Paddling upstream: Learning to Row, or Tread Water, at Least

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Abstract

We live in a rapidly changing world. Knowledge is a reflection of that world. What we learn today may no longer be relevant in 10 years. How do we navigate the treacherous reefs of change? How do we ensure flexibility, and ultimately choice, in such a context? This paper explores a dual tack – two general strategies – and provides a concrete example of how these strategies might swim together. First, we must change our focus from what we learn to how we learn. Knowledge is not a fleet of competing ships that offer independent journeys to fixed and final destinations. Ultimately the landscape is whole, but a shifting sea of doubt and we cannot be certain of destinations. If we want choice, we must learn how to navigate. Second, we must learn how to cast a light anchor from our skills-based vessel, learn how to live with the other passengers, even if living on the top deck we think we can ignore the crew in the hold. We can only do this by taking account of our context, where we have come from and what we carry with us: our cultural baggage. This paper briefly examines how we might tackle this task within the context of the social sciences in higher education.

1. Statement of the Problem: Learning to Think

A ustralia is producing graduates who, all too frequently, are not familiar in any disciplined sense with the society in which they are going to practise their chosen profession, who are not analytical, creative thinkers, whose education does not provide the basis for adequate flexibility, who are not sufficiently attuned to the need for 'lifelong' learning, and who are not good communicators. In short, Australia is producing highly trained technicians who are under-educated in the broader sense of the term. (Aulich Committee 1990, p.viii)

Such was the finding of the Senate Committee on Employment, Education and Training in the so-called Aulich Report, the result of a Senate inquiry into higher education inspired by the changes in the higher education system in the 1980s. It was a finding that echoed a multitude of previous government reports and enquiries. Beginning with the Murray Report (1957) and reiterated consistently over the years (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee [AVCC] 1963; Commonwealth of Australia 1977; Tertiary Education Commission 1978; the Williams Report 1979; Aulich Committee 1990), the quality of university teaching and learning has borne the brunt of sustained attacks.

Australia is reputed to have one of the best education systems in the world. If this can be said about a country such as Australia, how much more so might it apply to the Southeast Asia region, particularly Vietnam, Cambodia and the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic, each of whom has received substantial aid and technical assistance from Australia in recent years, including for education? I have lived and worked in the region for the last seven years: in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. My experiences tell me that the situation is considerably worse in this region than it is in Australia.

Why are graduates so unprepared to tackle the rigours of the contemporary world? Part of the answer lies in the quote above which mentions the following:

- Lack of familiarity of society
- Lack of adequate flexibility
- Lack of analytical, creative thinking
- Lack of attention to 'lifelong' learning
- Inability to communicate well

This is summarised by saying that graduates are highly trained, but they are under-educated. What is this distinction between training and education? Education is a much broader concept than training.

Training usually refers to a specific time period in which individuals or groups of individuals are brought together with a trainer/s to learn a discrete piece of knowledge or amount of information, or a discrete set of skills and/or attitudes within a discrete period of time. For example, one might attend a gender training workshop which has as its aim to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes concerning the inclusion of gender sensitivity into the development and writing of curriculum materials or program design. Education, on the other hand, usually refers to a much larger time frame in which the learning can take place in a variety of ways across a variety of locations, even including unintentional learning.

Despite the complexities of the issues, I believe the basic problem with education in the region, and in many parts of the world, or at least the statement of the problem, is very simple:

Most people do not know how to think or how to learn and formal education does little to alleviate this.

But there is another very important part to the answer. This is the part that makes learning how to think and how to learn so crucial in the modern world. We live in a rapidly changing world where technology has taken a massive quantum leap in the last 20 years. How many of you owned a PC 20 years ago? How many of you had access to the Internet, e-mail? The amount of knowledge available is simply far too vast for any one individual to master. "Since 1960 the world's store of information has been doubling every five years or less." This places an immense burden on students who "will be called upon to face problems unimaginable at this time and to reach decisions based on evidence that does not yet exist" (Bailey 1994, p.130). Gone are the days when one could acquire a body of knowledge through a three, four, or even five year degree, and hope that this body of knowledge would sustain one throughout a long and distinguished career in one's chosen field. Such bodies become corpses very quickly. Far from being fixed, knowledge is a tap dance performed at an increasing tempo on a shifting carpet.

