Report from the Field

Utilizing Critical Writing Exercises to Foster Critical Thinking in Diverse First-Year Undergraduate Students and Prepare Them for Life Outside University

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Context and Starting Point: Global University, Local Issues
London Metropolitan University is a post-1992[1] inner-city university situated near the heart of London (United Kingdom) and as such recruits students from countries across the world: it comes 18th in the QS Top Universities (2016) rankings for the international diversity of its student body. In addition, London Metropolitan University's student body is made up of almost fifty percent non-traditional students (Blagburn & Cloutterbuck, 2011), that is, the university's students are often mature (over 21), from working class and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities—typically they are the first in their families to enter Higher Education. In our first-year module, Becoming an Educationist, the student cohort is nearly 100% non-traditional. This means, students on the Bachelor of Arts with Honors (BA Hons) Education Studies, of which Becoming is a part, come typically from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds, and have mixed interests, abilities, expectations and connections. The majority of our students have to engage with paid work alongside their degree program and typically also have caring responsibilities within the home—their time in and for the University is often limited, which makes adjusting to the demands of university and university life challenging.

The BA Hons Education Studies is a multi-disciplinary degree drawing upon history, sociology, philosophy, pedagogics and cultural studies to equip students with the skills, knowledge and understanding to take on socially responsible roles as critical professionals in a range of settings, including (primary) teaching, youth and community work, sport education, mentoring and personal development. It is also an excellent preparation for further study towards Master qualifications and beyond.

The first year of the BA offers a grounding in key educational theories and concepts via four, year-long (30-week) modules: Making Sense of Education; Education and Encounter in the Global City; Culture, Curriculum and Technics; plus, our module, Becoming an Educationalist. Becoming an Educationalist is nominally the "academic skills" module, but we shape it as the synoptic module, the hermeneutic space wherein the students can make sense of and experiment with that which they are learning across the program as a whole. This framing of Becoming is disruptive of typical perceptions of the skills module as the place for fixing deficit students, as we take an approach that is creative and emancipatory— helping students find their academic identity and voice through blogging, role play, simulations, real research and the production of multimodal exhibitions and digital artefacts (Abegglen, Burns, & Sinfield, 2015). A key desirable outcome for us is that our students develop without losing themselves in the process. We seek to enable the emergence of an

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owned critical academic persona, to locate Freire's (1970) site of colonization in the Honors classroom, which a Freirean approach attempts to undo through critical writing exercises.

The Notion of Criticality
Since the early 1980s, a number of alternative approaches to the study of human beings have emerged, such as critical psychology, discursive psychology, discourse analysis, deconstruction and post-structuralism. What many of these approaches have in common is the idea that we need to take "a critical stance toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and ourselves" (Burr, 2015, p. 2). This idea is now often referred to as social constructionism and opposes what is known as positivism and empiricism. It resists assumptions that "the nature of the world can be revealed by observation, and that what exists is what we perceive to exist" (Burr, 2015, p. 2). This means that the categories with which we as human beings apprehend the world do not necessarily refer to real divisions. It also implies that knowledge is historically and culturally specific (Burr, 2015). Social constructionism therefore concludes that no true perception of reality exists, but that people construct their knowledge of the world, their common ways of understanding it, between them.

In education studies, a social constructionist approach is seen as a key condition to understand discourses surrounding education and childhood (Bartlett & Burton, 2012; Blundell, 2012). According to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, being able to demonstrate criticality is seen as a necessity to undertake "intellectually rigorous analysis of educational processes, systems and approaches, and the cultural, societal, political, historical and economic contexts" (as cited in Bartlett & Burton, 2012, p. 6). For our students, this means that they need to approach their studies in a critical fashion and provide a critical analysis of the phenomena observed. As Ward (2004) stated,

> Education Studies is an exciting subject which can help you to understand education as a powerful force for change across the globe. It is not teacher training, nor simply the *theory* of teaching, although some people choose to take it before going on to train as teachers. As future professionals they will have a critical analysis of what education is, how it works in different countries and cultures, and visions of what might be in different futures. (p. 1, emphasis in the original)

