systematically. Remember that one tutor categorised sophistry as a widespread problem in the philosophy department and some students characterised many of their peers as engaging in sophistic behaviour. Though Oxford tutors are clearly not *attempting* to foster the development of sophistic minds, it seems that some tutors are unaware or unconcerned that some of their students may be developing skills of intellectual manipulation. Questions for future research:

- (7) What are tutors' conceptions of intellectual traits, across Oxford University, and how do tutors think these traits should be cultivated?

- (8) What practices in the University either reward or discourage the development of intellectual traits across the disciplines?

Conclusion

If one juxtaposes the down-to-earth comments of the participants in this study with some of the many celebratory comments made by advocates of the tutorial (e.g. Palfreyman, 2008), some tension is revealed. It is clear that further research is called for to determine the extent to which critical thinking skills are in fact being fostered in even highly prestigious institutions such as Oxford.

Though this study has focused on relatively few individuals within one department at one university, the issues it raises are broad: it suggests that critical thinking strategies are more likely to be internalised by students if those strategies are taught explicitly and systematically. As with any skill set, if students are to develop the ability to think critically, they must grasp what that entails, they must be given guidance as to how they should practice it and they must be given time to develop their proficiency in it.

Many of the skills and traits canvassed in this article are *prima facie* significant for intellectual development (e.g. the ability to identify core concepts, the ability to formulate questions clearly and precisely, the ability to trace out the implications of what is said or done ...) and the extensive literature on critical thinking offers many more non-controversial candidates for study. For researchers, this study highlights the need to investigate such strategies and their effects on students. For educators, it suggests benefits might be gained by selecting important critical thinking skills and traits and clearly introducing and systematically requiring them of students.

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