The rapidly changing world in which we live and the so-called "knowledge or information explosion" has had enormous implications for education and training, for the acquisition of knowledge, for teaching and learning. In such a context the notion of lifelong learning assumes vital importance. By this I mean the ability to learn *how* to learn both now and in the future. And learning how to think is an important part of this. It is these lifelong learning skills that will enable us to learn how to dance on a shifting carpet.

Let me summarise what I see to be the nub of the problem:

1. Graduates are highly trained, but under-educated in the broader sense of the term.
2. One of the major reasons for this is that graduates are not educated how to think or how to learn.
3. Learning how to think critically and creatively and learning how to learn is vital in a rapidly changing world.
4. This is because knowledge and information changes so rapidly that it is quickly outdated.

2. Why Can't People Think?

I am not going to labour the point about *why* the situation is even worse in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. But it would be an abrogation of my responsibilities if I did not devote some attention to this matter because the historical why may prove to be the greatest obstacle to improving the situation. This will become clearer as I proceed.

The simple answer to this question is because they have never been taught. Children right through schooling from primary to secondary are not taught how to think partly because the curriculum does not encourage it and even if it did, the teachers themselves often do not know how to think let alone teach anybody else how to do it. The situation continues into higher education with the focus on learning vast slabs of information, often parrot fashion. Whether it is mastering mathematical algorithms and equations, scientific formulas, a multitude of social science theories or economic flow charts, the emphasis all too often is on memorising the content.

Why is this the case? We have to start from the fundamental assumption that education is perhaps the most political activity in the world. At primary level it is the hearts and souls of children. Let's start with primary school where formal education begins. I want to ask a deceptively simple question: **what is the purpose of schooling?**

Coming from a primary school environment in Australia you might be tempted to say that the purpose of schooling or formal education is for students to learn the knowledge and skills underpinning the major disciplinary areas of the curriculum. We could even be generous about this and say that at least in formal curriculum documents there is now a healthy focus on lifelong learning, including thinking

skills. Outcomes-based learning is sweeping the western world. The most cursory glance at primary curriculum throughout the English-speaking Western world reveals two trends in primary education (and lower secondary too for that matter):

1. Streamlining content to a number of Key Learning Areas (ranging from 5 to 8).
2. Focus on children's learning outcomes that include skills equally as much as knowledge content.

This is certainly not the case in the curricula of the three former colonies of Indochina. But the above answer ignores another crucial dimension to schooling that applies in Australia and the West just as much as it does in the region: its socialisation function. Schooling serves a primary purpose of inculcating into students the norms and values of the wider society. From an anthropological perspective, education is the major means of cultural transmission from one generation to the next and this means passing on the cultural traditions, norms and values. Of course, there is always inherent tension in this activity, often conceptualised as the "generation gap". This tension is important because if the young simply accept all at face value a culture would stagnate and die. It is the complex interplay of the old and the new, tradition and innovation, that keeps a culture alive and thriving, able to cope with the demands of a rapidly changing world.

In Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia it has often been the socialisation function of formal education that has been emphasised at the expense of all else. Let us take a look at the recent history of these countries. Throughout the first half of the 20th century there was no mass education in any of these countries. Formal education was for a restricted corp and the major purpose of this education was to create a bureaucratic elite that could serve the interests of mother France and her needs. After the French were ejected in the 1950s each of the three countries set about trying to create an "indigenous" education system with some very unfortunate role models. This enterprise had scarcely begun before Vietnam and Laos were plunged into the Indochinese War – we must never call it the Vietnam War – in the early 60s. They were joined by Cambodia in 1970. Let us say there was a moratorium on the incipient indigenous education systems. In 1975 all three countries were "liberated" by Communist governments, including Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Now education could begin anew. Of course in Cambodia education was essentially eradicated during Pol Pot's reign of terror from 1975-1979. Meanwhile, Vietnam instituted a rigorous Soviet-based system whose primary aim was to create obedient, unthinking citizens (comrades) who would do as they were told in furthering the greater Communist cause. And Laos followed suit. It is little wonder that none of these countries provided opportunity for people to think. Thinking was lethal in these days. In 1979 when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia to liberate the people from Pol Pot, Cambodia began its quest to develop an education system anew. Not surprisingly this system was basically a Soviet/Vietnamese Communist education system whose major aim was to create compliant citizens who would do as they were told.