In our course, most of our assessments ask students to provide constructive criticism of an issue, topic or text. This is particularly important, considering that they are undertaking a degree in a subject area where there is an understanding that the world is made up by several competing and context-specific truths (Bartlett & Burton, 2012; Blundell, 2012). It is expected that students take a critical stance towards the world and provide a systematic critique of a topic or idea. Ironically, whilst the students are very aware that they live in and need to respect their diverse communities and globalized world, they do tend to feel that their own diversity and difference is not welcome or respected in the typical Honors classroom. Further, with respect to criticality, we have observed that where students are just required to summarise or précis key theoretical perspectives, they are disempowered and silenced, knowing that they are just being tested on producing the "right answer." Moreover, as Godfrey (2011) stated, "One common reason for low marks is too much non-critical

content (background information, description and explanation) and not enough critical content, particularly detailed analysis and evaluation" (p. 19).

In our Becoming module, we came to realize that students, non-traditional and international alike, interpret the notion of criticality differently since it is imbued with different cultural codes (Gobo, 2008). The criticality that bears academic value for us, and lecturers in social sciences in general, is normally the type of criticality that aligns itself with a systematic, balanced critique of a topic or idea (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2003). Moreover, criticality is contested and plural—and there is a gap between tutor and student expectations (Lea & Street, 1998)—and a lack of transparency of the criteria and language used to judge student writing (Lillis & Turner, 2001). Our students, for example, either think that we want them to swallow whole the new ideas that we offer them or think criticality necessitates disagreement, opposition and negativity as well as the need to judge or find fault.

Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator and leading advocate of critical pedagogy (viz. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970), emphasized the need to provide populations with an education that was simultaneously new, modern and anti-colonial. Reprising the oppressors-oppressed distinction, Freire championed the idea that education should allow the oppressed to regain their sense of humanity. For this to occur, he argued, both the oppressed and the oppressor must be willing to rethink their way of life: "Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly" (1970, p. 60). Critical engagement in the seminar room—and in student writing—requires both parties to interrogate material, pedagogy and critical thinking itself. Higher education is not just tutors facilitating critical thinking in students, who often experience it as (attempted) indoctrination to preferred white, male, middle-class views and stances—education is a political act that cannot be divorced from pedagogy—colonizing or emancipatory:

> Education makes sense because women and men learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because women and men are able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing—of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't. (Freire, 2004, p. 15)

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire also attacked what he called the "banking concept of education," in which a student is viewed as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge. He noted that this approach "transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads men and women to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power" (1970, p. 77). Freire claimed that this results in dehumanization of both the students and the teachers. He argued for pedagogy that instead treats the learner as a co-creator of knowledge—a more mutual approach to education that considers all people incomplete and allows them to strive to become more fully human. Considering Freire's (1970) work on the oppressor and the oppressed, it seems that we need to consider more carefully how we work with our students—and reflect more critically on the methods we use in our classrooms. What is it that we expect from our students? And how do we make sure that what we expect from them is what we teach them?

Critical Writing Exercises

One way that we foster students' criticality is to use critical writing exercises to encourage students' active engagement with material, particularly in seminar sessions where there is a need for students to interact with lecture content in more detail. To lead in to this and to position the students with the authority to speak—including to the lecture and to the written texts with which they engage—we open the module by facilitating critical, dialogic learning through role plays and topic- and image-mediated dialogues—enabling meaningful discussion by putting something in the middle (Palus & Drath, 2001). Here the students learn that discussion and dialogue *are* learning and that there is often no correct answer, but there may be persuasive argumentation.[2] The aim of the writing exercises is not only to encourage students to think more critically about a topic or issue, but also to write to learn whilst simultaneously acquiring academic writing capacities in less stressful ways—and therefore to write more successful essays. According to The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (n.d.), "[t]hrough critical thinking exercises, students move from a vague or felt sense about course material to a place where they can make explicit the choices about how words represent their ideas and how they might best arrange them" (para. 3). We use such exercises not only to help students write, but also to surface their real issues with academic thinking and writing. Many lecturers, however, make clear to students that they feel that they cannot write, that they "pay scant" in regards to spelling, punctuation and grammar, and that they have little or no proficiency with academic codes and conventions. Students tend to internalize this condemnation and when writing worry about "getting it right" (Carter, Lillis, & Parkin, 2009), perhaps to the extent of not thinking freely—or critically—about the question that they have been set—or the material with which they are engaging. So, our first writing exercise is a variation on free writing (Elbow, 1998). Free writing, according to Elbow (1998), is a form of writing without censorship or too much conscious control. The idea is to forget spelling, punctuation and grammar—and to allow ideas to flow onto the paper. Elbow said it is writing as cooking—letting ideas "simmer and bubble" before they are ready to be used. It allows exploration and understanding rather than shaping and constructing an argument to please the teacher or follow the teacher's opinions. This supports Freire's notion of freeing the colonised—helping to remove the unconsciously internalized academic censor that prevents thought and eradicates the diversity of the diverse. This is powerful in many ways—not least that it models to time-poor students that one-draft writing does not in fact save them time, but rather serves up raw ideas, undigested and uncritical.

