

Thinking critically about critical thinking: direct versus indirect approaches

Abstract

Critical thinking. This is one of the key terms that crops up over and over again in discussions about the role of the university and tertiary education. In particular, it manifests in discussions about graduate attributes – along with specific disciplinary content and skills, we hold to the belief that our graduates should emerge from their tertiary studies with abilities in such generic areas as critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, logical reasoning and so forth. Indeed, excellence in teaching and learning is somehow seen to be tied to students' development of these skills. So, given that the development of these skills seems to be an essential part of students' university experiences, what are they and how do we actually go about introducing and fostering them? This paper is thus an exploration of this issue. Divided into three main sections, I first clarify these skills themselves. What are they and why are they so important? Secondly I focus on methodology. How do we actually introduce and foster these skills? And here I will draw on both best practice and actual practices. Finally, I explore some of the pros and cons of actual practices I've been involved with in teaching these skills, both directly and indirectly, at Murdoch University, Curtin University of Technology and Edith Cowan University. In other words, what actually works and what are some of the typical problems that can be encountered.

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