Then things started to change in the late 80s, early 90s. The Soviet bloc was collapsing and the Soviets made it clear that they could no longer afford to support Vietnam. What changed was that Vietnam, with Laos following suit, decided the time was ripe to introduce "Red Capitalism". That is a capitalist economic system under the leadership of a one party state. Not surprisingly, the curriculum did not see a rapid about-face with the primary aim being to nurture the thinking and learning skills of students. This is the perennial tension of all one party states in the contemporary rapidly changing world. It can be expressed like this:

1. the world is changing rapidly;
2. therefore, we need citizens with flexible skills, including critical and creative thinking skills, to best serve the needs of a rapidly changing society;
3. but if we educate people to think they will pose a threat to the power of the one party state.

Cambodia was little different in reality. Cambodia was virtually plunged into civil war after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese. UNTAC made a pretence of chaperoning fair democratic elections in 1993. The people voted for the royalist-style party FUNCINPEC, but rule was usurped in practice by Hun Sen's People's Party, spawned by the Vietnamese Communist Party, which was essentially a police state in which no opposition was tolerated.

This brief excursion into the history of the region in recent times intends simply to provide a cursory explanation of why thinking independently, critically and creatively has not been a major impetus of curriculum at any level.

3. What do we do about it?

Anything I have to say must be prefaced by the caveat that emerges from the above discussion. We can do nothing about nurturing critical thinking if there is lack of political will. But most leaders in these three countries recognise their fundamental dilemma: if they do not educate their people in the broadest sense of the term, especially to think critically, they probably cannot keep pace with the rest of the world, since knowledge is fast replacing capital as the critical commodity for economic progress. It was Lyotard (1984) who said that countries (or nation-states) will compete for knowledge in the same way that they once battled for control over territory. Similarly, Bohme and Stehr (1986) argue that "the rise of science as a prestigious and potent form of knowledge has seen the retreat of property and labour as the main forces driving and organising society" (Hatty n.d., p.61). Given such a context, we can assume that perhaps there is a little more political will than in the recent past to foster a thinking population.

There are actually many strategies that one might employ to remedy the situation. These start from macro level policy decisions concerning curriculum development and program design across a range of sectors – education, health, agriculture, industry and mines, transport and communications, and so on – and at a number of levels within each sector; for instance, primary, secondary, and tertiary within the education sector. I do not want to focus on these macro issues today. Rather, I want to look at what a practising tertiary educator can do within the social sciences in a classroom setting. This, of course, assumes that one has the political freedom to do this. That is, we have to assume that the macro is not trying to strangle the micro.

Again, I want to emphasise that there is a vast variety of strategies for tackling this issue. I simply want to share one approach that I have used successfully in higher education in Australia and Vietnam. But before I can do this, there's a little groundwork to do.

3.1 Clearing the Ground: Defining some Terms

I apologise. I have been behaving like an eel: conceptual slipping and sliding has been standard fare. Thinking, critical thinking, creative thinking, I have been using these terms as if they were all the same thing and that we all shared a common understanding of their meaning. This is certainly not the case. I actually prefer the term critical reflection, but even here one does not have to go far to discover that the major thinkers in the area sometimes mean vastly different things by the term. Concepts are slippery entities. And they are connected, integrally connected to a host of background assumptions and world views that we might call their paradigmatic home. We could say that concepts are embedded. We cannot easily replace one concept with another, just as we cannot wrench the heart from the human body and replace it with another organ. This is a vital feature of concepts which also does something to explain why translating across languages is such a fraught exercise. In short, concepts take on their meaning from the role they play in a larger network of ideas. This means I cannot simply provide glib one sentence definitions of the major concepts. I have to contextualize them within their networks, their paradigmatic homes.

Four major concepts appear most frequently in the literature: critical thinking, reflection, critical reflection and reflective practice. I shall discuss these terms under two related headings: critical thinking and reflection, critical reflection and reflective practice. The headings are the result of two largely separate literatures.

3.1.1 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking skills are perceived to be vital in the current age. As noted earlier, Bailey (1994, p.130) remarks that many writers attribute their burgeoning importance to the 'knowledge explosion' and "to the fact that since 1960 the world's store of information has been doubling every five years or less."