In a first free-write session that we hold with our students, we ask them to write with two pieces of paper—one for the response to a question set—and one on which to write their reasons for not writing. This free-write makes use of writing under time pressure—we typically ask our students to write for ten minutes on a topic, although the exercise can be shorter or last much longer. What is important is that students write continuously for the time set, even if they do not know what to write. In that case, they are simply asked to write "I don't know what to write. I am stuck"—or to surface and write a reason for not writing—until another thought or idea comes to their mind. The aim is for students to generate as much as they can about the set topic in a short period of time and get used to the feeling of articulating their ideas on demand on paper. There is little or no focus on correctness. Hence, it is okay for them to make mistakes and ignore spelling, grammar and punctuation. After the timed writing, we have guided reflections focusing on emotional responses to the

writing, reasons for not writing and lessons learned that can be taken into their more formal academic writing. Here we discuss the students' reasons for not writing—and typically it is not a lack of basic grammar, but a lack of confidence and a fear of failure—very different from what discipline staff describe as the student writing problem. The fear of not getting it right makes students write and correct at the same time—an act of censorship that makes writing very difficult. Regular engagement with these writing activities allows the students to realize that writing itself gets easier with practice, which is a powerful lesson to transfer to other modules and other subjects. Moreover, after the initial workshop, where it is significant just to learn that a fear of not getting it right is a key issue in and of itself, subsequent writing workshops encourage the students to identify why they did not know what to write and/or why or what made the reading and writing process so difficult. Lessons learned from these sessions often involve students realizing that when free-writing they can actually write—and that once they start writing, amazing things can happen:

> "When we first started free writing I didn't get it at all. What's the point? Then I realised that I could just let myself go. Things started to happen."

> "When we did that free writing every week, I got the best mark I've ever got for an essay."

> "All the free writing helped me to take control of the module. I think it helped me be more creative."

> "When I did the weekly writing, I finally understood why I was reading!" (Burns & Sinfield, 2016, p. 160).

Another exercise we use is that of identifying and arguing for or against the key argument presented in a piece of reading or a lecture or explaining a concept or idea to another—perhaps as if to a ten-year-old or to one's grandmother—where it helps that the other person is not familiar with the presented ideas. A further workshop task is to set the final essay question and give students just ten minutes to write their responses—whilst another time we might ask students to jot down their main ideas about a topic or theme on a piece of paper and then see if they can connect ideas in some way. This process helps to clarify and focus the idea. Another structured session that we run involves peer review of writing—where students give feedback according to the essay's actual criteria—and where the feedback process is highlighted as active and dialogic—and definitely not as one where the writer is positioned as a passive receiver of instruction. The assumption underlying writing exercises like this is that

> [a]s students have been working with their ideas [*and the ideas of others*], they have been making a series of choices about their ideas that will lead them to feel "ready" to put them in more complete, coherent form; they will feel "ready to write" their ideas in something closer to the assignment or paper from. (The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d., Drafting, para. 1)

Encouraged to synthesize material in this way—and with others dialogically—the students recognize that writing is a social activity (addressing a specific audience) and that they are moving beyond being observers to becoming knowledge-makers.