> To deal with this fast-emerging clash of new values, technologies, geopolitical relationships, lifestyles, and modes of communication, we will need a means of critical thinking to arrive at reasoned decisions on the complex, urgent and unprecedented issues that will confront us.
> (Freeley 1990, p.viii)

Such recognition has partly spawned the so-called 'critical thinking movement' which has swept the United States in recent years, crossed the Atlantic to Britain and now infiltrates Australian shores. It is not new. Meyers (1987) notes its roots in Plato's academy, as does Seelig (1991), specifically mentioning Socratic dialectic, Bacon's scientific problem-solving, and Dewey's reflective thinking techniques. Brell (1990) notes that the modern movement stems from Ennis' (1962) landmark paper, "A Concept of Critical Thinking", which builds on the work of John Dewey, *How We Think* (1933, orig. 1910), Max Black, *Critical Thinking* (1952), and B. Othanel Smith, "The Improvement of Critical Thinking" (1953);

though the movement received impetus with the release of an American report in 1983 from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which "described our nation as 'at risk' and in the process of 'unthinking unilateral disarmament' " (Seelig 1991, p. 24). In Australia, the more recent West Report (1998) also makes a similar plea. It would be a mistake to assume that the current movement owes its existence solely to a demand for graduates who can think critically. Kaplan (1991) describes a second factor: declining enrolments in philosophy courses. It is significant that the current movement began in *philosophy* departments in the United States. This has had a major impact on the types of courses, where one of the defining features of the movement has been the simple translation of critical thinking as logical thinking and associated argument analysis. A typical course, Kaplan (1991) notes, teaches two skills: identification of arguments; and argument evaluation. Meyers (1987) suggests a slightly broader ambit, which includes logic and problem-solving skills. Bailey (1994, p.128) reveals that the approach is alive and well in Australia. "By teaching students to argue and reason more effectively, their overall critical thinking skills will improve and society will benefit."

With few exceptions the critical thinking movement is construed within a narrow, cognitive frame which is technical in orientation and positivist in its underpinnings. In short, critical thinking emerges as an apolitical, ahistorical, acultural notion which denies what we know about knowledge as an historically-grounded social practice mediated by language and imbued with power relations (Foucault 1980a; 1980b; 1983; 1984c). Donald Schön (1983) in his highly influential book *The Reflective Practitioner* mounts a strong assault on the 'technical rational' model of professional education. Schön's ideas have spawned a burgeoning literature which is linked by concepts such *as reflection, critical reflection, reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, reflective practice.*

3.1.2 (Critical) Reflection and (Critically) Reflective Practice

The traditional use of the term 'reflection' goes back to German Idealism (Habermas 1978), though Newell (1994, p.79) remarks that reflection as the "human ability to introspect about activities and modulate these activities as a result is as old as religion or the idea of personhood." Note the link between reflection and action. The concept of *reflection* has assumed much vigour in recent times, taking three major flight paths: experiential learning; reflective practice; and the work of Habermas and his devotees. Not surprisingly, the concept "has been used differently depending on the tradition from which the writer or practitioner comes" (Boud and Walker 1998, p.191). This is consistent with my notion of embedded concepts. That is, they take on their meaning from the role they play in much larger sets of ideas, their paradigmatic homes. The insertion of the 'critical' before 'reflection' has tended to align the approach with Habermasian critical theory (e.g. Mezirow 1981; 1990a; 1990b; 1990c; Brookfield 1995).

Experiential learning in modern times stems from the work of John Dewey (1933) (its heritage can be traced as far back as Aristotle). Dewey defined reflection as the

> ...active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.
> (Dewey 1933, p.9)

But, as James and Clarke (1994) ask, what does 'active', 'persistent', 'careful', or even 'consideration' and so on mean? This leaves us with a conceptual infinite regress. Most thinkers in this tradition view reflection as one element in experiential learning. "One of the key ideas and features of all aspects of learning from experience is that of reflection" (Boud and Walker 1998, p.191). The most notable examples of this approach are David Boud and colleagues (Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985; Boud and Walker 1991; Boud, Cohen and Walker 1993; Boud and Walker 1998) and David Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning.

The second path occurs in the work of Donald Schön (1983; 1987) who views reflection, central to his notion of the 'reflective practitioner', as an 'epistemology of practice'. Note also Dewey's influence here – Schön's PhD was on Dewey's enquiry learning (Argyris and Schön 1974). In fact, there are close connections between experiential learning and reflective practice. Usher (1985) observes that the link comes by positing the key role of reflecting on experience. "When we talk of 'learning from experience' what we really mean is learning from reflection on experience. ...experience may be the raw material but it has to be processed through reflection before it can emerge as learning" (Usher 1985, pp.60-61).

Both Boud and Walker (1998) and Morrison (1996) note the burgeoning popularity of *reflective practice* in educational programs, particularly in

teaching, nursing and social work, where field experience and academic study need to be closely integrated. Morrison (1996) summarises the vastly different approaches that shelter under the umbrella term of 'reflective practice': action research; professional development; the linking of theory and practice; teacher empowerment; and personal, social and political emancipation. He attempts to bottle these rampant notions of reflective practice into two 'ideal type' models. The first, 'reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action', which is an apolitical model and springs from the work of Schön. The second, 'reflection, development and empowerment' is highly politicised and has its theoretical origins in Habermas. Morrison notes that the two models are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. The former is her meneutic, pragmatic and apolitical, the latter highly politicised. As noted above, most of the critical thinking literature is underpinned by positivist notions. Schön's 'reflective practitioner' arose as a counter to this 'technical-rational' model and is firmly entrenched in the hermeneutic paradigm. Habermasian-inspired notions of reflective practice are anchored in the critical theory paradigm. Foucault's notion of 'dialogue' and his concept of 'ethico-critical reflection', which Morrison does not discuss, spring from post-structural motivations (see below).

Habermas reworks the concept of reflection for his critical social science (Habermas 1974, 1978, 1984, 1987). Habermas' ideas have been taken up and in some cases adapted by a range of writers. Mezirow (1990b) is one example. Noting the multiplicity of meanings and consequent ambiguity of the term 'critical thinking', he attempts to sharpen the term by using the concept of 'reflection' and analysing it into its three functions: to guide action; to give coherence to the unfamiliar; and to reassess the justification for what is already known. Mezirow argues that while all three functions may be involved in critical thinking, it is the last function – reassessing the justification for what is already known – that is central to critical reflection. Mezirow distinguishes between reflection, *critical reflection and critical self-reflection*. His distinction between reflection and critical reflection is vital and I shall expand on it.

> Whereas reflection involves the assessment of the assumptions implicit in beliefs about how to solve problems, there is a special class of assumptions with which reflection has to deal that are quite different from these procedural considerations. While all reflection implies an element of critique, the term *critical reflection* will here be reserved to refer to challenging the validity of *presuppositions* in prior learning. ...Critical reflection addresses the question of the justification for the very premises on which problems are posed or defined in the first place.
> (Mezirow 1990b, p.12)

Critical self-reflection, in Mezirow's terms, is the "assessment of the way one has posed problems and of one's *own* meaning perspectives" (*my emphasis,* Mezirow 1990a, p.xvi). He stresses that this process is much more than simply a cognitive one. "To question the validity of a long-taken-for-granted meaning perspective predicated on a presupposition about oneself can involve the negation of values that have been very close to the centre of one's self-concept" (Mezirow 1990b, p.12).

Foucault's Ethico-Critical Reflection

Implied in all the discussion henceforth re critical reflection is the role of 'self'. One cannot discuss reflection, critical reflection, self-reflection and so on without some notion of a 'self' or 'subject' who is the conduit for these processes, which, as we have already discovered, are not simply cognitive processes. All the major writers discussed so far have a relatively clear sense of the type of subject they want to create and critical reflection is seen to be a central ingredient in the creation of this subject. For Foucault this is vital. Foucault expresses his disdain for the 'hermeneutic confessional' as a modern form of power whose norms are to be questioned and if necessary, resisted. This is because underlying this notion is the foundational, essentialist subject, the aim of such practice being to discover our 'true selves'. For Foucault, the aim "is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are" (Foucault 1983, p.216). We require self-creation. But, "what kind of specifically philosophical reflection or critical activity will assist or promote this process of cultural self-creation?" (Falzon 1998, p.67).