Developing Critical Thinking Skills: How Equal Are They?
Critical writing exercises such as the ones described above acknowledge that students are not empty vessels; they are encouraged to build on their existing knowledge and are asked to take an active role in their learning. However, we want critical writing exercises not only to improve critical thinking skills, but also to lead students to write better essays, where they have something to say, as they "identify issues and assumptions, recognise important relationships, make correct inferences, evaluate evidence or authority, and deduce conclusions" (Tsui, 2002, p. 743). And yet, this language itself reveals that lecturers assume a superior position, the role of the oppressor, as they are the ones that not only judge students' ability to think critically, but also the ones that define what a good academic essay is. This is far from what Freire (1970) believed to be a suitable approach to free "the colonized"—a dialogic approach to learning and teaching through the use of cooperation, unity, organization and cultural synthesis: "Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence; . . . to alienate humans from their own decision making is to change them into objects" (p. 85).

Following Freire's (1970) argument, we sought to re-evaluate, together with students, our learning and teaching strategies, including through exercises used to foster the desired skills in an open and dialogic manner. For example, one year we asked a student from another year to initiate a "zigzag" discussion[3] amongst our students about their experiences of the module and to initiate (collaborative) writing as a means of enquiry (Gale, 2013; Murray, 1972). As Stivale stated, "The zigzag is the lightning bolt spark of creation and the 'crosscutting path from one conceptual flow to another,' a path set off by the spark of creation, unpredictable, undisciplined, anti-disciplinary, and non-static" (as cited in Mazzei & McCoy, 2010, p. 505). Following the zigzag discussion, students were asked to write—then to read one other person's writing—and to write in response to that. In this way, we sought to unleash true dialogic feedback sparked by the students' own thoughts and gathered through their writing for us to reflect on and use. As Freire (1970) argued, it is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality; they must act together upon their environment in order to reflect critically upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection: "Education must begin with the solution of the student-teacher contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (p. 53).

In this process, lecturer and students must trust the other or, as Freire (1970) stated, there must be mutual respect and love (or care and commitment). This means, both parties must question what they know, and realize that through dialogue existing thoughts will change, and new knowledge will be created. For us, this means to open up our sessions and ourselves to critique. It also means questioning our own approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, including our assumptions about the essay as the dominant form of assessment—and about the exercises used to foster certain skills in our students. As a consequence, and as Rust, Donovan, and Price (2005) suggested, we want our students to be actively engaged with every stage of the learning and teaching process, and the criteria and standards being applied: "tutor and student . . . should not be seen as separate but as two

halves of one dynamic system, each informing the other, ideally at every stage, with common understanding being shaped and constantly evolving within a community of practice" (p. 236).

In our case, we have built in assessment challenge and assessment choice as a way of harnessing student motivation and engagement (Pokorny & Warren, 2016)—and as a means of developing critical engagement with ideas and with a variety of media in which to express their ideas. Hence, our students do not just express themselves in the traditional academic essay—but through projects and multimodal exhibitions (where they convey ideas critically through 3D artefacts, knitting, jigsaw puzzles, animations, comic books and poetry).[4] Student choice is fundamental in student engagement, granting them some autonomy within the curriculum (Cheng & Warren, 2007). Thus, our students choose which three projects, of many, they reflect on and submit for assessment whilst the traditionally non-academic multimodal exhibitions fill the students with a sense of joy and achievement, which directly works with their *successful* immersion in academic discourse. We reconcile the hierarchical relationship between these two modes of discourse (where academic discourse is typically more privileged within the university) within the disciplinary space of our classroom by inviting students to make conscious the criticality required to produce arguments in alternative modes—and to challenge the traditional essay itself (this year we had a final essay submitted as an illustrated shoe box, containing an illustrated shoe, an annotated tee-shirt and postcards). Importantly, they experience the iterative, dialogic and developmental nature of writing—and arguably this form of essay writing becomes as developmental and empowering as the multimodal work.

Summary and Recommendations

In education studies, similar to most other social science subjects, there is a strong belief in the idea that human beings develop jointly constructed understandings of the world that form the basis for shared assumptions about reality (Bartlett & Burton, 2012; Blundell, 2012), and that social constructionism can help to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social reality (Burr, 2015). For students in this area, this means, to accept there are multiple and often contradictory realities—hence, social phenomena need to be critically analysed and questioned: "Social constructionism cautions us to be every suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be" (Burr, 2015, p. 2). This seems particular important as these contradictory realties are becoming ever present within the professional worlds our students are entering—with (inter-) agency working, multi-disciplinary collaboration, and global sharing of knowledge and tools.