Clearly, it cannot be anchored in a foundational metaphysics, "the kind of modernist philosophical reflection which turns to the self, to a foundational subject, in order to formulate ultimate principles for thought and action" (Falzon 1998, p.67). The alternative is intrinsically ethical because it is motivated by 'opening up the space for the other'. But it is an ethical attitude of openness taken up in reflective form (Falzon 1998). "We reflect on ourselves in order to open a space for the other and thereby to assist resistance to the prevailing forms of social

organisation" (Falzon 1998, p.68). This requires "recognition of our finitude to become explicit; and in its extended form this becomes the apprehension that the forms and principles we live by have emerged historically, out of a whole series of encounters with the other, out of a long process of dialogue" (pp.68-69). Initially, Foucault calls his form of reflection 'genealogy' (Foucault 1984a); later, the 'historical ontology of ourselves' (Foucault 1984b). It is essentially a historical form of reflection, one in which the critical question is: "in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression" (Foucault 1984b, p.45). Such an exercise reveals the contingency of our existing forms of life and social practices. While this might appear unsettling, disturbing even, for those hankering after certainty and security, it also acts as a funnel of possibilities, potentially opening up the space for the other in a quest for change, for re-creation. There is a dual process at work here. Re-creation at both an individual and cultural level.

Falzon (1998, p.70) points out that "Foucault's comments on the nature of critical reflection, understood as a historical interrogation of the present, are scattered throughout his writings, but it is only in his late works, especially in the essay 'What is Enlightenment?', that he makes explicit the ethical spirit that informs his critical activity." Falzon's reworking of Foucault through the concept of 'dialogue' embraces the notion of 'ethico-critical' reflection. It is ethical because its primary motivating force is opening up the space for other. It is critical because it is reflection mobilised in the task of excavating subjugated knowledge, for re-creating both self and culture. Note that this critical task is not the same as the critical theory task motivated by its quest to overcome 'domination' which prevents us from realising an idealised form of life which operates according to universal norms. In Foucault's brand of ethico-critical reflection all universals and norms are problematized, historically interrogated.

This ethical and critical position does not imply that we have to reject all forms of order, unity or community, as oppressive, which would be the case for a postmodernism of fragmentation. On the dialogical view there may not be one ideal, transcendentally grounded form of life, but there are still forms of social order and unity. ...Given this dialogical account, the ethical and critical task is not to avoid all principles and all forms of social order but rather to avoid the absolutization of particular forms of order, the establishment of forms of social and political closure.

(Falzon 1998, pp.95-96)

3.2 Fostering Critical Reflection: A Case Study

That's a lot of heavy theory. Navigating the treacherous depths of Habermas and Foucault can be like walking a tightrope slung over the Mekong in full flood during a cyclone. But it is important to give some indication of what the theoretical roots of my case study are. Essentially, they spring from Foucault's brand of ethico-critical reflection as this position has been reworked by Falzon (1998).

3.2.1 Assessment – Defines the Curriculum

> *If we wish to discover the truth about an education system, we must look into its assessment procedures.*
> (Derek Rowntree 1977, p.1)

I'm not going to explore the notion of assessment in any detail, but I want you to accept at face value that it might provide an accurate indication of at least a single subject. That's why, rather than going through a detailed description of the subject, I am going to begin by providing the first of two pieces of assessment that was used in the first year university subject that forms the basis of my case study.

Choose a selected piece of interaction between two people, either from a book, magazine, TV or radio programme, or an interaction you have observed.

Part 1. Provide a 250-500 word descriptive summary of the people, the context and content of the interaction (non-assessable).

Part 2. Provide your 'theory' for what is happening in the interaction, both in relation to the individuals and in relation to the interaction between the individuals. In your theory, pay particular attention to identifying the *concepts* you have chosen to use, the *assumptions* underpinning your theory and the *propositions* made.

Part 3. What factors about you (background, culture, gender, age, beliefs, ideas, experiences) have led you to develop the theory you have?

Assessment 2 was identical with the following significant difference: interaction choice was no longer a dyad, but a group of three or more people.

The view taken of assessment is captured by the following quotation:

Assessment is about several things at once. It is not about simple dualities such as grading versus diagnosis. It is about reporting on students' achievements and about teaching them better through expressing to them more clearly the goals of our curricula. It is about measuring student learning and it is about diagnosing specific misunderstandings in order to help students to learn more effectively. It concerns the quality of teaching as well as the quality of learning: it involves us in learning from our students' experiences, and is about changing ourselves as well as our students. It is not only about what a student can do; it is also about what it means he or she can do.
(Ramsden 1992, p.182)

This means assessment was used to direct student learning.

3.2.2 Theories and Knowledge

Knowledge is a function of being. When there is a change in the being of the knower, there is a corresponding change in the nature and the amount of the knowing.
(Aldous Huxley 1945, p.vii)

How does one go about teaching such a subject? The above discussion on critical thinking and critical reflection indicates that there is a fair amount of suspect practice going on in higher education under the guise of critical thinking and critically reflective practice. Part of the motivation for developing such a subject, which happened over a number of years in tandem with another colleague, was that it became apparent that beginning tertiary students had no concept what knowledge or theories actually were. Hearing students talk about theories one could be excused for thinking they were referring to alternative commodities on a supermarket shelf. They had no scaffold on which to hang this multitude of theories, paradigms and approaches hurled at them from day one. The subject was designed to provide them with such a scaffold, to give them a framework for dealing with knowledge and theories in a critical way.

One crucial goal was to get students to understand that theories are spawned by flesh and blood theorists located in particular times and places. They are not god-like structures created by machines, they are not different in kind from the low-level theories that all of us use daily simply to operate in the world. We all use theory constantly. We may not be aware that we are using theory, it may be muddled, implicit theory, but then this provides a key justification for articulating it, trying to make it explicit and coherent.

We all use theory constantly? This is a difficult concept to get across to beginning tertiary students, many of whom will dispute this claim with a vengeance. This was always my starting point. I shall briefly describe one teaching strategy used in the opening tutorial session, since this was crucial for all later work. Many students have an aversion for theory. In fact, it is not uncommon for some students to say something like the following: "I don't use theories. I want to help people who've got real life practical problems. I don't see how all that book stuff can help them that much." I therefore see it as one of my primary teaching tasks in this subject to demonstrate that all 'observations' and resulting ideas and behaviour are theory-driven, whether implicit, muddled or both. Indeed, it is my contention that practitioners must make every effort to make explicit and coherent their theoretical thinking if their practice is not to suffer. This is the very rationale and basis of the subject.

I begin by giving a very simple and common example of an interaction:
A mother is at the supermarket with her three year old child. They reach the checkout and the child is insisting that the mother buys him/her (I vary it from year to year) some confectionery. The mother refuses and the child begins a screaming tantrum.

What is your immediate reaction?
Most students every year say something like: "Spoilt brat. Needs a good smack". I then begin an intensive period of probing and interrogation, continually asking 'why?' I shall summarise very briefly a typical sort of 'inquisition':

- Why does the child need a good smack?
- Because it's being naughty?
- But why do naughty children need a smack?
- Because it will help them learn.
- Help them learn what?
- That they can't do whatever they want?
- But why can't they do whatever they want?
- Because people won't like them when they grow up?
- I see. But couldn't you just tell them not to do it? Why smack?
- But the child's only three.
- Why should that matter?
- Kids that age don't understand reason.
- But they understand smacks?
- Right.

- What do you think would happen if she didn't smack the child?
- It'd turn out a little arsehole.
- Is that such a bad thing?
- Sure. We can't have everybody running round doing what they like. The world would be chaos.
- Let me get this right. You seem to be suggesting that there's a link between what the mother does now – smack the kid – and how it turns out as an adult.
- Course there is.

And so on...

After completing the 'machine gun' probe, I then summarise the key points and draw out the theoretical connections explicitly, recording them on the board as I go. For example, it's not such a big jump to move from the link between the mother's smacking the child now and its relationship to adult personality, to demonstrate that this idea masks, at the very least, a theory of child development (note that this theory is premised on the fundamental assumption that childhood experiences shape adult personality. This is useful later on when we deal with assumptions and alternative explanations). It's not difficult to see that by successful probing and drawing out, one can soon uncover an entire host of significant theories, many of which have provided the occasion for hundreds of metres of library space. Let me summarise some of the major theories: learning theory; a related theory of discipline and punishment; a theory of communication; a theory of social values; a theory of ethics; a theory of parenting; a theory of child development; a theory of personality.

And this all derives from a seemingly simple everyday observation consisting of six words! This is usually a remarkable revelation for students whose widening eyes provide ample testimony to the effectiveness of the teaching strategy. If necessary, I challenge students to provide any scenario for which one has a verbalised reaction which they believe to be theory-free. I am pleased to say that no student has yet been able to do this.