Based on this theoretical orientation, we aim to prepare diverse students for a life outside University by making our classroom a paradigmatic, dialogic, emancipatory and engaging space, where our students are valued for the selves they already are as they become academic. We make space in our classes for students to "write to learn" and we also challenge the tradition to assess student learning only in the form of written coursework. We have incorporated classroom exercises in our module, the Becoming module, where we ask students to critically assess a topic, issue or text. However, as our experience shows, students often misinterpret our intent (feeling that they are supposed to imbibe new ideas, in fact uncritically, as part of becoming the preferred middle-class subject) and the tasks themselves: they seem to have a different cultural understanding (Gobo, 2008) of criticality

than we, their lecturers. Hence, their work is often criticized for "not being critical enough." As Natriello and Chae (2010) pointed out, this can have disastrous consequences:

> When students misunderstand the tasks they are assigned in class and when they misunderstand the criteria that the teacher considers important for the task, student performance can suffer because of the inability of their teacher to effectively communicate his or her expectations. (p. [4]85)

One possibility to overcome these disparities is to actively engage students in the learning and teaching process, including in the development of classroom tasks and methods. However, as Freire (1970) has outlined in his work, and as it was argued in this report, it seems not enough to simply involve students in writing to learn to develop a critical voice— where criticality itself is still adjudged by the coloniser-lecturer. There needs to be an open and honest dialogue about all aspects of the learning and teaching process so that students have a real say about the tasks and criteria in question. Only this allows students to become critical learners and writers—students who not simply fulfil criteria but rather engage with a topic or issue in a critical manner and as themselves, as they become academic (Abegglen, Burns, & Sinfield, 2014). This implies that we lecturers need to critique our own practice— something that is challenging, but carries great potential. Freire (as cited in Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990) stated,

> The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves. (p. 181)

When the above arguments are taken into account, it seems necessary to implement discussions not just about texts and contexts, but about learning and teaching strategies used in the module syllabus. For our Becoming an Educationalist module, this means to open up discussions about what is meant by criticality in education studies, and also to critically question writing exercises and assessments that ask students to provide a critical analysis of social phenomena. In this regard, critical writing exercises seem a good starting point for students to think about their own practice and that of others—but they are only a first step to truly embrace dialogic learning and teaching. As Wolfe and Alexander (2008) stated, "Argumentation and dialogue are not simply alternative patterns of communication; they are principled approaches to pedagogy . . ." (p. 15). It seems as if such an approach to learning and teaching practice is long overdue, especially when considering that ". . . there is more leverage to improve teaching through changing assessment [and assessment practice] than there is in changing anything else . . ." (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004–05, p. 22). Hence, for students to become truly critical, lecturers need to open up their own practice to critique. As Habermas (1990) and Giddens (1984) asserted, there are many epistemological structures that have to be negotiated—hence, it is not foremost the structure that is important, but the position in which one enters these negotiations. This is what our module in its broader sense attempts to achieve: fostering a critical approach to knowing—and writing. The skills acquired in the module are transferable beyond academia and into the professional arena; more directly, the practice models for students how to engage with competing and

contradictory realities; and lastly, the module seeks to enact Freirean practice in the Honors classroom and emphasizes collaboration and the sharing of knowledge on a global scale.

Notes

[1]In 1992 U.K. Polytechnics were offered the opportunity to become universities in their own right. These are now called post-1992 institutions.

[2]For readers interested in developing activities like these to enable dialogue—and to introduce students to rich qualitative research methods—please explore our #Take5 website and blog: http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/take5/—and link to http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/take5/dicussion.html.

[3]A zigzag discussion is more open and freeform than, say, a typical discussion or focus group. The line of flight of the conversation is typically started by a question or a topic statement—a speaker is indicated, who speaks—he or she then point to another who also speaks. Each speaker has the choice of responding to previous comments—or zigzagging off into a topic of their own.

[4]For an overview of student work, see https://becomingeducational.wordpress.com/2015/11/11/mentees-multi-modal-exhibition/.

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