Thus, in this subject, we were not content to allow theories to possibly surface. The theories are in existence already. Our policy was to unearth them, spotlight them, break them in to their component parts, then reassemble them by highlighting the role of self in their construction. Compare this with Argyris and Schön's (1974) *tacit theories-in-use.* In an important sense we were trying to get students to tap into these tacit theories-in-use which are implicit in our patterns of spontaneous interactions with others. Argyris and Schön argue that it is these implicit theories that are the dominant theory of action in contradistinction to *espoused theories* which are used to justify and explain behaviour. But unlike Argyris and Schön, we wanted to locate these implicit theories in their social, political and historical context (compare Boud and Walker 1998). Ours is an epistemology grounded on a foundation of difference which "takes as its starting and end points 'the responsibility to historicize, to examine each deployment of essence, each appeal to experience, each claim to identity in the complicated contextual frame in which it is made' " (Luke 1992, p.48 citing Dianne Fuss).

3.2.3 The Self/Selves and Cultural Location

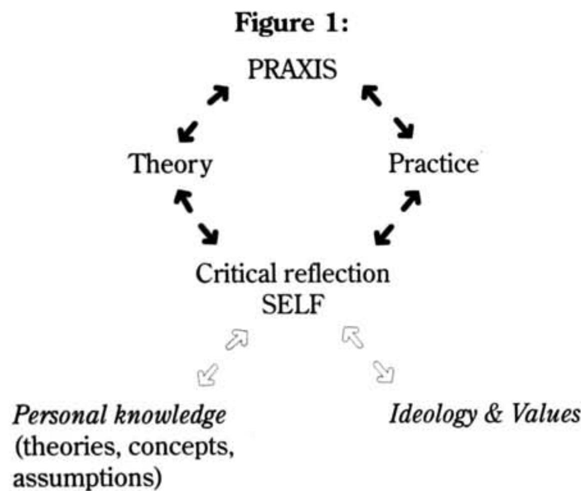
> *The self is not contained in any moment or place, but it is only in the intersection of moment and place that the self might, for a moment, be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once.*
> (Jeannette Winterson 1987, p.87)

The self or multiple selves is vital to this subject. The self/ves is perceived as a tool for unlocking our personal and cultural baggage. Note that in Part 3 of the assessment we asked students to identify the factors about themselves (background, culture, gender, age, beliefs, ideas, experiences) that had led them to develop the theory they have. Over time we actually guided them to see how the personal (beliefs and ideas) was shaped by the broader structural factors of culture, gender, ethnicity, language, age, history, geography and so on. Using Foucault's notions, we saw creation and questioning of the self/ves as a "historical interrogation of the present", an attempt to understand how we got to be the way we are and how the culture in which we live got to be the way it is.

'The self' plays a central role in critical reflection in particular and knowledge production in general. In an important sense, one cannot separate the nature of the person from knowledge. Epistemology and ontology blur. "The way we gain knowledge about the world, what comprises an adequate explanation, depends on the sort of beings that exist in the world: to put it another way, the object we are studying determines the knowledge we can have of it" Craib (1992, p.18). I have already made it clear that I reject the foundational subject of modernist theories which presuppose an enduring, essential human nature. Rather, the 'subject' or the 'self' is produced through

language and systems of meaning and power. Human nature is a product of culture, rather than cultures being different ways of expressing human nature. Human beings both create and recreate their social conditions and are in turn shaped and reshaped by these social conditions. 'The self' (or selves) is not simply a cognitive/rational being. Holding particular theories, assumptions, values and ideologies, and so on, involves substantial input from other dimensions of self: the affective, the physical, the sexual, the social, the ethical, the spiritual. In other words, I am arguing for a holistic conception of self/selves. This implies a holistic view of education. This is both a *descriptive* claim and a *prescriptive* one. That is, I am suggesting that one *should* not educate from the neck up, nor can one. The following diagram summarises some of the key elements of the subject:

Figure 1:



4. Conclusion

I began by suggesting that we have a major problem: many people cannot think critically. This applies in the western world, but the situation is even worse in the region. It is a serious misgiving in a rapidly changing world because knowledge changes at such a frantic pace. I did a 100 metre dash through the recent history of the region in order to understand why so many people cannot think critically. I then looked at what we might do about this deplorable state of affairs by offering a case study of a subject developed for first year university students designed to nurture their powers of critical reflection.

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